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Inside: Photography for *Passage to India*
Robby Müller and *Paris, Texas*



A PASSAGE TO INDIA

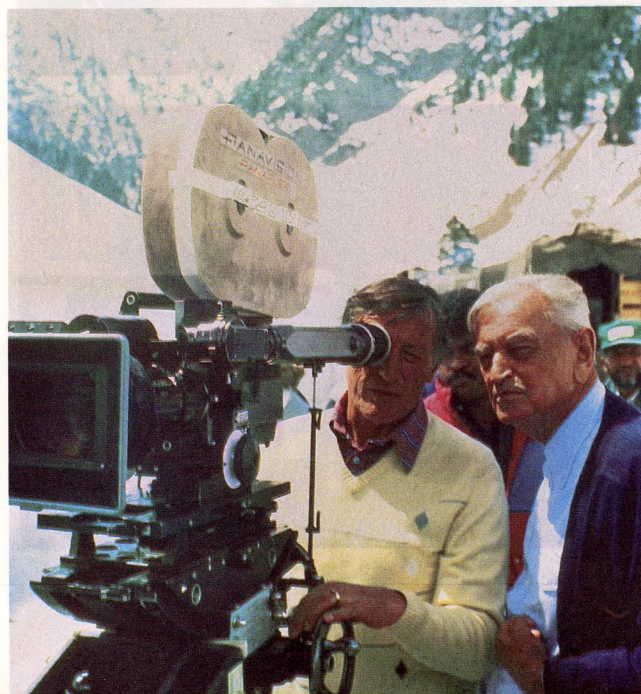
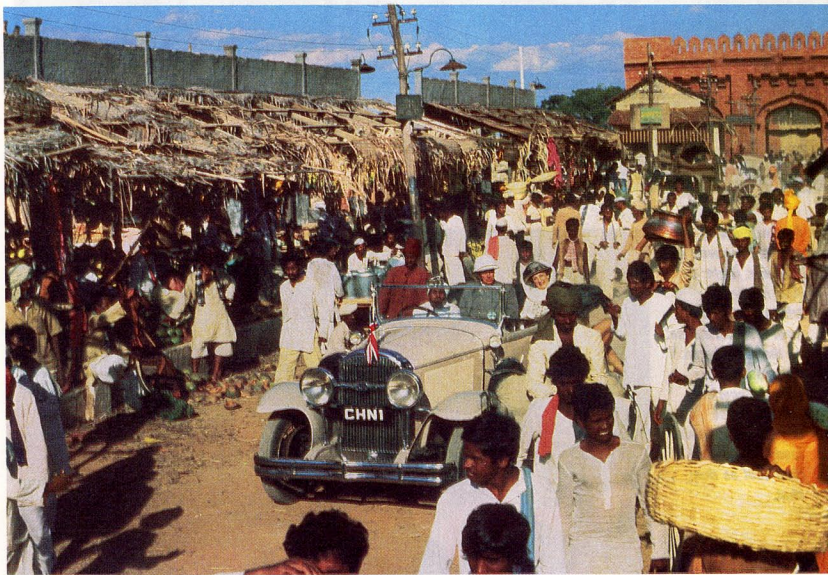
Ernest Day, BSC

*Dr. Aziz and Adela
approach the caves.*



A Passage to India is an adaptation of E.M. Forster's novel set in India in 1928. It is essentially a story of the conflict of cultures as embodied in the lives of six people in India, and is considered a classic of modern English literature. David Lean first became interested in adapting it to film when he saw a stage adaptation of it about 20 years ago, but Forster was initially unwilling to sell the film rights, apparently for fear that a film would not fairly present both the English and Indian sides of the conflict. When Forster died in 1970 the rights became the property of King's College, Cambridge, and were eventually sold to John Brabourne and Richard Goodwin, the producers of the film, who had also been pursuing the rights for over 20 years.

My involvement with the film began with a phone call from London while I was dubbing a film I had directed at the then Goldwyn studios in Los Angeles. I had been the camera operator on David's last three pictures, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Doctor Zhivago* and *Ryan's Daughter*, but had since moved on to work as director of photography or second unit director of photography or second unit director on several films. After doing second unit direction on *Moonraker* and *The Spy Who Loved Me*, I was offered a picture to direct called *Waltz Across Texas*. Directing and creating my own films is really my all consuming passion, but an invitation to photograph a film for David Lean is, in my opinion, the highest film industry accolade for a cinematographer. Every picture he has directed since *The Bridge On*



Above: A complete bazaar was constructed on the palace grounds in Bangalore. Left: Ernest Day and David Lean on location in Kashmir.



