

K.K. Senthil Kumar ISC was proud of his team's work on the complicated bridge sequence in *RRR*



In the previous edition, *British Cinematographer* explored India's rapidly expanding film industry. In this issue, foreign and Indian female cinematographers share their experiences and discuss how this growth has created new opportunities in what is becoming an increasingly diverse industry, with insights from the Indian Society of Cinematographers (ISC).

Historically, the Indian film industry has been somewhat limited in terms of inclusion, especially in key creative roles. Opportunities for women and foreigners were scarce, with most top positions being held by a small, established pool of Indian men. However, as the industry has expanded and gained more global recognition, there has been a noticeable shift. The increasing demand for varied and inclusive content has opened new job opportunities for people who might not have had a chance in the past.

Anil Mehta ISC, one of the founding members of the organisation, notes that streaming platforms not only open up access to larger global audiences but have also transformed the production landscape. "This shift has paved the way for a new wave of talent and content in the filmmaking process," he says.

One of the most noticeable changes, he observes, is the significant increase in the number of women on set. "Producing, art, editing and cinematography are where they have really come into their own in the recent decades," Mehta says. "Indian Women Cinematographer Collective (IWCC) a forum for women cinematographers has a vibrant and vital presence on social media and in the filmmaking firmament. ISC is trying its best to be inclusive of all the new entrants in a pan India way. Not easy in a country as diverse as ours but the recognition of the new realities is definitely there."

Yamini Yagnamurthy (*Raghu Thatha*) says that in her "early days as a female cinematographer in India" she faced some tough challenges, with people doubting her skills, especially with handheld cinematography.

"I got the chance to prove myself with the film *Saani Kaayidham* (2022), which was shot entirely handheld—no sticks or dollies," she explains. "I purchased the EasyRig from Sweden with which I supported the camera. That with the Cinema Flex vest was a game changer. This project improved my skills and showed everyone what I could do. It was a challenging experience that changed me and made my work stand out. Over time, those doubts went away, replaced by recognition and respect. This journey taught me the importance of resilience and dedication, especially in a male-dominated industry. It showed that talent and hard work can break any barriers. Now, I see each challenge as a new learning, an opportunity to share my passion for cinematography and help shape Indian cinema."

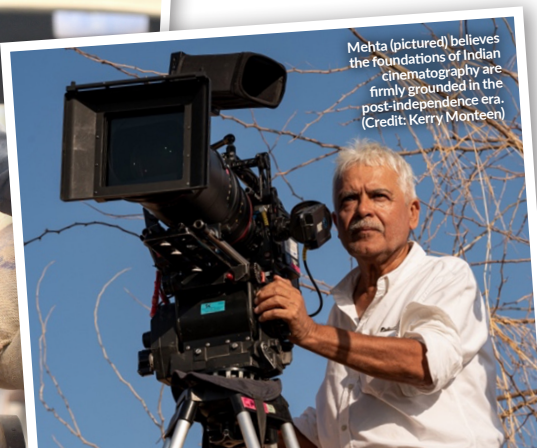
Yagnamurthy notes that, in addition to advancing her own career, audiences in India tend to respond strongly to films that feature strong female perspectives or stories.

"Some notable national award-winning films are *Kahaani* (2012), *Arundhati* (2009), *Mahanathi* (2009), *Queen* (2014) and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022)," she adds. "These films have not only showcased strong female leads but have also been embraced by the audience for their compelling stories and powerful performances. Indian cinema is evolving, and it's heartening to see the growing appreciation for women-centric narratives."

The foundations of Indian cinematography, Mehta believes, are firmly grounded in the post-independence era. In the 1950s and '60s pioneers like Subrata Mitra, V.K. Murthy, Fali Mistry informed the aesthetic of many Indian films thereby creating a legacy for generations to follow.

"Today students from film schools across the globe form a part of almost every film crew in the country," he adds. "Film professionals trained in New York, LA, London, Prague are commonplace today. Along with the multiplying private film schools in the country the list is long and the young professionals eager to make a difference are a rapidly growing community. I sometimes feel, growing too rapidly."

