

SUNNY JOSEPH

(a response to the questionnaire)

SECTION I: Personal Background and Early Years

1. Tell us something about your family background and the cultural context in which you grew up.

I was born as a Roman Catholic Christian in 1957 October 12th, in a small town of Cherthala, in Alappuzha district. My father C.V. Joseph was a merchant [medical store] and my mother Thresiamma was a schoolteacher [craft - stitching and needle work]. We are nine children, three brothers and six sisters. I have a twin brother [fraternal], Josy, and we are the eldest. My mother used to write poetry and short stories. And my twin brother was a best actor [comedy role] at the university. He now is a media person himself. Until my 7th standard my cultural environment was our parish church and school. During this period I was very attracted to the priests and even thought of becoming a priest myself.

During my early years, may be when I was 3-4 years old, I used to tell my mother that like a plant, I germinated from the sea shore and not from her womb. [I was born in a hospital, just at the seashore called "Kadappuram Ashupatri", in the town of Alappuzha. This is of course my recollection of my aunts and others telling me this. I even used this memory to create the opening sequence in my FTII diploma film "the Clown and the Dog".

Also one of my earliest environments which I recollect fondly and happily is of the house of our neighbour who was the postmaster of our town. His residence was also the Post Office. He was a Brahmin and I used to spend a lot of time in their house. I used to be sitting with him in the prayer room and breakfast table. Later, at the Kozhikode bus stand, after 25 years, without seeing

him I recognized his voice from behind a wall and walked up to him. All of us were so surprised.

I had many friends from different communities and social strata. I even felt a stronger solidarity with my friends who were economically weaker.

2. Were there any people in your immediate environment who had any interest in, or professional involvement with the visual or performing arts. Did they in any way initiate your interest in cinema or the visual arts?

One of my neighbours was a Film – Representative who used to talk about cinema. His uncle was a novelist and one of his novels was made into a film. A sequence for that film was shot in my father's medical store. I still remember the reflectors and the sound van. And yellow/off white dresses worn by the actors.

Also, the acclaimed poet / lyric writer Vayalar Ramavarma was a friend of my father's younger brother C.V. Emmanuel, and he used to visit our shop. At that time he was the King among the film lyricists [a national award winner]. Strangely, it was with my uncle's Kodak Box camera that I started taking photos at the age of eleven and it was at the time of Vayalar's funeral that I touched an Arriflex Camera [when I was fourteen] and made a pledge that one day I will use this camera myself.

Opposite to my Father's medical store, there is a cinema hall where we used to go to see films in the weekends. The projectionist Mr. Rajappan was a friend of my father and he used to give me 'frames' from the films, which I used to project on the walls using a electric bulb filled with water as a lens and a mirror reflecting sun light through the bulb. I was really fascinated to do this. This was during my primary school days. Later when I was studying for Pre – Degree [plus two] in 1972-74, I started to learn film projection with the same projectionist, *Rajappanchettan*, during which time I was totally immersed in film. It was a

soothing feeling to listen to the running sound of the projector. Even now I visit that cinema hall - Bhavani Theatre - and sit in the projection cabin, just to listen to the sound of the projector – “Devi”. I started learning projection just to see films free. In fact in 1974 I had seen more than 365 films - all kinds of films!

3. How were films, people associated with cinema viewed in your family and in your immediate circle of acquaintances?

As with any other Christian middle class family my father was not very happy to hear about my wish to join the FTII, instead of a medical college. My family accepted me personally, probably after me winning a national award for my diploma film in 1984. My friends were very supportive of my decision. That was also because in 1978 I formed a film society, “Free Circle” in our town and started screening world classics, through which they began to respect cinema. My mother, Thressiamma, always supported my attempts become a film maker – even giving me money to buy my 8mm film stock, 25’ rolls in tiny cans. Those days it was my most valuable possession.

4. Please describe in some detail the ‘visual field’ of your childhood, (perhaps in terms of colours and light). By visual field we mean the ensemble of things that you saw and that have left an imprint on your memory. These could be details in nature, memories of performances or rituals, or films, or paintings and photographs, things that you saw on the street or in a city, or any other striking visual memories.

Upto my college days my favourite colour was deep blue. Watching spiders making their web was a favourite past time. “Spider web” was an image I strongly remember from my early days. Other visual fields were: different colours of the leaves of the various garden plants, nursed by my Grandfather, rainbow and its colours, unending cloud formations in the sky, butterflies and their magical

colours, a small stream in front of my mother's house and the weeds in the water, decorations and electric illumination in our parish church for the main festival, changing colours of a paddy field etc. Another visual field is the reflection of my own face in a mirror which left an impact on me in the early days.

When I was in the 8th standard I made two animated films by drawing match stick figures on my textbook page's corners. I vividly remember both. One was a sword fight between a hero and villain and the other was about a ritual and a person appearing and disappearing! And on the back cover I proudly wrote that, a film written, photographed and directed by Sunny Joseph. By the time I was in the high school, I was determined to become a film director.

5. Do you recall the first or very early films that you saw? Can you tell us something about that experience? What was/were the films? Do you recall anything about the cinema hall, or space where the film was shown, and about the general atmosphere about the space?

May be the very first film I recall seeing is "*Palum Pazhavum*". After that many of the sentimental films from the "Udaya Studios" and "Merryland Studios". When I was 16/17 I was attracted to lots of Telugu action films because of the action sequences and cabaret numbers, especially by Jyothilakshmi.

In 1973 I had an opportunity to attend a film appreciation course conducted by AICUF in Trichur. The camp director was Fr. George K George. This camp was my initiation into serious cinema. At this camp I saw great classics like, "*Battleship Potempkin*", "*Wild Strawberries*", "*Seventh Seal*" etc. Suddenly I was initiated into a new way of life and faith. There I become a devotee of the magic and wonder of cinema. Eisenstein and Bergman became my Gurus.

During 1974 – 75, I saw G Aravindan's "*Uttarayanam*" and wanted to become his assistant to learn direction. He advised me to join the FTII. And in 1974 I wrote my entrance examination. Strangely, I got admission in FTII only after five years in 1979. By then I had attempted the admission procedures five times! I owe my admission to FTII in 1979, to the psychologist/poet one member in the interview board, Late Dr. Manas Ray Chauduri from Calcutta, who gave me full mark in the interview.

6. How did you get interested in watching films? Were you ever a member of a film society or film club? Did you know about film societies?

As I described above my interest in cinema started at the age of eleven and by the age of fifteen I was initiated into serious and meaningful cinema. By 1974 I started buying books on cinema and got hold of books like "Film Time and Film Sense", "Cinema as Art", "Film as Reality", "Film vs. Film", "FILM – Space, Time, Light" etc. In 1979 I organized a Film Society in my hometown and conducted film appreciation camps. During my degree classes I made a film in 16mm [silent] about the National Service Scheme. Mr. Raman who was a graduate from the London Film School shot it on a Bolex camera, and I myself did the editing on a home made editing table. And when it was projected I ran a live commentary using a microphone attached to the Photophone projector. Prior to this venture I did shoot a lot of 8mm footage myself and attempted to do a fiction film in 8mm – "*The End*". But it was never completed.

7. What were your other interests? Have those interests remained with you in later life?

I was generally interested in the artistic and cultural activities and during my final year in college – in 1977, I was also the Arts Club Secretary in the

college union. I started a photography club and film club in the college. I was also a dedicated member of the National Service Scheme.

During my college days I was also interested in the electronics and I did assemble a transistor radio and a working radio transmitter all by myself.

8. Did you have an interest in still photography? Were you ever a member of any amateur photography club?

It was indeed still-photography which initiated me into the world of images. As I told you earlier, I started taking snap shots with a Kodak Box camera that belonged to my uncle. This was when I was in seventh standard [1969]. My first teacher was one Mr. Jose who was working in a nearby photo studio - "Vimala Studio". Later during my high school days I saved from my pocket money and bought a Click III type camera. Subsequently I did set up a basic darkroom in my home. During my degree time in Deva Matha College – [1974 – 1977] I also organized a Photography Club in the college.

9. Can you name some of the important films that you saw when you were growing up? Why did you think of them as significant?

I was lucky enough to see a few classic films during my college days, during two Film appreciation camps conducted by AICUF. The Camp Directors were Fr. George K George and Fr. Jacob Srampical.

Battleship Potemkin

Wild Strawberries

Passion of Joan of Arc

Pather Panchali

Bhuvan Shome

Silence etc.

Among Malayalam films the following films were striking for me:

Uttarayanam

Swayamvaram

Kanchana Sita

Nirmalyam

Swapnadanam etc.

By reading books, seeing good films as well as by practicing I was able to understand the basic grammar of the film language. So I saw all films with a higher critical awareness. During that time I came to believe that "*Uttarayanam*" directed by Aravindan as the first path-breaking Malayalam film in all ways. All the above-mentioned films were true to life and the image quality was strikingly beautiful.

10. How, why and when did you decide to become a cinematographer? What were the factors that influenced this decision? Did your family encourage or discourage your choice of vocation?

