TOLLY MONEY MATTERS

Suman Ghosh wears his economist’s hat to quiz three industry heavyweights about the money mechanics of our movies

SHRIKANT MOHTA
Director, Shree Venkatesh Films

It’s being said that there has been a resurgence of Bengali cinema. Do you agree?

Absolutely. Compared to five-six years back when you see the last two years, things have changed and I am very hopeful about the next 10 years which I am confident will be the golden period of Bengali cinema.

Is that for parallel cinema alone? I was told that last year was really bad for mainstream cinema... I do agree that the last year has not been very good for mainstream films. You see such downturns happen for every industry. Even Bollywood cinema. Our latest release Awara is one of the biggest hits in the last five-six years. So, definitely the market is still there.

But in terms of box-office results, we don’t have a transparent system to verify true figures, unlike in Bollywood where you get day-by-day box-office figures.

That’s true but I think the media and the film critics have to be equally blamed for this. There is a Taran Adarsh in Mumbai who writes film criticism as well as publishes box-office figures. Here when people write about films they are just interested in the creative side. Nobody bothers about the business side.

But my journalist friends tell me producers and directors are guilty of coming out with figures which are unverifiable.

We don’t know about other producers but we are absolutely fine with revealing our figures. We have produced so many blockbusters now that we have nothing to hide. You can see our books now.

So many studios like Mahindra, Planman, Reliance etc, have come to Bengali films but no one has stuck around. Why?

I don’t think they are studios in the true sense. If someone only finances a few films, they cannot be called studios. Where is their infrastructure? Where is the producer? They just hire a director and start operating. There are many sides of the film business — producing, distributing and marketing. A good film without proper distribution doesn’t make sense. You see the Hollywood studios like Warner, Sony or 20th Century Fox. They have producers, distributors of their own and they own theatre halls across the world. That is essential. I learn a lot from how they operate.

There is an allegation against SVF that you control all aspects, starting from production to exhibition, and hence have created a monopoly preventing others from entering the industry. Is that true?
You see, we have built ourselves over a period of 16 years. We also started as a small entity, we were small distributors. Then we started production and increased our business. We have now created a brand.... If someone enters Bollywood and thinks he will be Yash Chopra overnight, it's not possible. One should realise that the entertainment industry is built on brand value. Films are a difficult business, it's not that easy.

It has also been alleged by your main competitor that you block other producers from distributing their films through a pact with your own movie halls.

The reality is that we own just one theatre [Mogra, in the suburbs] but yes, we do have our theatre chains. We produce just five-six films a year and that too, two-three of those are like Autograph and 22shey Srabon which have a very limited release in say 30 halls. So in an industry where more than 90 films are produced each year, how can we block other producers? So, the allegation is completely false.

What is the percentage of hits here — I am defining it as a film which recovers costs and earns some more — and has that changed over the years? What can be done to increase this ratio?

Ten per cent. I think nothing can be done to change this. Whatever you do, the success ratio cannot be increased. It's true all over — in Bollywood, in the Tamil industry, everywhere. I have studied this.

If piracy can be stopped, how much will our industry benefit?

Whatever our turnover is now, it will become three to four times more. But I don't think anything can be done about this at the moment. Nowhere in the world has this been successfully stopped. Data show that 30 per cent of the Internet consumption is due to piracy. We have to accept it.

What can the government do for our industry?

I think the current Trinamul government has taken an active interest in our industry. They are doing a lot to improve the infrastructure. They are revamping studios, planning film cities. The entertainment tax, which was 30 per cent before, has been reduced to 2 per cent. That's a very good thing. Though we still don't have proper labs, proper dubbing and mixing studios, there is not even a Super 35 camera in Calcutta.

There are industry insiders who complain about a Marwari duo (Shrikant and cousin Mahendra Soni) controlling Bengali cinema. How do you feel about that?

That deeply hurts me. I feel I am a Bengali. Just because I have a Hindi surname doesn't preclude me from being a Bengali. My father was born here, I was born here, we are producing Bengali films, what more can we do? If I ever get an Oscar I am willing to exchange that for a Shera Bangali award! Every year when I go home after the (ABP Ananda) Shera Bangali award I cry that someday I wish I will get that.

ASHOK DHANUKA
Director, Eskay Movies

It's being said that there has been a resurgence of Bengali cinema. Do you agree? I don't think so. Let me give you a figure. In 2005, the percentage of hits was 90. But then around 40 films were produced. After that the number of films kept increasing. A lot of people who wanted to produce films came in with no idea about filmmaking. A lot of dalaals entered the market. Now almost 150 films are produced and the hits is around 5-10 per cent. But I must agree that after the introduction of multiplexes the situation of parallel cinema has become better. A lot of experimental work is being made.

But we don't have a transparent system, unlike in Bollywood where you get day-by-day box-office figures.

