

Ashok Mehta

Remembered By Naresh Sharma

Ashok Mehta was the most sought after cinematographer in the history of Indian cinematography and the highest paid in his time. Once I finished my graduation from FTII Pune in December 1993, I contacted him. First time when I called if I can join him as an assistant, he asked "What is your experience ?". Since I was a fresh graduate, I realized that the qualification of 3 years from a premier institute is a different thing and having industry experience is something else.

Though he called me on the set as when I contacted him, but it was more of observing rather than that of an assistant. After my stint with Vikas Shivaraman, I again contacted him after a couple of months. Many a times I visited him on the set and observed him working.

I was always wondering that even if I was ready to work for free as an assistant why is he not allowing me. Later, I realized that it was his way of checking till he made sure that I was really passionate about working with him. Many FTII graduates comes to Bombay with a lot of arrogance and he wanted to see if I was also one among them !

Almost after 20 to 30 phone calls and a couple of visits, one day he said why I am just standing there but I should help them (Narayan and others) which was a signal that from today onwards I was a part of the interns team. Almost for 3-4 months I worked with other 2 interns. Though I was never paid even the conveyance allowance but I was happy as every day there was something or other which I was learning.

It was during these 3-4 months that I realized that what we learnt in FTII is not the cinematography but we gained the confidence of becoming a cinematographer. The real learning

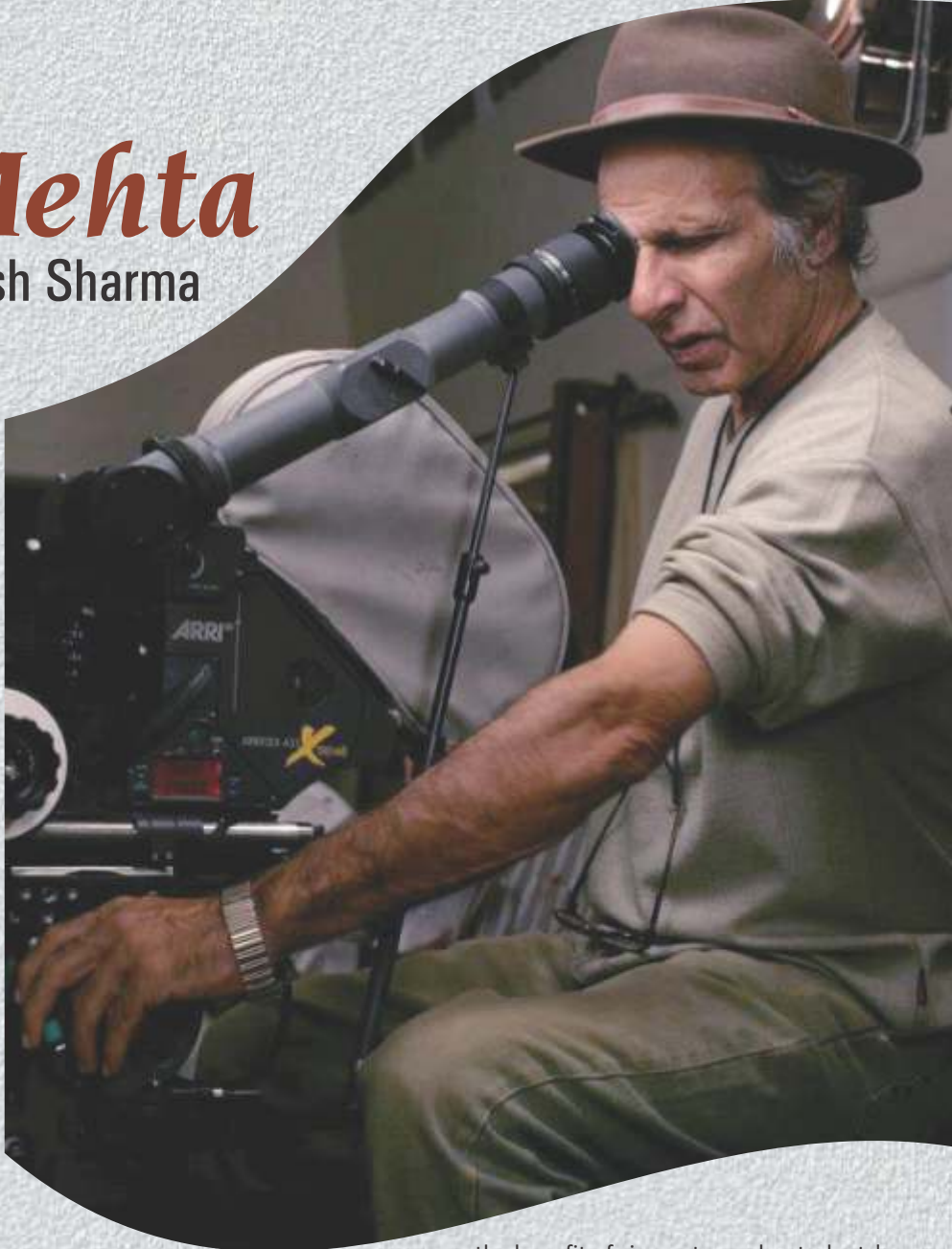
happens in the field when in day you work under pressure and all the time there is something or other which is new to be learned. I used to keep a pocket spiral diary in my back pocket so that whenever there is something new I observed, I would jot that down in my diary. One day when I told him after 4 months that I should be paid as I need to take care of rent etc.

