

BIG PICTURE



BY KENNITH ROSARIO

At the dawn of the new millennium, when Selvaggia Velo founded River to River: Florence Indian Film Festival, arguably the first film festival abroad dedicated to Indian cinema, she had no idea what to expect. Unlike London, New York or Toronto, the Renaissance city could neither boast of a burgeoning Indian diaspora nor did it see the commercial release of desi films.

The only access to Indian cinema was through limited exposure to Italian-dubbed Hindi films. It was quite a surprise then to find a unique and dedicated audience returning to the festival in its first three years: Italian women reliving their memories of visiting India.

Diaspora in droves

Seventeen years on, the festival has a more diverse audience – from Italians and the French to English speakers (British and Americans) living in Florence. “In town, there is hardly an Indian community, and the few Indians who attend come mostly from Milan or Rome,” says Velo. But other cosmopolitan cities around the world, which host well-known Indian film festivals, find no trouble drawing the diaspora community in droves.

The week-long New York Indian Film Festival (NYIFF), which begins tomorrow, or the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA), which concluded last month, both started as diaspora festi-

All the world’s a screen

As Indian film festivals mushroom across the globe, desi cinema is drawing new audiences

als, aimed at showcasing indie cinema from the subcontinent. “It’s also for the second generation, the younger audience that wants to connect back to the country and in a way that is relevant to them,” says Christina Marouda, founder of IFFLA.

However, with increasing popularity, the audience for these festivals has grown to include non-Indian cinephiles too. “If we’re showing an LGBTQ film from a local or Canadian-Indian film-

maker, that tends to attract an audience of its own,” says Aseem Chhabra, Director, NYIFF.

More than Ray

When The Bagri Foundation London Indian Film Festival (LIFF) started a decade ago, founder and programming director Cary Rajinder Sawhney noticed that mainstream British media had a limited understanding of contemporary independent cinema from India, and seldom ventured beyond Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.

The festival, which claims to have a more than 40% non-Indian audience, invites journalists and critics from British media to interactive sessions, giving them a chance to discover emerging filmmakers. “All the diaspora festivals are ambassadors of India and we’re selling our products and telling the au-



Only connect Stills from *Village Rockstars*, *Love Sonia* and *Omerta*, some of the films being featured overseas this year. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

diences how wonderful India is,” says Sawhney.

In the last two decades, Indian film festivals have mushroomed in several cities across the U.S., Europe and Australia. Latest to join the club is the Boston International Film Festival of India, which will reportedly roll out in September. “Most film festivals severely under-represent cinema from India, if they represent it at all, despite the country’s long tradition of quality filmmaking,” says Mike Dougherty, Director of Programming, IFFLA.

Intimate networking

Over the past two decades, Indian film festivals have gained enough reputation to attract world premieres. The ninth edition of LIFF will open with the world premiere of Tabrez Noorani’s *Love Sonia* in June, while NYIFF will see the world premiere of *Bird of Dusk*, a documentary on Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh.

These film festivals provide an intimate networking opportunity for filmmakers who would otherwise not be seen or would get overshadowed in major forums such as Cannes or Berlinale. They are also a platform for diaspora filmmakers keen on an American or European release over an Indian one.

IFFLA prides itself on its geographical proximity to Hollywood, which helps it provide aspiring artistes and filmmakers easy access to high-profile executives, distributors and agents.

With growing diversity, programming for a mixed audience is an exciting challenge. London-based author-filmmaker Nasreen Munni Kabir, who has been curating Indian films for British public-service broadcaster, Channel 4, for over three decades, says that filmmakers matter more to the U.K. audience than stars. “When *Court* (2014) was screened, we had almost 80,000 people watching it, which I think is a very good number,” she says.

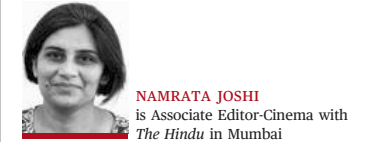
But Florence is a different ball game. “Nothing can be taken for granted in Florence,” says Velo. The appeal here lies in themes and stories. Movies with social commentary seem to be a big draw. This year’s line-up at LIFF too includes several women-centric films and a few on the toxic masculinity of father-son relationships, says Sawhney.

