

RAMACHANDRA BABU

(a response to the questionnaire)

SECTION ONE: Personal Background & Early Years

1. Tell us something about your family background and the cultural context in which you grew up.

I was born in a small village 80 Km from Chennai in a middle class family. My parents are from Kerala had settled there running a hotel. My schooling was done in the local High School in Tamil medium. The ten-day festival at the temple, and the crowds that gather, the musical performances are the lingering memories of the past.

2. Were there any people in your immediate environment who had any interest in, or professional involvement with the visual or performing arts. Did they in any way initiate your interest in cinema or the visual arts?

My father is said to be an expert in drawing pencil portraits. Though I have not seen him drawing he had once shown me one of his portraits hanging in a hotel at Chennai. Before starting the hotel business he was a cinema operator for sometime. He had encouraged me in drawing and painting.

3. How were films, people associated with cinema viewed in your family and in your immediate circle of acquaintances?

Just like any other job cinema was also considered as a profession. A top Tamil film Director was my father's customer who still owes him some money for the food he partook during his days of struggle.

- 4. Please describe in some detail the 'visual field' of your childhood, (perhaps in terms of colours and light). By visual field we mean the ensemble of things that you saw and that have left an imprint on your memory. These could be details in nature, memories of performances or rituals, or films, or paintings and photographs, things that you saw on the street or in a city, or any other striking visual memories.**

There was a big lake near my place where I used to go and watch the sun set. The ever-changing play of colours in the dusk hours had left a lasting impression. I used to wonder at the floating shapes of the clouds turning into different forms like an elephant or a face or a chariot etc. Another thing was the beauty of nature, when viewed from a hilltop which I used to climb in my childhood. The vast expanse of landscapes over which the shadows of clouds race along are a sight to behold.

- 5. Do you recall the first or very early films that you saw? Can you tell us something about that experience? What was/were the films? Do you recall anything about the cinema hall, or space where the film was shown, and about the general atmosphere about the space?**

I remember seeing a Black & White film, a Western in which bald headed tufted Red Indians fought Cowboys wearing hats, wielding guns, riding horses and generally shooting everything in sight. It was a morning show. There was something wrong with the sound so I didn't remember hearing any dialogues or music. Just some "Thud...Thud..." noise when the operator fumbled with the projector which I mistook for the sound of gunfire. Also the film broke several times. The hall was not crowded as not many people came to see English films. The Cinema hall was a big structure with four classes of seating arrangement Sofa, chair, Bench and Floor. We generally avoided sitting in Sofa class as it consisted of Cane chairs full of bed bugs.

6. How did you get interested in watching films? Were you ever a member of a film society or film club? Did you know about film societies?

I was not a member of any film society nor have I heard about any such. I was only a casual viewer of films.

7. What were your other interests? Have those interests remained with you in later life?

My only other interests apart from drawing and painting were stamp and coin collecting which I still retain to some extent.

8. Did you have an interest in still photography? Were you ever a member of any amateur photography club?

As a chemistry student I got interested in learning how to mix chemicals for film developing and printing purposes. I used to take photographs with a box camera and used to develop and print in a makeshift darkroom. I was not a member of any amateur photography club.

9. Can you name some of the important films that you saw when you were growing up? Why did you think of them as significant?

During the college days I saw many Hollywood films out of which those that impressed me were *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Dr. Zhivago* by their visual brilliance. Especially *Lawrence of Arabia* which had such strong visuals you felt the heat of the desert though you were sitting in an air-conditioned theatre. Similarly you felt the freezing coldness of the Russian winter in *Dr. Zhivago*. The films of Alfred Hitchcock were fascinating to watch with their master craftsmanship. Films like *Beckett* with superb dialogues and fine acting were gems of that period.

10. How, why and when did you decide to become a cinematographer? What were the factors that influenced this decision? Did your family encourage or discourage your choice of vocation?

Was your becoming a cinematographer not a result of a conscious decision, but a result of circumstances? If so, please tell us something about those circumstances.

After my graduation I wanted to study painting at Shantiniketan, but finding it to be of five years' duration I had to leave it. While applying for various other courses I came across the Advertisement for Film & Television Institute of India, Pune. As I was keen on non-office type of jobs and this was one connected with the visual arts, I thought I would give it a try. Luckily for me, I got selected just on the basis of my paintings rather than on previous photographic expertise. In fact I was the sole person who came with paintings while others came with albums and albums of photographs. My family were very encouraging in my decision to join the Institute.

SECTION TWO: On learning to be a Cinematographer

1. Tell us about your education as a cinematographer, did it occur in film school (which institute), or in the industry.

I did my Diploma in Cinema (Motion Picture Photography) at the FTII, Pune, 1968-71.

2. If you studied in a film school, can you tell us about your years in the institute, and what your memories are of that time? About the syllabus, and quality of film education and technical training. Things that you were

dissatisfied with. Any specific memories of visiting faculty, important workshops.

I think it was one of the best things that had happened to me. A sprawling campus, with students from all over India and neighbouring countries made our horizons wide open. We had the latest equipments and fully equipped facilities to train. Some of the teaching staff were excellent and thought provoking. Both theory and practicals were well mingled and I suppose that I learnt all the basics from the Institute training only-. Except for the Acting students who were a bunch apart and who behaved as if they are superstars which led to a strike, life there was fine. Of the visiting filmmakers I remember meeting Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, M.T.Vasudevan Nair etc who shared their experiences both in classrooms as well as outside.

3. Can you talk about the important films that you remember seeing from this time. In what way was your perception of cinema, and of cinematography, changing as a result of a sustained and formal film education?

Pather Panchali - It was a revelatory experience of a totally different kind of filmmaking. The lighting was soft and natural, very realistic. Films of Akira Kurosawa, Bergman, Eisenstein, etc. made a deep impact which still haunts me. I try to do realistic lighting as far as possible, true to the source in the frame. I think films should be purposeful and not merely entertainment.

4. When you look back on the exercises that you had to do as a student of cinematography, what are the things that come to mind?

In the Institute we used to do all the things right from loading the magazines, threading the film, focus pulling, lighting, camera operation as well as pushing the trolley. The present day cinematographers can't even do the threading of the film. The overall training enabled me during emergencies when

some Camera assistants fail to turn up or some inexperienced one comes to location.

- 5. Tell us something about the experience of shooting your diploma film or first film? If you had to do it over again, what approach would you take? What were the mistakes that you learnt from?**

My diploma film mostly consisted of outdoor locations. I think I have lit the indoor scenes pretty well though shot inside the studio floor I managed to give it the look of being shot on location.

- 6. Were you attracted to the work of any particular cinematographer/s. If so, what attracted you to their work. Tell us something about the important cinematographic influences on you in this period? Have you found that in the course of time, these influences have varied, or have they remained the same?**

The cinematographers who influenced me were Subrata Mitra, Sven Nykvist, Nestor Almendros. I liked their realistic lighting, soft and natural looking, as if they never used any lights at all. I still feel it is very valid even today.

