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recollects his journey

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exclusive interview with Directors

Oasis, Sweety

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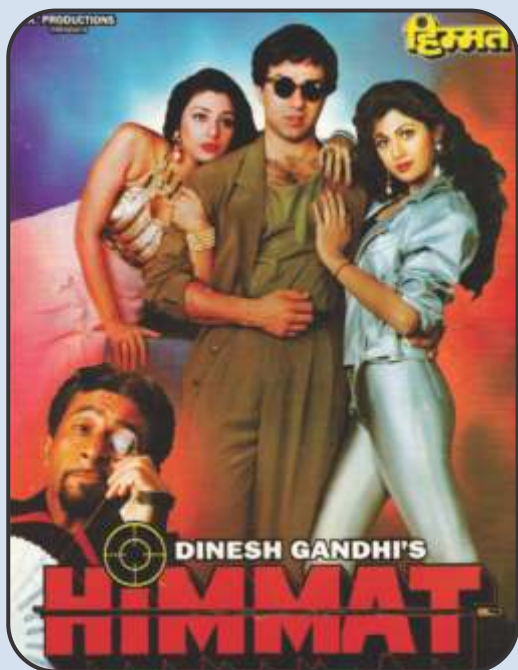
Padma Shri

SANTOSH SIVAN (ASC)

The League of Extraordinary Gentleman



Center for Research in Art of Film and Television (CRAFT) • Film School • Publication • Event (PS - CSR) • Production



DOP Sunil Sharma, an FTII graduate, has been working in the Bollywood film industry for the last forty years and has to his credit an association with about 40 Feature Films, 250 Advertising Commercials, 500 Episodes of TV, and 50 Documentaries in various capacities. Films like 'Saath-Saath', 'Raahee', 'Insaniyat', 'Abodh', 'Nadiya ke Paar' and 'Jalwa' are some of his prominent feature films wherein he exhibited his talent as DOP. His expertise as cinematographer was pressed into service in mega serials like 'Chandra Kanta' and 'Karam Chand'. He also directed & photographed a Telefilm 'Chakshu' for Door-Darshan. 'Himmat', starring Sunny Deol, Tabu, Shilpa Shetty and Nasiruddin Shah, was his directorial venture.



Sunil Sharma Recollects his journey

INITIAL JOURNEY

After passing out from FTII Pune, in 1976, I started working with ABC (ABC American broadcasting corporation) in Delhi. There was a film which was being made by Sippy Films with Manmohan Singh as the camera person and Surinder Suri as Director and it was their first film. They persuaded me to come to Bombay and do that film with them. I was then working in Delhi & was drawing a very handsome salary. However, I quit the job, left Delhi and went to Mumbai with a contract of Rs. 5 thousand for this film to be made in 3 months. That's how I landed up in Bombay. Immediately after that I came in touch with Mr. K.K. Mahajan (four times National Award Winner for best cinematography). I did one film with him as an assistant. There was a film called "Ram Nagri" which he was doing independently. Kantilal Rathore was the Director of the film starring Amol Palekar and Suhasini Muley. For a day or two there was a kind of confusion. Mr. Mahajan asked me to go to Mr. Kantilal Rathore. However, when I met Mr. Kantilal Rathore, He did not recognize me and asked me who I was. I told him that I was there on behalf of Mr. K.K. Mahajan. He asked me if I was from FTII. I answered with

a Yes. He further asked me when I passed out. I answered that it was in 1976. He then told me that he was the examiner of diploma films for that year. He again asked me about my diploma film which I told him was "Proposal". I had done that with Ashok Ahuja. After that he did not ask me anything. Instead he just said, "Sunil, this is the shot." This was very encouraging for me. I shared the credits with Mr. Mahajan for that film. Mr. Mahajan at that time was doing eight or nine other films also and as such he was extremely busy and, therefore, Mr. Kantilal had let me complete the film on his behalf. Mahajan Saheb was extremely firm and very quick at deciding the things. He knew at once what kind of source light it was going to be for a particular shot. Once the source was decided, it did not affect his speed of work. Now if a wrong source is taken, you are caught in the web. It takes just half an hour to light up, but if something goes wrong, it would take next two hours to rectify it. So how to decide to put lights for the very first shot was the most important thing and that I had learned from Mr. Mahajan. When we are lighting up for the night, then a direct light is used for the day and we could manage with the bounce light.

Mr. Mahajan also shot "TARANG" for Kumar Sahani. I worked as an assistant and learnt big lessons. Once four days Shooting of TARANG was washed because of faulty equipment. I did not notice while changing the lenses that they did not get locked properly.

