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Film Industry In Nepal

By

Narendra R Panday
FILM INDUSTRY IN NEPAL

Narendra R. Panday

Introduction:

The medium of celluloid made a late entry in the development of communication in Nepal. Cinema began in a very modest scale as a public sector venture in the mid-sixties. Nepal's first feature film was appropriately entitled 'Ama' meaning, "The Mother", marking the birth of film industry in the country, although the theme of the movie was actually related to the motherland. Subsequently, the government Department of Information released two more feature films. However, the efforts of the government to nudge film production into momentum by acting as a trailblazer proved a non-starter. Few films were produced in the ensuing years. During the 1964-1970 period, there was just one production in the private sector.

The reluctance of investors to risk their money into an uncharted industry was not difficult to understand. While, on the one hand, capital in those days was not readily available in the country, on the other, there were more pressing needs and better investment opportunities
where profit was more assured. Moreover, film making was a cumbersome job. The lack of equipment and studio and laboratory facilities, the bureaucratic process involved in the import of raw stock, and, above all, the need of having to take the exposed film abroad for printing and editing and recording of songs made film making hardly a commercially attractive proposition. Only a party which could afford the expenses and cope with the problems associated with logistics could venture into film-making.

The Current Scene:-

The current state of the film industry in Nepal may however be said to have assumed the semblance of at least being in motion. In 1971, the government launched the National Communication Plan, which provided, among others, for the establishment of a semi-government corporation, known as the Royal Nepal Film Corporation (RNFC) with a view to promote film production in the country. Having entered an almost empty scene, the RNFC has contributed towards keeping Nepalese films in the minds of the public with its occasional productions. Since its inception to date, the RNFC has screened seven feature films and numerous documentaries. More importantly,
the RNFC by entering into joint ventures with private sector has been able to attract new entrepreneurs in the film industry. As a result, in the last five years or so, there has been a sudden flurry of Nepalese film production companies, the number of which has swollen to nearly eighty from almost nil.

It is indeed an encouraging phenomenon which can be attributed to a unique but attractive incentive scheme instituted by the government about five years ago. The scheme, which considerably minimises the risk of loss in film-making entitles film producers to as much as fifty percent of the entertainment tax realised from the gate collection during the screening of their films. The fact that the entertainment tax constitutes nearly two-thirds of the total value of the ticket in the upper classes and half in the lower ones speaks for the worth of this incentive. This income is much more than and in addition to what a film-maker gets, under mutually agreed terms, from the cinema owner out of the remaining value of the gate ticket. This incentive arrangement has not only attracted investments in the film industry but has provided film makers a necessary hedge against serious losses which can drown a fledging industry. Provided producers do not end up making a really bad movie, the chance of not being able to at least break even is remote.
Notwithstanding the emergence of a number of production companies, the film industry is still in a fledging state. None of the companies is self-sufficient in terms of equipment or technical man-power. If equipments have to be borrowed, free-lance technicians are hired for specific jobs. Perhaps a more serious obstacle is the absence of even a reasonably equipped film laboratory and studio in the country. As a result, if printing has to be done either in India, Bangladesh or Thailand, indoor sets are usually improvised from facilities in fancy hotels. These constraints naturally tell upon the quality of the product. No wonder then that seldom does a Nepalese movie make it to the box office. There is yet another, no less important reason to it. Since the taste of Nepalese movie goers has been conditioned by decades of exposure to Hindi films from Bombay, inevitably a set of standards has come to be established with which a film is judged. Nepalese films have thus to contend with being continually compared with films and their worth being determined by whether they are better or worse than the ones from Bombay.
Nepalese film producers have responded to this situation by moulding their product in the Bombay model - song for song and action for action. As a result, Nepalese films have hardly been able to set new trends or establish distinct character or identity of their own. With three or four Nepalese films being launched every year, film makers will have to give serious thought to improve the quality of their products. Since the release of a Nepalese film is no longer a rare occasion as in the past, the element of curiosity has gradually eroded. Nor is the audience as sympathetic as it used to be in earlier years. It is more sophisticated now. Growing levels of education (literacy level over 30%) and increasing exposure to a wide range of cinematic fare (mainly because of the advent of video culture) have made film viewers more discerning in their choice and taste. It means if the Nepalese film-makers who considered Hindi films as their chief competitor up to now, days may not be too far when they may be competing among themselves. Therefore, instead of trying to compete with the largest film industry in the world, the Indian
cinema, by aping them, Nepalese film industry would do well if they endeavoured towards forming their own identity which might enable them to survive in their own right and not continually judged by trends set by Hindi films.

The rich cultural and natural heritage of Nepal provides ample avenues for such endeavour. Stories based on history and mythology can make interesting movies. The variety and uniqueness of some of Nepal's customs and tradition provide interesting theme for films. One such movie was made in the recent past. Though the film could not be called a success, it was described as a "badly made good movie". The story was based on a typical tradition of Kathmandu, which is still in vogue. It is about the Living Goddess. According to a practice which has been in existence for several centuries, a girl of five or six years of age, with certain qualities or characteristics, from a certain family is selected and enshrined as a Goddess until she attains puberty. During this time, she is housed in a temple-styled building and allowed to come out only in festivals. People visit her and worship an important
occasions. After she retires upon attaining puberty, the belief is that the boy who marries the ex-goddess will face a pre-mature death. The movie is a psycho-analytical story of one such ex-goddess who falls in love with a boy, and is confronted with a Hamletion dilemma of whether to wed or not to wed. Because of its unique theme, this was perhaps the only Nepalese feature film which was subtitled in English and shown in the Western countries.