- 7. What if any, were the other sources of influence (outside cinema and filmmaking) on the shaping of your vision?**

My other source of inspiration was nature, the ever-changing patterns of light created by just one source, the sun during day and the moon during night.

- 8. What suggestions do you have about the education of a young person studying cinematography in a film institute today?**

Apart from studying in the Institute, he should study the works of great painters and sculptors to understand the use of light, colours, composition, shapes etc.

- 9. If you learnt in the industry, what were the sources of information on technical matters? What was the relationship that you had with the cinematographers from whom you learnt your craft? From the point of view of learning your craft, can you tell us about any significant experiences that you had?**

Not applicable

- 10. What is the nature of the relationship between you and the cinematographer/s from whom you learnt your craft today?**

N/A

SECTION THREE: On entering and being in the Profession.

- 1. Tell us something about how you entered the profession? What were the first few projects that you worked on?**

At the end of my final year, John Abraham who was my senior by two years asked me to work as a camera assistant in his first feature film "*Vidyarthikaley ithile ihile*" (1972) in Malayalam. Later on when I came to Madras, John asked me whether I am willing to accept the challenge of doing cinematography on my own. I accepted it and did the film even though I was not aware of the ways in which the Industry functioned. Thus without assisting anybody and with out having any Industry experience I became a Cinematographer. Later on I did one or two films, but a significant one was "*Nirmalyam* directed by M.T.Vasudevan Nair, which won the President's Gold

Medal for the best feature film in 1973. Later I did K.G.George's "*Swapnadanam*" which also won many State and National Awards.

- 2. What are the kinds of experiences that you had as an assistant? Who were the cinematographers that you worked with as an assistant, on which films and for how long?**

Not applicable.

- 3. Tell us something about the different things that you learnt from the cinematographers that you have assisted.**

N/A.

- 4. How has your experience of being an assistant influenced your relationships with your assistants today?**

N/A.

- 5. Is there anything in the generally prevalent relationship between assistants and cinematographers that you think needs to be questioned?**

Many assistants just attend the shooting part, get their payments and go home. They just do not bother to come to the Laboratory and watch how their exposure or light is being manipulated on the colour analyzer etc. so that they can correct their mistakes in future. Some of them don't even watch the films they have worked. Then how will they learn?

- 6. Can you talk about any devices that you designed or innovations that you brought into practice? How did these come about?**

I was fascinated by the "Box Lights" made by Subrata Mitra at the Institute, but I found them difficult to lug around from location to location. So I made a wooden frame of 4 feet by 3 feet and covered it with a variety of white

plastic tablecloth. This frame I kept in front of the light to get a soft even light. Nowadays Acrylic sheets are being used for this purpose. Some years back I have successfully made a portable jib arm which is mounted on a tripod to be used as a mini-crane. It was based on an Australian product, the photo of which I saw in a magazine.

7. Were there any 'improvisations' that you had to resort to, in order to deal with a particular problem or situation?

Even to get frames made will take a few days in a location and you will be left to do some makeshift arrangements to soften the harsh HMI lights. In order to overcome that I have got Aluminium frames made which can be dismantled for transport.

8. How did you get the 'break' to shoot your first film?

See my answer to Q.No.1

9. Can you trace a graph of your learning curve from film to film, or project to project?

Each film is a learning experience as locations vary every time. You have to think about how you are going to place your lights without being seen by the camera. All the time you have to be innovative and ready to experiment. Only by taking the untrodden path can you discover.

10. Please describe in detail at least 3 important sequences that you have shot in the course of your career. Describe also the work that you had to put in, in order to realise these sequences.

In the Malayalam film "*Padayottam*" (70mm) there was this "Chess Board Dance" sequence to be shot at night, on the banks of a river. Dancers were dressed up as chessman and a huge Chessboard was constructed. In order to show the expanse of water and the distant hills, I wanted to shoot the long shots at dusk hours. For that we had to put hundreds of lights well in advance. We usually started the job around 3 pm. The year was 1980, we had only Arc Brutes and incandescent lights and I was using only 100 ASA film for fine grain results in the Blow-up. We had very little time to measure and balance the lights against the fast fading daylight. We had two cameras covering from two angles and we used to take two takes of each shot at two different times so that we could choose better matching shots. Like that we shot for 4 or 5 days to cover all the long shots. In the final film the effect was wonderful as you can see the faint sky, the distant mountains and little shimmer of the river all in a night scene.

While shooting for the Malayalam film "*Itha ivied vare*" (1977) I wanted to avoid painted backdrops in studio sets. So whenever we had to shoot opposite angles, I shot it in outdoor locations with real skies, trees and water as background. Though it was difficult to match the colour temperature, I could balance in the laboratory and give the sets a real location feeling.

In the film "*Oru vadakkan veera gaadha*" (1989 - Mal) there was a day-for-night sequence of the hero riding a horse for a rendezvous. Late afternoon light was my choice and the Director agreed and waited for the suitable light, and shot it around 4 pm using it as back light, under exposing by about 2 stops, without an 85 filter on the camera. The result was excellent and people still talk about it.

11. Can you tell us something about the problems that you have had professionally and technically and how you have dealt with them? Can you

tell us about at least 3 significant professional and technical decisions that you have had to take in the course of your career?

For the historical film *Oru Vadakkan Veera Gaadha* I wanted to give a golden tone to evoke the oil lamps used in those days. I could not find any suitable filter to put either on the camera or on the lights. I finally managed to get the effect by having the voltage reduced by putting the lights on dimmers. I could further vary them to obtain a shimmering effect too.

Always light up based on the source in the frame. Never take the shot if the light is too less, for you can't save a shot which was underexposed. Do not yield to pressure by others for taking a shot, for they will be the ones to criticize you first when they see it on the screen. Only the result counts. These are three of my decisions.

12. Can you tell us about how you have seen the position of a cinematographer change:

- a) **In the industry at large**
- b) **In a film unit**
- c) **In terms of public perception.**

In the Industry people look for quality work rather than just getting some image on film. Not just some fast cameraman who uses very few lights. In the film unit he is still supreme, but the aura surrounding a cameraman of olden days is gone. He is more of a glorified customer. In the eyes of the public he has a better image, people read their names in the credit titles and remember it for a long time too if they like the images.

13. How do you react when you hear the statement "The Cinematographer takes too much time to light up"? What are your thoughts about the pressure of time, and its effect on the quality of your work?

This is an often-heard statement. People can wait for days for the stars to arrive on location, wait for hours for a set property or costume to be brought to the set, but they can't bear to wait for a few minutes for the cinematographer to do the final touches for finishing his lighting. Sometime all the effort taken is lost in the last hurried up moments when a net is not held in position or a flag is not properly placed to cut off the light falling on a bright background. It is better to turn a deaf ear to all the noise being made around, for ultimately it is the result that counts. The same people will turn against you if the results are bad, saying, "We may in our tensions ask you to hurry up, but you must have seen that the result is not affected".

SECTION Four: On The Practice of Cinematography.

