

# zerbo

The Journal of the Guild of Television Cameramen



**From the front**  
**Income from stock footage**  
**Oscar winners: Garrett Brown, Ira Tiffen**

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# River to heaven

## The Zone

by L. K. Gilbert soc

The old man lay motionless on a bed of straw in the back of the freight truck. He and his family had travelled for three days and nights over rough unsealed roads and had endured a torturous 500km journey specifically so that he could die in this place. But arriving at the city perimeter, the truck wasn't allowed inside. Its bulk wouldn't fit down the narrow streets designed only to accommodate Ambassador motor cars, rickshaws and bicycles, and at the truck stop the family couldn't find a taxi willing to take the dying man to the hospice. They asked us if we could transport him

in our camera car.

So it was that the first bond was formed between the film crew and the families of the subjects we had come to film in India, people at the actual moment of death.

As a journalist writing about TV and film, Geeta Nadkarni had thought about it and written about it, but she had never really lived it – location film production, that is. Yes, she'd sat in her air-conditioned office in Singapore and written knowledgeably about various features of tripods, cameras and other essential production equipment, but what she needed now was a healthy

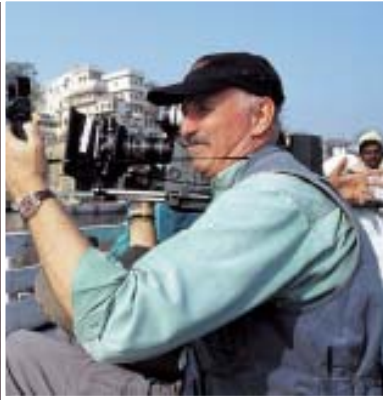
dose of reality to turn her theoretical musings on the industry into genuine experience if she was going to be able to compete with the 'war stories' that professional film crews entertain each other with.

### Facing reality

"When can I come on a real location shoot with you?" Geeta had demanded, envisaging images of sipping chilled Perrier water in a comfortable Winnebago as she waited to interview her childhood hero on the set of his latest exotic Asian feature film.

But reality was to hit Geeta

PHOTO: MONIC KUMAR



Director of Photography, Laurie Gilbert has worked on almost every kind of production (as regular readers of Zerb will know). Journalist, Geeta Nadkarni is a novice on location. When a shoot in the ancient Indian city of Varanasi brought them together, neither was completely prepared for what they were about to experience.

sooner than she expected, for earlier this year she found herself on location in the city of Varanasi, in India, the country of her birth, surrounded by predatory, thieving monkeys and a multi-national film crew. I interrupted her reverie: "Geeta – I need your help to light something" and she responded with a grin that reflected her innocent delight at being on the 'front line' where the real action happens. If Geeta had previously fantasized about such a request, her dreams would probably have included a large studio set, a handful of photogenic celebrities, lights, glamour and all the hype.

Not so this location. Ten minutes after she had helped me to light and shoot our 'talent', she returned to the rest of the crew looking pensive and very subdued. Her next question was underpinned by a deep, emotional reaction to what she had just experienced: "How do you handle something like that?" the professional reporter in Geeta asked.

For in reality, the glamorous studio of Geeta's imagination had been replaced with Mukthi Bhavan, a dark and very basic Indian hospice. The film light she had just manipulated was a simple candle that needed to be held six inches off the cold, hard concrete floor. And the talent was a very old and impoverished Indian lady who had literally died in front of us just three minutes ago.

By its very nature, working in the motion picture business can mean shooting elaborate production sequences in a commercial studio one week and spending four weeks in an Indian hospice trying to shoot sensitive imagery of the moment of death the next.

**Emotional defence mechanism**

As Geeta rightly asked - how do we handle it? Well, I believe experienced film makers have a place in their psyche I call The Zone, which is a professional state of mind which allows us to focus on our craft and to do what we have to do, no matter what the situation.

Despite having been shooting documentaries for more than 25 years on all manner of subjects in 45 different countries, this shoot was genuinely one of the most challenging I had ever faced, both technically and emotionally. As Geeta very quickly came to realise, to solve the very immediate technical problems of cinematography, you have to find The Zone and insulate yourself from the emotional problems.

