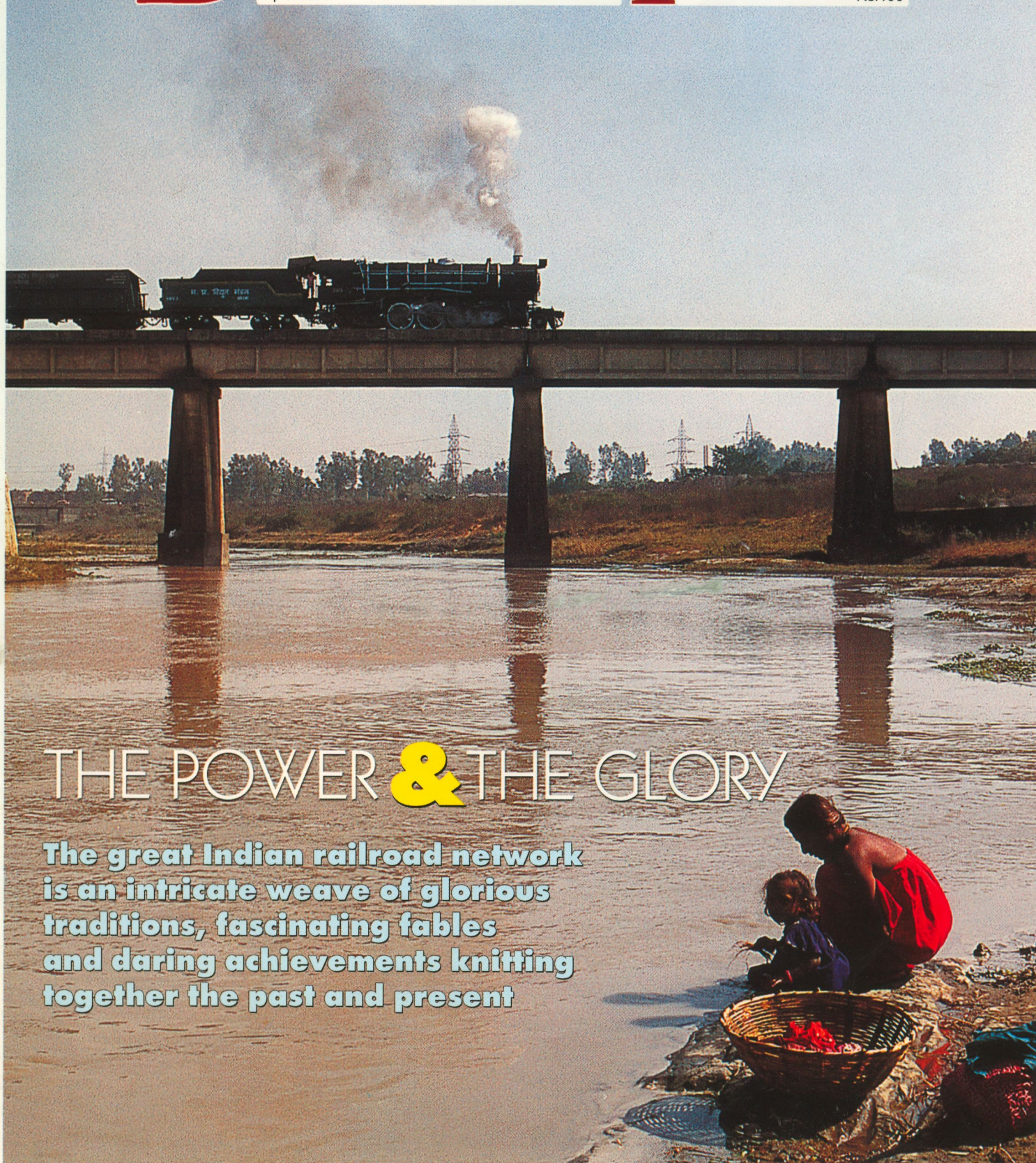


# Discover India

April 2001

Rs. 100



## THE POWER & THE GLORY

**The great Indian railroad network is an intricate weave of glorious traditions, fascinating fables and daring achievements knitting together the past and present**