When I wanted to join FTII, my family did not take it very happily. [But my mother did encourage me a lot.] They probably wanted me to become a doctor and look after our business. Later when I won the National Award for "*The Clown and The Dog*" they all changed their perspective a little bit.

Was your becoming a cinematographer not a result of a conscious decision, but a result of circumstances? If so, please tell us something about those circumstances.

When I joined the FTII, my intention was to become a Director. So I opted for editing specialization at the time of admission. Even though I had tried still photography and cinematography during my school and college days, I always thought of becoming a director only. After the second year exams, I came

first in the class, as well as in the subject of cinematography. Even then I did not think of taking up cinematography. In fact I started attending the editing class for my specialization year. After about a week, our cinematography professor Mr. Bhanumoorthy suggested to me under the 'wisdom tree' to take up cinematography as my specialization. After lots of hesitation I finally did join the cinematography class.

Since our batch had no direction students we all made our own films. My film [as a director] "*THE CLOWN AND THE DOG*" won the National Award for Best Experimental Film too. When I returned to Kerala, I was again determined to pursue a career in Direction rather than in Cinematography. So I joined G. Aravindan in his film "*CHITAMBARAM*". I went to the location on the opening day holding the Clapboard. Here again, my destiny was different. The Cinematographer for the film was Shaji and his assistant was absent for that day. So he asked me to be with him. [I had already assisted Venu and Shaji before. But I never thought that I would become a cinematographer.] Again I obliged and there after I continued assisting Shaji.

Even after my first film as a DOP "*THEERTHAM*" directed by Mohan, I was reluctant to take up Cinematography as my profession. But from my second film "*EENAM MARRANNA KATTU*" directed by Thomas Easaw, onwards I enjoyed my work and continued to do photography with more joy.

SECTION II: On Learning to be a Cinematographer

1. Tell us about your education as a cinematographer, did it occur in film school (which institute), or in the industry.

My education as a cinematographer was done at FTII, from 1979 to 1983. Later I assisted cinematographers Venu, Shaji and Madhu Ambat during 1983-1985. During 1985-1987 I worked as a Producer/Cameraman at the

Christian Medical College, Vellore making medical education programs. I did my first independent film as a DOP in 1987.

2. If you studied in a film school, can you tell us about your years in the institute, and what your memories are of that time? About the syllabus, and quality of film education and technical training. Things that you were dissatisfied with. Any specific memories of visiting faculty, important workshops.

I have only the finest memories about my time at FTII. As a person as well as a filmmaker I grew up in FTII. The best thing happened to me there, was, that I became a Universal human being and a World Citizen. Our syllabus was excellent and the quality of the film education and technical training were inspiring. In fact we had ample practical works to do and during the specialization year we shot almost every day. We had the luck of seeing two feature films every day too. This is one single factor, which makes the experience at FTII doubly remarkable. We had also many workshops with practicing Cinematographers like KK Mahajan, Virendra Saini, RM Rao, and the great Subrata Mitra.

Subrata Dada's workshop was special. It was an awesome feeling to be face to face with a great master of cinematography. I don't remember even talking to him then. But later, after I did '*PIRVI*', he has become my Mentor and inspiration.

Badal Sircar on theatre and group existence and Farah Rustom on Western Music conducted the other two important workshops we experienced in the Institute.

I don't remember anything that I was dissatisfied with FTII. Except, my financial state at that time. [Not much difference even now ☺] During my final year at the Institute I had rarely any money for breakfast, so I used to sleep until

noon and took 'Brunches'. Once I was absolutely broke and very hungry after skipping many meals. I decided to go and ask ten rupees from my friend Jayan. He gave me the money, but by then I was too lazy to go down to the canteen. So, I just ate the ten-rupee note and went back to my bed! ☺

Talking about the syllabus, we had a wonderful opportunity to learn all aspects of cinema, in detail. In 1979 we even had a detailed input in video-production. Funny thing is, many at that time thought that it was a waste!! We were given lot of interactive opportunities with eminent artists in all walks of artistic life – Writers, Painters, Dancers, Theatre People, Historians, Scientists etc. And this is a great advantage. I certainly believe that the more you know about other artistic expressions, it is so much better for a film director, cinematographer or editor.

I am totally against the modular, encapsuled limited way of imparting the technique of cinema. Another great fortune we had was the three daily screenings of classics. If I hadn't seen those classics I would not have been the same Sunny or the same cinematographer that I am today.

Institute also gave me lots of opportunity to fine tune my philosophical quest, and put me in company with great thoughts. Unless we have a vision, attitude and philosophy about life we will not be able to create anything beautiful and meaningful.

The current authorities in FTII think that seeing films from other countries is harmful for the students. That is stupidity and insanity!! Do you think we must also ban Rembrandt, Dostovsky, Shakespeare, VanGogh, Beethoven and all other 'foreign' artists so that our indian artists remain pure 'Hindustani' souls? Come on, we all know that great art is always universal and human. Then why this fascistic attitude towards film-makers?

3. Can you talk about the important films that you remember seeing from this time. In what way was your perception of cinema, and of cinematography, changing as a result of a sustained and formal film education?

There were hundreds of important films, which I saw during the course at FTII. And I remember most of them. Like *Seventh Seal*, *8 1/2*, *La Strada*, *Red Desert*, *Kanal*, *Ivan's Childhood*, *Seven Samurai*, *Death By Hanging*, *Tokyo Story*, *Structure of Crystals*, *Aguirre: the Wrath of God*, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, *Bicycle Thief*, *Breathless*, *Citizen Kane*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Night and Fog*, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *Mirror*, *Red Beard*, *La Dolce Vita*, *Olympia*, *Red Psalm*, *2001 A Space Odyssey*, *Viridiana*, *Weekend*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Stalker*, *Ajanthrik*, *Bhuvan Shome*, etc.

All such films had a great influence on me, developing me as a human being. Elements of technique, which I learnt were secondary. Because of these films I become a better human being first and then a cinematographer.

Hollywood spectacles never attracted me. Cinema's spiritual quest was more important for me. Naturally, I was attracted to European Cinema and Japanese Cinema more than anything else. From Kerala I find Aravindan's films closer to my heart.

A sustained and formal film education gave me the opportunity to understand my own limitations, which made me more humble. It was during my time in FTII that I read more of Indian Philosophy and got introduced to Haiku Poetry, which has had an ever-lasting impact on me.

4. When you look back on the exercises that you had to do as a student of cinematography, what are the things that come to mind?

It was the laboratory process, which is as important as the exposing of a negative which puzzled me a lot during the student days. I became more aware of the chemistry involved in the photography.

Realizing the finer qualities of different types of light sources and understanding the concept of negative's 'latitude' were important revelations.

The one thing for me still to master is Ansel Adams' Zone System. When Subrata Dada told us about 18% grey as equal to 'Ma' on a musical scale, it was a discovery of great importance.

5. Tell us something about the experience of shooting your diploma film or first film? If you had to do it over again, what approach would you take? What were the mistakes that you learnt from?

As a director, my Diploma film was "*THE CLOWN AND THE DOG*" which won the National Award for the Best Experimental Film in 1984. As a cinematographer my diploma film was "*KRISHNAPAKSH*" Directed by Anoop Jotwani.

In case of "*C.A.D.*" I am unsatisfied only with the acting. Surprisingly the whole film looks valid even today after 17 years. After seeing the "*Clown and the Dog*" in 1984 Costa Gavras told me "Good. Keep it up" and in 2000 Zanussi asked me "Why did you waste your 17 years" [referring to my non-practice as a film director.]

Regarding "*KRISHNAPAKSH*" I feel ashamed of seeing one sequence in it, which has candlelit source lighting. I was determined to master it [source lighting] later, which I almost perfected in my later films like "*KAHINI*", "*TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*" "*PIRAVI*" etc.

6. Were you attracted to the work of any particular cinematographer/s? If so, what attracted you to their work? Tell us something about the important

cinematographic influences on you in this period? Have you found that in the course of time, these influences have varied, or have they remained the same?

I was always attracted to the school of source lighting and natural lighting. So cinematographers like Subrata Mitra, KK Mahajan, Seven Nykvist and Nester Almendros were my heroes. Somehow I wanted to be a cameraman whose work will be the least visible. I wanted my cinematography utmost transparent. In this regard I think, my work in Aravindan's "VASTHUHARA" as my best achievement.

Of late I also subscribed to the philosophy of the great Vilmos Zsigmond "An image can not be more beautiful than it's meaning/content".

It was tough to resist the lure of the gallery, and even at the laboratory, technicians advised to me to change. All through this, Subrata Dada's words gave me courage: "Sunny, I like your work because one does not see the lights, in your work". So I remained so. Once in a while, I get a congratulatory note from a far away cinematographer [This one was actually one of Fellini's cameramen!]: "Sunny's work is as good as age old Italian cinematography." Or from a French critic, Yves Thoravil, who quotes me in his book, or from an unknown Martina from Paris: " I like your creations, your wonderful work in many films."

