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# American Cinematographer

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## A Healing Discovery in India

by David Heuring

*Beyond the Soul* is the latest directorial effort by Rajiv Anchal, a filmmaker whose interest in spiritual matters is always a prominent aspect of his movies. Anchal's credits include *Butterfly* and *Kashmeeram*, and his previous film, *Guru* (which earned an Academy Award nomination in the foreign-film category) delved into mystical realms through the experiences of its title character.

*Beyond the Soul* is a cross-cultural, metaphysical journey involving an American physician who discovers Ayurveda, a system of ancient Indian medicine. Attempting to cure a patient's mysterious illness, the doctor travels to India, where he learns in a vision that the source of his patient's malady lies in one of his past lives. The film crosscuts among scenes set in contemporary India, scenes set in contemporary America, and scenes set in the characters' past lives in 1920s rural America.

Indian director of photography Ramachandra Babu, ISC was originally to film the entire feature for Anchal, but in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Babu and several members of his crew were denied U.S. visas. Consequently, Anchal asked cinematographer Keith Gruchala, who had originally been brought on board to advise Babu during the U.S. portion of the shoot, to film the American scenes.

Babu, one of India's top cine-

matographers, has been making films for 30 years. He graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, in 1971. Since then he has worked with most of his country's major directors, including Barathan, with whom he made seven films, and K.G. George and I.V. Sasi, for whom he shot 10 films each. Babu is also the founder and president of the Indian Society of Cinematographers.

Babu came onto *Beyond the Soul* just 10 days prior to the beginning of the shoot. He and Anchal knew each other from a previous film on which Anchal had served as art director. Babu says that because the theme of *Beyond the Soul* involves an ancient system of Indian learning, he and Anchal decided that particular attention should be paid to the ancient buildings that serve as locations for much of the film. "We wanted to highlight the texture and craftsmanship in the antique buildings, to represent the beauty and antiquity of India," says Babu. "For interiors, a soft, naturalistic type of lighting was used so that there wouldn't be any visual distractions. The outdoor scenes were shot in a sunny atmosphere with harder light, preferably in the mornings and evenings, to highlight the natural beauty of the Kerala coastline."

Babu and Anchal chose picturesque locations and worked unique cultural forms, such as the Kathakali Dance, into the script. "For day scenes we tended to use ordinary HMI lights and a couple of Kino Flos," he says. "For night scenes I often used 1K Babies and 2K Juniors." Babu adds that the production recorded live sound on the set, which is unusual in Indian production, and that the HMIs were not flicker-free; the humming sound they produced created headaches for the sound department.

*Beyond the Soul* was filmed in the standard 1.85:1 aspect ratio. Babu used an Arriflex 535B and a set of Zeiss prime lenses, and he also had an Angenieux 25-250mm HR T3.5 zoom lens on hand but rarely used it. "I prefer the sharpness and contrast of the prime lenses," he says. "The only filters I used were the Kodak Wratten 85, 85 N3 and 85 N6 gels and a polarizer. I used [Kodak]



**Left to right: Director Rajiv Anchal, A-camera operator Billy Nielson and cinematographer Keith Gruchala on location in the Illinois countryside.**

EXR 100T 5248 for indoor and outdoor day scenes because of its excellent contrast, very good grain and large exposure latitude, and I used [Kodak] Vision 500T 5279 for night sequences, as it has deep, rich blacks and fine grain structure.”

Babu rated both stocks normally. He notes, “In our part of the country, labs prefer a slightly denser negative because most of the prints are made directly from the original camera negative to save on making dupe negatives. Cinematographers generally tend to overexpose slightly to get a denser negative, which will have fewer scratches after running in the printer 20 or 30 times. For *Beyond the Soul*, I stuck to a more normal exposure because I knew that the film was slated for international release, and that dupe negatives would be made on intermediate stock for release prints.”

