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A NEW DEAL FOR ASIAN CINEMA

I believe that tomorrow is born as a result of a dialogue between yesterday and today. When we think of a new deal, it is important to remember, what forces have shaped us, in terms of our past, leading to an understanding of the present, in order to deal with the future and plan a new deal. Hence I intend to devote sometime to recapitulate the status of cinema in Asia, during the 20th century, initially in the first-half of the century, and subsequently in the second half. This will help us hopefully to initiate some thoughts for a new deal for the 21st century.

My historical narration is intended to be brief, talking broadly about the trends and world events. Initially in the last few years of the 19th century and the first few years of our own, the production of movie images spread across the world. A motion picture was projected in India, within 6 months of the first ever showing in the world by Lumiere Brothers in the basement of Grand Cafe in Paris in 1895. Thus, audiences in most parts of Asia were exposed to the motion picture within one calendar year of the world’s first show. Production of feature-films began in right earnest in most parts of Europe by 1910, while India produced its first feature in 1913.
Eventually, India became the most established producer of feature-films among all the colonised countries of the world. The Asian audience from Arabia to Indonesia had an opportunity to see silent movies made in other parts of Asia as well as most countries of Europe as well, besides occasional films from America. The first world war changed all this. The film studios in Europe closed down due to the war. Production activity was on a much smaller scale in the Eastern countries. The US found a fertile market around the world for movies produced in a nascent production centre called Hollywood. American producers made the best use of the opportunity by signing what was commercially described as "Block Booking and Blind Booking Contracts" for several thousand cinema houses across the globe. The terms of the contract were that, while the cinema owner may not even come to know the title of the film in advance, he was obliged to screen whatever one of the 8 major Hollywood companies provided him to screen over a period of years, since Hollywood became virtually the only source for supply of movies to the film-hungry audience and film-thirsty cinema houses all over. It took many decades for several countries to legally or commercially intervene in this situation and liberate themselves from the inequal monopoly foistered by the American companies.
Ironically, the US Government itself initiated an anti-trust action in the late 1940s and by about 1950, 16,000 cinemas in the US were allowed to become independent entities with the right to choose films from either Hollywood or from any other source within America or from any other part of the world. An independent film production movement started in the east coast of America to compete with Hollywood, but these producers did not have the means to reach world markets. Gradually, several countries of the world began to see the serious cultural threat of a dominant American cinema in their countries. I am sure, that this audience is aware of such a movement which started later and of the on-going efforts even today, in a country like France, which makes valiant efforts to retain its cultural autonomy by legally restricting the manner in which American films can be imported and distributed in France.

Thus, without diluting due respect that should be given to the pioneers among the Directors, Artistes, and Technicians of Hollywood for their stupendous contributions to the world of cinema, it must nevertheless be remembered that clever, if not cunning business strategies, bordering on chicanery, accomplished a substantial part of this success story. Virtually, this started as a historic example of fishing in troubled waters, since the world affected by the First World War became the most fertile ground for Hollywood to fish for its international audience.
During the colonial period in the first-half of this century, it is interesting to examine America's political perceptions on the one hand, and the perceptions of Hollywood on the other. Having suffered the agony of colonialism, such historic memory helped American political opinion to be sympathetic to freedom fighters in India and in other parts of the colonised world. Whereas Hollywood, but for a few exceptions, consistently represented its Indian characters as "Nincompoop fools", and its Chinese characters as "Consummate villains". Populated primarily by elements with a narrow world view, Hollywood created the architype of a backward Asian, who was either a source of stupid humour or one of destructive vengence. There have been several studies of the portrayal of India, China and other countries in the Hollywood screen, including my own paper on the subject, submitted to Columbia University, almost 35 years ago. On the other hand, American intellectuals in general, and philosophers and sociologists in particular, expressed concern about a very distorted image of American society which Hollywood projected to the rest of the world.

The second-half of the 20th century saw a new set of developments. On the distribution front, the anti-trust action in America made it possible for an occasional European or Asian film to be shown in a small number of cinema houses which came to be known as "Art Theatres". On the production front, Rosellini in Italy, and Kurusova in Japan, along with Ingmar Bergman of Sweden and Satyajit Ray of India, became known to this small coterie of the American audience, who were otherwise grossly dis-satisfied with the average Hollywood film.
International Film Festivals began to encourage what came to be known as "Parallel Cinema" in some countries like India, appealing to a more discerning audience as distinct from the commercial film for the mass audience.

From about a dozen of such Festivals that existed in 1950, presently there are about 300 Festivals worldwide, some of them devoted exclusively to feature-films and others to specified "genre".

