

Santosh records the changing seasons of life while filming

Asoka

As a child in the city of Trivandrum, India, Santosh Sivan was fascinated with drawing and sketching. His father, who is a documentary filmmaker and owns Sivan Studios, taught him photography. Sivan says the first and greatest lesson he learned was the importance of traveling and experiencing people, places and nature in its raw form.

Sivan studied the works of Subroto Mishra (Satyajit Ray's cameraman), and Nestor Almendros, ASC, and other master cinematographers at the Pune Film Institute (Film and Television Institute of India).

"I have always had great respect and admiration for the earlier generation of cinematographers who laid the foundation for us to learn and see the world poetically, in terms of light and shadow," he says.

Sivan is a founding/executive member of the Indian Society of Cinematographers. He has photographed numerous musical melodramas and takes particular pride in his award-winning children's films (**Halo, Mali**, etc.). His recent credits include **The Terrorist**, a film about the suicide bomber who killed India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. **The Terrorist** captured the Jury Prize at the 1998 Cairo International Film Festival.

His credits include features **Peramthachen, Kaala Pani, Iruvar**, the documentary **Mohiniyattam** and the short film **The Story of Tiblu**, which won a National Award in 1998. His personal favorites include Mani Ratnam's **Dil Se, Roja, Dalpati**, Priyadarshan's **Kaala Pani** and Shaji Karun's **Vanaprastham**.

Sivan's most recent credit as a director/cinematographer is **Asoka**, a biographical story of a renowned emperor who reigned circa 232 B.C. Asoka's life follows a course of good to evil, brought on by witnessing the savagery and destruction of war.



▲ Director/
cinematographer
Santosh Sivan.



▲ Kaurraki, played by Kareena Kapoor in the film **Asoka**.

Eventually, Asoka, portrayed by the actor Shah Rukh Khan, renounces war and violence and devotes himself to spreading the teachings of Buddhism.

Sivan draws photographic parallels between Asoka with changes in the seasons. The weather and seasons are a great source of inspiration for him.

"I try to capture light based on my experiences with the weather

"As the seasons change, the quality of light changes, too. Monsoon light has a nostalgic kind of timeless quality."

including rain, sun, snow and clouds," he says. "It is a great challenge for cinematographers to capture changes in season. Since the film deals with transitions in a person's life, I tried to shoot it while seasons were changing—capturing the monsoons, mist and nature in its changing form. For example, just as a full moon affects the tide, a change in the weather brings changes in emotions in human beings.

"As the seasons change, the quality of light changes, too," says Sivan. "Monsoon light has a nostalgic kind of timeless quality. One doesn't know what time of the day it is, and the light is soft and it portrays the face in a tender way. This is in contrast with

the bright, hot sun, which is violent, expressive and dramatic. We extended these kinds of light into the exteriors in artificial light as well, to enhance the arc of Asoka's character."

Sivan chose to frame his story in anamorphic format (2.35:1 aspect ratio). He used Kodak Vision 200T (5274) film and Hawk anamorphic lenses, with no diffusion to give the film a stark and realistic look. "The wider format seems to lend a very dramatic visual quality to the war sequences," he says. "I have found this film to be extremely adaptable to all kinds of lighting conditions. It has good color saturation in bright light and still holds up good blacks in low light. It's my personal choice and I'm very familiar with it, since I film a lot of commercials and features for other directors. I have exposed more than 600,000 feet of 5274 in the last year, so I know how the stock responds in almost any situation."

Sivan believes it requires spontaneous instincts and a strong grasp of technology to successfully capture the essence of changes in weather and seasons.

"Being a director and a cinematographer gives you the added advantage of making spontaneous decisions," he says. "This being a period film, one tends to be governed by symmetry and painterly qualities. I chose to be non-symmetrical because I wanted to be inside the painting. I didn't want to create just another run-of-the-mill period piece." 