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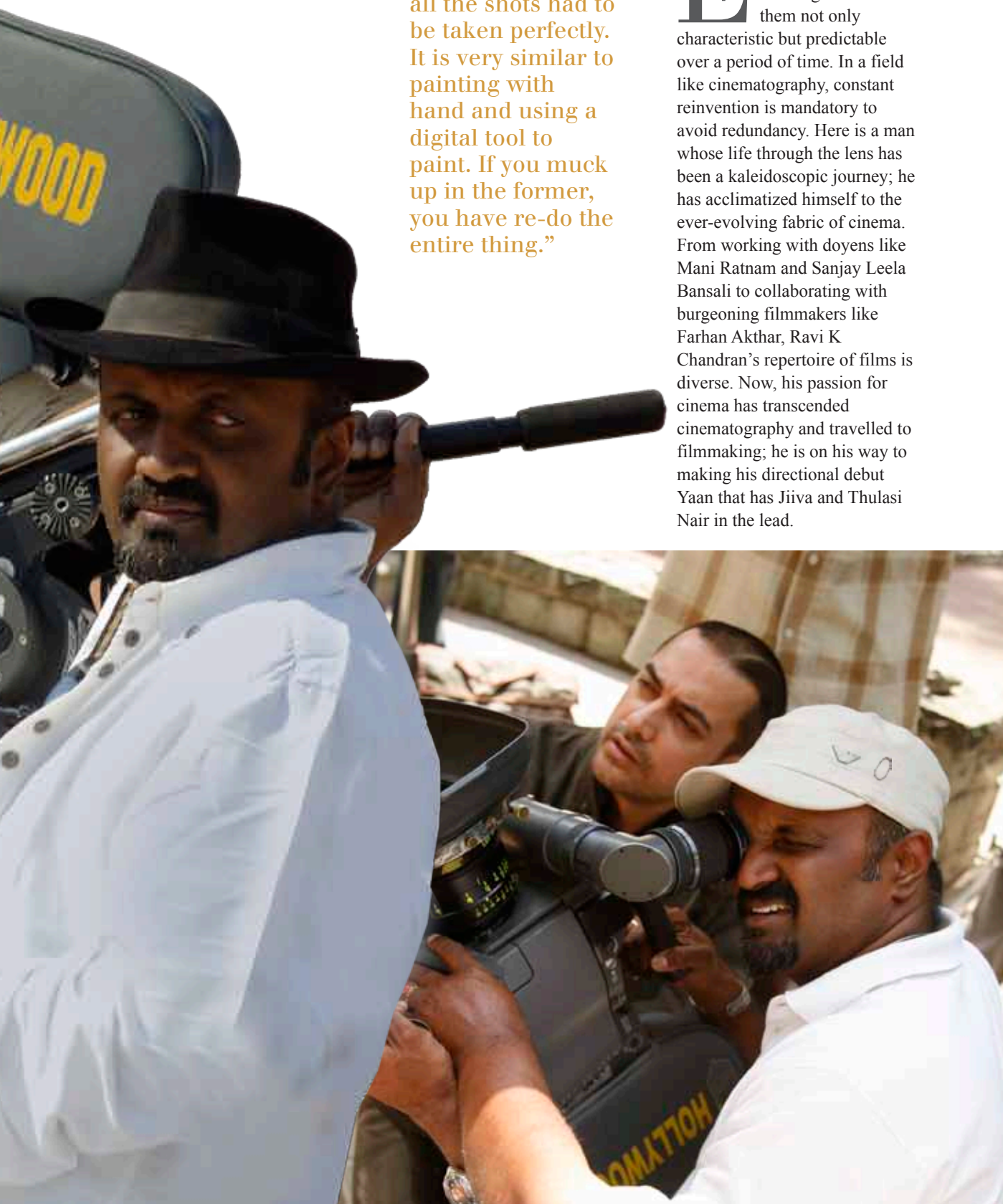
AN EYE FOR DIVERSITY

From his love for art eventually leading him to cinematography to working with filmmakers of different calibres, Ravi K Chandran has done it all. **Vijetha Rangabashyam** finds out what goes on in the mind of a man who paints a picture that is no less than perfect



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Every cinematographer as a distinct style of working that makes them not only characteristic but predictable over a period of time. In a field like cinematography, constant reinvention is mandatory to avoid redundancy. Here is a man whose life through the lens has been a kaleidoscopic journey; he has acclimatized himself to the ever-evolving fabric of cinema. From working with doyens like Mani Ratnam and Sanjay Leela Bansali to collaborating with burgeoning filmmakers like Farhan Akhtar, Ravi K Chandran's repertoire of films is diverse. Now, his passion for cinema has transcended cinematography and travelled to filmmaking; he is on his way to making his directional debut Yaan that has Jiiva and Thulasi Nair in the lead.



A WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE

Ravi K Chandran's first recollection of holding a camera spirals back to his youth, of having grown up together with his elder brother, cinematographer, K. Ramachandra Babu who he assisted on several films at the dawn of his career. "My brother used to take lot of stills with his small camera which we used to process at home and print. He would take multiple exposures and he would make us stand on a stool and cover it with a pot so that it would seem like we are emerging from the pot." All the perspective tricks played by his brother drew Ravi even closer to the field of photography to begin with. "My brother became a cameraman at 19 which was such a big deal in those days. While he was studying at the Film Institute, he simultaneously did his course in cinematography. He would bring back home various books on cinema and French New Wave was such a rage at that time."

Apart from being exposed to path breaking Tamil cinema made by veteran directors, Ravi understood that there is another world of cinema which entailed of stalwarts like Kurosawa and Godard. "I used to read all the books my brother brought and I was exposed to world cinema at such a young age." During his college days, Ravi would go to the British Council Library and read several books on cinema, especially the Sight and Sound magazine. "I was also part of Chennai Film Society which had cinematographers like Rajeev Menon in it. We used to get together frequently, watch films and discuss them." In a time when search engines were nonexistent and access to information was difficult,

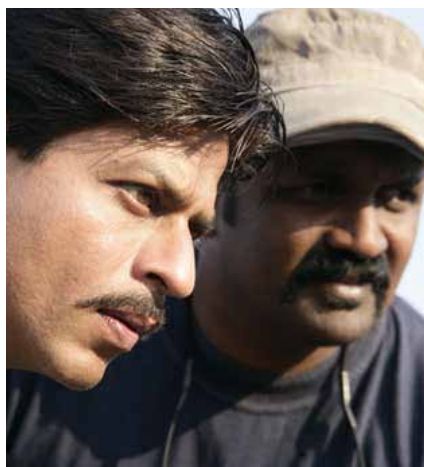
primary research through books, exposure to films and being part of interest groups helped Ravi to build on his passion.

FROM SKETCHBOOK TO CELLULOID

For Ravi, cinematography is the only thing he got exposed to at the very beginning. "I remember the first shoot I witnessed. It starred actor Ravichandran. He was one of the main reasons I changed my

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name into Ravi K Chandran.”

His interest in cinematography stemmed from his inclination towards art. “I used to draw a little. I never went to classes or pursued art professionally but I always had a flair for drawing. I am a lazy person to start with. It is very much like watching a Bruce Lee movie and all of a sudden you want to enrol for karate classes but the excitement fizzles out in six months. I am something like that.” Even as far as cinematography goes, Ravi did not join a course and he did not undergo any formal education. He joined his brother one fine day and started to assist him. “Honestly, I believe anyone can become anything if they have the will. But for me, I had it a little easy right from the beginning considering I had a cinematographer in the family.”

Actors like Mamooty, Mohanlal and Prathap Pothen used to hang out with his brother frequently at a time when they were still trying to make a mark for themselves in the industry. “I was staying with my brother during college days and I got a chance to mingle with all the actors. After college, I just

jumped into the field without thinking twice.” Though he assisted his brothers on films, his first chance of even being noticed as an assistant cinematographer was accidental. “I remember it was a Mani Ratnam’s film. My brother fell ill and he could not make it to the shoot. I was the third assistant. The first two assistants were so nervous that they could not position the camera properly. So Mani asked me to position it and I did. Then he asked me to handle the equipment and that is how I started to operate the camera.”

His first break, however, came through a friend who was a line producer. When asked if he was ready to shoot, Ravi said yes and as the next thing, Ravi went to Mumbai to cast a heroine for his debut film. “I chose Suchitra Krishnamoorthi for my first film Kilukkampetti, directed by Shaji Kailas. I shot so fast that my life changed after the film.” In the next three days, Ravi got booked for three films and the same year, he had ten Malayalam films to his credit.

WEAVES OF INSPIRATION

Growing up, Ravi would watch plenty of films by ace Malayalam director Aravindan. “I watched his films like Oradithu and Thampu. He had a great visual sense and was extremely poetic.” But the real reason why he became a cinematographer was Steven Spielberg. “I watched Close Encounters of the Third Kind so many times. When I went to the US, I watched E.T. I even picked up an E.T. doll which I still have with me.” Ravi drew inspiration from every film personality he had a chance to work with. He was greatly driven by the works of director Bharathan who made





Thevar Magan. “During college days, I was highly inspired by the Barathiraja-Nivas combination. They brought in reality and lent an artistic touch to village based subjects and even modern films like Sigappu Rojakkal and Tik Tik Tik. Balu Mahendra is another filmmaker who motivated me into becoming a filmmaker while I was in college. Of course, I cannot leave out Mani Ratnam and PC Sreeram from this list.” According to Ravi, his creative juices poured out after meeting Rajeev Menon. “I never knew music before I met Rajeev. He is musically inclined. He pays so much attention to detail. I would say he is an encyclopaedia. He also loves to teach.”

