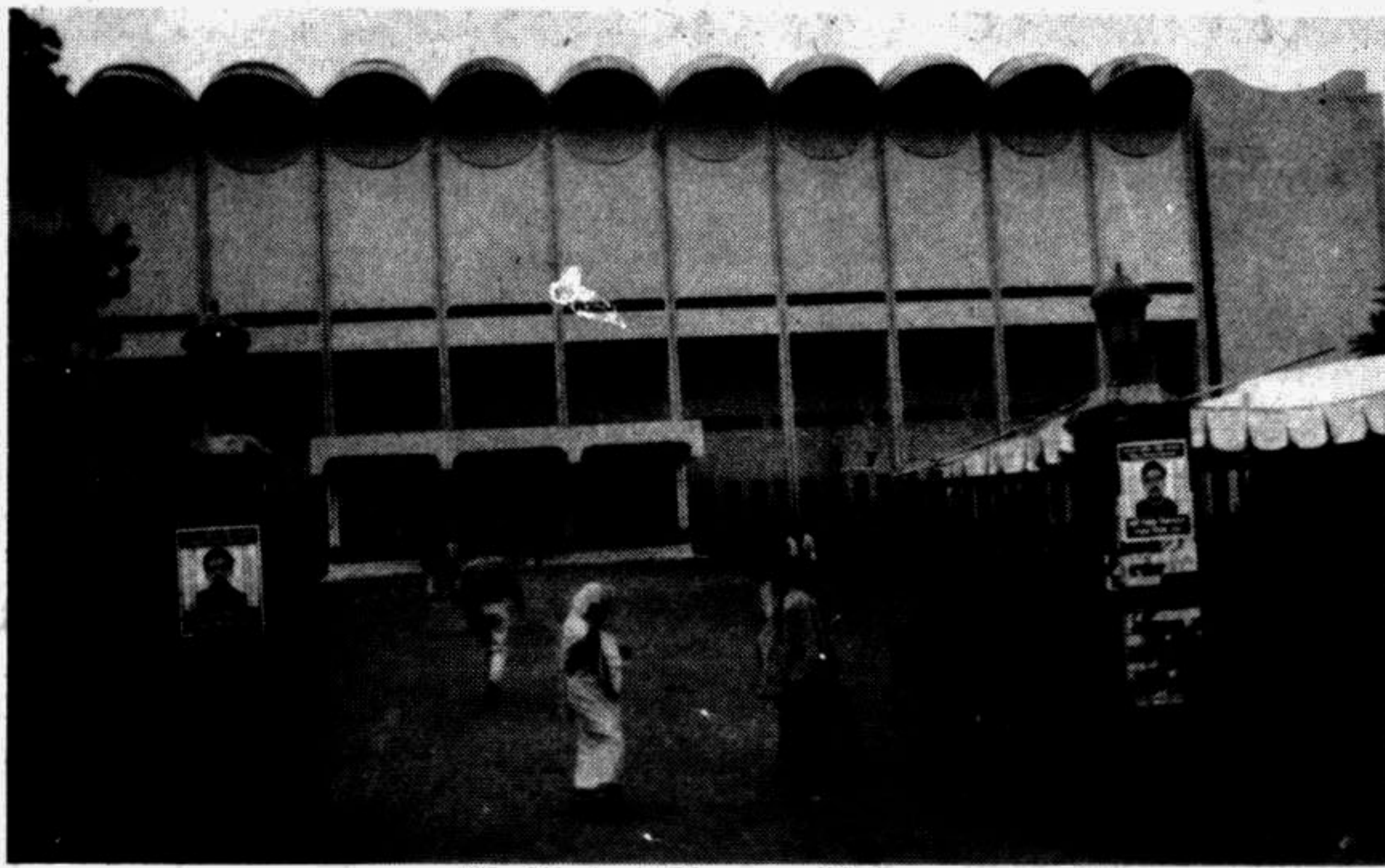


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PRESERVING THE PRICELESS PAST

Repertory in the National Museum

by Fayza Haq



The National Museum, Dhaka

ABOUT a thousand people visit the National Museum in Dhaka every day. This includes four batches of 50 students with a proper guide appointed or approved by the Museum, as well as foreign tourists. The original Museum building was built in 1914 during the British period. Today the new imposing construction, with its varied stories, near Shahbagh point, houses a host of wealth — ranging from the Brahmanic and the Buddhist sculpture of the sixth and seventh centuries to the arms used during the Liberation War.