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 prefer to work in Historical & Period based themes, Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Special Effects oriented subjects because you have a lot of scope to try out different type of lighting patterns. In such situations you feel as if you are creating something, which is true especially in work involving graphic elements, where images are created electronically.

2. Tell us your opinion (based on your experience) about what you think is the nature of the relationships between the following. (In these relationships please talk in terms of what you think is the ideal and what you perceive as the existing reality.)

- **cinematographer & director**

This should be one in which a lot of understanding is involved. They both must be able to adjust to each other's strengths and weaknesses as well as complement each other. It is a relationship that should exist not only on the sets but off the set too, so that even after pack up we should sit and chat about how we should go about shooting the film. Ego problems should not arise in accepting good suggestions made by the cinematographer. The relationship should be "Made for Each Other".

- **cinematographer & art director/costume designer**

Here is one which needs close collaboration especially in deciding upon the look of the film in terms of the colour scheme, texture and design of materials used which will ultimately affect the final look. This should start right from the script stage itself for perfect blending.

- **cinematographer & choreographer/action director**

It is always better to discuss possible angles, camera movements, camera speed etc. to achieve effective picturisation.

- **cinematographer & sound-recordist**

An understanding location Sound Recordist will always seek the opinion of the Cinematographer for possible mike placement.

- **cinematographer & assistants**

Closest possible collaboration is needed here. Understanding the needs of the Cinematographer instinctively and doing the necessary thing in the most efficient and fastest manner is the hallmark of a good assistant. Among themselves they should have perfect co-ordination so that there is no confusion on who is to do what on the sets. They should be bold enough to ask questions and have the guts to point out if any thing goes wrong. In fact they are the pillars that support a Cinematographer.

- **cinematographer & actors (experienced & inexperienced, stars & non stars)**

Actors should be in close communion with the cinematographer for whatever they enact on the set is going to be on the screen through his craft only. Even poor performance can be enhanced by inspired lighting and camera placement and vice versa. Unfortunately the new breed of stars is not aware of this. If they do not hit the marks the focus goes wrong and they do not get proper light. I remember veteran actors asking me which is their Key light and the placement of the camera. Some even went to the extent of holding a mirror and watching their facial expressions too. They also know their good angles and always remembered to present their best sides to the camera. Another thing they should remember is that it is their face that is being photographed, so they should come and stand in their marks for lighting purposes and not to opt for stand-ins or others.

- **cinematographer & light boys**

They are the people who translate the cinematographer's vision into reality. They must understand the style of the cinematographer and the way he likes to light up and do it accordingly. They should be adventurous enough to

climb anywhere to place lights at impossible positions. They can make or mar a cinematographer's work and hence have to be kept good-humoured.

- **cinematographer & laboratory technicians**

Here is the most important collaboration that will affect the final outcome of a cinematographer's work. An understanding Lab Technician will help a cinematographer to achieve the desired look and tonal quality in the final print. He will also point out if there are any mistakes in terms of exposure or focus or other faults etc at the time of negative processing. A good colour timer should read the mind of the cinematographer and give him the desired colour tone.

- **cinematographer & production in charge**

In order to economically and effectively utilize the facilities within the allocated budget thorough planning is needed. Interaction with the Production in charge and the cinematographer can result in smooth shooting without any undue delays or re-shoots etc.

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

- **Art Direction**

The closest collaboration and coordination is needed with this department. Right from selecting the location. choosing appropriate background colours. props etc they can be a lot creative in realizing the Cinematographer's vision.

- **Editing**

They should respect a Cinematographer's artistic decision by not using N.G. shots and also by not cutting shots while in movement thus creating visual jerks. They should also see that visuals are given their due screen time for the audience to appreciate them. They must take extreme care while handling the

negative in the editing room. It has been my experience that the maximum damage occurs during the negative cutting stage.

- **Scriptwriting**

Script writers should be able to conceive a film in terms of visuals, i.e., through the eyes of a Cinematographer. So discussions with him will be highly productive in terms of visual richness.

- **Music**

Having a good sense of music will be really helpful, for if you know the kind of background music that will accompany a particular shot, you can devise the camera movement faster or slower accordingly.

- **Sound**

Sound should complement the visuals. A jarring sound can mar a beautiful shot. As different elements join together to constitute a great picture, all the departments must function together in the right proportion without overshadowing each other.

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.

Having done ten films for Director KG George, who has been a friend of mine since 1968 Institute days. I found his mise-en-scenes very interesting to do, for instead of going for several shots he combines artiste movements along with camera movements to create a single fluid uninterrupted shot and achieves a better effect. This kind of shot needs a lot of planning as well as a number of rehearsals by all concerned. But the result is worth the effort.

The late Bharathan is also another director who opted for mise-en-scenes. Being an Art Director, he had the eye for visuals and planned the shots accordingly, choosing the proper locations, props and also waiting for the suitable atmospheric conditions. He would also suggest lighting patterns and refer to paintings of past Masters as reference. He inspired you to do your best by creating artistic atmosphere on and off the set. No wonder I got State Awards for Cinematography for two of his films.

Director Jijo for whom I did the only 70mm Malayalam film *Padayottam* is a person who lives film. All the time he meticulously plans out things. He is a perfectionist to the extent that he saw to it that the film was projected in all its glory in the theatres where it was screened. A team of people consisting of Laboratory technician, Sound Engineer, Projectionist, myself the Cinematographer and Jijo visited all the theatres with test films and a reel of our 70 mm print, projected them and corrected the projection conditions. I think the success of their 3D film *Chota Chettan* was also only due to this perfectionism.

In a career spanning 28 years I have had the opportunity to work with some of the leading lights of the Malayalam film industry such as John Abraham, Ramu Kariat, MT Vasudevan Nair, KG George, Bharathan, IV Sasi, PN Menon, Mani Ratnam, Hariharan, KS Sethu, Madhavan, Lohita Das, Fazil, etc. I also had the opportunity to work in 19 maiden directorial ventures, which include John Abraham's, KG George's, MT Vasudevan Nair's among others. I have done 10 films each for KG George and IV Sasi, and 7 films for Bharathan.

I have learnt many things from my Directors: how to do and how not to do shot division, shot composition, handling of actors, framing, lighting, mood, how a shot is going to be edited etc. In the early days of my career, I used to be present all through the script stage, location hunting, artiste selection, shooting,

dubbing, editing, rerecording and release. In fact we used to live together discussing all the time about films.

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.

I fully agree with the statement. Without a proper basic structure however fine a building you may construct it is bound to fall down and collapse. A painting done on poor quality cloth is bound to crack, flake and fade. Script is the skeleton of our being.

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

- **Mainstream Commercial Cinema**

We have to be fast, flexible and willing to do the lighting in a higher key so that the highly paid stars are shown in all their glory. That means more glamour or rather Ad filmic look. Instead of looking for lighting continuity Directors seek fancy lighting effects. You get more state of the art equipments, bigger units, more crowd the merrier.

