

**P.C. SRIRAM**

**Can you tell us something about your childhood, the kind of family you come from and how you got interested in photography, cinema and cinematography?**

With me you have to start from the beginning. Start from the birth. Because it started there for me. I never studied in my life. In a sense, education was not part of my life at all. I used to go to school but I did not understand what was being taught there. I understood nothing at all. So that's something I was not able to understand. I did not know what was on the paper. I do not know. I was a very disturbed child at that time. A very disturbed child.

And as for my family background, except for my mother's sister, who was a writer - there was not much of art or culture. She died last year. So there is some literature in the background. I used to go to her, not to any of the other elders in the family, because I was an outcast.

I was a black sheep in the family and I had very few friends, very few friends from school. So I used to go to my aunt's house. The literature, I did not understand, but they were always people talking, and I used to watch them talk.

You would not believe I never passed any of my exams including the Madras Film Institute exam. I said to myself will never write an exam again and I never wrote exams again.

But the most important thing is that my world opened when I went to the Institute, only then did I start seeing the world. I started studying. I started reading like mad; I wanted to know more and more.

My grandfather was doing still photography. He was a horticulturist. He was doing still photography there for his work, for his samples. And on other occasions as well he used to take stills. Even at the age of seventy also he was able to take the stills. So, he gave me a camera and when I started clicking, I could see, I could relate or see myself.

**What did you feel you could see in yourself?**

Something was happening to me. I kept doing it (photography) continuously. I could see something, which made me feel something I didn't quite know, the 'unknown', if you like.

That was the time; I was in school, and this was the only hobby I had. I could do it because I could do it alone.

Now you have instant cameras. You can shoot, go to the studio, print. These things were not the same then. So in my days of loneliness, at night, I used to take my camera. I used to say "let me shoot the moon, let me shoot dreams".

How to shoot dreams? It was only a thought. It was very childish. Looking back, I can say I was in the learning process, thinking "How to shoot dreams, how to shoot the moon, how to shoot the night".

All alone in my room I used to sit with my camera and shoot various kinds of things. Even now if you see those negatives you can see lot of things in those negatives. I remember when once I was putting my leg down on the window like this and the moon was there. I had the support of this thing for longer time for exposure. I kept the leg there and I kept the moon there and I shot the moon for a long time.

Call this realism, this ism or that ism, I don't know, all I wanted to do was to go in the direction in which my mind was travelling. The only thing that was happening in my life was that I was travelling with my camera in my hand. It made my mind travel. That was the only reason I went towards the Film Institute. I wanted to travel so I had to go through the film institute. You need at least a certain education.

I had to struggle to finish every paper. At that time nobody use to go to the institute. Now you pay more to study there than you do to become a doctor. All the sons of big people now want to study film. Now it is a fashion. The Government of Tamil Nadu is spending so much on each film student - a couple of lakhs per head. No other state government in India spends so much. Why, because they are using the media for their own ends, their personal ends also. That's why so much money is put in there.

When I went into the Institute it was different.

Once I went into the Institute I started learning. The learning process was endless. I saw a film called '*Dune*', and then I saw '*400 Blows*'. I said "Is it possible to think in these terms", because, normally you are confined to just one

kind of cinema which you see in the theaters. What you know is only one kind of cinema. It can be English, or Hindi, or any regional film but - it is still one kind of cinema.

But when I saw '*400 Blows*', I said - "this is my autobiography". Recently I got my own copy of '*400 Blows*'. I saw it. It still hit me again in the same way. I have gone through that kind of pace. I was a disturbed child.

In the background that I came from it is very difficult to find any support for a disturbed child in the home and protect him from society. My mother was a big support and my father you see, used to say, "you are an insult to my family".

But I don't blame him because he never offended me. I know everybody in that state of mind. But my mother, looking back it looks very funny; she would say lots of things to me, talk to me. She spoke to a lot of doctors, they told her lots of things, but she knew how to hold a disturbed child.

