An Interview With Bansi Chandragupta

- by Shama Zaidi

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SHAMA: *Bansida, I have heard that you started as a set designer with Jean Renoir's The River.*

BANSI: In a way The River is the true beginning, although I had, been in films for two and a half years at that time. It was during the making The River that I truly learned the craft of designing for films, from conceptual sketches to the three-dimensional set.

A lot of this film was shot on actual locations in Barrackpore, near Calcutta. In a big colonial house there and in its garden, overlooking the river Hooghly, we added, deleted, constructed and made changes to suit the needs of the script. All interiors were sets built in The Great Eastern Studio, Calcutta (now defunct). Besides, there was that large outdoor set of a jute loading-unloading jetty; and a local bazaar built on the banks of the river.

SHAMA: *Why do you call it the beginning?*

BANSI: Jean Renoir brought to Calcutta his old associate, the designer Eugene Lourie, who had worked with him in France and then in Hollywood. I worked under Lourie. Before this I was completely disenchanted with art direction as it was in our films. Art direction in most Bengali films was at its lowest ebb then. It meant erection of a few miserable studio stock doors and windows built in, where some hired furniture and fittings of sorts were put in to give the semblance of a house. Exteriors such as a street, a village, a landscape, etc. were simulated indoors. And my God, they were truly obnoxious. The painted backdrops, the sky, the greenery, the trees - everything looked like nothing on earth. Cameras hardly ever went outdoors, as if they were afraid to face

reality and sunshine. Working on The River was a total change of approach. No simulated exteriors. Sets were built on locations in their actual setting and photographed in varying moods of sunlight.

SHAMA: *You mean no lights were used?*

BANSI: Oh no! There were the full contingent of arc lamps, brutes and du-arcs run on two huge generators mounted on trucks. The generators had been brought over from Europe and were the ones used for the filming of Carol Reed/Orson Welles' The Third Man. The film was shot in Technicolor and it was a tremendously slow speed stock. Claude Renoir had trouble with the excessive contrast in shadow and light and a blazing winter sky. In any case it was all very new and exciting. To mix the existing, the available, with the artificially created, that was a great lesson in technique. In time, eventually, I learnt the deeper truth: instead of trying exclusively either to create or record the narrative, film attempts a synthesis. It both records what has been created, and creates by its manner of recording.

SHAMA: *People in general are less aware of an art director's/designer's function in films. Can it be simply stated that his function is to provide setting for the action of the story?*

BANSI: The primary function of décor/setting is to provide a believable environment for the action. In most fictional films credibility remains the controlling factor. To be lifelike the setting must be thought of in relation to the story. Quite often a location is dictated by the plot, and design controlled by the location. The designer has to start from what is known, or necessary, or likely, or at least possible. Once a setting/set is complete, the director takes over. He is free to work in and on the setting so as to develop the implication of its relationship to the action and image. As André Bazin puts it: "to reveal its secret links with drama."

SHAMA: *Thus it may be argued that the script is a constricting factor.*

BANSI: Yes and no. It's the frame of reference. As I said, the setting has no independent existence of its own. It's related to the script situation, to the characters of the story. Many great art designers like Lazare Meerson, Alexander Trauner, John Bryon and others, have produced sets of great beauty and depth working within the constrictions of a script.

In Bengal most of the directors I have worked with, Satyajit, Mrinal, Tarun Mazumdar, would consult me at various stages of script writing. During the writing we often made trips to scout locations. The directors would talk about their ideas and the kind of form that was evolving in their minds. Here you relate script situation to location and location to the situation. In Jalsaghar we were basically looking for a typical zamindar's house situated on or near a river; what we found was a provocative setting. The great river Bhagirathi had changed its course during the monsoon , coming dangerously within a few yards of the house. The river had swallowed the mansion's vast grounds and the driveway, turning it into a vast bank of sand dunes. Satyajit perfectly integrated the vast sprawling mansion, the desolate sandbank and the river to reveal the drama of Biswambhar Roy's disintegration in an alienated hostile world. The story dictated the location. Once the house was found, its architecture dictated the design the music-room which I built inside a studio.

SHAMA: *You have singled out Bengal. What happens in Bombay in a typical commercial Hindi film for instance?*

BANSI: This kind of exchange or contact is not there. In most cases the total script is not there at all. It's written piecemeal for each schedule of shooting, so it's difficult to relate. A few days before the shooting starts, a hurried meeting - may be our first - with the

director is arranged. The story may be related in a rough outline. And since the stars in the film have agreed on certain shooting dates, you are asked to build a certain set comprising, let us say, a drawing room, dining room, and bedrooms.

