

Interview With **A.K. Bir**

A graduate from FTII pune, A.K. Bir belongs to the league of K.K Mahajan, R. M Rao and Subrata Mitra. He started his career making advertising and documentary films, some of which have received national awards. He handled the second camera in the first unit of Richard Attenborough's Gandhi. With his feature films, Aadhi Mimansa, Lavanya Preeti and Aranyakam, he received national awards as well as international recognition. Mr. Bir has made many films for Children's Film Society, India including 'Lavanya Preeti' that won the Best Asian Film at the Osaka International Film Festival and 'Baaja' that won the National Award for Best Children's film in 2003. He is a sensitive filmmaker and who has often depicted children trapped in a world of adults obsessed with materialism and lack of harmony. Mr. Bir headed the "Technical Sub-committee" and was the chairman of the feature film jury of the 45th International Film Festival of India in 2014. Mr. Bir is first cinematographer in India, who Received prestigious Padam Shri for his contribution .

How did you begin your journey as a cinematographer?

I had no idea ,neither about film making nor about any film institute. My father, who was the principal of a government college, one day, asked me, how about applying for a new discipline which had been advertised in a national news-paper in an institute known as Film Institute of India. After clearing its exam, I received a letter to attend viva at FTII Pune. During my interview, I honestly told them that that I never had taken a single snap but I had come to Pune to learn. Eventually I was in the waiting list and I was upset. Suddenly after a week, I received a telegram which stated "come and join". I was not very keen to come back but then my father insisted and I joined FTII. It was a very adventurous experience for me because I had absolutely no knowledge about this field, whereas all my colleagues were very well acquainted with the discipline. Then I started learning of my own. I used to engage myself in more practical exercises during the off time, when everybody used to go away. Gradually, I picked up but the real interest came during film appreciation class when they started showing films which we hadn't seen before. It was an eye opener for me as it started to connect your sensitivity, your intelligence and your visual perception.

After finishing your graduation from FTII, how did you seek work as DOP in Bombay as FTII was not known during that time?

It was a tough time because the only possibility was to assist well known cinematographers or to work with production houses. When I graduated, I had a different kind of a feeling that by working in a production house or by working with someone familiar, won't be able to give me a wider opportunity to learn and groom myself. I stuck to that idea even though it was in a hand to mouth situation for my survival. I used to spend my time in doing some reading work, sculpting or some painting. Basically I kept myself engaged to keep my creative spirit alive .

How did you get the break in terms of starting or getting the work?



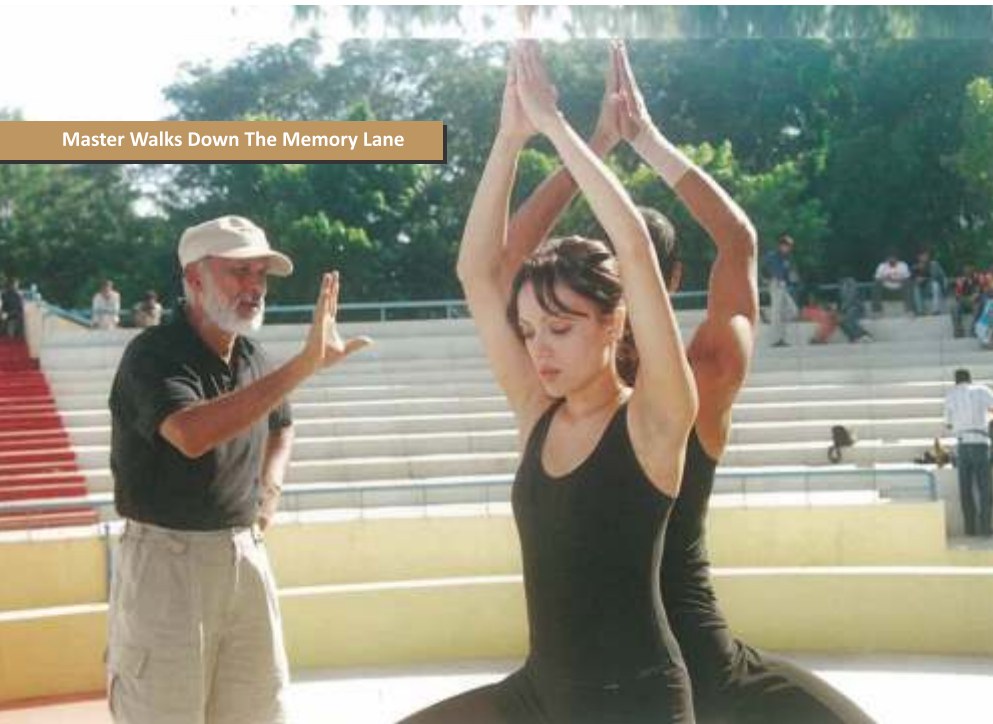
I started doing still photography , even though I was not very keen about it. I thought that it was another way of trying to exercise one's visual perception. This is how I started working with still photography and gradually got into advertising films. Thus I started doing advertising films and then became very busy. I got too much engaged with many advertising films and documentaries. My real aspiration was to do feature films. As it carried on with advertising films, I again felt little stagnant. In 1973, an offer for a feature film came along my way. It was "27 down", a black and white film directed by Mr. Avatar Kaul. He had just come from New York and was planning a feature film. When he presented the script and I read, it sparked an adventurous spirit in me. The script was very interesting. In terms of capturing certain images and the type of the authenticity that was to be created, I felt that it was a huge challenge.

