



VOL: 2, ISSUE: 1, JULY - SEPTEMBER 2014

www.cinematographyart.org

RS. 100/- \$5.



CINEMATOGRAPHY ART

a quarterly Magazine

Assem Sinha

Editor

INTEGRATING IMAGES

Nakul Kamte

Sound Designer

PAR EXCELLENCE

Subodh Poddar

Ad film maker on his favorite Ad films Shot By

Ashok Mehta, Barun Mukerjee

Rajiv Jain, Ajit Bhatt

Shyam Benegal

on his Collaboration with

Cinematographers

GOVIND NIHALANI,

ASHOK MEHTA,

PIYUSH SHAH, RAJAN KOTHARI

Reflections

Trusha Patel, Publicity Designer

Moolchand Dedhia, Master Gaffer

Sunil Sharma, DOP

Gopal Shah

Veteran

Cinematographer

recollects his journey

NSD

Graduate Show 2014

exclusive interview with Directors

Oasis, Sweety

& Actors Sonali, Gagan

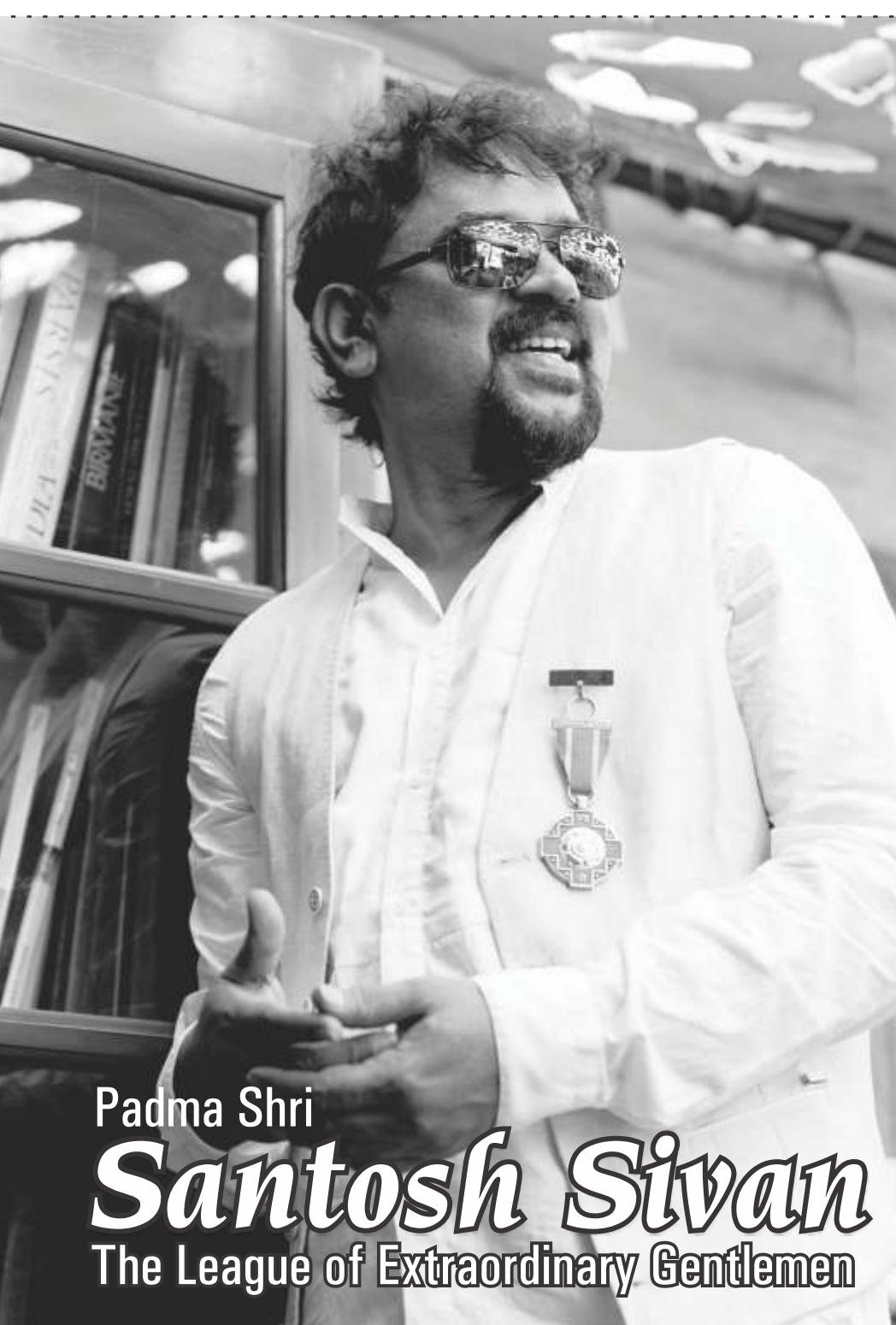
Padma Shri

SANTOSH SIVAN (ASC)

The League of Extraordinary Gentleman



Center for Research in Art, Film and Television (CRAFT) • Film School • Publication • Event (P.R.-CSR) • Production



Padma Shri **Santosh Sivan** The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen

What was your basic approach towards work when you first started as a cinematographer?

Since I hadn't assisted any DOP in a film, I was just looking for an opportunity to film a feature. Back then, the script, money etc. Were not a real concern. I just wanted an opportunity to work as a cinematographer, just like a writer writes every day; my idea was to film every day, however less challenging it maybe. There are always opportunities where one can do something interesting. And if you are lucky, someone is going to see the film and offer

you another. Also later during film making, when you get along well with the director, you exchange ideas, recce locations and spend time talking about it. You try to figure out how the director sees the film and try to blend your ideas into the story and the source of the director's inspiration may be an incident from the past or an adaption or sometimes even a remake. Even now, whenever I start a film, it feels like my first one.

Could you talk about some of your initial projects as a cinematographer?

