“Punjabi Cinema” - Origin and its Journey

By B. R. GARG

Cinema was introduced to India on 7 July 1896, when the Lumiere brothers' showed six short silent films in Watson Hotel, Bombay charging Rupees two per person, an exorbitant price those days, from an audience of two hundred people. In India, first Cinema house was established in Bombay in 1907 by Mr. Pathe. In a span of few years, cinema-houses sprang up in many more cities. Dhudiraj Govind Phalke produced the first Indian silent film “Raja Harish Chandra” which was released at Coronation theatre in Bombay on May 3, 1913. Between 1913 and 1932 more than one thousand silent pictures were made in India. Following the successes in other parts of the country, film production got started in Lahore and these films were mainly historical, mythological, stunt pictures, costume dramas and social romances. In 1928, the first film company United Players' Corporation, was established in Punjab by AR Kardar and M Ismail with the production of “Mysterious Eagle” alias “Husn Ka Daku”. There after many silent movies were produced in Lahore. In 1931, the first Indian talkie “Alam Ara” directed by Ardeshir Irani was released. Taking a lead, A R Kardar made the first talkie of Punjab “Heer Ranjha” in Urdu under the banner of “Play Art Phototone”. However, it took another four years to make the first Punjabi language film “Ishki-Punjab” alias “Mirza Sahibaan” featuring Bhai Chella, Bhai Dessaand and Miss Khurshid. The film was released in Niranjan Talkies Lahore on March 29, 1935.
starting a new chapter in the history of Punjabi Cinema. Meanwhile, some of the Punjabi producers started making Punjabi films in Calcutta and Bombay as the producers in Lahore were reluctant to support the project because of popularity of Hindi and Urdu pictures and a narrow market for Punjabi films. Seth Sukh Lal Kirnani of Calcutta gave Rs.25000/- as incentive to Sh. K D Mehra (the father of Punjabi cinema), to produce the Punjabi film “Shiela” alias “Pind Di Kudi” in Calcutta. This film has the distinction of introducing Noor Jehan, the “Nightingale of Punjab” to the filmdom.

The myth proved wrong and soon many more producers started making Punjabi films, as it proved to be a good proposition and Lahore became a big film market in view of large Punjabi population extending beyond the boundaries of Punjab. Many studios sprung up and many artistes, producers, directors & technicians namely Shanta Apte, Motilal, Chandra Mohan, Hiralal, Noor Jehan, Mumtaz Shanti and Wali etc shifted from Bombay & Calcutta to Lahore. Interestingly Lahore, the only centre of film production in the Northern India had the monopoly of producing Punjabi films and some of the hit films included “Heer Sayal” “Sohni Mahiwal”, “Sohni Kumaharan”, “Gul Bakawali” “Mirza Sahibaan”, “Sassi Punnu” and “Dulla Bhatti”. All these love stories of immortal legendary lovers were preserved for the posterity on the silver screen. “Yamla Jatt” a musical comedy, broke all the records and had a three months consecutive run at a cinema hall in Lahore.

“Mangti” produced by Kamla Movietone became a colossal hit in Punjab and it was the first film to celebrate platinum jubilee. The basic theme of Punjabi films used to revolve around light entertainment provided by hilarious interludes of pithy dialogues interspersed with pun on Punjabi words. In 1940s, Punjabi cinema reached the zenith of the Indian film industry when many hit movies like Ravi Paar, Patwari, Ek Musafir, Kamli, Gawandhi, Koel Ali
Baba, Mera Punjab, Pooran Bhagat, Jagga Daku, Laila Majnu, Chaudhary, Chambey Di Kali, Mera Mahi, Sehti Murad, Mubarak, Pardesi Dhola, Nikhatoo were produced. In 1944, the playback singer Mohammad Rafi was introduced by music director Shyam Sunder in the Punjabi film “Gul Baloch”.