Now, there are countless different possibilities for designing such a combination. There is no reason, implied or otherwise, why a drawing room or bedroom should not be done in one way rather than a dozen others. You start with very little, with vague clues. I mean there is little participation. Usually most Hindi film directors contribute very little to the growth of the design (and the designer's concern is that the set is so organized that it works for the director). The directors normally ask for gorgeous, posh. and big sets. Like most other creative technicians working on the film, the designer also tries to be clever - tries to impress, hiding behind artificiality and surface slickness.

SHAMA: *Tbe concept of an overall production designer is not feasible under such haphazard conditions, is it?*

BANSI: In spite of big money in Hindi films, that kind of concept does not exist. Generally speaking, we sadly lack managerial skills in our industry. No one is willing to invest in pre-production planning. Given that there is a working draft of the script, you have to find a talented designer, engage him and his team of sketch artists and draughtsmen long before the production goes on the floor. This is done in all other countries. In actual practice however, in our industry, the art director himself functions as the artist and the draughtsman. In the short: period between the first meeting with the director and the actual construction of the set, combined with the; fact that he might be working on 5 to 12 productions simultaneously, there is little time left for the thinking process, sketches and working drawings. What he might produce is either a wash drawing, pencil sketch or an isometric view of the set design. After the director has approved or suggested a few changes, the art director's chief anxiety is to get started so

that he can complete the job in time for shooting. A ground plan in one-fourth inch to one foot scale with some important sectional elevations is usually drawn by the art director himself. Details like ornamentation, cornices, doors and windows, etc. are left to the assistants.

SHAMA: *In designing a film set what is the most basic element in the transition from the drawing board to the three-dimensional physical reality?*

BANSI: The most operative element is the fluidity of the camera and its frequent change of position, distance and direction. What is seen on screen is what the camera records. As against "theatrical stasis", cinema uses an a-logical and dis-continuous space through "change of shot" (that is editing) which is the basic unit. of film construction. The illusion of dimension and depth in.the photographed image is the consequence of the camera's ability not only to record but also to select, mould and heighten reality through the use of lenses, movement and change of position.

SHAMA: *How do you go about the actual construction of a set?*

BANSI: It would be difficult to tell you everything except some of the standard methods of studio construction. Today set designers do not hesitate to use anything, method or material, which will give the desired effect. All plans and the layout of the set on location, or on the given space of a studio floor are drawn in 1/4" to 1' scale. So are the sectional elevations. Details are usually done in 1/2" scale. In a specifications chart on the plan are indicated the wall finish, floor finish, practical doors, windows, locks, plumbing, special effects, etc.

For most sets, wall surfaces are built from standard "flats" of 3" X 1" timber framing. Usual sizes of the flats are 10' .to 12' high and 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 8 feet wide. The flats are nailed together to make whole or convenient sections of walls with doors and windows

built in. Each section is placed and braced on its position as marked out on the studio floor according to the layout. Each section now is covered with tightly stretched lengths of coarse calico (majerpat in Bombay lingo) tacked on to the back of the timber frames. Cloth is then pasted on with tough, brown paper, rough side out. All papered surfaces, when dry, may be painted with water-based paints. Acrylic emulsion paints are the best for quick drying. This then gives a highly finished flat painted surface. A thick impasto with whiting or earth colors may be used directly on the cloth surface for slightly rougher results. All woodwork may be papered and painted but I prefer to prepare the wood surface by filler and then paint them in flat or semi-matt oil paints to impart correct feel and weight. Sometimes when walls have to withstand vigorous action such as in fight scenes, the frames are covered with thin commercial ply. To be able to withstand the wind, rain and sun on outdoor sets, ply covered flats are standard practice. If the surface is rough and grained, flats are covered with hessian, then plastered with plaster of Paris or a mixture of plaster and sawdust. In case a heavily weathered texture is desired, 3' X 4' sheets of plaster about three inches thick are cast from a suitable mould, then nailed on to the frames. The joints are finished on the spot.

