

Meet Hetal Dedhia India's First & Only Female Film Gaffer, Guts, Hard Work And Passion

1Raj Mani Maurya

1Guest Lecturer

1Centre For Theatre & Film, University Of Allahabad

Abstract - What is the gaffer? "Gaffer" is a British slang term for "Old man / godfather or grandfather, or the head of a group of labourers," so the sight of that title in movie credits has probably triggered some laughs from moviegoers. But although the idea is funny, this is not a special film job for old fogeys - the gaffer is actually the head electrician on a movie set. In British theater, the term was used to describe the man who adjusted the lighting, and that came from the city lamplighters who used a "Gaff," a pole with a hook on the end, to light the gas lamps in the streets.

keywords - Gaffer, Film Lighting, Key Grip, Cinematographer, Cinema, Electrician..etc.

Introduction

Who is Hetal Dedhia? Hetal, who is known as India's first and only female gaffer, began her career in 2005, following in the footsteps of her father, Mulchand Dedhia. Born in Mumbai, 1985, Hetal is the youngest among her siblings. Her father Mulchand, India's one of the most renowned gaffer, started his journey as an electrician at weddings and other functions before he became a gaffer. His first big break was Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* in 1998.



Hetal and her two elder sisters work for the family-owned company, Light and Grips, founded by Mulchand in 1993. Hetal is the only sister who took to the physically intense role of gaffing. She wanted to do work that was challenging. *She liked getting her hands dirty.*

What does of work of Hetal Dedhia? Ever wondered how certain scenes in a film create a mood just through their visuals? What creates 'the look'? One of the many important factors that goes into achieving 'the look' is Lighting. Who exactly takes care of it? The head electrician or chief lighting technician on a film set, also known as gaffer, works closely with the Director of Photography (DOP) to execute their vision of a perfect visual. Hetal Dedhia does just that.

Gaffer Family & Hetal's Training

The rags to riches story of her dad is yet another inspiration that Hetal has learned a lot from. "He has his own story," Hetal says. As the essay tells, "Mulchand, who never got a chance to study, worked as an electrician at weddings and other functions before he became a cable and generator operator. While laying cables on a film set, he would watch the 'lighting dadas' working around him—technicians were not called 'gaffers' back then."



It was by silently observing these technicians, that Moolchand learned all the technicalities of lighting. He absorbed all that he could and eventually learned how to light up a film set and that is when he started getting lighting jobs. Mira Nair gave him the first big break by hiring him for Salaam Bombay!

While “Hetal did not expect to follow in her father’s footsteps. But those who know her say they are not surprised by the path she chose. They point to her brother’s death as a turning point. Keval passed away in 1999 after a sudden heart attack. He was twenty-two.”

Out of the four siblings, Keval was physically and mentally challenged. However, the family never used that fact to pity him, they rather drew their strength from the enthusiasm with which he lived his life. Thus, while his death came as a big jolt to Hetal, it also provided her with a direction.

All three Dedhia girls now work for the company Light and Grips, which was founded by Mulchand in 1993. However, out of the three, it is only Hetal who took up the physically tolling job of gaffing.

Who is the Gaffer?

Sometimes called the chief lighting technician, the gaffer, along with the key grip, works directly under the Director of photography (otherwise known as the DoP or cinematographer). The gaffer and key grip handle the physical and technical labor that make the DoP's vision into reality -- the gaffer and his or her crew are in charge of lighting, and the key grip's crew work with the cameras. The DoP, gaffer and key grip are always in close communication during a shoot. The key grip is the head grip, in charge of the labor and non-electrical equipment used to support and modify the lighting. Grip equipment includes stands, flags and gobos, etc. The gaffer's job is definitely a technical and administrative one, but depending on the DoP's working style and their relationship, the gaffer can also have some creative freedom with the lighting and lighting effects.

Gaffer Job Description (in short): The gaffer is the head of the Lighting and Power Department on a film set. They work in Pre-production and during production to help achieve the desired cinematic image through setting up light and running cables.

How to train Hetal Dedhia for the Gaffer Roles & Responsibilities?

Hetal told her parents that she wanted to become a lighting technician. Her decision was met with initial scepticism as her parents thought it was an unconventional career choice for a woman. There was not a single woman gaffer they knew of.

Being a gaffer’s daughter did not make it easy for her to enter the world of gaffing. Before working professionally, Hetal worked for her father’s company for six months where she was treated like any other employee. While working for her father she learned to use and maintain different kinds of lights. Her work required her to lift heavy lighting equipment and climb on ladders to rig lights. She had to work out regularly in order to stay strong.

After Completing her training as a technician, she worked under other gaffers and saw how directors of photography (DOPs) operate. This made her realize the aesthetic value of lighting which along with the technical knowledge helped her understand how to achieve different moods and textures.