My mother's uncle, Ari Rajam, was a big doctor. She must have told him about me, "suddenly he is very angry in the middle of his dreams, nobody knows why, he comes home from school and he throws everything, cannot sit still." He must have talked to her. He gave her a book "In Search of Dibbs". It is the true story of the growing up of a disturbed child. She took up that book in a big way; she even read it to me.

When I read the book later, in the Film Institute days, when I had a thirst for knowledge, a thirst for everything, it changed the entire pattern of my life.

I came across things in cinema that I never knew before. I came across, say Japanese culture, every thing in it was mind blowing. It made me ask myself "What are we doing here?" I felt that I was not able to do anything. I felt that I had to do something, something that I was not able to do. This happened in the final year of the Institute. First and second years were mind blowing. I wanted a camera, I wanted film, and I wanted to do something.

Looking back, I think I can go back to childhood. I stayed in a house, which had a film studio in the backyard. It is no more behind my house. It was called 'Venus Studio'. Sometimes in the middle of playing ball I would stray into the studio lot in search of the ball. There were six or seven floors on which there was non-stop shooting going on, of Hindi, Tamil, Telegu and Malyalam films.

In those days I used to just go there, watch, nobody was allowed there and nobody would notice me. I remember watching at the age of four or five - I remember noticing the sound, sets made to look like jungles in the heart of Madras city.

I am forty-three now, but I remember it distinctly. I used to go, sit in a corner and watch, with the watchman and the peon. It is all coming back to me as I am talking to you. Then I got cut off. Cut off completely.

The beauty of it all is that I went and erected a set there when I was shooting *Nayakan*. I knew everything about the place, at the age of five, six, seven and then I was coming back to the same place as a grown up. It looked the same, it felt the same, like *deja-vu*, I should not use that word, but I know that

I felt the waves of a very strange sensation when I walked into the set of

*Nayakan*, into that studio, the same place. So this is how the evolution of cinema inside me took place. This is what it is like.

**Tell us something about the early films which saw and which left a deep mark on you, both before and during your days at the Institute.**

See before the institute days, as far as English films are concerned we had '*Makenna's Gold*', '*Towering Inferno*' - those kinds of films. I remember that when I saw '*One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*' it made me sit up and think that it was interesting. I have already told you about the impact that '*400 Blows*' had on me when I joined the Institute, then I was also quite taken in by '*All the Jazz*'. I also remember seeing '*Woodstock*', it was a 70 mm print that came and ran only for two days. It came back again after three years and ran for a hundred days in the Blue Diamond cinema. At that time we went to see films as some form of 'mob psychology' but still some of them did stay and had an impact on my mind. Like '*One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*', '*400 Blows*' and '*Woodstock*'.

As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, a very strong film for me was '*Andanaal*' by S.Balachander. I was also zapped by Nimai Ghosh's '*Chinnamul*' - a Bengali film that was shot in the partition time, it used a lot of documentary footage. Maybe the film itself was not that great, but it had a very imaginative way of using documentary material. Other films that I remember were '*Kalpana*' by Uday Shankar, and '*Kagaz ke Phool*'. I was also very impressed by the early Sivaji Ganesan films. I can say that all these films influenced me.

**Was there any thing that influenced you in a cinematographic way, a particular style of lighting, visual patterns, framing and so on?**

I never see a film from the photography angle at all. Not even today. It was only when I started going to the Film Festival that I noticed that all the Pune Institute guys knew the names of the cinematographers. I think the only name I know is that of Vilmos Zsigmond. And that is because one of my assistants had the chance to work with him on some commercial that was shot in Turkey. And then he called me at three in the morning, imagine!

**Did you work as an assistant?**

I never worked as an assistant. But even during my school days, I used to go and observe films being shot, one of my friend's father was making a film, so in the school holidays I used to go and watch. And in the Institute days, I would go each day to Satya Studios at 6 o'clock and watch what they were doing. During the vacation I would go and spend all my time there. I used to not mind anything that they would say to me. They used to behave quite strangely but I did not mind that either.

Once during the summer holidays I travelled with them from Madurai to Salem on a 40 day shoot. It was a circus. I was the fourth assistant or the fifth assistant, something like that. I was not paid; rather you could say that I was a burden on the producer.

