

cinema

India needs to learn some film fest lessons

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Time was when India had just one movie festival. The International Film Festival of India or IFFI moved from city to city, returning to New Delhi every other year, every January. Movie buffs in Kolkata waited for the tinsel caravan to pitch its tent as did

those in Chennai or Bengaluru or Hyderabad or Mumbai. State governments vied with one another to get the Festival into their capital cities, the competition being as keen as the one fought for the Commonwealth Games or the Olympics. Such wandering was in a way necessary in those days when Indians could not afford to spend much on travel.

But with the gradual emergence of smaller, satellite film festivals, IFFI no longer needed

to move from place to place, and after a long debate, it settled down at Panaji at Goa in 2004. After several years of sluggishness, brought about mostly by an inept administration, IFFI seemed to have found some kind of sheen this year. Hope it lasts, even it does not grow any brighter.

What has been singularly interesting is the growth of some of the other festivals, most significantly the Mumbai Film Festival. The only one of its kind that is not supported or funded by the government, this event is run by Reliance Big Entertainment, and has become in the past couple of years bigger and better.

However, as much as the festivals in other cities – that have all come up in the past decade or so – have been growing, they have all had one problem to grapple with.

The festivals in Kolkata, Chennai, Kerala, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Pune and, of course, Panaji take place between October and January. Such clubbing could have been avoided, and a set of the same movies gets rotated from one to the other, with the result that there is nothing really fresh in any of these festivals. Mumbai, by being the first in the Indian season, gets films that are not seen by the rest of India, and by the time the movies travel to Chennai in December or Pune in January, they are pretty much stale.

It can always be argued, for instance, that people in Kolkata or Pune would not have seen what Mumbai had offered earlier. So there may not be any great disadvantage in circulating the same movies. But for a critic like me this can be sheer boredom. Also, with the Indian festivals liberally borrowing from Berlin in February, Cannes in May and Venice, among others, in September, there is very little novelty in the India-based events.

This is one issue that needs to quickly addressed, and every Indian festival (or for that matter any other) must put together a unique selection. But the festivals cannot hope to do that unless they develop a vibrant market.

Today, if Cannes scores over Venice (world's oldest festival) it is mainly because of the French Riviera's huge market that helps a film to be sold. And however much anybody might shout at the top of his voice about the medium being, over and above anything else, a great form of art, I refuse to buy this.

Every man who finances or directs a movie needs to not just recover his cost but also make a profit. If somebody says he does not want to make money out of cinema, he is fibbing.

So, it is imperative that the festivals in India work towards exclusivity and the establishment of market. Otherwise, there is the danger of most of them dying out in a few years.

Chennai film fest

One of the most exciting possibilities that a movie festival throws up is the opportunity for debates, discussions and a free flow of ideas, apart from the sheer pleasure of watching world cinema. The recent 9th Chennai International Film Festival introduced a forum this year, where speakers spoke about various issues on cinema.

A crucial area of the debate – also much discussed elsewhere and for long – was India's poor or zero showing at some of the major movie festivals, particularly Cannes. It has been years since an Indian work made it to the festival's top competition. In fact, last year, Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* played at Cannes' A Certain Regard, the first Indian film in the Festival's official sections after many years.

And this is what *Variety* felt about the movie: "Earnest, predictable, conventionally crafted *Udaan* brings nothing new to the coming-of-age genre in this tale of a fraught relationship between a sensitive teen and his abusive, controlling father, which adopts the style of popular Indian melodrama. Needless drawing out every dramatic situation and shamelessly milking every sentiment, tyro helmer Vikramaditya Motwane overwhelms the pic's few truly touching moments... Aspiring more to Bollywood than to Satyajit Ray, pic boasts musical montages with treacly lyrics in the slots where Bollywood would sport large-scale production numbers. In spite of the widescreen format, most thesping and the overall look seem more suited to television soap opera".

As long ago as 1994, Shaji Karun's *Swaham* screened at Cannes, and the *Variety* reviewer said: "Overlong and repetitive, this story of a widow grieving for her dead husband will have almost no commercial chances outside its home territory, and even fest outings may be difficult to achieve.... The movie would fare better with considerable pruning. India isn't often repped in competition at Cannes, and it's a shame that the sheer length of *Swaham* makes it such a daunting viewing experience".

I felt the same.

These two reviews tell us in some ways why Indian cinema is being shunned, not just at Cannes, but in many other major festivals. If the pacing is just out of sync with modern times, the story, script and performances are just not up to the mark, conveying that Indian film producers and directors are sadly out of touch with the rapid strides cinema as a medium is taking. It is a continuous process, a highly evolving process, that needs to be watched, understood and learnt from.

But I suppose in the face of a thriving home market in India – with cinema still the cheapest and, hence, the most widely patronised form of entertainment – helmers or producers are the lest bothered about their movies doing the overseas festival circuit.

Whatever it is, finally what really matters is good cinema. Nobody can stop its march, festivals too. If India has been more often than not unsuccessful in the selection process at Cannes or elsewhere, it is because the willingness to discover and learn and improve is seriously lacking in India's movie- 'woods'. Or, is the "chalta hai" attitude of Indians which they are notoriously famous for that is proving to be an impregnable wall between a film and a festival?

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