

Mencken

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and morality and the pretensions and hypocrisy of the leading political players of his generation. With every thrust he drew blood.

Mencken on his homeland: "...the United States is essentially a commonwealth of third-rate men (where) distinction is easy... because the general level of culture, of information, of taste and judgment, or ordinary competence is so low... Third-rate men, of course, exist in all countries, but it is only here that they are in full control of the state, and with it of all the national standards." This comes uncomfortably close to describing Pakistan: third-rate men in rampant control of everything. But, seventy and more years on, it is also a welcome corrective to the arrogance and superior airs which the US has started wearing since the collapse of communism.

Mencken on politicians: "...If experience teaches us anything at all it teaches us this: that a good politician, under democracy, is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar... The politician, at his ideal best... is a necessary evil; at his worst he is an almost intolerable nuisance." And here is Mencken on his own profession of journalism: "Most of the evils that continue to beset American journalism today, in truth, are not due to the rascality of owners nor even to the bombast of business managers, but simply and solely to the stupidity, cowardice and philistinism of working newspapermen. The majority of them, in almost every American city, are still ignoramuses, and proud of it. All the knowledge that they pack into their brains is, in every reasonable cultural sense, useless; it is the sort of knowledge that belongs, not to a professional man, but to a police captain, a railway mail-clerk, or a board-boy in a brokerage house." This last applies quite well to the broad fields of Pakistani journalism.

Granted that a newspaperman with Mencken's style and erudition (he had read widely) comes marching once a century. Even so, for all varieties of the journal-

istic craft his is the model to follow: drawing blood and leaving an indelible image behind when putting pen to paper or, in the e-mail age, tapping a computer's keys.

But in a country like Pakistan whose pillars and scaffolding cannot take the strain of too much sarcasm or raillery, it is not easy to follow the Mencken trail. Write too harshly about the ways of the Republic and you stand accused of subverting its foundations. Say what scumbags its rulers are and you will be accused of cynicism. Point to the hopelessness of the national situation and be ready to shoulder the charge of negativism.

All this is made worse by the internet. Not so long ago when you wrote for a newspaper you were primarily addressing a domestic audience. Now with most English language newspapers being carried on the net, what someone writes can be picked up with equal ease in Andhra Pradesh or California. With this technological expansion in the reach of the written word, anything critical that you write of your country, even if justified by the evidence, can be grist to the mills of your country's detractors.

This is especially true in the Indo-Pak context. With India trying to portray the Pakistan army as a 'rogue army', with India trying to prove that Pakistan is a failed state, with the United States pursuing its own agenda and indiscriminately labelling everything within sight as an example of terrorism or fundamentalism, the knight of the printed page faces a dilemma. The requirements of his trade (I will not say the truth for that is a dicey word) will pull him in one direction, regard for country (I will not say patriotism for that can have a funny meaning) in another. What is he or she to do?

Living in a small town, and in the centre of it to boot, with my companions mostly ordinary folk as opposed to the high-minded citizens of Islamabad or the other big cities, I have a fair idea of how bad things are as a result of the military takeover. Even in a military-recruiting town like

Chakwal, ordinary folk complain in the harshest terms about army rule which they hold responsible for high prices, unemployment, the sluggishness of the bazar, the municipal engineering (mostly maladrofit) of which the army monitoring teams seem to be so fond. This is the overwhelming reality on the ground. How to balance it against the need to present a good image of the country?

Soon the military government's first anniversary in power will be on hand. What can it look back to? Little by way of any tangible achievement, a great deal by way of drifting and confusion. What to talk of the economy being turned around, NAB-style accountability has dried up the last wells of investment, domestic or foreign. Untouched by reform, the bureaucracy remains the mess it was. Foreign policy is a series of defensive reflexes activated by external stimuli.

It is a measure of what things have come to that a nondescript figure like the Commonwealth secretary-general, who would not be taken seriously anywhere else, gets royal treatment here with politicians of every hue vying with each other to dance attendance upon him. A German tourist gets raped in the north and the nation, beginning with the English language press, is deluged by a tide of self-recrimination. As if such things do not happen elsewhere. Blacks have been murdered by white thugs in Germany. There is a proper sense of outrage and the law takes its course. But the country is not seized by a frenzy of self-loathing as is to be seen here at the slightest opportunity. Low self-esteem, that's what it is.