Lengths of hessian may be dipped in a viscous mixture of plaster. This then is hung on, patted and smoothed on an open slat-work of split bamboo or straight on to bamboo chattai nailed to the frames. This will give a gently undulating surface such as for a rustic dwelling. With a framework in timber indi.cating the forms, rock surfaces can be effectively, quickly and cheaply built with the chattai-hessian method for long shots.

SHAMA: *There are very often heavily eroded, weather-beaten surfaces in your sets - sets of slums and such ... very convincing to look at.*

BANSI: The best results are achieved by preparing your casts from any such actual walls or even a cracked, damaged (cement and brick) floor surface. Endless variations

of decay can be achieved by throwing more or less amounts of sand in certain areas of the mould before the plaster is poured in.

SHAMA: *In the film Jangal Mein Mangal there was an underground cave/den set - the usual haunt of dacoits in the Bombay films, with overhanging boulders and all that.*

BANSI: I had selected a spot near the National Park on the highway from where about a dozen moulds, very big in size, were cast from actual boulders and rocks. Used in combination and permutation, hundreds of pieces cast from these dozen, moulds gave me an endless variation of forms. I had a 6' X 8' miniature made, which the carpenters and plasterers used as a guide for the general forms shaped in 3"X 1" timber framing to which the plaster pieces were nailed and finished on the spot. After painting them in various shades of gray, I had them sprayed over with a thin coat of varnish. When lit, the varnished surfaces picked up beautiful highlights.

SHAMA: *In Shatranj ke Khilari I saw you had huge arches and pillars cast in one piece. Is that the usual practice? It needed - in one instance I counted - a dozen men to hoist one arch in position on to the timber frame.*

BANSI: Because the arches had a lot of complicated ornamentation, I preferred to cast them in one piece. Sometimes the piece with an engraved arch was 8' 3" X 8' with a 6" depth of the half moons. The usual practice is to cast them in more convenient sections. All pillars - round, square, octagonal, plain or ornamental - are cast in two longitudinal half sections and screwed on to the timber frames which follow the shape of the pillar. If the pieces are cast in more and more sections, the accuracy of form tends to suffer in the process of fitting and finishing and after all the work you put in, you may be a very sad man at the end.

SHAMA*: Bansida, I have seen that unlike most other designers you prefer to use heavier material like precast plaster plates or softboard for your wall surfaces rather than the papered-cloth-paint technique; Is there a particular reason for this?*

BANSI: Actually it all depends on what effect you want. Plain, flat, highly finished surfaces are cheaply and best done in the papered-cloth technique. If you are working in a slum, a provincial house, in a small room, where the actors are very close to the walls, the texture and weight is very important. Verisimilitude is best achieved in plaster.

SHAMA: *What methods do you use to get the "lived-in" feeling?*

BANSI: "Ageing down" is most important. In expert hands spraying the set with a gun loaded with toned down amber, gray or black can achieve surprising results. Suggestions of dust, dirt, and grime, effects of dampness, leaks and decay, of rust and marks left by oily heads and hands are sprayed in. Then sometimes these are finally worked on with shellac or thinned varnish. A more effective method, particularly on textured surfaces, is to "wash" with 2 or 3 tones of color with a loaded brush. Rubbing and working in with the brush then settles the color in the dents and depths, thus producing very realistic and photogenic results. In Shatranj ke Khilari, several sets with plastered surfaces were just given a coat of a solution of common animal glue, soap, and a dash of color to get the effect of age, with very convincing results.

SHAMA: *And when wood has to be aged?*

BANSI: Ageing and effects of exposure to rain and sun are achieved by charring the wood surface on an open fire or with a powerful flame. Afterwards, the soft, charred grain is vigorously brushed with a wire brush. This makes the hard grain very pronounced and is very close to what nature does to exposed wood. You remember the door in Pather Panchali set on the outer wall of the house? It's as age-worn and battered

as the old aunt in the film. A new door built with pine wood was charred and brushed. To get a look of complete decay at the lower end, it was partially burnt out. Afterwards, I bleached the whole door with caustic soda. You know the street I made for Seema? At one point my assistants were burning and treating a whole lot of exposed woodwork like doors, windows, posts, beams and the lot to give them the weather-beaten look. At that moment the producer of the film, Sohanlal Kanwar, happened to drop by. He thought a lot of newly constructed property was being destroyed by careless workers and began screaming at them. They finally managed to calm him down and explain what they were doing. But he still thought it was a waste of good money by a whimsical, "artistic" art director from Bengal!