The sculptures are mostly from the eastern and northern areas of Bangladesh, and related to the old geographical divisions of Banga, Samatata and Barendra. Coming down to the Gupta period one is more sure of the dates of the astonishing blackstone pieces with their minute sculptured details. The same applies to the terra-cotta fragments from Mainamati and Paharpur. The earliest specimens belong to the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. There is a certain uniformity in these pieces as these are the characteristics of Buddhist and Brahmanical sculpture.

Even the damaged item from Tippera of the 11th century was of interest. It has deities sitting and posing on lotus stalk. The lower panel showed the seven symbols of Buddhism: horse, swordsman, money-lender, young woman, jewel, wheel and an elephant. There is then the 11th century blackstone statue of one of the five Buddhist goddesses. This shows a young goddess with three faces. She is seated on a double lotus holding a sword, arrow, trident, bow, lasso, hatchet and other weapons in her eight hands. This was found in Bikrampur, in Munshiganj.

There is then the other sculpture, representing the medicine god, Pindola, obtained from Sohargao. On the palm was the fruit symbol of herbs and medicines. Another image which held one's attention was that of the ninth century AD eight-handed Buddhist goddess, recognised as Sitatptra. There was the small bronze image of the Buddhist goddess Hariti, the protectress of children, which may be compared to other deities in the museum. She too sat on a lotus and held fruits and a child in her hand. Similarly, the 14 inch Krishna in the 'tribhanga' pose, with his flute, found near Dhaka, and dating to the 16th century AD, would win the admiration of most viewers.

Apart from the deities in the stunning blackstone are the terra-cotta pieces which were found in the form of plaques, and stamped and inscribed slabs. Though not altogether cut off from religious and legendary importance they are more of traditional folk art type, and often lacked in sophistication and stylisation. They show birds and animals such as snakes, ducks, monkeys and peacocks, with their particular actions. As for the human form, they are simplified. They have open mouths, thick lips, which are the characteristics of the terra-cotta of the time. The earliest of these series are from Paharpur and Dinajpur and dated back to the eighth century AD.

Apart from the plaques there are the slabs of terra-cotta obtained from Savar, near Dhaka, and these once formed part of Buddhist temples. They often depicted the image of Buddha in the 'Dhyana', 'Lalita', 'Bhumisparsha' and 'Maharajalita' poses. They are somewhat more conventional and stylised. There are also a number of stone slabs and railings, with deities carved in relief. These deities have the Buddhist and Brahman background like the other sculpture in blackstones.

It is fascinating to study the different items found in the terra-cotta and stone pieces such as the cross fish, bull, the swan with the pearl string, the laughing man, and the warrior, with the shield and sword in hand, from Mainamati, from the eighth century AD. The mythological terra-cotta plaque from the sixth century AD brought in intriguing rosettes, flower and creeper motifs. There are too the fascinating geometrical designs from the 18th century AD.

On another display point are the figure of a European soldier from Pabna, a Siva with the moon in hand from Bogra,

a warrior with a sword in hand from Pabna, and a woman performing her toilet from Dinajpur. All these terra-cotta items are from 18th century AD, and capture the attention of the viewer straight away for their element of beauty, and their magic of being able to

recreate the past.

A woman giving birth to a child was depicted in details in a terra-cotta plaque. Krishna-Lila from Dhaka and Rajshahi were found in plenty. So were items like elephants, horses, swimming ducks, and horse riders from 19th century AD. They recalled the past in a most vivid manner.

The display does not always keep the dating in mind so that one sometimes found a hotchpotch of centuries, although the mode and pattern or the terra-cotta art remained similar. Thus one saw elephant processions from the 1st century BC, and chariots from the same period displayed with embracing couples from the eighth century AD.

These are mingled with objects from Mahasthangarh, and this includes a marvelous double-bodied Kinnar in angular terra-cotta from the eighth century AD.

The brass and bronze gods and goddesses are also marvelous to behold. There is Vishnu, the Hindu god of protection, in bronze from Naogaon. This is an eleventh century piece. The brass Durga from Rajshahi is dated 17th century. Gauri in bronze from Munshiganj was a 12th century AD bronze item. There is Vishnu mounted on the Garuda in brass from eleventh century. The 31-inches Buddha from Sylhet is an eighth century creation of remarkable beauty. You find Ganesha, Kartika and Sadasiva from Dhaka and Munshiganj — all in bronze.

