## bollywood

Starting this week, an exclusive column on Indian cinema by Gautaman Bhaskaran

## Piracy bane of film industry

iracy no longer happens on the high seas. Or, hardly. It happens at the street corner, in the tiny makeshift structures where movies are pirated in what is now a huge industry panning across continents.

In Chennai's Burma Bazaar, one can get pirated versions of current films, including those in English, Hindi and any other language. From the French Novella Vague to the Italian Neo-Realism to British classics and Japanese gems to movies that may have opened the other day, are all there for the asking, and they cost just \$1 a disk. In Marrakech, Morocco, one can find hundreds of disks of the latest Bollywood hits in the souq for as cheap as \$3 each. Visitors to Japan say an illegal DVD of a Hindi or Tamil film is easily available there at dirt cheap prices — sometimes even a couple of days before it actually opens in India and elsewhere.

In contrast, if one were to walk into an established store, one would end up paying 10 times as much, sometimes 15. Those who regularly patronise pirated fare say that the yawning difference in the price between the legal and the illegal disk is intimidating. It is strange that Indian business seldom thinks of cutting prices and increasing volumes.

Of equal concern is the fact that many American films come to India months after they had begun playing in the US and Europe. They are pretty stale by then, and for the large cinema literate population in India this is a terrible put-off. Worse, some of the world's greatest cinema is never theatrically released in India.

Cinema lovers never get to see, for example, works of filmmakers like Mike Leigh, Ken Loach or Michael Winterbottom on general release.

There are instances when a foreign picture is released in northern India and weeks later in southern regions. Tim Burton's oven fresh, *Alice in Wonderland* opened in the north last month, but not in the south, giving an excellent opportunity for pirate factories to flood the southern market with illegal copies.

K V Anand's 2009 Surya-starrer Tamil thriller, Ayan, elaborates how counterfeiters amass huge wealth and social status in seedy shacks copying especially south Indian cinema. In a way, the pirate becomes the hero, a classic case of the medium's increasing tendency to celebrate villainy.

Again, a foreign movie in India is so heavily censored that just about everything is lost.

For years, the Indian government has been asked to consider an American-type rating



\* Pirated copies of Bollywood films, among others, are seen in a street market in Senegal, in this archive picture. Piracy in Indian films alone is now a \$250mn market.

system, where a film is not censored (read cut) but classified according to its suitability for different age groups. This is still to happen, with the result that many directors and producers are wary of sending their movies to India.

Interestingly, piracy is not confined to foreign films alone. Indian cinema is also widely pirated. The ever increasing cost of a theatre ticket, the woeful lack of halls, the dilapidated condition that most of them are in and linguistic preferences that may keep a Malayalam or a Bengali or even a Hindi movie out of territories where these languages may not be widely understood are factors that help pirates thrive.

Piracy in Indian films alone is now a whopping \$250mn market. It is an industry employing thousands of people. A Northbridge Capital Asia report contends that the Indian movie industry, which produces around 1,200 films in many languages every year, loses 14% of its revenue to video piracy.

This can be an underestimated figure, as the widespread practice of illegal downloads from the Internet may not have been taken into account.

Big Indian production houses like Yash Raj

Films, UTV, Eros International, Shemaroo and Moser Baer joined hands, in December 2008, to invest a 'significant amount' to fight piracy. However, they would need \$4.5mn for this, and where is the money for this?

Obviously, easier options have to be thought of and executed. The window period between a theatrical and a video release must not be more than a few weeks — like it is in Japan and some other countries.

Big producers can factor in video rights in their agreements with distributors or make disks of their own movies at rates that will stop consumers from peeping into the pirate's den.

Finally, government censorship must be replaced by a rating scheme to help world cinema to roll into India.

Pirates are desperados, and, mere symptomatic manifestation of a deep-rooted malaise

What is more, they have a community starved of good cinema and hit by ridiculously high prices behind them. It will make a lot more sense to defeat piracy by producing legal DVDs at easily affordable prices.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and international cinema for three decades.)



The Japanese Wife set for release

Aparna Sen's long awaited *The Japanese Wife* opens on April 9. Discovered as an actress by Satyajit Ray in his 1961 *Teen Kanya*, Aparna Sen *(pictured)* caught the eye years later with her marvellous directorial debut, *36 Chowringhee Lane*. About old age and the overwhelmingly depressing sense of loneliness, the film was one of the late Jennifer Kapoor's most classic performances. And it was Sen's most remarkable direction till date. It took about 20 years after that for her to create another riveting piece of work, *Mr and Mrs lyer* (2001).

The Japanese Wife, based on one of Kunal Basu's short stories, traces the life of a humble school-master, essayed by Rahul Bose. He lives in a tiger infested Sundarbans village in West Bengal and falls in love with a Japanese pen pal, Migaya (played by a Japanese actress, Chigusa Takaku). In what seems like a fairytale, they get married through letters they write to each other, but do not meet for 15 years after that. Much like her mentor, Ray, whose favourite actor was Soumitra Chatterjee, Sen has had a fascination for Bose.

The Japanese Wife will be their third film together.

## Big time beckons Tamannaah

Tamannaah's (spelt so for numerological luck!) latest Tamil blockbuster, *Paiyya* may well push her into the big league. The role came to her unexpectedly. A major Hindi project of hers fell through, and the original heroine of *Paiyya*, Nayanthara, walked out. Tamannaah plays Charu in the film, and she says she emotes with her eyes. This is an absolute rarity in Indian cinema, where the face is so often eclipsed by the arms. Bold gestures take precedence over subtle expressions, a scoring point in foreign cinema, especially European.