ON LIGHTING APPROACH:

It all starts from what kind of a film it is going to be -- What is the script all about? Is it an action, thriller or a romantic film? What are the backdrops going to be? How many indoor and outdoor scenes are to be there? What kind of film and emulsion speed you are going to use? Whether the film is going to have contrast scenes or soft scenes? Also what kind of budget the film holds? It is extremely important to choose the emulsion of the film since the emulsion has to be chosen according to the script. To me, emulsion speed makes a difference in your working style as well as time taken to light up. You see, feature film, is as important as an advertisement film. Now an advertisement would appear 25 times a day where as the film would be shown only four times a day. In a day people are going to watch the commercials much more often

than a feature film. It is why a little more importance is given to an ad film. Every minutest detail has to be taken care of, and that is the only difference. The benefit in the feature film is that even if you are short of something, the actors will somehow carry you through. There the focus is on the actor and not on the environment whereas in an ad film a lot of importance has to be given to the environment or background.

There was a film named "JALWA" which I did with Pankaj Parashar. In that film a scene was to be shot with Archana Puran Singh and A.K. Hungal. There was a very strong light of the sun which was falling in the room. I was not able to figure it out how to remove that patch of light. I didn't wanted to use the sun light directly because of high contrast. Even the room was very small and there was no space to put the artificial light. Finally I decided to use the fog filter on the lens instead of putting ND filter on the window. In that scene, A.K. Hungal had to exit and Naseeruddin Shah was to enter and, as it happened, it became a wonderfully romantic scene between Naseer and Archana. After the first screening of the film, the question which struck almost everybody from FTII was how I did it. The fact was that one particular source with one particular filter could change the whole feel in the scene. I still remember a film named "Chehre Pe Chehra" with Sanjeev Kumar. There was a very big church in old Goa which was to be lit at night. About 400 k w of lights was placed one by one very strategically so that the whole church could be lit up well. Now it

was a track shoot wherein all the engravings inside had to be enhanced. It was a very challenging task.

Among the various directors I had worked with one is Satyen Bose who was the director of "Jagriti" and "Boot polish" and it is he who needs a special mention here. He was making a thriller film in which about 11 or 12 camera persons were changed. It was because their work was not up to his expectations. Finally when I was called, the very first question I asked him was -- "Dada, there's so much difference of age between you and me that I wonder how we are going to communicate. Either I should be older or I think it is easier for you to be younger because you have already passed through that age. Then I hope it will be a healthy communication. He just looked at me, broadened his eyes and said, "Okay, Let's see." And when camera was called in, the very first thing that he asked me to explain was what was close-up and to show that to him. So I did. Then he asked me about mid-close, long shot and everything else before we started the actual shooting.

I was aware of the fact of eleven-twelve people already being sent back. Still before we set up the lighting for the first scene in a den, I politely asked him to tell me the source of light coming into that den. Since as per the scene around three hundred mice would enter with the light, so I asked him if adequate precautions have been taken to catch them. He immediately realized the problem and worked it out quickly. Working with him was indeed a great inspiration in terms of learning. Whenever I used to put the camera, he would come and ask to put it three inches up or four inches down. Frankly speaking, after doing nine or ten films, placing the camera and judging the height of the camera at an accurate position are the things that I had learnt from him. He had some wonderful books which he used to give me for reading purpose in the morning, and in the evening he would come to my home and take those books back. They were all technical books, about cinema, about filters and so on, so forth. These books were not available in any normal market. I don't know for how many years he had been collecting all those books.

If we talk about lenses, 50 mm is one such good lens with which you can shoot an entire film. It gives you a wide and a close enough range to shoot. I used to be very-very comfortable with this lens because sometimes the location is not the concern and the characters are more important than the background. But with 50 mm you can get

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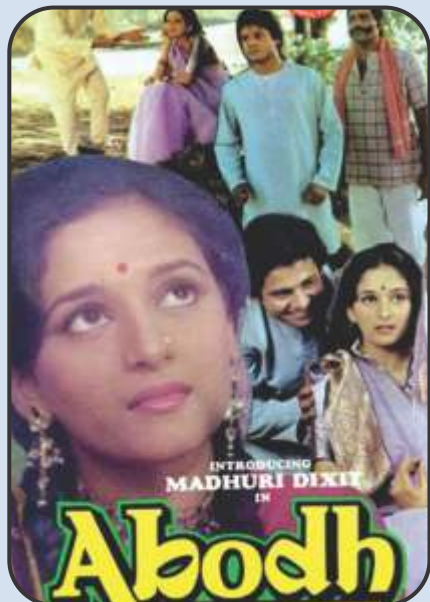
good depth of field. I don't like zoom lens and use it very rarely. "Atishbaz" with Shatrughan Sinha, Prem Chopra, Gulshan Grover, Anita Raj and Aditya Pancholi was a film which was shot entirely on zoom lens. Shatrughan Sinha had to leave for the flight to Bombay and his shots had to be completed. The dancers and the junior artists came from Bombay. We were given two and half hour to shoot the entire song with all the stars, six other characters, twenty dancers and fifty junior artists. The full song of five and half minutes was shot within two and half hours.