Joint Venture:-

The Himalayas and natural beauty of Nepal as also her ancient temples and towns have attracted many a film producer from abroad to have location shooting in Nepal. Not only the noted Satyajit Ray from Calcutta and the Ananda brothers from Bombay, even producers from Holywood have been attracted by what Nepal has to offer. This is also one of the reasons that has prompted film companies from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to entered into co-production with Nepalese film companies.
In the last few years, some fourteen or fifteen films have been produced as joint ventures of Nepalese and foreign film companies. The pattern of collaboration varies from case to case. But apparently the major share, and thereby also the say, lies with the foreign company. Invariably, the original script is in the language of the major investor's country and only about one-third of such co-productions have been dubbed in Nepalese language and screened in Nepal. Since the incentive of fifty percent of the entertainment tax, as mentioned earlier, does not apply to joint ventures with foreign companies, it is not what has attracted foreign film makers to Nepal. The attraction is that in a joint collaboration with Nepalese film company, it is believed that foreign film makers are able to meet the supply of raw stock much more easily than in their home country through the quota of their Nepalese partners. It reduces the production cost considerably. On the other hand, the interest of a Nepalese film production company to go into joint ventures lies in the fact that with little investment one can be a co-producer and share whatever profit the movie makes in the concerned foreign market.
Further more, foreign movie-makers are attracted by unique opportunity for location-shooting and perhaps the peaceful and friendly nature of the people, willing to help and cooperate that they easily find in Nepal.

Market and Distribution Mechanism:-

Market has always been an impediment for film makers in Nepal. The small audience and few cinemas along with the absence of effective network for distribution are the main problems of marketing. The hundred-odd distributors that exist are in most cases run by cinema owners themselves. Since they pay a lump sum for the Hindi films they rent for screening, and because they have their own pre-commitments with Hindi film distributors, they are reluctant to rearrange their schedules to accommodate Nepalese films which are inadequate in number and erratic in supply.

In a country with nearly seventeen million people, there are less than a hundred cinema houses, out of which only eleven are operating with permanent licence, 38 with temporary, and the rest are mobile or makeshift cinema houses. Most of them have come into existence only in the
recent past. The system of temporary licence was adopted as a compromise, as the standards fixed for a regular licenced cinema house proved too stringent which included air-conditioning, spacious parking space, cloak room etc.

Obviously most of the cinema halls are located in urban centres. Since less than ten percent of the population have access to electricity, it will be a long time before cinema reaches the rural and remote areas of the country.

Outside the country, Nepalese films have been shown in parts of India like Assam, Darjeeling, Dehradun where there are sizable settlements of people of Nepalese origin. They are also shown in Hongkong and Brunei to the soldiers from Nepal serving in the British Army.

No Nepalese film except one, has yet been dubbed or subtitled in Hindi or other language because it means additional investment and extra work as there exists no such facility in the country. Therefore, unless the product is highly promising for the box-office in India, film makers do not find it worthwhile to add to their investment.
Impact of Other Mass Media:

The Nepal Television (NTV) has just entered its third year of transmission. Currently it is on the air for twenty-three hours a week. Besides NTV, Nepalese viewers have also access to the Doordarshan through the use of boosters. The impact of television on cinema is minimal because the few telefilms that have been made are amateurish and have little commercial value. Nor are there any interesting serials made so far. The reception of Doordarshan is not reliable. Above all, the cinema audience is by and large different from TV owners or viewers.

However, the advent Video in Nepal since the late 70's, has inevitably affected the cinema attendance. With ever-increasing number of VCP or VCR owners, the opening of Video Cassette libraries in every corner of the street, and the existence of illegal video parlours, (there is yet no legal provision for video parlour) people have a much wider range of materials, censored and uncensored, to choose from. It is interesting to
note that no Nepalese film has yet been marketed or even pirated in video cassettes. Hence, luckily, Nepalese films have not had to suffer from the clutch of the video culture. The most visible negative impact of video on cinema has been seen in the fact that while almost any good film easily ran for 20 or 25 weeks before the advent of video, hardly any film runs beyond 6 or 7 weeks now. The Nepal Motion Picture Association has submitted its grievances to the government, and it is understood that a policy regarding video is being worked out.

Training:-

There is no training facilities available in the country to train people on the difference aspects of film-making. The industry is managed by a few foreign (mainly India) trained personnel and many impromptu ones. Whenever there is no expertise available, foreigners are hired. To overcome the problem of shortage of trained man-power, the need for a training institute cannot be over-emphasised. Once batches of trained personnel are produced providing for one of the key components of a film unit, it could act as a catalyst for the expansion of the film industry.
Export/Exchange of Films:

Except for a few documentary films made for the promotion of tourism, there has hardly been any export of Nepalese films to foreign countries. On the other hand, obviously almost all movies that are shown in Nepalese cinemas are imported. They are almost all Hindi, and seldom from other countries.

As regards exchange of films, there have been exchanges of documentary telefilms between television networks. But in private sector there exists no scope for such exchanges.

Recently, the seven countries of South Asia have launched what is known as South Asia Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) under which every month the seven countries simultaneously show on their television a film of a particular member country in rotation. As of now, such screening is limited to documentary films with twenty-five minutes duration.
Conclusion:

To sum up, the current status of the Nepalese film industry is characterised by an inadequate infrastructure, lack of properly equipped film laboratories and studio facilities, dearth of trained personnel, undeveloped and limited domestic market, difficulties in distribution and screening and lack of stimulation to explore new trends in film making. The cash incentive scheme has played a major part in encouraging film producers to venture into the field as has been seen from the noticeable rise in the number of Nepalese films in recent years. But because of the geographical terrain of the country with consequent difficulties in transportation and the scattered population, it will be long time before the internal film market will be adequately developed from commercial point of view. That is why, if the film industry is to be economically viable on a long term, the potentiality of export of films to foreign market needs to be seriously explored.