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THE CRISIS IN THE FILM INDUSTRY: IS THERE A WAY OUT?

The local film industry is at a crossroad today with the quality of films progressively declining but, paradoxically, the number of production increasing, making way for a glut the industry people find difficult to rejoice over.

THE film industry is at a difficult crossroad today, unable to find a proper sense of direction.

The quality of locally produced commercial feature films has drastically declined in recent years. The overall lack of creativity, originality, planning and an acute dearth of talent is severely undermining the industry.

Rising production costs, over-production, widespread copying of foreign films, declining viewership, shortage of artists and technicians and a host of other problems are making the situation worse.

Although about 70 films were released last year alone, very few can claim any distinction either for quality of content or technique. Detached from any realism to a large extent, these films rarely depict local art, literature or culture. Blatant copying of foreign films seems to be the only game in town. The trend in the industry these days is to have a script concocted from one or more foreign films seen on video cassettes, sign up some crowd-pulling stars, throw in a few extra dance and song sequences into the plot, complete the production somehow and hope that the film does good at the box-office.

The 'formula' based movies, by far the vast majority of them, often do not have any local cultural or social basis. These films are accused by critics of projecting an 'alien

period. Even renowned Indian film maker Rihitwik Ghatak made a film, *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam*, here at that time.

So, what hastened the decline in the quality of local films? Why are the films not depicting our art, literature and culture even as much as before?

Industry sources pointed out that a major detrimental factor for the film industry is the excessive influx of 'black money' into the industry in recent years, which is perhaps the primary reason for the declining standard of local films. A large number of money-men began to produce films to launder black money, without giving much thought to making decent quality films, they added.

The film industry essentially is said to have gone into the hands of the financiers. A group of powerful people have consolidated their grip on the industry. Producers became distributors and exhibitors, while distributors became producers and so on. Even the big name stars joined in the fray. Now there are stars who are actor, director, producer and distributor all at the same time. The film industry is run by a coterie of powerful people, by a kind

sively high fees these days, which is a contributing factor for the rising production cost. Increasing cost of raw films and chemicals together with service charges for studio rentals has made the production costs prohibitively high, they added.

Another reason for the poor standard of local films is perhaps the lack of competition. The market here is an extremely protected one, foreign films which can directly compete with local films are not allowed to be screened here. "All along producers wanted a protected market in which they have no competition. It is making them lethar-

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A Star Special by S.Y. Bakht

gle," Iftekharul Alam pointed out.

Although the quality has suffered alarmingly, the number of films released has increased significantly over the last few years. According to FDC figures, at least 60 movies were released at an average every year since the mid-

think is far too many," noted Azizur Rahman Bull, president of the 170-member strong Bangladesh Film Producers Association. "We should not release more than 52 movies a year for the sake of the industry's well-being," he added.

The industry is facing a tough time in deciding how many films should be allowed to be released during the coming Eid festival period, considered the most profitable time for releasing a film. The Chalachitra Shilpa Shangrakshan Committee—an industry lobbying group—has selected three films for release through a lottery. The producers and distributors associations are ac-

tively backing the move, and the FDC is also going along with the plan and accordingly making final prints of those films only.

But some disgruntled producers and exhibitors feel cheated and they do not seem to agree that there is an actual glut of films waiting to be released. "The supply is being curtailed to create an artificial shortage, so that one can derive unfair and unreasonable benefit," explained Iftekharul Alam, also managing director of Star Corporation Ltd.

to pay under any circumstances," Mr. Alam added.

The Capacity Tax replaced the earlier excise stamp on tickets sold form of entertainment tax. The then Managing Director of FDC, Syed Yousuf Hussain, pointed out that "When the Capacity Tax was introduced in the early-eighties, then all of a sudden business began to increase and the numbers of films released also increased." At that time, more films were being produced than the existing number of experienced directors and technicians could cope with, he said. Thus many inexperienced people started to make movies, which had an adverse effect on the industry. As the industry expanded in such an unplanned way, the quality of the films declined and the long-term effect of which is being felt now, he added. "If the present downward trend continues, then it will not be possible to save the film industry at all," he warned.

