



Interview with

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On Collaborating With Various Cinematographers

You've worked with various cinematographers, starting with Govind Nihalani to Ashok Mehta. What is your general brief to a DOP when you decide to work with a particular one?

I've worked with a number of cameramen, some of whom were venerable old time cameramen from the silent era with styles very much of that period.

My normal working method is to discuss the film, its characters, the style of lighting and so on with the DOP so that the way I would like the narrative interpreted is clear. It is very important for the cameraman to know what exactly you are seeking visually. And I always prefer to discuss that in some detail before we actually start shooting. So he is quite clear about what you want and the demands being made on him.

Now there are certain kinds of films where you might want to shoot - say for instance - with an 18 mm wide angle lens. This lens does a very important thing. It gets the environment to dominate the character. When you use a lens that is less wide than that, say 35mm there is a greater balance

between the environment and the character. You can interpret relative importance of objects, places and people by the lenses you use and the angles you choose to look at them, for instance by shooting from low angles to foreshorten and create dominance.

It all depends on the results you want. You can also choose to have different points-of-view; both subjective and objective. Take the famous Japanese filmmaker, Yasujiro Ozu for example. He used only 35 and 50mm lenses and hardly moved the camera. His view point was by and large from the Japanese sitting position. Your view point determines the way you look at the world. You are made an objective observer, and not a subjective participant in the story. Ozu would use a subjective point of view very sparingly at climactic positions in the narrative.

Each filmmaker has his or her own method of working. This has to be made clear to the DOP. I personally believe this is a very important aspect of a director-cameraman relationship. For instance, you may have changed your staging of a scene

that will require the cameraman to make drastic changes in his lighting. Perhaps, he may offer an alternate plan which may still be in keeping with the narrative character of the film. The narrative character of any story cannot be arbitrary. It has to be organic and all action should seem inevitable. The Cameraman and the Director, are concerned with not only the visual expression in terms of space but also with physical action, emotional and psychological development of the characters in the narrative that need articulation with the means of light, lenses and movement. It is your DOP who articulates your vision.

Starting from the very beginning I have worked with very senior cameramen. When I was making advertising films, I had cameramen like Mr. Malhotra, a very senior cameraman whose career had started with silent cinema and worked almost exclusively with B.R. Chopra as his cameraman. Then with Dharam Chopra, who was B.R. Chopra's brother. Then the self effacing but hugely accomplished Kamat Ghanekar, who was my partner as well as my cameraman. He had started his career with the famous



Let me put it this way. Whatever film you're making; two things you should never forget. Cinema has a grammar that you have to follow if you don't wish your audience to get confused. Nor can you change the idiom half way. There are certain rules that you have to follow. Either you create a new grammar and a new vocabulary as when Jean-Luc Godard or others of the French nouvelle vague did or follow the narrative conventions that have evolved over a period of time.

To begin with, you must know what your cameraman's capabilities are. There are different kinds of cameramen. Subrata Mitra was very original in the manner in which he used lighting. His lighting was designed to get a naturalistic quality. He hated arbitrariness in lighting. He was very particular about the sources of light. Some cameramen are concerned largely with giving you the effect that you want. Then there are other cameramen who are combination of these two. V.K. Murthy, who shot a couple of films and the mammoth serial 'Bharat Ek Khoj' for me, blended both these techniques. He also concerned himself with source of light but he was not above giving little highlights and touches just to enhance a certain quality that you wanted, to heighten the emotional quality of the scene. He was also a great innovator (much like Subrata Mitra) in lighting and knew how to get certain kinds of light effects that were quite magical.

Could you elaborate the term "innovative" in the case of Subrata Mitra and V. K. Murthy?

Subrata Mitra was probably a pioneer of bounce lighting. So much of his interior

Prabhat Studios. And these were people who were much more orthodox in the manner in which they used lighting and in the use of lenses and camera movement. This was because there were many more technological limitations under which they had to work. Today's cameramen don't have those limitations. They had to be much more inventive in lighting, use of lenses and camera movement.