We had come to India to make a 90 minute cinema documentary film about the legends, beliefs and religious practices of the Hindu religion. The city of Varanasi, which the Hindus know as Kashi (the ultimate destination of pilgrimage) is situated on the conflux of the two rivers Varuna and Asi as they join the sacred Ganges. It is renowned throughout the world as the oldest living city on earth and there is a timeless quality in its day-to-day practicalities. Electricity, for example, is available only occasionally and life goes on either with it, or without it.

Devotees of the Hindu religion

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believe that to break the eternal cycle of reincarnation after death, they must travel to Kashi and be publicly cremated at one of the funeral pyres that form the legendary Burning Ghats of Varanasi. This then allows them to achieve Moksha (eternal salvation). When they feel it is their time, devout Hindus like the old man in the truck will travel across India, by any means possible, to come to the city to die and be cremated with the time-honoured rituals which bring them their eternal salvation.

American 'indie' film-maker Gayle Ferraro of Aerial Productions in Boston has a passion for filming documentaries on aspects of Asian culture and was using her own money to make this film and to communicate her vision to a cinema audience. She had searched the web for Asia-based industry professionals who would help her realise her

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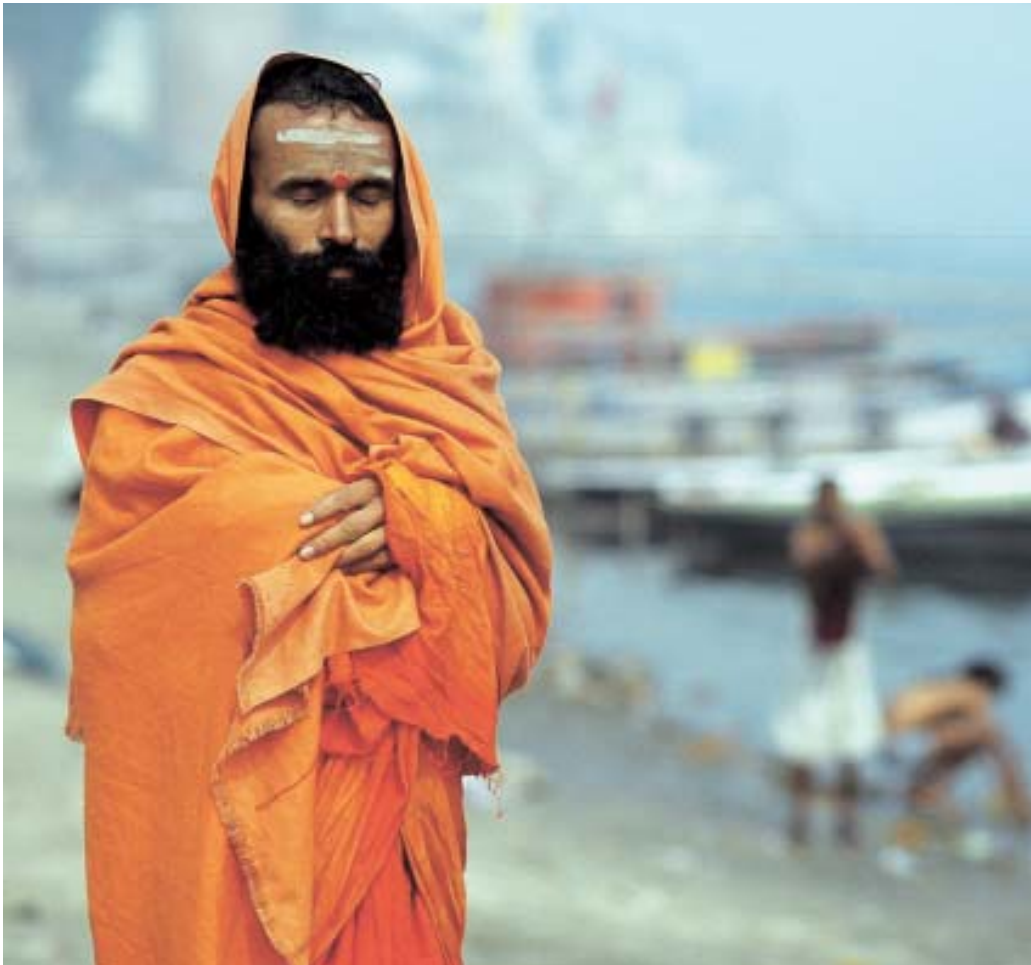


1. Dawn at Assi Ghat on the Ganges

2. Next is Ritual Bathing

3. Bottom is Devotees travelling to the Burning Ghats

PHOTOGRAPHS: L.K. GILBERT



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1. Sadhu On The River Bank

dream and late one night I got the call from the USA.