Above: Fielding and Aziz bid farewell in Kashmir. Right: Dr. Aziz is carried triumphantly away from the courthouse as the rains begin. Bottom: Dr. Aziz (Victor Banerjee), Godbole (Alec Guinness) and Adela (Judy Davis) cool their feet as they chat.



the River Kwai in 1957 has won an Oscar for cinematography. Needless to say I accepted the offer.

As everyone knows, many things can go wrong between the time one agrees to be part of the team making a movie and the actual completion of that project, and I admit I offered up more than a few prayers that this particular project would reach fulfillment. There were the inevitable long delays and many of us on the sidelines of the various momentous negotiations were beginning to have doubts that *A Passage to India* would ever appear on the screen. As usual the main hurdles appeared to be monetary, and to add to the concern hardly a day seemed to go by without some story of another project collapsing. I personally have the greatest respect for film producers who have the expertise and the tenacity to negotiate the jungle of financial and legal headaches surrounding a film. *A Passage to India* was certainly blessed in this category with producers John Brabourne and Richard Goodwin. Goodwin had spent the first ten years of his life in India and the two first worked together on *Harry Black and the Tiger* (1958), a picture which was John's first as a producer and involved location photography in India. More recently they produced the series of Agatha Christie mysteries from *Murder On the Orient Express* to *Evil Under the Sun*.

By September 1983 things had progressed far enough on *A Passage to India* for me to go to India to see the locations David had selected during the previous six months. It was not my first time in India. I had spent some eight months there during the early 1950's as a Technicolor technician working on an Indian film directed by Sohrab Modi and photographed by Ernest Haller, ASC, who had previously won an Oscar for the photography of *Gone With The Wind*. Even after all those years memories came flooding back, and I do mean flooding because I arrived in a violent rain storm in the early hours of the



morning. Anyone who has witnessed the lower castes in their corrugated-iron roadside hovels coping with Indian monsoon conditions will know what the scene was like.

In contrast the offices and accommodations for *A Passage to India* were located at the West End hotel in Bangalore in the state of Mysore. Bangalore had been chosen as the principal location for the film, standing in for Forster's fictitious Chandrapore. The Maharajah's palace in Bangalore, about a ten minute ride from our hotel, has extensive grounds that production was able to use as a kind of back lot on which to construct sets. Economically, of course, this arrangement was near perfect - minimum unit travelling time plus almost 100% crowd control in a country renowned for inquisitive citizens appearing in thousands, filling the screen inevitably where they are not usable photographically or during a particularly difficult and tender dialogue scene.

Numerous sets were constructed on the palace grounds including a whole complex of bungalows covering what must have been five or six acres and a complete street for a bazaar which

I defy any viewer to recognize as a set rather than the real thing. David was very excited about this quasi studio lot, and his enthusiasm was infectious as we walked around partially built sets and pegged out grass-covered spaces where other sets were to be built.

In addition to the sets constructed on the palace grounds there was also a set built in the grounds of the hotel which included a lily pond and we were able to take advantage of some marvelous trees similar to banyan trees which cast lovely shadows over things.

One of the bungalows on the palace grounds was to be used for interiors as well. It was revamped so that it could serve for different interiors and it was built in such a way that shooting in it was like shooting in a real Indian house. One wall was designed to float but the others required considerable effort to move. It was intentionally built to encourage lighting and shooting in the way one would in a real building. One result of this was that in some cases I had to use more bounce light than I might otherwise have done. The fact that the furnishings in an Indian house tend to be sparse also made it more difficult

to conceal lamps within the set. On top of all this we decided to shoot without 85 filters on the windows in order to get the effect of sun streaming in the windows and we didn't want to mix incandescent light with daylight.

A crucial scene in the story takes place at the Marabar caves and David had selected two locations for these scenes: Ramanagaram and Savandurga. There were no natural caves at the locations but there were spectacular granite cliffs with varied colors in the rock. The cliffs faced south so that they had full sun hitting them all day. Photographically the location was absolutely wonderful but it was necessary to create entrances that appeared to lead to large caves. The cave interiors were sets constructed later on the stages in England, but the entrances were blasted out of the face of the mountain. As the locations involved were somewhat remote, the Indian craftsmen lived on the site and worked in shifts to complete the work on time. Initially there were some complaints from people about what was happening to their countryside, but in the end everyone realized it was not doing any damage. The holes in the rock, however, are there for

*Judy Davis as Adela
Quested exploring
the countryside
around Chandrapore.*



*Dr. Aziz helps Adela
onto the elephant for
the trip to the caves.*



good and required a monumental effort to create.