It was because anything which needed to be done in the next shot, you zoom that and the shot continued. So for the whole scene, the shots were divided in such a way that the zoom was the dominant factor. I don't remember the song. It was inside the studio in Goa. It was not a very drastic zooming but, then you knew you were using the zoom to move forward to go ahead with the song. It was not pre-planned but was decided on the set.

I also remember a particular situation in "Roop Ki Rani Choron Ka Raja."

Initially Boney Kapoor was keen to do the titling in Hong-Kong. The entire thing was supposed to be done by Peter Ferrera. I was called in because I did a film called Sur-Asur in which I had done all the camera tricks. It was television's one of the first

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feature films. In Filmistan Studio they had set up the screen. Many a times whenever I used a hand held camera and if there was no sync sound, I would always shoot it on a slightly higher frame, say twenty-six, twenty-eight frames per second in order to get everything smooth. For instance, "Jalwa" was shot with 90% hand held camera, and it was a cinema scope film. Nobody had ever imagined that a cinema scope film could be shot thus with a hand-held camera, but I did that. Today, as an artist, cinematographer sits on a very easy seat because if something goes wrong it can be corrected later. Earlier before you finalized the shot you would think ten times but today somebody else is there to finalize the shots for you and that's how we monitor. A lot of things have been eased up and burden has been taken off the shoulders of the cinematographer.

Now it's no more about cinematography; it's only a camera operation because the rest of things are being done by the support system. As far as the exposure, color correction and the other things are concerned, you can change them in DI. The only thing a camera person has been left with is framing and camera movements. These two things are still very important for any good work. Otherwise the rest, they all can be adjusted the way you wish to do in post production.

ON KARAMACHAND :

"Karamchand" is a different story altogether. In the very first shoot which we

took, the camera was supposed to be on a track. It was a fast track towards a particular character and every time when the tracking was done faster, the camera would tumble along with me and the assistant who was focusing. We tried this ten to twelve times and finally I asked him to hand over the camera to me. Though the tracking speed again was as fast as the last time but the difference was that now the camera was in my hands and I was sitting on a stool. When the track would stop, it would give a jerk and the camera would slide further and could fall with that jerk. However, since it was hand-held, I would hold that tightly in my hands and would stop at the head of that character. Immediately after the shot Pankaj Parashar came and asked how I did it. He even complimented me saying that it was a wonderful shot. It was all of a sudden and happened spontaneously.

Then practically all the thirty nine episodes were shot with hand-handled camera. Now the actor was not confined to a particular territory or an area and Pankaj Kapoor had the liberty to move around in any way he wished. But camera was supposed to catch him. In this process the angle of the lens changed so dramatically that it gave the feeling of inquisitiveness among the audience regarding what was going on. Earlier the camera would be steady and the character used to do all the tricks. Now for the first time the camera was doing the jugglery. That's how for the first time entire performance of an actor was enhanced by the technique of the camera.

HIMMAT (DIRECTOR, DOP, SCREENPLAY)

After the release of "Jalwa" with Rajshree production, I shot "Nadiya Ke Paar" in thirty days and later "Abodh" (Madhuri Dixit's first film). Rajkumar Barjatya called me and asked me what I was doing those days. He was asking me for the subject of a feature film.

I was both surprised and shocked at his words, but at the same time I was thrilled also and asked him for a day's time. I had one short story which I thought could be made into a 90 minute film. Then I narrated that entire script to him. It took me almost two hours to narrate. He was impressed and asked me to meet Shri Charandas Ashok, a very fantastic writer, with almost 12 golden hits. I met Shri Charandas Ashok.

He looked at me and asked me whether I wanted to make a film. He asked me about the subject and about my past works. I told him about my projects "Nadiya ke Paar" for Rajshree and "Jalwa". He became

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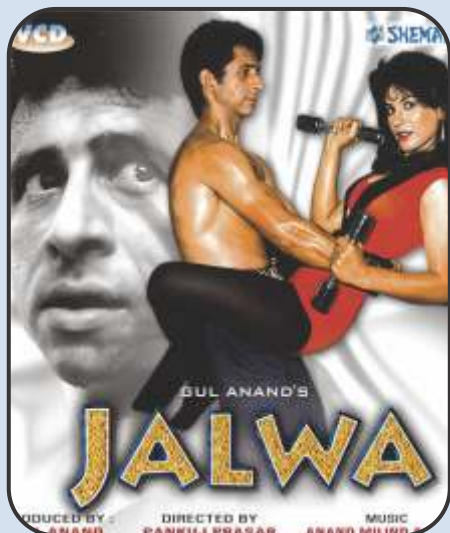
enthusiastic, immediately stood up and said, "Let us meet in the Rajshree office." We went there and within six months the subject was ready. At the same time, Suraj Barjatya was also working on his script. He finished with his script and started the execution. His film was a big hit. I was told that they were exploring the film in a different language and therefore they would not be able to work on my film for the next two years.