Syed Yousuf Hussain also pointed out that the proliferation of video cassette players in the country is keeping even the lower middle-class viewers out of the movie theatres. But observers said that the arrival of VCPs in the living room is an illogical system, you have

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Although the quality of our films has declined alarmingly, the number of films released increased significantly over the last few years. According to FDC figures, at least 60 movies were released at an average every year since the mid-eighties, with a single year highest of 77 released in 1989.



The Beginning: 'Mukh-O-Mukhosh'.



The Growth: 'Surjodighal Bari'.



Scene from a senseless costume extravaganza.

How Much Money Does it Take to Make a Film?

HERE is big money involved in producing a commercial feature-film.

It is said that a decent sized manufacturing industry can be set up with the average production cost of a full-colour feature-film in today's market.

According to Azizur Rahman Bull, president of the Bangladesh Film Producers Association, the average cost of a commercial feature-film in full-colour is about Taka 50 lakh while the maximum can be as high as Taka One crore or more. On the other hand, the average cost of a film in black and white is about Taka 30 lakh. But hardly any black and white feature-films are made these days, he added.

A major portion of the production costs is said to be spent on buying raw-film and chemicals, paying for services for using the film-studio and also paying the film artists. As raw-film and chemicals are supplied by the Film Development Corporation, thus together with service charges producers end up paying about Taka 25 lakh at an average to the studio. Artist fees are also a major expense and producers pointed out that if the film has a star-studded cast, then the cost can go as high as Taka 15 lakh.

As the production cost are extremely high and there are

no loan provisions available, the total cost has to be met privately and mostly in the form of cash money. Thus, film producing is some what restricted to those businessmen who have unused cash money, industry sources said.

Industry people seem to agree that the film industry is perhaps totally in the hands of businessmen. They also noted that excessive amount of 'black money' has entered the industry in recent years. Another factor which has increased the scope to monopolise the industry is that a number of financiers have consolidated their hold on the industry. In recent years, many producers have become distributors and exhibitors, while exhibitors have become producers and distributors also. Big name star artists have also joined in and now there are number of artists who are directors, producers and distributors all at the same time.

The number of films released has increased significantly in recent years. According to FDC figures, at least 60 movies were released at an average every year since the mid-eighties. A total of 70 films were released last year and a whopping 77 in 1989, the largest single year total for the film industry.

Although the middle-class

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culture', highlighting sex, violence and extreme vulgarity.

"Very often, these films do not have any relation to the local social or cultural context, sometimes the characters and even the costumes are foreign, nothing is local," pointed out Kabir Anwar, himself an acclaimed film director.

The film industry has come a long way in this country. The industry has been around for over 30 years, ever since the Film Development Corporation (FDC) was established in 1957. The first film, *Mukh-o-Mukhosh* by Abdul Jabbar Khan, was, however, released in 1956. Thus the industry has a comparatively long film-making tradition to follow. Relatively much better quality movies were made here in the past and some were even acclaimed internationally. Film-makers honestly attempted to depict the local society and culture even in the commercial films and most also did good at the box-office. After all, film-makers like Faiz Lohani, Zahir Rathan, Mustafiz and others are a product of this industry only.

Even after liberation, reality-oriented films continued to be produced. A number of films on the Liberation War and also on social problems were released. Alamgir Kabir, Anzad Hossain, Kabir Anwar and other film-makers distinguished themselves during this

of a 'mafia' to quote a critic.

In the early eighties, the trend to copy Bombay films took off like wild-fire in the industry. And unlike before, when a written statement by the producers stating that the film was not a copied version was required to be submitted, the Censor Board began to allow these films to be marketed without any questions asked. Later, the Censor Board changed the rules of the copying game only slightly, requiring producers to furnish receipt of copyright purchase.