Apart from journalist and 'production assistant' Geeta Nadkarni, I was to be joined by three of India's most talented and experienced film professionals – producer Girish Thakur, recordist Rajendra 'Raj' Hegde and 1st AC Monic 'Imax' Kumar. All of them knew they were going to be working in a city where the principal business was death and all of them had the professional experience to be able to use The Zone when things got a little emotionally challenging.

### Technical challenges

Arriving on location, I began to realise that from a cinematographer's viewpoint, my technical problems were immense. I had not had the benefit of a local recce to anticipate lighting, camera, lens and film stock requirements accurately and I was going to have to do the job with only whatever basic facilities, budget and equipment were available.

Our equipment included a Super 16mm production Arriflex SR3 with three magazines and 100 rolls of Mr

Kodak's finest, in a 4:6 stock ratio of 200T to 100T. The tight budget allowed only a limited lens selection which included a 6mm Century, a 9mm T1.3 Zeiss Super speed, a 10:1 Zeiss T4 and a superb Canon 300mm T2.8. I also had with me my own documentary lighting kit, a Vinten Fibretec HD100 tripod, a Cinesaddle and my Hollywood Microdolly.

What I didn't seem to have anywhere in Varanasi was reliable electricity, essential for powering battery chargers, location lighting and computers. Neither did the budget run to professional generators. By the end of the first week another challenge in the shape of a linkage problem inside the Zeiss 10:1, my most important lens, had presented itself. What was happening inside the body of the lens was not matching either the setting on the aperture ring or the exposure I wanted to go on film.

The rooms inside the Mukthi Bhavan hospice were often shuttered and were always very dark. The extreme sensitivity of what we were trying to document in front of griev-

ing families meant that we had to operate as discreetly and as invisibly as possible. The only lens that actually worked in this dark and very desperate photographic situation was the 9mm T1.3 Super speed but this was often too wide for the normal 'sit back on a long lens' inobtrusive documentary shooting style that would have suited the inevitable events unfolding in the room.

The short focal length of this critical lens meant that 90% of what I shot inside the dying rooms of Mukthi Bhavan had to be shot kneeling up close to the subject (sometimes as close as 18 inches, which is perhaps why Geeta was so affected by the process) with the camera supported only inches off the floor by the Cinesaddle. It was often too dark to focus accurately from the ground glass screen and my assistant and I had to rely on estimating the distance by eye and setting the focus by instinct. If my subject was sleeping and movement from breathing was at a minimum, I ran the Arriflex at 6 fps gaining another two stops in the darkest corners of the room.

There were three separate occasions when I was actually rolling at the time of death and I have to admit only The Zone allowed me to expose accurately, shoot steady, stay sharp and literally fade to black at the end of the take. How these images are actually used will be up to the editor, Keiko Deguchi, in New York.

PHOTO: L. K. GILBERT

### Hunting tigers

As part of The Zone, the crew needed to find a code word for our subjects which would allow us to talk about them discreetly in a professional context. We decided to call them 'tigers' because of the orange robes they would wear for the duration of their final journey to Moksha. On the regular occasions when we were trying to locate and shoot one of the 200 funeral corteges that wound their way through the crowded streets every day, we were 'hunting tigers'.

When one of our hero 'tigers' finally passed away in Mukthi Bhavan, their body would be decorated in the traditional manner by family members and then carried ceremoniously through the streets to their final destination at the Burning Ghats. Monic and I would try and follow this procession, for more than a mile, through narrow, busy alleyways with a handheld camera equipped with the 6mm Century lens. This challenge became 'chasing the tiger' and one of the biggest



PHOTO: L. K. GILBERT



obstacles we constantly encountered were the thousands of sacred cows wandering the lanes and performing their daily business with immunity. Once the family had arrived at the Burning Ghat, the 'tiger' was ceremoniously dipped in the sacred River Ganges one last time before being laid to rest and finally cremated on the top of one of the multitude of funeral pyres.