The communal disturbances leading to the partition of the country in 1947, proved to be a big jolt to the Punjabi Cinema and the migration of studio owners, producers, directors, technicians, artistes etc. turned Lahore into a ghost film city. Only one Punjabi film Kamli was made during the period 1945 to 1948. After partition, the leitmotif running through Punjabi films mirrored the Punjabi folk dances woven around rural themes. There were many who tried to keep Indian Punjabi Cinema alive. Film-makers made movies like Chaman, Chhai, Lachhi, Pagri sambhal Jatta, Posti, Do Lachhian, Chambe Di Kali, Vanjara, Kikli, Bhangra, Khedan De Din Char etc. Some of these films had successful run at the box-office. In 1964, a big-budget romantic Punjabi film titled "Satluj De Kande" featuring Balraj Sahni, Nishi, Wasti, and Mirza Musharraf was released and this film earned a national award. In the late 1960s, many Punjabi film producers made serious efforts to switch on to subjects having religious appeals. In this respect “Nanak Naam Jahaj Hai”, an inspiring movie on the great spiritual and cultural heritage of the devotees of the great Gurus, was the first really major successful Punjabi film in Post-Independent India with a cultural impact and is credited with
the revival of the Punjabi Film Industry in India. The cine-goers used to wait in long queues to buy a ticket for the film.

Most of the them used to enter the cinema halls bare-footed as a symbol of respect and throw coins on the screen platform as and when scenes of religious places flashed on the big-screen. The mega success of Nanak Naam Jahaz Hai had spawned a series of religious films like Nanak Dukhiya Sab Sansaar, Mitar Pyaare Nu, “Man Jeete Jag Jeet”, “Guru Manio Granth”, “Dukh Bhanjan Tera Naam”, Papi Tarey Anek, Sawa Lakh Se Ek Ladaun, Sat Sri Akal, Guru Manio Granth and Ucha Dar Babe Nanak Da etc.

The other genre releases included multi starrers like Kankan De Ohle, Do Sher Daaj, Giddha, Santo Banto, Taakra, Yamla Jatt, Saal Solvan Chadya, Udeekan, Fauji Chacha, Balbiro Bhabhi, Sarpanch. “Putt Jattan De” and Til Til Dalekha. In Teri Meri Ek Jindri along with Dharmendra this movie introduced his cousin brother Veerendra, who contributed a lot to the Punjabi films. Punjabi cinema was shaken with the sudden assassination of Veerendra during the filming of Jatt Te Zameen. During the next decade, a crop of artistes like Satish Kaul, Yograj Singh, Gugu Gill, Shivender Mahal, Mehar Mittal, Preeti Sapru, Upasana Singh etc. made an impact on the run of the mill Punjabi films. In 2000 the life of Udham Singh was portrayed by Raj Babbar in Shaheed Uddham Singh while in 2003 Jee Ayan Nu with singer-turned actor Harbhajan Mann and directed by choregrapher-turned director Manmohan Singh became hit at the box-office. Then followed hits like Asaa Nu Maan Watna Da, Des Hoyaa Pardes, Main Tu Assi Tussi, Yaaran Naal Baharan, Dil Apna Punjabi and Ek Jind Ek Jaan etc. Gurdas Mann’s “Warish Shah”, a much acclaimed film which won many national awards was sent to the Oscars.
The lack of financial resources, apathy of the government and the indifference of the audiences played havoc with this industry. Small territory translates into bad economics. However, the NRI factor and stepping in of big production houses like Tips may well catapult it to the forefront of the regional cinema. Slowly, the industry is showing signs of change with top producers, Corporate houses and NRIs pumping in money for quality productions. The Punjabi audience, which has grown up on the themes of revenge and macho pride, crude humour and songs around Sarson De Khet, has seen farmhouses replacing the village scene and foreign locales replacing mustard fields. The image of Punjabi people and culture in films is changing — for the better even in Hindi films. This is noticeable in a number of recent films such as “Jab We Met”, “Heroes”, “Singh is Kinng”, “Crook”, “Tanu Weds Manu” and “Patiala House” etc. and the Punjabi flavour has become a good selling point. It appears that with the opening of the global market Punjabi movies have become more market savvy. Movies like Jee Aayan Nu, Asa Nu Maan Watna Da, Yaaran Naal Bahaaran have established Manmohan Singh as the industry’s Renaissance man. ‘Mera Pind - My Home’ starring Harbhajan Mann was a recipe for an entertainment with a perfect mix of emotions, drama and comedy. Despite being a Punjabi film, it has great opening in India as well as in foreign countries. In 2010, Rabba Mail Karade proved to be a smashing hit.