As film curator and programmer Meenakshi Shedde says, “A lot of third- or fourth-generation Indians, who have a different worldview, are less likely to watch something just because it is Indian.”

FILMY DIALOGUE

Abbaji’s Ni Sa Ga Ma Pa

Ustad Allarakha’s brilliant career in Hindi film music risks being forgotten



For a brief while on April 29, the stage at Bandra’s St. Andrews Auditorium turned into an old-fashioned music studio. With the young singers Prashant Samadhar and Harpreet Hasrat singing two melodies from the 50s and the 60s, to the accompaniment of a live orchestra, it recreated the feel of real-time recording that music-making for films used to be; a far cry from the technological exercise it has become today.

‘Hindu ke Ram, Muslim ke Khuda; Haaye Ramji Pa Ma Ga Re Sa’, joyously sung by Samadhar, also brought to focus legendary tabla maestro Ustad Allarakha’s largely unheralded innings in Hindi cinema as a composer. This song, ‘Ni Sa Ga Ma Pa’, is one of the earliest with ‘sargam bol’ (musical notes) for lyrics; long before ‘Do Re Mi’ in *The Sound of Music* (1965).

Haunting melodies

Abbaji’s (as Ustad Allarakha was often referred to) unique tryst with Hindi cinema was one of many chapters in the larger celebration – called *The Journey Continues* – to mark his 99th birth anniversary.

A stringing together of musical pieces (conceptualised by his musician son Fazal Qureshi) with an engaging, anecdotal narration about his life by actor-director-rconteur Danish Husain, the show had Hasrat and Samadhar reprising another of Abbaji’s haunting film melodies ‘Je main jaandi Jagge ne mar jaana’ from the Punjabi film *Jagga* (1964), his last as a composer and the only one in which he is credited as Ustad Allarakha; all of his film work gets attributed as A.R. Qureshi, his actual name. Layered, rich, rooted, raw and earthy, the two compositions left one asking for more.

Husain refers to cinema as the start of Abbaji’s musical journey, which he had to eventually put on the back-burner. “Between 1943 and 1958 he composed music for more than 30 films,” says Husain. These include *Yaadgar*, *Aandhiyaan*, *Humsafar*, *Hatimtai ki Beti*, *Laila*, *Khandaan*, *Bewafa*. It was an interesting part of his life that not many are aware of.

From Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Vilayat Khan to Shiv-Hari, Zakir Husain and Kishori Amonkar, classical musicians have been consistently composing for films. However, unlike Pan-



Raw and earthy Ustad Allarakha with Zakir Hussain. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Having trained in dhrupad and khayal, legend has it that Ustad Allarakha may have done playback singing in films

dit Ravi Shankar’s ‘Haaye re wo din kyun na aaye’ and ‘Jaane kaise sapno mein’ in *Anuradha* or Ustad Vilayat Khan’s ‘Ambar ki ik pak surahi’ in *Kadambari*, Abbaji’s work has not been so strongly imprinted in the mass consciousness.

While researching for the show, Husain found himself faced with reams of incomplete information and he could access very few of the original recordings; most of them have disappeared. “Artistes of his calibre come to the world once in decades and centuries. [Ideally] we should be preserving every bit of their work,” he says.

Where’s the record

Music direction apart, Abbaji is also said to have played the tabla for Ustad Ali Akbar Khan’s compositions in *The Householder*, *Dev* and *Kshudito Pashan* (Hungry Stones). He was also a guru to Jaidev and R.D. Burman.

Having trained in dhrupad and khayal,

legend has it that he may have done playback singing in films, specifically for Prithviraj Kapoor. “But it’s one of those mythical things that can’t be proved or disproved because no record is available,” says Husain.