Mehta says that "it's time, perhaps, to regain vernacular expression, individual voices in writing and directing" films in India. "Expressive cinematography that serves the context and does not cater to the 'flavour of the season', be it the anamorphic bokeh, rainbow lens flares, dark and moody till where it's barely seen," he concludes. "Cinematography in India today has a new energy of many young women and men expressing themselves through the medium. It's their responsibility to make a meaningful contribution to the medium."





## WESTERN IMPORTS

Diversity in India's film industry extends beyond gender. Many foreign cinematographers are not only finding work, but securing regular roles in the industry.

French cinematographer Jean-Marc Selva AFC (*No Fathers in Kashmir*, *Lakadbagha*) has worked on more films in India than most foreign counterparts.

"Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, is often viewed in the West as primarily consisting of dancing and singing films," he says.

"However, I can't speak to that, as all six feature films I've shot in India are dramas or action films with no dancing or singing scenes. I am under the impression that this type of film is less produced nowadays. There are really all types of films being made in India, and the know-how there is equal to the best films made in the West."

He adds that "at any given time, there is a staggering number of productions happening in India," meaning the number of people working in the industry is also large.

"Contrary to smaller European countries, it is not possible to know all of the players in the Indian film industry," Selva opines. "The first thing that one realises is that the scale of things is completely different in India. The crews for example are way larger. I have had really big crews to work with, with a base number of grips and electrician much higher than what I can be given in Europe. Unlike in the West, the first AC acts as a bridge between the technical crew, the vendors, and the DP. They handle equipment, plan the lighting, and resolve various issues, relieving the DP of many time-consuming and tedious tasks."

"The consequence of this is that as a DP I can go much further in the direction of achieving what I



Frenchman Selva has shot six feature films in India (Credit: Ayush Mishra)



Yagnamurthy reflects on breaking barriers as a female cinematographer in India (Credit: Hombale Films/Yamini Yagnamurthy)

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want in a same given amount of setup time. The access to equipment is also larger. One can achieve bigger and more complex results more easily. I have heard of 450-person crews, even of a 600 crew once. One just needs to browse the pages of Zee5's website to get a feeling of the scope of the Indian film scene."

US-based cinematographer Sheldon Chau also has extensive experience in India and across Asia, which began when an Indian film producer was looking for a US-based director for a feature film. Through his network of Asian American filmmakers and the NYU Grad Film alumni network, Chau "somehow got

connected" with the producer. Next thing I knew, I found myself in Hyderabad, thrown into a world of dosas, biryani, and Indian filmmaking," he recalls.

"I had been working consistently on a global scale at the time (and continue to do so today), as one of my deepest passions is learning about different cultures and telling stories from around the world. So when the opportunity to travel to India and work there for six months came up, I jumped at the chance."

He recalls his first impression upon arriving in the country: the sheer size and complexity of its film industry. "Indian cinema is divided by language, with >>



Photo: Netflix original series Berlin, by Vancouver Media

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Ravi Varman ASC ISC used ambient light from LED panels for *Indian 2* (Credit: Ravi Varman ASC ISC)



Chau's Asian journey began with an Indian producer's call for a director (Credit: 24 Frames Factory)



Chau and Selva both note the sheer scale of Indian productions (Pictured: *Kannappa*) (Credit: 24 Frames Factory)

» major regional industries like Bollywood (Mumbai, Hindi), Tollywood (Hyderabad, Telugu), Kollywood (Kerala, Malayalam), and the Tamil film industry, among others," he explains. "The infrastructure is so vast, it's fascinating to think about why Indian cinema hasn't broken through internationally more—beyond the success of S.S. Rajamouli's *RRR* in 2022. When I first arrived, I had the Western misconception that all Indian cinema was Bollywood, but I quickly learned otherwise. Though *RRR* became a global sensation, it's primarily a Telugu film, and the Telugu-speaking community is immensely proud of it."

From "a shooting standpoint", Chau has worked on two Telugu films, including the upcoming *Kannappa*, and he notes that the biggest difference lies in the approach to filmmaking.