# Discover India

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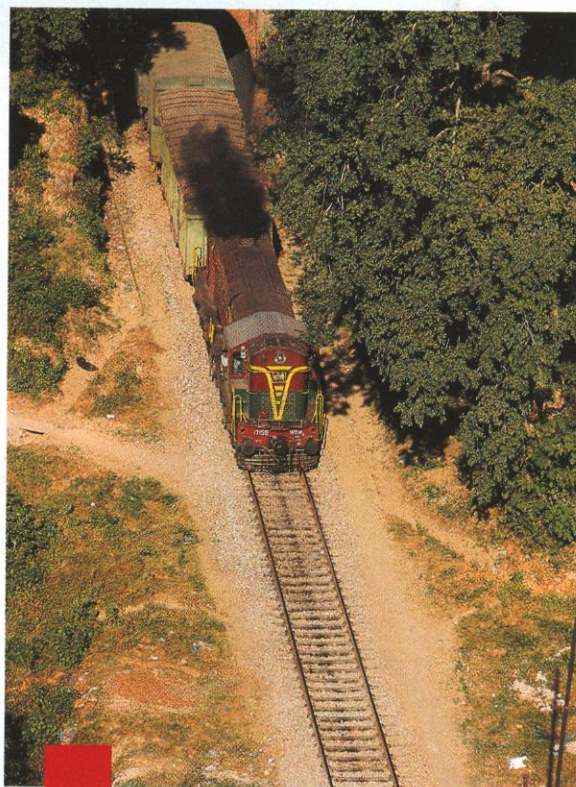
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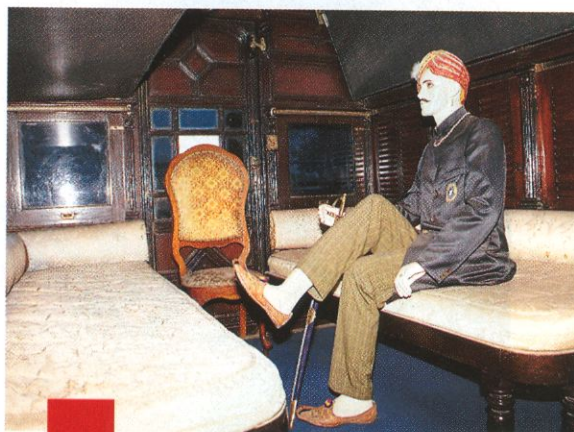
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REVIEWS • TROYNA'S TRAIN TRILOGY



# THE GREAT RAILWAY JOURNEYS

Nihal Mathur

One of the most successful programs BBC Television has produced in recent years has been a series of travel-documentary films that criss-crossed the globe and were called the *Great Railway Journeys of the World*. The first series was commissioned in 1979 and consisted of six railway journeys around the world. One of them was *The Deccan* from India. The success of the programme led the BBC to recommission a second series in 1982 which once again featured a train journey from India called *The Line of Dreams*. In 1998, once again, there was an Indian journey called *East to West*.

The Great Railway Journey documentaries filmed in India is the work of one man, Gerry Troyna, who has been the producer and director of all the three films. Once a BBC staffer, Troyna is now an independent filmmaker who has had an enduring love affair with India that began with *The Deccan*. Why did he choose the Deccan? Troyna recalls: "The decision to go on the Deccan route was born out of a frustration of seeing India in the North only — Taj/Shimla/Delhi. So we decided to go south because of wanting to be different."

And different he certainly was, in the treatment and conception of the film that is laced with the sparkling wit of the playwright Brian Thompson, the traveller-narrator. With Brian, we embark on the journey from the cathedral-like Victoria Terminus or the VT in Bombay. Taking different trains and travelling in different classes, Brian goes through Pune, Guntakal, Mysore and Ooty finally ending his journey a week later at village near Cochin where the backwaters meet the sea.

"Nothing in the imagination can quite prepare you for the pure shock of India," declares Brian in the opening sequences. Yet, as he meanders southwards, he comes to marvel at this country, and of course, the Railways.

Perhaps because he now encounters the "real" India of teeming millions — coolies, coffeewallahs, booking clerks, line inspectors, ticket collectors, guards, signal men, waiters, fellow passengers, and of course children. It isn't surprising that Brian concludes the film by saying: "If ever there was a country in which the common people



Jacket cover of the BBC book produced on the Little Lines featuring "The Line of Dreams". Photo: Nihal Mathur

**In a period of 20 years, the BBC has taken the travel-documentaries to almost every part of the globe with a viewership of hundreds of millions**



Coolies taking film equipment across the station. Photo: Gerry Troyna

determine your view of it, then India must surely be that country." 'The Deccan' was showered with plaudits and prompted the *Guardian* to write that *The Deccan* had re-invented the genre of the travel documentary.

Then came the second series that concentrated on the narrow-gauge railways that were, once upon a time, built to serve remote and inaccessible places, linking the 'frontiers' to the colonial powers. Titled *Great Little Railways*, the second series told the story of some of these charming "little lines" and explored the landscape through which they passed while introducing some of the people who either used the railways or help run them. Gerry Troyna chose a perfect journey in Rajasthan — a meter-gauge line between Jodhpur and Jaipur. This journey on the Marudhar Express was called *The Line of Dreams*.