One does not know whether the bronze and brass pieces were more captivating or the blackstone sculptures, such as those of Brahma from the 10th century, Gauri from the 12th century, and Nataraja Siva from 10th century, from Dhaka and Comilla. There is also an intriguing symbolic form or Siva, the 'Sivalinga' from the ninth century, from Dhaka. These are all in stone.

Another interesting aspect of the Museum is the coin collection. There are the ones of

the Scytho-Parthian period as well as the Gupta period, which include Puru Gupta, Chandra Gupta II and Kumar Gupta. Coins from Sindh and Delhi are also among the collection of silver and gold mint work.

The coins found in the Museum depicted medieval Bengal from the historical point of view. Dr Bhattacharya, the first curator of the Museum, wrote a book entitled 'Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal,' which dealt with the pre-Mughal Muslim rulers of Bengal.

Among the coin collections, the one by Hakim Habibur Rehman and Syed M Tahir are the most important. They date back to the emperors Nasiruddin Mahmud of Delhi, Ghiyasuddin Balban, Alauddin Muhammad Khalji, Sikander Lodi and Sher Shah. Silver coins of Bengal rulers such as Shamsuddin Firoze and Jalaluddin Muhammad are also included in the display.

In addition are the coins of other Mughal rulers as that of Taimur Shah of Kabul, and the sultans and kings of Gujrat, Nepal, Mongolia, Assam and Persia.

There are medals issued by the British during the World War I and World War II. There is, as well the Kaiser-e-Hind medal of 1877, and contemporary medals of Edward VII.

One finds too the eighteenth and nineteenth century silver ornaments such as the 'hasulaf', 'madulif', 'sutilhar' for the neck, 'bala', 'kangan', 'bajuband' for the arms, 'paazeb' for the ankles, and various types of 'bichhas' such as 'lara', 'darhi', 'phal' and 'jhumar'. These have been collected from Dhaka, Sylhet, Chittagong and Comilla.

The Museum has a sizeable display of Arabic and Persian inscriptions as well. These often belonged to the era of the sultans of the Mughal rulers of Bengal. The epigraphy has a tendency for versification and carry names and dates of historic importance. The let-

tering is of the Suls, Naksh and Tughra type. The Nastaliq dominate in the Mughal period. While Persian was the language of the inscription in the Mughal period, Arabic was popular in the pre-Mughal time. The writings are inscriptions of old mosques, tombs and public buildings, and belonged to the 17th to 19th centuries, such as the recording in the mosque which had been erected by Masnad Ali Fateh Khan in 1588, and which had the Tughra style.

Good specimens of Muslim calligraphy are also there in other forms such as the one by Sultan Ali Mashadi the Shah-i-Rubaiyat-Jami. This is in the Nastaliq style. There is then the Quran written by Mohammed Riza with the geometrical designs in blue and gold. There is also the calligraphy by Al-Hussaini and Hafiz Muhammad. Floral and geometrical patterns heightened the beauty of the writings in various styles ranging from the Nastaliq to the Naksh. The Gulzar also provides rich manuscript writing with the flowers and animals, such as the one by Mirza Bahadur Hussaini.

The paintings of the Museum ranged from the 17th century to the present time. Of interest are the Eid and Muharram processions of 19th century Dhaka, and the book covers depicting the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Krishna legends. The Mahabharata has a deep red background on which figures are done in brown, green, yellow and gold. The style is that of the Rajput-Mughal court in the delineation of the dress, architecture and the decorations. There were depictions of Krishna's pretense sleep, Visma's bed of arrows and other details. Another Ramayana manuscript depicted the prince and his companions in green, yellow and light brown, with black outlines.

While the floral designs in the book covers spoke of the Mughal influence, the manner in which the human figures were done told of the Rajput impact. There are a few Mughal miniatures and a couple were done in the style of the 18th century Lucknow. Although from the artistic



Illustration from the Shah-Namah, June 1677

point of view the illustrations may not be very valuable they are definitely so from the documentary point of view, as they depicted people, houses and customs of the time. The Eid processions, for instance, delineated the Hindus, Muslims and British — men and women. They are shown with buildings in the background.

