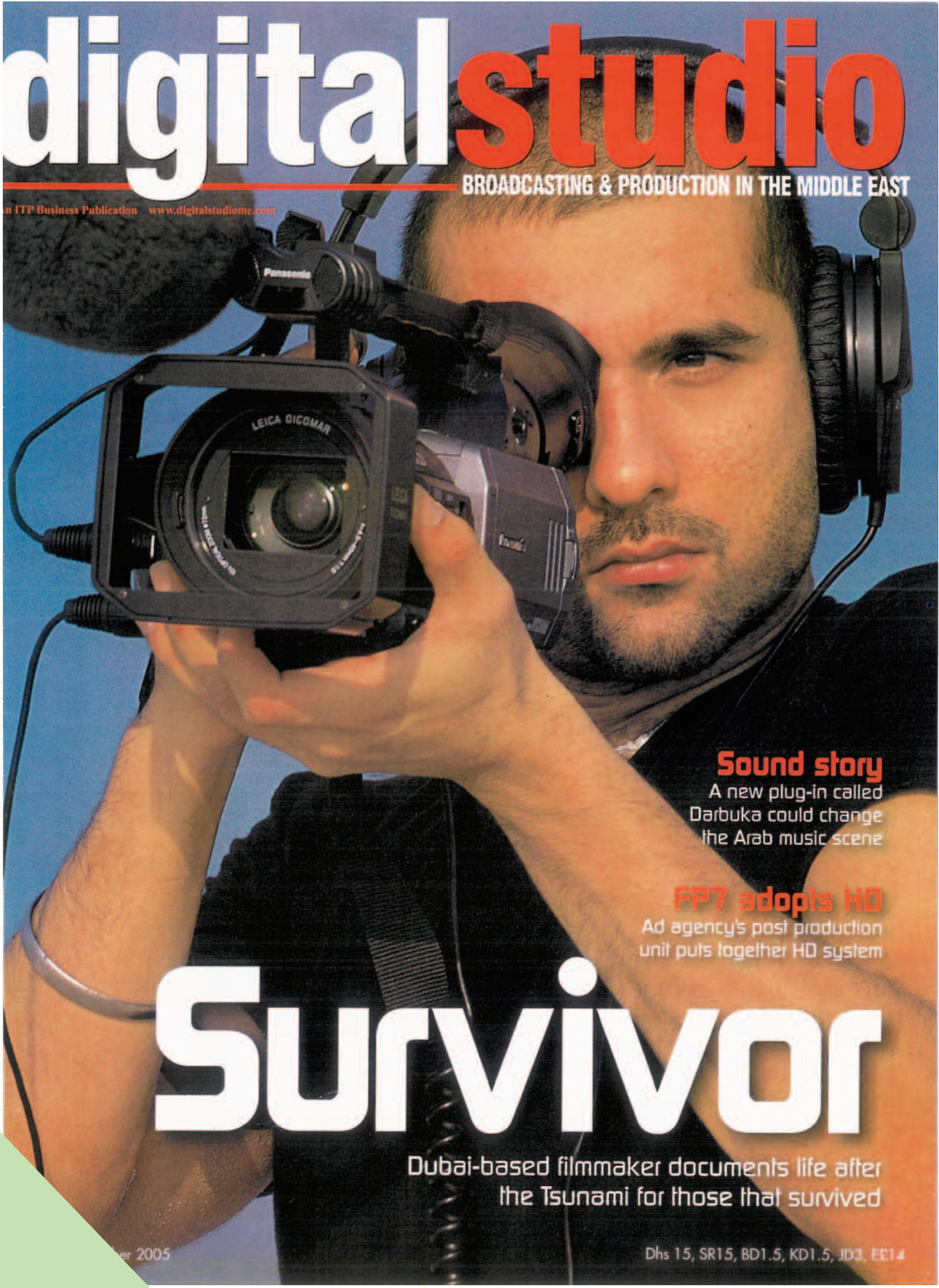


# digitalstudio

BROADCASTING & PRODUCTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

an ITP Business Publication www.digitalstudio.me.com



## Sound story

A new plug-in called Darbuka could change the Arab music scene

## FP7 adopts HD

Ad agency's post production unit puts together HD system

# Survivor

Dubai-based filmmaker documents life after the Tsunami for those that survived

October 2005

Dhs 15, SR15, BD1.5, KD1.5, JD3, EE14

PRESS

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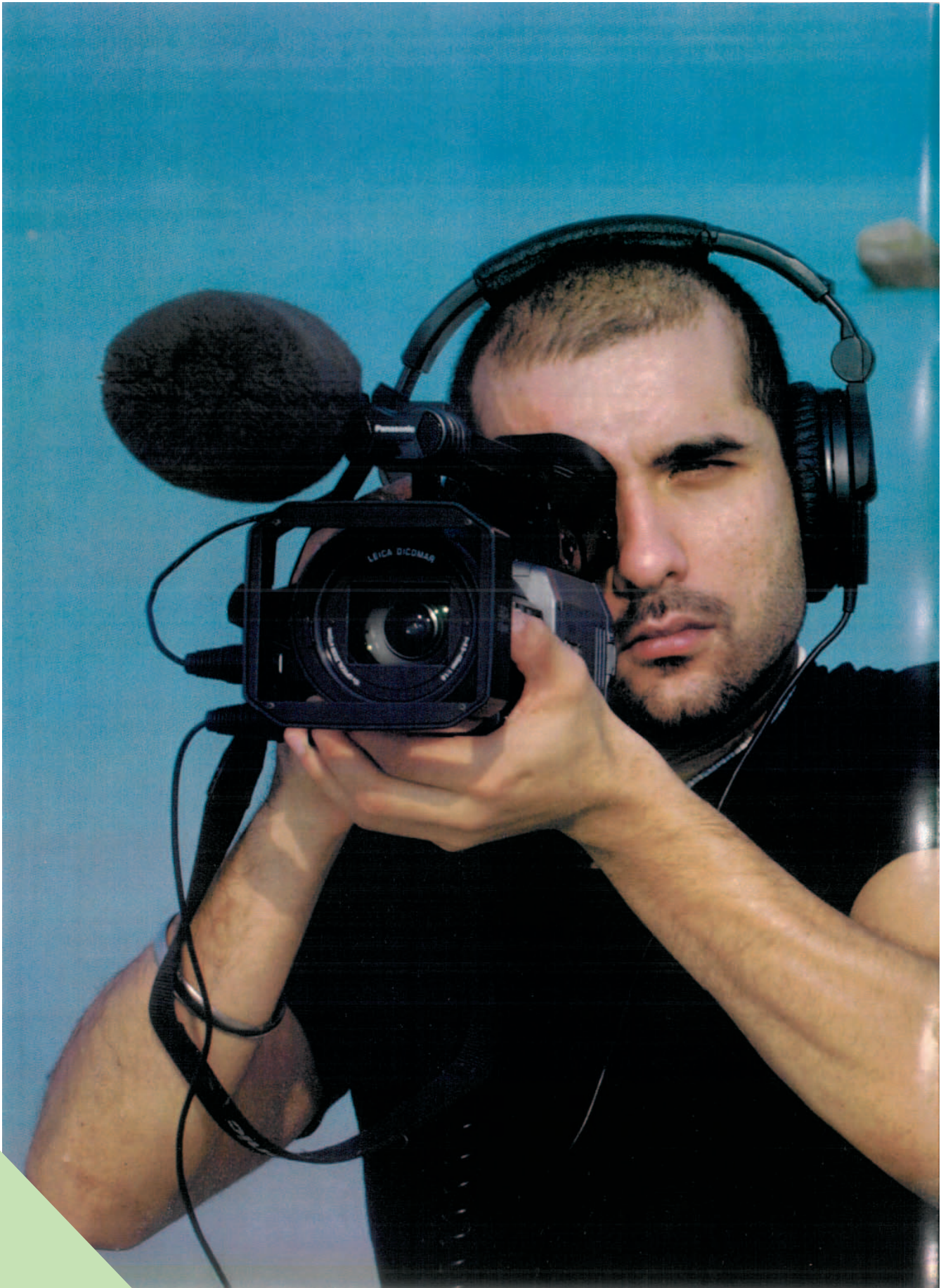
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P R E S S



PRESS

# Survivor

On 9/11, he was in New York looking out of his window at the smoke and rubble that was left of what was once the World Trade Centre. He later felt bad that he never told the story of the people that survived. When in December 2004, the tsunami struck, Dubai-based filmmaker, Dhruv Dhawan wasn't going to sit back again. He wanted the world to remember the people who had braved such a calamity and survived. In an exclusive interview with *Digital Studio*, Dhawan shares the challenges of filming in Sri Lanka after the tsunami and how his documentary, *From Dust*, took shape.