He just mentioned that he had already paid 3 assistants and 2 senior light men. It is difficult to ask payment from the producers for 4th assistant. I knew that there were 2 other people like me who were interns with him but he suggested something which I did not understand at that time and this is the reason why I am mentioning it here for

the benefit of cinematography students' community which is keen to work with a specific cinematographer.

He suggested that I should come on his set and work whenever I am free but try to assist others where I will get paid. That way I can strike a fine balance between learning and earning. Somehow I did not understand this idea and joined Alok Upadhyay, another senior FTII graduated DOP as a paid assistant.

Fresh Gradates need to remember this. If you are determined to work with a particular cinematographer, he would already be having some paid assistants. If you work with him for 6 months as an intern which means no payment, chances are that he will recognize your dedication and may be after 6 months,



you will be start getting paid in some of the shoots where on rotation basis 2 of 3 would be called for the shoot.

Whenever at any point, from being a senior assistant graduate to become an independent DOP, your chances to work as a full fledged assistant cameraman becomes more brighter.

In this article, I am sharing some of the observations during this tenure with Ashok Mehta which I still remember after almost 25 years!

Santoor Soap. Directed by Subodh Potdar :



There was a "Santoor Soap" commercial with the model Priya Kakkar walking in to a music shop. Mehta Ji took one whole day for lighting the long shot. There was a wall on which a guitar was hanging and he felt that it is not enough as it has some filled light spilling from here and there. So he asked one of the boys to make circles of 1 foot, 1.5 feet and 2 feet diameter in the ply board of 4x8 at certain points.

Now cutting a circular hole in the ply board is tricky and I was wondering how we assistants would be able to make it. While we were still discussing, he realized that we could not find the solution. He asked one of the boys to bring a wooden strip and he nailed it from one end and from another end the knob of the nail was rotated on the ply so that a circular groove was made.

Later, he let the assistants rotate it so that after 3-4 minutes of continuous rotating the circular path of ply was out and we could see a small circular hole measuring one foot diameter. Again, we



made two more circles at various points in the plywood by using the same techniques. This may not impress you as what is so great about making these circular holes in the plywood by Ashok Mehta! Now after we did that, he asked to place it on the corner of two walls and covered the rest of the ceiling with a black cloth.