Medieval arms and armaments such as guns, swords, daggers, helmets, arrows and breast plates similarly see a rich collection in the Dhaka Museum sections. These date back to Sher Shah and Isa Khan and even Babur and Akbar. There is a section on the Liberation War too, where specimens of arms and ammunition — which ranged from bows and arrows to cannons — are well preserved.

Another absorbing entry in the Museum's collection is the porcelain. There are Chinese bowls, jars, and plates in green blue, ochre and white, with floral designs and Arabic inscriptions. Human motifs are also found intertwined in the floral patterns. These porcelains are from Dinajpur, Noakhali and Mymensingh and date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. There are also the collections from Balha showing British lords and ladies seen in a relaxed pose and on horseback. There are also the contributions of S M Tahir and Khan Saheb Hasnat Ahmed.

Darbari robes, armchairs, beds and ivory curios given by the Dinajpur and Balha royal families add to the lustre of the collection. This include the bedstead of teak with carved lions, angels and flow-

ers from Tangail from the 19th AD. The one from Jessore, also of the last century, is a high bedstead, requiring steps to climb and had four fascinating angels on the four ends. The one from Faridpur has deer, sculptured women, lions and was complete with a set of stairs. There are wooden palanquins, with swans and human figures, as well as massive carved wooden chests from the last century.

The 'chogas' and 'achkans' as well as the 'balabar anga' of the nineteenth century, with the sequins on gold brocade, velvet and silk once again speak of a recent rich past.

The giant decorated umbrella with the dragon pattern, sewn with pink pearl on violet velvet cloth, and ornamented with sequins and seed pearls is another feast for the eye.

Last but not least are the silver and gold filigree models of the Hussaini Dalan, of the Shah sect of the Muslims and the Ahsan Manzil, which was once the residence of the Nawabs of Dhaka.

The Museum has a library for scholars and experts, as well as a collection of paintings of famous musicians, poets, politicians and men of repute of Bangladesh. There are sections dedicated to Zafar Abidin and contemporary artists.

A day at the Museum would perhaps not be a poor choice for an outing in the city. One only wished that the books that had been published by the Museum were not out of print throughout the year. Also, the labels of the exhibits could have been more precise and in more details.



Nataraja Siva. Basalt. 11th century



Ceremonial umbrella made in Dhaka. 19th century

Coming Soon : The Fall of Indian Cinema

INDIA'S film industry, one of the world's biggest, appears to be on the verge of collapse.

The prolific industry, which churns out some 800 major films annually, is under threat. Poor fiscal management, government apathy, rank indiscipline, over-production and the growth of other media like television and the video are the main reasons for the industry's increasing difficulties in recent times.

Amit Khana, a veteran film director, said, "We are seeing the phantoms of darkness. Some 30 million Indians who flock to 13,000 theatres every day are now beginning to drop out. Some 2,000 cinema halls already closed down. Some large theatres are being converted into offices."

Mr. Khana believes serious trouble for the industry began in the 1980s.

The advent of colour television in India in 1982 — followed by the video revolution — challenged the cinema's domination of the Indian entertainment scene for the first time.

Rising production costs and delays compounded the ailing industry's troubles. Many film projects do not even get beyond the studio doors. Several mighty movie moguls have left the industry.

Economists expect the industry's financial woes to

worsen. They say the cost of producing a film will rise further. It will no longer be possible to produce even a modest film for a million rupees.

One observer said, "Only 17 films out of 126 released last year recovered their investments. More than 600 were on the floor and well over 40 films got stuck never to

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Majority of film projects do not get completed because the movie industry no longer draws serious financiers. Many of the present financiers, according to sources, are smugglers, gangland bosses and racketeers.

These shady financiers often get involved in fly-by-night projects. But they appear to have become the mainstay of the Indian film industry.

The entry of these ques-

tionable characters into the movie industry has, among other things, pushed the fees of stars into unbelievable heights as they demonstrate a preference for projects involving glamorous personalities. Projects have to have impressive casts if they have to get financial support. People with money are interested only in getting to know the beautiful people.

Thus, in many instances, half of the cost of the film is only for the fees of the stars.

Indian movie audiences primarily consist of the urban poor rather than the middle class. Ticket prices cannot be raised substantially unlike in the West where the cinema is a distinctively upmarket entertainment medium.

