

Innovation with an Anamorphic Grainy Look

Sakthi Saravanan
Director of
Photography

India

A 10-year-old boy playing around with his grandfather's camera trying to ape his favorite special effects from mythological films has grown up to be one of the leading cinematographers in South India. Sakthi Saravanan has come into his own with two major hits – *Chennai 28* and *Saroja*.

Sakthi started his career by assisting cinematographer Muthu Ganesh, and then moved to making the hit TV serial *Chithi*. 10 serials later, he moved back to where he belonged – as he was offered the movie *Chennai 28* by his friend S.B.P. Charan. He shares his creative streak and wavelength with his art director Videsh, who has worked with him in all his films.

When asked about his love for working with film, he replied, "While using film, one does not have to worry about clipping of highlights or underexposure. In video, we had to cut the light and shade the areas to avoid burnouts – there is no chance of correcting it later. I am more comfortable with film because I can do a lot of tests before the shoot. Fujifilm always gives me enough stock to test for each film. If either the emulsion or the lab changes, one can perform the usual tests like under/over exposures up to 3 to 4 stops. Then I can judge exactly how the film will behave with different exposures."

For the film *Saroja*, Sakthi tested ETERNA negative series and shot in Super 35 format. The story of the film starts in the afternoon and ends in the morning. While shooting at the Binny Mills, the crew encountered several problems due to light placements, as all the scenes from the third reel onwards had to be shot at night and large areas had to be captured in the frame. Sakthi's team managed to keep the lights on top of a few buildings quite a distance away.

Sakthi says, "I was not getting enough exposure, though I had high speed Zeiss lenses of 1.3. I wanted to shoot at least at f-2 for the sake of depth of field and focus pulling. Since I couldn't boost the exposure, I push-processed the negative. I rated the ETERNA 500 at 1000 and pushed one stop in the lab. For the indoor shoots, I under-exposed the close-ups by one and half to two stops to keep consistency in the look of the film." There was a lot of hand-held camera work, which, coupled with the grainy desaturated look, was appreciated by the critics.

In spite of hailing from Madurai, the temple town, Sakthi does not use many colors and tries to

desaturate them. This effect was used in *Chennai 28* which was directed by Venkat Prabhu. Influenced by Conrad Hall's cinematography, Sakthi used the ETERNA 500 film in anamorphic format, even outdoors, and overexposed by 2 stops to wipe out the colors. Almost all the details in the highlights were wiped off, giving a lovely in-camera effect. The night scenes were shot with ARRI 12k and 6k PARs. Sakthi says, "We decided not to use helium balloons because the light would spill all over the place. I needed some texture, not a completely flat look."

Sakthi also used the Bleach Bypass technique on his negatives for both the films. Sakthi's innovative nature is apparent from the way he used the bleach bypass method for one song and the push processing technique for another one to get different looks. He says "I shot with a small PAR can on a portable generator. We just went around the city and shot in the available light plus the PAR can. We didn't bother too much about the correct exposure and color but our aim was to get a totally different look. For my next film I am going to use the Hindi film type of glossy lighting. I am bored with the other avant-garde look."

Sakthi says that the *American Cinematographer* magazine is a source of inspiration to some extent; he watches a lot of films and attends the Goa film festival. He always feels that pictures communicate better, so he shows reference pictures or films to his team, especially the art director. Sakthi adds, "We discuss details about the shot taking, but do not make any rigid decisions; instead we improvise during the rehearsals and test shoots. In *Chennai 28* we used several single takes, contrary to *Saroja*, where the narrative has a very fast pace with cuts and hand-held camera movements." For the hand-held movements, Sakthi prefers the lightweight ARRI 235 with Zeiss super speed lenses.

Other than the international cinematographers Conrad Hall and Vittorio Storaro, Sakthi looks up to Santhosh Sivan and Binod Pradhan as his idols. He likes working with new directors, with their new ideas. Listening to a suggestion from his director for his next film, Sakthi will be using a mixture of formats like Super 16, 35, S35 and anamorphic. The idea is inspired from the movie *Babel*. But the difference will be Sakthi's trademark anamorphic grainy look.

Sakthi prefers to create an intimate relation with the audience, so he uses many hand-held shots. In his latest film, *SMS*, he used a 40mm anamorphic lens and hand-held camera to enhance a street-smart boy's life.

He concludes, "I like the floating kind of effect one can achieve with the hand-held camera rather than the flying effect of a Steadicam." ■