THE CATALYST OF SUCCESS: VIRASAT

During the late 90s, when Bollywood still entailed of glossiness, Virasat was a fresh, welcoming change; perhaps why Ravi considers the film to be his biggest break. “Bollywood was full of colours at that time and Virasat had warm undertones.” In a time when digital correction was absent, everything had to be manually corrected and that gave Ravi enough practice to survive the rest of his lifetime in the industry. “All the shots had to be taken perfectly. It is very similar to painting with hand and using a digital tool to paint. If you muck up in the former, you have re-do the entire thing.” Virasat was technically different from other Bollywood films at that time and was visually appreciated in a big way.

CHANGE: THE ONLY CONSTANT

It is in Ravi’s nature to get bored of things quickly. “I keep changing my furniture or my car very often. Even now my wife jokes that the only thing I have not changed is my family.” He is not any different when it comes to his working style. “While I was shooting for Virasat on one end, I was simultaneously working on Minsara Kanavu. I don’t like my work being repeated.”

Before choosing his films, Ravi either looks at the filmmaker’s previous works or the script. “I have done films of Farhan Akhtar and Nandita Das merely because the scripts appealed to me. I worked on Yuva, which was extremely rustic but if you look at Paheli, it is full of warmth and brightness.” Fanaa, Saawariya and Firaq were consecutive releases all shot by Ravi but none of them had a semblance of each other. “To be a part of films that are distinctly different from each other is a conscious decision I made. I don’t have a working style. In fact, if someone saw a shot and said, ‘This is shot by Ravi’, that is definitely not a compliment.” Many friends call Ravi after watching an ad thinking that it was shot by him. “If you Google some films, I am associated with a few of them even though I have nothing to do with them.”

A CREATIVE SPARK IN BLACK

Ravi claims that he is one of the fastest cinematographers apart from Santosh Sivan and Jeeva, which is very much a part of his impatient nature. When asked about the most challenging shot he had to implement, he talks about a sequence in the film *Black* which was not particularly challenging but extremely creative. “There is a door. Amit Ji (Amitabh Bachchan) has to prevent the mother from entering the room considering it would distract the girl from learning. She says she wants to see her child and he says you can see but you cannot come in. Amit Ji was standing on one side of the door and the mother on the other and I had to focus on both their faces. When I read the scene, I got a spark. I put the light on Shenaz Patel’s head which lit Amit ji’s face such that both of them were seen from either

end of the door.” The shot was appreciated by Amitabh Bachchan so much that he continued to finish the entire scene in one shot. “After the shot, Sanjay said, I am not going to invite you to my premiere. Everyone is going to say you shot the film.”

MOTIVATION IS NOT MONEY

When Ravi decided to be part of *Dil Chahta Hai*, many people from the film fraternity thought that it was not a wise career move. “After three days of working with Farhan, I knew that he would make it big. The film’s cast was questionable at that time but I still loved the script. In fact I remember telling Anil Kapoor that I don’t mind taking such

risks because I don’t need a crore in my bank account next month. I am quite content with the money I get, paying tax and living in the house I first bought.” Ravi has dismissed several commercial projects on the basis of his work ethos being adulterated by materialistic desires. “This is probably one of the reasons why I am not the richest of cinematographers today.”

Ravi considers it a privilege to be part of the film industry. “I don’t know how to drive a car or even book tickets like how other human beings do. The only thing I know to do well is cinematography. It is an art that speaks for a long time, like a piece of painting or a book.”

THE JOURNEY OF YAAN

Ravi wrote the script for *Yaan* quite sometime back but a tight schedule and lack of time prevented him from putting the film into execution. “I have worked with an array of filmmakers and shot with them. There came a point in my life when I said, if I don’t start working on my film now, I never will and so I decided to approach an actor.” After meeting a handful of actors, Ravi thought Jiiva fit the bill of the character perfectly and Jiiva also agreed to do the film after half an hour of hearing the script. “When I was looking for production houses for funds, Jiiva

suggested R.S. Infotainment. Mr Kumar fell in love with the script immediately. I slowly started working on the film and roped in talents like Sabu Cyril and Rasool Pookutty.” After both Mani Ratnam and Rajeev Menon suggested that Thulasi Nair is fresh and talented as an actor, he decided to cast her

as the female lead. “I am not here to make a film that is reforming. I want to make a film that is entertaining, something that I would want to see. It is a mishmash of romance and action.”

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