Punjabi cinema has had its moments of glory. Music, drama and comedy used to be salient features of the Punjabi films. The contribution of music directors like Ghulam Haider, Dhumi Khan, Master Govind Ram, Shyam Sunder, Vinod, Hans Raj Behl, Sardul Kwatra, S Madan, S. Mohinder etc. have led to the success of many Punjabi films over the years. The songs like “Kankaan Diyaan Fasalaan Pakiaan Ne…”, “Shaala Jawaniaan Maane…”, “Aithon Ud Ja Bholia Panchhiya…”, “Ni Soniye Ni Heeriye…”, “Saari Saari Raat Tera Takni Aan Raah…” Batti Baal Ke…”, “Daana Paani Khich Liyonda..”, “Jag wala Mela Yaaro..”, “Mitter Pyaare Nu Haal Muridaan Da Kehna..”, “Naale Iammi Te Naale Kaali..”, “Pyar De Bhulekhe…”, are hummed even today. These melodious songs
rendered by Noor Jehan, Shamshad Begum, Mohd. Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle, Suman kalyanpur have become immortal. The names of popular hero/heroines of Punjabi films like Noor Jehan, Mumtaz Shanti, Gita Bali, Nishi, Indira Billi, Preeti sapru, Pran, Om Parkash, Karan diwan, Sunder, Ravinder Kapoor, Dara Singh, Veerendra, Satish Kaul, Gurdas Mann and Yograj etc. are still fondly remembered. Majnu, Khairati Bhainga and Mehar Mittal provided comedy par excellence.

Over a period of time movies belonging to different genres like comedy, romance, devotional, socials and serious or art cinema were produced. With films like Posti, Bhangra, Jatti, Wilayati Babu and Wilayat Pass comedy phase continued well into 1980s with such popular productions like Yamla Jatt, Mamaji, Jija Saali, Do Madari etc. But now movies belonging to other genres are becoming successful at the box office. In 1969, the devotional movie Nanak Naam Jahaj Hai started a new trend. While these two genres were popular with the family audiences then dacoit and action movies regaled the rural youth. The only other cult-status flicks are Putt Jattan De, Qurbani Jatt di and Rustam-e-Hind. Barring these exceptions, most of the productions belonging to this genre portrayed senseless violence essayed by the likes of Varinder-Yograj duo. Recently, a new trend of family sagas and urban-cross-culture movies has become rather strong. Jee Aayan Nun, Asan Nun Maan Watna Da, Des Hoya Pardes, Dil Apna Punjabi, etc. have ushered in an era of sophisticated and clean movies that are popular both in India and abroad. Then socials like “Mehndi wale Hath” and ‘Main Maa Punjab Di” highlighted the burning social issues such introspective movies indicate sensitivity and new awareness among our filmmakers. “Waris Shah” has all the features of a classic, viz., authentic, ambience, great acting, beautiful photography and impeccable direction.

The National Awards have started coming the way of Punjabi films. The past half century and more, one has to really look for Punjabi films that may have figured in the National Awards but for a few like Satluj De Kande, Nanak Nam Jahaz Hai and Chann Pardesi. Apart from these, Til Til Da Lekha won Punjab State Govt.
award for Best Story Writer and Second Best feature film in the year 1979. In the recent past, Des Hoya Pardes has made a clean sweep by getting the Best Regional Film Award and the Special Jury Award for Gurdas Mann as actor.

Earlier, Shaheed-e-Mohabbat — a poignant tale of love set in the harrowing times of Partition — won accolades. It was selected for the panorama section of the IFFI and later went on to collect the prestigious National Award for the best film in the regional cinema category. Other National award winning films are: Madhi Da Diva, Kachheri, Main Ma Punjab Di and Shaheed Udham Singh. Gurdas Mann’s legendary production “Waris Shah-Ishq Da Waris” made a rare distinction by winning the national award not only for the best feature film in Punjabi but also in three other categories i.e. Best Play-back, Best Art Direction and Best Costume Designer. The future of Punjabi cinema is bright and improving with the achievements of the new breed of artistes. Punjabi Cinema has completed 75 years of its existence and it is an occasion, though belatedly, to celebrate the platinum jubilee in a befitting manner by all the Punjabis and the State Government.

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A scene from Shiela.

Pran in Yamla Jatt
Scenes from the Punjabi Film “MANGTI”

Raj Babbar in Marhi Da Diva