Since most of the film was shot in the train, what were the challenges you encountered for lighting it up?

After reading the script, I had a long discussion with the director and then I told him that probably we should use only block lenses. We had a lot of scenes which were happening on the spot in the crowded areas. All of them needed to be taken very candidly.

Did you have the idea that the camera will be lighter when you use the block lenses rather than zoom lenses?

No. I didn't have that idea. With the zoom, the whole visual characteristics are very different because a lot of glass elements within zoom give a different kind of imaging quality, at that time. The director wanted to take a lot of talking shots on the streets, on the platforms and in the train and how we were going to manage the crowd. We used to go to locations like VT platform around the local area and local trains were so fully crowded. I was thinking how to take those shots because the actress Rakhi was there along with other actors. We decided that I would keep the camera in my hand and I kept moving around and there would be some signals between the actors and me. The actors were absolutely thorough in their dialogues, accent, acting etc and in a flash of a moment we used to take shots. By the time people came to realize what was happening, we had finished the shot. It took a hell lot of energy, concentration and time because it was not an easy thing to do. One has to keep the mind focused all the times, so that one can anticipate the opportunity, during which the crowd would not be attracted by your presence and they remain engaged to their natural activities. If one notices the film, 75% of the film is filmed on



hand held and nobody feels that it was so, because that's how the shots were taken ..

Could you just talk about the particular film "Dasi " for which you received the national award?

Yes. That was again another challenging factor I had to face because of being in color and the theme was such that it was very poignant story about a girl whose life has been confined to a feudal atmosphere. The poignancy had to come out in the whole film because it was based on the character of this girl. After scouting for many locations, we focused on one location and with many difficulties we got the permission. We had to add little more color to give a different state to the already existing color pattern without disturbing their natural color scheme. The girl's life is completely confined to that small room of the huge Haveli. That small room was kind of her world. Here there was no way of putting any light. In fact, I had lights with me but I didn't want to use any light because the moment you use any light there it will have a different character by itself. Hence the kind of color scheme that was

there and a streak of light was coming from top, had a striking effect. One couldn't also depend on that light because it kept changing as the sun was moving. What we did was that we didn't shoot when the actual sunlight was there on top. We took shots when sun was at an angle. We took the reflector on the top, bounced the sun-light and directed the shaft of light through an opening on top. That was the only source of light with which we shot the character. It gave the kind of feeling, which was somber, oppressive, loneliness and stimulating.

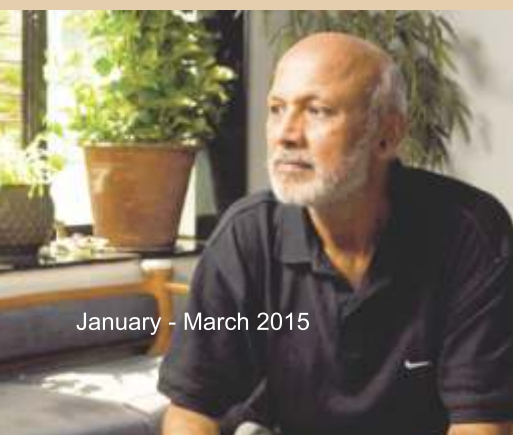
There are certain situations which we still retain in our memory after many years of shooting because of the creative challenges they offered. Do you recollect any other such instance from the feature film shoot?