Two weeks after the tsunami claimed many lives and destroyed several coastal villages in different parts of Asia, one Dubai-based filmmaker went to Sri Lanka looking for a tale of hope amidst the destruction that the sea had wreaked on December 26, 2004. Now, 10 months later, Dhruv Dhawan's *From Dust*, a 52-minute documentary, shot on 16mm and DV, is being readied for a possible premiere at the Dubai International Film Festival, which will be held in December this year.

"*From Dust* is an attempt to move beyond the morbid images of death and despair that the media has bombarded us with and to look at how people stood

up against this calamity and started to rebuild their lives from nothing," says Dhawan. "I witnessed great resilience among people who were struggling to keep their heads above water after the Tsunami and also struggling against the forces of corruption and greed in the country," he adds.

The documentary primarily focuses on three people — Ravi, an entrepreneur who lost his father, sister, business and home to the wave that crashed through Galle, a large town on Sri Lanka's south coast; Siril, a young fisherman disabled in one arm, who saved his wife and son from the waters that submerged the village of Kogala; and Cameron, an

Australian acupuncturist who flew to the aid of the people of Kogala.

Ravi and Siril thought that they would be able to rebuild their homes with promised funds, but once the debris was cleared, the Sri Lankan government waved a 100 metre rule before them, stipulating that the land where their homes once stood was now government property. They willingly surrendered this land to the government when they were promised a new place to rebuild their homes. *From Dust* then proceeds to unfold a sequence of events that shows how a wave of corruption among Sri Lanka's political forces hindered one of the world's largest aid efforts.

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Dhawan puts it in perspective. "In the 1980s, the Sri Lankan government had introduced a 100 m rule, according to which, 100 m from where the water touches the land was declared government property. But the rule was never enforced and fishing communities and small dwellings had sprouted up all around the coastal region. The tsunami opened an avenue for the government. It first used the media to spread the fear of another tsunami among the people. After that, government officials came around and began to offer these people new land if they surrendered their current land. Fearing that another tsunami would destroy them again, they readily agreed to be relocated," he explains.

Meanwhile, the US sea battalion that arrived to rebuild homes around the coast of Sri Lanka was stopped from doing so. In the film, Dhawan explores the political motives behind this act.

Despite all of this corruption, however, people seemed to be taking things in their stride, says the filmmaker. "With Siril, I found endearing moments as he continued to fish, chat with friends, whistle at girls, and play with his child in

the rubble where their home once stood."

There are images of Siril and his wife sharing a piece of fish from the same plate, picking it down to the last bone and feeding each other. "Later that day, they sat in the sun and combed each other's hair. On another afternoon, Siril found a 100 rupee note that was badly torn. He spent several hours meticulously putting the note back together and then bought us all ice cream with it," says Dhawan.

Initially, the filmmaker had rallied a couple of other friends to join him to make this documentary. But finding it difficult to live there and find inspiration in a land ravaged by both natural and political calamities, the other two crew members left. "When we arrived, we did not know where to film and whom to film. There were so many different locations and hundreds of stories to tell. And then, there was this big paradox. Against the backdrop of this beautiful tropical island with palm trees and hills, there was this terrible devastation," he says.

Dhawan himself planned to leave soon but changed his mind on the night of January 26, when he saw a huge crowd

of children lighting candles and placing them on the beach. Thus began his resolve to continue his quest for stories and that is how he came to meet and live with the people he has portrayed in this documentary.

The filmmaker lived in the tents with the subjects he was filming. "Living with them allowed me to get the kind of footage that an observational film is made of. I would spend my nights with them in the tents and leave my equipment with them as well. We trusted each other. As a result, they did not look at the camera as an intruder but became very comfortable with its presence," he explains.

The Dubai-based filmmaker says that his degree in Cultural Anthropology proved very useful to do this documentary. "This science provides you with the tools you need to both depict cultures as well as to assimilate with a community and gain a better understanding of them. Although I did my post graduation in film direction, I believe that the tools I had been taught to use in my anthropology classes came in good use because they helped me to understand these people better," he says.