Or even the fishermen in Calicut who advised me that I should only do films like "PIRAVI" and "VASTHUHARA".

7. What if any, were the other sources of influence (outside cinema and filmmaking) on the shaping of your vision?

Two great influences on me outside Cinema are Haiku poetry and Advaita Vedanta. My attempt is to make my cinematography as simple and condensed as a Haiku poem. To be focussed to the point, like a haiku. To be in

the “NOW”. It was my great fortune to get to know Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yathi and learn from him many things on the ‘self’. His nearness itself enriched me spiritually. It will be my aim to become a true disciple of him.

8. What suggestions do you have about the education of a young person studying cinematography in a film institute today?

Give them enough practicals, show them as many classic films as possible and teach them music, dance and literature.

9. If you learnt in the industry, what were the sources of information on technical matters? What was the relationship that you had with the cinematographers from whom you learnt your craft? From the point of view of learning your craft, can you tell us about any significant experiences that you had?

Not relevant.

10. What is the nature of the relationship between you and the cinematographer/s from whom you learnt your craft today?

After FTII I assisted three cameramen for different durations. I learned most from Venu, Shaji and Madhu Ambat. The relationship with all these masters was stimulating and educative. And it was based on true friendship. Later, when Shaji directed his first film “*PIRAVI*” and Venu directed his first film “*DAYA*” they entrusted the cinematography work with me. It is really a matter of pride for me.

SECTION III: On Entering and being in the Profession.

1. Tell us something about how you entered the profession? What were the first few projects that you worked on?

I am thankful to Shaji and Madhu Ambat for my first film. It was “*THEERTHAM*” directed by Mohan. The project was entrusted to Shajichettan and due to unavoidable circumstances he was not able to do the film. So he talked to director Mohan and put me onto the film as DOP. But when I went to the location the director was absent and the producers were very reluctant to accept me as their DOP [due to my boyish – 13 years before- appearance, at that time no one would think that I am capable of even taking a still picture. The case is not much better even now when I am 42.]

Anyway without telling me the producers contacted Madhu Ambat and narrated the story. Since he knew me, Madhuvettan stood by me and categorically said that ‘Sunny will do the film.’ This is how I entered into the film industry. I am happy that I honoured Shaji’s and Madhu’s trust on me. I hope I will be able to work with Madhuvettan too when he directs his first film. That will be a unique achievement for me.

2. What are the kinds of experiences that you had as an assistant? Who were the cinematographers that you worked with as an assistant, on which films and for how long?

I have assisted the following Cinematographers:

1. Venu – I started assisting Venu even when I was a student at the FTII. I worked with him more than two years. Films include – MP Sukumaran Nair’s “*BHAVI*”, Lenin Rajendran’s “*PREMNAZIRINE KANMANILLA*” Padmarajan’s “*ARAPPATTA KETTIYA GRAMAM*” and Vijayan Karot’s “*CHANTHAYIL CHOODI VILKUNNA PENNU*”
2. Mahu Ambat – worked with him on one film – directed by Vijaya Menon “*NILAVINTE NATTIL*”
3. Shaji – I worked with Sahji also for about two years. Films include – “*PRINCIPAL OLIVIL*” and Aravindan’s “*CHIDAMBARAM*”

From Venu I learned the attitude to attain the perfection and precision of lighting, from Madhu Ambat I learned the need for experimentation and from Shaji I learned the love for light and nature.

3. How has your experience of being an assistant influenced your relationships with your assistants today?

Venu, Shaji and Madhu treated me more than an assistant, like a brother. All of them have special affection for me. We used to stay in one room and eat together. Always looked upon me as an equal. My experience with them made me look at my assistants also with kindness and affection. I am proud that in the last 13 years ten of my assistants have become independent DOPs, both in film and TV.

4. Is there anything in the generally prevalent relationship between assistants and cinematographers that you think needs to be questioned?

I understand some cinematographers do not even talk to their assistant outside the location. They are not slaves and one need not be bossy.

5. Can you talk about any devices that you designed or innovations that you brought into practice? How did these come about?

N.A.

6. Were there any 'improvisations' that you had to resort to, in order to deal with a particular problem or situation?

During the shooting of "*AMERICA AMERICA*" we were at the Niagara Falls one whole day. We shot during the whole daytime and at night when we were about to leave; I thought we must have some shots of the falls at night. Our

limitations were – negative [200T], and camera [ARRI III] and the format was anamorphic, so the max. lens opening I had was about 2.8.

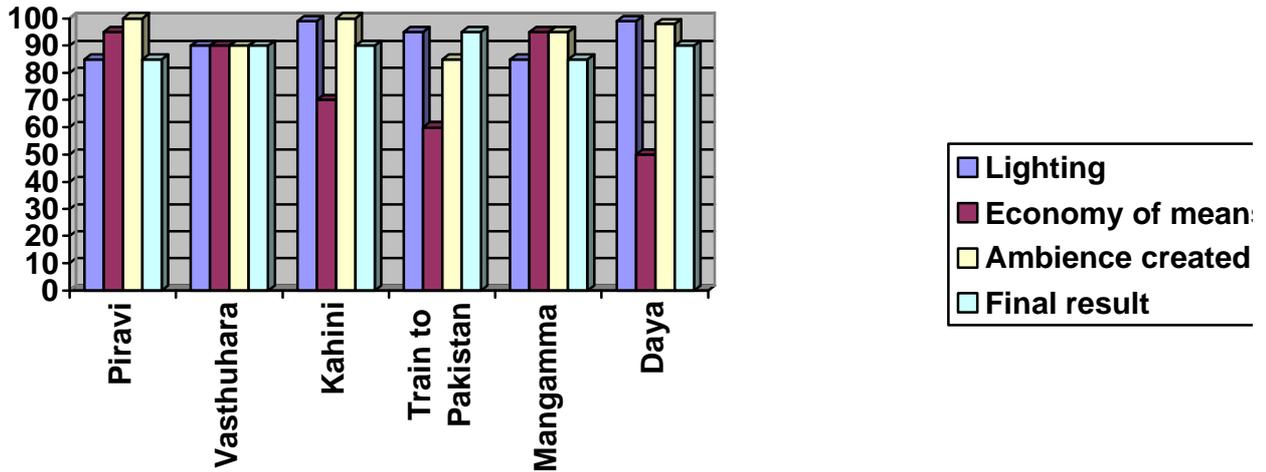
I noticed that the original lighting of the waterfalls was very slow changing and the moving objects in the frame [vehicles in the road on the Canada side] were at least 5km away. I tried to take a reflected light meter reading using a still camera [I only have an Incident Light Meter, Minolta IVF] and it showed no reading at movie speeds. Anyway I decided to experiment and cranked the camera at the minimum possible speed [3fps] and ran the camera for minutes to get few feet of exposed film. These shots became the highlight shots in the film.

Another instance I did something similar was for Aravindan. We were waiting at a Dam site to capture the early morning light, reflected on the water in the vast reservoir. We were present at the site much before the daybreak. It was still night and I thought of capturing the daybreak. We were using an ARRI BL4 and as soon as I was able to detect a faint light at the horizon I started to run the camera using the electronic inching button!! It ran about one frame per second and I kept the switch pressed for more than ten minutes. [We had Zeiss lenses which were kept at max. opening T2.1 or so]. This was an enigmatic shot which we got and Aravindan liked it a lot.

7. How did you get the 'break' to shoot your first film?

Explained earlier.

8. Can you trace a graph of your learning curve from film to film, or project to project?



8. Please describe in detail at least 3 important sequences that you have shot in the course of your career. Describe also the work that you had to put in, in order to realise these sequences.

1. The climax of "*PIRAVI*"

We were shooting in the monsoon with real rains and for this scene we waited for a day for the real rains. There was no rain and we had to rely on artificial rain. This was done by pumping water on to the roof. I was shooting the scene in available light at about f-2. When I was doing the last part with artificial rain outside was very bright [almost f-11] and I had to adjust my light accordingly. My exposure decisions on this scene were so crucial. This probably is the beginning of my career.

2. The climax of "*KAHINI*"

This was a day, rain sequence in a busy Calcutta street. I was able to do it with precision and poetry. I love it.

3. The scene in "*TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*" where the dead bodies are floating in the river, at night and the villagers witnessing it. I was able to use the sun as moon. I am happy.

9. Can you tell us something about the problems that you have had professionally and technically and how you have dealt with them? Can you

tell us about at least 3 significant professional and technical decisions that you have had to take in the course of your career?

All above.

10. Can you tell us about how you have seen the position of a cinematographer change:

a) In the industry at large

The DOP today has a vital role in the completion of a film.

b) In a film unit

The DOP was the prime figure for a unit at any time.

c) In terms of public perception.

People understand a DOP's role much better now.

11. How do you react when you hear the statement "The Cinematographer takes too much time to light up"? What are your thoughts about the pressure of time, and its effect on the quality of your work?

Madly. What do you mean by too much time? 😊

SECTION IV: On the Practice of Cinematography.