- **Parallel Cinema**

It is the opposite of the Mainstream ones. You have to make do with available equipments, constantly improvising to finish the film within the budget and schedule. The pay packet may be thin, the living conditions poor, the work hard but you are immensely satisfied with your ultimate product.

- **Documentary**

This requires a lot of patience, dedication, understanding of the subject and lots of hard work in unexpected situations.

- **Ad Films**

Any thing goes as long as it is outrageous and eye catching!

- **Music Videos**

I haven't done any, but I suppose it is just like Ad films

- **Television Serials**

It is a race against time, of how many episodes you can cover in the given number of days. There is no place for lighting effects. It is just assembly line production.

- **Television Shows**

I haven't done any.

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

I prefer working in films mostly because I feel that in Video you do not have control over the final images. Ultimately that is what counts most. Moreover a film image is meant for repeated viewing unlike a video which may or may not be seen afterwards. Film is forever!

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?

Digital and computer added image making are all tools in the hands of a creative Director. Just as computer created creatures cannot replace actors, there ought to be a Cinematographer with an artistic vision sitting if not behind the camera but in front of the computer. There ought to be a creative artist and not just a computer expert if visionary and haunting images are to be created. A

Cinematographer should take it in his stride such developments as if unlimited shades of colours are being added to his palette.

9. 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?

Excepting our mainstream cinema, I find that in all other Hollywood, European, Asian, Our own Parallel and Regional cinema, the trend is for naturalistic "Unlit" type of photography. No gimmicks, no fancy angles, crazy movements, flashy filters no oddball lighting effects. If it is to be done there is a separate category of filmmaking, namely Ad films and Music videos. There to get the attention of a viewer for a short duration all kinds of visual acrobatics are being performed. But imagine doing it for a full two and half hours at a stretch in a feature film. This is exactly what is happening in our mainstream cinema. A part of the blame is due to some of our eminent cinematographers who introduced it in our feature films.

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

I haven't done a documentary in the past 20 years or so.

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

In ad films gimmicks won't last much. It is the idea which will stand the test of time. I still remember the Award winning ad films I have seen at the Institute not because of the fancy cinematography but by the content which exemplified the product.

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?

I have done only one Hindi film – *Patita* - Dir: IV Sasi so I can't say much about this.

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

I think there are different schools of cinematography. Hollywood European. Russian. Latin American etc.

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

I hate indifferent cinematography - just placing the camera, putting lights etc. with out any reason or purpose.

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

I watch new films as well as T.V. Programs showing 'behind the scene' events. I also read American Cinematographer, Cinefex, BSC, ACS, Kodak Newsletters to read about new developments.

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

I keep in touch with others personally and over the phone while I am at home. Also through the newsletter - INDIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER which I edit for the INDIAN SOCIETY OF CINEMATOGRAPHERS.

With colleagues I discuss the recent trends in Cinematography, the latest equipments, films, new movies, and other factors affecting cinema on the whole, etc.

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

I feel we do not have any proper forums for debate or discussion. Even though an association or guild may be formed, it can only function effectively if members take sufficient interest. I am telling this from my experience as founder President of Indian Society of Cinematographers, that though we had been requesting for Articles, anecdotes, letters etc. for our Newsletter I am yet to get one. May be they are busy or couldn't find time to write. But they should actively take part by expressing their views. Another thing is, since we are small in number and spread out all over the country it is difficult to keep in touch compounded by the fact that most of us are away on location.

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 are by nature encouraging and accord recognition. But the monetary rewards are a pittance when compared to the other categories. But I feel that it hasn't helped to raise the standards. I am sure that no cinematographer does a film aiming for the awards. Firstly he tries to create his best possible work. Only when he sees the final result he thinks, perhaps he might get an Award. Only when non-deserving cases get the Awards do we feel the handiwork of politics, money and other influences.

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

I do not think that we get critical attention from reviewers and critics. It is usually a one-line statement that the photography was excellent or eye-catching!

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?

Ordinary viewing public gets carried away by picture post card visuals, acrobatic camera movements, odd lighting effects and then think that to be great cinematography. They are not aware of our contribution to the film as a whole.

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 are?

I think it is because the work is tough physical work requiring you to be on your feet even for 24 hours at a stretch for long schedules running for months at a time. While everybody on the set relaxes, the cinematographer is busy doing the lighting for the next shot. Immediately after the director yells, " CUT - OK", he rushes to the cinematographer to tell him that he wants the next shot to be taken like this. Even during lunch break invariably he is yanked away to see some location or to see some dress or props etc. Because of the sheer physical stamina needed women hesitate to come to this profession. I think that many of us do not take female assistants because we do not want to take up the additional burden of looking after their security etc. on location.

22. What do you think of the payments given to cinematographer?

"Cinematographers are well paid but highly exploited." - Comment

The statement should have been "Cinematographers are poorly paid but highly exploited!" Even a character artiste who works for a week or so in the film gets more money than a Cinematographer who toils for months. Actors get their full amount before they finish their shooting if they do not dub (75% during shooting and balance before dubbing, if they are dubbing) whereas a cinematographer is finally paid only at the time of release printmaking.

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

Now a days after the formation of Trade Unions, their lot has improved much. They are not cheated of their payments, their wages are fair and working conditions have improved.

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

Though it doesn't happen often, I sometimes stand by the crew especially when they are falsely blamed for something that they didn't do.

SECTION FIVE: Technical Questions and Issues.

A. Pre-production Planning:

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

I strongly prefer Film only! If you really care about your work being viewed as you had wanted it to be, you wouldn't go for anything else. If you do not want some one in the Telecine section, engineers in the Telecasting Studio

and millions of viewers to adjust the colour, brightness and contrast of your lovingly crafted images, then go for film, and only film!

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)

I believe all these equipments are tools for you to create the images you want. According to the nature of work you select them. A Panavision Camera doesn't by itself create a great film. Many of the world classics were created by hand cranked cameras. So insisting that you will use only such and such equipment is absurd. It is the "How" you do which is more important rather than "With What" you do it.

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

I feel a good Digital Meter which can be used for reflected and incident light reading both in f Numbers as well as in foot candles is ideal. If you have a Spot Meter it will lessen your frequent 'to and fro' walk between the camera and the subject.

4. What are your preferences in terms of aspect ratios? What, in your opinion is enhanced, and what is lost, when you move from one aspect ratio to another?

Personally I like the 1:1.66 format for social dramas and Cinemascope for Epic dimensions or Nature based wide vistas. At present most films are being made in Cinemascope, we are constrained by filling the frame with just faces especially when it comes to taking close-ups. I personally think that we are not utilizing the vast possibilities of the Cinemascope screen of letting the audience choose what portions of the screen they want to watch. Frequently the shots are not sustained for sufficient length of time to allow for it. In fact fast cutting has a jarring effect in bigger formats.

5. What are your preferences in terms of film stock, and why?

The choice depends on the budget of the film, but if asked I prefer Kodak for the colour reproduction, grain structure, latitude. But Fuji stock is also good, especially the high speed ones which I feel are better than Kodak when it comes to graininess.