Initially, the group was filming with a 16mm Beaulieu sync-sound camera and the Panasonic DVX 100A but when the rest of the crew dispersed, Dhawan sent the film camera back and stayed with the DVX 100A, which, according to him, was a good choice.

"Only once did the Panasonic's head collapse but a day later, it came back to life again. When I came back here, I took it to Panasonic to be serviced and they filed out a handful of dirt from the camera. I wasn't surprised. I was in Sri Lanka for a whole month and the humidity and the dust would have caused that," says Dhawan.

A look at the footage shows that the filmmaker has used a lot of low-angle and high-contrast shots. There is also the feeling of sunlight being let into the lens. "I treated this documentary like an experimental ethnography. I used a



Dhawan's tuk-tuk driver, Nilantha doubled up as a sound recordist, assistant cameraman and runner.

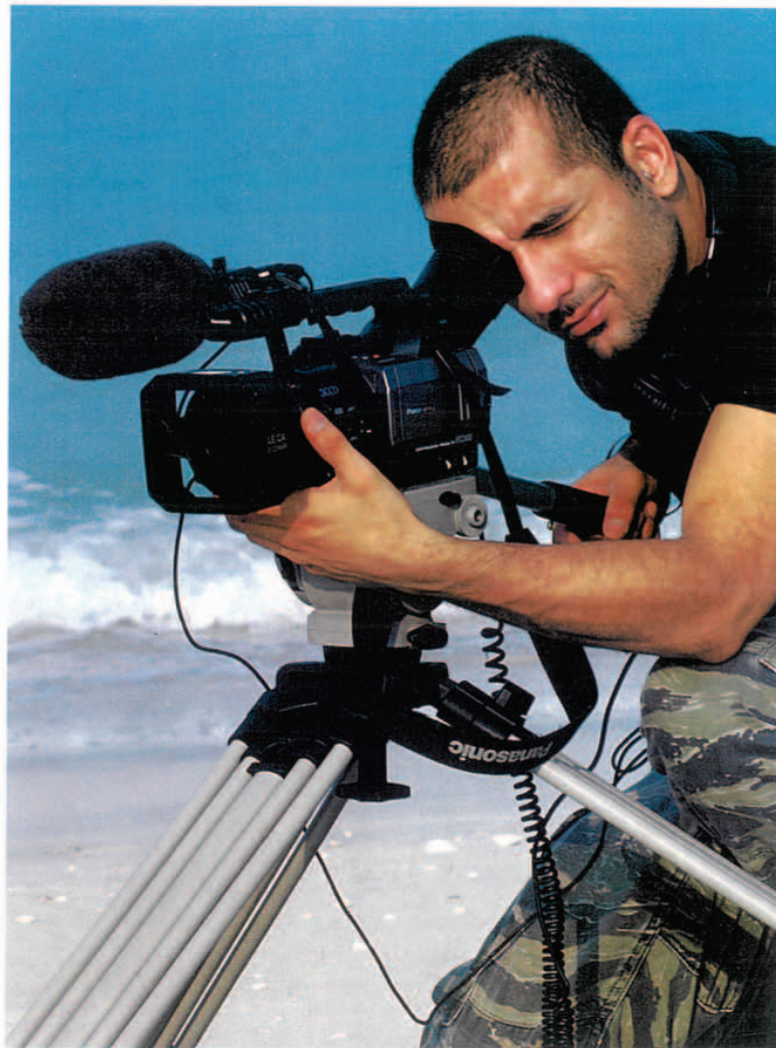
personal style to move the camera and created a soft image to tell the story. Many times, I also found myself filming slightly out of focus and directly into the light. Initially, when I reviewed the rushes, I thought that might have been a bad idea, but when I look at the edited version, I feel it was the right look to create," he says.

"Likewise, I used low angles to show the strength that I saw within my characters and the kind of lighting I used helped to convey their hope. I mean, here was this young man who had lost his father, his home and his documents. He couldn't prove that he was Ravindra Munasinghe (Ravi) and so, he couldn't access his father's bank account or lay claims to the land he had lost. Still, he was holding up and conducting English lessons in the tents at night."