Bombay is an organised sector. It is not so here. You can get multiplex figures here. Previously when the entertainment tax was 30 per cent there was a lot of fudging of figures. I can guarantee that those tendencies have decreased after that rate became 2 per cent as there is less incentive to under-report. But still, only Venkatesh (SVF) and I are organised.

What do you mean by "organised"?

It means that proper records are kept. We have detailed business figures for each hall and territory. Some new producers are illiterate about films. They are not dedicated to the business. That makes them disorganised. You make films, don't you realise that here?

So many studios like Mahindra, Planman, Reliance etc, have come to Bengali films but no
one has stuck around. Why?

Most of them are also disorganised. More importantly the people who are in charge of these studios are after all salaried people. They don’t own their films. So whether a film is a hit or a loss hardly matters to them, whereas I am the proprietor of my films. Secondly, in Bengal a lot of work is done based on personal relationships and sentiment. You can get a job done with a personal request which may be impossible to do even if you spend two crore. Studios need to understand that.

There is an allegation against both you and Venkatesh Films that you control all aspects from production to exhibition....

Yes that’s true and that is very unfair. When I made my first film Swami Keno Ashami (1997) there were many distributors and there was a tacit agreement that if a film is running well then it will not be pulled out of theatres. But Venkatesh started this unfairness. They started dictating terms and producers started getting scared.

This competition between you and Venkatesh, do you think it is good for the Bengali film industry? Competition can often be healthy...

It is very unhealthy. Till 2009, we were like partners. After that things started going sour. Initially they had asked me to stop producing films. I said no. You see, I always welcomed new producers because they would make films and sell video and satellite rights to me, so that would benefit me. But Venkatesh wanted to be in the market alone. They blocked the theatres in times of the release of my film.

How could they do that? You also have control of a lot of theatres...

Not to begin with. It was in response to them that I started acquiring theatres of my own. That too not in the first-grade centres. Those were kept by them.

What can the government do for our industry?

Recently I was talking to a friend who is a producer of Marathi films. I always thought that in Maharashtra Marathi movies won’t run. Mainly due to the fact that the Hindi film industry is so dominant. But to my surprise they run very well. There the government has a very important role to play. They set up a committee for allocation of subsidies. Initially there was corruption in that and producers misused the subsidies. But then they made gradations based on the budget of the film and framed other rules to prevent such misuse. After that good movies started being made. In Bengal there is no subsidy from the government at all. Let me tell you another interesting thing. Intellectual films run well in the suburbs and villages there, quite contrary to what is here. Ami Subhash Bolchhi and Chalo Paltai, which were copies of Marathi films, flopped here but were superhits there.

Why do you think that’s the case?

Literacy is the main reason. People in villages and suburbs there are more literate compared to here. My friend said that if they shoot a Marathi film in say England or Egypt, it won’t run in Maharashtra. “Ora maatir gondho chay”. So they can make films within one crore and make profits.

Subsidy apart, what would you like the Bengal government to do?

There are serious infrastructural problems which they should address. The theatres in the districts are so ill-maintained that you won’t feel like going there.... Another thing is the service tax, which the theatre owners get from each ticket sales for maintenance of their theatres. The producer’s share gets reduced as a result. I think that should be eradicated. Theatre owners get the money but don’t do anything for the halls. I strongly believe the government should eradicate that.

ARIJIT DUTTA
Managing Director, Priya Entertainments

It’s being said that there has been a resurgence of Bengali cinema. Do you agree?
For parallel cinema definitely it is true. New kind of movies are being made and there has been an upward trend in box-office results. But for commercial cinema there has been a downturn.

But in terms of box office, we don’t have a transparent system, unlike in Bollywood. For multiplexes, exact figures are definitely available but not for single-screen theatres.

But in Bollywood, day-by-day figures are available for say a film like Rowdy Rathore which is primarily a single-screen film.

Those are not exact figures. In Bombay films are sold territory-wise and hence you can
say that UP was sold for some amount and incorporate that in the collections. But whether those amounts are actually realised, how do you know?

So many studios like Mahindra, Planman, Reliance etc, have come to Bengali films but no one has stuck around. Why?

Planman was completely disorganised and so were some others. In order to make a film in a regional language you have to partner with someone from here. You need to be involved in the process thoroughly. There should be ‘love’ in the process.

What is the percentage of hits in Bengali films and has that changed over the years? I would say 50 per cent. And this percentage has definitely increased over the years.

If piracy can be stopped, how much will our industry benefit?

I would say 60 per cent of our current turnover will increase. I can tell you that all films will recover costs if piracy is stopped. It is really unfortunate. The government should take an active role in this. There are so many illegal video halls in the suburbs and also the cable operators show films illegally. The government should impose harsh measures to control this. For example, the main cable station responsible should be caught and just put in prison for five years. Unless that fear is there they will continue this.

What else can the government do for our industry?

A lot actually. First of all a committee should be formed to address and make legislative changes to a lot of the current rules and regulations. They should hear out the grievances of exhibitors. Currently there are 13 types of different taxes imposed on exhibitors, which is ridiculous. It is mired in bureaucracy.