1. Do you have preferences in terms of what you like to shoot, and why?

• **song & dance**

I always enjoyed shooting song and dance sequences, for its music and rhythm. It gives you also an opportunity to take-off from the realistic plane.

• **Action**

It was fun to shoot action sequences for three or four times. Later I am not very keen, because there is always a lot of repetition. I am also interested to create great action sequences with simple means.

- **drama**

Dramatic sequences actually give a director and cinematographer the best opportunity to work out their mise-en-scene. And if one charts it with great care and psychological precision there will be always wonder and beauty. Your audience will then love every moment of it.

- **nature & wildlife**

Nature is inevitably an important character in many films, which I photographed, like "*PIRAVI*", "*VASTHUHARA*", "*KAHINI*" and "*SANABI*".

Nature is also the best place to learn the colour combinations and compositions. The longest time I took to compose a shot was about 20 mints. That was for one Banyan tree in "*VASTHUHARA*".

I have no special interest in wildlife photography.

- **historical and period based work**

It is great to do historical and period based work because it demands greater attention in visualization and depiction of details. Also the architecture of past creates an ambience where the wonder is generated and I always feel joy composing those monuments. May be because their own artistic precision.

- **fantasy/science fiction/ special effects oriented work**

The thrill in achieving a special effect assisted scene is always greatly satisfying. I myself have done bits of miniature work and blue screen work.

- **work with an emphasis on architecture**

I have done two films where Architecture is the major protagonist. One on “*KERALA ARCHITECTURE*” and the other on “*BHARATHANATYAM*”. The way you compose the structures and buildings become the single most important thing in such films.

- **work with an emphasis on graphic elements**

This is true for all films irrespective of other categories. Nobody can compose even the simplest of the frame without the effective use of graphic elements. In fact this is the primary resource to communicate the meaning of an image. Sometimes we pronounce it little more evidently, like I did in “*KAHINI*”.

- **documentaries**

Documentaries give more creative freedom to a cinematographer than fiction films, but you must have a poetic, philosophical and political attitude.

- **Other – Music Videos and Ads**

These films give the cinematographer the ultimate freedom to experiment. I will always be willing to do one without any hesitation.

2. Tell us your opinion (based on your experience) about what you think is the nature of the relationships between the following. (In these relationships please talk in terms of what you think is the ideal and what you perceive as the existing reality.)

- **cinematographer & director:**

Until both have love and trust of each other nothing will work. It is also important that their philosophical point of views must compliment each other.

- **cinematographer & art director/costume designer:**

An Image on the screen is the final work of this trio. Their relationship should be complementary. Until we have a correct picture of the colours and tonal values in a frame, which is evidently created by the colour and tones in the set and costumes, it is impossible to visualize a single frame. I ask all my art directors to look through the camera on each shot. But few do it. We never get time to sit and discuss these matters among us. This must change.

- **cinematographer & choreographer/action director:**

I understand in many films the action director/choreographer decides and fix the frame for their work. It should not be like that. They should work in co-ordination with DOP.

- **cinematographer & sound-recordist:**

Both should understand each other's problem and try to work in synch. Otherwise unnecessary tensions build up between them.

- **cinematographer & assistants:**

Explained earlier.

- **cinematographer & actors (experienced & inexperienced, stars & non stars):**

Here one has to deal each on a very psychological level. Most of the time they look at the cinematographer's eyes to know the immediate reaction. DOPs must positively help them to bring out the best in them. I have noticed a strange thing. When ever there is great performances in front of my camera, my lighting also improves!! Perhaps that is the only way to compete with them.

- **cinematographer & light boys:**

I always treat them as equals.

- **cinematographer & laboratory technicians:**

The grader in the lab is the right hand of the DOP.

- **cinematographer & production in charge:**

Many a times a DOP should insist on certain things even if it annoys the Production. Otherwise the technical value of a film may suffer.

3. What in your opinion is the relationship between the craft of Cinematography and the other departments in film making:

- **Art Direction:** Gives you the skin to reflect.
- **Editing:** Discovers the music of your camera and light.
- **Scriptwriting:** Gives you the notations to create the music.
- **Music:** Fills in your gaps and elevates your attainments.
- **Sound:** Gives your images texture. WOW!

4. Please tell us about at least 3 instances from your experience that clearly illustrates the cinematographer-director relationship. Who are in your opinion the significant directors that you worked with, on which films and for how long? Tell us something about the different things that you learnt from the directors that you have shot for.

I had the good luck of working with many eminent directors of India. First and foremost it is Aravindan. I have learned a lot on Cinema and Life from him. As I mentioned earlier he was my Guru, Mentor and Friend. I did two feature films "*UNNI*" and "*VASTHUHARA*" with him, a long documentary on Bharatanatyam featuring Alarmel Valli, and many other documentaries. I first met him in 1975.

I will consider my association with doyen of Malayalam new wave cinema, PN Menon as another valuable experience of mine. I have learned a lot of mise-en-scene and methods of working with actors from him. I did one feature film "*MONEY ORDER*" and one 13 episode serial "*ITHALUKAL*" with him.

I have learned a lot of philosophical attitudes towards mise-en-scene from Aribam Shyam Sharma, with whom I worked for "*SANABI*"

I have also learned many things from Shaji N Karun, with whom I worked for "*PIRAVI*" and TV Chandran with whom I worked for "*ALICINTE ANWESHANAM*" and "*MANGAMMA*"

Last but the least, my work with Malay Bhattacharya for "*KAHINI*" was also a great study. Being a designer himself, I was able to communicate with Malayda more efficiently. It was a pleasure to build upon his visualisations, in creating the final images.

Other notable directors with whom I worked for are KG George and Pamela Rooks.

5. **"Without a well worked out screenplay/script and an imaginative director who is willing to take risks to open out possibilities for the camera, the cinematographer's labour is not worth the footage" – Comment.**

Very true. If we don't have well worked out script it will be almost impossible for the cameraman to create anything meaningful. A coherent interpretation of the theme will be possible only if the director has the clarity on story and characters. Of-course; just to create a string of enchanting, picturesque shots, you don't need any such clarity. There you are creating peripheral beauty, which is also very attractive.

6. What in your opinion are the different professional and technical demands made on cinematographers in:

• **Mainstream Commercial Cinema:**

Authority, Skill for handling large number of people, Speed and technical virtuosity.

• **Parallel Cinema:**

Artistry, effective means for using limited resources, understanding directors vision, communication with artists, talent in lighting and composition to highlight the mindscapes of characters.

• **Documentary:**

Agility, on the spot decisions on what is the best point of view, at any given moment for the given subject, positive interaction with the environment.

• **Ad Films:**

Perfection of the surface layer.

• **Music Videos:**

Sense of music.

- **Television Serials:**

Understanding of the video format apart from other things.

- **Television Shows:**

Same as above.

7. What are the different ways in which you approach working on film and working on video?

These days it is not much different.

8. What do you think is the importance and role of new image making technologies, digital and computer aided image making in shaping the work of the cinematographer today?

Digital technologies biggest use is to enhance the reality. To create nature, which we experience, but can't reproduce in film - like a starlit night sky or creating a rainbow.

9. What are the international trends that you see emerging in cinematography today? What kind of work do you admire in Hollywood, European Cinema, Other Asian Cinemas (Iran, Hong Kong, Japan, China, South Korea etc.) in Mainstream Indian Cinema, in parallel and regional cinema in India?

All over the world, for the last 100 odd years, all that was preserved as good photography is synonymous with good cinema. I am particularly interested in European cinematography. The best works of cinematography always integrate with the film so effortlessly, that you don't even notice its presence. I admire all photography when it illuminates the mindscapes rather than the

landscape. I too believe that photography in a film must be unobtrusive. One shouldn't know where the light is coming from.

10. What are the trends that you see emerging in Documentary cinematography?

Not attempting

11. What are the trends that you see emerging in cinematography for advertising?

It is all becoming 0101010101010101...

12. Do you perceive a difference between the cinematography of the mainstream film industries in Bombay, and in the South? If so, what is the nature of this difference? Is there a difference also in terms of the work culture, professional standards etc?

Till the beginning of 1990's there was a big difference in the production methods of film industries in Mumbai and Chennai. Down south film production was more organised and it was executed in shorter time period. Technically Mumbai had many of the great masters of Indian cinematography like, VK Moorthy and Radhu Karmakar who worked with in the studio system and created masterpieces. Down south we had great cameramen like Marcus Bartley and A Vincent. When a new batch of Young people from FTII made their presence in Mumbai and Madras, a more professional attitude originated. They were KK Mahajan, AK Bir, Madhu Ambat, Shaji, Balu Mahendra Ashok Kumar etc.

13. Do you think there are different schools of cinematography, in India as well as internationally?

Yes

14. What kind of cinematography would you have very negative feelings about?

One that dominates the story and actors. One that is loudly crying out for attention.

15. How do you keep up with new trends and ideas in cinematography? What are your sources of information on new developments?

