

V.K. MURTHY

What is the kind of family atmosphere you grew up in?

I am from Mysore city. You see, I was the son of an Ayurvedic doctor. Actually I lost my mother when I was very young, when I was 7 years old, and my education was not quite smooth.

I studied till high school, and studying was not very easy for me. I was never a "good student". I must have passed the matriculation exam in 1941 or so. I just wanted to go to Bombay to join films. I think I was about 14 -15yrs old at that time. I went away in half pants to become an actor and not a cinematographer. You know in younger days the feeling is like that, and that is how I went there.

Tell us the story of how you went to Bombay...

It was so very difficult. I didn't have any money. I had a distant relative who stayed in Bombay, and that is all I knew. But I did not have any address for him. I did not know how I was going to find him either.

On the train there was one inspector of education in Jaipur who was traveling with me from Pune to Bombay. When he saw me in half pants he asked me, "Young man where are you going?"

I said, "I am going to Bombay."

He asked, "Have you been to Bombay before?"

I said "No, never..."

He asked, "Is there anybody coming to pick you up?"

I said "No, I have to go and find my relative" .

He said, "You are a fool, you had better come with me. I am staying in Bombay for 1or 2 days and then proceeding to Jaipur. I am staying in a hotel room, so you can come and stay with me and try to find your relative".

He was a very nice man. It was so kind of him to be concerned about me. I knew that in two days I would somehow have to find my relative. I knew that he was in the police and I thought that it would b easy to find out about an inspector of police. I called up a police station and luckily I found the very man I was looking for.

He said, "stay at the hotel, I'll pick you up".

He was on night duty and there was some confusion about the time that he said that he would come to pick me up. Meanwhile, the inspector of education took me to the beach. His train to Jaipur was at 10-o-clock, he said we would just go for a stroll, so we went.

We came back at 8:30 or so, my relative had already come looking for me and left. Luckily for me he had left his address, so that I could go over to his place. I must say that it was very nice of him to have done so. I thanked the inspector of education and left to look for my relative. I found him at that address that he had left for me. He had never seen me and I had never seen him but I could tell that he was related to me. So he took me in and then went away to night duty.

This is the beginning of the story. This is how I came to Bombay. It was the month of August. It was raining heavily. It was terrible and depressing. What to do? You can imagine what I was feeling like. I was a 14-15 year old boy who had never stepped out of Mysore city, not even to go to Bangalore. And here I was, lost in Bombay. And it was raining. I started crying, thinking that I had to go back. So that was the situation at that time. Then of course I stayed there with my relative.

He asked me "Why did you come here?"

I said, "I want to join films".

He asked, "What do you mean by joining films?"

I had seen an advertisement in the newspaper for something like a film institute where all the departments were going to be taught, including acting. It was a very nice advertisement made out of glazed paper. I showed it to him. This is what I had come for.

This was in 1941. The advertisement mentioned a fee of Rs.250 for the course. That was a lot of money in those days. The train fare from Mysore to Bombay was 12 Rupees. So that is how I went to Bombay. I had seen that ad and made up my mind.

My relative also looked at the ad and said, "Let's go there tomorrow morning, and see if it really is an institute or not".

So I went and found the place that had been mentioned in the advertisement and saw that it was just a small office, a room and with a few

tables, chairs, brochures and papers. I asked the person there, "Is this the Prabodh Institute?" (That was the name of the institute given in the ad).

"Yes-yes, come sit down."

He asked me where I had come from and when I told him that I had come all the way from Mysore he said that he would offer me a concession since I had come from so far away. He said "You can give me a hundred rupees now and pay the rest later. So what course would you like to enroll for?"

I said "I can give you 100Rs, but where is the institute? Where will the classes be held?"

He said. "Oh, that will be arranged, don't worry."

Then I got a little upset. I insisted on knowing whether I'll be taught in a studio or in a school. He said "We'll tell you everything, first of all just fill this form and pay 100Rs."

Then I said "I don't have 100Rs" and saying this, I went back to my relative's house. I told him what had happened.

He said, "You are a bloody fool, there are so many people who are just out to cheat people like this. Did you pay them anything?"

Luckily for me, I had not paid them anything. He told me to stay where I was and said that he would try and find some people who were connected with films, in the hope that they could give me some opening in the field.

Of course he was not that interested in finding a chance for me in films and he didn't know many people either. It was very difficult to get to know people in the film industry and moreover people who were working in films at that time were actually quite badly off. They were not paid well at all. People wanted to join films just for the glamour.

After some time my relative get in touch with a music director called Vasant Desai. He was one of the top music director's of those days and used to give the music for Shantaram's films.

This did not really work out either. Desai was in Pune; we were in Bombay. We never met. Then he took me to meet another musician who worked in films and introduced me to him. He thought that I wanted to work as a musician.

He asked me "Do you know anything about music?"

I said, "I have learnt a little bit, I can play the violin".

"Can you sing?" he asked.

I said, "No, I can't, but why are you asking all these things?"

He said, "Wouldn't you like to join films as a musician?"

I said, "No I have come for some other purpose, either to become a technician or an actor."

Then he said, "I am sorry, I can't help you at all"...

So that ended then and there. But, over time, I went to all the studios. The security people at the gates would say to me, "Who are you, go away from here!" I went to Bombay Talkies. I went to Prabhat Studio and to Ranjit Studio. I went back again to Bombay Talkies. As usual, of course, the security men didn't allow me in. So I went back to where I had come from.

I had to come back actually. I had to appear for the matric examination in 1941 but I had wasted three to four months in Bombay, so I had to re-appear again. I realized my mistake.

By that time my father had retired. We didn't have much money. It had become quite difficult for us at home. We were three people at home, my elder brother, my father and myself. But it was difficult to run the household with the pension of Rs. 30 that he used to get. So he started teaching primary students (some 2-3 boys) at home. He used to earn 9-10 rupees by doing that, which helped pay my school fees.

But the main thing at that time for me was that I loved music.

I was learning to play the violin. Luckily for me, that year they had introduced music as an optional subject and this helped me a lot. I was bad in all subjects, especially science, maths and history. I was only good at art and music in school and secretly wanted to become an actor. Frankly, I would have failed in school if music as an optional subject had not been introduced.

I had started studying music earlier. Opposite our house there lived a man who learnt music, a violin teacher used to come to his house to give

lessons. I used to go there and sit, and I got this craze, or you could say inspiration, to learn how to play the violin. I requested my father to buy me a violin. And he bought one for me. Can you imagine for how much? For three rupees! That helped me a lot, so before I even reached High School I started learning how to play the violin, I think at that time I was around 12-13 years.

Did you watch lot of films? Where did you got your love for films?

That's a nice question - I did see a lot of films. You will ask me how could I afford to get to films that time? You see, when I lost my mother I was about 8-9. So a cousin of mine became very sympathetic towards me. He was a harmonium player in Cinema halls. You see, in those days you needed musical accompanists for silent films. In fact I have seen him playing the harmonium when the film was going on. When a fighting scene came, the music would be different, sad scene had different kind of music, and so on. There was a harmonium, one tabla *walla*, one flute and some bells. 3-4 musicians in all. So my cousin used to play the harmonium.

As I said, he used to sympathize with me, he would say "Motherless fellow, what will you do, come to the theatre and spend some time with me"... and that is how every day I used to go. But in the interval time I came back. He used to drive me out, saying, "...Get out now, go home and study".

What kind of films?

In those days, there were mainly stunt films. What we call "action films" these days were called stunt films. American films, English and Hindi Films. Tamil was not so popular. There were no Kannada films then.

And what was the atmosphere of the cinema halls?

The halls were very nice, very well maintained I should say. And the people who went to see films in those days were nice, not *goondas* like in these days. Nowadays, they tear off the seats.

It was quite good in those days. But, by that time silent film era had gone and talkies started coming. So where would these musicians (like my cousin) go? The proprietor of the theatre sympathized with these people (the musicians) and made them gate keepers and ticket collectors. My cousin being the only educated person (his education was not much, but he had gone to college for a year) was asked to manage the office, the collection and things like that. So that is how I got the bug of joining the films.

So did you think then of becoming a cameraman?

No, no, no. At that time it was only the craze for being an actor. This is what it was like until I had gone to Bombay, got disappointed and returned. Then I decided that I am unfit to become an actor, and that too in Hindi films. My brain (mind) was not mature at that time. Then after that I started concentrating in my studies. This was in 1942. Quit India Movement was on. I joined this student freedom fighter group and got arrested. They put me in jail with other students. Then after 3-4 months they gradually they sent us home. I had lost touch with the lessons in school and all that. I somehow got through the matric exam. I didn't know what to do in the future. I had to do something with film, this I knew.

But still, it was 1940.

A relative, who was in Pune owned a big bookshop, a law bookshop. His wife was related to my mother. So he said come to Pune, let me try to bring you up (look after you). So I went there. He knew a cameraman, he took me to the studio, introduced me. I hung around for a long time there.

He (the cameraman) didn't allow me to come even 10 feet near the camera. That cameraman's name was Purohit. I can't ever forget that name because he didn't allow me to come 10 feet near the camera. Actually that camera was Debris camera. It looks like a box camera and nothing else. I was there for 2 months. I would go there every day stay 10 feet away from the camera and go back home. 2 months, mind you young people, it tortured me. It was real torture I tell you. Then I said to myself "...it's of no use, why should I stay here and just look at people working and learn nothing, get to know nothing about what they were doing".

Then I decided to go back to Mysore. This was the second disappointment. Once, many years later, after I had become successful, when I had become a cameraman, when my name was flashed a little bit here and there, this same Purohit came to me asking for an assistant's job. He said to me, "... take me as your assistant ". He was much older than me. So I said, "...I am sorry, you are a much older person. I can't take you as my assistant. I can help you financially." So I gave him 10 Rupees and said. "Please don't come to me again". So this is another incident that I can never forget.

There is another incident, in some ways quite similar. When I had first gone to Bombay Talkies as a cameraman, the security men who didn't allow me to go inside when I had gone there earlier as a boy (trying to become an actor), was still there. So I looked at him, I forgot his name, it was Bahadur or something. I asked him, "Kaise ho?" (how are you).

He said " theek hun jee" (I'm fine).

"Kitne saal se kam kar rahe ho"" (How many years have you been working here). I went on asking him. He said, "jab se paida hua, 25 saal to ho gaya ho ga" (Ever since I was born, must be 25 years)

I said "Tum ko maloom naheen hoga, main aaya tha, tumne mujhe ander bhi nahen jaane diya tha" (You probably would not know, I had once came here, and you had not let me go in)

He said, "vo to hum hamara kaam kiya hoga... maaf kijiye" (I was only following orders, please forgive me).

You know, poor fellow, what could he do, he was only doing his job. But these are the few incidents where I have felt hurt, so I never forget these.

So then you join the Bangalore Institute.

When I came back I was from Mysore another cousin of mine, who was very close to me, wrote to me and said that an institute had opened which was offering cinematography as one of the subject. He wrote, "You are so interested in this, you had better come here and join".

He sent me an application form as well. By that time my father had retired and I didn't have money. My brother had left home and joined the military, I couldn't ask him for any help either. So it don't know what to do, or

how to go to Bangalore. It was a very bad situation. Still, I tried to borrow some money so that I could go to Bangalore, ask about the details. When I got there I was told that admission would start in a week's time. I was told to come at that time. They had mentioned Science as a required qualification. I had Science only as an optional subject. That itself was against me. So it had to get a recommendation letter from somebody to get admission.

My father had taught the Deputy Commissioner of that time when he was a small boy. I thought that this influence might work. The commissioner gave me a letter for the principal of the school. I came to Bangalore. He said, "OK, come to the institute".

I went there. He asked me "You are not a science student how can we give you a seat?"

I said, "Sir it's my ambition since childhood. I have been to Bombay and Pune for this. I actually worked at Saraswati Studio. It will be disappointing if you don't give me a seat."

So he said, "Ok, go and meet the manager and pay your fees". I didn't know I had to pay any fees.