It’s in the context of this lack of archiving of film music history that the individual work of a few passionate music buffs needs to be acknowledged. In the 90s, when the Internet was still in its infancy, the late Amarjeet Anand was one of the first to start a website (indiascreen) for vintage music. U.S.-based Prof Surjit Singh collects and shares songs from the 30s and 40s on his website hindi-movies-songs.com.

K.L. Saigal fan Surinder Madani has been collecting and sharing his Saigal and Pankaj Mullick collection. V.K. Rangarao in Chennai, Indore’s Suman Chaurasiya, Jodhpur’s Girdhari Lal Vishwakarma, and the U.S.-based Narsingh D. Agnish and Dr. M.L. Kapoor are assiduous music and record collectors.

Last, but not the least, Harmandir Singh ‘Hamraaz’ of Kanpur has been tirelessly compiling songs (with complete credits) for the encyclopedia of Hindi film music, *Geet Kosh*, six volumes of which (1931-1985) have been published, even as he soldiers on to put the seventh and eighth together.

DOCU DRAMA

Varanasi’s worn weaves

Breathtaking visuals and some interesting contradictions

BY ANAHITA PANICKER

Somewhere in the middle of *Bunkar: The Last of the Varanasi Weavers*, filmmaker Satyaprakash Upadhyay asks erstwhile weaver Shyam Jiya-van if he still keeps his loom. He does, he says, but at home. Does he still use it? “No, I have dismantled and stored it carefully so that it stays safe,” he says.

Another former weaver, Naeem, talks to Upadhyay while sitting in his bright red-and-green autorickshaw. He sounds disgruntled: “I used to weave saris. It didn’t pay well, so I took to driving a rickshaw.”

No longer feasible

Several more of Naeem’s kind find a voice in Upadhyay’s debut documentary, where Varanasi sari weavers talk about their craft and its present state of decline. Most of them have been forced to abandon their profession because it is no longer feasible. Activists and revivalists, who are trying to help the artisans, plead their case.

Since the film is pegged on the weavers, it is a pity that it does not delve deeper into their personal narratives. We meet them late, some 13 minutes into the lengthy and sometimes repetitive 68 minute-long film. The film rides on its breathtaking visuals,

capturing the vibrancy of the art form, from the rich hues of the saris to their delicate detailing, and Varanasi’s landscape of opposites, with its teeming life and rituals of death. Cinematographer Vijay Mishra’s artistry is somewhat marred by the relentless background music though.

Bunkar opens with a shot of the emerald-green Ganga and pans to Varanasi’s riverfront before it unexpectedly cuts to a CGI of the river – a voiceover that seems determined to exhaust all the metaphors related to weaving. Sample this: “I [Ganga] have watched the loom of time weave the past into the present.”

The film then segues into a sketchy history of the art form, lists the weaving styles, and then comes to the threat posed by the near-identical, mass-produced and significantly cheaper saris made on power looms. The threat has forced many craftsmen to take up other professions.

“I can’t blame one department

or a particular association [for the decline], for the problem is vast,” says Upadhyay. “My aim is rather to inform people,” he adds.

And so the tone of his film remains equivocal and non-committal to the point that at times it contradicts itself. It does manage to make interesting juxtapositions – but that may have been accidental.

Disparities

Take, for instance, the documentary’s discussion on the government’s efforts to protect and preserve the art form by giving it a GI tag and a Handloom Mark. A weaver concedes that such initiatives have given a boost to his business. This is followed by a former weaver saying that only a handful of craftsmen who were awarded the government certification could benefit from it, and that the effort is hardly enough to combat the steady and overwhelming influx of power-loom products. The documentary does not dwell on this disparity.

Upadhyay’s film is an important discussion on the lives of the Varanasi sari weavers but its voice flounders. At the same time, it achieves more by way of solutions than similar documentaries, which do no more than simply acknowledge that a problem exists.

The Mumbai-based freelance journalist is obsessed with cinema and gender rights.



Warp and weft A still from *Bunkar*.