

Swan song for cinema

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of Indian movies and clamping down on piracy. Says Asif Razzaq, owner of Capri cinema, "Video shops all around the country are blatantly renting and selling Indian movies, cable television is showing Indian films and cultural exchanges are taking place now more than ever. Then why not allow the legal exhibition of Indian films? As it is, they are being illegally shown everywhere, including in cinemas in the smaller cities such as Hyderabad. The Indian government has not imposed any restrictions on the import of Pakistani movies, so why have we? Fair competition is always healthy. Moreover, Punjabi movies will find a big market in India. Once we become stronger financially, we will be in a better position to fight piracy also."

Currently, the Pakistan Film

cinema, has already started working on an ultimate closure.

How is it, then, that investors are arriving in Pakistan to invest in co-productions? Shaym Shroff, owner of multiplexes in India and one of the biggest distributors there, has actually come to buy the rights of a TV show from a private television channel, which they want to run in Indian cinemas. He has signed MoUs with the film association, but the fact remains that he will only invest here if the economic climate is viable – which means no piracy and the opening of Indian movies.

Many sceptics are of the opinion that the main reason why people have stopped going to cinemas is their lack of maintenance and that the problem will be solved with their upgradation. Not so, assert Zulfikar Ramzi, owner of the now defunct Star cinema, and Razzaq. They claim that the better halls have been



Exhibitors' Association's demand is that they be immediately allowed to exhibit the 100-odd old Indian films lying in stock with them, import latest Indian movies and make co-productions. The general opinion is that as long as the print is half-decent, people will flock to the cinemas to see old movies, and at least exhibitors will have a product to show. Presently, the situation is that there are no good films available for exhibition and hardly anyone coming in, so much so that some cinemas prefer to remain shut because they are not earning enough to even pay the fixed amount of weekly taxation. Many halls have not run their night show in ten years, and occasionally even the better halls have been forced to remain shut for the last show.

However, the outcome of the recent meeting held with the government in Islamabad was that it appreciates the problems of the industry and wants a proposal accompanied by individual assurances from cinema owners that the industry won't close down if they take the recommended steps. According to the exhibitors these are fruitless exercises and the time for dilly-dallying is over. The buck stops with them, they say. If there are no cinemas, where will movies run?

Adeel Imtiaz Sheikh, owner of Bambino, Scala, Lalazar, Nargis, Mehtab and Shish Mahal cinemas says that if their demands are not met, he will shut down his cinemas one by one and Nadeem Mandviwalla, owner of Nishat

pumping money into the cinemas, constantly modifying them — introducing digital sound systems, new projection screens, painting the halls, changing carpets or getting vinyl flooring done.

According to Ramzi, one cannot entirely blame the poor quality of Pakistani films either due to the lack of audiences. "Even in India, most movies are not super hits. In fact, the majority are flops. But at least people go to the cinema on Friday and then pass the verdict. Our dilemma is that even on the first day, first show, no one comes to the cinema. Take the case of *Jinnah* — the first movie ever to be made on the Quaid — no one came to see even that. *Terminator 3* was shown three weeks after its release in the US. That too didn't run. Piracy alone is responsible for our downfall."

A blatant testimony to the fact that providing a state-of-the-art cinema house in a posh locality is not incentive enough to draw audiences is the recently opened Cineplex. Only one of the two halls remains open most of the time and the cinema is reportedly being used to show movies run on DVD — both Indian and English — to organizations that book the entire show.

It appears to be a doomsday scenario for the cinema industry. If the government doesn't wake up even now, maybe people should start visiting cinemas, if only to bid their final farewells. For chances are, cinemas may not be around for long. ■