

R.V. RAMANI

Can you tell us about what it was like to assist, whom you assisted and what were the kind of work conditions that you faced as an assistant? How assisting was a totally different experience in terms of learning from being in the film institute?

Yeah, assisting is a different ball game all together. In the film institute, you still have your own entity, a whole entity. You are a student and as a student you are learning, so it's a full on thing. So, there are no half-baked decisions to take. But when you are assisting, it's not a full on thing. You are assisting a cameraman. So your role is just to assist. You don't have any other identity, and it is not a complete identity. I find this incompleteness of the role of assisting very interesting.

I assisted a lot of people actually. When I was in the institute I assisted one cameraman called Asid in a feature film because he desperately wanted an assistant cameraman. It was one of those low budget films. They used the normal tape recorder for sound recording and 16mm film. It was a very rough and tough kind of filmmaking and I quite enjoyed that work. It was just a 15-day schedule and a very ordinary kind of family drama. It was good working in that film.

Then I also assisted Prashant Desai. All this while I was still in the institute. Whenever there was a gap, I used to go out to work for a documentary. After passing out from the Institute (FTII), I worked with a cameraman called Bharat Nerkar. That was my first work in a television serial called *Bante Bigarte*. So, I worked on 13 episodes. It was entirely shot in Film City in one studio. So, that was a very hectic experience for me, two shifts, two and a half shifts, and even three shifts together at times. I worked continuously and I was completely in-charge of the lighting. He (Nerkar) was there looking at the other things. When

I took the job, the producer of the serial asked me if I can shout at the light boys or do I know how to control the light boys. I said I can relate with the light boys but I don't want to control them and I won't shout at them. In the film industry there is this notion that, the more you scream at the light boys the better you are as a cameraman. Somehow I felt that you don't need to do all that. All you need to do is to really know your work and then you can get things done very easily. I had a big argument right in the beginning, when I had just joined this place. The cameraman and producer expected me to shout and take over the production. I told them this was not the way you do things.

I had a fantastic relationship with the light boys. All of them were expert light boys. They were very good. It was very beautiful working experience. It was tough. It was again a family drama and there was one instance when two or three times the bulb got blown off. And these people billed the producer. And this producer would throw fits and shout, "How can you do this. I am producing and this is too expensive for me." He started shouting at the light boys and once when he was doing this I started shouting at him. I said, "What are you doing. These things happen in any production". I shouted back at him, "I said you can't shout at the light boys. You should understand what production means. You are using so many light and these bulb will really blow off sometimes". That was the last time I worked with him. After that I didn't work with him.

It is all very interesting, the terminology that gets used - 'Light Boys' and 'Cameramen'. There can be a 60-year-old light boy and 30-year-old cameraman.

That was the first thing that hit me when I joined the industry. The first notion was that you have to shout at the light boy. Just like in a factory a supervisor has to supervise so that producer feels like there is some work going on. So that he can sit back and relax. First of all I had to challenge all of this. According to me, this is not the way you should work. Lighting is not something you can do like that. It is a technical thing, an aesthetic issue. And I proved that

you don't have to shout or raise your voice to be able to do lighting. All you need to do is to coordinate everything and everybody in a nice way.

Then I joined A.K. Bir for a long stint. I joined him because I used to like him for his discipline. I always thought he had got kind of personal trip about life. I particularly liked the discipline part and so I joined him. I worked with him in lots of ad films and then many teleplays. One of these was directed by Vijay Mehta and another was directed by Girish Karnad. These were all wonderful experiences for me. I really thought that all these people were all very good in their work. Girish Karnad made a T.V. Serial called *Amma-Ne*. It was a Hindi Television programme about some children on their way back from school. There was this old bungalow where they all played. They used to play at being adults and they would get very serious about it all. This led to a fight amongst them. One of the girls runs away and hides and all the boys leave for the home. Then the girl falls asleep and she dreams that her mother who had died had come and woken her. These situations required some heavy-duty shot taking.

