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Life, Death & Moksha

Or alternatively

Ganges – River To Heaven

Or

Waiting for Tiger

High in the Himalayas, the midday sun gently warms the slopes of the mountains and the pristine glaciers give birth to a trickle of clear, effervescent water. The trickles combine to become streams and the streams combine to become a river. It is the origins of one of the most significant and sacred rivers on planet earth – the river the Indians call “Mother Ganga”.

In its inexorable journey from the most northern reaches of India to the Bay of Bengal it will provide irrigation, transportation and sanctification to the millions of people who live by its banks. Flowing south across the plains of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the river actually turns north at Chunar and traces a huge arc to the ancient city of Varanasi, situated on the confluence of the Varuna and Asi Rivers.

“Older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together” was Mark Twains’ opinion of Varanasi, which historians respect as one of the oldest living cities on earth.

To the Buddhist faith it is called *Kashika*, or the City of Light because it is very close to where the Buddha preached his first sermon. To the Hindu faith it is venerated as the most sacred spot on earth: *Kashi* – the ultimate pilgrimage destination and it is also here that Lord Mahavira revealed his philosophy of Jainism. In Indian mythology, the legends and stories of this ancient city stretch back to the dawn of time and it was the myths and the ancient Hindu cremation rituals that attracted American “Indie” film director, Gayle Ferraro of Aerial Productions in Boston, Mass.

As an Asia-based cinematographer, I had encountered Gayles production company whilst searching the web for potential USA clients for my specialist “aerial” skills. (see S.O.C. magazine Winter 2001). Her web page revealed that she was a documentary filmmaker with a track record in making personal films about challenging subjects in Asia. I sent her an introduction to my global cinematography services and a year later she called me in Singapore with an invitation to put a team together to shoot a motion picture project for her in India.

Gayle wanted to make a 90 minute documentary film for global cinema on the legendary *Burning Ghats* in Varanasi. Unlike her previous two projects that were shot in Myanmar and Bangladesh on Mini-DV format, this one was to be originated on Super 16mm for 35mm cinema release. The production was to be entirely financed by Gayle herself, but what it may have lacked in budget, Gayle herself was to make up for in passion, and the crew in imagination.

Through the Mandys production data base I was able to access three of the most experienced and talented film crew available in India – producer Girish Thakur, sound recordist Rajendra Hedge and 1st AC Monic “Imax” Kumar. We also had the support of international media journalist Geeta Nadkarni, as a production assistant.

Gayle had been able to secure a particularly good deal from Boston Cameras on an Arri SR3 Production Kit and my contribution from Singapore included a Hollywood Microdolly, a Cinesaddle and my Lowel / Dedo based documentary lighting kit. I had also been offered the opportunity by the Vinten Company to trial their revolutionary Fibertec tripod with the HD100 head to give me the camera support I needed in India. Although the Kodak Vision II film was not available for this job - coincidentally it was launched in Singapore the afternoon I flew to Delhi - I had chosen to shoot a 60:40 roll ratio of 100T to 200T. I hoped this combination would handle everything we encountered because in preproduction I was unable to access accurate local information on our primary locations.

On the memorable day that the film crew met together for the very first time in Varanasi, we went for a walk in the city to assess our shooting locations. Almost immediately it became apparent just how challenging this shoot was going to be. We were operating in what is truly a timeless city, a city which has evolved at its own chosen pace with little regard to the modern world beyond its municipal and national boundaries. Reliable electricity seemed to be a non-existent luxury, which the locals don't seem to need nearly as much as our lights, battery chargers and computers did. Transportation was by auto rickshaw, cooking by charcoal and lighting by candles and oil lamps.

Varanasi has a unique identity as the city where life goes hand in hand with death - and death and is very big business. On an average day, more than 200 bodies are transported on litters through narrow winding streets to the cremation centers of the legendary *Burning Ghats*. The Hindi faith believes that a ritual cremation at one of the most revered Ghats like *Manikarnika* or *Harischandra* will break the eternal cycle of *samsara* (death and rebirth) and eventually bring the deceased the much-desired *moksha* (enlightenment). Every evening, the last rays of the sun must fight through the pungent smoke that rises from the innumerable funeral pyres situated along the river bank. This smoke symbolically carries the souls of the pilgrims on their last journey as they are finally released of their earthly burdens.