One fine day I was shooting for "Insaaniyat". I was narrating a scene and as per chance Sunny was there. He was also listening to what I was saying and then suddenly he told me that he really liked the scene and was very keen to know about the script. I asked him to meet when we both had some leisure time so that everything could be explained in a better way. He agreed and said that Deepak would get in touch with me within a week's time. His secretary called me up and fixed the meeting.

I wanted an absolutely peaceful environment to narrate my story. Then the other day by 6 a.m. in the morning we met and I explained to him the whole thing. He stood up and agreed to do my film.

He further told me that we would start from the coming January and asked me to prepare myself for the same. Mr. Dinesh Gandhi, a financier also agreed to fund our film.

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Sanjeev Sood

Mentor Remembered

My cinematic sojourn with Sunil Sharma in 1986 came at a time when K.K. Mahajan asked me to join him, as his chief assistant Ajay Tandon got busy with some independent work. Joined him on the shoot of hit detective TV serial 'Karamchand' directed by Punkaj Parashar. U-matic low band was industry norm and for a hardcore cinematographer like Sunil it was just a toy of plastic to play around with.

So far, the video camera language was 'mid long, mid and close shots interspersed with few dolly shots'. Hand held camera movements in fiction was unheard of in Indian Television i.e. only Doordarshan at that time. It was Sunil Sharma who introduced a new style of hand held takings with continuous shots, sometimes more than ten minutes long... equivalent to one reel in cinema! It was not a documentary kind of hand held but a weird way of using it. Why I say weird because it was not traditional hand held but an unique way of rewriting grammar of cinematic takings. Talking of hand held camera techniques work in many ways, at times holding it from the handle or keeping it at ground level and then tracking in which it ultimately becomes top angle in the same shot (there were no Louma Cranes or Jimmy Zibs around at that time).

We were using the camera like hand ball. In some running shots camera was literally chucked at me to catch and continue with the shot, this was to get a shot with a feel as if it was a POV of character or moving object. Among many, I remember once

Karamchand was running down the stairs and camera always used to be ahead of him, at each flight, in a continuous shot. There were no camcorders available at that time. Camera and VTR used to be connected with a remote cable. In the history of television or cinema in India, no one could think of this kind of shot taking. I think this was the only TV serial in which all possibilities of hand held camera were explored including at times artists themselves doubling up as camera operators. This taking style became a hit to an extent of becoming a "LANDMARK". This made the team of 'Sunil Sharma and Punkaj Parashar' popular. Following the same style feature film 'Jalwa' was shot on cinemascope. It was very difficult to shoot as the camera becomes very heavy with cinemascope lenses and also keeping the format in mind compositions had to be done carefully.

Among many things, I learnt working with Sunil was to create respect for oneself as cinematographer. How to be firm in many situations. I remember shooting a dance number where a very well established choreographer wanted to operate the camera as he used to do all the time but Sunil Sharma put his foot down and simply refused by suggesting him to rather concentrate on the work assigned to him. Equally important thing is to get your dues. I remember while shooting for 'Insaniyat' we came back after two week long schedule from Bangkok. Went to collect payment from the producer who while chewing Zarda raised his head and just refused to recognize

me and asked "Aapun kaun" !!

When I told this to Sunil, he kept quiet. Few days later... There was an expensive set erected at Filmistan studio for the climax of the same film. On the 1st day of shoot, he yanked light meter from me and decided to be gaffer himself, asking me and another assistant Garry (Virendra Singh Grewal) to be on the camera. At 4:00 pm Amitabh Bachchan arrived on the set and Sunil was still lighting background of the set. Shift was about to get over. Amitabh and full star cast that included Jaya Prada, Sunny Deol, Nootan among others, fight and dance masters... all sat on their chairs patiently waiting for lighting to get over. Extremely unusual for an Amitabh Bachchan starrer in those days, guess even today. Sensing trouble the producer summoned brief case full of cash and tapped on Sunil's shoulder. He turned around took three steps back, scanned him toe to head and asked "Aapun kaun...!!" Every one on the set rolled in laughter. Later Sunil narrated the incident to Amitabh how producer behaved with me when I went to collect the payment. Even Amitabh loved his style and asked him to keep it up.

It is important to learn from such incidents in the film and television industry or wherever we work where technicians are not paid and left alone without being respected. I personally think that a true disciple of Late K. K. Mahajan, Sunil Sharma is one among few cinematographers who has played his inning with dignity. □□□