The institute was conceived by Vishweshwarayya, his plan was to start an institute that taught not only theory, but also practical skills like carpentry, shoemaking, tailoring as well as civil and mechanical engineering along with cinematography and sound recording. Vishweswarayya donated his salary that was lying untouched from 20 years (whatever salary he was supposed to have got from the Mysore palace for his services as the Diwan of Mysore state). He

had donated this money with the idea that the people who cannot afford to go to college for engineering degrees and people who didn't need much education to become a shoemaker or a practical electrician should be able to enter this institute. So this was his idea and luckily this was the subject and I got it. But still there was the matter of paying the fees.

The school fees were 60Rs. 10Rs. was the admission fee and 50Rs term fees. So I almost fainted. I had just borrowed just 3Rs. to come to Bangalore from my neighbour. I didn't know what to do. In desperation I went to see a friend of mine from Mysore who was also in Bangalore. This person was elder to me; he was working in shop, as a dealer of dal and sugar. He was a very close friend of mine. I went to his shop and sat there. He said, "Why have you come, what has happened?"

I told him what the matter was, I was literally crying. This was the first time that I had cried. He said, "What's wrong with you?"

I said, "I had thought that this was supposed to be free education. But now they have introduced fees. So I came here with a great ambition to study, but now I can't afford it."

He said, "Don't be silly. Are you a girl that you are crying? You want to study, how much money do you want."

I said, "I want Rs.60."

He said. "Come, tomorrow morning, take the money and arrange your admission".

Even today I can't forget this. With that Rs.60 I went and joined the institute. Not only this, for as long as I was studying there, for 2 1/2 Yrs, he would help me with fees as well as petty cash

Had you done any photography before that?

No, I had done nothing. I had no camera, nothing. I came from a very poor family so I could not afford a camera or anything like that and unfortunately those were the days when Second World War was going on so films were not available either. Even a professional photographer could get only two or three rolls per month. And an amateur could only get one roll of a film called 120.

So I could neither afford to buy a camera or any film and nor did I have any practice. Only after joining the institute we used to study a lot of theory with equipment which was very old. There was one Balendo camera which should have been kept in a museum. Even our professor was not a professional cine photographer; he only knew still photography. So, there was a lot of theory but hardly any practicals. Somehow for 2 years I studied all this. From the third year they sent us for practical training in different studios and to have practical training. So that was the thing that helped us. I preferred to go to Bombay as my relative was there. It's only at that time that I was able to know something about the camera, lighting and other interconnected things.

So you began working as an assistant?

We were only apprentices, that's all there was. There were three studios that accepted us as apprentices, one was Prakash studio in Andheri, next to that there was another one (whose name I don't remember) and then there was another one called Mohan Studio. Big studios like Bombay Talkies did not take us in. I was in Prakash studio, we were some 30 students in all, 5-6 had

gone to Madras and other 5-6 students in Bombay, so I preferred Prakash studio.

Was KPR Nair who later worked at the Pune film institute with you, or junior to you?

Mine was the first batch in the Bangalore Institute, there were no Nair with me and I was the last student in rank in my class. I was interested mainly in art and music. I spent my time playing violin with a great dancer, a contemporary of Uday Shankar known as Ram Gopal, who went to London later. So I was with Ram Gopal for 6 months and he told me that he would give me Rs. 250 salary per month. Can you imagine - Rs. 250! Anyway, I didn't get even 2 and half Rupees from him, but I was going there all the same. But my music had helped me all through. When I came to Bangalore my music helped me a great deal. Do you want to know how?

You see, in the Ganapati festival in Bangalore everybody calls musicians to their homes and arranges for musical programmes. There was one student home in Bangalore called Ram Krishna Students Home. In this place they provided 30 students free boarding and lodging. The cousin of mine who had first called me to Bangalore was studying medicine and was one of the students there.

He knew the financial problems that I had. So he took me to meet the secretary of the students home. This man said, it's already late to be admitted here. It so happened that during the Ganapati festival this Student Home arranged Ganapati celebrations and used to call musicians for musical

programmes. So my cousin told me to go there and play the violin. So I played there for one and half-hours. It so happened that one of the main persons; a trustee of the Students Home was present in the function. This man liked my playing, and he called secretary, asking him if I was a boarder? The secretary told him that I could not get a seat over here. So he said remind me about him (me) in the next meeting of the board of the Students Home after 15 days.

So then they called me and said "...look young man, there is no vacancy as such, but if you want to have food here, you are welcome". So I said (to myself), "I was quite lucky, the music helped me".

When I joined Ram Gopal the dancer, he didn't pay me even a single rupee for 6 months. That was in my second year. In fact I was bunking the classes because of this man. But I was told that if I missed even one day more I would not be promoted, and that I should take care. Then I gave up and stopped going to play for Ram Gopal.

But, once I went to Bombay with Ram Gopal for an all India Dance Festival where Uday Shankar, RamGopal, Gopi Nath Thagamani from Madras and Janki were performing. These were the 'top dancers' of that time. During this event I got to be quite close to another man, a Punjabi called Mohan Sehgal, (Zohra Sehgal's husband).

This helped me later on. After my apprenticeship in Bombay was over, I was looking for work. I used to meet Mohan Sehgal regularly. He said to me - "Murthy why are you wasting your time, I know a music director in films, join him as a violinist, he will take you to recordings". I agreed to this suggestion. This

man that Mohan Sehgal knew was Sardar Malik (Anu Malik's father). He was getting his break at that time, and was a rising music director. I met him and he asked me to come for his rehearsals. In this way I get to know some music directors who would contact me to come and play for their recordings.

After some time there was a recording in Jayant Desai's studio. This Malik was giving the music and I was one of the musicians. Luckily for me, this Mohan Sehgal was also there and it so happened that he knew the cameraman of that studio, Dronacharya. Sehgal introduced me to Dronacharya, saying "Murthy has come from Bangalore after studying cinematography and he is looking for a job". Dronacharya said to me, "Ok come from tomorrow to work with me". So you see, if I had not played the violin, I would never been able to afford staying in Bangalore - it paid for my food, and if I had not played the violin with Ram Gopal, I would never have met Mohan Sehgal, and if I had not met Mohan Sehgal I would never have met Dronacharya and If I had not met Dronacharya I would probably never have got work in the camera department. Music has been very lucky for me.

What was the kind of teaching at the Bangalore Institute?

Nothing at all really. Only theory was taught. Nothing but theory. But even then, for the chemistry part and the physics part of the course they didn't have teacher. We were going to the college and there was some book on screenplay that we would look at from time to time. I don't know how we learnt anything. We were wasting time, that is all.

You never shot anything as a student there?

No, we didn't have a movie camera. Our H.O.D had a personal 16mm movie camera. Once in a while he would let us do some things in that camera. But you can't call that shooting. You could say that it was a waste of three years but the 'theory' did help me get ahead once I had joined the job with Dronacharya. Once, when I went to the studio I saw that he had opened up a Mitchell camera. People had just started using the Mitchell camera at that time. So this studio (where I was working with Dronacharya) had also bought a new camera on that day. He had opened up all the lenses for cleaning and racking. I was not allowed inside this room at that stage, I was standing near the door. He and his two assistants were cleaning, and he was irritated with them because he thought that they had spoilt a new camera. He was not getting the proper focus. They didn't have even this much knowledge, that if it is a question of matching with the calibration, they should recalibrate the camera with the lenses.

You see, there were nothing like theoretical knowledge in those days. It went on like this for three hours. I watched all this silently. Finally, he called me and said "You have studied cinematography, look at this, the lens is ok everything is ok, but still I am not getting focus. Why is that?"

I said, "...maybe the ground glass is inverted". Now, I hadn't seen a Mitchell camera in my life; that was the first time that I was coming across one. So how could I say that it was a problem with the ground glass for sure? So I said, "I don't want to touch the camera sir, but please take out the ground glass."

He did what I had suggested and luckily my guess turned out to be correct. Then he looked and said to me "You, young man have ruined my experience of 14 years in one day."

But he was very happy with me and appointed me as a 3rd assistant and said that we would be having shooting tomorrow, and asked me to report. So shooting started. He asked me - "Do you know focusing?"

I said, "Yes I do". Actually, I hadn't ever touched the camera, but luckily for me, somehow I did it for 2-3 days. On the evening of the 3rd day I was focusing, I looked at him, he was behind me. After focusing, the character had come and stopped at the focus mark on the floor. He called for a "cut" and asked me, "Why are you watching my face, do your focus?"

I said, "sir, I have done it all right, he is on the mark and my focus is all right". I was almost in tears. That was the last shot of the day. Next morning I came to the studio for payment, I was standing in the musician's line and this cameraman came, actually he had gone to the lab, and checked that the focus and everything was ok.

"Why are you standing here", he said, "The camera department's line is there".

I said, "No sir I want payment for my music recording."

He told me to go and stand in the camera line and they paid me Rs.100 (Rs. 25 for music recording and Rs. 75 for camera assistant). I was shocked to see Rs.100 in my hands. This was my first experience of working in the camera department.

You continued with him?

I continued with him for 10 months. I was paid Rs.75 per month. It was sufficient you can live.

What was the film you were shooting?

Maharana Pratap, a historical, another one was *Sati Tulsi*, mythological, another social *Renuka* which was being directed by Ramesh Sehgal. These were the three films that were being shot by Dronacharya and I was assisting him. From 3rd assistant, I became 1st assistant in two months - and all because of the "theory".

What was the kind of lighting that you saw being used in these films?

Lighting, the general conception of lighting that was prevalent at that time was - "Everything should be all right, all should be lit, should be visible." But in my mind it was not like that. I did not like this flat lighting. I had begun seeing a lot of English movies at that time. From the time that I came to Bombay - from 1946 to 1960 - I had not left even a single film unseen. Even if I didn't have money, even if I had to go to sleep an empty stomach also, still I would see a film.

What did you not like about what was being done in terms of lighting?

At that time I couldn't properly understand why they were not following the natural lighting source. This used to bother me a lot. I used to try a few things to change this from time to time.

For instance, suppose there is a sequence in a jail. I would tell the cameraman (I was the new assistant, remember) - "Sir, may I suggest something. Sir I want a light outside the window and want to get lighting on the wall. He would say "Ok, let's try it that way. So that how gradually I would try out things that I saw in my mind.

At that time I saw an Indian movie - *Amrapali* produced by Laxmi Studio. I don't exactly remember the name of the producer, but I knew that Fali Mistry photographed it. When I saw that film it felt like I had got a jolt of lightning in my brain. I thought to myself "This is the man I should go and join."

The very next day I went to Laxmi studio and told this cameraman that I would like to work with him and like to learn the sort of thing that he was doing. I didn't go to the studio where I was working for the next few days. The 10th day was the salary day, so I went on that day, to collect my salary and to leave the job. The cameraman I usually assisted was there. He said Murthy you have come, Fali Mistry is calling you. I said, "Why are you joking" and he said to me - "You want to join him, don't you, so go and meet him."

I went to Laxmi studio, meet the manager and told him, "Mr. Mistry wants an assistant. I have come for that".

He said to me "Yes, we want, you will be paid Rs.100. Come from tomorrow."

I asked about salary and he said "We can talk about that later, but even if you talk to Mr. Mistry you won't get more than Rs.100."

When I heard this I felt very happy because I had been getting only Rs.75 before.

So, I said, "Yes sir, I will come tomorrow."

He said, "come at 9:00'o clock to the studio", I said, "Sir, tomorrow is Sunday". He said, "We have shooting tomorrow so you have to come."

So I went there the next day, a little early. I was sitting at a bench outside. I saw a car drive up and Fali Mistry get out of the car. Fali Mistry was very handsome, young and tall. I still remember that he was wearing spotless white shirt and trousers. I stood up and he came to me and asked "Are you Krishnamurthy, I heard you want to work with me".

I said, "Yes sir that's my ambition."

He said, "Come on let's get inside the studio."

It so happened that I was the only assistant working that day. We worked till evening and then and packed up.

Then he called me and said, "Look, I like you. You seem to be quite interested in the work. Did the manager said anything about the salary?"

I told him that the manager had told me that I would get Rs.100.

He said "Look Murthy, every month take some money from me besides salary"

I said, "No sir, thank you, even working with you is a great thing for me."