In this era of Internet, all the information you want is on your fingertips. I also subscribe to CML a professional mailing list for cinematographers and I also run a mailing list on cinematography - ISCML.

16. What is the level of your interaction with other cinematographers? What issues would you discuss with your cinematographic colleagues?

At least in the south we have a very cordial relationship among cinematographers. We discuss everything from personal to technical. Details of technique as well as professional demands.

17. Are there enough forums for debate and discussion on cinematography? What are the role of the associations, guilds and other organisations of cinematographers?

We still have to have a better organisational existence. All this work is voluntary and so, it becomes fragmented. In India we still need to strengthen the associations to achieve the minimum rights for the cinematographers. We need to create a better awareness to improve the artistic abilities of ourselves.

18. What is your opinion about the practice of giving awards for cinematography? Has this helped raise standards? Has it encouraged unhealthy competition and patronage networks?

It is good to encourage excellence in work. But many a times it goes to the undeserving hands, which is a pity.

19. Do you think that cinematography gets the critical attention it deserves in the press and in film criticism/reviewing?

No

20. Do you think that the ordinary viewing public in India is sensitive to and aware of the contribution made by the cinematographer to a film or television program?

Yes, especially in the south. Audience even clap at the credit title of many a DOP.

21. Why do you think there are very few women in the profession of cinematography? And why are so few women taken on as assistants are?

In a profession where there is lot of travel and odd working hours, we see less number of women involved with it. Luckily there are a lot of women entering worldwide into the profession of cinematographer now. In whole of my career, only one woman approached me to be an assistant and I gave her a chance to work with me. She now works as a camerawoman in a TV channel.

**22. What do you think of the payments given to cinematographer?
"Cinematographers are well paid but highly exploited." – Comment**

Absolutely true and in case of cinematographers working in parallel cinema, they are not even paid well.

23. What is your opinion on the payments and working conditions of assistants, light boys, grips electricians etc.

Worse for assistants of the cameraman. Not so bad for others.

24. Do you find yourself having to become involved in protecting the interests of the camera crew often? Why is this so?

Yes. Most of the producers want to exploit the crew to cut down their expenses. In one film I protested for the whole unit, against the producers ill treatment of members.

Light unit stopped working and I supported them. Finally I refused to shoot any further until all payments were made. The producer packed-up the schedule!

SECTION V: Technical Questions and Issues.

A. Pre-production planning

1. Given a choice between Film and Video what would you like to work on and why?

Given a chance, I would like to work on film format for its clarity of detail and latitude. Apart from this, the viewing experience of film is a social experience, which is a positive social phenomenon.

2. What are your preferences in terms of the following and why:

In Film & in Video: Accessories & Gadgets, Video Assist-

I would like to use a video assist to communicate with director. But his assistants should not be allowed to look into the monitor. In any case a directors viewfinder will definitely improve the composition and plotting of mise-en-scene. If there is no director's viewfinder, we tend to limit our search for a better composition.

16mm-

I will prefer 16mm for doing documentaries. It gives me more freedom on usage of the negative, economically. In Kerala many people are now turning to 16mm even for Feature films.

Beta, Digi Beta-

In Video I will prefer only beta as minimum.

35mm-

Definitely my choice for fiction.

Cinemascope-

I really don't like this format except for films which have greater importance for the landscape and the horizontal axis.

Mini Digi, Hi 8-

Ideal for candid shoots, very unobtrusive in nature. It is my dream to buy a Mini digi Camcorder to shoot my project.

Lighting Fixtures-

Portable efficient lights and fixtures are only a dream for us working in the regional cinemas.

Steadycam, Remote Control-

I will need these very rarely.

3. What are the different meters that you feel are essential to your work, and why?

I use only an incident light meter. But a reflected light meter will definitely enhance the tonal rendering of a shot. Subrata *da* has asked me to buy a reflected light meter six years ago, but I couldn't buy one yet!

4. What are your preferences in terms of aspect ratios? What, in your opinion is enhanced, and what is lost, when you move from one aspect ratio to another?

I really prefer 1:1.33, because it is most suited to compose a human face. There will be no negative space. If one tries to compose a face in Cinemascope there will be so much negative space around the face. What a waste of space! I also like 1:1.85, which is good for emphasizing graphics, which I seldom wish for.

5. What are your preferences in terms of film stock, and why?

Answer: I prefer Kodak for its consistency and rendition of colour and detail. Of all emulsions, I have a preference for Kodak 5297 - old 250 ASA Daylight - because it gives perfectly natural colour rendition. In the case of latitude no other stock surpasses Kodak. I would even say: "Trust Kodak, more than your eyes."

6 Which camera/s do you prefer to work with, and why?

I will prefer at least an Arriflex BL for its image steadiness and sharpness. It is surprising, but true that a more steady, sharp image is more tangible and so more loved by the viewers, than an unsteady and unsharp image.

7 Which lenses do you prefer to work with, and why?

I definitely don't like ultra-tele lenses. Because they cut off the characters from the environment. Which is strangely also ideal for the dreamy mainstream films. I would prefer a 24mm to 100mm range. Ultra-tele lenses of 600mm to 1200mm are probably good for few song sequences! I am not saying that they cannot be used artistically.

8 Given a choice between working in a studio and a location, what would you opt for, and why?

Given a choice I would like to work in a location, because its restrictions make you think in different patterns. In a studio, you have all the means to place a light from anywhere you want, which I feel is not that good. 😊

9 From a cinematographer's point of view, what typically are the things most neglected and forgotten at the budgeting and production planning stage?

In almost all instances, production designers overlook the image quality. They don't consider the time and expenses involved in creating the necessary image for a particular film. So the DOP struggles hard to create the image with limited resources and time. This will definitely affect the quality.

10 How much say and involvement do you have in discussions about sets, locations, costumes and props? What are the things that you think have to be kept in mind when discussing these questions prior to production?

In fact the creative use of sets, locations, costumes and props are the means to create a style in the imaging. You can only shoot that which is created in front of your camera. To have a correct image close co-ordination of the DOP, Set designer, costumer and prop-man is a must, especially in creating the visual look and texture. I don't believe in the easy way out of colouring the lights or adding filters to camera. In the set design, designer must consider the needs of the mise-en-scene and the needs of lighting etc. Costumer should think about the mindscape of the characters and overall visual pattern the DOP wants to construct. Prop-man should understand the ambience Director/DOP wants to have and place the props accordingly. Unfortunately such discussions never happen. There were even instances, where my primary compositional need was just to avoid all that the art director created!!

11 "If we do a comparative analysis of the heads and amounts of expenditure in an average film, we find that the least amount of money is actually spent on what the film is going to end up looking like" – Comment

Absolutely True.

12 What are the different kind of tests that you are able to do, and would like to do prior to filming (In terms of equipment and stock tests)?

Most of the time the stock and camera come on the day of the shoot. So where is the time for all the tests? Ideally I would like to test the quality of the lens - sharpness, flare factors, focus etc, camera for image steadiness, tripod and fluid head for smoothness, and negative VS Lab specificity.

13 What is your opinion on the general standards of maintenance of camera equipment, lights and accessories?

Very bad. That is why it becomes essential to check the cameras and lenses every time you use them, even if it is familiar equipment.

14 To what do you attribute the absence of innovations in technology, equipment and accessories, especially with relevance to Indian conditions? What can be done to remedy this?

Lack of money and a wish for improvement. Plus the Majority [almost 99%] is satisfied with present conditions. Unless the majority demands for a change nothing will change. So to begin with, the mindset of the DOPs must change first.

15 What in your opinion is the importance of lab reports on stock tests?

Very important. These reports may wrongly influence you too. In my first film I sent the first day's negative to process and print. They sent back the rushes, which were terrible to look at. No shadow details, contrasty, wrong colours etc I almost wanted to commit suicide. I was not even able to face the director. Much later the Lab told me that they printed the rushes on "yellow stock", stock which was very old and foggy! I still don't forget the pain of those days.

16 How do you decide upon a particular laboratory?

Not much choice to make. What one looks for is consistency.

B - Lighting

1. When you begin thinking of a lighting design for a film, do you work towards an overall look for the entire film, or do you work out your lighting scheme in terms of different sequences, scenes and shots.

Of course, I try to fix an overall look for the film to start with and subsequently work with each sequence and each shot. It is important to understand the script very well as intended by the Director. Otherwise we may go wrong in the very first move. To think of it, it is not even the director who decides the visual look, it is the content of the film itself. I too believe that each film has its own independent growth beyond the intentions of the author. It is no magic, but an incidental destiny. In my career, I have seen this happening with so many films, like *Piravi*, *Vastuhara*, *Sanabi*, *Train to Pakistan*, *Mangamma*, *Kahini* etc. I am so fond of quoting Vilmos Zsigmond in this regard: "No image can be more beautiful than it's meaning/content".

Within each scene, one of the primary concerns for me is the space. You cannot overlook the narrative of the space and light up. It is always important

to be faithful to the ambience of the architecture to create a convincing reality. Of course, we sometimes break this intentionally to the dramatic needs of the story.