6. Which camera/s do you prefer to work with, and why?

Beggars cannot be choosers. The only cameras available are the old trusted Arriflexes. I would prefer the newer 535 model, for the picture steadiness, variable shutter and higher speed and precision control.

7. Which lenses do you prefer to work with, and why?

I would like to work with Cooke lenses, because they are extremely sharp, no diffusion and no flares even when wide open. I would like to try the new Zoom lens of Russian design now being made in the U.K. which is said to be excellent. It must be much better than the anamorphic adapted 25-250 Angenieux lenses. I understand nobody in the world uses the Kowa anamorphic lenses/which we use in large numbers in our country.

8. Given a choice between working in a studio and a location, what would you opt for, and why?

I would always prefer a location for the simple reason that you cannot place the light wherever you want. It makes you think, innovate and be creative in the placement of lights. You take an existing available source of light and modify or enhance it according to your need. This I find challenging and also you are never repetitive as the lighting conditions and locations keep on changing.

9. From a cinematographer's point of view, what typically are the things most neglected and forgotten at the budgeting and production planning stage?

During budgeting things like Steadicam, remote crane, high camera platforms, vehicle mounts, helicopter Work, rigging equipments are not taken into consideration. Same is the case with special lighting equipments and minor graphic work. These come up during the course of shooting and sometimes it is not possible to use them because of budget constraints. In the planning stage too make-up and wardrobe tests are not done, which means there will be lot of delays during the shooting time in correcting the make-up and costumes as every artiste now-a-days have their personal make- up man and costumer.

10. 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 am willing to spend as much time possible for discussion about sets, locations, costumes and props, but the concerned director or producer doesn't find time or give serious concern about such things. In my opinion a cinematographer should be consulted on these matters long before the shooting

starts for his invaluable contribution for the betterment of the film as well as saving a lot of wastage during the shooting stage.

11. "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

Very true! Look at the film *Titanic*, you can see where the money has gone, certainly not into the pockets of the stars. And look at our mega productions and see if it is worth the boasted crores of rupees budget. You know a major portion is wasted due to poor script, bad planning, shoddy execution and astronomical star salaries.

12. 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)?

Testing of equipment or stock generally doesn't take place, as the equipment will not be available as also the stock. But I usually test the lenses visually with the aid of a Lens testing chart and immediately get the first few rolls printed and see the results for any defects. Ideally I would like to take a steadiness test and focus test of all lenses. Also if any new stocks are to be used, exposure test should be taken and emulsion from the same batch should be used.

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

Generally the equipments are very badly maintained as they are rushed up from one shooting location to another. Regarding cameras and lenses, we do not have many company trained service personnel who have the expertise as

well as equipment to repair such precision lenses and cameras. A few such have their hands full, so there is a long waiting list and ultimately the equipment hirers take it only when a serious breakdown occurs. Many of the lights come without plugs and not proper insulation that every time you touch a light barefoot, you are bound to get an electric shock. There is utter disregard for safety features.

14. 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?

Technological innovations like remote controlled aerial cameras, helium balloon lights, underwater cameras, lighting equipments, fluorescent lighting, miniature photography, etc. all can enhance our way of filmmaking. Of course some of them are expensive but it is nothing when compared to star salaries. Producers should come forward to spend money for this purpose. Our equipment rental companies buy new equipments only on the basis of their return of investment in the form of rental income. They want their investment back as soon as possible. They are also ignorant about the latest equipment scene.

15. What in your opinion is the importance of lab reports on stock tests?

Lab reports on stock tests show you exactly how your results will be in the final film. So they are of very much importance to me.

16. How do you decide upon a particular laboratory?

I decide on the Lab for the following factors: The processing should be consistent with no day-to-day variations. The negative handling should be perfect, no scratches, watermarks or dust particles. Developing should be of proper density and prints should be of proper colour tone, contrast and density.

The colour timer should understand enough to know your tastes and time your release print as per your intentions. It is the result that counts and nothing else.

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.**

After going through the script and discussing with the Director, try to integrate suitable lighting schemes for individual scenes etc.

- 2. How do you realise 'the look of a film' in your work? Please talk about this in detail, with examples in terms of lighting, framing, saturation, colour and movement.**

The look of a subject is decided on the basis of a subject whether it is a period one, romance, action, comedy, etc. Lighting effects can be high key in Romantic and comedy films whereas it will be low key, dark and moody in mystery, suffering or depressive situations. Colour can be bright and splashy in happy moods and dull and subdued in grim scenes. Figures can be composed either as the centre of focus or at the edges as if unimportant. Oddball compositions can give hints of something about to happen or other worldly weird look, useful in horror and science fiction films. Movement can be of great value in fast packed action films. Playing with colour saturation can be used to depict drab existence.

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

After forming a suitable lighting pattern I look for the possible sources in the set, then start the background lighting first, then the artistes' lighting is done, while on the way the props are also lighted accordingly.

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. Please answer with examples from your work.

First I fix the frame and with reference to the frame I do the lighting. Generally the framing determines the lighting. But in some rare cases where I want to include a light source (Table lamp, Window, firelight etc.) I might frame it so that the audience get to know from where the lighting effect is coming from.

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

Though I love diffused lighting, I use specular and bounced light too, for in nature we have all the three types of light. So to do a naturalistic lighting we have to use all of them. For sunlight effect we have to use specular light only. Similarly light coming through frosted glass windows will be of diffused variety and the light coming from the ceilings are bounced light.

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

I do not use many filters because invariably their presence is felt on the screen. Sometimes I use a light Black ProMist to create a dreamy effect or slight Fog in early morning outdoor sequences.

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

I like to work for an "unlit" feeling for the simple reason that the audience should not feel the presence of a cinematographer putting some light here and there. Our work should be as unobtrusive as possible.

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

I mix Tungsten and Daylight only in situations where there is a Tungsten source in the set. Otherwise I do not mix the two types of lights.

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

True. There are cinematographers who flaunt their greatness by having a number of generators and an army of lightmen to man the hundreds of exotic lights. Whether they need it or not a lot of light is brought and using less than two generators is below their dignity. They forget the fact that God, the Greatest Cinematographer just uses only one light, the Sun for all his myriad lighting effects!

10. Do you ever consciously make an effort to use fewer lights?

I always try to use the minimum number of lights as possible in a situation.

11. 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?

I try not to give any visual jerks due to variations in lighting conditions in out door locations. If it becomes suddenly cloudy and if there is no possibility of

sunlight coming up, I might use some specular HMI lights to simulate sun light effect or use Scrims vice versa.

12. 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?

If possible I will opt for shooting in the same lighting condition. But sometimes it will be cloudy for days on end. So I will see to it there is some transition shot, say a close up of a person sitting in shade comes before the overcast shot so that there is not much of a visual jerk.

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

I do not have any particular aperture preference but I try not to shoot wide open as lens performance deteriorates at that setting.

14. 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?

A building with a lot of windows or openings is an interesting place to light, whereas a room with out any windows is difficult to light. The only source may be through the door or perhaps a lamp in the ceiling. And some places like old palaces, stately mansions inspire you by their classic architecture to opt for a period style of lighting.