SHAMA: *How do you show various kinds of floor surfaces?*

BANSI: If the set is built on a platform, it is comparatively easy. The platform is usually built of 12" X 1 1/2" planks and is covered with 3/4" thick sheets of plywood. Finished in matt or semi-matt oils or polished or lacquered, it gives a highly finished surface. Any pattern, border or design may be stenciled in before the final finish. Flagstone, brick and plank flooring is actual. A method popular in Bombay studios is to use3'X 3' rubberized sheets laid closely edge to edge. You can't get odd shapes with square sheets, and they overlap. These slip under the actors' feet and spoil the scene.

SHAMA: *You have a complicated inlaid mosaic tile floor in the Charulata house and a black and white marble floor in the Shatranj durbar set. They don't look like stenciled work.*

BANSI: No, not plain stencil work done on the spot. But stencil all the same. Designs were printed on 30" X 40" paper sheets by silk-screen process and pasted on the flooring of the set. In Goopi Gyne I used the silk-screen stencil directly on a painted floor.

SHAMA: *In Calcutta all your films were in black and white. Here in Bombay it must have been exciting to work in color.*

BANSI: I don't know really! You hardly ever get a chance to use color as a meaningful element - for its psychological or emotional significance, beyond the purely functional. I have found out that a highly charged color scheme can land you in trouble, because you hardly ever know what the actors will be wearing till you see them on the set. To avoid an unpredictable and disastrous clash with such clothes, I prefer to stay with neutrals using vivid colors in small areas only. If the situation permits I use a lot of white or near white, a feeling of color created by textures rather than pigments.

SHAMA: *You worked for Maya Darpan. I read Kumar Shahani's explanation about the psychological factor of color in his film. Any comments ?*

BANSI: There was a kind of psychological progression chart designed by his friend, the painter Akbar Padamsee. Painting a canvas where you are in control of every factor is different from filming on location for obvious reasons. Film is inherently different from a painted canvas.

SHAMA: *How did you become a designer for films? Were you trained for it? Or like most, were you trained in one of the visual arts?*

BANSI: I joined films in 1946, purely by accident. I had stopped going to college in Srinagar, during the Quit India movement in 1942. A chance meeting there with the painter and designer, Shubho Tagore, inspired me to study painting. I left home in early 1944. My family, violently opposed to my ideas, was angry and apprehensive at seeing their boy leave for a famine ravaged Bengal. Only a few months before, the Japanese had bombed the docks and some other spots in Calcutta. Anyway, I was there in

Calcutta pretending to be a serious student of painting, but unable to feed myself, living by the good grace of Shubhobabu. Occasionally I earned some money by designing book jackets and illustrating stories in magazines.

SHAMA: *So your basic training is as a painter.*

BANSI: I wouldn't dare to call myself a painter. But I was exposed to a lot of good art during those formative years. That was my grounding. The contemporary art scene was baffling but charged with anxiety. The horrors and brutality of the famine and a world war had finally dealt a death blow to the lingering romance of the Bengal School of Abanindranath. Younger generations of artists were restless and exploring new ideas, looking toward the West and folk forms for inspiration. In painting, Jamini Roy was the new master. Shubho Tagore headed The Calcutta Group which included some well-known names of today: Pradosh Dasgupta, Nirode Mazumdar, Paritosh Sen, Gopal Ghose. The Group had a two-room studio where exhibitions were held and artists, writers, poets and musicians would gather there for an "adda". I was asked to move there and look after the place. Although the studio does not function any more, I have lived there for 26 years and still retain the place. Shubhobabu was a designer of furniture and tapestries. One of Shubhobabu's friends, the writer, the late Jyotirmoy Roy asked for oriental furniture, tapestries and knickknacks to decorate a set in his new film Abhijatri. He was quite a celebrity then. His previous film, Udayer Pathay, written for New Theatres and directed by the late Bimal Roy, had been a stupendous critical and box-office success, mainly due to its story and dialogues. Shubhobabu took me along to "do" the decoration. That was my first contact with films. Jyotirmoybabu asked me to stay on as an assistant to his art director, Batu Sen, an old veteran from the days of silent films. He offered me Rs 175 per month as salary, free lunch, several cups of tea on all working days, and a role in the film. I stayed on because I needed the money.