I also feel that, the focus of the lighting is to illuminate the space and the characters moving in it. So one should desist applying such lighting where the artist's body becomes insignificant. One example would be the heavily backlit close ups of faces. I always feel, as if the DOP is 'hitting' the artist with the light instead of illuminating.

2. How do you realise 'the look of a film' in your work? Please talk about this in detail, with examples in terms of lighting, framing, saturation, colour and movement.

A tough question! It will take so much time to explain this. But, I will try to just give some glimpses to the inner work of a DOP.

Let me talk about "*PIRAVI*" - From the very beginning Shaji and myself had detailed discussions on the script. It was rewritten many times, taking in to account the suggestions from others. In fact I never thought of lighting the film, I was only prepared to do the operation of the camera. Because Shaji never clearly suggested that I would be doing the lighting. Nevertheless, we had together prepared for the visual aspects of the film. [At that time I was the main assistant of Shaji]. One thing we wanted was the feel of the images in Tarkovsky's "*Sacrifice*". In fact we two alone saw the film together in a big cinema hall. Shaji never said that it should be like "*Sacrifice*", but we wanted similar force and weight of the images for "*Piravi*" too. I don't remember us discussing any details also.

As I said earlier, the look of the film depends very much on the selection of the space [house in *Piravi*, a "Nalukettu" with not plastered brick walls] and time of the year [Monsoon, with diffused light with dark overcast clouds]. We spent seven days finding out the house [total shooting of the film in the house

was for 18 days]. Add another four days in Trivandrum and the film was completed in 22 days. We were using 2 Mini Brutes [after a week all the bulbs got fused and never got replaced] and six M20s for day scenes, and six juniors and six babys for night scenes.

Since the walls of the house were dark, the characters stood out in the space. It was also easier to control the background. Obviously, I have experienced the space and light of such houses in my childhood and I was trying to recreate those impressions. In a subtle change, in the city the lighting is without character, flat to represent the emptiness of the souls in the city.

Rain was an important character in the film, so we had to use the presence of rain throughout the film. So we had to improvise and alter our shooting to the occurrence of the real rain. Except for the last part of the climax sequence, we shot the whole film in real rain. It was fun too.

One of my recent films, MT Vasudevan Nair's "*A Slender Smile*", I had an interesting problem just opposite to '*Piravi*'. The theme of the film demanded a sunny illumination for both interiors and exteriors. Due to production problems, we had to shoot the film in the monsoon! There were heavy rains, so we started with interiors. I lit up the interiors, imagining bright sunny day outside. The house had such low ceilings, and placement of any lights inside the house was almost impossible. We finished the interiors and came out to shoot the exteriors. It was still rain. So we had to wait for little breaks to get a little sunshine and we had to literally run to catch that light. I had to even change from f2 to f16 in my exposure within a single scene! We had only day scenes to shoot, and we completed the film in 15 days.

Another film where, I had to approach the film with an entirely different way was Aravindan's "*UNNI*". He wanted a near to documentary style for the film. So I didn't want any feel of lighting. Amazingly, I shot the entire film with natural daylight. We did not even use reflectors. One scene I did use reflectors and the

shadow crossing over the coconut trees behind the characters were too distracting. Hence, no reflectors were used henceforth. Even, in the interior scenes, I used lighting only in three night scenes in a house. We were using 250D[5297], and this experience prompted me to say 'Trust Kodak More than your Eyes'.

Consider the film "*SANABI*" directed by Aribam Shyam Sharma. This film was also shot entirely by natural daylight. Here we were using 1:1.33 for the frame which we decided after much discussion. Aribam wanted frames where his characters and nature – trees and mountains – were in perfect integration. Suppose they were sitting under a tree. If it were to be say, 1:1.85, I would have to use wider lens or move away from the tree to get the top of the tree also. Then the scale of the characters would become smaller!

In a Film like Venu's "*DAYA*" I was to create an Arabian nights fantasy world, and for that we used lots of colour and very diffused lighting. It was also to feel like a fairy tale. Here again the spaces selected and costumes used and props arranged give the fine-tuning to the visuals.

In a film like Aravindan's "*VASTHUHARA*", I personally feel that I was able to reach to my own ideological positions about cinematography. Creating an ambience, still very unobtrusive. I feel that photography in films should be transparent. In that sense, "*VASTHUHARA*" is my finest achievement.

Consider Malay Bhattacharya's "*KAHINI*", which I consider as the most technically perfect work of mine. Even though it took three schedules in two years. Here the compositions were to be important, and we used an aspect ratio of 1:1.85 coupled with mostly using a wider lens. Here also, I adopted a natural lighting pattern, but because of the compositional elements, it has become more than real, expressing the anguish and search of the protagonists.

Another interesting film of mine is "GALILEO" directed by James Joseph. This film was shot entirely on the studio floor, except one sequence, within poorly constructed two 'L' shaped walls! So, how am I to create the 18th century Italian ambience? Nothing but to go for the lighting of painters of that time in Europe. So, every day before going to the shoot I looked at the paintings of Caravaggio and Rembrandt for at least one hour. No, I was not copying the lighting. But, there was a style which automatically happened to the images, which had the echo of those times. I am sure that if the sets were also good I would have got a lot of mileage on this film. Remember that when I say, 'L' shaped flats it also means that I can't even take counter shots!!

3. How do you begin to light a set?

I usually start by lighting the characters and foreground. Then if needed, I control the unwanted light falling on the background and if necessary light up the background separately.

4. Do you light for the frame, or for points of emphasis within the frame? Does Lighting determine the frame, or, does framing determine the lighting. Please answer with examples from your work

I light for the points of emphasis within the frame. Lighting and frame are interdependent only in the sense that it allows or restricts light placements at the optimum place. This happens only in a restricted/small space. Otherwise, both lighting and frame have an independent existence.

5. What are your preferences in terms of specular/ bounced/ diffused lighting, and why?

I have no specific affinities for any of these qualitative differences. It all depends on the source light/imagined source light with in a scene.

I am ready to use all this, provided that I am justified to do so.

6. What kind of filters do you use, in what contexts, and to what effect?

I have almost never used filters to achieve lighting effects.

7. Do you like to work for a 'lit' feeling or for an 'unlit' feeling? Why?

I would like to work towards an 'unlit' feel. I have explained it earlier. Yet, to keep it short, cinema must be an 'art' of feelings and sensibilities, not of 12Ks and flash cuts.

8. Do you ever mix Tungsten and Daylight? In what situations? Why?

I will not want to do it, except in a song sequence in a mainstream film.

9. "The Film Industry wastes a lot of power. There is a lot of unnecessary lighting in films today" – Comment

I agree. You need half the lights and power to light up those "well lit" scenes in mainstream cinema.

10. Do you ever consciously make an effort to use fewer lights?

Yes, I do.

11. How much room or leeway do you give to the possibility of changes in your lighting scheme in terms of variations (clouds, sunshine, changes in the weather etc.) in the light condition in your locations?

I am very flexible, within the needs of the theme. Within acute limitations, I try to achieve what is needed for the film.

12. Do you incorporate such variations into your lighting pattern, or, do you insist on taking shots at particular time and only under pre-determined light conditions?

It depends on the original idea of the 'Image', which the director wants. Even if he goes back on his first intentions, I will stick to it.

13. Do you insist on working at a particular aperture setting for a film? Do you have a favourite aperture setting? Why?

Between f2.8 and f4. I wish I were always able to work with the optimum aperture, with every lens. Which, unfortunately never happens.

14. What makes a location or a set interesting to work with in terms of Light? What can we say is the 'feel' of a location?

It is the story, which makes a location suitable for shooting. That is why it is important for the director to find appropriate locations considering the mise-en-scene he wants to create. One has to also consider a DOP's need for space in terms of placing the lights, height of the roofs, position of windows, possibility of camera mobility etc.

15. In a given location or set, how do you consciously incorporate natural light sources, available practicals like lanterns, firelight, candlelight etc., architectural features like pillars, doorways and different elevations in the designing of your shots and lighting?

Yes I do. In fact we will be choosing a particular location foreseeing such possibilities. The script is definitely the guide. Within each scene we look for the possibility of using the graphical elements of lines, space and tonality of the

architecture - pillars, doors, windows, corridors etc- to create tensions, feelings of emptiness, loneliness, captivity etc, which will appropriately illuminate the psychological/inner mindscapes of the characters beyond the spoken words.

16. Do you ever experiment in terms of playing with differences in exposure for different takes of the same shot?

Rarely. I mostly do it only when I shoot day-for-night scenes.

17. How do you work in the possibilities of camera and character movement into your lighting scheme for a given shot? Please give at least 3 examples from your work.

This is the Directors realm not the DOP's.

18. Do you like to use the idea of moving your camera between different intensities of illumination in a given space? Or, do you prefer evenness in terms of lighting on the set?

There is neither evenness nor unevenness. It all depends on the mis-en-scene.