U.A. Thadani, president of the Theatre Owners' Association, says film showing is no longer a profitable endeavour. "Built-up space can be used much more profitably. Believe me, the day the authorities allow it, most of the 126 theatres in Bombay city will be pulled down to build shopping centres, residential flats or anything."

Mr. Thadani said the land value alone of an average theatre in large cities may exceed 20 million rupees (US\$1.6 million). But an average theatre-owner in an Indian metropolis earns a net income of 5,000 rupees (US\$400) per

week.

"We should earn many times more than what we are earning from the theatres," Mr. Thadani said. "But I bet the audience will not pay a rupee more."

Since 1975, ticket prices have gone up by about 60 per cent but production costs have risen by 400 to 500 per cent.

But the most serious threat to the film industry comes from videos. It is estimated that there are now more than 10 million video sets in India.

Apparently as a result of this, Gulshan Rai, president of the Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association, said, "Today, only 5 per cent of the films are running, 95 per cent are failures...How can the industry exist on a 95 per cent failure rate? The industry is on the verge of closure."

Also losing a lot as a result of the invasion of videos is the government. Sources estimate that some 22 million rupees (US\$ 1.7 million) a month in taxes are lost due to the proliferation of video cassette recorders (VCRs) in India. The amount is likely to rise as more and more people invest in a VCR. Most of these VCR owners get their tapes from video pirates.

"If you are a thief or a murderer you know you will be caught and punished one day. Not so the video pirate," Prakash Mehra, a well-known

producer, complains. "He is not scared of the law. The government itself cannot understand video piracy, its seriousness and the loss of revenue through piracy."

Mr. Mehra said a feature film costs about 20 to 30 million rupees (US\$1.6 million to US\$2.4 million) to produce. Average loss due to piracy is estimated at about 59 per cent for every film. As a result, film production is down by almost 55 per cent.

Video pirates reportedly have a turnover rate of 10,000 million rupees (US\$800 million) a year, giving them a very comfortable edge over film producers. The video trade has indeed become a profitable enterprise in India. A provision store owner, for instance, now has a flourishing video business worth more than 40 million rupees (US\$3.2 million).

Television has also eaten into the film industry's market. India TV viewers now total about 100 million. Some 30 million black-and-white and colour television sets are being watched around the country. This number is expected to go up to about 50 million over the next five years and eventually 100 million as prices fall because of mass production.

Industry people pointed out that, at one time, Indian TV relied heavily on the cinema industry for most of its material. But the situation is fast

changing. The state-run Doordarshan television network is now producing its own sponsored serials.

Although two or three films are shown every week on TV, more and more original serials and plays are being produced attracting large advertising revenues. Last year, TV's advertising revenues totalled

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2,500 million rupees (US\$200 million).

But not everybody in the Indian film industry has lost hope. Subhash Ghai, a film producer whose latest project 'Ram Laxhan' is a runaway success at the box office, believes the industry will survive. He is confident about the cinema's power to draw crowds and pay for itself.

Mr. Ghai blames film producers for their own failures. They are always short of cash and filmmaking becomes a race against time and money.

"I do not believe that cin-

ema is a dying art in India or anywhere. The magic of the big screen in a darkened theatre will always be there. It is even true of the US, a nation which has competing cable TV and video," Mr. Ghai said.

Some filmmakers are also looking into ways to exploit TV and videos. As a result, 27 new TV serials are under production, most of them featuring well-known film stars. Doordarshan is busy juggling around producers and their serials to provide them precious and expensive TV time.

Other filmmakers are hoping to rescue the dying industry through music. One observer said, "The sound of music rings loudly in cash registers. Rare is the film that is a hit without a best-selling sound track. Eventually, it is the song that guarantees a film's success."

"Ram Laxhan," for instance, sold a million copies of its sound track. Mukul Anand, director of the film "Hum," said, "Now a producer says 'to hell with the situation.' Give me a couple of hit songs and I will make a film. It's music, music all the way. One song sequence has cost 1.6 million rupees (US\$128,000)."

As a result of the film's success, numerous films dealing with love stories are now in various stages of production. Producer Randeep Kapoor says Indians are going to see countless variations of "West Side Story," a tale of tragic young love. — Depthnews

by Prakash Chandra