

***From Hollywood South to India's Kollywood,
Director of Photography inspires Director to Uncover Five Gems***

The film *Five Gems* arrived in Hollywood with filmmaker Artemis Preeshl for the 10th annual DIY Film Festival in March 2012. The Do-It-Yourself Film Festival celebrates artists who make films. The short film, *Pancha Ratna (Five Gems)*, won Honorable Mention in Best World Cinema.

Pancha Ratna focused contemporary decisions Indian youth make about marriage and dowry which sometimes result in murder or suicide. Although dowry became illegal during India's independence in 1947, most women are expected to provide a dowry. If the dowry is not sufficient, the husband's family may pressure the wife's family to give more money or property. Because 70% of Indians are Sudra (servant) caste and 10% are Brahmin, class issues also cause difficulties for couples. If dowry is insufficient, or the family objects to marrying outside of caste, the wife may be induced to kill herself or she may be murdered.

Shot in the South India, this Tamil film with English subtitle was created in partnership with *Liquid Gems*, a Bharatanatyam/Western dance suite. Kalakshetra Foundation, the "Juilliard" of India, featured the film and dance presented side-by-side to explore the concept of intervisuality, storytelling in diverse mediums.



Nemburu village in South India

When Artemis Preeshl applied for a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship, New Orleans' Director of Photography Keith Gruchala suggested Chennai. Gruchala had worked in India and has since invited Indian filmmakers to shoot in New Orleans. Fortune smiled and Preeshl secured an invitation to conduct visual literacy research at Kalakshetra in Chennai. Preeshl assembled a team from Gruchala's contacts, Kalakshetra dancers, and actors and crew from the University of Madras's street performance company, "Muktam", "courtyard" in Tamil.

The film's theme emerged from a girls' chorus who sang *Pancharatna Kriti*, the Five Gems of the Hindu god, Ram. Based on characters from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The five gems symbolized women worthy to marry regardless of caste or socioeconomic status. During the concert, priests bathed Ram's statue in rosewater, turmeric, sesame oil, coconut, river water, fruit, honey, milk, curd and sandalpaste in a ceremony called the *Abhishekam*. The flow of liquids became a metaphor of transformation for the female characters.

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Director Artemis Preeshl interviews a potential crew member for *Pancha Ratna* from the University of Madras Department of Journalism and Mass Communication.

In *Five Gems*, three villagers, Aishwarya, Vinodha and Sangeetha, contemplated marriage without dowries. Aishwarya supported her ailing father by making beauty products. Vinodha sold milk and Sangeetha sold coconuts. Arjun, an IT entrepreneur, returned to the village of his birth to start a literacy project with his friends, Raghu and Krishna. Aishwarya's late mother had arranged an unusual marriage between Arjun, a low-caste *sudra*, and her *Brahmin* daughter, Aishwarya. His friend, Raghu courted Sangeetha because his parents wanted him to marry a village girl. Krishna discovered his ex-girlfriend, Vinodha, in the village and won her love despite caste differences. When Ravi, Arjun's half-brother, returned from prison for kidnapping and allegedly raping Sangeetha, he thought that if Sangeetha cleared his name, Aishwarya's father would permit him to marry Aishwarya. The incensed Ravi murdered Aishwarya's father. Durga, the mother goddess to whom Aishwarya prayed, induced Ravi throw himself onto the funeral pyre of Aishwarya's father. The three couples created a literacy project sponsored by the Indian Government.

When the team shot on location in a Tamil village near the archeological site of Mahabalipuram, permissions had been obtained. A drunken motorcycle gang interrupted the initial shooting of the funeral. Imagine the goddess Durga chasing the murderer Ravi through a harvested field even as the Production Executive Soundar Bairavi gamely pacified the gang! Fortunately, holy cows mitigated the feud by eating the funeral grass. The next day, a new location was secured: the cremation was shot in a picturesque orchard.

The Kollywood (Chennai) film industry suited *Five Gems*. The songs with classical and Bollywood dance made *Pancha Ratna* stand out. Rarely do short film include musical numbers. The comedic approach to social justice played well, due to Bharatanatyam gestures which became in-jokes for the informed audience. When Arjun made indicated his strength, good looks and status, the audience spontaneously applauded, laughed and cheered. Tamil film director Abdul encouraged U.S. distribution because a cinematic treatment of Hindu rituals would interest a Western audience. Kollywood producer Zac Samuels called the production, 'enjoyable'. *Pancha Ratna*, engaged both to an Indian audience and the DIY Film Festival in Hollywood.