15. 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?

As I always follow the sources in the set as a basis of my lighting pattern, I always insist on switching on the practicals first. It will help me to see the existing pattern of light and then I will modify it to suit my lighting design. I try to include the practicals, lanterns, firelight etc. in the frame so that the viewer knows from where the light comes. Architectural features are incorporated in the frame for compositional purposes, and also for providing foreground information for perception of depth. For moving shots, pillars, doorways, etc. can be effectively used for obtaining three-dimensional feeling.

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

I do not give different exposure values for different takes of the same shot.

17. How do you work in the possibilities of camera and character movement into your lighting scheme for a given shot? Please give at least 3 examples from your work.

The shot: Two persons enter a cellar with a flaming torch and search. Since it was the opening shot of the film, I planned to dolly back from a mid-long shot of total darkness, in which the door is opened and the room is flooded with the light. As they move forward from one chamber to another the background gets darkened and the foreground gets illuminated, the camera moves back. Finally they come nearer to camera for a closer view and move out of frame. I had all the lights on dimmers so that the background illumination is faded off as soon the characters move away from that chamber. Meanwhile they are lit by a number of small units which are being carried by hand and followed by a team of light men. At doorways the changeover from one team to another was accomplished by fading out and fading in of the dimmers, which were also used

to give the flickering effect of flames. It required many rehearsals and perfect coordination to achieve the effect. (Film: *Oru Vadakkan Veeragaadha*)

The shot: At night the Doctor is rushing through the corridor to attend an Emergency case. To create tension, I wanted a staccato pattern of light to fall on the face of the doctor. I installed some overhead photofloods to form pools of light to pass through and also used the windows to provide a pattern light. Finally the problem was a lengthy dolly shot for which we could not lay tracks as it would be seen in the frame. It was solved by me sitting in a wheel chair and taking a handheld shot. (Film: *Sandyakku Virinja Poovu*)

The shot: The character wakes up at mid night on hearing some sound and searches in the darkness. As this was a horror film, I had the character silhouetted against windows lit by moonlight and when he goes in dark areas, he is faintly lit by patches of backlight. To forebode the danger the camera was planned to follow him from behind as an over the shoulder shot. This time I had a Steadicam to achieve the effect. (Film: *Aakasha Ganga*).

18. 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?

I do not like evenness of light at all. It is the variations in intensities of illumination which gives depth in lighting. I like the camera to travel through different zones of brightness in the same shot.

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

Newer faster films haven't changed my overall lighting pattern except for the fact that now I can use smaller units of light consuming less power.

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

When I feel that I have finished the rough lighting, I'll call for the full rehearsals with the artistes and camera movements to *fine-tune* my lighting, and only when I am satisfied, I'll say that the lighting is done and we can go for a take.

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.

True. Each person on the set may have their own opinion regarding the framing and composition and they may directly or indirectly express it if they get an opportunity to see it in the video monitor right there on the set. Decisions about framing and composition are determined by the cinematographer and Director and not by collective discussion of the crew.

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

I guide the viewer's eyes within the frame through graphic elements, symmetry/asymmetry, volume, light, colour, etc. based on the classic rules of composition.

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

Eye level camera angles are used normally, as in everyday situations we view the world from our standing eye level. In the case of point of view of a person, the camera is placed at his eye level position. A low angle is used for emphasis, to show huge or domineering figures. Similarly a high angle is used to

show lowly or downbeat, sad or desolate situations. So according to the need of the shot camera angles are chosen.

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

I try to create depth through the use of light mostly as the colour of the set, costumes, props may be determined from earlier scenes and in continuity. So colour scheme may not be manipulated much for creating depth. Hence I depend on light for that purpose.

D. Lenses & Lensing:

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

I prefer to work with block lenses only because they are much sharper than the zoom lenses and we can work at wider aperture and with less lights.

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

I have no choice as we have mostly Kowa anamorphic lenses only. (See my answer -Section 5, A-7 for more details).

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

Longer focal length lenses are ideal for isolating the subject from the background and hence are used for shots in which the character feels loneliness or separation etc. The so-called normal lens covers an angle approximating human vision and is capable of keeping the background also reasonably in focus.

This lens can be used in everyday situations where you want to provide both

foreground and background information - the focal length is neutral and non-specific. Wide-angle lenses encompass more information that we normally encounter in our field of vision and unusual by nature. Hence they can be used to dramatize and depict strange and powerful emotions. Ultra wide lenses call attention by their distorting qualities and so may be used for odd shots or out of the world visuals.

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.

Different aspect ratios determine the kind of lenses you would use. As also the size of the screen. Wide screen and Cinemascope formats lend themselves easily to panoramic vistas and hence to wide angle lenses. For T.V. and 16 mm viewing closer shots are preferred, so normal and long lenses are much used. In the case of 35 mm all the lenses can be used as it is neither too small nor too large a format.

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

When compared to dollying in, zooming doesn't produce a perspective shift. When a subject is close to a background, zooming in can be very effective in going closer to the subject unobtrusively with out giving any perspective clue of camera movement. It can be used to effectively convey the thought process going on in the mind of the subject.

E. Movement

- 1. What is the way in which you approach movement? Do you see movement as a way to move from the whole frame into its details, or to move from details towards the whole?**

There should be a reason for movement. Either the subject moves or something has to be revealed or some detail has to be pointed out. Just movement for the sake of movement is not desirable. I see movement both as a way to move from the whole frame into details as well as to move from details towards the whole.

- 2. Do you think that movement affects the subjective experience of the duration, or 'time value' of a shot?**

Movement affects the subjective experience of the duration, or "time value" of a shot. While in a static shot the distance travelled by a subject can be perceived, in a moving shot it cannot be done. It is possible to compress time in moving shots.

- 3. When you are thinking of revealing a space in your shot division or breakdown, do you prefer to work in terms of a series of camera set ups that move the viewer within the space, or do you prefer a fluid mobile camera on tracks and trolleys?**

I prefer to work in terms of a series of camera set ups that move the viewer within the space for a scene in which a location is revealed.

- 4. What are your preferences in terms of a choice between a stable frame, which allows for movement within it, and a dynamic, mobile camera? Why?**

It will depend on the nature of the scene involved. Not all scenes would require static shots alone or mobile cameras only. Certain scenes need camera movements and some others static placements.

5. What are the common difficulties and problems that you face in executing camera movements?

Jerk free tracking systems are rare. Flexible tracks which we can lay in any configuration are not available. Good reliable levelling systems to lay tracks in all kind of terrain are also lacking.

6. In which conditions would you consider taking the camera off its tripod and going in for handheld shots?

For subjective shots of persons, for realistic documentary feelings and for dynamic action sequences I prefer handheld shots.

