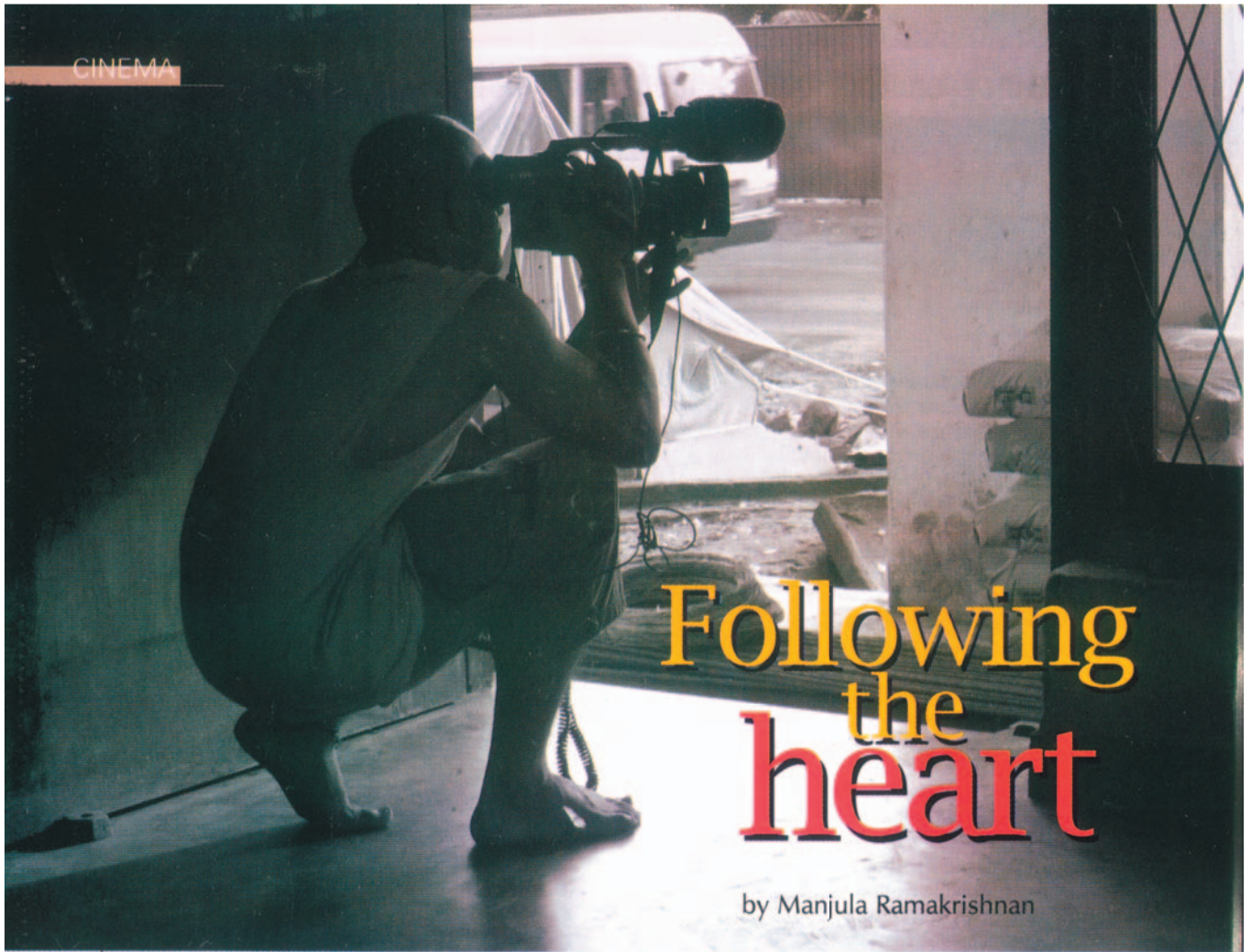


CINEMA



Following the heart

by Manjula Ramakrishnan

From Dust, the first feature length documentary made by Dhruv Dhawan, a freelance director and writer based in the UAE, was screened during the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF)

AS WE BOB ALONG THE FLOW OF LIFE, submitting the bills to be paid at the end of each month, fighting the corporate battle, having thrown ourselves into parenting and child rearing, our dreams get pushed under the rug, soon forgotten as life's toils assume all-consuming importance. But when you meet somebody who decided to chase his dreams, our ears prick up wanting to know what makes him different from the rest of us.

Meet Dhruv Dhawan, who after studying cultural anthropology at Duke University, decided filmmaking was his calling and quickly moved over to study directing at New York Film Academy. "Inspired by the diversity and scope of human experience I began to nurture my passion for documentary filmmaking in the United States, focusing my skills in the areas of ethnographic and observational cinema," he says. Dhawan has developed projects in New York with Albert Maysles

and has directed films for the Swiss Bureau of Cultural Affairs. Dhawan currently freelances as a director and writer in the United Arab Emirates where he creates work for the broadcast industry and the commercial sector besides making corporate films for private and government institutions in the UAE.