Six hours car drive from Bangalore, on a plateau 7,220 feet above sea level is the town of Ootacamund – affectionately known as Ooty to the British army in the days of Raj. It is approached from the plain by a rack railway, and it is this track with its steam train and wooden carriages, winding through stunning scenery which was selected for the sequence in which Dr. Aziz and the two English women ride the train on their way to the picnic at the caves. Some of the train interiors were filmed on the stage at Shepperton, but the scenes in which Dr. Aziz does his Douglas Fairbanks number hanging on to the outside of the train were filmed on the ancient steam train – with Victor Banerjee doing his own stunt work.

Other locations for the film were in Delhi and in Kashmir, where the final scenes were shot. Dr. Aziz's office was built overlooking the wooden bridge of Fateh Kadel spanning the Jhelum

river at Srinagar in Kashmir. It was an extremely picturesque location and the interior scene was played continuously with a background of large leaded windows forming two sides of those situations where one longs for consistent weather outside to avoid the time consuming light balancing act inside.

By the time I went location scouting with David the locations themselves had already been set. I was primarily concerned with two things: discussing the photographic possibilities with David in each location and assessing the equipment required for the production.

In conversations with the director and the producers about the style of photography essential to the film it was unanimously agreed that the overriding mood to create was of oppressive, morale-sapping heat for some 80% of the movie – both in the scorching dry season of the story and the humidity of the monsoon period. My preference for not resorting to any kind of filters to achieve this effect

suiting David's conception of the film as well as his penchant for sharp focus. We agreed that we wanted the heat to look real and that hard shadows were a way to accomplish this. As a result we were prepared to wait for a hazy sun to clear rather than shoot in light which softened the shadows – particularly on a location like the caves.

David, of course, has a reputation for waiting until the weather is right to get a shot or waiting until everything is right. There's no point in trying to hustle things along with him by shooting things which he does not want in the movie or which affect performances of actors. When we were shooting *Ryan's Daughter* the call sheet might have five different calls depending on what the weather was like the next day. We did not have to resort to that on *A Passage to India*. In fact we were extraordinarily lucky. There were two sequences which required rain and I was afraid we might be faced with bright sunlight when time came to shoot them. Instead we had exactly the number of overcast days we needed. Also David is not unrealistic. We were supposed

to have a lot of snow on the mountains when we went to Kashmir to shoot, but unfortunately it did not happen for us. We were forced to rethink the shooting there and it was accomplished on schedule.

One thing must be understood about David's determination to wait until everything is right before he starts shooting. He is so prepared that once he does start shooting it goes like clockwork. Because of his experience as an editor and his overall mastery of cinematic storytelling, he is able to shoot only what is really needed. On *A Passage to India* from day one of principal photography David made it clear that there was to be no "print that take, now one for safety's sake." With him there is no "let's shoot the scene and see what happens" approach to putting things on the screen. Rehearsals were times of intense concentration both for cast and crew – time well spent, resulting in a shooting ratio of something like 3 or 4 to 1. Every shot was composed for maximum impact and, when visually exhausted, dismissed with a brief "Cut." You may spend a lot of

time waiting for the haze to clear, but once David's in gear, your feet don't touch the ground.

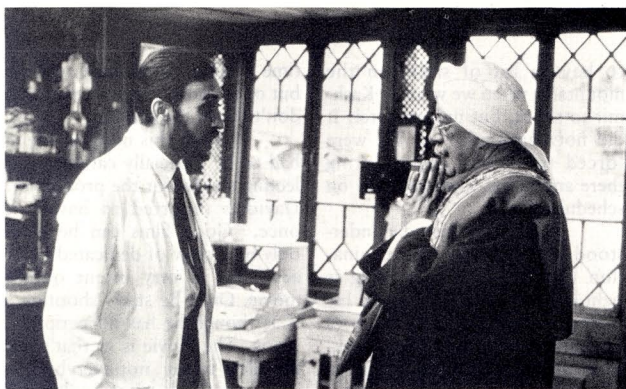
With this in mind I felt I had to be especially careful in selecting a crew for the production. David is reported to have said once, "Good films can be made only by a crew of dedicated maniacs." He is very intent on the movie. Once he starts shooting it is as though he has no peripheral vision. The movie is it; that's life. Needless to say, not everybody is suited to that kind of working atmosphere. Also it had been 14 years since he had worked with a crew so I felt it was doubly important to select people who would fit in with his working style. I got together with Richard Goodwin after the location scout in India and fortunately we were able to come up with a crew that worked out very well.