Compared to the reality of the Western world, where the "little lines" hauled by steam had been long abandoned, it was nothing short of a dream that here in India it not only continued to exist but actually carried passengers to several small towns along its route! Obscure stations between Jodhpur and

*Besides sheer story-telling, one of the most striking features about Troyna's films is his use of music, which seems to blend and merge with the moving images*



Jaipur, which normally flash past in a fast train, come to acquire their names and become destinations like Merta, Makrana, Phulera, Sambhar etc.

Travelling this route, Troyna introduces us to characters who seem to live in the world of their dreams. Take for instance, Maharaj Swaroop Singh of Jodhpur who, even while playing cycle polo, seems to be reliving the dreams of his royal past. We follow twelve year old Kailash, the young busker who makes a living by singing in the train, often travelling without a ticket! Although his pockets are empty, his heart is full of Bollywood heroes and heroines. Then there is O.P Dixit, the inimitable Ticket Inspector, who lives out his fantasies of being a detective while apprehending "ticketless travellers". Between O.P Dixit and Kailash are some of the most endearing sequences in the documentary as one tries to catch and the other dodges, changing compartments in a moving train! We also get to meet Mr. Mandis, a retired Anglo- Indian loco-driver who poign-

A child sings by the railway tracks in Mumbai. Photo: Gerry Troyna

antly reflects on the glorious days of the colonial past and actually says: "I look back to those days like a dream. Just like a dream." Troyna too, was not untouched by the experience and concludes the film with "India is the oldest dream and the dream lives on."

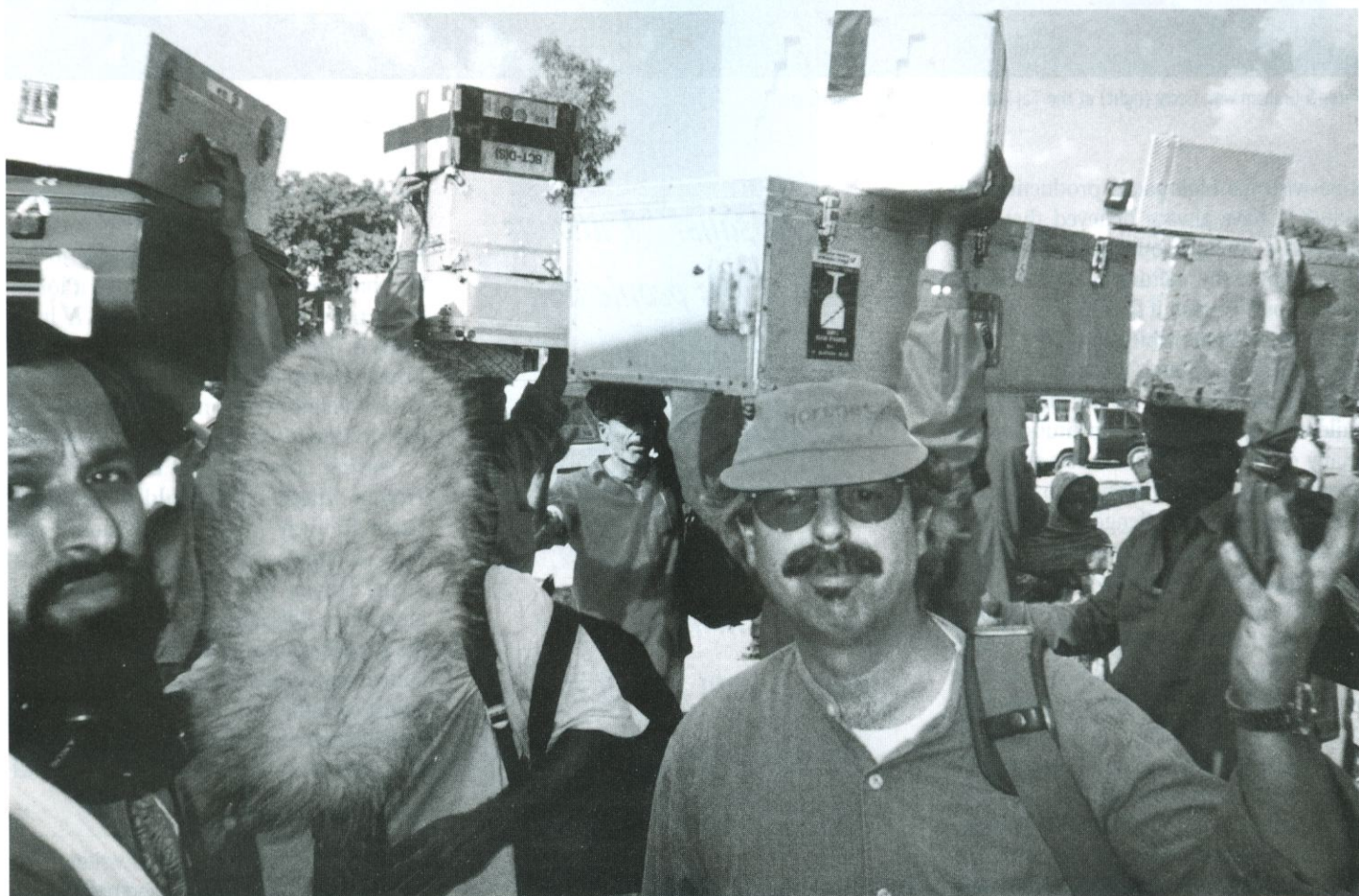
In 1998, Troyna got to make his third Great Railway Journey film in India with Ian Hislop, editor of *Private Eye* who takes a journey across the subcontinent in the 50th year of Indian independence. Beginning at the Metro in Calcutta, Ian journeys westwards to Jaisalmer, discovering the legacy of the British as he goes along. After all, the Railways were one of the biggest legacies of the British in India. He travels on India's most prestigious train — the Rajdhani Express to Delhi and a south-bound people's express to Agra. He also takes a slow train to Ajmer and finally boards the luxurious Palace on Wheels that takes him to Jaisalmer. Besides the British legacy, in his journey from east to west, Ian discovers that this is also a journey that India is taking itself as it arrives at the