That's how I started working with him. I worked with him for 2-3 months, and he left the studio. So, I was worried about what to do. I was still working there, in Laxmi Studios. Then I took his telephone number from the manager and called him.

I said, "Mr. Mistry, I want to work with you."

He said "I have talked to the other company about you. You will be joining me and your salary will be Rs.500."

I fainted. You may feel I am exaggerating, but it's all true.

What year is this?

This was 1947. I remember because we were shooting on Independence Day, actually on the night of August 15th. The *mahurat* of a stunt picture had been fixed that night. Fali Mistry came after 2-3 days. He said to me "I have joined one Mr. K Aasif who is making a picture known as *Mughal-e-Azam* and I have talked about you and fixed your salary as Rs.100 but then you be here until we start that production," This meant that for a brief time, until that shooting started I was the boss in this studio.

There was one bossy assistant; his name was Kalyanwala. If there was any work on a Sunday, he would get irritated. He used to ask me to work in his place on Sundays. I said ok, I was getting extra. It was very good and there was hardly any work. I just had to focus the camera. So it continued like that for 7-8 months.

Was there any interior shooting done at that time?

Not really. They had put up a set in the studio, exterior of a bungalow that was there from the time I joined the studio till I left. Whoever came, worked there, all films were shot there, and I was just wasting time. Anyway I was getting money. I had to live till *Mughal-e-Azam* started.

By this time you must have had some idea about what you considered to be good photography?

Of course, that's why I joined Fali Mistry. There were so many good cameramen in those days - in English and American movies. I particularly liked this picture known as **Mildred Bees**, the heroine was Joan Crawford, it was the story of a woman with a teenage daughter who got married to someone. When this woman comes to know that the man she has married is like a villain, that he has designs on her daughter and that he has married her for her money she shoots him. See, I didn't forget that story part.

The lighting was beautiful, natural type of lighting, night shots were really beautiful. Another film I remember is '*Portrait of Dorian Gray*' and another one was a Joseph Cotton and Jennifer Jones film, '*Portrait of Jenny*'. It had a lot of shots of painting on the canvas, and you could see the threads of canvas with the kind of effects that he had given. I tried my level best to achieve things like this. I got somewhat near to it but I wouldn't say my work was ever equivalent to that, and I never felt that I had the kind of knowledge that could allow me to write to those people and ask how they had done these things

But were you also reading a lot at that time?

I used to read American Cinematographer. But in American Cinematographer they were not giving technical details, only a few stills and a few general questions to the cameraman about how he did what he did. Like for instance - How he shoots, about the location, about the lights used - that sort of thing, it was not a technical book.

What type of film stock was available?

There were three types of film stock available at that time - Plus X, Double X, and Triple X. Plus X was in 100ASA, Double X was 250ASA, or something like that. My goodness, it was so beautiful.

You used filters?

Yes, we used filters in lots of films. 15G was very popular in those days, and also 3N5, 5N5, 72B. I had lot of filters and diffusers to make girls look beautiful.

Where did you pick up this knowledge?

I picked this up from Fali Mistry. Some of my knowledge came from watching British films. I don't know whether or not you have seen British films of that period, I am talking of the B&W productions. One such film, for instance, is "*Great Expectations*" and there were others, particularly 'crime oriented' films that used what you may call 'frightening' type of lighting. Alfred Hitchcock's pictures and so many others used to inspire me very much.

Was there a lot of discussion amongst the assistants?

It was not good enough to think about. Right from the beginning of my career, I used to talk to the other assistants. When I was working with Dronacharya, I often asked things from his other assistants, just to know how much they know. Like for instance, I asked one fellow who had been working there for 5 years why they used to say 50 ka lens dalo, (put in the 50 lens) or what does it mean when Drona-ji asks for the 25-75 lens. What do these numbers mean. They would say, "Oh these are just numbers that Drona-ji has

given to the lenses as names". And these people had been working there for 4-5 years. I don't blame them because they only had practical knowledge.

Was there a lot of feeling of hierarchy and 'seniority'?

Yes, there was. It was not like that with people like Fali Mistry, but with others there definitely was. Remember the man who told me to stay 10 feet away from the camera. That sort of thing was there in every field. You know... "Ustad will never teach the student".

So the relationship with Fali Mistry was much more open?

Oh yes, he was a knowledgeable person; he was always reading American Cinematographer. From him I used to borrow these magazines and read whatever technical things they had in them. They would have stills, photographs that used to inspire me. If you see some of my stills in those days which I did, like a mad fellow, you would know what I mean.

I would pick up my camera in the rainy season and go out on to the streets. I would keep the camera in such a position that I could get the glare on the road and the streetlights, as well as the little bits of illumination on the trees near the streetlights. I didn't know much about exposure. Some time I would keep the shutter open for 1 minute, sometimes 2 min. or even more. You see, I was getting free film, I would use all the bits at the end of the rolls.

So then you started working on *Mughal-e-Azam*.

I didn't get that job at all because that picture didn't get made, at least not at that time. Fali Mistry was there for 4-5 months, then I told him I had

came for a job and not just to get paid for hardly doing anything. He told me, go to the Famous Studio at Mahalaxmi, it is the most modern facility with an air-conditioned lab.

Do you believe I got a call from there? I was just thinking, "How can I get this job". And so I talked to Fali Mistry again, he said, "the Famous Studio people are calling you."

I said, "How do they know me?"

He said, "Just go there, I'll be joining there soon, as well".

So I went there. The proprietor was a Marwari, a nice educated man.

He said, "look here, Murthy, there are 100 applications here for the job and I am told you are the best and you have not even applied. He went on, "So how much salary are you expecting".

I said, "I am not expecting anything, whatever Mr. Mistry says is fine with me".

He said, "If Fali Mistry says Rs.250 we can't give, we can give Rs.150."

I said " you talk to Fali Mistry, if he says 1Re. or 1000Rs. I will take that."

He laughed and said, "I liked your frankness".

Immediately, he took out a file, and said, "These are the things which should be in the studio, please go down and check that they are there."

So, I went there and saw 4 Mitchell cameras, 2 Imoh cameras, 100 5kw lights, 250 2kw lights, all this sort of things. I was the first man to be appointed

and when the studio started after two months Fali Mistry joined and we were a team.

In those days, if you were a producer, all you did was bring the actors to the studio. The cameraman and all other technical support were provided by the studio. As a director you could tell the studio art director what type of set you want. So it's a package deal with the studio. We as assistants worked with the cameramen. By chance, if the producer brought his own cameramen, we would have to work with him also. It was just a job.

Even if no shooting was going on, would you have to go and sign in every day?

Yes, it was a type of job but not a regular job which is 9:30 to 6:30. Sometimes, very rarely, the day would be extended.

Overtime?

Not me, I never got overtime. Only light boys got overtime. I was not given overtime even though I supported the other assistants. I think they had ego hassles with me. Producer's used to pay Rs.3 for every extra hour. This was supposed to be a good allowance. Rs.3, my goodness, maharajas were not eating food that cost Rs 3!

Anyway I was working like that. Fali Mistry had given me full freedom. He would tell me to do whatever kind of lighting I wanted. He just used to give me suggestions and left the execution to me. Every time we put up a light check, I would also go to lights and adjust them myself, and then come and

check the camera again. It was a 'one-man show. Except for the fact that I was not going on to the catwalks, that's all. The ground lights, I was handling myself. I was trying to sort out the problems, but not everything. I couldn't do that before I become a full-fledged cameramen with Guru Dutt He was the person who gave me a break.

You used to do lights from the ground also?

Yes of course, but only fill-in lights were used from the ground. Otherwise, overhead lights were used for the face lights. Backlight, and setting lights were used wherever possible. I did that to keep the pattern of shadows in a scene.

Did you use any diffusion on the lights to match them with each other?

Of course we had to match. Suppose there is a highlight, if it is there in this portion, then we have to use fill-in lights elsewhere. Highlight must be seen properly. Highlight means highlight.

We used to mainly have nets made especially from some silky type of cloth and besides that, some metallic nets. For the face light, we used to put diffusion even on the lens, and do a little bit of adjustment in the lighting and focusing.

How did you begin to work independently?

Gradually, Fali Mistry thought that I could begin to work independently. One producer came with a new film; following him the Director came and started

shooting with our properties. Mr. Mistry said to them, "Murthy will be the cameraman for you."

I was so happy. I did one full set of shooting for them - 3-4 days of shooting. I didn't remember the name of the producer; the director's name was *Walisaheb* (he ran away to Pakistan later with his wife, her name was Mamta Shanti or Mumtaz Shanti). Now as you know in those days everything was under one roof in the studio. Lab was there, theatre was there, everything was there - and under control of V.K Murthy, because you could say that I was the 'first' employee of the studio.

So, you could say that I had an upper hand with those people. Like, if I wanted to see anything in the theatre, I would just give the footage to the operator and see it. I could go to the lab and develop the things personally. Fali Mistry and I saw the results and both of us were happy. But, this picture was not completed, because *Walisaheb* ran away to Pakistan.

So my first 'break' in one sense went nowhere. I thought that if even after working for three years I have to continue working for another year as an assistant and still not get a break then I will give up camerawork and go back to playing the violin - at least that way I could earn more money. So, after 4 years I went to Fali Mistry told him this and said "From now onwards I do not want to work as anybody's assistant, so I am going".

He said, "pagal ho gaya hai kya, (have you gone crazy) you are the best assistant out of the 23 assistants that I have worked with, and I can see

that within one year you will get a break. I will make you a cameraman, please don't go."

So because of his order, or you may say because of his affection, I continued to work there.

Is there an incident that you remember fondly from your days as an assistant?

When I was working for Chetan Anand's film, he used to take very lengthy shots. One shot was almost 9 minutes long and involved some 5-6 characters, and that too on a small set. Moving a Mitchell camera in that situation was very difficult. Ratra was the cameraman and he was doing the operation. It was tough to do the lighting because all the characters were moving and turning in this confined space. So I was the one who did the lighting. I told the light boys whenever anyone gets a bad light just cover it up when the camera is on other side. You see, I had made some arrangements to get all the lights from the proper angle. Chetan was extremely happy with me, and he praised me so much that he actually he called me to his office and give me 25 Rupees as a gift.

I returned it, I said, "Please don't give cash, give me a pencil I'll keep it and proudly say that Chetan Saab has given it to me." and that is what he did.

Can you start with talking about how you first met Gurudutt? Was this before you ever shot for him?

Yes, this was before. As I said just now, I was working in Famous Studio as an assistant cameraman and Chetan Anand was shooting there,

Ratra was the cameraman. I was assisting him from the studio side. So halfway through the shooting I noticed a man who kept coming and going, coming and going, almost everyday. After seeing him several times, I asked Dev Anand who this man was.

Dev Anand told me, "His name is Guru Dutt, he is making a film and he is a director."

I said, "He looks very handsome, fit to be a hero."

This is first time I saw Guru Dutt and tried to know who he was. Then the production of *Baazi* started.

Guru Dutt came for the shooting of his first film *Baazi*, and took an office on first floor of the Famous Studio Building at Mahalaxmi. That Mahalaxmi building had more than two hundred offices, and Dev Anand's office was one of them. So I started working as an assistant cameraman on that film as well. The cameraman's name was V Ratra - he was a cousin of Dev Anand. A good typical Punjabi person. Loud, liked jokes, not particularly interested in work. And since the hero (Dev Anand) was his cousin, and since the heroine Geeta Bali was also a Punjabi - the atmosphere was not heavy.

He (Ratra) would always say to me, "Murthy tum kar do na" (Murthy you please do the work). That gave me a very good opportunity to do everything. I was doing lighting, camera placement operation – everything. Ratra was simply enjoying. One day, during a shooting, it so happened that Guru Dutt was trying to find an angle to take a shot of a particular portion of a song. This portion had a lot of music. He was thinking about how the music could be covered up with camera movement.

So I told Guru Dutt, "if you don't mind, I could suggest one thing, see - there is a big mirror we can use that to create a great sense of movement. He asked "How?"