In addition to visiting the locations in India I spent many hours with John Box, the production designer, discussing the film and examining sketches, drawings and cardboard models of sets before returning to England. Even before I went to India I had discussed equipment requirements



A camera boat on the lake in Kashmir.

Aziz and Godbole in Aziz's office with the windows overlooking the bridge in Srinagar.



with Richard Goodwin and expressed my wish to use HMI lighting. Simply on the basis of the script and of what I knew about India, I concluded that HMI's would be better because of their easier operation in remote places and the absence of well maintained carbon arc lamps in India. Two crystal-controlled alternators and heavy HMI lamps had already been sent to India by sea by the time I returned from the location scout. It only remained for decisions to be made about smaller ancillary electrical equipment which would travel by air. It was agreed that local incandescent housings would be used but that the globes would be imported from the U.K.

As it turned out there was one occasion when we used four local Brute arc lamps in addition to the HMI's on a night sequence. We managed to get some mechanisms and carbons from England, but the Indian D.C. generator and the lamps themselves had seen better days. As a result there was a good bit of carbon flicker and shouts of "trimming" just when the actors were up to speed and ready to go. The gaffer, Alan Martin and I were thankful to get back to the stability of the imported lamps. I might add that the Indian electricians were extremely competent technically and their uncomplaining, cheerful hard work was much appreciated by the British cast and crew.

We took two cameras, a Panaflex Gold and a PSR as a backup camera. I think the PSR only came out of its boxes two or

three times. The adjustable eyepiece on the Gold came in particularly handy in actual locations or sets where it would have been too time consuming to move walls. Even though we had two zoom lenses, a 20 to 60 Varo Panchro and a 10 to 1, it is difficult to see an apparent zoom shot in the whole movie. These lenses were used mostly for their intermediate focal lengths and in this respect they were a practical aid. Panavision prime lenses were used on a high percentage of the interior sequences and in combination with Eastmancolor 5294 allowed light levels which were comfortable for cast and crew. All day exteriors were shot on Eastmancolor 5247.

We used a Fisher dolly and the camera movement in the film is economical - not visually complicated but precise.

Partially because of the involvement of Home Box Office in the production, *A Passage to India* was filmed with spherical lenses and an aspect ratio of 1.85:1. HBO did not want us to use a hard mask, so we marked the ground glass of the Panaflex Gold with two vertical side lines to indicate TV cutoff. Sometimes there were moments of indecision about what to include in the composition to keep both theater and TV audiences happy. David's last four pictures were either anamorphic or 65mm, and I think I am right in saying that he and the producers both would have liked to shoot *A Passage to India* in 65mm if the budget had allowed for it and the climate in the exhibition/distribu-

tion side of our industry been sympathetic to it.

There were no front or rear projection process shots for the film, but we did use some glass shots for scenes of the ship landing in Bombay and the governor coming ashore to eliminate elements inappropriate to the period. Incidentally David did not insist on absolute authenticity in the production design, probably because it was felt that the period for the film (ca 1928) was not a particularly attractive one either in overall life style or costume design. There had to be a reality about both sets and clothes but nothing was written in stone.

In addition to the location work in England we returned to Shepperton studios to shoot sequences including the interior of the caves, some of the train interiors, the exterior of the ocean liner and the courtroom. Unfortunately space was limited at the studio and we had to make do with one large stage and one small one. The courtroom set was quite a big one and we had some difficulty positioning the lights. The set was backed right up against the painted backing and we were using something like ten brutes to create the intense light associated with the heat of India. This was complicated by the fact that we were shooting in summer and the ventilation left something to be desired, but Alan Martin and his electricians enabled us to get what we needed. When did a director of photography not want more space between the windows and a painted backing or less height to the sets or more places to hide lamps or quicker ways to make good the plaster of a wall he would dearly love to take out? More time! More space!

Finally I would like to acknowledge the incredible concentration and enthusiastic dedication of the camera crew on *A Passage to India*: Roy Ford, camera operator, Frank Elliot, first assistant, Martin Kenzie, second assistant and Chunky Huse, an outstanding grip. ■