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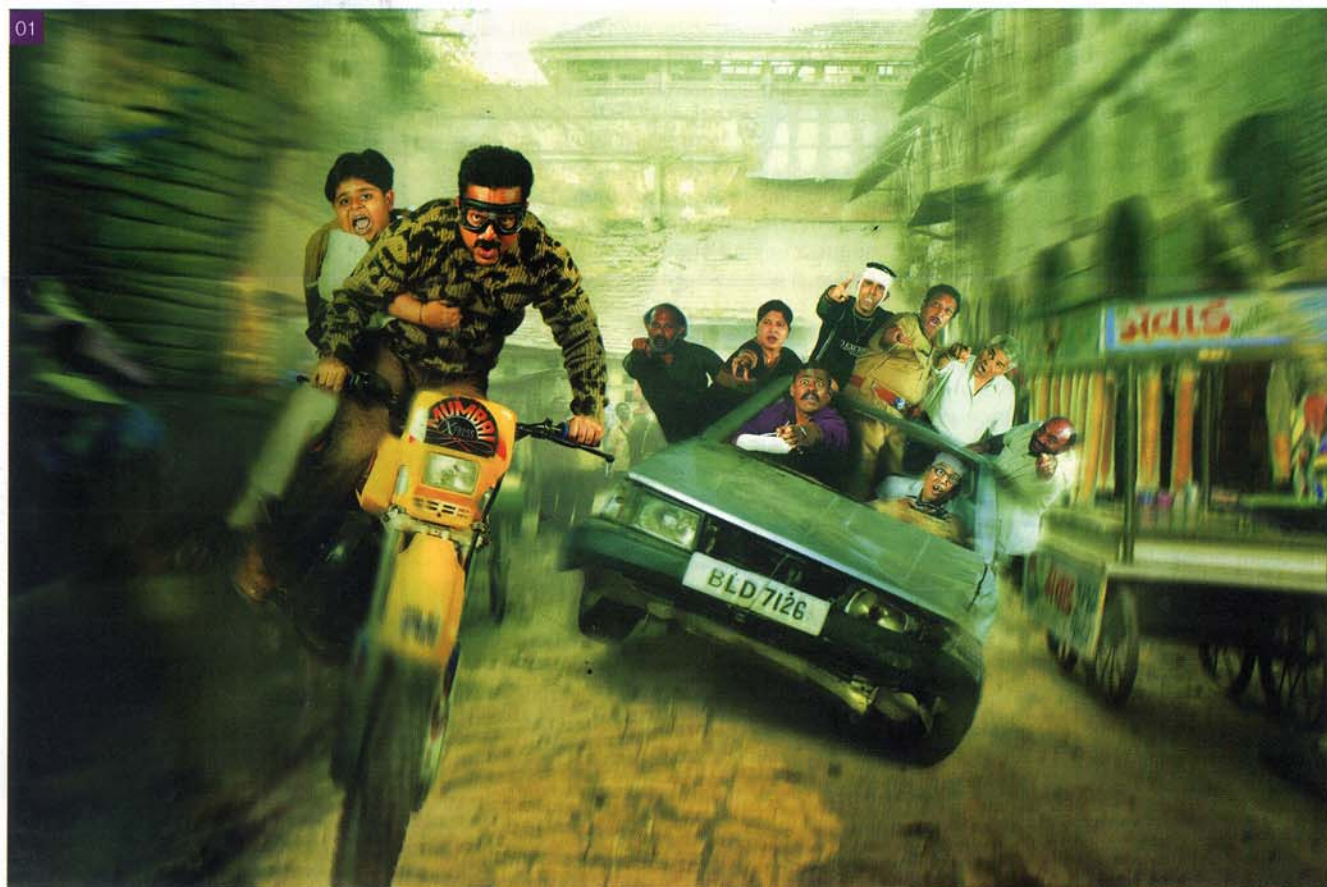
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Express Delivery

Indian movie *Mumbai Express* was shot digitally for greater flexibility and cost savings but producer Kamal Haasan cautions that this is an option that may not work for every film

By Ritesh Gupta



strong incentives, it was not a trouble-free process. "We were new to this medium. We did some tests and were happy with the results. Our main concern was how it would look when transferred to film finally. But while we were shooting we had some technical problems like tape dropout and some tapes got erased. We realised this a little later but the artists and sets were not available for reshoots," shares Haasan.