Ganges River on the discreet end of the 300mm T2.8 Canon. We also turned the barge into 'Studio Ganga' and interviewed Dr Mishra and our various interview subjects sitting cross-legged on cushions in the bow. As Dr Mishra talked to us about life and death in Varanasi, subtle variations evolved in the background as we drifted past the face of the oldest city on earth bathed in light

cally separated from it with a Swiss army penknife!  
Gayle left India with a large, tin trunk, which had been custom decorated by a local signwriter to avoid accidental airport x-rays. Inside were 92 rolls of exposed 16mm film, documenting one of the most sensitive of all subjects, shot in the darkest of locations, with the minimum of light, in the oldest living city on earth.

1. Producer Girish Thakur and 1st AC Monic Kumar
2. Gayle Ferraro and her crew at the Burning Ghat
3. Director Gayle Ferraro and DOP Laurie K. Gilbert

*we spent many blissful hours just drifting with the flow and shooting the culture and daily activities of the Ganges River*

### Going with the flow

To complement the emotional intensity of Mukthi Bhavan and the Burning Ghat footage, we hired a river barge from the persistent boat wallah who parked himself outside our guest house each morning and spent many blissful hours just drifting with the flow and shooting the culture and daily activities of the

from the setting sun.

Four weeks after we had arrived in Varanasi to face a mountain of challenges, we finally repacked the camera and production equipment for the trips back to Boston and Singapore. The fondness my friend Monic had developed for the state-of-the-art Vinten Fibertec tripod was so intense that he had to be surgi-

For the final film, Gayle rejected the crew shooting title of Ganga and it was the big thumbs down to my suggestion of Life, Death and Moksha. But as the camera rushes began to evolve into a real film through the craftsmanship of editor Keiko Deguchi, so did inspiration for the final title, and the production will be released in cinemas as *Ganges – River to Heaven*.



PHOTO: MONIC KUMAR

Laurie K Gilbert soc is an Asia-based director of photography who operates globally shooting productions for cinema and television. More information on this and other productions can be found at [www.limage.tv](http://www.limage.tv)



PHOTO: RAJENDRA HEGDE

# Beer and holy water

by Geeta Nadkarni

1. *The Sorcerer and the Apprentice!*

Emotionally Yours' said the airline's slogan, and I must admit the usual pre-travel butterflies in my stomach felt more like hummingbirds as I boarded the Air Sahara flight to Varanasi. My heart gave a little lurch as the plane took off and I wondered what the hell Laurie 'Grape' Gilbert SOC had gotten me into.

## Bloody grape

It all started with an email one morning in Montreal, where I now live. "Get rid of that barstool you've been wearing for a hat," he wrote in his usual exuberant style, "and come on down to India." The mail contained the contact details of one Gayle Ferraro, American indie filmmaker, and a note that she was looking for someone who spoke Hindi and might be interested in going along for a shoot to Varanasi.

The thought of finally being underfoot during a production instead of merely scribbling about the aftermath - while simultaneously partaking of various familiar culinary delights - catapulted me out of my stupor and had me galloping about the house trumpeting the news to my flatmates. I looked up the website and made that all-important phone call. The woman at the other end sounded enthusiastic and asked me what I knew of Varanasi. I told her I'd never been, but had read reports of Deepa Mehta's aborted film *Water* which had been meant to be based on the plight of the abandoned widows in

the old city. But filming had been interrupted by hooligans with friends in high places. Was that, I politely enquired, going to be the subject of her film? She assured me it wasn't and went on to explain how, on an earlier trip to the fabled city, she had been struck by how horribly polluted the River Ganga was and the desperate need to do something about it. Then she had met a Dr Mishra - a man who was both a religious leader and a highly

right lens.

