

Life through **THE LENS**

From travelling with Haile Selassie to being knighted by Prince Philip, cameraman Mohinder Dhillon has packed several lifetimes of experience into one

INTERVIEW JACKSON BIKO



celebrated cameraman
Mohinder Dhillon
filmed Ethiopian

emperor Haile Sellasie for eight years, and earned himself a knighthood for bringing the 1984 Ethiopian famine to the attention of the world. Here, the 77-year-old talks about life behind the camera.

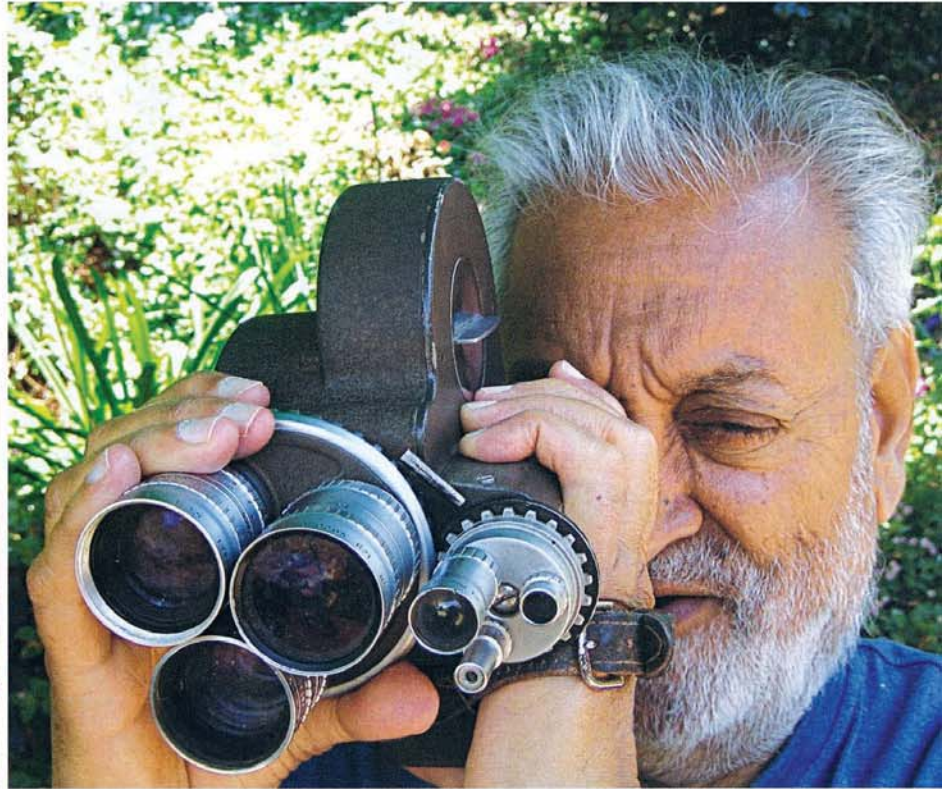
I came to Kenya in 1947 from Punjab, India. I was 14 years old. To get here we had to use an ox cart to the nearest railway station, then three days' train journey to Bombay – my first big city, then finally a 10-day sea voyage to Mombasa.

Life in Kenya in 1947 was a departure from my earlier life in India where a flush toilet was a novelty. Village life in Punjab was tough and unhygienic. I caught malaria so many times I became immune. Village life in India prepared me for gruesome tasks in the future when I had to work in extreme conditions, like drinking straight from the muddy River Nile or eating whatever kind of food was available wherever I was filming a story.

People often ask me what it was like to be Emperor Haile Sellasie's official photographer for eight years and travelling to dozens of countries. Here is the thing: I travelled the world with this emperor, but I only got to talk to him once. He was like a god, totally revered. But he was a lonely man, trapped in a world of perception that he had built for himself. I don't listen to reggae music, in case you are wondering.

These days, camera teams are treated like numbered robots and I'm glad I got out of this race in good time. News filming has become a thankless job. The networks think they are doing you a favour when they send you to locations like Mogadishu and Eastern Congo. It has become much more enjoyable to shoot corporate videos, advertising films and documentaries.

War is a nasty, cruel and selfish business. I have covered many wars in my time. I was in Saigon, Vietnam, during the most senseless war that America has waged on any country (well, now there is Iraq) and I watched the American soldiers and nationals scamper to their choppers when the Vietcong approached Saigon. I was in Aden, Yemen, scampering for



'I EARNED THE NICKNAME "DEATH-WISH DHILLON" FROM MY COVERAGE OF DANGEROUS WARS'

PHOTOGRAPHS: JERRY RILEY; GALLOIMAGES/GETTYIMAGES.COM; MOHINDER DHILLON'S PRIVATE COLLECTION

safety with heavy camera equipment on my shoulders as grenades went off and machine-gun fire whizzed over my head. **During the Congo war, I narrowly missed being executed by firing squad.** I earned the nickname 'Death-wish Dhillon' from my coverage of dangerous wars. If you want great footage you have to risk your life for it. It was the only way to do it. **The Ethiopian famine is one of the worst disasters I have ever filmed.** It's amazing how hunger can cripple a nation and ravage humanity. The BBC's Michael Buerk and I were the first journalists to be allowed into Ethiopia, which was under tight military control. The disturbing scenes will always live with me. I still get nightmares, which will remain with me for the rest of my life. **There is a price you pay for being too trusting towards people.** People are likely to take advantage of your decency – even your own family, as I have learnt painfully. People have always made a sport of ripping me off.

A friend of mine borrowed my plane to go to Ethiopia but ended up crashing in the Congo. Always read whatever document an insurance company issues you – in mine there was fine print that excluded the Congo and Biafra [Nigeria]. My friend never paid me back. He took off. **Recently, my partners in business did a number on me; I lost two of my houses.** When I married a Canadian woman after my wife passed on, I thought it would last, but she also took off, leaving a big hole in my pocket. **My first marriage was arranged. I had never seen her before the marriage.** My father just showed up one day and announced that he had engaged me, and that was it. My late wife, Ambi, was the nicest person ever, humble and dignified. But meningitis struck in 1991. She succumbed in a London hospital. **I have travelled to more countries than I care to count.** I have covered one

of the worst famines in Africa. I have owned planes and handled good money. I have won awards for my work. I don't think there is much more left for me to do that will excite me. I'm at a stage where money or a life of luxury does not appeal to me. I live a simple life now: I drive a 28-year-old car and I eat vegetarian meals. **I have lived my life and contributed a lot to humanity.** With the help of some Kenyan writers, I'm in the middle of a book about my lifetime of experiences, *Through the Viewfinder*. I just feel frustrated that I can't write to save my life. ☐

