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A NEW DEAL FOR ASIAN CINEMA

PRESENTATION OF AMARNATH JAYATILAKA (FILMOLOGIST)

SRI LANKA

Please let me begin by extending my warmest thanks to A.M.I.C.- Asian Media Information and Communication Center and its Head of seminars and Institutional Development Program Mr. Joe Ma Carlos and other executives for inviting me for this important conference.

I must also state how impressed I am with the arrangements made for this conference.

I consider this invitation a personal honor to me and also to my country- Sri Lanka where we completed 50 years of National Cinema just two years ago in 1997.

My main thrust in this presentation is, of course, the terms of reference set down by the organizers in which the primary urge is the escalation of the status of Asian Movies. Before I present my view about these matters, I deem it proper to make a brief observation about cinema in Sri Lanka and its fluctuating fortunes. I make this reference not merely because it is my country and our cinema but also because what’s taking place in Sri Lankan Cinema could, to a great extent, facilitate our formulation of strategy for the whole of the Asian region.
Some experiences in the Sri Lankan Cinema are undoubtedly identical with the issues that other Asian cinemas have to cope with. In consequence focusing upon the relevant aspects of the film scene in Sri Lanka, I feel, will be broadly useful.

In the field of Cinema in Sri Lanka there has been a considerable quantum of concerned dialogue about one of the themes proposed for the present conference. This is the perceived threat to National Cinema from the deep inroads of Hollywood. In this context, I have a viewpoint, which, I am afraid, is likely to go counter to some of the generally held views relating to the impact of Hollywood films. It might come as a startling surprise to some of you when I say that in Sri Lanka we do not have even vestigially a threat or competition posed by Hollywood movies. We have all along co-existed with Hollywood Cinema while providing the wherewithal and the atmosphere necessary for the nourishing of local Cinema.

But please let me add that, if there is any drawback or shortcoming in our National Cinema, it is due by and large, to other factors rather than the impact of Hollywood movies. In Sri Lanka, the National Cinema was not affected by the Hollywood film industry, due to a peculiar phenomenon which may exist even in other Asian countries specifically in India and Pakistan.

We have, strangely enough, a twofold audience for movies- of course theatrically presented movies, in our country. We have a well defined audience for the locally produced, exclusively national cinematic works. The filmgoers who are the main
patrons of locally produced movies do not generally take an interest in Hollywood movies. This mass audience thrives primarily on locally produced movies, such as they are.

It can also be stated here that at surface level one may conclude that there is a marked addiction in Sri Lanka to popular Tamil and Hindi Films. On analysis, We see that it is not quite so. This mass audience purchases a ticket to the theatrically presented movies mostly when local films are shown. But an occasional Hindi or Tamil film is likely to draw vast audiences due perhaps to its operatic quality, its action content or its star glitter.

Similarly there is a well defined Sri Lankan audience for Hollywood and other foreign movies, who tend to derive their cinematic entertainment mainly from theatrically presented movies from abroad.

But when foreign films are presented through the medium of Television, the scenario changes. Most people may watch these irrespective of whether they are from the mass audience, or the elite audience, I referred to above. This patronage of TV movies does not as a rule affect the National film industry. But of course, there are instances when addiction to TV movies may affect the National film industry. This occurs mainly because the atmosphere in which the theatrical films are presented cannot attract a sufficiency of patrons for the good health of the industry. The theatres may be
dilapidated and unattractive. They may not have a sufficient power to tempt home audiences into the Cinemas. When the audiences dwindle the industry will invariably face a crisis, leading perhaps to near collapse.

It must be stated in all fairness that the State in Sri Lanka has at least, at this moment, has become alert to the urgent need to safeguard National Cinema from impending disaster. The Policy announced by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, under whose purview the cinema industry comes, has, though a little belatedly, addressed the issue of State aid to rescue national cinema.