Armed with nine years of experience in cinematography, Dhawan shoots his own films to create an intimate feel and produce a reflexive style in his work. Thus came about the creatively acclaimed film *From Dust* — his first feature length documentary that was screened during the recently concluded Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) and that received strong reviews from *Variety*, *The Times* and Reuters.

From Dust is a tale told with naked honesty — without even remotely attempting to clothe it with laces and frills — the sordid tale of life after the devastating tsunami in

two coastal villages in Sri Lanka and how after a year, rehabilitation is still a far-fetched dream. The truth that unfurls with the film leave the viewers zapped.

"Filmed over the course of ten months, this documentary explores how a natural disaster creates suffering for some and opportunities for others. It is a tribute to the human spirit and a controversial exposé that reveals how the rebuilding process in Sri Lanka has been slowed by design. When I went to the Sri Lankan coast, I did no filming initially, wanting to familiarise myself with the people and their problems. And this exercise brought me close to my protagonists Ravi and Cyril – two natives who were trying their hardest to re-build their lives, having lost near and dear ones to the giant waves that rose that fateful day, enveloping in a death trap all that it came in contact with. The third principal person in my film is Cameron, an Australian acupuncturist who reached the devastated shores with altruism in mind but who returned back disenchanted with the whole process of aid-distribution and home building.

"I am often asked why I chose the subject of Tsunami for my documentary. This was because of the great synergy in the humanitarian response that I saw and the surge of help came from across the hither to yon of the world. And for the first time here was a chance for me to be a part of it through my film and not remain a mere observer. Much was discussed about the scientific aspects of tsunami, much again was said about the human fears of the unknown – earthquake and other natural calamities. What I wanted to do through my film was not to dip in and out superficially, but to give an in-depth coverage of the extent to which lives had been tossed around mercilessly."

It is important for Dhawan that the film is not viewed as an attempt to expose corruption in high places, but merely to find answers to how millions of people dotting the coastline are cop-

ing with life post tsunami. The film is therefore about people's rehabilitation, realism, responses, reactions, albeit with very little to rejoice about.

"There were many lessons learnt during the course of the making of the film – both with regard to my craft and the experiences garnered. As we got talking to the people, I was affected greatly for I was making them revisit their trauma, a kind of probing into their grief. But in that village filled with death and destruction, initially the people would say, 'you are going to make a film, but what will we get from this' and they were cynical about the entire effort. But soon I gained their trust and we would spend entire nights talking."

On Jan.26, 2005, a month after the calamity, the children of the coastal community lit candles along the entire



coastline. That was the time when a decidedly convinced Dhawan moved in with his 'characters' to set up tent alongside them.

When the film was screened during DIFF, Dhawan decided to bring the physically challenged fisherman in his film – Cyril – to Dubai. "We housed him in five star comfort in glitzy Dubai. Nothing fascinated him. The breakfast buffet was a gorgeous array of foods

many in his coastal village would never have even seen. But Cyril stuck to his modest meal of bread and tea. He asked for just rice and curry for lunch costing a mere Dhs6 rather than the five star spread. And so Cyril came all the way to Dubai from his humble village to teach us how little one needs from life. And to have even that little taken away callously by nature's fury, somehow seemed so completely wrong."

Dhawan was pleased with the response his film evoked. There were people who were moved by the content; considering that films like *From Dust* are not made to compete against mainstream dance and song circus. "Such films are not the popcorn and Pepsi kind of films. They are thought provoking messages and ought to set people thinking and asking a lot of questions. For instance in Indonesia

65 per cent of the houses has been re-built. In Sri Lanka, over one million people have been rendered homeless, but only a meagre 10 per cent have been taken care of. Surely the arithmetic is wrong somewhere."

The film has been edited brilliantly by Nirmal Chander, directed and produced by Dhruv Dhawan. To Dhawan's credit it has to be said that the film was made entirely on his own in Sri Lanka, with just the assistance of Niranka Abesoorya who was his tuk-tuk driver, but who was taught how to record sound by Dhawan. The Sinhala lines mouthed by the principal people come with an English voice-over.

Watching the film, I sit jaw agape, affected deeply by the huts torn by wind and water, some of those alive wishing openly they were dead, life being brought to a grinding halt with little help from the powers that be. What is heartening is the zeal and desire of many of them to walk past this patch of pain in their lives and people who actually manage a valiant smile on their lips. They are the ones who offer that glimmer of hope, teaching us that as long as there is life, there is hope.