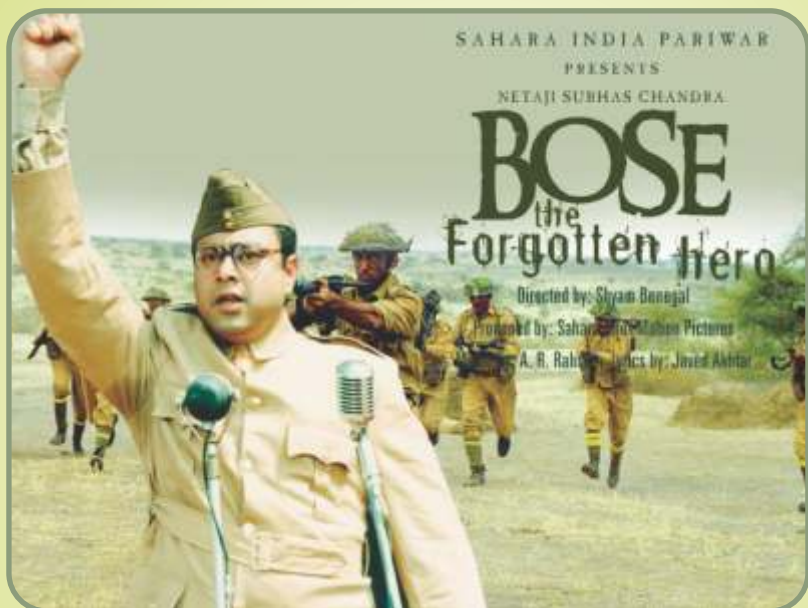
Some cameramen don't require very detailed briefing, but they sense what is required all the same. It always helps if once the cameraman knows what it is that you are looking for and how you wish to interpret it. The important thing is for the director and the cameraman to be on the same page.

How do you approach the shot taking? Do you say it has to be shot with this lens and height or you describe the shot to the DOP and let him decide how to go about it?

I do both, depending on the cameraman. I have worked with very accomplished cameramen like Subrata Mitra who was Satyajit Ray's cameraman.

Subrata Mitra did not like some of the methods I employed. He would say, "Don't tell me what lens I should use. Just tell me what you want". Sometimes we would have an argument and I would tell him, "But how do you know what I have in mind unless I

tell you the mechanics of how I think it can be achieved? You'll get me an excellent result but it may not be the way I want it. If you say that this is a better thing, let me look at it and decide whether it is better." When you start shooting a film, it is always like the first film you have ever made. It's the same with the cameraman. But once the cameraman gets used to working with you, things generally work out to your satisfaction.





work was shadow-less as you see in real life. You don't notice shadows. The techniques he used were both economical and quite innovative.

Subrata Mitra used white sheets of cloth while V.K. Murthy preferred to use silver paper, or reflective silver foil, depending on the kind of result he wanted. Both used bounce lighting in different ways.

A lot depends on how the DOP has been trained. For instance, Govind Nihalani has been influenced quite a lot by V. K. Murthy as he had assisted him for a long time before he became an independent cameraman. His technique is a combination of what V.K. Murthy might do plus his own considerable contribution.

You had consistently worked with Govind Nihalani for more than 10 films. What did you find unique about him?

Empathy. With Govind Nihalani I did not have to discuss everything in great detail. On the sets we hardly discussed because he could read my mind just as much as I could understand the technique that he was employing. There never was a problem. Once you find a comfort level of that kind you don't want to change your cameraman. It was only when he became a filmmaker in his own right, did I need to go looking for another cameraman.

In between I also worked with K. K. Mahajan and we got along extremely well because he and I were similar, very restless in the manner in which we would function. And he was also very interested in getting certain kind of results as he was very fond of shadow less lighting.

I worked with Ashok Mehta on some of my most satisfying films. Ashok was constantly wanting to experiment, attempting to do new things. And because of his tireless nature I wanted to shoot 'Trikal' with him. I discussed the visual character of the film in great detail. The film

was set in Pre-liberation Goa when there was no electricity, and homes were lit with oil lamps or petromax lanterns or candles. Ashok and I discussed the best way to get the result we wanted.

I introduced a film called 'Barry Lyndon' by Stanley Kubrick to Ashok and some of it was shot like that. In European art, you find that Renaissance painters always used light and shade (chiaroscuro) that gave their work a kind of depth and character that did not exist before in paintings either in Europe or India. That is the kind of result Stanley Kubrick got in Barry Lyndon. He even used lenses that were specially ground and crafted for his cameraman to allow working in low light. Ashok Mehta mastered this technique in 'Trikal'. Ashok came up with idea of actually shooting in candle light and kerosene lamps, as sources of light for nights. This was at a time when the fastest colour negative available was only 200 ASA. To reduce the grain and yet get enough light for exposure, Ashok contacted different candle-makers and they made candles of different shapes and sizes. Constant experimentation allowed Ashok to light all the interior shots in this kind of lighting.