I said, "put the camera on the mirror, make Dev Anand start here from his reflection. I will move the camera as he walks toward to the dance. So I follow him until he goes and sits on the chair." The Camera used to have a dolly. I placed the camera according to the music, I rehearsed the timings and all that and I said to Guru Dutt if you like it I will take the shot.

He said are "yeh to Ratra se nahin hoga" (Ratra wont be able to do this). Ratra was a bit fat, and would have difficulty in executing the kind of movement that I had described to him. Guru Dutt said, "tum Ratra se baat kar lo, (you speak to Ratra) If he allows, you can do it. Then he called Ratra and said "Murthy wants to take this shot, do you have any objection?" Ratra said no, "Let Murthy take the shot if he wants to".

I took the shot. Now I knew that Guru Dutt was also a very short tempered person. So I said to him, "look Guru Dutt I will take 3-4 takes and I will tell you which take will be good, and you have to keep the take that I approve." He agreed to this. The second take was ok.

Shooting was packed up. In the evening we were standing outside, Gurudutt came to me and told me "From the next film onwards will be my cameraman, we will work together." He kept his word and from the next picture we started working together. So this is the first chapter of my life.

You must have seen lot of directors by that time. Did you notice anything different about Guru Dutt?

Yes, he was very particular about angles. And also he used to tell me "tum lighting karo in your style" (you do the lighting in your style).

But was Guru Dutt different from other directors?

Definitely, other directors didn't know anything at all. They used to depend on their cameraman. They would ask for a close up at the most, or after two or three fixed shots were over, ask for a trolley shot. Guru Dutt was not like that, he was very particular. He liked big close ups, a lot of movements, altogether different. I liked him. I told him also; I said, "Guru Dutt, I like the way you take shots".

Then he said to me, "I like the way you do lighting."

Do you think he was taking risk by going for your kind of lighting, and at that time? For instance, even in *Baazi*, a lot of things were dark. *Baazi* had a very different type of look and since it was being tried out for the first time people may have said that this won't work.

He never said anything, other people may have said. We were all like a team and he liked me immensely. Even though I was an assistant he treated me as if I was a cameraman. So that helped me a lot. But I too did not want to insult the cameraman (Ratra) so I did not make it a big show. I would always call him - "sir come and see." Ratra would say "Murthy, tum ho na, bus" (you are there, that is enough). He was also a very jolly type of person. He never felt bad.

What was the type of reaction when it was released?

Everybody saw the rushes and my goodness, they were so happy. They said, "This is entirely different. This happened not only with *Baazi* but also with the rushes of the incomplete film with *Walisaheb*, which was the first set that I shot on my own.

What were the things that you were trying out on the set?

Nothing much. Little things, like, I never lit a wall flat. I would just keep some shadow and filter, some backlight. After all, this was my beginning.

Wasn't there any fuss made about the time taken by you as a cameraman?

No, as I said, in those days a good director was someone who depended on the cameraman for everything. No one said anything about time then. I have worked on very successful box office hit films like '*Mela*' and '*Babul*' but I never faced this then. Like, when working on *Udan Khatola* with Mistry, I heard the director, Sunny (who did not know a bit of direction and depended on Fali Mistry for everything) say - "Arey Murthy yeh picture silver jubilee ho gaya to Mahalaxmi studio mein yahan se vahan tak dinner laga denge. Do mahine ka bonus de dunga." (Murthy if this film becomes successful, I will arrange for a dinner table from one end of Mahaluxmi studio to another and everyone will get two months bonus). The film became successful, but he didn't give me even 25 paise. Those days, I tell you, maybe I was unlucky.

Did you have a lot of discussions with Guru Dutt?

No, he liked my kind of work, he never interrupted me in my work, and the only thing he said sometimes was that I used to take more time.

Once I said, I don't want to work. For some reason I got irritated and left the set. It was already 9:30, and I was having a headache. There was a little bit of tension, so I just left the set. Luckily, I didn't throw the meter. I went straight to the camera room, picked up my bag and started walking, and then the production manager came.

He said, "Why are you so angry, wait a minute, I am arranging a car."

I said, "I don't want a car. I am going." You know how it is, young blood, can't hear anything. I even said to Guru Dutt - "What do you think you are, some big director."

At that time we were not thinking that we are doing something great. We never thought our work would be remembered after 30 years. This "Arre Guru Dutt vahvah javab nahin tumhara," (Gurudut, you are great, matchless) thing was not there.

When *Kagaz ke Phool* was half done, it was edited and we saw the cut. He asked me, "kaisa lag raha hai" (how is it looking like to you).

I said, "whatever is done is good but whatever money you have put into this film you'll not get back. From the box office point of view it is not good. Change your script slightly even now; put some light scenes in, which a common man likes. "

I was the only person who could tell him frankly whatever I felt like. The others had no guts to say anything.

Sometimes he would come to me and tells me to read a scene and I would ask him "What is this that you have written?"

Then he used to say "tum Madrasi ko kya samajh aayega?"(What will a Madrasi like you understand)

Then I said "agar madrasi ko nahin aayega to baaki logon ko bhi nahin aayega." (If a Madrasi does not understand then nobody will). You explain to me what exactly you want to say in this scene."

I was so frank with him that if I didn't like a thing I would just tell him, and then leave it upto him. We were very friendly - but in our professional lives, in the films, not so much in personal life.

We behaved like children many times. Whatever I did he would also want to do. The camera boy, Vittal, who took care of the camera had a room in a studio. Once I said to him "Vittal, make some bhagra roti with chutney.

Guru Dutt would ask me, "Murthy kya kar rahe ho?" (What are you doing)

I said, "Vittal ke ghar ka roti kha raha hun", (I am going to eat at Vittal's house)

Then he would "Hey, Vittal, I give you the salary and you feed this man with bhagra roti. Make some for me also."

So many things this. We used to behave like children but we never had any enmity between us.

Once I went to his flat, and he was working on the script of *Jaal*. He said, "I have a script especially for you, we can work together". That was *Pyaasa*.

Then I said, "Listen Guru Dutt, you have earned a name making crime oriented movies and I think you should make 2 or 3 more pictures of the same kind and establish yourself as a very good director then you can attempt this *Pyasa*."

We started the shooting of *Jaa*. We were shooting outdoors near Goa, in a place called Malvand, which had a tourist bungalow and some small hotels. We used to stay there. We were very enthusiastic, we wanted to shoot a song in the light of the early morning sun. The song was to be on a boat. We didn't have an Arriflex camera; we had a Mitchell camera, which needed 250V power and three-phase supply. So we fixed a generator on another boat.

In the night we fixed up the boat with the motor, a production manager and carpenter with a lantern was with us. The boat was some 100yards away from shore. It was in the month of January and whole night we stayed on the boat as nobody came to take us back. In the morning a chap with small boat came and took us back. Then we came back again and shot the scene. I was so keen on shooting the song early in the morning when the sun came up. This is how we worked together.

What were the most important challenges that you faced when working with Guru Dutt?

Most important challenge - his taking of songs and scenes was unique, others just used to keep the camera fixed, have the actors perform the song, walking in or out of frame and have a few cut to close up shots, that's all.

But Guru Dutt was not like that at all. He emphasized movements and that too in close up shots. He used the 75mm lens. In those days, it was very difficult to focus accurately with a 75 mm lens, in a close up, in a moving shot. But that was the type of shooting he did. For me it was o.k., for lighting also it was o.k. I would always go to the light operators and tell them, when the actor goes to this side put this light off and put that one on.

And when we had to do panning and tilting shots with a 75 mm lens, it was quite difficult. You see, the viewfinder is away, it's not a reflex camera, viewfinder is away from the original shooting lens, so in the beginning I used to find it very difficult. Sometimes in the viewfinder I would be seeing only half the face even though on the camera it would be complete and in the center. So that was a little difficult.

So you were not always sure about what you were composing?

I used to think about what would be the major element in the composition that I had in mind and make an estimate when I was framing. Later on these things like follow focus gadgets and arrangers came and then we bought one, but even that was not very accurate. Another thing was that his shooting was mostly in close up and in movement. You know that when shooting close up, giving a fill in light is difficult because another shadow will get cast all the time.

I was thinking about how to solve this problem and then it struck me. I saw a friend of mine who was an artist; he was working in Walter Thompson & Co. He had a drawing board for sketching on which he used to have a light with

a clip on it. When I saw this, I said that this is the idea, I must use this somehow. I borrowed the device from him and the whole night I spent thinking where I could fix it. I was not able to fix it anywhere on the camera. Then I thought that the sunshade for the Mitchell Camera has two rods on it. I made a wooden board and fixed that on the rods. On that I could fix the clips anywhere. And the light worked!

So I was able to exclude the second shadows. I behaved as if I had invented a camera! I was using a 100w or 200w bulb. And the main thing was that I was able to connect this whole system to a dimmer.

Did you use the same device in your colour shooting as well?

It was difficult, as in colour it needed a constant colour temperature.

I made another light with rolling net. This was a challenge for me when I was shooting with Guru Dutt. One day a senior cameraman called Divecha came in. So he came and saw me using all this when we were shooting in this studio, to Kalra Studio. He said, "Hey Madrasi, what are you doing, tell me how are you doing this. Saale tum log ka hi dimag chalta hai, hamara chalta hi nahin (Only you people have brains that work, we don't).

So he also tried to make it in a different way. He made a square frame and said, "hey Murthy ab hamara dekho." (Look at my frame). I used to respect him. He was a very good cameraman though not of an artistic type. He did what you might call drawing room photography.

I followed his idea myself many times, especially about using cutters to block light in crowded sets.

Did you ever tell Guru Dutt that a particular shot was impossible to take?

No, that's one thing that makes me a cameraman; I never refused. My thinking was that I must try whatever he wants. And that whatever he wants should be whatever I want.

Why do you think Guru Dutt chose to shoot in the way that he did?

To get proper expressions from the artist, to convey to the audience the intensity of those expressions. Shooting mainly in mid or long shots would not have given those expressions in that way. For him, everything must be in close shots. This suits T.V also, which is so much there nowadays. There's no long shot at all. Shooting in close-ups is very much a T.V technique.

Do you think you had any influence on Guru Dutt's career?

A lot of influence. It was I who persuaded him to be an actor. I said you look like a hero, why do you want other people to act as heroes in your film. He didn't agree at first, then I said, let me take a screen test. You judge for yourself. So in the first schedule of *Jaal* when we were shooting outdoors, in one sequence, I told him, "You come and do this role". It was not an important role, just a fisherman. We did the shoot, he looked at the results and they proved what I had said.

Before that he had also worked in Prabhat films. His career was that of a dance director. He started his career as a dance director. Guru Dutt, Dev

Anand and two other people used to share a room. Only Guru Dutt had a salary. He supported the others. That is why Dev Anand and Guru Dutt were so close. They promised each other that whosoever of them became a successful man would give the others a chance. And that's how Guru Dutt got a break from Dev Anand when he started his own company. But it was me that convinced him to be a hero.

He would never have been an actor if you hadn't told him.

I don't know if I can say that, but my influence is very much there. I insisted that he should act. By that time this star system had also begun a little bit. Where were we to get stars and getting dates from them was proving to be very difficult. Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor were all very busy. Then I insisted that he should act. We tried this out in *Baazi*, Geeta Bali also encouraged him. The first film (*Baazi*) flopped but not because of his acting, somehow it flopped. That's how he became an actor.

The song "Jaane voh kaise log the", in *Pyaasa* – it is shot in closeups, yet the camera is moving constantly and there are lot's of people. How exactly did you achieve this?

He (Guru Dutt) is seen standing at one place in the corner of this library like room. His position reflects the fact that he is considered to be an unimportant person. He is not invited, just an employee of the host (Rahman). In that particular shot the camera moves with the rhythm of the song and you know one of the good points in me was that I had learned music. So I knew when to stop the camera, where to cut the shot, in all this the music helped me a lot.

Would you say that music is directly related to your camera in terms of movements and lighting?