SHAMA: *That was your period of apprenticeship.*

BANSI: Which wasn't a long one. Once again Fate played its part. Batu Sen became taken ill with typhoid, a long and wasting disease in those pre-penicillin days. The late Hemen Gupta, the director of the film, and Jyotirmoybabu asked me to take over. I pleaded my incompetence. But Hemenbabu was reassuring: "You have to mark down the plan on a piece of paper. I will show you the plan myself. You supervise the construction, only take care that the joints in the flats don't show."

We had that stupendous set of all Indian films: the hall with a grand staircase leading to several first floor rooms, a portico in front for the car, and of course, the grand piano in the hall. We were only midway, finishing the balustrade of the grand staircase when riots broke out in the city. It was August 1946. Work was resumed after several days. Our cameraman, Ajit Sen, was trained in the UFA studios, Berlin, during the heyday of German Expressionist cinema. A day before the shooting he walked in, spotted some 5 KW lights on the set and lit the set up. Then he called me and said through the perpetual cheroot stuck in his mouth, "Look here son, I want you to fill these shadows cast by my lights with a deeper shade of the green you have on the walls. Use a spray gun." The reason, he told me, was that the film stock, or rather stocks (because of the war scarcity you were forced to work with several brands - Kodak, Dupont, Agfa) were old and had developed a base fog which flattens the contrast ratio. "And I do not have enough lights." He planned to take all long shots and tracking shots with the painted shadow set and then repaint it flat for medium and close up shots.

SHAMA: *What were your interesting assignments after this?*

BANSI: No art direction work for a long time - maybe for one-and-a-half years - till I was asked by S. D. Narang, then a refugee from Lahore, to take over as the art director of his

Bengal National Studio. Meanwhile, the only assignment I remember now, was as a "dialogue reminder". This strange job consisted of coaching and reading to a predominantly Bengali cast their Hindi dialogues. They offered me Rs 250 a month. I was glad for the money. It did not last long though. I was thrown out because I dared to smoke in front of Kanan Devi, the heroine of the film.

SHAMA: *How did you like the job of studio art director?*

BANSI: Absolutely lousy. I was disenchanted. How could a young serious-minded "artist" participate in a cheap tamasha? That was my state of mind.

SHAMA: *I guess this must be round about the time you met Satyajit Ray?*

BANSI: I knew him only slightly through a common friend - Prithwish Neogi. I remembered him because he said he liked my acting in Abhijatri, where I had played a trade union activist. But it was only when he asked me to become a founder member of the Calcutta Film Society and we saw a lot of films together, that we became friends. We saw each other frequently in the USIS library. He came there during his lunch hour : to look at the American magazines and papers - mostly to read the film reviews. I was there because I was attracted by Lewis Jacob's The Rise of the American Film which I read through and through, for the first time realizing the range and scope of cinema as a form. It was here during one of these meetings that he told me about the Film Society. There were very few books; even the standard classics on theory and technique by Pudovkin, Arnheim and Eisenstein were not easily available. I found Satyajit knew a lot about films, about technique, and he had seen hundreds of films, mostly American, and some European. Knowing him through serious reading at the library, through the Calcutta Film Society, that is how the transformation happened. One of the first film shows at the Society was Battleship Potemkin, a 16 mm silent print purchased from The

British Film Institute, London. The Calcutta Film Society still owes them money for the print!

SHAMA: *So the Calcutta Film Society and the filming of The River in Calcutta was a prelude to the launching of Pather Panchali which broke all known conventions of the Indian cinema.*

BANSI: Marie Seton perhaps rightly calls this period "a prelude to persistence". She points out that but for persistence Pather Panchali would never have been started and certainly not completed. Through the tremendous financial difficulties and a completely hostile, cynical film crowd who thought we were mad amateurs. That we survived all this, indicates the strength we had in our convictions. In 1950, D. J. Keymer had sent Manik (Satyajit) to their London Head office. One of the first things he did there was to become a member of the London Film Club. In four and a half months he saw some 99 films! He passionately wrote to me about the Italian neo-realist films. DeSica's Bicycle Thieves was a tremendous experience for him.

Then in India the First International Film Festival (1952) exposed us to the hitherto unknown trends in the post-war cinema. There were DeSica, Rossellini and Kurosawa. The neo-realist cinema grappling with reality. Shot on location in available light, with a modest budget, with non-actors. This reassured us of our own convictions (of how to shoot a film). Meanwhile Manik brought home the first draft of the Pather Panchali script which he wrote on the ship returning home.