Ashok got the National Award for Cinematography in that film. Ashok Mehta was a very adventurous cameraman. He had first worked with me way back in 1967, when he was not yet a cameraman. He was 18 years old and had come on board as a camera hand, not even an assistant cameraman. He would carry the equipment around and set up the camera, fix lenses, change film rolls and so on. He was totally self-taught. We had gone to Bastar to shoot a documentary on the tribal communities there. By the time we reached Bastar, my cameraman fell ill with malaria. I was stuck. I had no budget provision for another cameraman. I was in a quandary. Necessity forced me to operate the camera. But I did not know enough about exposures. Ashok knew how to read an exposure meter and

set the exposures. He also functioned as a focus puller. Eventually he took over as cameraman. He used car head lights, petromax lamps and so on to light night scenes. The results we got were fabulous. Ashok had a great sense of adventure. His exposures were absolutely perfect. So when 'Trikal' happened at the beginning of 1985 he seemed the right person to shoot the film. By that time, of course, Govind was very much an independent filmmaker. After that Ashok remained with me. We shot 'Kalyug', 'Mandi', 'Making of the Mahatma' and several other short and long documentaries.

In 'Mandi' I wanted a certain kind of color palette. Also I was shooting on actual locations, but I wanted to shoot with the ease and facility of shooting in a studio. So Ashok created a catwalk on the first floor level of the house which went round the entire structure, about 25-30 ft above the ground. He had done that for me when he shot 'Junoon' for some of the battle scenes we had shot from such a trolley, high up. Those days we didn't have huge cranes and, therefore, all of this was specially created for the film. This was used both for use as a camera trolley as well as for lights when needed. This allowed the camera to move around the house, into the rooms on the first floor and so on. It was very inventive and ingenious. This is what made Ashok very special.

Do you remember any other situation which still makes you remember Ashok Mehta?

Another quality which I appreciated greatly in him was the fact that he did not like direct lighting on characters. He always preferred diffused light, particularly in interiors where the light was in any case diffuse. As a result, the characters came alive in a marvelous way. It was not simply for cosmetic reasons. It always helped in



creating the right atmosphere for the narrative.

During "Making of the Mahatma", we had to shoot in the old Parliament House in Pretoria. It was a large hall and was quite a challenge. The gaffer saw it and said, "We will require a large number of lights, much more than we have. What is more, it will take a couple of days to light up the entire hall. We will need an additional generator." I told Ashok that we could not afford that. He said, "Leave it to me." He decided to use both natural light and some selective artificial lighting. He surprised everybody as we finished the shooting in half a day. He started lighting from 6 to 9 am and by lunch time we had finished shooting the scene. We had only been given the location for a single day.

For "Making of the Mahatma", we had worked out an 85 days shooting schedule. We finished shooting the film in 38 days! His lighting style was to make the best use of whatever natural light he'd get and augmenting it with artificial lights to get the results we wanted. He was an absolute master at that sort of thing.

Another DOP you have worked with for many films is Rajan Kothari. What do you find in Rajan Kothari so unique about his way of working?

Rajan and I had excellent understanding. And we shot films primarily outdoors, like 'Samar', 'Hari Bhari' and 'Welcome to Sajjanpur'.

Rajan Kothari was always very cool, very quiet. No shouting, no screaming. Ashok Mehta was quite the opposite. So there never was any kind of tension on the sets. I haven't found any other cameraman to match that quality. Although now I think I have found another cameraman who in some ways has a similar kind of personality; Akashdeep Pandey, who shot 'Samvidhaan'.

I believe it is important for a director to understand basic principles of lighting and also the use of space, lenses, camera movement, etc. If he knows these basics, it is a great help to the cameraman.

In between you've also switched to 2-3 people like Piyush Shah and Prasann Jain. What was your experience with them?

Piyush is another very gifted cameraman. Again, he's a great innovator. He reminds me a lot of Ashok because of his ability to innovate. I had seen his excellent work for Mani Kaul, particularly his aerial shooting. I took him as a second unit cameraman when I made 'Bharat Ek Khoj'. He had to shoot from a helicopter all over the country. We filmed all the major rivers of India, all the major forts, historical monuments and so on. We couldn't afford expensive equipment needed for this and he had to do all this with a handheld camera. You will not notice any of the vibrations of the aircraft or the camera shaking due to those vibrations. This he



managed by shooting at high speed, just enough to eliminate the vibrations and other small jerks and shakes. He did a brilliant job. After 'Bharat Ek Khoj', Piyush shot 'Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda.' And that was also some kind of a record because his lighting style was very simple and very effective. We had created a set, both indoor and outdoor and he shot the film at such speed that we finished the entire film with a whole week to spare. The time taken was much shorter than what we had scheduled for the film. Piyush is very quick, and very confident of his work. That's what I like in him and he's very intellectually attuned to the film being shot. He's not just a craftsman. He is imaginative, creative and wants to be intellectually and emotionally part of the complete film. An excellent cameraman!

Considering that I've been a filmmaker now for over 50 years, I can't say that I have had a difficult time with any cameraman I have worked with. All the cameramen I have worked with have been exceptional craftsmen and extremely creative people. Their contribution to my films has been immense.

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