My lighting used to be much better in songs than in scenes so I think my musical sensibility has something to do with that. Lighting for songs can be more creative and artistic. And also, maybe because of music, there was also more scope for movements, the movements were also set and rehearsed properly. They would also not mind more rehearsals of movements. People used to say "Murthy kitna accha camera karta hai." (Murthy does such good camerawork) And I was working with the 75 lens. It was difficult for the assistants but somehow; I could manage the focusing.

How many assistants did you have?

I used to have two assistants.

What do you think made heroines look beautiful?

Good lighting, and some diffusers. Sometimes I used to put two diffusers. A & B or half only B. I also bought one Kodak MP diffuser. In those days I bought one set for RS. 200, now it may cost RS. 25000.

I still have that one with me.

If I ever sacrificed my quality, they (the heroines) would become angry with me. So I had to make them look beautiful. All the heroines were happy with me, Mala Sinha, Geeta Bali, Nimmi, Waheeda Rehman.

But sometimes, did you also make a decision not to make a heroine look glamorous?

Definitely, if the film and the story demanded that the actress not look glamorous, I would not make her look glamorous. Take for instance the beginning of "*Pyaasa*". Take for instance, the scene when Waheeda Rahman is introduced for the first time, as a prostitute. We shot in Calcutta on the banks of Ganga and at night. In once place, there are lot of pillars; we wanted the moon in the background. It was the "original" moon, not a fake moon in the studio. So I had to match the moon with Waheeda's face. I could not use heavy diffusers. Whatever exposure I gave for the moon was important, and naturally I could not use separate diffusers for the moon. That was one reason why I did not put any diffusers while shooting her, also, according to the story that was the first introduction of the very ordinary character that Waheeda plays in the beginning of the film, so I didn't want to glamorise her either. Later on when she became the heroine, at that time I glamorised her.

Waheeda started her career with us so she didn't know anything technical about how heroines are made to look glamorous and beautiful, but even later on when she became a successful heroine, then too she didn't ask anybody to ensure that she should look "beautiful".

But can you believe it, Nadira, no, not Nadira, Shashi Kala, - I was shooting a serial some two-three years back in which she was acting, and she said to me "Murthy don't forget me, I have to look good." Shashi Kala at this age wanted to look beautiful!

Then I was the first person to use diffusers on TV, and this was even before the ad films on TV. At that time, there was nothing like the concept of

using diffusion on TV cameras. I had bought some huge handkerchiefs of almost transparent Nylon in Paris in 75. I started using it on the zoom lens. After that I see, every girl in ad films looks beautiful, smooth and soft even though they are ugly.

Even Shabana Azmi looks beautiful. When Shyam Benegal introduced her, the role was cent percent perfect for her because she was an ordinary looking working girl, not what I would call beautiful. I have seen her first picture *Ankur*. I have also shot with her. She would say, "Murthy Saab mera angle dekhiye, mujhe side light naheen dejiye." (Murthy sir, please look after my angles and don't give me any sidelight). I said, "Don't worry Shabana, I will take care of you; but then, when she had become an established artist, then she did come and say to me "Do whatever you want" and she is a very good artist now, like Bengali artists. I like Bengali artists very much; they work very naturally, Soumitra Chatterjee, Utpal Dutt and the heroes of those days.

Were you the first person to shoot outdoors at night? It must not have been a common thing to do, as it must have been quite difficult.

It was not a common thing, you are correct, and it is difficult to shoot in the night on the streets, but I don't exactly remember if I was the first person to do it. The story of the film '*Pyasa*' sort of demanded it, the character of the poet played by Guru Dutt is a frustrated fellow, staying alone, going to sit on his own by the riverside - Ganga Ghat, you see what I mean.

The story might have demanded it but normally in such conditions you could have created a whole set in the studio.

As I said, the story demanded it, and then, Guru Dutt said "We will do it on the actual location." We never thought we were doing any great film or that we were photographing something for the first time or anything like that. We just did it.

When I was an assistant, I worked on a film called *Arzoo*, it had Dilip Kumar and Kamini Kaushal, I think the Director was Shahid Latif. They had fixed up an outdoor shooting schedule in Mahabaleshwar. I, as an assistant went there on behalf of the studio. It so happened that the stars were entangled in romantic affairs and as a result they would not come on time. Even on an outdoor shooting they would report at 12 o'clock in the afternoon, that was the sort of behaviour of these artists at that time. So the Director couldn't finish the scene, or do what he wanted to because these people were always coming late. You see, in hill stations like Mahabaleshwar what happens is that you can do shooting only from the morning to 1 or 2'o'clock, later clouds start rolling in, so after that we all pack up. And in the morning a very beautiful fog used to come and cover the whole place.

Now, I had seen fog in English films. It is like that most of the time in London. I too, wanted to shoot in the fog. I told the director and the cameraman that this atmosphere will be very good for a particular song, it was a sad song.

They said, "No, how can we shoot without sunlight? " I said, " It will look beautiful, just try it and see."

But, after all I was an assistant, so they both refused and packed up. Since I was in-charge of the equipment on the shooting at that time, and I was very curious, I took some test shots. I took out the camera; the films were with me and took a few shots with the movements of characters against the trees, walking out of the fog. I could do it because no one was there, the cast had not come yet and the director and cameraman had left saying that there was no sunlight. I took it with my light boys and assistants, making them stand in for the actors.

As I have told you I was everything in that studio, so when we then came back to Bombay, I got it developed, printed and saw it in the projection theatre. I felt so happy; it was beautiful. Then I called the director and the cameraman of that film. Fali Mistry was also there. Mistry said "Beautiful Murthy, very good shots." Then I told him, I suggested this to the director and he said "kya karta hai, forget it". They didn't use my suggestion.

But all these things came to me, and I could do them because of the knowledge of theory I had. So that is why when Guru Dutt said to me, lets shoot outdoors, at night, by the riverbank, in the fog. I could say to him, "Why not, we will do it."

You used lot of fog in *Pyaasa*.

Yes, particularly in Johnny Walker's "Tel Maalish" song. I wanted to create a sort of shadowy atmosphere, with all the prostitutes and their clients appearing and then getting lost in the public park as a backdrop to the song. We did that in the studio.

In fact in the beginning Guru Dutt wanted me to do that role of the masseur that is played by Johnny Walker. He said to me, "Murthy, you do it, it will look good." I said, "No, I am happy behind the camera."

But, as you said I used a lot of fog.

What for you is the crucial difference between using fog on the set, and diffuser on the lens?

I was using very mild diffusers, because of what it does in terms of what you could call the 'finishing' of a shot. Suppose you have two cuts that need to be joined, Now, you don't want a join between the two shots to draw attention to the harshness of light in maybe one of them. Then you would have a sort of 'light jump', to prevent that from happening. We used filters. I would typically use the NP quarter diffuser, though I would not use this in absolute long shots or full long shots, only in mid shots and close ups.

Did at any point of time you feel like not using diffusers?

Many times I felt like that, but for their (the actresses) sake I had to use it, I didn't want them to blame me and say "Murthy Saab you have not done well." For them, good photography means that they must look good.

At this time you must have seen films with a very different look, in which diffusers were not being used, for instance, - *Bicycle Thieves* and the other Italian Neo-Realist Films.

Yes I did. But I must say that there is one important thing you have to keep in mind. There is a lot of difference in light conditions between India (and in tropical countries) and European countries. I have done a lot of shooting in Paris and London and in none of those instances I have had to use a diffuser. The light itself is so soft, because it was cloudy all the time.

I was not unhappy to do shooting like that, and I never think that it is impossible to shoot like that. Other cameramen and directors refuse to shoot if they see cloud and fog. But theory helped me. And we always have the meter to rely on.

When I did that *Pyasa* outdoor night shoot I used tracks. The film speed was 250 ASA. I didn't mind. Whenever a new stock came to the studio, I was the first man to be given the test roll from Kodak. They used to give me a 100 feet roll. I used to shoot, real shots in real light, I used to take still shots at night, so these things helped me a lot, and also, it looked artistic.

You went for a real wet look in the outdoor night scenes in *Pyasa*, didn't you?

Once, for *Pyasa*, we even shot in real rain in Calcutta. My camera was in the car and Guru Dutt was outside in the rain, he started running in the real Calcutta rain. I did it. I asked Gurudutt "Do you want me to do it", he said, "yeh karenge yaar" (we will do it). So you see, it's a combination of director, actor, artist, cameraman. Between Guru Dutt and me, this was possible.

He was an actor also in those films. He was not standing behind the camera. So he had to trust you completely.

Yes absolutely. But he used to guide me on the camera angle and on the language, the dialogue in his films was often in Urdu, and I did not always understand if someone had made a mistake. But often, I would ask for another take, even if it had nothing to do with camerawork or lighting. Then he would ask me, "Why do you want another take?", and I would tell him, that the expressions were not good and the look was also not good. So naturally he had to depend on me. And I must say, that for this sort of thing, my activities in theatre helped me a lot. I did a lot of theatre.

Even in those times you used to do theatre.

I was doing theatre regularly till 1982. I used to direct Kannada plays. My last play was in 82, in the Ravindra Kala Shetra, after that I was not able to do because there was no more any fixed timings for shooting. Theatre activities happen only in the evenings and so I had to give it up, because of the new irregular shifts.

In earlier days when I was an assistant and even with Guru Dutt there were only two shifts – either 9.30-6.30 or 9-5 in the day. My evenings were free and in that time I would do theatre.

Do you think that it is important for a cameraperson to engage in other activities like theatre, music or fine arts? The reason why we are asking this is because nowadays cinematographers are so busy that they do not have the time to do other things.

Working in other areas does help cinematography; it gives you an artistic sense. As I told you, while I was shooting the song sequences my lighting used to be different from what it would be in the other scenes. Music does help a man, not only in the film industry but in personal life also. I consider music and not painting to be the finest art.

You mentioned highlight as being a very important statement for you. What does highlight mean to you?

Highlight is an exterior source coming on to a character. Suppose sunlight is coming in, such as even now in this room light is coming in. I can get half light if I cut this bulb's light on me. Highlight, shadows and mid tones are the three points even in a painting. That is what gives contour and depth to a picture in a frame. Even if you have a flat light, with a little angle, you can create a bit of shadow which will help you achieve a three dimensional effect.

In long shots I always establish the source. In mid and close shots I can't always establish the source. In those cases what is more important is that I show the people, the expressions of the artists and what they are going to say.

Nowadays there is a lot of what is called "artistic highlighting". Now suppose, I shoot only in candlelight, on a film screen it is ok, but when it comes in TV you don't see anything. Take for instance, Shyam Benegal's '*Trikal*', I saw it on TV recently. Half of the picture was like a blank screen. The TV medium is entirely different.

So highlight and shadow gives three-dimensional effect and gives texture to a place and to the artist. But you have to be aware of when and for what you are using it.

But you took a lot of risks with lighting figures, like there is this scene in *Pyasa* where the character is coming straight into the light...

I know that is the 'Aaj sajan mujhe ang lagaa lo' song in *Pyasa*. To tell you frankly, at that time, I thought the shoot is on the balcony of the set (a different set up) but then I realized that Guru Dutt wanted it all in one fluid sequence, and that while the character climbs up the stairs, the lighting is different, from the time when she comes into frame. I remembered that the moon light was a constant factor in both set ups, so I kept the main light as moon light from the back, and this meant that the character seems to walk into the light.

I think a lot to depends on how you frame also. In this case another character is standing near the wall and she comes looking for him and she comes almost to touch him, but then she doesn't touch him. It is quite dramatic, and the lighting (or what may have been considered a 'mistake' in the lighting) actually works very well with the dramatic nature of the situation and the song.

You were talking of highlight but you were not afraid of placing the characters in complete darkness.

Sometimes, I have gone as far as is possible. I am not a creative genius. I did whatever the scene demanded in combination with whatever came to my mind at that time. I could do this because there was no objection from

anybody. Guru Dutt was the person who asked me to do these things but he never interfered in my work. In fact all the time before a take he would look through the camera, I used to rehearse in his place, doing the movements, not the expressions, of course.

At that time did anybody say - "If you have created a set then everything has to be visible".

I tried to follow nature. Whenever you enter a studio you don't see anything for some time. It is almost totally dark and gradually you begin to see. That is how I begin to imagine the light in a frame.

