

A Five Year Plan For The Film Industry

By V. Shantaram, winner of the "Filmfare" Awards for the Best Picture and the Best Direction



❖ In this survey of the Indian film industry, one of India's foremost film makers, V. Shantaram, who has won two "Filmfare" Awards this year (for the Best Picture and the Best Direction—"Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje"), outlines a blue print for the advancement of the film industry . . .

THOUGH our first film was produced in 1913 by Dadasaheb Phalke with Indian technicians, the film in India did not make much headway for several subsequent years. This was for two reasons. On the one hand the educated classes preferred stage-plays to films. Films were in their infancy then, while the stage was at the height of its popularity. On the other hand, foreign films offered stiff competition to the crude indigenous product.

With the coming of sound, however, the motion picture industry in India was revolutionised. Now, it could compete both with the stage and with foreign films. Moreover, then as now, on the majority of cinegoers the spoken word in their own tongue had a tremendous impact. Besides, there could be no real entertainment without songs, and the talkie was eminently equipped to provide such entertainment.

The Indian film industry made great strides to become, in time, one of the key industries of the country. Films excelled all other mediums of entertainment, and as the latter fell into oblivion, the screen became the favourite entertainer of the masses.

Since there are no signs at present of the introduction of large-scale television in India for many years to come, our films will continue

to be without competition from any other medium of entertainment.

Today, India produces between two to three hundred films a year, and as such can be classed with the first two or three film-producing countries of the world. Most of our pictures are in Hindi, though a number of them are made in the regional languages, such as Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kanarese, Punjabi and Oriya. The Hindi films are shown throughout the country (as against the others which have only a regional market), and have played a great role in popularising Hindi as the national language—even before India became free.

Let us examine the various aspects of the industry, the conditions prevalent in it today and the means that may be adopted to improve them.

Market For Our Films

Relative to the output of our films, the market for them is very limited. Though India has a population of thirty-five crores there are only three thousand cinemas for the entire country. Roughly speaking, this means there are scarcely ten cinemas for one million people, which is totally inadequate to meet the

growing needs of an ever-growing population. Increase in film production, therefore, without a corresponding increase in the number of cinema houses, has been one of the major causes of the struggle the industry had all these years without being able to establish itself on a sound footing.

Countries like Britain and Japan, with much smaller populations, have far more theatres than we have in India. It is true that since the attainment of Independence, new towns and new cinemas have sprung up. But the process is far too slow to be of much help to the industry.

As Indian producers depend mainly upon the home market, they have to take into consideration its limitations in making their films. Most producers do not find it financially worthwhile to go in for CinemaScope, Technicolor or any of the latest and expensive technical developments in cinematography, no matter how attractive they may be.

Indeed, a Technicolor production made with the utmost care cannot earn large profits from the home market alone (no matter how successful it is) unless it is assured of a foreign market as well. In fact, many pictures made in colour have been unsuccessful. When I undertook to make "Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje" in Technicolor, colleagues and other producers warned me against the great risk involved. Fortunately, the picture became phenomenally popular. Yet, I feel that despite the tremendous success of "Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje," considering the cost of production, profits will not be very large.

The home market has certainly developed since Independence, but this has been offset by the loss of the important territory of Pakistan, which was an integral part of India. This territory has been lost to our films because of the policy adopted by the Government of Pakistan, which does not allow the free import of Indian pictures. Pakistan has suggested a barter system—one Indian film against one Pakistan film.

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fair deal. If such a system were to be universally adopted there would be no chance for Hollywood films to be shown throughout the world. In fact, the film trade of the entire world would come to a standstill.

We in India have never advocated a barter system. We believe that films should have complete freedom in respect of import and export, and only such restrictions as are necessary for purposes of exchange, censorship, etc., should be imposed. Apart from Hollywood and British films, we would also like to see pictures from Japan, Italy, Mexico, France and other European countries.

We believe that a free exchange of films would foster cultural relations and contribute to better understanding and good will among nations. So far from decrying the exhibition of foreign films in India I would welcome them, just as I would like foreign countries to exhibit our films.

Until after Independence the foreign market for Indian films was practically non-existent. Only in East Africa, Singapore and other places, where Indians had settled, were our films in demand. Now, of course, things have changed. Our films are popular not only in East Africa, but in Egypt, Turkey, Iran and other countries of the Middle East and in South-East Asia. Indian pictures are in demand in South America also and they have proved tremendously popular in the Soviet Union. European countries like Germany and Czechoslovakia are also buying and screening them. This expansion of the market has given us greater confidence and hope for the future.

I feel there is greater scope for our films abroad. But we must make an organised effort to secure a wider market than we have at present. The film industry and Government should co-operate to establish offices in the capitals of all the countries of the world to arrange the commercial release of our films and attend to allied problems like exchange facilities, dubbing and editing.

