

A review of the **INDIAN FILM INDUSTRY**

It was 1911, and a Coronation year. King George V was being crowned. The nationalist movement had not yet gathered momentum and Mahatma Gandhi was still in South Africa. The British Royal Family was popular—at least it had not yet become identified with foreign domination in the minds of Indian masses. But more enticing was the news that one can see walking and gesticulating figures on a screen, instead of the usual still photographs. So when a few prints of the Coronation newsreels arrived in Bombay, people flocked to them to witness a new marvel of Science, and to experience a totally novel sensation.

These were shown in tents in what was then called the Esplanade Maidan by a few peripatetic exhibitors. But the wailing and jerking and gesticulating figures enjoyed such popularity that the peripatetic exhibitors decided to turn permanent ones. Soon durable cinema halls began to go up, first in Bombay but gradually in most leading cities of India. Foreign pictures, with captions in the local language, accompanied by harmonium and tubla to reinforce a crisis in duelling and shooting scenes, set the pace. That was the beginning of the Indian Film Industry, an ironic beginning. Yet it was a beginning that blossomed forth in the course of time to present India with a film industry that is next only to Hollywood when it comes to the number of pictures produced every year. There are at present 60 film production studios, 3250 cinema houses (of which 850 are touring cinemas) and 800 distributors. Every year about 90 crores of Indian citizens go to see motion pictures, more than twice the entire population of India. The investment of the production branch alone amounts to eighteen crores. The total investment of the entire industry comes to more than forty crores.

Indian Cinema Industry is one of the most lucrative sources of revenue for the Government of India. The gross income per year of the entire industry is round Rs. 30 crores out of which 13 crores or 40 per cent. of the total gross income goes to swell the earning of the National Exchequer. In 1950-51 722.80, lakhs of rupees were collected from the entertainment tax alone. Around 1,25,000 Indian citizens are directly employed by the industry and many more make their livelihood through it by the way of auxiliary and ancillary trades and professions.

It is a common complaint, especially coming from educated classes, that the improvement in the quality

of Indian films has not been as spectacular as expansion of its size. Old and established producers of India readily own the charge but they propose minor amendments to the sentiment. What they claim is that some very bad pictures are being made and perhaps they give a black eye to the entire industry. What they further point out is that some very nice pictures are also being made—pictures that can certainly bear comparison with their best counter parts in the Western world. What happens is this. Most of our educated people have a notion that Indian pictures cannot be good and so they frequent only those theatres which show American and British movies. Their prejudice therefore is due to hearsay reports and not an outcome of personal experience.

A glance at the thematic development of Indian Films will be helpful in this respect. In the beginning concentration was on mythological themes. The first full length Indian film ever to be produced was "Raja Harishchandra." Not only all Hindus but perhaps all Indians are aware of the thrilling theme wherein a devotee of truth sacrifices his wife and son on the altar of truth, only to be rewarded by God in the end. The story has thrilled Hindu hearts for centuries and so it was easy for it to attract vast audiences. No new trails had to be blazed by the producer; Indian audiences were eager to see on the screen what they had heard from the lips of the bards and read in books. Then came such films as "Krishna Janma" and "Kalia Mardan." In fact Krishna the image of Hindu childhood, the darling of poets, and the most dominant gay note in Indian mythology has been the centre of Indian imagery and Indian aspirations. His life provided central themes for the early movies made in India. Sometimes illiterate but devoted people in the cinema halls went up to the screen to touch the feet of Lord Krishna as being depicted on the silver screen.

From those ready-made themes, ready-made both from the point of view of conception and audience interest, it has been a long stride to the social dramas of today discussing with daring and vigour such burning problems as Hindu widowhood, Indian aspirations for and the achievement of Independence, Pagree, Black-market, the tragi-comedy of a college graduate marrying an unlettered woman and India's relations with foreign countries.

Several novelists have often complained that a gulf exists between vernacular literatures and the films

produced. The point is well taken, because a distinct group of scenario writers, almost existing in the studios themselves, and away from real life, has come into existence. Yet good beginning have been made to transform literature into movies, especially in Bengal and Maharashtra and to some extent in Madras. Such books as "Parineeta" based on Sarat Chandra's novel have become minor classics, pictures than can be compared with the best lyrical movies produced either in France or England or Italy or America. The tendency is growing; producers are finding more profitable themes from recognised novelists than from scenario writers. They are also finding that movies based upon recognised and popular novels lend themselves to cheaper and at the same time successful productions.