Monic, Raj and I landed in Varanasi in the middle of an unprecedented cold spell. It was close to freezing as we finally pulled up at the guesthouse. Having had some time to think about the film, I realised that I was sort of scared. What I wasn't sure our American director understood was that, beneath her fascinating exterior, the city had teeth. Sharp ones. How else would she have survived all she has? India can be a tolerant place, but as with any religiously charged destination, there is a thinly veiled madness that one could sense lurking beneath the politeness and warm smiles. I was suddenly less than enthusiastic about the prospect of touching a political hot potato like the cleaning up of the Holy River. It took about five cups of steaming hot 'masala chai' before I could work up the nerve to mention this to Gayle at our first group meeting.

You can imagine my surprise and relief then, when I was informed that the film had very little to do with pollution and treatment plants, and was instead to focus on Hindu death rituals. Apparently the talk we'd had about the sewage treatment plant was nothing more than information Gayle had picked up on her earlier trip - an angle that she had explored but eventually rejected.

So, instead of having to pussyfoot through powderkeg interviews with moustachioed politicians, all I would have to do was talk to people who

“ the challenges were completely different from the ones I had expected ”

trained civil engineer - who had devised a groundbreaking new system to clean up the river.

Wow. A mystical protagonist with the oldest and holiest of Indian rivers as his leading lady. Count me in.

## The City of the Dead

Varanasi. Benares. Kashi. She goes by several names, this 'City of the Dead'. The Hindu equivalent of Mecca or Lourdes, Varanasi is acknowledged to be one of the oldest living religious cities in the world. She has survived both Mughal and British invaders and managed to wrap herself in a time warp that has one constantly fumbling in the camera case for the

had either come themselves or who had brought relatives to die in the Holy City. I found myself suddenly craving a tall beer.

And I don't even drink.

## The shoot

I had come mentally prepared for this shoot to be hard: long hours, frazzled nerves, spy cameras and dangerous liaisons. But somehow, in the event, the challenges were completely different from the ones I had expected.

I certainly didn't anticipate having to sit with Girish Thakur, our Indian producer, and draft around a gazillion carefully worded documents seeking permission to film in

the city, particularly around the Burning Ghats where the bodies were cremated around the clock. Nor did I foresee the sinking worry with which we approached the empty hospice (the unusually low temperatures were discouraging people from coming into the city).

And then there was the weird place I was in psychologically, being 'Westernised'. Sure, I am Indian having been born and brought up in India. But I'm fundamentally a big city girl, and nothing in my experience had prepared me for the matter-of-fact, almost callous way that people handle death and dying in Varanasi. Here, poverty and hardship keep people in far closer touch with

nauseating stench of burning flesh. I don't like to think about how close I was to decorating Laurie's shirt with the morning's toast when I saw one of the workers carrying the charred remains of a woman's pelvis to throw in the river. And I don't think I'll ever forget the sight of an old man's face on fire as his flesh melted away and dripped off his skull.

The idea of escaping the ghat only to return to the hospice (which isn't unlike one of those horror movie spooky mansions) and to listen to the Hindu hymn that played over and over 24 hours a day didn't hold much charm. There were plenty of moments where the tears threatened to spill out and leave large

**as tends to happen with any difficult situation, we gradually became desensitised**

the circle of life than us more privileged folks. There were no euphemisms. While I would be careful to use the Hindi phrase for 'passed away' when referring to a recent guest at the hospice, their families would bluntly say 'died'.

And I could tell that I wasn't the only crew member to be so affected. Things came to a head when we paid our first visit to Manikarnika Ghat one of the two burning ghats which was really just a huge open-air, mass crematorium. We watched transfixed as thick billows of smoke rose up over the bodies of devout Hindus lined up on their pyres. The air was unspeakable, filled with the

smears on my 'professional image'.

Because I was a non-cameraperson, ie, translator and self-appointed chronicler of the documentary, I had no technical problems to occupy my mind. Instead, I had to keep my eyes and ears open, not just for the objective events in progress, but as much for the emotional quotient that hid in the downcast eyes of the people at whom I was directing my carefully phrased questions.

"I feel like a vulture," I remember saying. Laurie and I were talking quietly over a cup of chai. He made a joke, but I could tell he was brooding too, and we just sat there until the keeper of the hospice alerted us

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PHOTO: L. K. GILBERT



that one of the two dying ladies at Mukthi Bhavan had finally breathed her last.

