A Festival to Remember

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Manohar Khushalani writes about an event celebrating 50 years of Indian cinema in Nepal

EVENT

Manisha Koirala at the celebrations

If Kathmandu is the seat of power of the only Hindu kingdom on earth, it is also probably the only country where you don't need a passport, where your very own Indian credit cards are accepted, where a rupee has greater buying power and where Indian film stars are just as popular as in their own homeland — if not more.

Little wonder therefore that the Indian ambassador to Nepal, K.V. Rajan, hit upon the idea of celebrating fifty years of Indian independence with a film festival commemorating fifty years of Indian cinema. Four Indian stars were also felicitated. Among them, two stalwarts, Dev Anand and Waheeda Rehman, and two youngsters of the new generation of the two nations, Shah Rukh Khan and Manisha Koirala. If Raj Kapoor's 'Mera joota hai Japani...' made him a legend in the USSR, Dev Anand's 'Dum dum...' did the same for him in the mountain state.

Kathmandu, a sleepy capital with a small-town atmosphere, protected in the womb of the tallest mountain ranges of the world, suddenly became alive and vibrant. The ten days of festivities, flagged off by Jaaved Jaaferi's quaint sense of humor, proved that laughter defies all barriers and unites all ages, sexes and nationalities. "Why are we Asians obsessed with films just as we are with our own mothers? Is it because even cinema has a *maa* in it? Unfortunately Oedipus could not see cine*maa* during his lifetime." For detective movie fans Jaaved belted out an Ajit joke. "How was Peter supposed to respond to Michael's 'Off On Off' signal? With an 'On Off On' signal, silly!" Nobody was spared — other victims of his mimicry included Dilip Kumar, Rajendra Kumar and Amitabh Bachchan. Not to miss the formula film in which the villain is about to drink the hero's blood, Dracula style ("*Main tumhara khoon pi jaunga*"), but for the pendant which he discovers in his adversary's neck and realises they are brothers. And, if he would have us believe him, modern women's clothes remind him of barbed wires which protect the property without obstructing the view. Whew! Thank God for little mercies. There was also the brilliant audiovisual commissioned by the embassy which took us down memory lane and provided nostalgic relief. There were old songs that uplift one's spirits even today 'Ai mere pyare watan...' 'Ye kahani hai diye ki aur toofan ki...' 'Jhanak jhanak payal baje....' There were also excerpts from films that have immortalised Indian cinema: *Mother India, Guide, Chalti Ka Nam Gaadi, Anarkali, Mughal-E-Azam, Nagin, Baiju Bawra*. The list is endless.

Among the stars Dev Anand was called on stage first. He struck such an instant rapport with the audience that it kept him on stage for half an hour. The performance was so brilliant that Waheeda Rehman decided to lose her voice to an allergy and Manisha Koirala had to resort to her native tongue. Shah Rukh Khan of course could not hold a candle to Jaaved despite his Ka-Ka-Kathmandu in his now famous stammer. But it was all in good fun and if the stars did not partake of the cocktails for long, one could not blame them, they were after all being mobbed in *desi* style. If the milling crowds outside the Birendra International Convention Centre were any indication to go by, the festival was a grand success — so what if none of the government officials were present due to "other engagements"? The people were there in full strength to again prove that a people to people relationship is far stronger than ties between politicians.

Manohar Khushalani interviews the Indian ambassador to Nepal, K V Rajan

Mr Ambassador, it is known that this idea of a film festival in Kathmandu was your brainchild..

We found that people here had a lot of interest in Indian films. It seemed a pity not to recognise it as a boosting factor in Indo-Nepalese friendship.

So, this was our way of expressing our appreciation of the Indian film industry, for the friendship and goodwill they have helped build between India and Nepal.

What are the other ramifications of this festival besides goodwill?

Of course, once the idea matured, other suggestions began to flow in. When we decided that *Tamanna* would be one of the films to be premiered, Pooja Bhatt offered the film free of cost, provided there was a good charity, especially for the girl child.

When we started talking to government officials and NGOs interested in the problem of illegal trafficking of minors, particularly girls, from Nepal to India, it struck us that this could be an opportunity for the Indian film industry to support Nepalese projects aimed at preventing this flow of children.

How would you go about it?

By encouraging education, awareness and developmental activities in identified villages here. We also thought the Indian film industry could be motivated into taking up themes concerned with the Nepalese girl child.

What role do you see for the North India Films Association (NIFA) in Nepal?

What you need is some institutional contact between NIFA and the Nepalese film industry. The proximity is there, it is easy to come back and forth, easy to trade films, and so on.

What other role could the Indian film industry play?

Quite a lot. If films are made in collaboration with the Nepalese film industry, or shot in Nepal, it will create an awareness of the tremendous tourist potential in this country.

Are there still some irritants between the two countries? For example, the entire government machinery was absent from the function.

No. This happened only because the entire function had to be postponed by one day. Because of the crippling air traffic controllers' strike in India the stars arrived a day late. There was a lot of interest in this function.