Shooting in Sri Lanka posed several technical challenges, says Dhawan. "Lighting was a significant issue. On the one hand, my subjects had very dark skin tones. Secondly, it was very hot so they would always sit in the shade. Thirdly, I was shooting on video most of the time. Film has a lot of latitude unlike video. With film, you have a latitude of about 3-5 stops over or under, depending on the stock. But with video, after three stops up or down you are not going to see much. So you have to make a choice. If you want to expose the face in the shade, then you have to let the light in the background blow out. At times, I would even keep my characters as silhouettes," says Dhawan. "I am very happy with the results. The images look great and some of the credit for that goes to the Leica lens used on the DVX 100A," he adds.

Dhawan has shot this documentary in 25p (progressive). "Interlaced is much too crisp and cold for this kind of film while 25p gives a much softer look," he says.

Sound was also an issue that needed to be addressed, especially in Galle, where buildings were being demolished. "I carried four microphones with me — a cardioid mike, a super-cardioid (shotgun



Dhawan says his Panasonic DVX 100A and Vinten tripod system stood him in good stead in Sri Lanka.

and two lapel mikes to keep on my subjects throughout the day. The cardioid was great for picking up speech but it was running off phantom power from the camera. This meant that my battery, which would normally last for six hours, would be consumed within two hours. This was a big strain although I had two additional batteries," he says.

But one day, while filming at a demolition site, dust pierced the

diaphragm of Dhawan's cardioid mike and it broke. "I thought this was my best microphone but in a way, this was a blessing because it was draining too much battery power. And there were situations, where I could not afford to use phantom power. So then, I learnt to rely on my other mikes," he says. In some instances, he would resort to wireless recording and in hindsight, he says some of his best audio was a result of this

approach. "I was carrying Sennheiser radio transmitters, which can receive and transmit any XLR audio signal and transmit it via radio frequency into the camera. This meant that I had a complete wireless audio solution and my lapels were also wireless. My sound guy could sit up to 40 metres from me with the mike in his hand and the transmitter plugged in. I would then carry the receiver, which was connected to my camera audio input, in my pockets. This allowed me to film from far, so no one would notice I was filming and I was getting raw natural audio with my sound guy just hanging around them," he says.

"Sometimes, I would just plant the mike inside the tents or near some object where it would be hidden without wires or cables. This way, it captured sound unobtrusively and allowed me to go wherever I wanted. I did not do this all the time and quite often, I was very close to my subjects. However, in hindsight, I realise that some of the best footage in terms of the dialogue that I captured was through this unobtrusive approach," adds Dhawan.

The filmmaker actually managed to train his tuk-tuk driver, Nilantha Gamage, to double up as a sound recordist, assistant cameraman and runner. "I spent a few sessions teaching Nilantha how to record sound and how to stay out of the frame. He picked it up very quickly so he was of great assistance because he also acted as an interpreter when necessary," he says.

Dhawan also says he is very impressed with the durability and strength of some of the other equipment he had. He especially praises the Vinten Vision 3 tripod system. "This is one equipment that went through hell. Besides being transported on the tsunami-ravaged roads in the back of a tuk-tuk, this tripod has been placed on rubble, glass shards, dust, water, mud and even, slush. If you look at it, you will think it's been through a war zone. It's shown me the importance of spending on quality



A lot of aid was sent to Sri Lanka but most of it never reached the intended recipients, says Dhawan.

products."

He also speaks highly of his camera rain coat and Pelican case that stood him in good stead in Sri Lanka. "I never shot in the rain as I could not take that risk but I used my camera rain coat at night, when I was filming in the tent on a few occasions. When it would rain at night, the water would often seep through the seams in the tent. Likewise, this pelican case can be driven over with a truck (tried and tested) and it won't break. Inside, you could have the most delicate lenses and they won't shatter. This box uses very simple foam technology and is also waterproof," he says.

The trailer for the film was cut by Dubai-based production firm, AV Productions, and run at the Sunny Side international documentary market in Marseille this July. The film is now being edited further on a Final Cut Pro HD edit suite by a Dubai-based documentary editor, IBE LLC, a private media and creative consultancy firm in Dubai, stepped in to cover the remaining production costs. At the time of going to press, *From Dust* was being submitted to the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) officials. If Dhawan's movie qualifies, its first premiere will be at DIFF 2005, the first anniversary of the tsunami. 