Before 'Raakh' I did a film titled 'Nidhiyude Katha' (Story of a Treasure). It was a Malayalam film for a critic turned director Vijayakrishnan. It was shot on 16mm. He asked me whom I had been assisting. This question is always put to a beginner. I had learnt a lot from my dad, and from all the movies I had seen. There are many DOPs such as Subruto Mitra, V K Murthy, Ashok Mehta, Vincent Master, KK Mahajan, Melli Irani, Marcus Bartley and a host of others from across the borders, like Nestor Almendros, Gordon Willis, Storroro, Greg Tolland, to name a few. One always learns from masters and from the films one sees, but I had not assisted anyone, and that always leaves a question mark for the director who is almost without a budget.

My first film for the critic was slow paced and full of metaphors. We had no budget and had to shoot the movie in four days with a shooting ratio of 1:2! We shot in a very misty terrain. It was rehearsed and the hours were long, but we got caressing shots filmed with magic skies and lanterns etc. Then Chitranjali studios, had acquired a new 16 mm BL Camera. But they didn't have facilities for a Blow-up to 35. For this we had to go to Mumbai AD LABS. The blow up print was quite good for a 16 to 35 blow-up; the process was just getting popular. And every blow up print was a revelation.

Manmohan Shetty screened the film for quite a few people in the industry. Ashok Mehta and Basu Bhattacharya were also present. I remember Ashok ji wanted to direct 'Moksh'. But thanks to all of them that I got to film 'Raakh' with Aditya. The movie turned out to be a very different experience for me. Actually we shot that film with very few lights, mostly car headlights, and a very small unit, with interesting actors like Aamir Khan, Pankaj Kapoor and Supriya Pathak. It was also Sreekar Prasad's debut as an editor. It was very interesting to be the part of a film where everything was being improvised. The whole film was shot with a Mitchell reflex and all the optical were done in camera. The film was very organic and so it was challenging to explore darkness and nights in Bombay.

Tell us about the film 'Perumethuchan' for which you got National Award for the best cinematography.

