

Punjabi films: hope on the horizon



By Manohar Singh Gill

THE Punjabi film industry will today receive formal recognition when the State Governor, Mr Jaisukhlal Hathi, gives away the first ever State awards. The selections were made by a jury headed by Dr M. S. Raudhawa.

According to the jury, although State awards could only be given to Punjabi language films, the massive contribution of Punjabis to the national film industry also deserved recognition. It was decided, therefore, that at each annual State awards function two Punjabis who have made an outstanding contribution to the national industry would also be honoured. Appropriately enough the first two such awards will go to Raj Kapoor and Rajinder Singh Bedi.

Punjabi films were produced in pre-partition Lahore, though these were in small numbers. There was the odd one with some pretensions to quality (and I remember "Mangti" in this category), but most Punjabi films revolved round the "Bhalaji" syndrome. Poor acting, cheap and vulgar jokes and a complete caricature of the virile Punjabi culture were considered to be the essential requirements for a box-office hit.

AFTER PARTITION

After partition the Lahore industry disappeared, and the few Punjabi film makers migrated to Bombay. They were the poor refugee cousins of the Hindi film industry. They neither had the finances nor the guts to produce a worthwhile Punjabi picture. Though the national industry was dominated by Punjabi artists, they were not willing to divert their attention from the lucrative all-India market to attend to a regional language.

Thus the Punjabi film scene has been a depressing and dismal one over the past 30 years. It could only improve if the State extended some support. Bengal

had set an example by backing Satyajit Ray in the early 50s. Even States like Kerala, Maharashtra Tamil Nadu and Andhra began to encourage their local film industry in the 60s. But no one took the Punjabi film industry seriously. Punjabis continued to produce third-rate films portraying this virile and self-respecting people in the most adverse light possible.

It is obvious that if a worthwhile film culture is to grow in Punjab, then the State must lend a hand. Although this fact has been vaguely recognised, the policy is still unclear and the support uncertain. Even though Punjab has an affluent population, it has less than 150 cinemas, as compared to more than 2,000 in Tamil Nadu. This small exhibition circuit is naturally monopolised by the Hindi films with their stars and technical excellence. Who wants to book a small-time Punjabi film when "Sholay" is available? In such a situation few would dare to produce Punjabi films.

FEW FILMS

That is why barely a dozen Punjabi films are produced annually, against more than 100 in the equally small State of Kerala. As far as the spectator is concerned, the small number of theatres ensures that he has to pay through his nose and even then fight for a cinema ticket on a Sunday. Even senior officers in Chandigarh have to ring up the local S.H.O if they want to see a film! Considering the prevailing high rates, the spectator prefers to see top grade Hindi films.

The State has at long last recognised the fact that the Punjabi film industry must be supported. Entertainment duty concessions have been given to more than 30 films during the last year or so. But even now the procedure is cumbersome and a nuisance to the producers. They have to go through an elaborate preview system, and the conces-

sion for shooting in Punjab is required to be supervised by Tehsildars, Public Relations Officers and E.T.O.s! This whole system needs to be simplified.

Any Punjabi film passed by the censors should automatically be given a fixed level of entertainment duty concession. Those who are confident that they deserve more on account of quality should of course be required to come before the preview committee. This will ensure that the majority of producers can at least get the first concession without walking the Secretariat corridors for days on end.

GETTING A LICENCE

All these concessions will, however, still fail to give Punjab a buoyant film industry unless the major bottleneck of cinema licensing is removed. At present licences for building cinemas are given under an outmoded Act whose sole purpose is to obstruct the construction of new cinemas. So many authorities — the Town Planner the Health Engineer, the Electrical Inspector, the Municipal Committee, the District Magistrate etc — are involved and so efficient are they in raising objections that it is a brave man indeed who ventures out to try and get a cinema licence.

I should have imagined that this is one area where control could be relaxed completely with benefit to the State in employment and revenues, without any State investment. If licences could be freely given, as they are in the Southern States, a few hundred cinemas would come up every year. While investment would be by private parties, the State would benefit in the way of additional employment to people and more entertainment duty revenues.

Thanks to the new technology in film production, a cinema house is no more prone to fire. With soundproof systems, it is not a nuisance to neighbours any longer. In any case, the local government authorities should be

able to take care of all these points. While there may be reasons for being careful in the cities, there are practically none for constructions in the countryside. Tamil Nadu has freely allowed the building of cinemas in villages. Why can't we do the same?

CHEAP CINEMAS

The need in fact is to build cheap cinemas. The concrete boxes which cost up to Rs 60 lakh each should be forbidden even if somebody can produce so much ill-gotten money. Is it correct to allow scarce cement and steel to be dumped in such boxes particularly when we know that while they are designed for air-conditioning, the owners let the spectators stew in their own sweat? In the Army cantonments simple barrack-like structures are good enough as cinemas. The Government of India has developed standard designs for them.

Why can't the State frame a policy of giving quick licences to those putting up standard-design cheap cinema houses, particularly in the rural areas? In America they have large numbers of open-air theatres. Our climate too ensures clear rain-free days through most of the year. Why can't we allow cinemas which have walls but no roofs?

Today's State film awards have been deliberately kept equal to the national levels. This will give a sense of dignity to the dedicated men and women working in this field. It is particularly fortunate that the "best Punjab film" award has gone to Mr Hari Datt, a young and enterprising producer from Hoshiarpur. Given a little encouragement, I have no doubt that many Hari Datts will emerge to take up the challenges of the Punjabi cinema.

Barring a few exceptions, the quality of Punjabi films is still relatively poor, but I firmly believe that quality will emerge out of quantity, and quantity is possible only with some initial State encouragement.