Nobody wants to get their hands dirty’

All three Dedhia girls work for the family-owned company, Light and Grips, founded by Mulchand in 1993. Jinal Dedhia handles the finances while Minal Dedhia works in management—thought she is currently taking a break to look after her young family. Hetal, now a director at the company, is the only one who took to the physically intense role of gaffing. ‘My sisters would never think of doing what I do!’ she laughs. ‘Nobody wants to get their hands dirty. They are not one of those chicks.’

Ever since she had stepped on to a film set as a little girl, Hetal knew she belonged to one. She couldn’t ignore that pull any longer. Hetal told her parents that she wanted to follow in her father’s footsteps. She was going to become a lighting technician.

Mulchand was not sure whether she would be able to hack it as a gaffer. ‘I tried to convince her that this is a man’s job because it involves lifting heavy cables and walking on scaffolding to fix the lights,’ he says.

Hetal understood her parents’ scepticism. They did not know a single woman gaffer. It was an unconventional career choice—not just for an Indian woman but for a woman in any part of the world. ‘Normally, in the culture we come from, girls

get married by the time they are my age,' Hetal says. But she would have none of it. When Mulchand realized she was not going to back down, he simply said, 'This is your choice.'

He didn't ease his daughter's entry into the world of gaffing. Like every other aspiring gaffer who comes to him seeking a job, Hetal worked for the company for six months without pay. Mulchand told everyone on his team not to give her any preferential treatment. 'He wanted me to find my path,' Hetal says. The early days were tough. The learning curve was steep. The equipment was heavy and rigging lights meant climbing ladders and scaffolding. Hetal never thought twice about doing any of the grunt work. She would work out regularly to stay strong. She wanted to prove herself as a gaffer.

Often the only woman in a testosterone-packed world, Hetal doesn't feel the need to downplay her feminine side. At 5'8", with her athletic frame and long dark curls, Hetal is often mistaken for a model. She has been offered several roles in front of the camera but has never considered it. 'I could not build that confidence,' she says, smiling self-consciously.

Conclusion

"I think lighting is the most important thing for films and commercials. Without it, you can't make anything look good," says Hetal Dedhia, proudly relishing the fact that she is Hindi cinema's first and only female gaffer.

The 33-year-old woman is absolutely proud of the unique place that she occupies in the vast corpus of Hindi cinema. As she says, "I love it! I don't think there can be anything better than that."

An essay from Changemakers Twenty Women Transforming Bollywood Behind the Scenes looks at Hetal's journey in the film industry and how she became the first woman gaffer in Bollywood. It was in 2005 that Hetal stepped into the shoes of her father Mulchand Dedhia, India's most celebrated gaffer, and began her career in the Hindi film industry.

Bluff master, Karthik Calling Karthik and Road, happen to be among the illustrious list of movies that Hetal has worked on. To add to this list, she has also worked on international projects shot in India and takes special pride in Mission Impossible: The Ghost Protocol and Un Plus Une among many others.

As the Changemakers' essay mentions, "The Dedhia's are a close-knit bunch and the family bonds are strong." Hetal feels indebted to how her mother has contributed to the family as a homemaker. She says, "I saw my mother working all her life to keep the family going," Hetal recalls. 'It is a full-time job and shouldn't be considered nothing. I think being a housewife should be a highly paid job.'

The head electrician on any film or television production unit she's part of, thirty-two-year-old. Hetal is proud of the unique place she holds in Indian cinematic history. 'I love it!' she says, her face melting into a wide grin. 'I don't think there can be anything better than that.'

Lighting up her own path, says Hetal Dedhia (Gaffer)

After working under her father, Hetal worked on major films like Bluffmaster (2005), Luck By Chance (2009) and Karthik Calling Karthik (2010). She also assisted her father on the set of Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol (2011) when it was shot in India.

Hetal believes that lights play an essential role in films and have become a medium of reaching the audience. With their colors, distribution and intensity, lights can generate various moods and meanings in a film.

At present, Hetal works at her father's company. She proudly heads a team of men and is excellent at what she does. There was some initial scepticism but as soon as people realized that she knew what she was doing their reaction changed to acceptance.

Things were pretty rough when she initially started. "The learning curve was steep. The equipment were heavy and rigging lights meant climbing ladders and scaffolding. Hetal never thought twice about doing any of the grunt work. She would work out regularly to stay strong. She wanted to prove herself as a gaffer."

Today, she proudly heads a team of men and is excellent at what she does. When asked if there are men who get intimidated by her, Hetal replies chuckling, "Yeah, they are, they are."

Hetal's journey throws a light on the fact that A job is a job and a man or a woman will not be different at it.

Some Female Notable Gaffers:

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- [2] Tana Dubbe (California)
- [3] Melanie A. Ragone (California)
- [4] Vanessa Alexis (Brooklyn, USA)
- [5] Melissa Beaupre (USA)

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