end of 20th century. As the sun sets over the sand dunes, he says that modern India is looking west beyond Britain to America but feels confident that if Indians could survive "the Mughal Empire and the British Raj they would probably survive the MTV and the Yuppies too!"

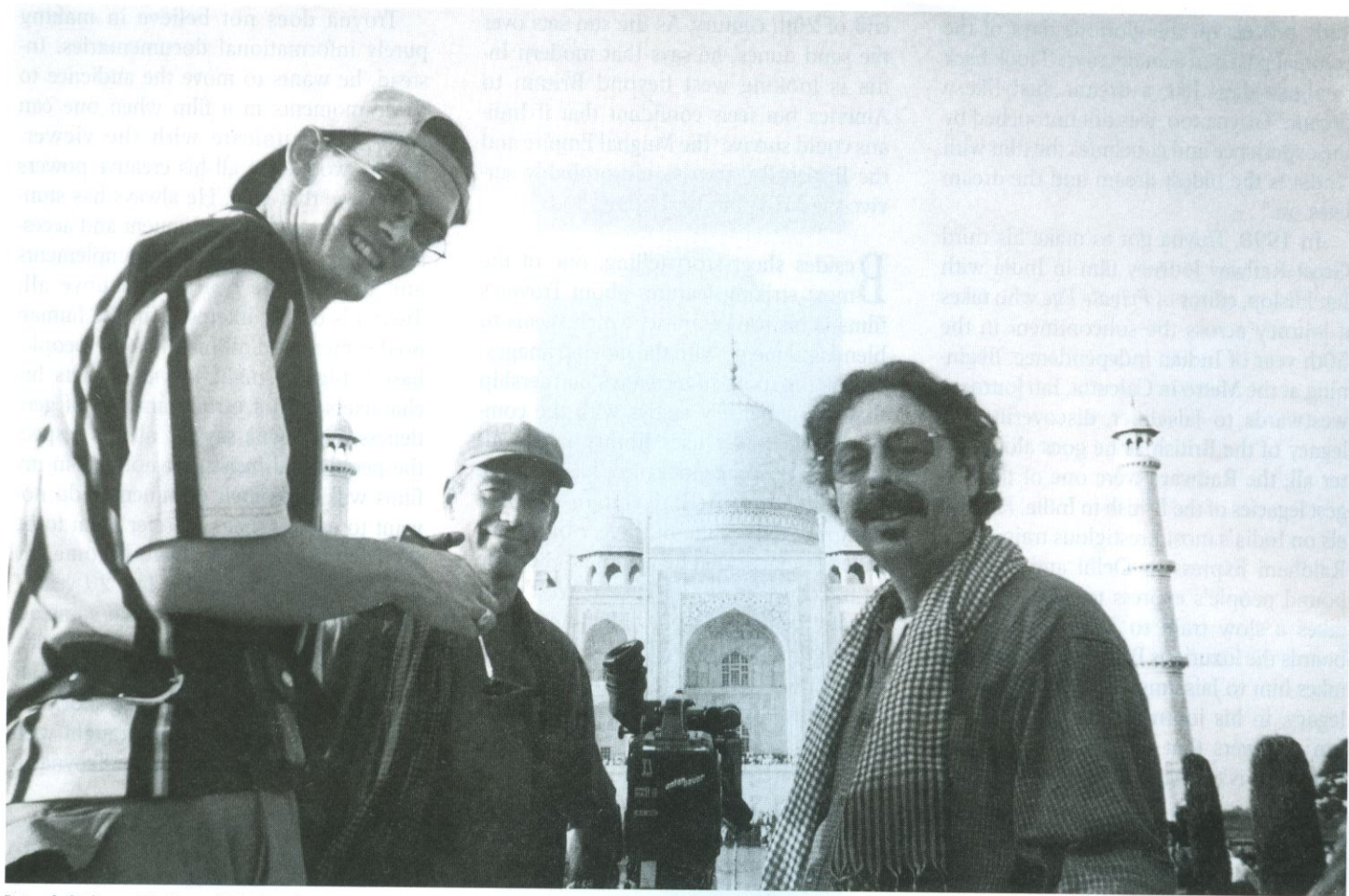
Besides sheer story-telling, one of the most striking features about Troyna's films is his use of music, which seems to blend and merge with the moving images. This is the result of a creative partnership that he immensely enjoys with the composer. He rarely uses library music although if an indigenous piece has a unique relevance e.g. A.R. Rehman's *Vande Mataram* during the 50th year of India's independence, then he would not hesitate to use it, as he did in 'East to West'. But usually he prefers to have his music specially composed and this process begins early in the post-production stages of the film. Troyna has worked with some of the leading musicians like David Bowie, Brian Eno and Terry Oldfield amongst others.