There was a shot, I remember, when the mother comes and wakes this child up from her dream. I think Bir was watching through the monitor. I was shooting from the point of view of the girl. The mother would come into the frame, put her hand forward (and we worked this out in such a way that when she touches the lens, the image does not distort). It was correct. Oh God! It was so freaked out. I remember that shot so much, the lighting and every thing. It was a night shot, she comes and just puts her hand forward and touches the girl! That one shot I remember so well. It was a very strong image. The kind that makes your body shudder when you watch it. So that was one fantastic thing. Grish Karnad was very good in dealing with children. Whatever criticism one may have about him, I remember that particular play he did was fantastic.

Similarly, Vijay Mehta's '*Vada Chirebandi*' another famous play made into a television programme was also fantastic. I really liked the way she dealt with actors and with people generally. She had fantastic public relations. It was too much to watch. She was at her peak at that time.

Do you think there is any difference in lighting patterns that a television drama requires as compared to feature films?

Different lightening patterns?

We ask this because translating a script on to TV is very different from translating a screen play onto film, because there is a certain unity of action within one's space. Were you shooting it like a film or were you shooting like a play?

It was shot like a play. The play was going to be telecast as a piece of theatre, not as a film. But we did have shot breakdowns. Bir had worked out how to do each segment and how to take the shots but it was very much the play and the feeling of theatre had to be retained. There were some elaborations, like some long track shots. Wherever there was a possibility we could do that but the idea was to document the play in a way that did justice to the performance, the enactment. It was a fantastic experience in both these works. Then I did a lot of television serials like *Ek Kahani* and ad films as well.

Were you shooting yourself or were you still assisting?

I assisted, I was only assisting people at that time. Then A.K. Bir, without telling me took on a commercial film. He just told me on the day of the shoot that what we were going to shoot was a feature film. So, I asked him, "how long is the project" and he said, "It is a long project, 85 days shooting." He asked me to report to the sets in Film City. We went to the sets. When we went to the

sets everything was ready there. Everything was set up, assistant director and all these people had already set up everything. The tracks were laid. That was the first day of the shoot. Shakti Kapoor and Anil Kapoor and all the other actors were ready. This was the first major shot, a dialogue sequence. Lighting was set up. It was all ready, the tracks were ready and the camera was ready and we just landed on the set, the dialogues were being rehearsed with the assistant director and we took the shot. At the end of it all, Bir said that you have to go and discuss the payment with the producer. I said I would not work. And that was the end of it.

That was the last experience you had with the commercial films?

That was the last experience with commercial films.

Why didn't you like it?

I don't know. It was a puzzle for me. The problem is with getting the right 'facing' for the stars, for Anil Kapoor or Shakti Kapoor, this is where the emphasis is always. You have to constantly 'show' the stars in the right way. I lost all interest and realized that I didn't want to continue this kind of work. I don't want to continue this work.

You never worked together again? (With A.K. Bir)

No, not after that. After that I worked with Anil Mehta on a long documentary serial, about the music and dance of the Northeast states.

Someone called Modi, a big businessman with a lot of property and business interests in the north east was funding the fantastic experience. I liked travelling to all those places, remote places and filming this and making everybody dance. It was good. It is good as you get a rhythm of it, the kind of rhythm they work on ad films.

Was there any difference in working with Bir and someone like Anil Mehta?

Bir is very stern and strong person on the sets. You can't stand next to him, it is impossible to stand next to him. The way he holds the camera is tough, his grip is very tough. He doesn't intend to be tough but his physical method is such that he can't have anybody stand next to him. So you have to be very careful when you work with him. He has a very strong energy.

What was his relationship with assistants?

It was very good actually. I like the way he is. I did not have any problems about that, and what I learnt from him is his sincerity. You have to hold on to that, otherwise the shooting collapses.

But, in a documentary film, the position of a cameraman can be quite different.

I am not saying that he should be invisible, but it is not as if reality can be arranged for the cameraman, like it can be in a feature film. He cannot be a fulcrum in a location like he can be in the feature film set. You worked as an assistant for a long time in feature films and then have worked as a documentarist – so how would you respond to this question in the light of your experience.

In a documentary, I think a cameraman has more responsibility because he controls the way you look at reality. In a feature film there are various ways of controlling things but in a documentary it is not so much specially when dealing with real life situation. It is completely in your hands. You know what are the parameters you are functioning under. What I mean is that I understand that in terms of responsibility you are looking through what I see and what I mean is slightly different.