From the distance on the catwalk, he gave one 5k and now we could see 3 elliptical (circle will take the shape of an ellipse if it falls in an angular way) shape patch of light falling on that otherwise dead space where the guitar was hanging. The whole process took us almost an hour to create those 3 elliptical shape patches of highlight and when you see that backdrop in a shot you will realize how those three patches added the value to otherwise dead space.

Trimurti directed by late Mukul Anand



It was the temple set and in Chandiwali studio where a Bhajan was to be shot. One of the shots has the close up of a Dholak and a hand beating it. After the frame was set, some fill and key to highlight the round contour was done. The close up shot was done. All of

a sudden, Mehta Ji realized that the round surface on which the hand is hitting is empty.

He changed the position of the camera slightly and asked one of the assistants to hold the traditional Manjira so that its shadow could fall on the smaller surface of the Dholak. This is one classic example of how sharp was his eye for detailing.

Soap Commercial directed by Piyush Panjwani



It was shot at Natraj Studio and I reached there around 8 am for the 9.00 am shift at the particular studio floor where the shoot was supposed to take place. There was no set and I was wondering if only a pack shot will be carried out or a proper new advertisement shoot. I was not sure that I have entered the right studio floor as Natraj had a couple of studio floors. Once Narayan, another senior assistant of Mehta Ji arrived, it was confirmed that I was on the right floor but there was no set visible. Few dismantled walls were standing on one side facing the studio walls. After arriving Mehta Ji started to assemble all those pieces of walls which were lying here and there. Almost in 4 hours, once the foreground was arranged with various vessels and other properties at an elevated platform and Diyas were lit in the background. Once the lighting was done and finally a low angle track shot was happening, you got the feeling of a proper set. It was first time that I felt that the cinematographer can create the visuals. In the morning there was nothing on the shooting floor and in 4 to 5 hours time by assembling various planes you got

the feeling of a Haweli kind of set with a lady lighting up the Diyas and the feel of Diwali festival was created.

The most important part comes here. There was a pattern of the shadow falling which was created by this Haweli railing on the ground. Even if the railing pattern was created but the shadow was not deep enough. Since there was a part of Rangoli set up done near by, so we had various color powders used for Rangoli. He asked two of the assistant directors to use the tread and add Rangoli powder of dark brown color on the shadow areas to make them deep. It took 30- 40 mins as it was supposed to be done neatly but once it was done, no one could feel that they are not the real shadows but deepened artificially with Rangoli powder. Such was his amazing presence of mind.



Reflections on the class

Bharat Bala Production: It was during one of the shoots where he was setting up one light through acrylic sheet on the glass of an office and many other lights. I could understand the purpose of the rest of lighting and failed to understand why he set up that acrylic sheet as it was not lighting up anything.

I had this policy that if you don't understand why a particular light was set up, try to figure it out from the lens axis. When Mehta Ji was busy I looked into the view finder and realized that the acrylic sheet was set up to create a patch of white rectangular reflection in the plain glass which was on the front part of the reception.

Normally I used to think people cut the reflections from the glass. It was on that day that I realize that sometimes you have to create the reflections too !!

Cream Pack shot directed by Mukul Anand.

It was at MAD studio and we had to shoot the pack shot of some cream commercial which was already shot. The composition was set and so were the other lights. The backdrop was black glass. I was wondering why did he use the black glass as a backdrop. Finally he lighted up a vertical wall which was set up of a particular color. He asked one of us to center a baby light on the colorful wall which was reflecting into the background glass where this pack shot was set up. Later I realized how this black glass is useful where you can creating vignette effect of any small round shape of color patch blending into the black.

Also on the packet of tube he wanted to give some fill light by adding another light. He asked one of us to cut the small rectangular shape of white ivory sheet and pasted on the back of the cream case, so that it will bounce back on the backlight falling on the cream tube next to the case and will add the necessary fill, which was otherwise difficult.

There are many things which no institute will teach you. They will tell you the basic fundamentals. It is for you have a presence of mind which can make the best out of any situation given for you to light up.



- Written by Naresh Sharma,
Editor, CINEMATOGRAPHY ART .