The Triple X film helped me very much. When I had to create one source of light, that too from a long distance, I used that film. I would use 10 KW light on the balcony, one light could cover up all the area softly and that sort of light that you could see in and it would expose on the Triple X film.

Often after shooting we, Guru Dutt and I, used to sit together and talk in the afternoon. This was during the days of the shooting of *Kagaz ke Phool*, which as you know is also set in a film studio. Sunlight used to beam down through a big exhaust fan, high up, close to the ceiling. It was a shining shaft of light, and all the dust in the studio was caught in it. I said to Guru Dutt "See, isn't it beautiful". He asked me if I could show this in the film. I said that I would try. He said, "I'll give you ten days to work out a way of shooting this sunbeam".

At that time, my idea was to focus a big spotlight, which was available in Shantaram's studio, and use it to mimic the sunbeam. We tried it. The

problem was, the highlight used to come, but it was a divergent light, it could not create a straight parallel shaft of light. One day I was sitting in the sun, thinking about this problem, and I saw a make-up man playing with a mirror. Reflecting sunlight on to a wall from his mirror. I saw that and thought "Damn everything, I will use sunlight and mirrors. I got two big mirrors, each some four feet tall. From outside the studio we used one mirror to bring light inside and other mirror was placed on the catwalk. The second mirror reflected the shaft of light on to the studio floor, creating that sunbeam that we had wanted.

So, when the sun shifted, you had to keep on adjusting the mirrors.

Naturally, but the shots were taken in just one hour. It so happened that on that day, the famous cameraman Faredoon Irani was shooting nearby in Mehboob Studio. He heard what is happening, and came to see what was going on.

He said, "Murthy Saheb, what are you doing?" I said, "Noting, we are trying to create a sunbeam in the studio" - Then someone said "But, Murthy, you are using sunlight!" We sent the footage to the lab and waited for the rushes. Faredoon Irani actually went to the lab before me and saw the results, he told me, as I was going in, "Murty, I have seen it, it is looking beautiful, I have never seen such good effects." Till then nobody had used sunlight inside the studio, not even in Hollywood Films. I can feel proud of it, I think, and that too because it was in India's first cinemascope film.

My only other 'first' is that I was the first person to shoot in the Vrindavan Gardens in Mysore, you know where the fountains are. Whatever

illumination they have over there is not enough, so I took some extra lights to shoot there. After me, a lot of people have shot there.

It is almost as if Guru Dutt offered you the films or parts of them as gifts for you to extend yourself...

I have told you how even when he was writing the script of *Jaal*, he had told me that he was going to make *Pyaasa* - for me. I remember the shooting of *Aar Paar*, when things were once getting delayed in the shooting, and Guru Dutt came to me and said "Murthy, please do this fast. Once we finish with this one, for your sake I'll make a film. Then you can do anything you want and take as much time as you want, but for now please co-operate with me and let's finish this one". The film he wanted to make 'for me' was *Kagaz ke Phool*.

That is the kind of relationship that we had at that time. During *Aar Par* he told me the story of *Kagaz Ke Phool*. He wanted me to shoot the first cinemascope film in India.

Even before this film we had planned on another cinemascope film. This was going to be a Bengali film, called '*Gauri*'. I had insisted that he take Geeta Dutt (Guru Dutt's wife and the famous playback singer) as the heroine of that film. We had started work on it as well. It was a test, both for Geeta and for cinemascope. It was a beautiful story. Burman (*R.D. Burman*) had given us two beautiful songs. And we shot the songs, but after shooting the second song, he (Guru Dutt) changed his mind, and after that *Kagaz Ke Phool* was started.

So he wanted you to do cinemascope, and then extended that by making sure that you were one of the first to shoot in colour as well. Can you tell us how you dealt with the transition from black and white to colour?

We first worked in colour in *Chaudvin ka Chand*. Guru Dutt was the producer of this film, but not the director. It was made to compensate for all the losses of the earlier films, and it was a hit all right. Sadik Babu was the director and the cameraman was Nariman, who at that time was my first assistant. But whenever there was a song sequence or scenes related to a song sequence, Guru Dutt and V. K. Murthy would take over.

Now, after the silver jubilee of the film, Guru Dutt wanted to re-release the film with two more songs. And this time he wanted the songs to be in full colour!

In those days the concept was that in colour film all you have to do is to put a lot of colour on the set and light up evenly so that everything is visible. Especially the Art Directors were of this opinion at that time. But I approached colour exactly as if it was B&W. I didn't find any difference. This was the case even though the people from the lab used to come and tell me always to give more light and people said that I must make sure that the lights were of correct and constant colour temperature. But only 50% of lights of our studio were of the right and constant colour temperature. We had a metre to find the colour temperature of the lights. Not a single light was giving more than 3000 Kelvin.

So I decided to use Nitro-Flood Lights, which are used for still photography, they have a colour temperature of about 5000 Kelvin. I used them on the sets for the face light. I was the first person who thought of this. Now

these were white lights, so I used these in combination with the old Mole Richardson lights that were in the studio. I did all these experiments in *Chaudavin Ka Chand*.

And then, one of these songs was sent to the Kodak festival in London. Now this festival featured colour photography and colour sequences shot by many cameramen from different countries. It was very well appreciated and we even got letters from London, saying, "V.K. Murthy is our VIP. You can get whatever facilities you want from Kodak".

So you were in touch with Mr. Krishnan at Kodak?

Very much so. Actually, he was the boss at Kodak in Bombay after that Englishman named John Kirsch left. This Englishman had learnt Hindi as well.

We have heard that you went for the shooting of *Guns of Navarone*. How did this happen and what was the experience like?

I wasn't actually interested in going abroad nor did I ask Guru Dutt to send me to London. Perhaps Guru Dutt was inspired by the fact that Raj Kapoor had sent his cameraman to study at Technicolour in London. Maybe because of that he wanted to send me. And also, his younger brother Atma Ram was in London doing Documentary Films for Burma Shell & Co.

Guns of Navarone was going to be shot at that time on Eastmancolor. So he (Atma Ram) went to the producer and talked to him about me saying that I wanted to get an opportunity to study colour photography. The producer agreed, talked to the union people and got a letter for me. And that is how I

went, I was very afraid, I had never been to a foreign country at that stage. I didn't know whom to contact. It was nighttime when I landed. Luckily when I landed, there was an announcement for me in the airport lounge. I went to the enquiry and the lady there said that someone was waiting for me outside. It was Atma Ram, so I felt all right.

Which year was this?

1960.

How was the atmosphere on the sets of '*Guns of Navarone*' different from what you were used to?

It was disciplined, every man knew his job and there was no wasting of time. English people are very disciplined compared to Americans. But Americans are freer with people. Nobody in the unit talked to me, they were so reserved as people. But there was an American still photographer who was very free and he was often talking to me. If ever I asked the cameraman any question regarding photography or lighting, he used to answer very much to the point and then forget me. In London, I was staying with Americans. Guru Dutt called me and told me "You can stay there for as long as you want. I am sending you money, *Chudhavin Ka Chand* is a superhit."

But even then what was I going to do, there was very little for me to study, so I told them "Give me some work to do on the set." Then they told me our union objects to you working, that's why we cannot allow you to do any work. But the producer was very nice man. Somehow, I spent two and a half months in outdoor shooting, doing very little.

Did they have a lot of cameras?

No, only one camera, with one standby camera. After shooting, when we went back to the hotel a technician used to be there to take care of the camera. The assistants were not doing these things, you know the work was well distributed and they were doing their jobs without hesitation.

The best part was, when even after 8-10 days of shooting nobody was still relaxed with me, Gregory Peck came to the set. Then everything changed. He was sitting, he saw me, asked me over and asked me where I was from, in a very friendly sort of way. I said "From Bombay", then he said, "From Bombay, oh! How nice. I have been to Bombay last year. How is it that you are here?" I said, "Sir, I am a cameraman. I just came here to study."

He called a still photographer and got him to take a picture of me with him (with Gregory Peck). So you see, the difference between an Englishman and an American.

What did you enjoy about the shoot?

We got to see the rushes quite soon. Each day's shooting rushes were sent to London the same day, and the very next day the printed and developed rushes used to come back. They had set up a big screen in the hall of a hotel and they were screening the rushes there. Each day after the shooting we could see the film as well. So if anything had gone wrong we could all see that. That was the best part, to be able to see rushes even on an outdoor shoot.

Who was the cameraman?

Oswald Morris was the cameraman. He was the top man in the English film industry. He had trained as the operative cameraman to Jack Cardiff, whose work I liked very much. I like the camerawork in English films.

Apart from this, there was another cameraman whose work I really liked, this was Robert Krasker. He was very good; I remember a film he shot called "*Odd Man Out*". Even after 50 years I have not forgotten the title of the film or the name of the cameraman.

So apart from "Guns of Navarone" I would attend shooting in London studios, whenever I went and stayed with Atmaram.

Did you go to the lab?

Yes of course, that was the main purpose of my going there. By that time the "three strip" business had gone, and now each film was dyed in a different colour then joined. I knew that already, so, effectively, there was nothing for me to study.

Were you already familiar with the Technicolor process?

In India, at that time, only one film was made in Technicolor and that was "*Jhansi Ki Rani*". It was shot by Adams Tyler. There were only 10 Technicolor cameras that were being hired out on a contract basis. Sometimes cameraman also used to go with the three-strip camera. But, by the time we started working in colour it was already an old and dated process.

When you came back, did you try and introduce any working methods that you had seen there?

I used to tell them about what I had seen. After I came back Guru Dutt told me I want to give you a raise of salary of 500 Rupees. I said "No, don't increase my salary, please give the light boys a raise. I have come from London, and I have seen there that the minimum wages a man gets on a film unit he can live on, at least that much they pay the light boys. Why can we not pay a decent wage? If man needs 150 Rupees, to live on, we should pay him that much at least."

Guru Dutt said "kya musibat mein daal diya Murthy." (You have landed me in a fix)

I said, "If you can give Rs.500 to me why can you not do something for them. They are the boys who go up on to the catwalks taking risks with their lives and shift those hot lights. You see, I loved those boys.

He said, "tum kya union leader hai, communist hai kya?" (Are you a trade union leader, a communist?). I said, "We have to pay a decent minimum salary."

See, we were very free with each other. The only exception was that I didn't join him in drinking. Maybe just a couple of times I might have had a glass of beer with him. He used to drink everyday, our production manager Surya Swamy was there to give him company in that. With me he used to play cricket and badminton in the studio.

Let us jump now to your television work, particularly your work on Shyam Benegal's multi part historical series - *The Discovery of India*.

I certainly enjoyed that. Shyam Benegal was a very nice person to work with. Full of information, intelligence and discovery. He did not interfere at all with the workers even though he had to take a lot of rehearsals. He had taken two editing rooms in Film City, and even as the shooting was going on he would be busy editing the rushes. As a result I had full freedom on the set when I was doing *Discovery*. Even though it was a 12-hour shift I was very happy because every day I could do whatever I wanted to do.

Was it interesting to recreate all those different periods?

Definitely and I worked very closely with the Art Director, Nitish Roy

But in recreating different historical periods did you have different visual styles in mind?

Yes, and we had to do a lot of background research. Shyam insisted that Nitish and I look at a lot of paintings and old photographs and archival material from old libraries and archives. We even went to see some places before hand to get a sense of what the look could be for a particular episode. We looked at the history part of it very carefully. I could say that in one way it was the best period of my life. The work was hard, but I really enjoyed it.

Why do you say that?

I had full freedom to do whatever type of lighting I wanted to do and from my point of view that was great. I could do any camera movement I liked. Even trolley shots could be planned easily. No one bothered about lengthy shots, there were circular and straight trolleys for us to do with, as we liked. You

cannot even imagine how smoothly and beautifully I could make the camera move on those trolleys.

I remember there is a scene in the Mahabharata episode where there is a long circular track. Tell us about that.