All these facts are pretty well known. But the question remains: how far should we take self-criticism? We should not be blind to our follies. That's the path to sure ruin. But at a time when the country's stock is low internationally and we are being assailed on every side for sins, real and invented, to what extent should we make a fetish of honesty? This is the predicament facing the Pakistanis.

# Pakistani cinema: yesterday, today

ASMA ALI ZAIN

Even as a beleaguered Pakistani film industry struggles to get its act together, Weekend spoke to two artistes trying to make a difference. An estimated 3,340 films in 50 years is not a bad record for a medium-sized industry catering to a restricted market. An industry that showcased the talents of stalwarts like Noor Jehan and Santosh Kumar - talents that mesmerised and entertained Pakistani audiences for a number of years. Films that touched life, explored issues, focused on realities as well as romance.

Not many can forget the simplicity and starkness of Jaga huwa savera, the story of a Pakistani fisherman who strives hard to build a boat, a symbol of livelihood and sustenance for his family. It later won a prize at the Moscow film festival.

Other scripts drew from social inequities, literature, legend and love folk and assimilated them into wholesome entertainment. Films like Duppatta, Gulnar, Anarkali and Badnaam had romance as their basic themes.

Actors Sudhir, Allaudin, Sabiha Khanum and Musarrat Nazir are a few names that dominated Pakistan's filmi duniya then. Legendary Noor Jehan was declared singer of the millenium by the National Film Award jury. Jugnu, Chanway, Khandan and Ghalib are some of the hit classics that she starred in.

The same decade also saw sensitive issues dealt with discreetly on the silver screen through movies like Saifuddin, Saif's Kartar Singh, Hasan Tariq's Neend, Qaisar's Clerk and Raza Mir's Lakhon main ek.

Today, more than five decades later, images on the Pakistani silver screen are anything but eye-catching: filmgoers, critics and serious film-makers are equally disillusioned. Dwindling attendance in cinema halls, lack of enthusiasm among film-goers and apathy shown by film-makers point towards a slow but sure decline in the industry. The glory and splendour of the celluloid is no longer evident. Pakistani film industry is on the edge of a precipice with scant hope of a meaningful survival.

What went wrong?

Lahore appeared on the film-making map way back in 1932 - prior to independence - with Heer Ranjha directed by A R Kardar, followed by Phairay, Laray and Do Ansoo. The Indian sub-continent had developed a prolific film industry by 1947. While Bombay had established itself as the capital of film-making, Lahore too had emerged as notable film production cen-

From this point, there was no looking

film industry of the sub-continent. But then events leading to Independence disturbed the working of the industry.

Facilities at the studios were either damaged or destroyed. When the dust settled, smoke hung in the air from the debris on the ground. Film activity in the new born Pakistan came to a standstill. Beaten but unfazed, some serious and dedicated film makers picked up the gauntlet and began from scratch.

What followed was a strong revival of cinema and by the end of the '50s, Pakistan was producing films of quality that not only survived the box office but many made it big.

The boom continued for two decades and then the rot began.

Shamim Ara, Mohammad Ali, Waheed Murad, Talish, Lehri were stars of the 60s-to-the-80s struggling era. Many factors caused the reversal. The circuit shrank with separation of East Pakistan. Quick money made its appearance and discouraged many entrepreneurs in the film industry as it did investors in other spheres. Government inattention took a turn for the worse and authorities worked to make conditions negative for cinema.

In the present day Pakistani cinema, censorship is unpredictable and hence unsettling for serious film-makers. The industry also suffers for lack of training facilities and opportunities for artistes and professionals. Old, outdated equipment that should have been discarded in the '60s is still being used. Excise laws have added to the burden. Most cinema halls abound in all kinds of discomfort. Plazas have come up in place of theatres.

This is what cinema has been and remains. The picture looks gloomy. It is, however, not unredeemable. Some film-makers continue to swim against the flow and produce fare that keeps hopes afloat. Present day stars responsible for bringing about a major revolution in the Pakistani film industry include Reema, Babar Ali, Shaan, Sahiba, Meera, Resham, Gia Ali, Saima, Momi Rana among others. Reema and Shaan, with their fresh faces and performance attracted huge crowds in the film Bulandi. Other recent hits include Jeeva, Choorian, Qaid and Nikaah, among others.