The beginning made by mythological themes provide India only with a trickle of industry. It was round 1930 when talkie was introduced that Indian cinema industry came into its own. Until then cinema halls showed more foreign pictures, mainly from Hollywood, than Indian productions. When it was a question of pure mime, even illiterate workers and villagers were quite content to see stunt pictures from Hollywood. It was the introduction of speech and of sound effects and music that attracted Indian masses for the first time in full force to the cinema halls. While they could not read pithy captions they could understand the spoken word if it was in their mother tongue or in Hindustani. Indian languages pictures thus began to be more popular than foreign pictures. The first talkie Indian picture ever to be produced was "Alam Ara" in 1931 by Ardeshir Irani; Parsis have been pioneers not only in steel industry but also in Cinema Industry. The monopoly of foreign and Hollywood pictures was broken and the vast population of India was turned into an extensive market for motion pictures speaking Indian languages. One of the reasons why our Industry is large is that our population is quite large.

Already more than 16 lakhs of Indian citizens go to picture houses every day, a fact that places the Indian cinema at par with the Indian Press and the All-India Radio as a means of mass contact. But from the point of our vast population, three thousand cinema houses is an extremely low figure. By opening small new theatres in middling towns and district headquarters, entertainment and instruction can be taken almost to the villagers' door. 1700 towns are still untouched. If 16 mm films are made as feasible as 35 mm. films through Government and public co-operation as recommended by the Film Enquiry Committee, cinema halls can be small and cheap enough to be sustained by small communities. Few people have thought of it but such a programme should form an integral part of the Five-Year Plan, itself. Those small theatres can become the backbone of the Government's effort to impart in the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, "a sense of partnership to the people."

The controversy over film music raises much larger issues. No thinking producer is for vulgarity or cheapness. But at the same time they offer a poser. They feel that a tune need not be condemned simply because it is catchy. They feel that a word should not be censored simply because it means love. They point out that what we regard today as classical songs and compositions were once upon a time simply popular songs and compositions, and only the passage of time imparted to them the aura of artistic sanction. Who can be unthinking enough to predict that none of the tunes or songs popular today will be considered classical by generations that will follow us?

In a democracy every one has the same master. Parliamentarians and Legislators have to serve the citizens of India who are voters to them; Film Producers also have to serve citizens of India who are the patrons of their pictures. There is a saying that people get the Government they deserve. It is more true to say that people get novels and paintings and songs and motion pictures they deserve. Indeed there must be a constant effort on the part of Film Producers to improve the public taste in art and morals, as there should be constant efforts on the part of politicians to improve the public taste in politics and morals. But neither Parliamentarians nor the Producers can afford to lose contact with the masses by setting up standards, political or artistic, that are remote from the people. The basic assumption of democracy is that people themselves possess wisdom and that in the final analysis we cannot go wrong if we are guided by them. We respect the taste of the people in choosing their Parliamentarians; it should not be beyond us to respect the taste of the people in choosing their songs or pictures. Improvement in the quality of films is a necessary thing but it will be in proportion to improvement in public taste, a challenge to be faced by Artists and Educationists, and Officials and Parliamentarians and Industrialists jointly.

That clinches the unique nature of the Film Industry. It is neither purely an art nor purely an industry. It is an Art-Industry. It therefore, suffers from double attacks in India. It is bound by all the rules applying to an industry in India and at the same time publicists want it to be as original and daring as an art-form. A proper approach lies in a diametrically opposite direction. It must be given certain leeways that a pure art is given and it must be at the same time given certain facilities that a money-making industry is given. On its part the industry should accept dual obligations stemming from its dual nature. It should advance high artistic standards and at the same time it should ensure industrial and economic justice. The is the proper approach. It entails certain breaks on the part of the producers, and it entails other obligations on the part of the policy makers. The speculators in the Film Industry

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should give way to creative artists, the production costs should be brought down by emphasising the realities of life rather than spectacles and Tamashas. Literature and classical music should be brought on the silver screen, of course in an adopted form because cinema is a totally different medium. On the other hand, the policy makers should take a less puritanic attitude towards the Industry. Appreciating the special problems that only persons in industry can understand, representatives of the industry should be associated with the censorship board and consulted when new pieces of legislation touching the industry are being contemplated. Entertainment Tax should be lowered and made uniform so that more Indian citizens can afford the pleasure that films give to them and the Government should give subsidies to that purposeful and educative notes become predominant in the themes chosen. It is this collaboration between the Producers and the Policy Makers that will enable the Indian Film Industry to become an effective source of entertainment and education in a welfare state.