"For instance, during prep, narrations often take precedence over script reading. The producer or director will gather the team and verbally narrate the entire story and key sequences," he explains. "There's also a difference in how crew positions are structured. Each department has an AD who reports to the chief AD, and the camera and lighting teams can be large, with dedicated assistants for each lens set or major light. The key is to adapt to their way of working and not impose 'Western' methods. The industries here are well-oiled machines, and they've got it figured out. The thrill for me, or any outsider, is merging into their workflow, respecting their process, and becoming part of the team. At the end of the day, camera, lenses, framing, and lighting are universal languages. Once you account for the human and cultural factors, it can be an absolute blast."

## SHOW ME THE RUPEES

Of course, it's one thing—and a great opportunity—to get work in a country thousands of miles away, but it also has to make financial sense. Chau notes that, like anywhere, it can be lucrative, depending on the budget and scale of the project.

"Another big factor is that the economic situation and cost of living in India differ greatly from major Western countries, which inevitably impacts the rates," Chau explains. "Because of the sheer volume of films produced in India, once your name as a DP gets out there and you make interesting films that peers start recommending, it can become a lucrative place to work. I'm still new to and exploring this world, but so far, I've enjoyed immersing myself in the process—watching a lot of Indian cinema, learning about the stars' reputations, and more than anything, opening my eyes to the impressive celebrity culture and intense fan base they have here."

Selva concurs, noting that "sometimes one gets paid more than in Europe, sometimes less", and that a lot of negotiating is involved.

"Generally producers prefer negotiating a flat fee rather than a variable one which would take into consideration the actual number of hours, night or day work, weekends, transport time, etc," he says. "All the things that are more taken for granted in the West, so one must be careful and fend for oneself. An agent operating from a Western city may not be all that capable to deal with the way things work in India. The same goes the other way; they are not used to DPs having agents and can get put off by it."

## NO LINGUA FRANCA AND TOUGH WORKING CONDITIONS

Of course, no job or industry is perfect – you must take the rough with the smooth. So, what are the challenges typically faced when working in India?

Selva explains that the sheer size of the industry makes it more complex to navigate and build professional connections, not just with crew members, but also with vendors and players.

"Another challenge is that many different languages are spoken in India today, not just Hindi," he adds. "And contrary to what one might expect, quite a few people do not speak English on a given crew. One can work hours on sets hearing people talk and have only a faint idea of what they are actually talking about. It can be unsettling. Luckily, filmmaking is a universal language and in the end one usually gets what one wants, but it does require some effort and patience. However, the fact that many English terms are used to name gear is of great help. One gets by."

Selva also highlights the strong work ethic of Indian crews and their willingness to help.

"They'll do whatever is required of them, and no task is too hard. That 18K will go where you want it to," he says. "Unlike some other countries I've worked in, there is still real respect for the DP's position. They receive better treatment, and what they say and need is

seriously taken into consideration. Another challenging aspect of working in India is the sheer volume of work that has to be produced every day. I can't generalise, but often the working days end up being very long. Moreover, several times I have worked on films that were using a six-day week base, and a few times even seven days base, which means that you can work every single day for many continuous weeks until the film is done. If you add to this the high temperatures, the humidity levels, the noise and pollution levels that you sometimes encounter there; it is no easy task to shoot films in India."

Still, Selva is positive about the Indian experience, or he wouldn't keep going back to film there. He is currently in India filming a martial arts film called *Lakadbagha 2*, the second instalment of a trilogy started two-years-ago.

"One thing I like about the Indian film industry is that one gets to work more easily on bigger scale jobs than one would do in smaller countries, thus one is more often faced with challenging situation, bigger sets, larger number of crews and gear to work with," he says. "So, ultimately one learns and grows further in the mastery of their job."

Chau agrees and says he would encourage DPs to consider working in India, because "it's just another world" and the films are so different stylistically, from bold social dramas to more mainstream spectacles that place special emphasis on hero/heroine culture, over-the-top action, lots of slow-motion, exciting dance/song numbers. "It's a place that challenges your craft and forces you out of your comfort zone in the best ways," he says. "And more than anything, India is a place so rich in history and culture (it's one of the oldest civilizations in the world) that the life experience of working here and making new friends and eating the good food is just priceless."

While the downturn in Western film industries shows some signs of improvement, India continues to prove a strong and growing outlet for cinematographers. ■