We now come to censorship. The Government has put scarcely any restrictions. Our censorship rules are based on the traditional Indian code of morality and other social values. Our censors have to take into consideration Indian audiences and their reaction to films. Thus, if the censors feel that certain love scenes or details of crimes are likely to have an injurious influence on cinegoers, they are perfectly justified in deleting those scenes, or even totally banning the films concerned. In this connection it is interesting to note that though foreigners think Indian film censorship is strict, some of our own citizens want it to be even stricter, as is evident from some of the speeches made by the representatives of the people in Parliament.

Just as our censorship rules are to be judged from the standpoint of Indian public opinion and traditions, so also our pictures should be judged bearing in mind the demands of Indian cinegoers. As pointed out elsewhere, Indian audiences insist upon songs and dances in all pictures. Without these ingredients they do not feel they have had their money's worth. The songs need not necessarily be gay and frivolous; they can be sad and sentimental. In fact, most of the popular song hits belong to the second category.

In India, songs play an important part in life. Songs herald the birth of a baby and there is no wedding without songs. Farmers sing while they work in the fields. There are special songs to be sung on the departure or death of people. Indeed, the best way to express any emotion at its height—whether sad or gay—is to express it in song.

Apart from providing entertainment, songs express drama and emotion more eloquently than dialogue or gesture. Despite this fact, we have had a few films without songs. These, however, are exceptions. Songs will continue to be an integral part of even films on serious themes.

Another characteristic feature of our films is that they are neither wholly comedies nor full-length tragedies. Like the old plays, they are partly both. Most of them also have a moral and a purpose. It is worth noting that the number of our purely escapist pictures is almost negligible.

Most pictures try to tackle some social, ethical or moral problem, and picturegoers patronise them as much as they do the purely escapist fare.

In our films we do not merely glorify our customs, traditions and culture, but also criticise them, demanding reforms and changes. This indicates that film makers have complete freedom in picturising controversial themes. In fact, films championing social reforms are encouraged by the authorities as part of the great upsurge of nation-building activities. Thus society as a whole recognises the importance of motion pictures.

Medium Of Education

At one time the film was looked down upon in India as a social evil, but today it is recognised as the most important medium of instruction, education, and propaganda. The Government of India produces educative documentary films and newsreels on a large scale, and has made several films to popularise the community projects envisaged in the second Five-Year-Plan.

Government has, in fact, made it obligatory for every exhibitor to screen "approved" newsreels and documentary "shorts" so that the maximum number of picturegoers may view them. This is the only compulsion enforced by Government upon the film industry so far.

The film industry in India is also subject to very heavy taxation. The entertainment tax

is as much as thirty-three and one-third per cent. of the admission price. This rate is the highest in the world. Perhaps only in Britain is the rate of the entertainment tax as high. But whereas in Britain part of the tax is ploughed back to the producers in some form or other, in India the film industry gets no benefit from this revenue as such.

Representatives of the film industry are clamouring for a reduction of the tax and hope that their efforts will ultimately bear fruit.

Internal Problems

The Indian film industry has many internal problems as well, which may perhaps be common to other industries too. Shortage of theatres, the star system and dearth of new talent, lack of banking facilities and finance, lack of good colour laboratories, and lack of indigenously manufactured equipment of good quality are some of them, and they are being tackled by the film industry which derives its strength from the support and patronage it receives from the public.

Motion pictures, especially those produced in India, constitute the best and cheapest form of entertainment as is evident from the attendances every day at film shows throughout the country. The progress achieved by the industry during the last twenty-five years is mainly due to the encouragement and support given by picturegoers.

In our country, filmgoers write fan letters not only to stars but to directors and producers as well. The fan mail producers receive is the real indication of the popularity of our pictures. Cinegoers are eloquent in their tributes when they like a picture and they go to the extent of sending its maker gifts of various kinds, cheques and other tokens of appreciation. This has been my personal experience. I have been flooded with thousands of letters and gifts from people who have enjoyed seeing "Jhanak Jhanak Payal Banje". I refer to this fact because I think it is a special characteristic of Indian cinemagoers that not only do they admire the glamorous stars but also producers, directors and technicians when their work is good.

The Future

Thus in India films play a dual role—of providing entertainment to millions and also educating them. Films being the only means of mass entertainment, cinegoers want different kinds of entertainment in the films they see. Hence one finds music, comedy, drama, dances, tragedy, sentiment, colour, all blended in a single movie. Hence our films are lengthy—usually more than 15,000 feet and in some cases as much as 17,000 feet or more.

The educative element or the message is implied in our films, and it is not a compulsory part of the footage. It is through the entertainment a film provides that its message is put across.

With the new Five-Year Plan under way India is on the road to economic stability and progress. Government should also prepare a five-year plan for the film industry along the lines indicated above. Such a plan would benefit the film industry and in turn the entire country. I hope our films will achieve greater progress and find their way to the theatres of the world in the years to come.

In conclusion, I would like to stress again that there should be a free exchange of films between nations. On the one hand we should have more films from all film-producing countries, and on the other those countries should show our films in their theatres on a wide scale.



"I feel there is greater scope for our films abroad," says V. Shantaram, author of this article.

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