In the President's Policy formulation, a strategy is outlined to nurture the national film industry and the personnel linked to it. This Policy statement makes the following specific proposals calculated to uphold national cinema:-(quote) "The national film Policy which has been submitted through a cabinet memorandum seeks to restore the industry to make it viewer friendly and to ensure that cinema artistes are lucratively employed. The new scheme envisages to restore the industry to its pristine glory through far reaching policy changes. The new reforms will end the monopoly of the National Film Corporation in the distribution of both local and imported films. The laws and regulations governing the import and distribution of films will also be liberalized. The reforms have also taken into consideration the close
and inseparable link between film and television. The cinema industry has suffered setbacks following the introduction of TV globally. The new policy includes the integration of the cinema with TV for the betterment of both (unquote)

As an individual centrally linked to the Sri Lankan Cinema for over three decades, I must observe that there are several salutary initiatives in the proposed package to improve the national film industry:

1. Low interest loan facilities for the production of outstanding movies.

2. Tax exemption to producers of exceptionally creative and artistic films.

3. Total waiver of customs and other levies for the import of State-of-the-art equipment and adjuncts essential for the modernization of film production and exhibition.

4. Reduction to a reasonable level the GST and entertainment tax.

The above package if implemented properly and without much loss of time could certainly nurture Sri Lanka's film industry. This hopefully could counter any deep inroads into national Film industry through foreign theatrical movies or non theatrical media products.
When the government has come up with the above incentive scheme, the industry cannot remain without reforming itself, if it is to nurture a National Cinema to withstand the competition coming from other media such as Network TV, Video Cassette, Cable and Satellite.

Due to 25 years of a disastrous state monopoly, Sri Lankan Cinema in all its aspects have stagnated. This was caused mainly by the wrong dictates of an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy. The narrow minded dictates of the Film Corporation almost ruined the National Film Industry. The agitations that were carried out since the liberalization of electronic media, compelled the government to take the bold step of removing the State monopoly of the Cinema trade.

With the Govt., support of various tax incentives, the exhibition sector is now planning to modernize the existing cinemas and replace the outdated projection system of Archaic carbon arc method with Xenon Lamp House and Platter system of smooth film projection. It is also going to modernize the sound system with Dolby Surround Sound capability.

On the other hand in the production segment of the industry, it has become vital to transform the existing old fashioned methods of making movies with age-old and outmoded equipment, by completely transforming both the audio and visual technology. In this sphere, format change has become vitally important. Sri Lankan Cinema need to
go for wide screen Cinemascope format with stereophonic surround sound recording system if it is to successfully compete with the other media in the 21st Century.

One of the main pragmatic aspects of this conference, to my mind, is the attention given to the strategies that could help create Asian and International markets and increase revenues for Asian Movies. This attention by the organizers of this conference, to the marketing aspect of Asian movies is a highly commendable initiative. In spite of the fact, that the Asian region taken as a whole produces the largest number of films in the world on an annual basis, sufficient or peripheral attention has not been given, up to now, to the formulation of a joint Asian Film Marketing Strategy.

In this context, it is proper to point out that 20 Asian Countries have their Own National film production industries. In spite of all these there has never been an attempt to synthesize all these efforts into one potential marketing force. Therefore, as I perceive it the most urgent need for the creation of markets and the increasing of revenues is the establishment of a central Asian Marketing organization.

It is possible for us to make an indepth study of the most powerful set-up in this field which is the American Film Marketing Association. During its existence of about 15 years, it has been able to woo and persuade would be buyers from all over the world to come to them.
My considered view of the matter is that as an outcome of this conference AMIC should take the initiative to create an umbrella body which could bring together the film industries of Asia into one central organization. Such a body could perhaps be described as the Asian Film Marketing Organization (AFMO) Each member nation could make a stipulated annual membership payment, towards the establishment and maintenance of AFMO.

Ideally, the Headquarters of such an organization should be located in an easily accessible centrally located place with all the infrastructure facilities essential for such Headquarters. In this instance may I suggest that we consider Singapore as the ideal location for the Headquarters of the proposed AFMO?

To pursue this suggestion, we could think in terms of setting up a committee or a group representing the Asian Film industry to explore the idea in all its detail and to work out an ACTION PLAN. In this task I call upon Asian Media Information & Communication Center (AMIC) to be the Catalyst in Launching the proposed initiative.

AMARNATH JAYATILAKA
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