

cinema



* Raj Kapoor played an idealist reformer of bandits in *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*.

A worthwhile century?

Raja Harishchandra, India's first indigenous film marks its 100th year in 2013, but the idealism that launched the country's movie industry has largely given way to mediocrity, rues **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Indian cinema will be 100 next April, and the year-long centenary celebrations to commemorate Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* have just begun. The silent work was first screened in April 1913 at the then Bombay's Olympia Theatre to a distinguished gathering of the city's rich and the famous.

Though films had been shown or made in India even earlier — in fact soon after France's Lumiere Brothers screened the first ever movie in 1895 at a Paris Salon — *Raja Harishchandra* was an entirely Indian product.

Phalke, who enjoys the distinction of having Indian cinema's highest honour

Established in 1934, the studio had a dream two-decade run, before financial losses crippled and killed it.

Owned by Dube Industries, Bombay Talkies will see the shooting of two movies in June. "Last year, we took a conscious decision to restart the company to coincide with the centenary of Indian cinema", said Satish Mahajan, who manages the studio. "We have waited 58 years for this moment," he added.

The studio was forced to close because Sashadhar Mukherjee (brother-in-law of Ashok Kumar and Kishore Kumar) bungled with finances after *Mahal* was released in 1949. The loss ran to about

Rs12,000, a huge amount those days.

But during its heyday, some of the most iconic names in Hindi cinema — like Lata Mangeskar and Ashok Kumar — began their careers in Bombay Talkies.

Now, brighter days are here for the studio. *Zakhmi* will go on the floors with Abhay Kumar (the grandson of the studio's original owner, Rajnarayan Dube). The yet untitled second work may have Mallika Sherawat, Tusshar Kapoor and Vinay Pathak.

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Phalke opened the curtain to a kind of cinema that was socially and politically stimulating. It awakened desire among the masses, and a yearning to see an independent India

named after him, was not the first to make a film in the country. Not quite. *Pundalik*, a short of 12 minutes, opened in 1912, but British cinematographers were employed. In that sense, *Raja Harishchandra* was fully "swadeshi" or Indian, to use Phalke's own term.

Today, a 100 years later, it is hard to understand or appreciate the meaning of "swadeshi", with commerce and consumerism blurring borders, and interstate co-productions in cinema happening all the time. (Fox, Warner Brothers and other American companies are making Indian pictures, not just in Hindi, but also in Tamil.)

But for an India shackled and shamed for 150 years, Phalke's 1913 creation was divine and seemed to have been made with a strong patriotic zeal. And, this feeling rubbed off in and overwhelmed every man and woman who saw it.

Interestingly, the title and theme of Phalke's 100-year-old movie are being recalled, reminisced and feted at a time when India stands far, far away from what Raja Harishchandra preached and practised. Truth and honesty, and the dichotomy appear too glaring to be passed over today.

Phalke opened the curtain to a kind of cinema that was socially and politically stimulating. It awakened desire among the masses, and a yearning to see an independent India, free from British tyranny and exploitation. Films that followed Phalke's work had a strong political-subtext, and they underlined disarming virtues to help better society.

Cinema also proved to be an excellent unifying force. Inside the darkened auditoriums, people of varying castes and creeds sat together — something that would not happen even in a temple. Low caste Hindus could not enter a temple then, but a theatre, yes. Cinema was truly egalitarian in that sense, and brooked no divisions, not even economic. A rich landlord found himself at touching distance from the poor labourer who toiled on the farm.

Also, cinema became a powerful platform for the freedom movement. India's first censorship controversy related to a movie — *Bhakht Vidyur* (1921) — because it was viewed by the British as "a politically subversive allegory."

Though songs were meant to enhance entertainment, some of them proved to slyly seditious. The Ashok Kumar blockbuster, *Kismet* (1943), had at least one number that



* A still from *Raja Harishchandra*, made by Dadasaheb Phalke.

openly and fearlessly challenged Britain's rule.

Later films like Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* and the works of early Raj Kapoor, which followed India's Independence in 1947, aroused people's consciousness. Through cinema, they became aware of the young nation's problems and prospects. The movies were tempered with Nehru's idealism and Gandhi's truth.

Happily, cinema moguls, such as V Shantaram (whose daughter Rajashree was an excellent actress), Mehboob Khan, Roy and K A Abbas among others considered the medium not just as a source of revenue, but also as a means of raising debates.

They packed social realism in cans of entertainment. They strove to make cinema agents of change, mirrors of the community. Often cinema told stories that were laced with issues of social inequity, gender disparity and communal disharmony. We have seen *Achut Kanya* (on untouchability) and *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* (on the reformation of dacoits) among an array of pictures that moved us like nothing else.

In the 100 years that have flitted across the screen, films may have been mishmash of socials, stunts and romances, but they never, never forgot their role as a well-wisher of the community at large. Cinema was educative, it was meaningful, and it was responsible.

Today, India may be the largest producer of movies in the world, but Indian films are driven by fantasy. They are callously scripted and unimaginatively mounted with songs that intrude into the narrative.

Make-believe situations cart the lead couple to exotic locations that even the most unquestioning of viewers would find it hard to take. Once, Raj Kapoor-starrer *Around the World* took us on a delightful world tour, but the story and the script were perfectly tailored for this. Nowhere did I feel that the work was digressing in order to show (off to) the viewer some of the great tourist sights.

Indian cinema needs to stop looping in the air, and learn to walk the hard ground.

A studio is reborn

As Indian cinema is all set to be 100, this year will also mark the reopening of a legendary film studio, Bombay Talkies. (Now do not ask me if it would be pressured by the Jai Maharashtra politicians to rename itself as Mumbai Talkies!).