Throughout the city are hospices or *Bhavans*, established by charity organisations to provide simple facilities for those people who have been brought by their families to live out their final few days in the most sacred of cities. These hospice are often nothing

more than a house with a collection of bare, dark rooms each with a raised concrete platform where the eldest son, for example will gently place his dying parent, wrapped in blankets, on a bed of straw. Attached to the *bhavan* is a priest who performs daily ceremonies with candles, music and mantras to calm the soul and encourage the serene sense of peace that prevails in these establishments.

Gayle's film (working title "Ganga") planned to document all the historical and religious aspects of life, death and Moksha in Kashi. She also wanted to portray the cultural significance of the sacred river Ganga that features in the rituals of life for all who have the privilege of living near her.

As we began to work at our primary location of *Mukti Buvan* we very quickly realised that we needed to be able to talk about human bodies in a sensitive, professional way so as not to offend members of the family, the priests and hospice administrators. Some time later, as we were waiting for one of the bright orange decorated, body-litters to appear on its way to the Burning Ghat, my Indian producer commented that it was like "waiting for tiger" on a wild life shoot. From that point onwards, our bodies, both dead and alive were known as *Tigers* in film crew code

Over time we were able to develop a relationship with each family who had brought a *Tiger* to the hospice. Our ability to take professional photographic portraits of the *Tiger* and present the family with complimentary prints the following day, earned us an enormous amount of emotional credit and acceptance with family members. Eventually we were invited with our cameras into the privacy of the dark room where death would be an inevitable visitor within a matter of days.

These rooms had basic window shutters which were often closed for privacy, and with little or no electricity available, we had to improvise with candles, oil lamps and the one 9mm Zeiss Superspeed lens the budget allowed. With the sensitivity of our subject matter and the demands that the camera crew be as invisible as possible, our working practices inside the dark, depressing rooms required all our years of experience and ingenuity. We became "The Ghosts Who Shoot" and the invaluable Cinesaddle often allowed us to operate the camera to production levels of performance without the intimidating intrusion of a tripod in such an intimate family gathering.

Operating in such low light levels created a whole series of new challenges, especially as all the dark tones blended together in the viewfinder, making accurate focus by eye impossible. For diplomatic reasons we also couldn't run out a tape measure to the subjects nose, so Monic and I estimated distances by eye and telegraphed focus settings silently to each other with the appropriate number of fingers.

There were many occasions when the subjects breathing movements were so imperceptible that I was able to expose properly for dark walls and dark skin tones by running the camera at 6 f.p.s. On three occasions I was actually rolling when a final, subtle sigh was heard and the whispers of smoke from the ever-present joss sticks escorted a human spirit away from the body in front of me.

When death finally arrived, the family then performed the ritual cleaning of the body and it was then carried in its bright, ornate, orange robes through the narrow winding streets to its final destination on the banks of the river. The litter was lowered into the dark waters of Mother Ganga for one final blessing before being placed on the top of one of the multitude of wooden funeral pyres. The eldest son would then have his head shaved as a traditional mark of respect and taking a burning brand from the sacred flame, would orbit the pyre five times before thrusting the flame into its base.

Gayle knew that the Ganga would be the thread that would link all of her film and so we hired river barges to transport us as we shot the routines of the river. Working on the long end of a Canon 300mm T2.8 we discreetly filmed the various bathing, religious and musical rituals that the river hosts on a daily basis. For key interviews in the film we turned the barge into a mobile "Studio Ganga" by creating a platform of cushions for our subjects in the bow. As Dr. Mishra and the various heroes of our film talked about the historical culture of Varanasi, the sunset river frontage of the Ghats changed and evolved behind their heads as we drifted silently with the tide.

Four weeks after facing the practical and emotional challenges of shooting our film in India, we cleaned our camera and re-packed all of our equipment for the last time. As Gayle left New Delhi for the lab in Los Angeles, she carried with her 92 precious rolls of unexposed film, carefully packed in an elaborately hand-painted, Indian transportation chest. Once she arrived in the USA, she anticipated a very complex, multi-lingual editing marathon with her New York film editor, Keiko Deguchi.

Her crew had shot a 90 minute cinema documentary film on one of the most sensitive subjects on earth, in one of the most difficult cities in the world to work in, in the darkest of locations, with little external support and no access to supplementary lighting.

Varanasi had challenged every piece of our equipment, all of our experience as professionals and every ounce of our emotional reserves as human beings. But then that was what the extraordinary film "Ganges - River To Heaven" and passionate, Indie film director Gayle Ferraro, deserved.

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