In a feature film set, all power in a sense flows through the camera, and ultimately through the person holding the camera. Sometimes I have noticed that people think that this is the case even when they are working in a documentary. They want to recreate that (feature film) situation but nothing works. It doesn't work. There are other cameramen who, I am not saying will become invisible, but whose presence is of a different kind. It is not a fulcrum like presence. The relationship between them and what they are shooting is not like a magnet and iron filings. Whereas sometimes, people who trying to be like a magnet are not able to get any results.

Please explain this.

Naturally, even I don't work like a magnet. You know, though I say all this about sincerity and fulcrum and all that, I don't myself suck the energy that is out there. I don't do it. I don't attract anything to myself. It's just that it passes through me. It does route through me and through the image.

But, decision-making has to go through the cameraman; a cameraman has to be like a conducting device, has to allow all that is there to pass through him. In fact you have to be completely porous. In fact I would believe in this position that you don't assert a position. I actually would believe that you don't have to say 'sub khare ho jao' (stand at attention!) in the cameraman's presence, or that kind of thing. I don't do that. I am a silent person. But the intensity is there. It is there strongly but it is not apparent at a physical level. I am there, involved, completely involved.

It is true that additionally, in feature films, people management comes in. Dividing time, energy and attention between the lighting, light boys and the artists in terms of movement, or with the camera department in terms of camera movement and with the directors in terms of deciding the form.

But most of this is there in the documentary as well. But there, you also have to manage yourself vis-a-vis people and lot of other things.

I have not done much in feature films. So far I have only done two feature films. In both these situations I experienced what it is to be in a strong pivotal position for myself. I enjoyed myself doing that.

As far as all the documentaries that I shot with others, for other directors. I again felt the same centrality. But what I do is to keep asking the directors to look through the camera for the simple reason that to basically understand what is their preference in terms of lending is.

In reality, particularly in the documentary, I came across a situation like, "why don't you catch that?" They see something, and they immediately want to shoot it, just like that. While you are shooting with a normal or a wide lens, suddenly they will look at something and they say, "catch that or take that." That's silly. This is the reason why you constantly clash with the directors. You know, because they are changing the '*stuti*', and as a result of this, you are getting distracted and you are not with what is there but you are getting distracted with something else. In situations like this I always have arguments.

Is it not because of lack of technical knowledge on the part of the directors?

Yes, but more due to a lack of '*being*' within the situation (of filming). They are more excited about events rather than making the film itself. You cannot move away from there, whatever is happening is on another plane. You cannot get involved with that. What do you do when you cannot get involved? You can watch it, you can empathize with it, you can see it, you can do all these things but your '*zeroing-in*' has to be *here*, where you are filming. When you internalize with your medium then you know how to deal with such situations.

But, do you not think that a documentary film maker must cultivate a certain agility, or at least cultivate or bring in to himself a certain ability to very quickly change what he is doing. In a feature film we will sometime sacrifice everything for the sake of a shot, conversely, in a documentary sometimes we may have to sacrifice a shot for something I am not talking about information only, rather what I mean is the ability to say – ‘okay this is a fantastic shot, but if I stay with this for too long, I may loose something which is more important.’

I think you are still thinking of shots, you are still talking about shots, that is all. There is nothing else to it. When you are shooting, you are only thinking of shots. Okay, you can take a teleshot and I am not saying you should not take a teleshot. But as long as you know that you are taking a teleshot, that is enough.

No, I am also not saying for instance one has to consider that if you are following a particular lensing you should break that unnecessarily. What I am trying to say is that sometimes there is because of the unpredictable nature of what might happen when we start shooting something, we are in a sense beginning to assert a certain kind of control over the situation. A shot begins to feel comfortable and then suddenly you are asked to feel uncomfortable again.

Yes.

It can be difficult. I can imagine that it is difficult for a cameraperson to constantly break himself or herself out of this comfort-discomfort swing.

Well I won't really go by these terms - comfort or discomfort. It is not like you are comfortable while shooting something. It is just that you don't necessarily want to break a sudden flow, I would rather substitute the word flow – for comfort.

I know I am into a certain kind of flow of shot taking, of looking at things when the shot is fine and then there is a suggestion coming for something completely and drastically different. Now, you say that this is intended to break it, break the rhythm. You can accept it. If you wish.