**And what was the experience of shooting your first film like?**

It was a 16mm film shot and released in Bangalore with some youngsters. We shot the entire film without any money. There was no money for shooting. It was a fiction film, but shot in a very documentary style, like candid camera, with a para-bolex camera. It was made by a collective, we assembled raw stock from here and there, the guy who was behind the whole thing has emigrated to the US

now. He plays the small role of a cop in one of the Kamalhasan's initial fight scenes in *Nayakan*. He had been to Sweden and seen a lot of cinema there; apparently he had even tried making a small film in New York. But anyway, what's the point of saying all this, you cant even see this film.

Anyway, we shot the whole film on MG Road in Bangalore. The whole thing was improvised. Looking back I can see that it was very amateurish, but I was zapped by it at that time, creating frames, improvising and shooting handheld and candid. It was quite a mind-blowing experience. We did not even have enough money for food. It was given only once a day. That too a little bit of rice. That is why we used to go to a village and beg for everything. We stayed outside Bangalore, and used to come to the city to shoot in a tempo. We worked like this for sixteen or seventeen days. It was a fantastic experience, but the lack of nutrition made us all weak.

But that film never took off. So this is how I shot my first film. I was doing only the basics of cinematography. When two characters are talking I told the director that I wanted the talking to be like this. I shot it straight because I wanted to play safe. I don't like the way I did the lighting. But it helped me get over a certain phase. Then I said to myself that this is not the direction in which I want to go, I don't want to do this kind of film. My life came to a grinding halt. I gave back the advance for the next film that I had got. And for two years you could say that I did nothing. I was in a desert.

Then, by the time that Pratap Pothan asked me to do a film '*Meendum Oru Kadal Kadai*', (which won the Indira Gandhi award, for the best first film) I really wanted to work again.



We had very little money but we created a lot with limited means. We started shooting in a mental hospital, so somewhere there must have been '*Cuckoo's Nest*' working in my mind. The whole film took nearly two years. Because when ever we got hold of any money, only then would we shoot the film. Only two prints were taken. It was odd but I could express myself, the story was what I wanted to express. I was expressing, expressing and expressing. The film was released. Very few people had seen it at first. It won an award. People don't even know about it. Afterwards it became very popular. Later after seeing that film Fazil called me. Fazil who is well known as a director in Malayam. He is one guy who did a different kind of filmmaking kind of cinema in Malayalam. Even today he has got his own character. He has not diluted it in these ten years. Lots of people got diluted in this ten years, but not Fazil. I shot for Fazil's first film '*Poove Poochoodava*' and then Mani Ratnam called me.

### **How did you begin working with Mani Ratnam?**

Then Mani Ratnam called me for '*Mauna Ragam*'. We did four films continuously. We never thought about whether these films were successful or not. You don't think about success when you are doing it. The success of the film was growing somewhere. Both of us were communicating at a level where we could read each other's minds.

This was really good for me. There was nothing to stop me. I was moving, moving and moving, one film after another. It was just 'let us do it, let us do it'. I was realizing what ever I had in my dreams, in those stills form my teenage years into celluloid. He would say while shooting, "Remember that still that you showed me, make this shot look like that"

Stills of mine were so popular with some of my friends. They will come and see all of them. Even now sometimes he will say, remember that still, that rain, that moon, that bullock. I must have been a child when I took that still. When I later enlarged and increased the contrast and started my own printing it became - "what a shot!" I was reprocessing a lot of my own old stills. This helped me a lot in working in cinema.

**Were you trying to develop a conscious style in your lighting?**

I have never repeated myself in my lighting between films. See, for example, the whole country went berserk with '*Agni Natchatram*'. I never did any thing like that again. I have never touched that area at all. I went to another extreme in '*Thevar Magan*' to a very straight documentary style. Everybody who saw the film said 'you were not there, you were not there, as if the camera was not present at all.' Why should I be there? The film was there. I did not understand what all the fuss was about. Lot of people did not understand that but at the end of the film when the film was over, then they understood the photography. I go by that. Then again '*Nayakan*' was another extreme.