7. What is your opinion on the use of steadicam shots that are increasingly evident in films today?

In our films Steadicam shots are not utilized purposefully. They are used mainly in action shots or just to follow characters in places where laying of tracks is not possible. Hardly they are creatively used in dialogue scenes ever. I think the main reason is, barring a few we do not have good operators who can frame the shot well. We still use antique models without remote focus and no wireless video transmitters for the cinematographer and Director to watch the shot in a separate monitor.

F. Colour

1. Do you think of colour in any way other than only in terms of registering the presence of colour?

Colour is feeling, a state of mind which cannot be measured and ascertained but felt and experienced.

2. What are the personal associations and cultural connotations that you have with different colours? Do you make use of these categories in working out a colour scheme for a film?

For me Blue is my favourite. It is soothing to the eyes especially the blue skies, the blue sea, etc. White is the symbol of purity and yellow is of holiness (Turmeric, Sandal paste) Green stands for peace and plenty. Red is the colour of violence and passion. Black stands for death and other unknowns. I try to incorporate my personal associations and feelings in working out colour schemes for films.

3. What are your thoughts on monochromatic rendition and on working for deep, saturated colours as stylistic options?

I am not averse to experimentation and if the subject needs that kind of colour schemes. I am willing to try.

4. Do you basically think of a frame in Black and White terms and then add colour (as ornament or flourish), or is your conception of a frame always in vivid colour?

My conception of a frame is always in vivid colour, but I check my lighting through a contrast viewing glass. In a way I balance the tones in Black and white terms.

5. How do you work with the art director and costume designer to develop a colour palette for a film?

Once I decide upon the colour scheme, the Art director is consulted on the colours to be used in the background and props and based on that the costume designer is told what are the colours he can use against which backdrop. A harmonious blending of colours can be achieved by this interaction.

6. What is the kind of work that you do on colour in the laboratory?

In the laboratory it is usually overall increase or decrease of one colour which is done. This is particularly useful for creating tonal uniformity. You can add a little warm tone to a whole scene or reduce some blue from night scenes. Only limitation is you can play with only one colour.

7. To what extent if at all do you play with the colour balance on video?

The same as I do with film. But in Video we have contrast control too.

8. Do you find any difference in the rendition of colour in video and film?

I find the colour in video is garish and the range of tonal quality is limited. Some colours don't reproduce well and also bleed into the background.

G. Laboratory & Post Production Work

1. What are your thoughts on the grading process?

Grading process is the place where the culmination of your creativity takes place. Unfortunately this is the most neglected phase in filmmaking. Producers think that once they hand over the negative to the Lab, their job is over and they want their copies to be struck as fast as possible. They just don't realize that it is here each and every shot is minutely studied, to be colour corrected and printed to proper densities to come out as release prints as the cinematographer

had intended it to be. This requires time to do the necessary test prints, to view the first print, correct it, see another print, if there are any more corrections, and then give the print strike order. Invariably enough time is not given for the cinematographer to complete this important phase of filmmaking.

2. What is the extent and nature of experimentation that you would do in the laboratory?

Only sort of experimentation I could do in the Lab was push processing. But I would like to try out Bleach by passing process etc.

3. What is the input of the work in the lab into the ultimate look of a film?

Laboratories play a major part in achieving the ultimate look of a film. Many films are ruined in the final print stage when proper stock test was not made. Also negative processing should be of the highest quality if results have to be good.

4. What is your opinion on the standards of Indian laboratories? What can be done to make for better standards and working conditions in the laboratories?

If we try, our Laboratories can give world-class prints. Our processing is as good as any lab in the advanced countries. Where we fail is in the film-handling department. There are scratches, pinholes, cinch marks etc, which ruin the print quality. Strict dust free atmosphere combined with absolute cleanliness and careful film handling should become part of everyday work culture. Also quality control in the chemicals and process control should be maintained.

5. What in your opinion are the essential qualities and features of a good film print?

A good film print should be free from physical marks such as scratches, water marks, pin holes, etc. It should be of uniform density so that highlight as well as shadow details are seen and also have proper contrast and colour saturation. The images should be sharp and there should not be any jitter during projection.

- 6. How much space is there for a cinematographer to intervene in video post-production - say in terms of colour rendition and image brightness? If a cinematographer's presence is taken for granted in a film laboratory, why is he/she generally absent from the entire process of video post-production?**

In video post-production there are limitations for colour rendition and image brightness due to the technical constraints of the electronic media. I think the cinematographer is avoided in video post-production for the simple reason that those manning the telecine think that they know everything about colour rendition and they are seeing the final result right there on the screen and there is no need for some one to sit there and tell them how to do it. Unlike film where you get to see the final result only after processing, here it is instantaneous. So they think that there is nothing more to it.

H. Viewing Conditions

- 1. What is your opinion on the standards of screens and projectors in cinema theatres in India? What can be done to make for better standards and viewing conditions in the theatres?**

Majority of our theatre screens are full of dirt and the projectors are in very poor conditions with broken mirrors, old lenses with worn out coatings and with the arc lamp run at a lower amperage etc. Even in cities like Thiruvananthapuram and Ernakulam, where I happened to inspect the theatres as a member of the Technical committee for two International Film Festivals, I found that most of the theatres were having a screen brightness in the range of 5 to 9 footlamberts instead of the International standard of 16 footlamberts. By cleaning the screen, installing new mirrors, servicing the lenses and by running the arc at the correct amperage we could bring them up to the international standard of 16 Fl. It shows that results can be obtained if we try a little. Our Indian Society of Cinematographers has been crusading since its inception for inclusion of these minimum standards in the Cinema licensing rules. Unless the minimum projection standards are made mandatory, the theatre owners are not going to comply. Also, like restaurants, theatres can be classified A, B, C class according to the projection quality so that viewers can know which theatre offers good viewing conditions.

2. What is your opinion on the quality of telecine transfers in television stations?

The quality of telecine transfers in television stations is of poor and indifferent quality. The colour contrast and brightness are all off key.

3. What is your opinion on the quality of transmitted video signals on television (including satellite TV)

When compared to the land stations, the transmitted video signals of Satellite TV are much better. It is still even better in the case of Digital Transmission.

SECTION VI: AESTHETIC QUESTIONS

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

I do change my styles according to the nature of the film. You just can't have the same style for a period film and a modern drama or a village story. It will look awful.

2. Can we make a distinction between 'realist' and 'expressive' cinematography? What are the markers of this distinction?

Realistic cinematography mainly consists of naturalistic lighting patterns. Whereas expressive cinematography, I feel, utilizes stylistic lighting patterns and modifying the chemical processes to achieve desaturated colours or increased contrast etc deliberately for artistic results. I feel that there is nothing wrong to do "expressive" cinematography if the subject demands it.

3. How much freedom do you give yourself in terms of changing your style? Or, do you work towards maintaining a consistent stylistic signature in all your films?

As I do not want myself trapped forever in a fixed style of cinematography, I keep on trying out newer things. You have to be constantly experimenting to fuel your creativity.

4. Subrata Mitra once said, "Could *Pather Panchali* have been shot with Panavision cameras, and sophisticated accessories?" - Comment.