"It is funny that the government has taken it upon itself to protect the copyrights of foreign films while requiring local producers to buy copyright permissions with the country's precious foreign exchange," said Iftekharul Alam, an exhibitor and producer of long-standing. "They should simply be banned," he added.

There is an acute shortage of experienced story, and screenplay writers in the industry, producers pointed out. Shortage of good artists and directors are also felt. New artists are rarely allowed to break onto the industry. And as the number of films being produced increased, the existing artists—especially the stars—are being overburdened and they are unable to do much justice to the roles they are portraying.

Producers said that the star artist's demand exces-

OVER a period of more than two decades, between 1964 and 1988, when this writer paid more than a dozen visits to the People's Republic of China, first as a journalist and then as an official of a UN body, his hosts always seemed to have a few surprises in store for him.

These were usually pleasant ones. However, when some surprises, say, a sudden change of plan or the cancellation of an agreed programme, caused me some inconvenience, regarded them with good humour, knowing full well that the embarrassment suffered by my hosts was probably much greater than my personal inconvenience. These visits to China and later my trips to Vietnam and Laos thus taught me to practise tolerance and consideration, which I now preach to others but which, I must admit, I myself use in my day-to-day life in Dhaka with increasingly diminishing success.

Visits to China in 1964-65, when the stage was set for the Cultural Revolution, produced more surprises than my frequent trips to Beijing in the eighties. In the sixties, an element of suspicion about most, if not all, foreign journalists, obliged the Chinese officials to maintain a degree of secrecy about the programme drawn up for a visiting newsmen. This was often the main reason why a journalist would be told of an interview,

sometimes only an hour or so before it took place. What's more, it might be a meeting that a journalist had not asked for.

My totally unexpected, unrequested but not unwelcome meeting with Henry Pu Yi, the last Emperor of China in Beijing in July 1964 represents one such extreme case of surprise that also falls in the subject category of my best recollections of that year.

I had a phone call early in the morning from my official interpreter cum guide who was waiting downstairs of the hotel that the "authorities" had arranged a "surprise" interview for me with Mr Pu Yi and that it was to take place within an hour. That meant that we were to start immediately.

Rather puzzled, I asked the most elementary but basic question that had come to my mind. "Who is Mr Pu Yi? Is he the economic expert that I am due to meet some time this week?"

Looking back, I would not blame myself for my ignorance of the identity of the man who, in an hour's time, was to greet me in an airy living room of single storey house in the suburb of the Chinese capital.

After all, that was some 20 years before "The Last Emperor" had hit the silver

screen as one of the greatest films of the decade, turning the name of Henry Pu Yi into a household one in millions of homes in the world.

During the motor ride, the interpreter had told me a little bit about "that last Emperor of China who was a Japanese puppet king of Manchuria, one who had betrayed his people." The young man had said all that in a voice that reflected both indifference and contempt, without much interest in going into details.

"How shall I address him?" I had asked him. "Maybe as 'Your Majesty'."

"Of course not," he protested vigorously. "You should just call him 'Mr Pu Yi'."

"Well," I replied, "I will think about it." The interpreter seemed uneasy, a little nervous and perhaps slightly angry. From time to time, I teased him a bit, but he was not quite used to my style.

Having had no more than hour's notice for the interview, and that too with a man I had read little about, I started my conversation with the last Emperor with perfunctory greetings, fidgeted with my camera and began wondering about what to say during the rest of our meeting.

sleeve open neck white shirt—not in a Mao suit, I quickly noted—asked, "Will you have some tea, Mr. Ali?"

My response was quick. "Yes, Your Majesty," I replied, "I will have a cup of tea."

While my interpreter muttered something in protest, it was Pu Yi who quickly said, "No, Mr. Ali, you must not address me as 'your majesty'."

Now, I am only an ordinary citizen of China. You should just call me as 'Mr Pu Yi'."