*'Agni Natchatram'* became a popular film, fine. If it had failed, I would have gone in some other direction altogether.

**Can you explain the difference between these two approaches, the expressive one of '*Agni Natchatram*' and the realist one of '*Thevar Magan*'? It seems as if there is always a tension between these two approaches in your work.**

*'Agni Natchatram'* brought a new kind of Pop Culture into India. I remember seeing a trailer of Stanley Kubrick's "*Clockwork Orange*" as a child, it

really made an impression on me. I like the picture very much I don't know why. For the sake of the trailer I kept on seeing the film. I was trying to apply that kind of visualization in this film. The film worked even in the remote interior of Tamil Nadu. The people there are not critics. They either like or they don't like a film. Their minds are clear. They saw it in such a way, in such numbers that it became a major hit. Even in places where the projection and the sound was very bad it worked.

In *Nayakan* I wanted to try a different light pattern. You can say that it was the 'top light' concept that I had tried very long time back in Fazil's film for one particular sequence. I

Then I used diffused light in '*Meendum Oru Kadal Kadai*' in certain areas, I try out different things in different films, and different things in different scenes.

**But do you try and develop a scheme for a given film?**

Yes, for instance I knew that in *Nayakan* I would play with shafts of light throughout the film. It was appreciated even by people like Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani.

The whole lighting pattern of *Nayakan* is about 'enhancement'. I remember for a night scene I started lighting up, I wanted to do 'low key' lighting. People don't understand that to do 'low key' lighting you need more lights...

Now I work a lot with silhouettes. Sometimes I ask for six generators!

Sometimes people don't realize how much light you actually need to do even

something quite low key. The amount of light is something which they are not used to.

Then, I wanted to work with brown tones, throughout *Nayakan* and *Thevar Magan* I wanted brown tones.

### **What are the challenges that you are placing before yourself?**

As I said I never want to repeat myself. I have done a lot of bright work, in films and in ads, now I want to try something different. I was telling you about brown tones, now I am fascinated with the idea of murkiness. I want to make a whole film to visually explore the idea of murkiness. In our Indian conditions, everything is not soft and beautiful. You find this murkiness in the polluted air - in Bombay, in Bangalore, in Delhi. It is a haze, sometimes, like in the winter in Delhi it can be aromatic haze, sometimes it is a dark haze. It is a state of mind, and I want to be able to reproduce that state visually. Nobody has captured that Indian murkiness which I am telling you about.

### **How would you try to achieve it?**

You are asking me about the technical application, I don't have an answer. Perhaps I have to work with tele lenses. I have never before touched the camera for that look, but now, whenever I try to shoot, I search for that look. Then if I want to work with a romantic murkiness, then maybe I should work with the 150 HR, or the 250 zoom lens, I don't know. I want to see that light of today's Indian cities.

**What excites you most of all as a cinematographer?**

When an actor is able to understand and play with and to my lighting. I have been very fortunate to have worked with Kamalahasan on more than one occasion. He has an exceptional ability to observe and incorporate light in his performance. It is not enough that you shine a light on an actor's face. The actor should be able to show that the light is coming on his face. I shot at sun set in *Nayakan*, the sun is a very important element in the film. And Kamalahasan has the ability to interpret the rays of the setting sun on his face. His acting enhances my lighting. I find it stunning. That is real talent.

**Is there anything that bothers you as a cinematographer?**

The theatres are so bad. I used to get so wild when I saw the theatres. It is a very basic question. I feel like am fighting against the whole world. I used to go to the screen in theatres, touch the screen and my fingers would become black. There was so much dirt. A screen has to be white. How can you project an image on a black screen? I remember I went to a theatre and I cleaned the screen. It was nothing, it was simple, but no one had thought of doing it. We are so ignorant in all things. The carbon arcs need changing, but they don't because each theatre owner thinks he has a fixed quota of carbon.

Then during the projection they leave the doors open, so light streams into the theatre. Then I realized I am fighting against the system. It is not one theatre or another; it is an entire system.

They may think that they have seen a film, but they have not seen the photography. This is not cinema.