Certainly *Pather Panchali* could not have been made with sophisticated equipments. Subrata Mitra became innovative by utilizing the Bengal government's police searchlights (the only lights available) to his advantage by

bouncing them onto white cards and got into soft lighting. Necessity is the mother of invention.

5. Can an excess of technological gadgets sometimes be a hindrance to the practice of cinematography, and to creative freedom?

An abundance of sophisticated equipments may produce a technically perfect film, but rarely an artistically superior cinema. It is not the equipments but the man behind it who is the creator.

6. 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?

When an actor is introduced in a frame, primarily he/she should be recognizable as a person and should not get merged into the background. Then only comes the question of whether face should be clearly seen etc. The nature of space occupied by the human figure depends mainly upon the nature of the shot (CU, MS, LS) and whether the character should be prominent etc.

7. 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?

First consideration will be the person's relationship with the backdrop. Whether it belongs to the person or a strange one. Whether the surrounding objects imprison, overpower or have any influence on the person. Then you have to look for possible light sources in the frame for placing the human figure to bit lit

as required. These elements remain the same, though in the case of outdoor locations the landscape should also be taken into consideration.

8. Are there any differences in the way in which male and female figures are lit and framed?

As there are differences in the body shapes of males and females, so is there subtle lighting change to emphasise the curves of the female body. Also softer lighting is used to accent femininity.

9. Are there any differences in the way in which, the eyes, the face and the body are lit and framed?

There are differences in the way in which eyes, face and the body are lit and framed. An example would be how a Long shot of a person, close up of the face and an extreme close shot of the eyes are lit and framed.

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

Yes. Giving harsh lighting for villains, soft lighting for gentler characters etc, can subtly do it.

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

If you want to practice in the mainstream cinema, the faces of the stars should be lit in a visible manner. Otherwise the producer will sack you by saying that he had paid huge sums as star salaries but they are not seen on the screen. He would any time prefer a cinematographer who would do more flattering glamour lighting. So one had to strike a compromise. You have to retain your lighting pattern and at the same time see that star faces are at least visible.

12. 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?

Lighting the space and allowing the characters to move in and adjusting the lights accordingly is my way of working.

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

Time management plays a large part especially if you want to take shots at specific times like sunrise or dusk hours. Unless the cast and crew are ready and right on location many crucial shots may not be taken and you may have to compromise by doing it at some other unsuitable time. Pragmatic considerations will help you to make full use of available facilities. Both will contribute to the aesthetic of the film.

14. "Editors spoil cinematographers labours" - Comment.

To a certain extent, especially when they cut the shots in mid movement or when shots are cut abruptly without giving the viewer enough time to appreciate the frame. Sometimes they even use N.G. takes which you might have rejected due to some technical problem but they justify by saying it suits them best editorially, and include it in the final film. In the name of increasing the tempo of the film shots are often chopped up. Shots taken in different contexts are juxtaposed creating problems while colour timing.

15. Do you shoot an urban setting differently from a rural setting?

As the entire milieu is different, the scenery is different and so is the pace of life, hence I would shoot an urban setting differently from a rural one.

16. "There is a preference for the panoramic eye in the depiction of the rural, and for the dynamic, mobile eye in the depiction of the urban" - Comment.

One is influenced by the atmosphere, the kind of landscape one sees etc. while one plans a shot. Naturally the wide open vistas of rural landscapes prompt one to go for panoramic shots. Similarly the fast paced urban lifestyle matches dynamic mobile camerawork.

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

I would rather say that the mobile camera is being over used. Whether it is needed or not remote cameras whirling overhead performing aerial gymnastics have become the fashion now-a-days!

18. Do you imagine the sound track when you are shooting?

Sometimes, when I take dolly shots I keep thinking about the possible music score to come over it and ask the dolly operator to push it at a particular speed.

19. "Conception of a sound track gives rhythm to the shot taking" - Comment.

If you have an idea of what the sound track would be and if you could match the rhythm to the shot, taking it will be more harmonious .

20. Is shooting a beautiful object beautifully good cinematography?

Definitely not. Real good cinematography means to find out not only beauty in everyday objects but also in bringing out the unseen qualities of the object as well. It is the inner beauty that counts rather than the exterior. Good cinematography should be the soul and bring out the character make it an enlightening experience.

21. What is the notion of beauty that you aspire for? What are the aesthetic goals that you set yourself?

Beauty should be eternal, divine. It should be appreciated by all people irrespective of race or region or culture. It should be universal. I seek to create some everlasting images on celluloid that will linger on in the viewer's memories for a long time. The images should not only be beautiful but also meaningful. It should be a spiritually elevating philosophical experience. It should be timeless for it is what you are going to leave as your legacy, your monument. It should be something by which people will remember you for, long after you had gone.

22. Have you seen the concept of 'Beauty' change in the course of your career as a cinematographer?

During my career the concept of beauty has changed from being only external to inner beauty as well as meaningful beauty and beauty with a purpose.

23. Why is the pursuit of 'Beauty' alone the motivation for so much cinematography? Can there be other motivations?

People want to see beautiful images. Though the sun rises and sets everyday, they don't have the time or patience to notice it the least. The very same people will sit dazzled by the Technicolor sunset on the screen. The easy way for a cinematographer to get appreciation is to cater this kind of audience by supplying beautiful images. But good cinematography is not a collection of beautiful images only. An individual shot of, say, a sunset has no value of its own in a film. It is determined by the shot preceding and the one succeeding it. It is the totality of the film that matters most and the camerawork should be in tune with it. A layman may feel that a jerky out of focus shot as shoddy camerawork, if

he sees it as separate shots. But if it is used to convey the mental state of a disoriented character it will be hailed as a masterstroke. Cinematography does not have an existence of its own. It is part and parcel of CINEMA.

24. Do you find that there is a generally accepted notion of an 'aesthetic minimum' for cinematography today? Does this constrain or enable you? Do you have your own, personal 'aesthetic minimum'?

Exotic locations, backlit bevy of damsels soft focussed and enhanced, dizzy remote crane acrobatics, odd low angle spot lighting of background and props etc have become the "aesthetic minimum" for today's cinematography. I don't set myself any such minimum. I would rather go out for the "maximum" to perfectly match my cinematography according to the subject of the film I am doing.

25. What are the aspects of the cinematographer's craft that you find unrealised in your working life? Just as a Director has the freedom to discuss an 'idea' and develop that into a script or screenplay, why does the cinematographer not have the same freedom to develop a specifically cinematographic conception into a full-fledged script!

A cinematographer can showcase his best work only when he teams up with a good, sensitive, sensible and understanding director. Unfortunately this is a rare commodity. The lack of imaginative scriptwriters is another problem. It becomes very frustrating to keep on doing mundane work day after day. I would like to do a lot of experimentation in terms of altering the processing techniques for both negative and positive, playing with contrast, with Lightflex etc. Try out surrealistic images in science fiction settings as well as do down to earth purposeful films that will enlighten our people.

It is a good idea but the cinematographer himself should direct it if it has to be fully realised into a fine film.