

Swan song for ^{Art} Pakistani cinema ^{Down}

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Drive down Aga Khan III Road and MA Jinnah Road – the so-called hub of Karachi’s main cinema halls – and you’ll see posters with skulls and crossbones painted on them and the words “Ignore piracy or protect cinema – what is in our national interest?” displayed outside every cinema hall. While one may cast a cursory and even amused glance at them, one does not realize that this is in actuality a desperate cry for help from an industry that reigned supreme in the entertainment world for decades, which is now on the verge of closing shop.

It is no secret that Pakistan’s film industry has been going steadily downhill since the mid-seventies. Tons of articles have

membership schemes to name some of the more respectable gimmicks) but to no avail. Even if things did look up occasionally, the euphoria would be short-lived, and understandably so. By and large Pakistani movies made with their limited budgets, outdated processing techniques and mediocre direction, have lost their appeal. Barring the solitary blockbuster *Yeh Dil Aap Ka Hua*, which had enough elements in it to attract audiences, most local films cannot entice people to give up the luxury of seeing the latest uncensored Indian or English movies in the comfort of their homes and at a fraction of the price of cinema tickets.

As for English films, they are available on DVD sometimes even before their release in the

Pakistan? According to most of the major exhibitors, there are only two immediate solutions to their problems – allowing the exhibition of Indian movies and clamping down on piracy

been written over the years citing reasons for its decline and even proffering advice for its revival, stressing that if certain measures were not taken, it would be curtain-drop for our cinema industry. However, for reasons best known to themselves, the government has by and large chosen to ignore the writing on the wall and the industry appears to be finally breathing its last.

It seems that after battling with all kinds of odds over the last three decades – loss of half the market with the secession of East Pakistan, unreasonable entertainment tax to the tune of 75 per cent (no other entertainment business has ever been taxed so heavily) formation of NAFDEC, to name a few – the last nail in the coffin has been the proliferation of piracy in the form of videos, DVDs and illegal television channels.

While legal enterprise is struggling to provide entertainment, pay taxes and meet daily running expenses, the local entertainment scene has become hostage to a massive invasion by smuggled and pirated videos and DVDs of every conceivable type, totally uncensored, irrespective of their ratings. Forget smuggling and selling pirated films with impunity; companies now exist in Pakistan with their own factories manufacturing pirated DVDs! And all this is happening not only with the government’s tacit approval, but at the cost of losing valuable revenue in the form of taxes.

That is not to say that stakeholders have given up without a fight. The last decade has been a tumultuous one for Pakistan’s film industry. In order to counter the negative effects of piracy, cinemas resorted to employing all kinds of tactics, both decent and indecent depending on the calibre of the cinema hall, to boost their business (showing dubbed English movies and introducing

US. So, why bother to see them three weeks after their official release, when you can see them right away? If a multi-billion dollar film industry is flourishing in the US, one must appreciate that the reason is a near-total clamp on piracy in their country.

Hence, from 600 cinema houses that existed all over the country in 1970, of which 115 were in Karachi, there are roughly 350 cinemas left in Pakistan (40 in Karachi). With prices of property booming and movies not bringing sufficient returns to even cover costs, one landmark of Karachi after another in the shape of great movie halls has been demolished. Capitol, Paradise, Rex, Khayyam, Palace and Kohinoor were among the major show houses to throw in the towel years ago. The latest to join the bandwagon is Star – one of the six main cinemas of Karachi – shut down almost a year after celebrating its silver jubilee, and at the start of the current campaign for the survival of the industry. Its closure does not augur well for the remaining five major halls – Capri, Nishat, Bambino, Lyric and Prince.

Likewise, where once there were about 25 distributors of English movies in Karachi alone, now there are only two left, with one on his way out. Previously, about 50 to 60 English movies were imported in a year, so exhibitors had the choice to dump a movie in the middle of the week if it bombed at the box-office, and exhibit another. In contrast, only 15 English films were imported in all of last year and about five this year.

Is there any hope, then, for the cinema industry in Pakistan? According to most of the major exhibitors, there are only two immediate solutions to their problems – allowing the exhibition

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