SHAMA: *On location do you generally change and do a lot of new construction or do you prefer to use what exists? Have you actually reproduced a house?*

BANSI: One never really reproduces an actual house. It is at best a synthesis of elements because the set has to suit the demands of the script. Of course I take a lot of

care by taking a lot of photographs of actual locations. For Aparajito I was in Benares for quite some time to get the feel of the architecture - its layout and spatial dimensions. I took my measuring tape along and noted down the ground plans and measurements of several courtyards, porticos, verandahs, rooms, doors, and windows. These were of great help when I got down to making my plans on the drawing board. Because in a film this sort of typicality is very important whatever elements you play with. They must look credible and so it's not important whether any such house really exists or not.

Basically, you look for the correct setting, the right kind of atmosphere dictated by the script. But really it's never airtight. I mean you may find features on location which are not there in the script, which can add to what is already there. Like in Pather Panchali you can plan for a long shooting spell on one location, you add, delete, reconstruct - using what exists. In small budget films, the money you have to spend is the key factor.

SHAMA: *It's generally believed that all Ray films are totally shot on location. Which is to say he ultimately finds the right kind of setting.*

BANSI: On the contrary, Manik has shot almost 85 percent of his interiors on studio sets. Of course, no exteriors have ever been simulated indoors. Pather Panchali was the first and the last film where large chunks of day scenes were shot on location. For night scenes a replica of Harihar's house was built in a studio. Besides several scenes in low key lighting of a single oil lamp, we had the studio-created rain, storm, and lightning, the night Durga died.

It was in the next film Aparajito, that day scenes were first attempted on a studio set (Harihar's Benares house). Subrata Mitra (the cameraman) argued that in such a traditional house, in the deep well of the courtyard the main source of light is reflected from the sky overhead and not direct. So he created an artificial sky over the set. He stretched a sheet of white long cloth over the opening of the courtyard and pointed all his

lights upwards to his cloth to get a shadowless reflected light bounced back into the courtyard and the verandahs of the set. To this day most people think that this house was shot on location. This is clearly indicative of how imaginative lighting adds not only to the credibility of a well-designed set, but to the mise-en-scene in general. This was the beginning of the now very popular technique of bounce lighting. From Aparajito ('56), Jalsaghar ('58), Apur Sansar ('59), Devi ('60), Teen Kanya ('61), Abhijan ('62), Mahanagar ('63), Charulata ('64), Nayak ('66) - the train was built in the studio - Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne ('68), Pratidwandi ('70), Mrinal's Calcutta 71 ('71), and later on to my latest film with Ray, Shatranj ke Khilari, most interiors are sets. Whenever the camera peeps outside a window or a door at a sunlit landscape, a river, a lane, or a city street, the shot is a location shot. Juxtaposed with studio shots the ultimate effect transcends the limits of a set.

SHAMA: *Shooting on location seems to be the new vogue in the Hindi films. Even five years ago they were terribly studio oriented in Bombay where hidebound conventions seem to reign supreme. Do you think the reason is just a means to save money, as predominantly believed by some producers, or to create an authentic atmosphere?*

BANSI: It's both. In rare instances of thoughtful application this has produced notable results, mostly in low or medium-budget films. Five years ago in Bombay I was still fighting with my producers/ directors that all exteriors should be done on location. Unless it's a period film, it poses few problems that cannot be satisfactorily resolved. Interiors can be effectively built in a studio, as I have done in many films. Location filming in most cases is economical, saves a lot of leg work, compared to mounting construction and material cost of sets. I am afraid one can ascribe motives more mundane than a quest for authenticity behind this new spate of location shooting. Innumerable houses of the nouveau riches at Juhu Vile Parle round the year have been turned into a vast studio.

Interiors are the most sought after. Fully furnished, carpeted wall to wall, draped and wall-papered, complete with crystal, glass, plastic chandeliers, and painted in motley clashing colors, most of these interiors (in their tastelessness reminiscent of an average studio set) are used unchanged in several films at a time. Changes are not encouraged even if someone bothers. You might disturb another man's continuity - one who was shooting there yesterday and will shoot again next week and another who was there the day before ! So much for authenticity! This is ready-made convenience - no advance studio bookings, no organization for building and furnishing sets. You save money. Whenever the actors are available, you can walk in any time and say, "Action!" That is the thing!