That was a long speech being given by Krishna to Duryodhana and his party. It was a complex shot, quite lengthy and a full circular trolley in which we had to move from close ups of Krishna speaking to 'group' close up shots of the others listening in a single take, while the camera was moving. I had to adjust the operation all the time, matching the camera movement with the actors. We did lots of rehearsals. It was not easy, neither for me, nor for the actors. The actor playing Krishna was also a very good artist. He was a Muslim doing Krishna's role. I think I can remember his name, yes, Salim Ghouse, that is the name. He was very good. Somehow, I really enjoyed shooting this very much.

And you had to keep in mind that this would be for television...

Yes, yes, I know it very well, in TV, do close ups. That is why once we had established a long shot for the location; we would work mainly in the mid/close range. We had an understanding, myself and Shyam, that since this is for T.V., we must work mostly in close -ups. We did it.

You said you had absolute freedom, so is there anything you did which you had never done before?

No, there was nothing like that. Everything I did in "*Discovery*" I had done previously as well. Actually it was easy for me to do. I did not have to think

so much, everything was there for me, I had to just follow my own ideas about the shooting.

Actually, "*Tamas*" was what I enjoyed the most.

You know "*Tamas*" was directed by my own student and assistant - Govind Nihalani. He is a cameraman, and is a director as well. When the script of *Tamas* was ready and everything had been arranged, he came to my place and started talking to my wife. In the days when he was my assistant he used to come often to my place, always have some snacks. He was very free and relaxed at my home. He was on very good terms with my wife. You see my wife is a very good conversationalist. She talks to everybody.

Even at the time that he came in connection with *Tamas*, half the time he spent in chatting with my wife. In the end he said, "Murthy saheb I am planning a serial, and I am sorry to tell you, I would like you to come and do the photography for it". I asked him "What sort of serial is it?" He told me the theme and said that it would be shot on film, not video - on 16mm film. '*Discovery of India*' was done on 35 mm and this was going to be on 16mm

He wanted a reply immediately but I told him "Govind I will be very happy to do but I need some 2-3 days to think about it."

Did you feel uncomfortable about the fact that your assistant is asking you to shoot for him?

I was not thinking about myself. After all, I had to simply do my job, that's all. The question of *guru* and *shishya* (master and disciple) didn't enter the picture at all. He would be a director I would be a cameraman, and this is something I had done in small ways in his earlier films as well. Whenever he made a film, he always wanted me to come and shoot for 1-2 days .

Once, Subrata Mitra had also come some work to the film city. To see a location or something like that. Govind was making this film called "*Aaghath*" at that time. So there was a scene in which he wanted a 2-3 camera set-up. And as usual, he had asked me to help out. I was on one camera at that time. Subratada came, we were chitchatting, and he (Govind) was standing, waiting, hesitating to tell me what to do. I told him, "Look Govind you are the director I am the cameraman, don't hesitate, tell me exactly what I have to do".

So this thing carried on to '*Tamas*' also. During '*Tamas*' also I told him "You want to give me a job. I will do it, but I want to take 2-3 days time to give my reply after consulting my wife"

She said, "You are working with so many *atram* - *patram* (run of the mill, mediocre) directors, who even don't know a bit of direction or have any sense of quality. If you can work for them, then why cant you work for Govind. After all, he is our boy and he is doing a very good job as a director, making good films. I think you should accept it."

So, after 3 days or so I told him, "OK I will come."

Tamas has a very different feeling...

Govind is also a cameraman, I am also a cameraman. It is bound to show. But he did all the operating. His direction is also always through the camera. That is the habit he has developed. So there was no question of my operating the camera, unless it was a very difficult shot, say a shot that involved 180 degree panning in the trolley. You see he was a little bit of a fatty, and he couldn't sit and operate those kinds of shots easily.

So whenever there was that kind of shot, he would say to me, "Murthy saheb, please, you have to sit and take this shot...". So, I must say that we had very good understanding between us and were full of respect for each and everyone in the crew and amongst the artists.

In '*Tamas*', a very important element visual for me is that a lot of it is outdoor, and there is very strong sense of clouds, of monsoon, of storm. I found this very exciting.

You shot Deepa Sahi in a very new way in '*Tamas*'. You said earlier how you try and make a heroine look beautiful, and here you had to work with a character who was a peasant woman. So, tell me about how you arrived at the way you would shoot her in '*Tamas*'.

See, '*Tamas*' was definitely an 'Art' or 'Parallel' film. Whenever you see people who are doing artistic films or parallel films, you can see that they don't believe in 'glamorising' people. Shyam (Benegal) never used to like it, but I was still doing it, and Govind (Nihalani) you see, was my *chela* (disciple). So, in *Tamas* we had to stay between a 'parallel cinema' look and the way I was used

to shooting. He wouldn't check much. But sometimes, very rarely, he would say, let us make them look a little beautiful. Now, how can you make Ompuri look beautiful!

We didn't used that much diffusion, we used bounced light and thermocol sheets to soften the light and for the rest of the scenes - they were outdoors, and as I told you, often in cloudy weather, so we didn't need to do anything in that kind of situation.

So how do you match tungsten with daylight.

We didn't have with tungsten we had, what do you call those new lights that have recently come, (see, in the last two years I have forgotten the names) HMI Lights, yes, HMI lights with colour temperature matching that of sunlight. We were using these for face lights and we used a lot of reflectors also. In fact I used to feel that reflected light was better than HMI light.

But did you soften the reflector because it has that cloudy feeling...

In close shots I always used bounce light, but in long shot and mid shot I would use reflectors. I would bend the reflectors to make them like dishes and put a stick in between - to make a pair of parabolic reflectors - position one, so that the set would get a uniform spread of light and position the other for the four characters in the frame. These are the things I did. We got very good and excellent results and used to see rushes some times in between the shooting schedule itself. After the day's shooting we used to go to the lab.

In *Tamas*, how were you able to achieve that very real "location" feeling, even in the studio set-ups?

Everything is done for the story. For instance, the sequence where the Sikhs take shelter in the Gurdwara - was a big studio set up. That was a practical decision. We had to shoot day scenes as well as night scenes in that set up. But for the night scenes, we would not use the conventional way of lighting up, as is usually done on a studio set. I relied a lot on 'practicals' and fixtures. You see, in a village at that time (1947) there would have been no electricity, so we used lanterns. Inside the lanterns we would place small lamps attached to dimmers, to match the intensity of actual lantern light, all these things made it seem quite real and helped us get over the "studio" look.

In *Tamas*, you had very large group scenes with a lot of action as well as some very intimate moments, for instance the scenes around Deepa Sahi's pregnancy. Did you think and develop different patterns for the shooting of these different kinds of scenes?

No thinking. I worked on the basis of needing to execute everything on the spot itself; I never did any homework. I didn't have to. I get inspired on the set itself. Once I placed the camera, did a few rehearsals then decided it all on the spot. No thinking, no home work at all.

Was the shot breakdown done from before?

It was done from before. Shot breakdown is the director's job. I used to have a copy of the shot break down, but many scenes were being changed on the spot. The writer himself (Bihsham Sahni) was also one of the actors, so

there would be always lot of last minute changes. I didn't interfere; it was not my job.

In fact I didn't even know the language. I can read Hindi, but the language of *Tamas* had a lot of Urdu and Punjabi in it - which I don't understand.

I treated this as a very good opportunity to do whatever I wanted to, because I did not have to bother about the dialogue and language. I could concentrate on my work. And, Govind being a cameraman encouraged me, gave me a free hand and supplied me with whatever I wanted.

For instance, in most of the street scenes a lot of smoke is used to give it that dingy congested north Indian small town feeling - that set was put up and it was there for six months, just so that we could use it whenever we wanted to shoot the street scenes. All this just for one single street set-up designed by Nitish Roy.

We did very little studio shooting - the beginning of the film - the scenes to do with the slaughter of the pig and the gurdwara scene, which I have already told you about, and some scenes in the hut where Deepa Sahi and Om Puri live - these were the only things shot inside a studio, as far as I recall.

I think some sequences were done very well - the song sequence with Amrish Puri, and the jumping into the well by the women - these were very effective.

You chose a very unusual angle for that scene - (the women jumping into the well sequence)...

We created a 10 feet deep ditch and placed the camera in that. You see, Govind, being a cameraman himself, wanted to try out unusual angles, - first we did the scene from the top angle, there were a lot of ladies, then he said, "Murthy saheb, ab low angle se lenge" (Murthy saheb, now we will take it from a low angle).

It was a very good opportunity for me to do something like this, in colour photography, after a long time.

You see, after Guru Dutt, for a very long time I was doing colour photography for Pramod Chakravarty - all his films I have done. He was absolutely commercialized. He cared only for the quantity of work done in a day, because he was very hard pressed by the dates of the actors. So I had to compromise many times. I still remember, the very first film I did after my days with Guru Dutt (with Pramod Chakravarty) were very difficult for me.

What film was that?

The film was '*Ziddi*'. It was a very successful film at that time. At first, I was trying to work in my style and it was taking time so he (Pramod Chakravarty) was getting upset. He had just started his career and had taken a lot of risk to produce this film. It took me nearly half of the shooting schedule of that film to adjust myself to that style of shooting.

What did you do to adjust to that atmosphere?

We have to work very fast, and the studio was also never our own space. We used to hire different studios for different schedules, and this led to a lot of technical difficulties - also, light boys were different each time. But I managed somehow. Out of those conditions also I did some very good work in those 30 years that I worked with Chakky (Pramod Chakravarty). The pity is, whenever people interview me they don't mention his name.

So tell us about this period. What was it like to be working in colour and with big stars?

In the first film (*Ziddi*) there were both outdoor and indoor shoots. For outdoor shooting we went to Ooty. The climate there - you know - clouds, low sunlight. I was shooting in that cloudy weather.

Mahmood, one of the actors on the films was very doubtful about what I was doing. I said to him "Mahmood you do your job, I will do my job".

Chakky (Chakravarty) was also doubtful, he used to ask me "...theek rahega na?" (will it be all right). I would say to him "...theek rahega, bekar mein fikr mat karo" (It will be all right, don't worry unnecessarily)

When they saw the results they were so happy. The close ups were beautiful. I used only reflectors. Not harsh reflectors, I used soft reflectors. I used net and sometimes cloth to soften the reflectors. And then I would give the reflected light from a low angle to give just a glow in the eyes - so these were some to the things that I tried to do.

This is why Asha Parekh, for instance became mad about me, and she started telling producers that she would accept their film only if I was doing the photography when her scenes were being shot. So producers started coming to me, requesting me to give dates, saying that she (Asha Parekh) insists that I must shoot her. So I had to explain to Asha Parekh that this was not going to be possible all the time, and that she could not expect me to go wherever she was shooting. There was also a moral binding - you may say - after all - the producer has already arranged to work with some other cameraman, he should not have to ditch him for me, just because Asha Parekh was insisting on it.

But was there a notion that you had to change the lighting or the framing pattern when colour film came? Suddenly from the in-depth photography of the B&W days, you had flat frontal framing and lights blaring on the set. Why was that?

Oh there was a lot of that when colour first came in. They would shoot with lots of top lights because they thought that in colour that was one way you could make dark people fairer, so that whenever you tilted up you would get the glare of three or four lights in your lens.

Or, they would use lots of make up, theatre make up which was not correct for colour photography at all. It would lead to all sorts of strange colours registering on the film instead of the correct skin tone. When I said once to Asha Parekh that she should just put some simple society make up on she said to me "Murthy sab kya bol rahen hain.." (Murthy saheb, what are you saying). But then

I explained it to her and to her makeup man and then they started doing what I had told them.

They didn't understand that in colour film things registered differently.

I told them, no thick make up, no theatre make up. All this happened because "*Junglee*" which was one of the early colour films became a super hit. In that film they used red and pink make up on everybody. So that became like a fashion. Now this just doesn't work with our (Indian) kind of skin. The glow of the skin just doesn't feel right. That is why I used to insist on light make up and kept saying, don't use these very bright lipsticks and don't put rosy and pink shades on the skin. In fact I was the first person to say "just use normal society make up, don't use these bright shades"

Were there any technical innovations that you made, any devices that you had designed?