After 'Raakh', I got offers from Hindi films. But my dream was to shoot some black and white films and to shoot in Kerala. Shooting in Kerala was an obsession. Personally I believe that everything fleeting



is very beautiful, be it a magic sky or twilight or changing seasons. Hence I made it a point to shoot very fast as I love to capture a full scene just after it rains when there is a shiver of sunlight. My mother once said that I was shooting only action movies and that I had never won any award. I promised her I will do a film exclusively dedicated to her, and then happened 'Perumthacha'. It was a folk story scripted by M.T. Vasudevan Nair and the director Aayan's first film. Budget wise it was the same story and we had to bring a period to life.

But the writer of the film told me that it was a dialogue oriented film. However, he did get curious when I told him that I was going to treat all faces like landscapes. The story was about a master craftsman who made beautiful statues of gods, all of them set to perfect measurements. Then his son comes along and does statues with slight imperfections, but garners more admiration! Eventually the father ends up killing the son. It's like the saying -- "No Beauty without blemish."

I still remember that it had a very gold kind of look. How did you get it?

In those days 85 gels were rare and expensive. We would buy glass, papers - orange, red and yellow- and try by fading them. On some occasions, dimmers were also used and normal tungsten 100 watts too. I also used to keep the lights moving.

Give us some insight about your work with Mani Ratnam.

I filmed 'Thalapathi' where I took a step forward with the golden look style. It was interesting as 'Thalpathi' was Mani's contemporary take on 'Karna', who is associated with the Sun God, and the central character Rajni Sir was called Surya. So the film is bathed in a golden hue, like the rising sun. I also liked the fact that Rajnikant sir's skin tone accepted this warm light nicely. It is always good to have cinematography caress a film with lights that sometimes subdue and some time reveal!

In a film like 'Roja' we started off without snow and terrace. We held back capturing the snowy hills and snow till the heroine first saw and experienced it. So it is great to plan it out and hold things back. A film is like a music piece. It should have interludes and rhythm in order to have its silences. Not that every shot has to be like that. Most of the times if one planned 100%, one might roughly get about 45-50% of what was actually planned. Though after the first five minutes, style alone cannot hold an audience. Mani Ratnam is someone who puts in a lot of hard work, and leads by example, and his passion is evident in his films. He likes to take risks and encourages innovations and ideas, in almost all the departments.

You have shot numerous films for director Mani Ratnam. How did you prepare yourself so as not to repeat what you had already done?

If you look at all the films I did for Mani Ratnam, you would notice that I had tried to

be different with each of them. 'Thalapathi' was very stylized; 'Iruvar' was almost like a tribute to ace cinematographer Subroto Mitra. It was like a black and white political world meeting the colorful world of the cinema industry. It also had this documentary like feel and the camera would move 360 degrees reveal in real time. So the challenges were immense choreographing, lengthy takes with 10,000 crowds, and magic skies...almost like the last over of a one day match, every day!

And 'Dil Se' was different. It was less subtle than 'Iruvar'. When I got a national award for 'Iruvar', Mani jokingly said that the next film should have a mass appeal. So whenever I used to look through the view finder, I would imagine I was sitting in a theater watching the movie unfold and go with pure wonder instinct. Even the "Chhaiya Chhaiya" song was shot as if it were the first time adventure journey of a kid.

You directed 'Ashoka' which was also photographed by you. How did you manage to take care of these two departments simultaneously?

I believe that a cinematographer can add scale to a film even without having the budget for it. And I also like being just next to the actors, and being in the midst of things, I guess I got used to that!

'Ashoka' was planned like a movie on the move: one schedule we did in Madhya Pradesh where we just had a kino, a small generator, a small crew, very small sets, and 4 days to film the war since I really didn't want to add fake scale with VFX which was imperfect then. 'Ashoka' was also about trying to film in different changing seasons





as the character changed. It was also about a war, where you were not taking sides, as to who would win, unlike a regular war film, where you want one side desperately to win. This was about a king who gave up all war, and he feels all the dead bodies have their hands open and the moon and the setting sun witness it. In fact we waited for the moment and filmed it at such time. People say when you die the families mourn but it's also the sun and the moon witnessing the moment.

'The Terrorist' was done with a very small but a very committed crew and a few students. We shot in real rain, and adapted a still camera macro lens to film

most of it. Visually the best compliment was when it became the first Indian film at Sundance, and the American Society of Cinematographer magazine picked it up as one of most visual films, and reviewed it, and all this paved the way for John Malkovich to present the film and release it worldwide.