The cameraman is can be seen as a reliever or dissolver, he is a dissolver of tensions. Actually I like to do all these roles - like being a healer, making everything relaxed, that is what I do. I guess, just making things, cool and all.

Tell us something about the way you approach movement? Mobility.

Mobility? Let me tell what someone told me recently. Recently, I had some screening of my work at Alliance Francaise. The director of Alliance Francaise, he suddenly came up to me and said he used to be an assistant cameraman in France many years ago. He said to me "You have a natural gift of movement" So, I said "...listen, you are lying." But he persisted, saying "You have a natural gift for movement. Whether or not you move, you are in perfect unison with the subject and I always felt this when I looked at your shots."

I think for me it is never simply - movement. It is rhythm. You cannot plan a camera movement unless there is a reason for it. Planning has nothing to do with the property of movement of the camera. It is nothing to do with that. You have to find the rhythm of what you are shooting and if it requires, a movement, you should get into that. For instance, in *Brahma - Vishnu - Mahesh* there is the movement of the sea. It is a great shot. It goes on and on and on and then every time it comes, it brings new surprises. You kind of enjoy yourself taking that shot and it is just getting into the rhythm of what you are shooting. It is just that. Movement comes naturally there. After that, you don't have to think of movement. There the magnetism comes. It is stuck there and you just have to do this. I can't

do anything else. It goes, wherever it takes me. So, I never think of movement in a conscious way, especially in documentary and short films.

I once tried to recreate this experience in a fiction film, in a track shot in a song sequence. It was a propaganda film, in Hyderabad, made in the style of a Telegu film, with a comedian, with a lot of people dancing in groups. For the entire sequence the camera moves up from or comes down towards a bunch of dancers. I remember those movements. They were very typical kinds of movements. And on top of that I tried to do my kind of movements in this set up, imagine!

Is the decision to move your camera a result of something you thought before , or is it quite instinctive and spontaneous. How do you make the decision to move?

It is completely instinctive. There is not pre-conceived notion about movement at all. I remember the first shot I took in one of my films, it was with a betacam camera. I was already in the mood to take the shot. So you go there, put the camera on the tripod. The camera was rolling, and I hit it like this and like that (describes some visual movements), something like a *lachak*. I never thought of this shot before. It just happened there spontaneously. It was a great shot actually. I liked the shot very much. All the frames were good. There was also a certain amount of violence to it. You just cannot plan a shots.

Okay, I understand that you start rolling instinctively, but the decision to stop the camera in any shot?

Wherever the camera rests, the rolling has to stop. Just like the way you start, you stop, similarly.

You know, sometimes when you plan a movement and even when you try a lot, the desired feel never comes. The shot never takes place like it was previously planned because something is not in sync, and that is why it does not come. Murphy's law. It is better to trust and abide by your instincts.

One question I would like to ask you because you edit most of your films yourself. Now when we go to the editor with our material, one thing I have seen is that you or in fact the whole group, the cameraman especially, fall in love with their shots. So sometimes it may become difficult to judge. You require someone who is not in love with your shots, in a sense. Like getting a critic to look at your work. So I am talking about the decision you have to take when you have to discard a shot without actually harming the content of the material. For this you may have to take some decision where you want not to fall in love with your shots so that you could discard some shots without having to feel as if you are cutting off your arm. How do you deal with that, what makes you discard a shot?

Well no I don't fall in love with my shots. I am not so possessive about my shots. And when you are shooting, you know that you have to discard. I have to start a new process to further progress and reach/create the next shot, so it is always in my consciousness that without discarding I cannot move further, so it just happens. Sometimes I hit it slow, sometimes fast. And sometimes the process helps to anticipate the rest of the shots also. So when I am shooting I have to keep thinking about what is coming up next, what will I be doing next, etc. So when I am shooting I cannot just shoot, I have to think all the time, the structure, the plan etc. So I cannot leave the responsibility to someone else. If the editor is a friend of mine, then I discuss that.

Sometimes things don't happen, and you know you can shoot. So it is not dependent on how exciting the subject matter it is. It is entirely dependent on the way you perceive things, reaching the way you are looking at it. Shooting means just how you look at things. And, There may be many ways of looking at things.