In one particularly tricky scene, the doctor has a mystical experience as he emerges from a swimming pool. The scene was shot in an elevated pool near the sea. Babu positioned the camera close to water level to make the surface appear to stretch endlessly into the distant ocean. Meanwhile, the sun was setting in the background, and Anchal asked Babu to make sure the actor’s facial expression was visible in the shot. The authorities at the location did not

permit a large lighting package, but Babu recalls that he “managed to bring in a couple of HMI lights and reflectors to fill in the shadow areas. I had to increase the [exposure level] as much as possible with the available sources. After taking an incident reading of the actor’s face, I underexposed by about two stops. The actor was fair-skinned, and I was confident that the details of his face would be picked up by the reliable 5248 film stock; I also knew the stock would take care of the bright sky and sun in the background. I shot the scene at 48 frames per second to enhance the mystical effect. The results are very satisfying.”

Gruchala, who photographed the U.S. portion of the shoot, is a native of the San Francisco Bay area who did theater lighting in college and earned a degree in cinematography at Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, California. After graduating in 1988, he spent a few years working as a gaffer, second-unit cinematographer and B-camera operator on low-budget features; he then moved to Europe, where he worked as a special-effects cinematographer and made documentaries, music videos and commercials. Gruchala moved back to California two years ago, and he met Anchal while researching a Scandinavian documentary that was to be filmed in India.

Gruchala notes that Schumacher

In *Beyond the Soul*, actors Ansa Akyea and Kim Ferguson portray characters in 1920s rural America, a period somehow linked to the patient's illness.



Camera in Chicago, which provided the *Beyond the Soul* team with cameras, lenses and other gear, was crucial to the success of the 22-day shoot. "They were more than helpful," he says. "I'm not sure the project would have been successful without their assistance.

When the going got tough, they were right there with us."

Anchal and Gruchala shot some tests and developed various filtration packages to create visual motifs for the American locations and time periods. "Because the scenes set in America comprise the sad part of the story, we decided to go for a very cold, desaturated look to contrast with the beautifully colorful scenes shot in India," Gruchala says. "We did a telecine at the beginning in order to set printer lights that we knew we could duplicate. We did some corrections on the telecine that we knew were not out of the range that was possible [on a Hazeltine], and came up with some interesting filter techniques." For the film's 1920s scenes, Gruchala used a Tiffen Antique Suede #2 on the lens and teamed it with either an 85 or a Coral #2, depending on the situation. The result was a desaturated look with colder skin tones and some warmth in the shadows.

For the modern-day scenes, Gruchala employed an unusual yellow

filter that was originally designed for correcting Russian color film; he'd found it in East Germany. "I've used it before on commercial shoots, and it gives me lovely, teal-green tones. It's important to control the art direction with it. I'm using the blue against it [in printing], and the yellow is mixing with that to accent the greens."

Like Babu, Gruchala shot most exteriors on 5248; his filtration package brought the effective ASA to 64. For many interiors, he used Kodak Vision 320T 5277.

One very low-light sequence, which was shot on a set built in Chicago, takes place in a root cellar beneath a sharecropper's cabin. In the scene, an African-American family has taken refuge from attackers in the cellar, and chemicals in the cellar are spilled and create dangerous fumes. "I was right down at the bottom of the scale," says Gruchala. "I had a good four stops down into the shadows. One of the actresses had very pale skin, and I was counting on

the glow from her skin to give me that edge of detail, enough to know where she was. I motivated the light to be cracks of moonlight coming through the cellar doors and barely backlighting and revealing little hints of detail here and there. I felt confident that the Vision 320T would give me a little bit more room. I'm familiar with the stock and enjoy using it — the latitude is always there in a pinch."

Gruchala says that a good translator and mutual patience kept cultural and language barriers between him and Anchal to a minimum. "The crew definitely expected to work in a more Indian style, and I sort of pushed everyone a little more in the direction of an American production," he says. "I tried to impress upon them that we were going to have an American crew, and that came with certain expectations. Any 'culture clashes' were related to organizational issues rather than artistic issues. Rajiv is very specific about what he wants, which was a great help. I was a



little concerned about coverage issues at times, because I think Rajiv is used to a method where film material is especially precious. I really loved working with him, and I look forward to seeing how the two segments blend together." ■

**The crew prepares to execute a crane shot at an Illinois farmhouse.**