19. Have recently developed faster film stocks changed or had any impact on your overall philosophy and pattern of lighting?

No. It cannot be. Speed of negative is just another tool.

20. When do you say that the lighting for a shot is done?

When I smile at myself, and when my assistants don't say any further on the possibilities!

C - Framing

1. "The presence of a video monitor or video assist diminishes the autonomy and authority of a cinematographer on a set in terms of determining the framing of a shot" – Comment.

It depends on attitudes. After all, I believe that the director must decide a frame.

Even when there were no monitors, directors always looked through the camera and confirmed the frames. Even now, I make it a point that my directors look through each and every frame and confirm what we shoot. Like I said earlier, it should be the director's psychological and philosophical needs and his point of view of the theme, which must determine the frame. Otherwise we will end up with the same monotonous shots/fashions of the DOP in all films which he shoots, though it may be colourful!

2. How do you guide the viewer's eye within the frame? Through graphic elements, symmetry/ asymmetry, volume, light or colour.

Through graphic elements, lighting and colour. In this regard placement of characters and elements of environment around the character, inside the frame becomes very important. It is more of an intuitive decision on location. From different possibilities I chooses one. This is at this point, where my ideology and philosophy of cinematography influences me.

3. What are preferences in terms of working with different camera angles?

There cannot be any preferences, other than the needs of the theme and director's point of view.

4. How do you create depth in a frame? With the help of light, or colour, or both?

With both. I usually like to have more depth in a frame. That also means, limiting the use of tele lenses. For me it is important to see the environment of the character. This was a primary consideration of compositions in TV Chandran's "*Mangamma*"

D - Lenses & Lensing

1. What are your preferences in terms of working with block and zoom lenses?

I would prefer to work with block lenses. Obviously they are sharper and you have better aperture openings. These days we have HR series zooms, which even surpasses block lenses. In India we get very old lenses and this is big problem. You give me a BL with fresh lenses, I will shoot with available light as it is.

2. Which makes of lenses are your favourites? Why?

Not relevant in Indian situation. What you have is Zeiss and Angenieux. Plus the cheap Kova lenses for Cinemascope. That too 10/15 years old. What is the meaning of choice then? Luckily things are changing.

3. Do you think that variations in focal length have expressive and subjective connotations? Please give examples to illustrate your opinions.

Yes I do. Generally I feel that lenses that approximate the normal viewing angle of human eye gives an objective/general/'unframed' point of view and anything towards tele as well as [surprisingly] the opposite -that is wider lenses gives an subjective/particular/'framed' point of view. With tele and wide lenses it is as if someone is 'looking' and a normal lens gives the feeling of 'being' there. This is with reference to a distance of 'object <-> camera' that is constant.

- 4. Does working in different aspect ratios have any relationship to the kind of lensing that you would go for? Compare between film and TV, and between 16mm, 35mm and Cinemascope.**

Not anything particular. The change of format itself brings in a new relationship with the format and focal length of the lens. There again the lensing depends upon the mise-en-scene.

- 5. What in your opinion is the subjective and aesthetic factor that makes zooming different from moving the camera itself?**

The most important element in a trolley shot is the movement of camera/lens/POV in space itself. This gives a dolly shot such intensity, and dynamism. Zoom becomes only an approximation of this. In a trolley shot, we walk closer to the object, either with respect, or the opposite - for a kill. In a zoom shot we pull the object towards us, like a vacuum pump, it sucks in the object resulting also in a loss of 'depth' perception.

E – Movement

- 1. What is the way in which you approach movement? Do you see movement as a way to move from the whole frame into its details, or to move from details towards the whole?**

Both. Again this is part of the mise-en-scene. Whether you take advantage of a movement forward [macro to micro] or a movement backward [micro to macro] depends on the psychological need of the situation.

- 2. Do you think that movement affects the subjective experience of the duration, or 'time value' of a shot?**

Yes. Now a days, the audio part too plays an important role in the 'time value' of a shot.

3. When you are thinking of revealing a space in your shot division or breakdown, do you prefer to work in terms of a series of camera set ups that move the viewer within the space, or do you prefer a fluid mobile camera on tracks and trolleys?

Again you must design this according to the needs of the theme. I don't any way believe in the widely held perception that "a film which has lot of camera movement is a better film"! When I saw Kurosawa's "*Madadayo*", I was spell bound with the mastery of his craft. He, for a change, does not move his camera in this film. Renowned film critics were walking out of the auditorium attributing his immobility to his old age! What a pity? They did not understand that it was his complete strength and confidence which made such a thing possible for the master of movement/kinetics in cinema. It was almost like a profound tribute to the other master of movement/kinetics of cinema - Ozu. To see seasons and epochs move through a single frame is nothing less than an experience of 'satori'.

What are your preferences in terms of a choice between a stable frame, which allows for movement within it, and a dynamic, mobile camera? Why?

The answer is given above! Let me shout... Mise-en-scene decides the needs of a theme.

4. What are the common difficulties and problems that you face in executing camera movements?

Limitations of the location space, money and time.

5. In which conditions would you consider taking the camera off its tripod and going in for handheld shots?

In stunt sequences for example. Or where I need movement, which cannot be executed in any other way - saving money. In "*Mangamma*" where there are few handheld shots, my director TV Chandran warned me "Sunny keep your hands loose. It should look like a handheld shot". ☺

I have done some effective handheld shots in "*Piravi*", "*Mangamma*", "*Daya*", "*Kahini*" etc.

6. What is your opinion on the use of Steadicam shots that are increasingly evident in films today?

Just a fashion. Unless you don't need such a mise-en-scene, why use it at all? Most of the time you can take a handheld shot which looks better than a "Steadicam" shot. Steadicam shots have an inorganic feeling, which reveals the machine. Handheld shots on the contrary have an organic feeling.

F – Colour

1. Do you think of colour in any way other than only in terms of registering the presence of colour?

Colour is also emotion, rhythm and velocity.

2. What are the personal associations and cultural connotations that you have with different colours? Do you make use of these categories in working out a colour scheme for a film?

These are both Universal and Specific. The local culture and physical environment mostly establish it. Obviously we must make use of such nuances in creating the mise-en-scene.

How do I associate these colours of the 'rainbow'? There are personal and culture specific associations. Let me try to decode them! Which is different for eastern and western mindset. But unfortunately, our colour associations are predominantly western.

Violet - Personally I associate violet with Intellect and something enigmatic. With Romance.

Indigo - Something indefinite.

Blue - Infinity, space, coolness, logic etc.

Green - Life, celebration, abundance etc.

Yellow - Wealth, money, gold, jealousy, surprise etc.

Orange - Fire, Sun, purification, etc.

Red - Blood, love and violence.

Cultural associations vary from nation to nation, village to village.

3. What are your thoughts on monochromatic rendition and on working for deep, saturated colours as stylistic options?

Monochrome [B&W] in a way, is the most saturated of all colours. Monochrome, if you mean one predominant colour only, then I will use it very sparingly. Like sepia for some flash blacks, or magenta/infra red for some psychedelic scenes etc. You can't use it throughout in one film to evoke any expression. Because, then you will have no comparative clues of dramatic change and evolution.

4. Do you basically think of a frame in Black and White terms and then add colour (as ornament or flourish), or is your conception of a frame always in vivid colour?

I always think of a frame as movements in space. Chromatic specifications are incidental. Of course, if I am shooting a B&W film, I will need to understand the grey tone reproduction of each and every colour surface. In black and white you also have an advantage of revealing texture - of a wall or a face. This gives B&W an added advantage over colour in portraying the mindscapes of the characters.

5. How do you work with the art director and costume designer to develop a colour palette for a film?

I do work within the basic mise-en-scene. In fact, a colour palette of a film is actualised not only by lighting. What is there in front of your camera also determines it. The art director and costume designer together give you the textures and colours to reflect your light. Unless this creation of the surface is not right no amount of your lighting skill will save the situation.

6. What is the kind of work that you do on colour in the laboratory?

I just try to get the most natural colours, which was present in the shot. Then some fine-tuning of changes in colour rendition because of differences in lenses.

7. To what extent if at all do you play with the colour balance on video?

Not at all. May be once in thousand occasions to make the shots to have a sepia tone or so.

8. Do you find any difference in the rendition of colour in video and film?

Yes I do. In film colour is integral to the lines/form. In video I always have this feeling that colour always looks like another layer over the lines/form.

G - Laboratory & Post Production Work

1. What are your thoughts on the grading process?

This is a very important stage in realising our efforts. Unless we work with a trusted colour grader, who understands our preferences, it could be hell. I was fortunate enough to have such people worked on my films, like Shri Ponnayya [*Vastuhara*], Shri Sudhir [*Piravi*, *Mangamma*], Late Shri Devaraj [*Kahini*, *Sanabi*] and Shri Bholan [*Train to Pakistan*].

2. What is the extent and nature of experimentation that you would do in the laboratory?

None. Because, most of the laboratories don't have the time or infrastructure facilities to execute such experimentation.