Right through that one hour meeting, Pu Yi spoke to me in Mandarin, with the interpreter providing me with the English translation. However, I had the distinct impression that he could follow my questions perfectly well. After all, he had an English tutor, which we all came to know some 20 years later from the movie, *The Last Emperor*.

It seemed Pu Yi was more than well-trained to face a situation in which the interviewer was unsure about how

to get the conversation off the ground.

"You probably know quite a lot about my unusual life," he said hopefully, almost condescendingly, "but let me try to fill in some gaps." It turned out to be more than just filling in some gaps. It became a narration, starting with his return to China from the Soviet Union (when he expected to be im-

mediately shot, but was treated with "exceptional kindness and consideration", as he put it) and then went on with his "re-education" and eventual rehabilitation in the Chinese society.

Ought I perhaps mention here that Pu Yi's return to China, the opening sequence of the movie, *The Last Emperor* largely followed the account given to me during that unexpected interview, but it was not without several variations, additions and omissions. For one thing, Pu Yi had said nothing to me about his suicide attempt.

By now, I felt relatively at ease, almost relaxed, ready to put a few direct, almost audacious, questions to a man who exuded a gentle natural charm and a friendly disposition.

"Are you a member of the Chinese Communist Party?" I asked.

The answer came promptly, in the negative.

"Would you like to be a member of the Party?"

"No, I do not think I can ever earn that honour," he replied in a respectful tone.

He answered a few more questions, about his interest in gardening, about that "stemple but exceedingly happy life" he led now with his "new wife" (second or third?—I did not ask), in contrast to the "artificial life" he had in the past, and finally about the changes in China, carried out under the leadership of Chairman Mao.

The conversation tended to get a little dull—well, thanks to my own lack of preparation—and even poor Pu Yi seemed to be looking bored.

My last question put a bit of life into our dying interview.

"Mr. Pu Yi, you are a unique man, but only a few foreigners have the opportunity of seeing you and talking to you," I said. "I suggest, you should travel out of China, see some foreign countries and meet people,

even some surviving monarchs, who, I am sure, will be excited to know the man who once sat on the throne of China."

Pu Yi followed my question with revived interest, no longer hiding the fact that he understood English perfectly well, and answered it almost as soon as it had been translated by the interpreter.

"Yes, yes, I would love to visit some foreign countries, including yours," he said with what looked like genuine enthusiasm. "But, then, you see, my health is not very good, not good at all."

A tactful diplomatic answer? Perhaps. But, then, Pu Yi did not really live long. He died a couple of years later, reportedly a victim of cancer, long before myths and facts were brought together, in a superb mixture, to create the movie, *The Last Emperor*.

At the end of the meeting, the last Emperor walked with me through a traditional Chinese courtyard and saw me off to the car parked near the gate. He shook my hand, smiled and nodded at both the driver and the interpreter, like any functionary ending a meeting with a visiting newsmen.

Then, suddenly, as I gasped the uniqueness of the occasion, I felt overwhelmed by the realisation that the man who was shaking my hand was an extraordinary individual who had been a part of the history of China during one of the most turbulent times of this great country, not as a footnote but as a figure occupying a whole page or perhaps a whole chapter of a great saga.

How did I handle my interview with Pu Yi? A short version appeared in the *Karachi daily, Dawn*, which was responsible for arranging my visit to China. A longer version, running to several pages, appeared in the Hong Kong-based leftist monthly, the *Eastern Horizon*. During my visit to London a year later, an attractive offer from UPI prompted me to sell to the agency virtually all my China photographs, with negatives, without any agreement—a foolish oversight—about the use of my credit line. One of my photographs of Mr Pu Yi appeared in the *Newsweek* in its then widely read column, "Where Are They Now?" The item showed the last Emperor, dressed in his military uniform, as the Japanese puppet king of Manchuria, in one file photograph, next to the one taken by me only a few months earlier in Beijing.

My scoop of the year hardly made a splash but only a stir at the back of my mind.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

'Yes, Your Majesty, I will Have a Cup of Tea'