



# WHITE LIGHT

India

K.G. Soman talks to Subir Chatterjee of White Light Moving Picture Company Pvt. Ltd.

K.G. Soman tries to explore the working world of the filmmakers – the dream makers. This time his interaction is with Subir Chatterjee, Director of White Light Moving Picture Company Pvt. Ltd.

## Can you tell us a little about White Light?

Namita Roy Ghose and I started White Light in Kolkata, then we moved to Mumbai in 1987. Namita was more experienced, so she was the creative director and my boss. She was into ad films while my background was in films, photography and music, so it was a good combination.

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## What kind of ad films did you make in the early years?

We did a series of small ads for medical insurance. Our first major break was a film for a tea company. At that time the budget was 300,000 rupees, which was huge. Since then, over 20 years we have made hundreds of ad films, a couple of them for video with very controlled indoor shots, and even a few handycam pickups for aesthetic values. It has been films throughout. We've made a whole lot of films – for Bisleri mineral water, Coke, Adidas – the list is very long.

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## What kind of film do you use?

We use mostly 35mm, but we've also been using a lot of 16mm. Earlier, telecine was a big problem in India. Processing was bad, with muddy prints and no detailing. Even better lenses or the latest ARRI IIIIs did not help. We had to get the negatives processed abroad, and the customs, travel, and delivery date problems were nightmares.

Now we have good operators and colorists; machines like the Gold and Spirit are doing well. The film stock has improved so that even high speed films can complement skin tones. This was unheard of 10-15 years back. Picture negatives have become finer – almost grainless and saturated with better latitude.

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## Are Indian ads on a par with international ones today?

Not exactly; if we process the negatives abroad, the crispness, depth and sharpness are much better than what we get here in India. But now, you can get good lenses like the high-speed, Ultra Prime, Master Prime ARRI 435, 235 and Panavision.

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## Tell us something about your pre-production work, such as the research

We do a lot of work in image manipulation, trying to do things differently. Working with brilliant DOPs like Kiran Deohans and Vikas Sivaraman is a great experience as they never copy from foreign films. They keep on experimenting with the shots using various ideas and techniques. Once for a Max Light ad we used an Angenieux shorter zoom on a Steadicam, the young operator was daring and enthusiastic, and we got a very good focus puller with a remote. We shot the whole film on 16mm because we didn't have an equivalent short zoom for 35mm.

## What do you feel about the new kind of grainy effect look in movies created with films that are almost grainless?

One knows that everything can be fixed in post-production. Here, we are not looking for color and fine grain; in any case we are degrading the stock, making it less sharp, grainier and adding dirt, crushing the blacks and playing with contrast – almost like a monochromatic image.

The pristine image has become old fashioned. Sensibilities are changing. Faster films like 400 and 500 have improved, which is a boon in high-speed cinematography with fewer lights.

Rectilinear lenses have reduced the little wide angle distortion considerably – today even the 16mm or 18mm frames are distortion-free. And advancement in lens coating and glass technology has almost eliminated flare! Once the image is on tape, shot with a Viper or Cinealta, the flexibilities are immense as well as the uncertainties.

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## Even digital workflows are not stable!

You're right – one cannot determine if the monitors are calibrated correctly. Once the telecine is done, the mother negative is almost forgotten. If the negative is correctly exposed, it is a treasure of information and detail which can be stretched, pulled up or down or turned around any which way you want. Film has another advantage in the ancillary support in choosing cameras of different sizes, weights and special functions, and lenses such as spherical ones.

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## What is your advice for newcomers?

I think companies like Fujifilm can contribute by educating youngsters. Most of them don't know the art and craft of film-making. Kids pick up a video camera, shoot whichever way they like, and make experimental films with Final Cut Pro. They use distorted shots under the pretext of being stylized. However, it is first important to know the basics well before distorting them to create or develop your own style. It is important to keep watching good short films and documentaries so that the sensibility of the art of film-making improves.

MTV was giving the much-needed finance to support young peoples' dreams. In Europe, youngsters took this to a different level with innovative camera angles, cutting, movements and creative concepts. But in India we destroyed it with lack of ideas and substance. Because of intellectual laziness, people try to copy without thinking or doing any research. This is a huge challenge that we need to overcome.

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## Do you think the gap between the two mediums, film and video, is narrowing down?

I think shooting on film to look like video or shooting on video to look like 35mm film is totally wrong; both are different media. ■