Then Laurie handed me that candle.

### Stories

Of course, as tends to happen with any difficult situation, we gradually became desensitised. We'd wake up in the mornings and make tasteless jokes about the 'tigers' over soggy cornflakes and spicy omelettes.

Heck, by the end of that first week, not only had the crew come up with some truly interesting ways around our technical problems, but Girish had managed to raise morale by finding a half-decent watering hole.

Over chilled beers and lassis we had worked our way around button-hole video cameras that didn't work (which thankfully we never really needed to use); boat trips on the river; the problem of charging batteries where the electricity supply is about as reliable as the Indian weather bureau; staring our own mortality in the face about a dozen times a day - and so on.

I learnt a hell of a lot on that trip - and not just about the realities of making a movie. I still smile when I recall Laurie bounding down the street hurling ceremonial rice in the midst of some stranger's procession in an effort to distract from the camera; or Monic wolfing down approximately five kilos of biriyani at dinner; Girish regaling us with stories of botched shoots; and Raj, whose calm acceptance of the gore around us was an inspiration.

I grew up - both as a writer and a person. And while I may not have managed to completely figure out the meaning of life, I am one of a small handful of people who knows where you can get a beer in Varanasi!

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PHOTO: L. K. GILBERT



1 & 2. Everyone has daily chores

PHOTO: RAJENDRA HEGDE



The closest Geeta gets to operating the camera!

Based in Canada, Geeta Nadkarni has spent a large part of her life cultivating the ability to fall asleep on long flights - a talent that stands her in good stead as a freelance journalist and amateur photographer. To contact her, email: [voodoo-scribe@yahoo.com](mailto:voodoo-scribe@yahoo.com)



PHOTO: L. K. GILBERT

# The Vinten and the pachyderm

by L. K. Gilbert soc

- 1. The legendary Monic 'Imax' Kumar
- 2. More daily chores

When Peter Harman of Vinten invited me to field-test their new Fibertec Tripod, it was a no-strings arrangement. They would lend me the tripod for the duration of the shoot and all they wanted in return was accurate feedback on how it operated on location under pressure.

When I unpacked the Fibertec in India and introduced it to my highly experienced camera assistant, Monic 'Imax' Kumar, it was love at first sight and for the entire duration of the four-week shoot he could be found cleaning it, analysing it and admiring it.

The Fibertec worked so well for us that we decided to use our geographical advantages and do something for Vinten in return. We would try and create the ultimate 'Vinten in India' photograph for their promotion purposes – a DoP carrying a production Arri SR3 in the Indian countryside, being followed by an obedient elephant carrying the Vinten Fibertec

crossways under his trunk.

We had the countryside, we had the Arri, we had the Vinten, we had the DOP, and so all we needed was the elephant.

Now if there is one man in India who can beg, borrow or steal an elephant, it is producer Girish 'What to

do?' Thakur. One overcast memorable morning found him sitting in a river barge with Monic, Raj the audio guy, and myself, motoring down the Ganges looking for a photogenic elephant that would take direction.

We travelled by barge, by motor rickshaw and even by foot, through village after village, but everywhere our guide took us the villagers told us we should have been there yesterday. A quick sniff at the evidence lying around the place and Girish was able to confirm that we had indeed missed them by only a matter of hours!

A week later Girish, Raj and I were desperately looking for a bear in a city that is theoretically 'dry', when a wedding festival paraded past us and bringing up the rear was one of the elusive pachyderms. Girish instantly switched from thirsty mode into producer mode and for more than 10 minutes negotiated theatrically with the owner as I watched optimistically on the sidelines. Unfortunately the owner wrongly smelt big money and the final price he demanded was well beyond our location pocket money.

Dear Mr Vinten - We tried. Honest! But Monic has promised that if he gets the opportunity to work with the Fibertec in India again, he will find an elephant and he will get the photograph. Of course that will then make him the Vinten Pin-up Poster Boy in India!

Visit [www.vintenc.com](http://www.vintenc.com)



PHOTO: L. K. GILBERT

for camera assistant, Monic, it was love at first sight