Most of the time, I work spontaneously. If human sensitivity is there and when one interacts in any situation, it gives a different kind of feedback, different kind of an idea about lighting pattern and character and the visual orientation. I always try to go through an exercise, by which one works from the beginning through one's conscious mind of one's intention and then gradually lead up to a kind of an imaginary state. For example, in a film called "Adi Mimamsa" which I directed, I wanted a kind of moon light feeling inside a room and the idea came immediately that I have resources like HMI lights, incandescent bulbs etc to create that kind of feeling. I instantly

realized that why not use the moon light pouring through a window on the lady of the house who is going through a dilemma. Hence inside the room there were so many details like a mosquito net, a wooden cupboard, the table, the door with different color scheme, the wall with a different color scheme. These elements had to be seen but had to remain unnoticed and the main character had to come out prominently because the light would be pouring on to her and on that basis she was applying her imaginative mind to think about the problems she was going through. This is what I did. I used soft bounced HMI light along with a soft reflector given directly on her. Now some light which came in, also got spilled on to other areas because it was a bounced light but the direct light from the soft reflector hit the lady giving a little highlight in her eyes as well as on the facial part. Later, I tried to balance it inside so that whatever the bounce light came in, that got bounced again from the satin cloth from inside, on the wall and the other area. Then I took the reading of the every point and based on that I evaluated the exposure so that the extended dynamic range of the stock could be exercised to the full extent. The tonal quality which I got was so amazing in the print that Adoor Gopalakrishnan who was the Chairman of national award committee of that year, wondered as to how did I get such a crystal sharp print. Thus, one has to apply one's instinct on the spot which is very important.

As an artist, you also wanted to evolve and wanted to do something which was not a routine kind of a thing. From where did you draw your inspiration to do the routine thing in a little different way?

Mostly it came through my habit of doing painting. When I do my painting, the paintings give me different kind of imaginative ideas and the structure of a frame also is very much connected with the kind of light that plays the role. Besides other objects which play a crucial role in terms of your compositional elements, the light also plays a very crucial role in your compositional design. Now that composition has 2 different characters, one is your ethereal element that is



connected in terms of your feel, the other one is purely intellectual. These are the rules of composition one tries to maintain and then one puts the object accordingly, until the perfect balance is achieved. But I must tell that life is never artificial, conventional or mechanical, it is something more than that, so that logical and mystical elements have to be discovered by applying the sensitivity on a different scale. Hence when one feels that one is in a trance. When one is actually taking a shot, one is in a trance one doesn't know who one is and what is one doing? But one is doing something because one is deeply connected with the spirit and the soul and is exploring a dynamic vision.

Advertising has changed a lot in the past three decades. Can you talk about any of your advertising film shoots from earlier days?

I recollect one of my first advertising films which I made with the actress Menat Aman. She had just become famous. The product was Taj Tea. We were discussing with what kind of lighting should we take the shots. We decided that let us take it in the evening light and at the same time the light should be mostly coming from behind and one can see the Taj in the background. As Taj is usually a white object, I didn't want the direct light to be on the Taj but as a model she will have that kind of modeling lighting in terms of her face and hair. It's like you do it in a kind of model photography. Coming back to the point one has to watch the nature and then keep in view the existing sunlight, the shadow areas and the gradation in the shadow areas in relation to the sunlight that one has to take in account. And we shot that with that kind of a light and it was something Hamid Sayani, the producer and Shama Habibullah the director liked the film immensely and from then I continued working with them on many advertising films.

Working for the advertising film, there one has the luxury of lighting for hours while for the documentary film one doesn't have hardly any time. What are the differences you found in advertising and documentary style of working and what exactly does the documentary style of cinematography mean for you?



They are two different disciplines because again it is the nature of the work and the objective. Advertising films have to promote a product. They have to reach the audiences so that audience would be aware of the product and whereas in a documentary film one is trying to represent actual image of reality and then one has to capture those images. For an advertising film, one requires a different kind of technological perfection which has to be very attractive in terms of visual perfection. In documentary mode, one is trying to sense the level of authenticity and how to capture it without distorting the natural nuances that hold the authenticity. This is the essence of documentary photography. When one is presenting an incident and it has certain value both in terms of historical value and its relevance to the present social context. One is actually capturing those moments of truth. There are certain truths which are very incidental and also at the same time very emotive by nature. One has to capture those things and be on one's toes to capture some elements like that. For example I did a feature documentary called "Chattrabhang" directed by Nina S about the caste system. The film won the critics award at Berlin International Film Festival.