Leaving aside this highly satisfying aesthetic level for a moment, if we look at what has come to known as "Main-stream film industry" producing commercially successful films in their own respective domestic markets, some of these films have achieved success in the international markets despite the bludgeoning Hollywood presence, worldwide. Indian films have enjoyed traditional markets in the middle-east countries, in several markets of Africa and in the far-east, including Malaysia and Singapore, as well as Sri Lanka. The Soviet Block had substantial trade restrictions on importing western films. In a political decision, as a policy, Soviet Union decided to allow the entry of Indian films into their market place. To the Soviet audience, largely tired of a dry propagandist and ideology-oriented cinema, Raj Kapoor and Nargis came as a fresh sweep of sweet breeze from India, instantly conquering the hearts of the audience in Central Asia, with "Awara, Sree 420" and other films.
As a Government Guest in Festivals at Tashkant, Bokara and Alma Ata in Kazakhstan, I heard local bands play songs from Raj Kapoor’s films to receive us, almost 20 years after these films were released in those countries. The Indian film continues to have a sway in Central Asia.

In the next phase, the most important commercial development in Asian cinema during this second-half of our century, is the emergence of Hong Kong as the world’s largest film maker. The "Martial Arts" of Chinese and Japanese origin have indeed conquered a wide variety of audience worldwide.

It looked as though the secrets of global popular cinema were initially known only to Hollywood and that a few strains of that formula were re-discovered in Hong Kong. But we have very recent indications that show a different trend. "MUTHU", a Tamil film, featuring matinee idol Rajnikanth has been commercially released in Japan. The success can be measured from the fact that Rajnikanth Fan Associations have emerged in various Japanese towns in the last year or so. Representatives of these Fan Associations visited India recently to meet their "hero" and to see more recent releases, featuring Rajni. The story goes that it happened by sheer accident. A distributor apparently picked up a video copy at random in Singapore asking for "an Indian Film" for previewing it. He bought the rights to the film for Japan and apparently made a fabulous success of it.
From the success of Lumiere brothers to that of a Rajnikanth starrer, I have deliberately scanned this wide historic canvas in what may appear a bird’s eye-view that lacks all detail. True, today my intention is not to get into detail, but to present a panoramic view, because lessons can be learnt and ought to be learnt, from even a casual perception of this historic view over a period of 100 years. I derive the following arguable principles from this aerial shot of a Century of Cinema:

Firstly, favourable historic circumstances of the First World War, and market conditions gave a boost and a disproportionate advantage to the American film, a trend which needs to be reversed in the interests of a more balanced flow of information worldwide.

Secondly, regional culture and national aspirations protected native cinema from the onslaughts of Hollywood even in the 1920s and 30s, as proved by the success of the Indian cinema, even when India was a colony.

Thirdly, where Hollywood had not pre-empted the market - again due to historic and political circumstances - as in Central Asia, then in Soviet Union, films from alternative sources (primarily India) succeeded in a spectacular fashion.
Fourthly, specialising in an unique "genre" such as Martial Arts, Hong Kong could suddenly emerge as an important player in the world market of cinema.

Fifthly, the thoroughly unexpected success of the Tamil film, "MUTHU" in Japan shows that the Asian family audience react favourably to other Asian family themes, because of an underlying unity in Asian culture and family values.

Sixthly, despite the enormous resources of the multi-national corporations and the clout of media barons like Rupert Murdock, successful independent satellite channels of television, depend substantially on programmes of local origin with only a minority audience for the imported western programmes. The success of the private Hindi and Tamil satellite channels stand testimony to this.

All this point to the fact that it is possible to tap an under-current of unity in the diversity of Asia, an unity in respecting family values and traditions, an unity in trying to keep the human psyche anchored in deep tradition, inspite of deceptive westernised exteriors. This can be achieved in the new information age, because Asia today is equipped in terms of talent to manage this. It is indeed appropriate that we are meeting for this Conference at Chennai, wherefrom, every year, the largest number of Information Technology professionals migrate to the whole world than from any other single source, or single city in the world.
If we tap the subterranean river of emotional unity through the exchange of popular Asian cinema within Asia, we will be making a solid contribution to the continent’s solidarity in the 21st century. Towards this end, a combination of political will at the Inter-Governmental level; entrepreneurial and commercial acumen of people in the media business; and the mobilisation of the enormous potential of the creative elements of Asian cinema are to be forged together.

This effort will result in a manner that it will not be uncommon to see in the neighbourhood cinema house or satellite channels in Chennai, the best film products of Thailand and Malaysia, Phillipines and Indonesia. A certain amount of convergence of the best creative efforts have been taking place at the global level in the realm of “Parallel Cinema” movement and Film Festivals. Although it is still not adequate and Asia is under-represented, nevertheless there has been more progress in the last half-a century, than the earlier-half. But in the realm of popular cinema, the time has come to change the monologue of the west into a dialogue of civilisations and this can be achieved by conscious efforts of Asian film makers.

Thank you,

Dr. S. Krishnaswamy