Post-war technology has gradually evolved a system of professional filming equipment which is extremely compact, mobile, sophisticated and economical at once - the Ariflex camera, Nagra type recorder, Agenioux zoom lens, quartz iodide lights added to faster film stock, and faster lenses that have liberated the filmmaker from the studio. In the near future, in Bombay, when the novelty will wear off, one hopes the significant aspects of the new found freedom may be noticed and used to serve films creatively.

SHAMA: *What has been your most challenging and satisfying assignment to date?*

BANSI: It's difficult to answer this. In a way all assignments of any interest pose a challenge. For instance Jalsaghar was difficult because then I was not technically - I mean as a craftsman - proficient. And I had to solve the problems, I hope successfully. Otherwise among my period films, maybe Charulata and Shatranj ke Khilari have been the most satisfying because all designs had to be backed by research in depth.

Excerpts from MONTAGE MEETS BANSI CHANDRAGUPTA

And how did you come to be so involved with Mr Ray's films?

BANSI: In 1950, Satyajit asked me whether I would like to work as his set designer for Pather Panchali. I agreed very readily. Subrata Mitra was also with us. We used to go looking for ideal locations and went to innumerable villages with a l6 mm. camera. The idea was to blow up the negative finally, which would prove less expensive than working with 35 mm. This turned out to be a little difficult, because the blow-up looked flat.

Did you find your ideal location?

BANSI: Yes, a dilapidated, crumbling old house, almost in ruins, in a village near Calcutta. It was vacant; we remodeled the house. A kitchen was built especially for the film, because it had to be wrecked later in the film, due to a storm. The verandah was thatched and columns were built into it. The compound wall with a door, deliberately battered and weather-beaten, was also fixed on - built by me.

How did you find working on Mr Ray's first film?

BANSI: It was inspiring - and exasperating. Our financial difficulties were immense. One scene, for instance, will explain what we had to go through. There is a scene of the clothesline in Pather Paachali. It is shot from the front and then from behind. The time lag between these two consecutively cut shots was one year.

How do you like working with Mr Ray?

BANSI: He goes abouthis sets in a very elaborate manner. Each set is seen by him in the minutest detail and hhe is very definite abouthis camera movement, angles and lighting. And his eye for continuity is astonishing. Naturally, this kind of meticulous attention and assurance is of immense help to an art director.

Why is this so?

BANSI: Because a set exists only in relation to the script. This close collaboration between the director/script writer and the designer gives rich results and saves unnecessary construction. I feel a particular stimulus in working with a director who has definite ideas on design and camera angles, on atmosphere and style of set designs. A designer gives a film an overall visual style.

A set is not a replica of what already exists, otherwise there would be no need for designers. A film set is built for the camera and for the camera angles only. Anything that is not effective through the lens is a waste of good money and effort, however pleasing it might look to the naked eye. Photography has its own limitations which must be constantly borne in mind. Ray has a keen camera-eye and each carefully picked detail helps to build the atmosphere.

Do you follow any definite method of work when creating sets fro Mr Ray's films?

BANSI: ell, the sets grow, so to speak, with the key scenes, and then we work backwards and around these sets. In the scenes themselves one usually takes the central feature. For instance, in Charulata the bedroom scenes were dominated by the huge Victorian bed. Then one arranges the whole set around this feature, piece by piece, detail by detail. This is putting it all very badly, but it is the only way I can describe my method. … a letter to me from Satyajit written at the time when Charulata was being

scripted… explains the closeness and reliance of our working relationship very clearly. Great attention is paid, at~ this stage, to the photographic requirements.

Can you tell us what this letter is about?

BANSI: It discusses the house-set for Charulata. Our main problem was the very limited floor space (80 feet by 45 feet) at our disposal. The first sketch shows the central quadrangular courtyard flanked by verandahs which, in turn, looked into the rooms of the house. We built only the three verandahs which were required by the shooting script. The entire quadrangle was also not necessary. The master plan of the house was divided into the following four major sets:

1. The interior of heroine Charu's bedroom and .its view of 3 verandahs, has a glimpse of 2 staircases.

2. The drawing room with a suggestion of its adjoining verandahs.

3. Amal's bedroom treated likewise.

4. A verandah with its view of 3 sides of the quadrangle and a suggestion of the rooms within.

Charu's.bedroom and its adjoining verandah built on a 6 foot high platform was erected to life-size scale. But the 2 remaining verandahs were deliberately made smaller to convey distance and perspective: a device dictated by the limited floor space. Separate sets were built for scenes played on the verandah itself. The wrought-iron railings as in sketch 3 of the letter were chosen for their light, decorative appearance - so typical of the Victorian influence of that period. Besides, wrought-iron structure took less space than masonry pillars and arches.