Lone Crusader

Weekend spoke to one such "crusader" as I would call him. Syed Noor is one of the leading directors of Pakistani film industry and is popularly known as the man responsible for reviving cinema in Pakistan. Noor, who could easily pass off as a 'hero' himself, makes no bones about the fact.

Since his debut with the hit Society girl in 1976, Noor has written screen plays for more than 200 Urdu and

Organisation, Noor related his struggle in the ailing world of Pakistani cinema with a frankness and disarming charm.

You started off as a writer and switched to direction. Why?

"I was the only writer for the top 10 directors of that time. I was writing for Shamim Ara, Parvez Malik, Sangeeta, Javed Fazil, Jan Mohammad. I noticed that my writings were not being projected as I wanted them to be, so I decided to produce my own film. In 1993, I directed Qasam, starring Saleem Sheikh and Irum Hasan, both newcomers. It was a small-budget film shot in Sri Lanka. It was a hit. I followed with two other films - Sargam and Jeeva. These films changed the present Pakistani cinema scenario as at that time, Punjabi films were popular.

Where does the Pak industry stand today?

Minus zero. The situation is still pretty bad.

What are the chances of revival?

The chances are great. For the past 50 years, this industry had been looking at the government for help but has now decided to help itself. So change can be expected now.

Pakistani cinema-goers too are not as enthusiastic. What is the reason?

I think that the crowd has to be given something good. Obviously, a neat clean environment would attract a good class of cinema-goers. If we offer them dingy, unclean and unhygienic entertainment houses then how can we expect them to come back. We definitely and desperately need good cinema houses and a good environment.

Why do you prefer shooting abroad when Pakistan offers excellent scenic locations?

The only reason is that we can have the whole cast on our disposal and don't have to wait for dates. Moreover, the government does not support us in this regard. We have no transport facilities and have major lodging problems.

Let me tell you of an interesting incident that occurred while shooting for Deewane tere pyar ke in Mauritius. I had to shoot an airport scene. In Pakistan we are not allowed to shoot near the airport or capture a plane taking off. When the authorities in Mauritius learnt that we were from Pakistan and wanted to shoot such a scene, they sealed off the airport to others and even allowed us to use their planes. You might find this hilarious, but even the ground security staff would follow my orders. If I asked for a plane to be towed, they would oblige and would do it no matter how many times I asked. Actually, this scene was a reason why this movie was a hit.

But doesn't shooting in foreign locations strain the budget?

can be covered as the value of the movie increases.

Why are our movies so long - so stretched?

This is because we are very sensitive and romantic people and prefer to have songs in our movies. If the songs were cut, then we would have a normal length of two hours.

Is this the reason Pakistan is not producing art movies?

Art movies belong to the parallel cinema for which complete government support and financial backing is needed which obviously we don't have. No producer would attempt to make an art movie from his budget. Sargam was my attempt at art movies.

Also, the censor board is very strict and unpredictable. We cannot touch sensitive issues that are needed for art movies.

What is your definition of a good director?

A good director should be a good captain. He should be in control and clear about his aims and objectives. Moreover, he should be able to guide his co-workers and his behaviour with the artistes should be friendly. Above all he should be imaginative.

Direction is a technical job as well. You have to learn the camera movements, camera angles, lighting, editing, etc. After you have mastered these techniques only then can you visualise what you want and know what will look good on screen.

What is the ideal storyline?

A good director should do justice to the storyline. It would be unfair if I think of producing or directing a James Bond film while working in the Pakistani film industry. My ideal storyline is a family drama or a romantic film which depicts my culture.

What about dance - isn't that a part of our culture?

Dance should be according to the situation. For example, if girls are dancing on occasion of marriage then it is okay. In my movies I try to avoid those situations where the actress is dancing to please the hero.

Such situations often convey vulgarity. Are you satisfied with your writings?

I write for my productions and am very satisfied as I think and write according to my capacity. It would be unfair to other writers if I use their storylines and then am not able to do justice to them. Now I think and write the story that I can direct as well.

We've heard that you will be shooting in Dubai. What is it about?

I will soon begin shooting for Jang Jang hai, which is based on the Kashmir issue. The shooting will start in Dubai and end in Kashmir. I'm also planning to host a festival in the UAE.