Troyna does not believe in making purely informational documentaries. Instead, he wants to move the audience to those moments in a film when one can really communicate with the viewer. Troyna would use all his creative powers to achieve that goal. He always has stunning photography, an eloquent and accessible script and music that complements and touches the heart. But above all, Troyna is deeply interested in the human predicament and all his films are people-based. Big or small, Troyna depicts his characters with a certain amount of gentleness. As Troyna says: "I always respect the people and insist that nothing in my films will be to their detriment. I do not want to exploit them, I prefer them to be my friends and many have become my long-term friends over the last 20 years." He rightly feels indignant when some accuse him of showing the poverty in India.

Filming in India is never an easy affair and for a foreigner, it is nothing short of a daunting experience, always fraught with problems. What was it like for Troyna to



Gerry with cases of film equipment at the railway station. Photo: Ian Hislop



Peter & Graham with Gerry (right) at the Taj Mahal, Agra. Photo: Ian Hislop

cope with his high-paced productions in India? "I have always believed that as a guest in a foreign country, one must always respect the culture and procedures of that country even if that means sacrificing some elements which might be attractive or even sensational." In the end, it boils down to the trust that Troyna manages to build with individuals and institutions that finally carry the day. Of course, there are always compromises that have to be made but for Troyna, the challenge is to find creative solutions to what seems to be hopelessly impossible situations!

This is never more evident than in filming on the Indian Railways — a complex and vast organization, which sometimes finds it hard to cater to the demands of a foreign filmmaker like Troyna. But despite the Railway bureaucracy and its sometimes crazy requests, like filming from a bogey travelling in front of the Palace on Wheels, the Indian Railways have always come up trumps. And in the end, always found a way to work together successfully both for

*Troyna says: "I always respect the people and insist that nothing in my films will be to their detriment. I do not want to exploit them, I prefer them to be my friends and many have become my long-term friends over the last 20 years"*

the film and for the Railways themselves.

Troyna is fond of telling: "It was the British who brought the Railways to India but now it is they who have a lot to learn from the Indian Railways. A little snow or leaves on the line can bring the British system to a halt. Not so in India, a DRM told me in Assam, but we sometimes have to stop for an elephant on the tracks!"

Having done his train trilogy, I asked Troyna whether he would do another Great Railway Journey film should the BBC recommission yet another series? It seems Troyna will never tire of making films about "this fantastic organization and the people who run the Railways. In fact, I am always looking for an opportunity to return to India — a culture and a people who have changed my life and from whom we in the West have a lot to learn." □

#### About the Author

Nihal Mathur, a freelance writer, was involved with the research and production of the films.