The technicians had to experiment and understand a lot about the nuances of the digital image and its various aspects, he adds. Haasan says this was not easy since the final delivery was on to the large screen. "Apprehension over the final quality was another worry," he says.

But with production wrapped and the film already released, Haasan says, "The set ups were simplified and easier. Flexibility in camera movements and camera positioning provided very interesting visuals."

"We shot the film with four Panasonic

01-03: *Mumbai Express* is an action comedy packed full of daring action sequences and stunts; Haasan wrote, co-produced, as well as starred in the feature.

Kamal Haasan is an actor-producer-director known for introducing intriguing concepts in his movies, whether they are related to treatment, characters, or storyline. In his movies, he has so far shrunk himself to become a dwarf, performed the role of an elderly woman, and has even experimented with a silent movie.

Taking it a step further, Haasan recently completed a feature film, *Mumbai Express*, marking his first movie shot completely in digital format. The project was completed in less than two months and shot simultaneously in Hindi and regional languages including Tamil. Released in mid April in India, there are plans for international distribution to other markets.

The movie, like the majority of Haasan's films, belongs to the comedy genre packed with lots of daring action sequences and stunts.

Raaj Kamal Films International's *Mumbai Express* is positioned as entertainment for the entire family, and sees this popular and versatile actor not only in the lead role but also involved in the digital shooting process, story development, and screenplay.

Apart from the screenplay, which Haasan terms as one of the most challenging projects he has ever worked on, the production of this film has been

altogether a different experience – shooting in digital format, Haasan had to deal with difficulties ranging from convincing the cast to training the crew, and much more.

Haasan says that although all the characters in the film are "serious", it's still a funny movie, which is about a kidnapping plan that goes all wrong. Haasan plays a daredevil death-well rider in a circus company who reluctantly joins a gang of kidnappers and from there, it's a comedy of errors.

This film is not Haasan's first dalliance with the digital format; he had shot 10 minutes of footage digitally in a previous movie *Virumaandi*. In the case of *Mumbai Express*, he says the decision to shoot in digital was content- and aesthetic-based.

"After going through the script, I felt that the content was well suited for digital acquisition. Great speed of movement, camera placements, speed in post production, greater flexibility, smaller crew, and savings on film raw stock were some of the factors that attracted me," he says. While shooting digitally had



DV cameras using one lens throughout. We used a maximum of four cameras simultaneously in many situations. The final output was different in the sense that the audience is able to make out the quality difference. Probably they would not have been able to do so had we worked in high definition," he adds.

The actors also found it strange to perform in front of a smaller video camera, being used to bigger sets, equipment, and crew. "Only after I put in my best efforts were they convinced and started getting into the groove. After that things

Word to the wise

Ram Madhvani, from Equinox Films, who is one of the earliest utilisers of DV technology in feature films (*Let's Talk*) in India, says there has been lots of advancement in the technology in recent years.

Let's Talk was shot with two Sony PD 100s with anamorphic adaptors three years back. "*Let's Talk* was a landscape of the human face kind of film. It

(shooting digitally) allowed the actors a freedom that shooting on 35mm film would not have. There are various ways to get to truth but for us, given the kind of film *Let's Talk* was, digital seemed the best way to be a fly on the wall, observing reality...interesting and emotional but not boring reality," he says.

"A filmmaker needs to understand the pros and cons of each (format) and that is dictated by content and by budget. Why you would use a zoom over a block lens is purely dependent on content. Technology is meant to free you, not shackle you. For instance, I use 35mm for a lot of the commercials I direct, and my next feature film will be shot on 35mm since the subject matter demands

35mm," says Madhvani.

Madhvani adds there are different levels and types of digital filmmaking. For him, it would be unfair to compare a PD100 to a HD 24P camera. "The former allows for a small guerilla-like attitude whereas the latter is closer to a 35mm attitude and output," he says.