Do you have the furniture and decoration made or designed especially for your scenes?

BANSI: Very, very rarely. Usually Satyajit and I spend hours and days scouting the bazaars for the kind of furniture, lamps, decoration pieces, etc. that we need. We usually find what we want in Chor Bazar. Then we may paint or remodel what we have bought or hired.

In which of his films has Mr Ray relied most heavily on sets?

BANSI: Many, I would say; Charulata being the latest among his recent films. Every scene of Charulata (except one by the sea-shore) was shot in sets. We went to a lot of houses of that period that still exist in plenty here in Calcutta. We were looking for a typical adaptation of the Victorian style house to Indian, or more correctly, to a Bengali style. Looking afresh at things with the particular film in mind is a routine with Ray. So that every film is preceded by a lot of location hunting, which gives a lot of fresh ideas. That is one reason also why the characters in his films so belong to the surroundings, whether on sets or location. For the costumes, we went to the photographers Bourne and Shepherds and looked through their albums of the period. Then Satyajit designed the costumes from references.

Mr Ray uses a lot of unusual houses in his films - such as the old sprawling houses of Jalsaghar, Devi and Charulata. Can you tell us how you came to select such locations?

BANSI: The house in Jalsaghar is in Nimteeta, situated on the banks of the river Bhagirathi (as the Ganga is locally known there) in the district of Murshidabad. This location is really provocative and has been used in many of Ray's films. Samapti was shot here. The river scenes and the scene of Amal walking in the mud. In Devi, the scenes of the river and the

sandy path in the white-flowered Kash-reeds; the mass of people filing past accompanying the song: the last scene when the girl goes mad and runs into a misty field.

The house of Apu's father-in-law, also shown on the bank of a small river, is in Maheshgunj near Krishnanagar. I added a cut-out facade on the top of a disused factory from the Indigo days. The compound wall, the gate, and the front verandah were constructed along with this house. Apu's own roof-top room in Calcutta was near Tala tank in Calcutta. The interior of the room was studio-built.

In Jalsaghar, all interiors were built in the studio including the music-room. The house on location was dressed and repainted for our purposes, as also the fountain in front and the partly fallen massive gateway, to the boundary of the house - were

all additional construction specially built to suit the script.

Can you give us examples of your attention to detail in Charulata?

BANSI: Well, take the wall-paper in Charu's drawing room. This pattern was first designed and then screen-printed. The paper came in 30"X40" sheets and we pasted these on to the plywood finished walls. It took a whole day and a night just to stick the paper. One of the designs came in a running floral pattern and in order to align the pattern during pasting required extraordinary care. Even the door patterns were done this way.

How do you manage to make your sets so authentic? Take for instance Mahanagar. The Anglo-Indian girl's flat was very realistic. How did you achieve this effect?

BANSI: Well, I visited as many Anglo-Indian homes as possible and talked to people. I also used my Leica to photograph details. One has to note details, specially the

insignificant ones. This comes through observation and practice. So, in this scene I got the hand gramophone, the curtain partition, clothes on hangers, and the typical mother.

Do you have any disagreements with Mr Ray in the course of your work?

BANSI: There are moments of disagreement, of course, on details. But, I believe a film is a director's medium. Besides, Satyajit and I have worked so long together that I know exactly what he wants. I admire him a great deal and this makes it easier, almost necessary, for me to accept what he says. Satyajit is in full control of all technical departments and every technician gives his best because in him they recognize a fellow technician with a superior sensibility.

Is there any particular film with which you have been disappointed where the sets are concerned?

BANSI: Yes. Paras Pathar. The art direction is, in my opinion, poor. The atmosphere is very slap dash and it lacks style. The cocktail party scene was unconvincing. I think Satyajit has preconceived notions about the rich - their propensity to drinking, gambling, etc. They appear as caricatures and types rather than people. I think in Parash Pathar he has an unusual disgust for alcohol and drunkards. It is this prejudice against drink that has influenced this scene.

Are you particularly pleased with any film?

BANSI: Yes. Charulata. In style and elegance, it is a film that I consider an achievement. I think Charulata is Ray's most perfect film.