Nothing in particular. I once improvised a table like thing on which you could put a light. This way you could put a light in a higher place. Earlier, you just took a high stool and then placed a light on it, and everybody followed this method. But I saw that the problem with this was that you could not easily reach and work with the lights, change their position or anything like that. So I thought that if you cut a groove on two legs of the high stool, lower down and then place a plank on it, a person can easily stand on it and manipulate the lights, even at that height.

I did this in Madras when I was shooting two films there and then we introduced it in Bombay as well and then people started calling it "Murthy ka ghora' (Murthy's horse).

Whenever I needed things like this I made them myself.

Tell us about the parabolic reflector that you made.

I have told you already about how we used Parabolic Reflectors in *Tamas*. But I thought about it long before that.

See, the problem is - if the characters are very close together and standing against a dark background you need softer light to match with the background. If I give a reflector from up close there will be too much intensity so I have to position it from afar. Now, to create an even sort of spread it made sense to curve the reflector. So that you got a dispersed, less intense throw of light. So I can get soft light beautifully spread in a bigger area.

See every time I was doing something like this it was because there was some shortage or some problem. So that is how I made this curved, bulging reflector. And two months later I saw in the American Cinematographer magazine a design for something new called a 'parabolic reflector'. I saw that it was basically my design, so someone else had also been working on the same problem. Only the word 'parabolic' was new for me.

You should have patented it and earned some money!

(Murthy laughs....) There was no time to think about anything like that.

But, seriously, time was a real problem. It was very difficult when you are shooting in a situation where there are a few big stars, too many productions and too little time. Once Amitabh Bachchan was working in a film that I was

shooting. He was doing two shifts a day. And the second set was outside Bombay, some 50-60 kilometres away. So he would say - "please, at two-o'clock I have to go for another shoot, can we be a little faster?" At the same time he would say to me "Murthy Garo (Garo is sir in Telugu) what superb photography you have done in *Kagaz ke Phool*". How could I tell him that I had time when I was doing *Kagaz ke Phool*, and that I had no time anymore?

Even Pramod Chakravarty who would never otherwise interfere with the lighting or anything would always ask us to hurry up. I was not happy in those days. Still, my film was in the top five nominations for the Filmfare awards for camera in those years, but I never got an award.

Tell us about the method of shooting day for night in B&W.

I couldn't do it to my satisfaction, because by the time I had an opportunity to do a day for night scene properly in a film, colour had come in. But I had tried it out in B&W in my free time in the studio days. Basically you have to use a combination of filters. You have to use the N5 (green filter) along with the 23A (red orange filter) in front of the lens. The whole frame would go completely dark, but the faces would register as pale. In fact they looked as if they had a white mask. So then I tried this out with a yellowish make up on the faces and this time the skin tone registered perfectly and it looked like night as well. The results were very good, but I could not use it. No one wanted to shoot in Black and White anymore.

So it was the studio system that made all these things possible...

We could do a lot of experiments in the studio. We had time, we had to go there everyday, even if there was no shooting. Makeup man was there, assistants were there, props were there, the carpenter was there, lights were there, properties were there and the lab was there. We could try things out, print and see the results. This made a lot of difference to the work. We could do what we liked. All this is possible only when you have every thing at your command, other wise it is not possible.

Now the studios are all closed. The studio system is over. No producers have their own studio except the RK people.

When video came in, you decided that you would continue to work on video while many people in your generation decided not to. Why is that?

In the beginning I too was not sure. I thought it is too late for me to learn ABCD all over again. I was also a bit upset by the kind of way in which people were shooting in video. So I didn't know what to do.

Now, you must have heard of Jal Mistry, younger brother of Fali Mistry - whom I had assisted. Jal told me, when you do the lighting for video, just think that you are lighting for 40 ASA film stock. So I did that. Later on better cameras came, and now you can shoot even in existing light. So now you have Betacam and even Digital cameras.

Anybody can shoot with video. When people come with these new little cameras from America even little children say "Uncle, uncle I want to do shooting".

Now I don't know what to say, but you know doing camera is a job, and we have to do it whatever happens, for the sake of the job. We belong to the older generation, young directors would come to me and ask me to do camera. We all have had to face that.

So when this video camera came, first I thought I can now leave Bombay and go to Bangalore and rest. And I almost decided that I would not work unless Shyam Benegal or someone like that calls me. Six months after this, one Shyam Kapur, who was a production manager in Guru Dutt films, came to me. Now he was working with the Cinevista people. So he asked me to shoot for their serial. I said "Nothing doing", they insisted, and then I said that I must be paid properly. Normally they pay you 7,500/- per episode, so I asked for 10,000/- per episode. They said, "Please work now for 7,500/-, later we will pay you more." This was in 1995. What were 3 or 4 episodes in the shooting would become 5 or 6 episodes in the editing. So not bad for me. They would pay me regularly and on time. I didn't even have to ask. Best payment, because, you rarely come across people who pay you regularly like this in the film industry. With these people I never came across a bounced cheque.

You see my generation is almost retired. The last film of Pramod Chakravarty released last year. He said this is my last film, no more after this. So I want it to be successful.

What in your opinion was the best floor to shoot on?

For me, the best floor was the floor on which Guru Dutt's films were made. That floor was one of the biggest floors in Bombay. I think it was about 120 feet long and 60 feet wide and 30-40 feet in height. Earlier, that plot belonged to one Govind Ram. There was a studio in that plot, but that particular floor was built for Alexander Korda. Korda had some plans to make a film in India and wanted a studio to be built for him. He sent the specifications for the dimensions and also sent an advance amount. That was how this studio floor got built. But then, Korda never came, and this floor was lying vacant. Nobody was shooting there.

Then Guru Dutt thought, "Why don't we ask if we can take that studio on hire". The owners agreed and we got the studio on a rent of Rs. 7500/- per month. We got the whole floor along with all the lights that were there. It was quite a good deal, even for those days.

Afterwards we got some extra 20 KW lights made. I was the first person to encourage lights to be made in India. The Patel India Company were the first people to start making lights; they started with 2 KW lights. They would come to me every time they made a new light and ask me to test it. I would turn their light on and keep it next to an original MR (Mole Richardson) light and compare the range and the throw of the two lights.

Some lights had very bright centres like spotlights, and in some the centre would be dark. The Patel India people would come and talk to me about all these things. I would give them suggestions about what had to be done on the technical side. I used to tell them, "See the difference between your lights and the MR lights. You have to think about what metal you are using, what type of reflectors you have and what is the element that you are using. You have to study all this carefully".

They listened to me and did all that I had told them to do, and then made quite a number of lights successfully. I was the first person to use their lights and buy the stuff from them. It was good for their business - the fact that V.K. Murthy had bought lights from them.

And what about other appliances - like track & trolleys?

Unlike today, in those days we used to have metal tracks, about 4 inches broad on either side. They were very heavy. You had to put a felt on the rails and then place the trolley on it. Then you could pull and push the trolley. We had to be careful at the joints; the joints were the places where you always got jerks. We always had to adjust the joints.

Afterwards I had the idea of making tracks with round pipes and in fact I told the electrician and one *mistry* (craftsman) to think about how we could make tracks with round pipes. This mistry was the only person in Bombay who made reflectors and accessories for lights.

I told him "...if you can think of a system in which the trolleys wheels have grooves which can fit on round pipe like tracks, then we can get a really smooth movement, with hardly any jerks in the joints."

He said, "Maybe I can find out something from the people who make things for aircrafts and airports". He went and tried to find out from these people, but he could not come up with any solution.

The important thing here was the groove in the wheel. It would have made for very smooth and silent operation. Then after some time, this kind of trolley actually came on the market. I don't know where from it came, or who started making it.

I had seen trolleys of this kind in London, they were electrically operated and had exactly that kind of smooth flow that I had in mind. There was nothing extraordinary about it.

How many cameras did you have?

We had only two cameras, one Mitchell camera, and the other one was an Arriflex.

Did you have a division worked out between the cameras, any thing to ensure that the Mitchell was used only for studio work and that the Arriflex would go for outdoors?

No, nothing strict like that. We did use the Arriflex a lot in outdoor shoots. But it was used whenever it was needed, indoors or outdoors. It had the possibility of variation of speed; you could get 24 frames per second (fps), 48 fps or 16 fps. So whenever we needed a camera with variable speed it was used.

In those days the way we did shooting was not like it is today. I shot a film for Pramod Chakravarty in 14 countries. In France, Italy, Spain and in a lot of other places as well. At that time the Arriflex camera was very handy.

What was the experience of shooting in other countries like?

Shooting outdoor in foreign countries is much easier than in India because people don't disturb you at all. Here the moment you put a camera somewhere, thousands of people will come and waste their time and our time. In other countries it is not like that. They won't even look at the camera, or cross

the frame. If they cross in front of the camera by mistake they would say "...oh, I am so sorry".

In fact I took a test the moment we landed in Paris. We had taken the camera, our own Arriflex camera; it was in the luggage, so I wanted to test and check whether or not the lens element had got shaken. I took a test in the outdoors. We asked the production manager, a French man, if we could get the film processed by the evening. He got it done, and we saw the results, the camera had worked ok. That fellow was very impressed, he said " you shot just like that and got such beautiful results. Our cameraman would have taken two days, to take a shot like that". He then said, "Mr. Murthy, do you want to do films in Paris, I can get you work. You will get five times the salary you get in India."

You were not tempted?

Even during the shoot of '*Guns of Navarone*' in Greece they offered me a job in an Athens studio. I was home sick at that time, I never liked to stay for long in foreign countries.

What has happened to Guru Dutt's studio now?

It got broken down when the Highway (Ali Yavar Jang Road) came up.

So there's no trace of it now?

No trace at all. That studio had gardens, trees and landscapes for outdoor shooting. Afterwards, after Guru Dutt, a Delhi man came and built a very nicely maintained air-conditioned studio. But it fell in the middle of the land where the highway was supposed to be constructed. So...

The studio sequences in *Kagaz Ke Phool*, with whole scenes on the film-shooting floor, do you think they reflected the atmosphere of the studio?

A studio is a studio. Always the same. A big hall with a backdrop of the sky. But when a studio is lying empty, all there is are some lights standing in the corner, or tables. Sometimes the studio has a few flats. That's all.

In that song "Waqt ne kiya, kya haseen sitam" Guru Dutt and Waheeda Rehman are seen alone in the empty studio floor. In that song also I used that beam from the exhaust fan, the floor was empty, there was just one bullock cart lying there, that's all. It was a property - there was nothing else.

I used the bounce light system in that song. Bounced sunlight off a mirror outside, then bounced it off another mirror on the gallery in the second floor, then it entered as a strong highlight on to the floor. I have described this to you earlier as well, in connection with that scene of that earlier meeting in the studio between them.

There was nothing else on the set, it was empty, you could see the walls, no backdrops, just odd bits of wiring. And I had time. So in that sense the lighting was easy for me. Guru Dutt liked it immensely and you can see that he used this throughout the film.

And then we see the heroine come, sit down and she imagines that song. When we cut to a closer shot I used a reflector's light from a lower angle, as if it was a reflection from that 'sunbeam' highlight coming from the door.

Afterwards a lot of people started saying "Bounced light! Bounced light!" whenever they talked about camerawork. But I used it as early as in *Kagaz Ke Phool*. I even used it when a set was put up outdoors, I would ask for a white cloth to be put as a kind of ceiling for the outdoor set - to get better soft illumination all over.

In *Kagaz ke Phool* are there any shots of camera operation...

Yes, yes, there is a sequence. It is when Waheeda walks in accidentally into a shoot and gets screen tested by mistake. Guru Dutt is supposed to be directing, he is on the crane, and with him is Ratra (the cameraman I assisted in *Baazi*) - he plays the part of the cameraman, and you can see me also behind Ratra, with my camera, for a little bit - acting as the assistant cameraman...

And the end of *Kagaz ke Phool*...

The end of *Kagaz ke Phool* was also in the studio. The aged Guru Dutt returns and dies in his sleep on the empty studio floor. The next morning we see him lying in the same shaft of light when the door opens, they don't even know who he is. Then one man recognizes him...it was very moving...

Almost like what really happened to him...

Here V. K. Murthy broke down and asked for the tape recorder to be switched off. This was the end of the interview.