

cinema

Brush with Bollywood's poster art

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Cinema is unmistakably glamorous. There is more style in it than substance. And this is particularly true of Bollywood, replete with satin and silk, and rubies and Rolls Royces. Yet, all this is confined to the screen alone, as two films buff recently realised with a lot of dismay.

For, the city itself can be most unglamorous, with Bollywood's innumerable creations creating a mesmeric effect only inside the darkened auditoriums. The sparkle on the screen seldom illuminates the streets outside.

So, the two movie enthusiasts have begun to brighten up Mumbai with murals, which will also double up as a tribute to Indian cinema's centenary celebrations that have already begun.

The iconic image of a cigarette-smoking Amitabh Bachchan (was he copying Humphrey Bogart?) in all his freshness of youth has been recreated on a roadside wall. Interestingly, while his character of Vijay from the 1975 *Deewar* that now adorns the wall represents the city's sordid underbelly, the painting itself is seen in the hip Mumbai suburb of Bandra, which has been the home of movie stars for as long as I can remember.

The scene from *Deewar* has been hand painted with oils — an art that has been long forgotten, its artists pushed into the crevices of memory by slick new posters printed on modern machines.

One of the two film buffs — both artists themselves — Ranjit Dahiya says he was pained to witness the eclipse of this great art. "I couldn't see any Bollywood in Bombay, yet



* Artist Balkrishna Vidya (74) retouches one of his Bollywood film posters at his office in Mumbai. Vidya and his 18-man team worked on posters for Bollywood classics like *Mother India*, *Deewaar* and *Mughal-e-Azam* during the 1970s.

this is the city of Bollywood," Dahiya avers, using the city's old name which many are still comfortable with. "So I thought I should paint the walls on the street."

The Bandra mural is the second to be completed as part of the Bollywood Art Project, funded entirely by Dahiya and his friend, Tony Peter.

They are determined to create an artwork that can be seen outside the art galleries, one that can be seen by everybody. As one walks by or even drives along, the murals will be a sight to behold, each reminding us of a frame that flashed by a long time ago.

The two men hope to finish several paintings before May 2013, when India will celebrate the centenary of its cinema. *Raja Harishchandra* opened in Bombay in 1913, and this is being officially recognised as the country's first movie. (However, like in the case of France's Lumiere Brothers, credited with discovering cinema in the face of other claimants, more significantly from America, there are conflicting views about *Raja Harishchandra* being the "first" Indian film.)

Dahiya and Peter have not always found their "walls" even; their brushes have not always stroked smooth surfaces. In some cases, securing permission to paint has been problematic. Their plan to recreate a 21m high dancing girl (what is Bollywood without its twinkle-toed damsels) was thwarted by the public, who were not impressed with the idea of art on their walls. They were probably more comfortable with seeing paper posters, some positively hideous looking.

The Bollywood Art Project began its brush with Bollywood in April with a mural of the 1953 classic, *Anarkali*. One of the greatest box-office hits of the decade, the movie traces the doomed love between a beautiful courtesan in Akbar's court and his son, Prince Salim.

That *Anarkali* was given cursory significance by most established historians is a fact, and the only sign of her very existence is a decrepit gravestone in Pakistan's Lahore. But *Anarkali* and *Salim* are legends that no love story can overlook. They are romance personified, and *Anarkali's* mural may well capture the essence of all that Bollywood has been known for.

Its mush, its melody, its drama and its dance that have enthralled millions not just at home, but across the seas.

The Egyptian cinema critic, Samir Farid — who was honoured with a lifetime achievement award at the ongoing Osian's Cinefan Film Festival in New Delhi — told me that Raj Kapoor's *Sangam* holds the unbeaten



* Indian artist Ranjit Dahiya works on a mural of late actor Rajesh Khanna on a roadside building wall in Mumbai on July 25. Dahiya and his friend Tony Peter are on a mission to recreate the dying tradition of Indian cinema's poster art, and to make it more accessible to the public.

record of having run for one whole year in a single theatre at Cairo. And what was *Sangam* all about? It was a haunting story, one of the first to have spoken about a triangular love affair, with lyrics and music that tugged at your heart.

Peter and Dahiya rue the fact that like such movies and many traditional Indian arts, cinema poster painting is dying. It stands little chance against the onslaught of digital technology and printing that have the power to turn out hundreds of posters in no time.

Hand painting may be a laborious process, but none can deny that it has the essence of a great art. The artists here have no models posing for them. They have to rely on photographs to recapture the very spirit of a scene. And there are some in Mumbai who want this traditional form — which in its glorious heyday offered a livelihood to many.

But like many other traditions in India, poster painting is in a state of decline and neglect. Hardly surprising, given the fact that the nation of a billion-plus people have begun

to care less about their own heritage.

In recent years, there has been serious lament about India's attitude to its film legacy. If some of its great studios have fallen by the wayside, their once glittering interiors in a state of regrettable ruin, the less said about original movie negatives and hand-painted billboards the better.

Yet, these could be invaluable reference material. Auteur director Adoor Gopalakrishnan once told me how several artists had hand painted tens of posters for his first debut feature, *Swayamvaram*.

Such posters have a certain characteristic individuality which those printed in their hundreds in speedy machines can never hope to capture. Dahiya and Peter are now set to take us back to an era when men used colours to brush canvases into cinematic life.

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