3. What is the input of the work in the lab into the ultimate look of a film?

If the lab goes wrong nothing will come out of our work. It is the most important factor in the actualisation of our dreams and aspirations.

4. What is your opinion on the standards of Indian laboratories? What can be done to make for better standards and working conditions in the laboratories?

They are less than desirable. If only power of money does not rule! Most of the times we don't even get a chance to take a second copy! May be personal rapport and persuasions work. When the Laboratory realise that you are serious about your work, they also tend to help you out.

5. What in your opinion are the essential qualities and features of a good film print?

Translucence and spotless quality. Saturation and shadow details.
Quality of the black.

6. How much space is there for a cinematographer to intervene in video post-production – say in terms of colour rendition and image brightness? If a cinematographer's presence is taken for granted in a film laboratory, why is he/she generally absent from the entire process of video post-production?

It should not be the thing to do. I don't know why productions do this. If we take that the DOP as the author of an 'Image', he should be present or at least consulted during the video postproduction.

I will add another instance. Tele-cine transfers of feature films. The DOP must be present at the transfer.

H - Viewing Conditions

1. What is your opinion on the standards of screens and projectors in cinema theatres in India? What can be done to make for better standards and viewing conditions in the theatres?

Very Bad. I was involved in three film festivals, in the projection committee. We went and measured the screen luminance/brightness of theatres in three cities in Kerala. None of them had the ideal measurement of +/- 16fl. ISC for the last five years is interacting with the Kerala State Government to include the minimum projection standards of sight and sound into the relevant cinematograph acts. Kerala Chalachitra Academy has already taken an initiative to bring some kind of quality certificate of projection of all theatres in Kerala.

2. What is your opinion on the quality of tele-cine transfers in television stations?

Of Local DD centres it is bad. Mostly they are taken from old prints, which is wrong.

3. What is your opinion on the quality of transmitted video signals on television (including satellite TV)?

It is improving. I get the Asianet cable connection, which is better than what I have seen in other countries.

SECTION VI: Aesthetic Questions

1. Do you adapt different styles in different categories of filmmaking?

I do. And I think that it is basic that you change your style with each film. Fashions will not endure the call of time.

2. Can we make a distinction between 'realist' and 'expressive' cinematography? What are the markers of this distinction?

Of course, there is a definitive difference in each style. In a realist tradition it is the aim to have an 'unlit' feel. What is an expressive tradition? Do you mean to say expressionistic? If so, here, one does want one's lighting to be noted to create an effect. And you create a very conscious 'lit' feel.

3. How much freedom do you give yourself in terms of changing your style? Or, do you work towards maintaining a consistent stylistic signature in all your films?

I work for each film differently. My consistent stylistic signature is my attitude towards cinema in total. And my effort to create the experience of being transparent.

4. Subrata Mitra once said, " Could *Pather Panchali* have been shot with Panavision cameras, and sophisticated accessories?" – Comment.

Absolutely true. I too believe that the excess of technology is taking away the essence of cinema, directors forced into spending more time for technology than his story and artists. There are many more examples.

5. Can an excess of technological gadgets sometimes be a hindrance to the practice of cinematography, and to creative freedom?

Yes. An Arri IIC with good lenses is enough to create an engrossing cinema. Technological development only improves the skin. The soul of a cinema is born from the heart and minds of all those working in a cinema. No technology can do anything in this matter.

6. How does the presence of the human body affect the decisions that you take in terms of lighting for a frame? What is the relationship of the image size of your frame to the volume occupied by the human figure within it?

As I told you earlier that I start with lighting the human body in movement within a frame. It is mostly the personality and creative competition of the artists, which affects me creatively. If there is a fantastic performance from an actor or actress I try to compete with he/she with my lighting. I have noticed myself that whenever there is a great performance from an artist; my creative inputs also improve. Many of the artists look to the cameraman's face first, after the announcement of "Cut", to know the result of their performance. I do always give an importance to the human figure in my compositions.

7. What are the different elements that you take into consideration when you position the human body within the frame? Do these elements change

when you move from a studio set to a location, from an interior scene to an exterior scene and from daylight to night?

There may be some differences.

8. Are there any differences in the way in which male and female figures are lit and framed?

No. Yet the interaction with feminine presence within the frame tends to attract more concentrated look from the DOP ☺. Eventually many a DOP's take more time and effort to light up a female face. As I said earlier, when there are great actors/actress working with us, we tend to improve our lighting.

9. Are there any differences in the way in which, the eyes, the face and the body are lit and framed?

Not really. It also depends on the space around the eye/face/body.

10. Do different characters in a narrative demand the application of different lighting codes and conventions?

No and Yes. It is very seldom that we will need to evoke different lighting codes for different characters. There could be occasions where we may even think of using different qualities of the light to emphasise a difference of character. We may use specular qualities for one character and diffused quality for another character. We may use green light for one character and yellow light for yet another character etc. There have be experiments like this.

11. "The visibility of the Star in mainstream films demands its own form of lighting." – Comment.

There is no escape. You need to make a 'star' look like the most 'desirable' object in the world.

12. Do you light up the space and then allow the characters to move within it, or, do you light the characters and by doing so evoke the space?

Yes I do light the characters moving in the space. And if needed light up the space for some emphasis.

13. "Pragmatic considerations and Time Management determine the aesthetic of a film" – Comment.

May be true. Accidents too have great role in creating great art.

14. "Editors spoil cinematographers labours" – Comment.

Not true.

15. Do you shoot an urban setting differently from a rural setting?

May be. The ambience is so different within an urban and rural setting, which necessitates different approach. Things are sometimes quite simple. In an urban setting you don't see more than the street. Your landscape is limited. In a rural space your landscape is vast if not infinite. In a rural setting you can climb up a mountain and see everything around you. In an urban setting you climb up a 10 storied building and look around, your vision is limited.

16. "There is a preference for the panoramic eye in the depiction of the rural, and for the dynamic, mobile eye in the depiction of the urban" – Comment.

Depends on who shoots! If the cameraperson is from the village he will go panoramic for the urban and vice versa! Just think about it.

17. "The mobile camera (extended tracks & cranes and Steadicam) have transformed the cinematographic experience and effect." – Comment.

Not fully correct. It just attenuates the kinetic effects of obvious 'movement' within a frame. A static frame can be equally 'moving' internally, which sometimes surpasses the effects of literal movement within a frame. I can illustrate this with the shot from "*Cries and Whispers*" by Bergman. It is an almost ten minute shot of the reflection of Erland Josephson and Liv Ullman. Just to virtual faces looking at their own images in the mirror. More powerful and dynamic than any Terminators and Predators.

Do you imagine the sound track when you are shooting?

Yes I do. Sound gives the texture, tactile feeling to your images.

18. "Conception of a sound track gives rhythm to the shot taking" – Comment.

Absolutely true.

19. Is shooting a beautiful object beautifully good cinematography?

No.

20. What is the notion of beauty that you aspire for? What are the aesthetic goals that you set yourself?

My aim is to reveal truth and love. My philosophy is not just to create beauty for its own sake. I have more affinity to my art, which is similar to Zen arts. I try to reveal the *saba*, that is, 'suchness of things' to my viewers. This is in fact is the 'imprint' of time on objects and persons. This imprint of time leads us to the inner essence of a character and object. Yes, we must create it in terms of light, space, surface, texture and colour.

21. Have you seen the concept of 'Beauty' change in the course of your career as a cinematographer?

It did not change for me. May be there is more commercial outlook in society. "All that sells are beautiful". I don't agree to this.

22. Why is the pursuit of 'Beauty' alone the motivation for so much cinematography? Can there be other motivations?

Money. There are other motivations too, which makes it an art. This is true for life in general. Let me quote Marx now - "Money is the alienated human ability." How true!

23. Do you find that there is a generally accepted notion of an 'aesthetic minimum' for cinematography today? Does this constrain or enable you? Do you have your own, personal 'aesthetic minimum'?

There is an aesthetic minimum within the parameters of each film, which is primarily determined by the budget of a film. This is not merely the budget/total money available to the author, but also the fact that where this capital is coming from? I do have an aesthetic minimum, which I try to adhere to. In every film I want to surpass myself and which is not possible at many times. You need such a support from your fellow workers and fate/nature, that you can do it. You may be able to do it thrice in your lifetime, if you are extremely gifted and extremely lucky.

I have many times looked at my own work and find it very difficult to say I progressed proportionately in every aspects of my cinematographic skill. There are films, which are obviously good for different reasons, not for the same reasons. "*Piravi*", "*Vastuhara*", "*Sanabi*", "*Kahini*", "*Train to Pakistan*", "*Mangamma*", "*Daya*", etc.!

24. What are the aspects of the cinematographer's craft that you find unrealised in your working life? Just as a Director has the freedom to discuss an 'idea' and develop that into a script or screenplay, why does the cinematographer not have the same freedom to develop a specifically cinematographic conception into a full-fledged script!

I always wanted to be a Director/author. Cinematography is an aberration for me ☺ ☺ ☺.