"It seems to me that more high level formats are mimicking the look of 35mm whereas perhaps what we need to do is understand that there is a beauty in the 'look' of video. Perhaps our eyes need to be accustomed. A film like *Collateral* has a distinctive look only possible because it was shot in HD," Madhvani says.

There are certain technical considerations, he points out, that one has to keep in mind when shooting on video. For

example, filmmakers have to learn to focus even in low lighting conditions as it is a key to producing video footage that can be blown up to 35mm. "Focus is not so noticeable on a small TV screen but it can make or break a shot seen in a theatre. Similarly, one should also keep in mind the final output while making decisions such as the lighting for shots," he says.

Madhvani also feels video gives an option of taking a lot more random, extra footage that can be used creatively. Apart from a wider variety of footage, actors can be more comfortable and the possibility of getting better performances is higher thanks to minimal physical interference of cameras, and even because video allows an entire sequence to be shot again and again from different angles.



went on smoothly," says Haasan.

Shot simultaneously in different languages, the team tried to give vernacular freedom to actors. Some actors are in both the Hindi and Tamil versions, with Haasan's favourite being 10-year old actor Hardik, who stunned Haasan with his fluency in languages.

Haasan is also well known for the risks he takes in shooting action shots and stunts in his movies. Recalling an experience in which he fell from a motorbike, he says, "We over shot by a few days because of my accident. When the bike toppled over, I was more worried for co-star Hardik but thankfully there was not a scratch on him."

Some of the stunt scenes, directed by Vikram Dharma, show Haasan racing over rooftops, dangling from incredible heights, and generally flirting too close for comfort with danger. The team says for the first time, a film has a hero walking to the tip of the boom of a tower crane perched on the 36th floor of a high-rise building. "No dupes for Kamal," claims the team proudly.

Prasad EFX, part of diverse visual media group Prasad Group, worked on digital grading, film recording, graphics, digital opticals, titles, online editing, digital output, and film processing and printing.

"We have some HD projects happening now in India. In the recent past, we have



worked on several HD projects at EFX including the first full length HD feature film in India by PC Shreeram. Right now, Cheran, a national award-winning director, is working on his next project in

HD. We are convinced that digital shooting will definitely increase in India," says Sai Prasad, CEO of the company.

He points out another advantage shooting in digital offers: cost savings during the post process. Prasad says, "It is cost effective - that is an advantage since you don't have to scan. The other advantage is that you are able to utilise all the benefits of the digital intermediate process like digital grading, digital

opticals, and much more. This also provides the advantage of a universal master from which you can output to any format/media."

Prasad says there is no specific genre for which digital technology is being used. "Projects that have been using digital format have been movies with good content and budget sensitive ones. This will change shortly with the advent and availability of HD equipment at lower rental and cost," he predicts.

Based on his experience with *Mumbai Express*, Haasan offers some views on the increasing trend for filmmakers to go digital: "Saving on film stock is one advantage apart from the creative possibilities. I feel, however, it is not an option for middle level films. Low budget films can look at it for cost savings if they are using DV formats. On the other extreme are high budget films with lot of visual effects and digital opticals that have the budget to use high-end HD cameras. Again (make) the decision to shoot digitally based on content and aesthetics. It can only be a 'case-based prescription'."

Haasan also feels camera manufactur-

04-10: Shooting entirely in digital format, Haasan had to deal with issues ranging from familiarising the cast, who were used to bigger sets and equipment, to training the crew.

ers like Panasonic and Sony should conduct more training seminars on digital filmmaking and the way their individual cameras handle digital images specific to the cinema medium and large screen displays.

"I will continue to shoot in film. I will shoot in digital format again, of course, as and when I feel digital is (a better option than film). Both are different and they will have their own place. The content is what would decide the acquisition media," concludes Haasan. ♦

Roll credits...

Director: Singeetham Srinivasa Rao
Producer: Chandra Hasan, Kamal Haasan
Line producer: Anu Hasan Chillar
Story and screenplay: Kamal Haasan
Dialogue: Saurabh Shukla
Music: Ilayaraja
Cinematography: Siddharth
Production designer: Sameer Chanda
Editor: Ashmith Kunder
Stunts: Vikram Dharma
Art: Nitin Wable
Cast: Kamal Haasan, Manisha Koirala