You have also acted in a few films. What has motivated you to accept acting roles?

I acted in only one film where I played Raja Ravi Verma. My grandmother used to teach at the Palace in Trivandrum. She would bring Raja Ravi Verma Calendars and tell us stories of these largely mythological subjects, and the stories about good and evil. She would bring visuals to life, like when the full moon came out, the girl in white appeared, etc. So we would look at the moon for long times, its reflections, and it would keep coming back in our dreams as well.

So I directed a film in Malayalam called 'Anandabhadram' wherein I experimented with good and evil etc, and also did a hugely popular song with the theme of a Raja Ravi Varma painting. So they thought I should play Raja Ravi Varma. Madhu Ambhat shot the film directed by Lenin Rajendran. This was when I was filming 'Ravan'. Filming it was fun and crazy enough because of them. All the actors were encouraging too. Some of them actually were pretty jealous because there were

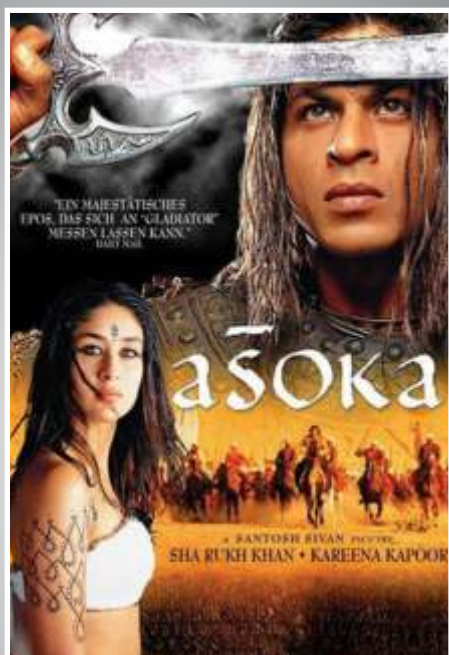
5 heroines!

Did your experience of observing so many actors from behind the camera come handy to you as an actor?

Anil Zankar who saw the film commented that he couldn't believe I would play so seriously! But I think the best reaction was from Buddhadev Dasgupta who said he would actually like to cast me!

How different it was to shoot the film "Meenakshi- a tale of three cities " for a celebrity painter M. F. Hussain?

He was just finishing a series of paintings on Kerala. He had seen some of my tourism films on Kerala, and he had also seen most of my films. During our meeting, he showed to me a huge painting of Ashoka on a horse with 5 heads, with Ashoka mounted like a warrior in the centre. This was a painting which he had painted after seeing the film. The experience was quite interesting and his son Owais Hussain was also there to bring the film together because the film was about his experiences in 3 cities, and was a blend of memories, art and years of experience. He was never afraid of using colors as he was truly romantic. In fact before he passed away, Owais was making a film that we were filming, and which he had scripted. And I remember talking to him in Dubai over phone, standing there in the green fields of Punjab.



Tell us about your experience of working with Gurinder Chadha on 'Pride and Prejudice'?

I liked working with her. Although she is Indian, she had a very western approach. As you know the film discusses how the Indians settled abroad follow Indian customs but there is also another side to it.

It is very interesting to place yourself in different types of scenarios. One of the best things about cinematography is that you get to travel and experience places. Visual language is universal!

There are many people who look up to you as a cinematographer. What advice would you like to give them?

I think it is traveling and seeing everything from your own sensibilities. I don't know how to put it, but in a creative space one plus one can't be two. In a relationship it can be 3 or 4, or as a farmer says-- You throw a handful of seeds, hundred saplings grow and yet every tree is uniquely different.

It is strange when someone compliments and compares one's work with a Hollywood film! One doesn't always have to imitate. There is so much in our culture that one can explore. I remember at the ASC club house meeting in Los Angeles how fascinated they were seeing the texture, decorative art, the play of the Sun, and the colors.

It was like different degrees of darkness, all projecting moving images from Meenakshi, Dil se, Vanaprastam, and Rudali.

□□□