In that documentary the lady who actually played the main role, went through the tragic part of her life, being from a lower caste. When she was asked to act, initially she was not willing because she thought that it would create a lot of tension but then gradually she got motivated to feel the courage to

take up that challenge and it was then she acted. The question was to capture some of her moments. We went to a village some miles away from Mumbai. There was also another lady who had faced a similar kind of very tragic situation. She wanted to speak it out with full flow of her emotions and as the director was talking to her suddenly I kept my camera rolling quietly at one point as I felt, something was going to happen. One has to be on one's toes to guess that. Gradually, she started emoting those emotions. The emotions which I was anticipating just came out and literally she went into tears and started talking about those brutal and tragic events and how they happened. Hence one has to be on one's toes, one has to be very alert especially in documentary.

In the later part of your career, you chose direction. You have directed a couple of films. I remember the film "Bajaa" which was a very unique subject. How do you choose the subject when you direct something?

This story, I wrote myself. When I look at Mumbai and meet people, I find that people are so busy in their own work, their own interests that





sometimes they don't have any idea about what is happening the next door. Hence it was a question of social sensitivity and I wanted to reflect that. After I wrote it, I did the sketching of the boy and based on this sketch I wanted to look for the boy of this nature dealing with instinctive intelligence, which leads throughout the whole film and ultimately deals with a situation which was unexpected. The boy then handles those situations and gradually it leads him to save the life of a 75 year old lady and as well as handle the small child who was in a desperate condition. While looking for the child, I went to Marathi medium, English medium schools. I couldn't find the child. I felt very depressed. It was then somebody suggested to look for the character in an orphanage. That's how I picked up a child from an orphanage. Then I took two NSD students who assisted me in conducting a workshop with the child. After the shooting of the film this boy was so well trained that he was teaching other boys about acting. I was very happy to have groomed him and realized that he will grow up one day to be a very decent human being, being aware of the language of expression. When I shot the film, I hardly directed him. I would tell him few things and that is it.

What is an important quality which any cinematographer should have?

Human touch. One might be very efficient and intelligent technician but a little perspective which adds to the talent is called human touch. Why am I telling this ? It is because of an incident which happened during the shooting of the film "Gandhi". I was in the 2nd unit handling the Panavision camera. In one of the scenes Lord Mountbatten was supposed to be landing with the aircraft and we were shooting at Safdarjang airport in New Delhi. Rony Taylor, who was deputing for DOP asked me to take the close up of a British flag on the cockpit of the aircraft as the plane lands. Hence to be able to take the close up of that shot, I had no idea from which direction it would be coming. The flag was suppose to be fluttering. A 600 mm lens was used to take the shot. I was little apprehensive about how I was going to take the shot and whereas the other British cameraman was asked to take a wide shot, when the plane landed, where as I had to follow the flag on the aircraft in close up. Just before the take Sir Richard Attenborough asked me if everything was fine, how was I preparing myself for the shot. The way he spoke to me, the tone itself gave a different kind of feeling. It was so much concern. There was so much warmth that one felt more assured. This

can be a little bit of an instinct that let's try and take this shot. I asked my assistant if he could pull the focus. After the plane took off, we assumed that it would be coming on the same track. It took off and went ahead, kept going and it didn't land. I had kept the camera on that space assuming that this way it would be coming and then it was a tight frame. Suddenly I saw the flag entering. I don't know what I did once it entered. I assumed that after a particular point I forgot. Later Rony Taylor came and asked me how was the shot ? I politely told him not to ask me anything and to see the rushes. The next day, we went to see the rushes. I was kind of nervous about what had happened and then the shot came. I couldn't believe that it was right in the middle, a very sharp flag fluttering and that was used in the film. It was on that day that I realized that this little bit which I call human touch makes a lot of difference. It gives you more confidence. This is the reason why the director has to be endowed with such human touch that his contact with whole unit gives a new depth and perspective of their involvement in the project. This is one essential quality one should have as a cinematographer. One needs this human touch while dealing with other people and it will make a lot of difference to your work. In fact it springs from trust, faith and belief. ■■■