

'Taare Zameen Par' crosses a rubicon in Pakistan

India and Pakistan crossed another milestone Friday with the Bollywood film 'Taare Zameen Par' being released in 19 halls across the country, the first after the government here gave in to the long standing demand of cinema owners to allow the screening of Indian movies.

Popular Indian actor Aamir Khan's directorial debut about a dyslexic child is the first Indian film after the Pakistani government allowed Indian movies to be screened. Earlier, permission was given only for specific films.

The screening of Indian movies in Pakistan stopped after the 1965 war but certain films were allowed by different governments - the classic 'Mughal-e-Azam' for instance. Now, all Indian movies can be screened in Pakistan after clearance by the government-controlled censor board.

With the two often hostile neighbours sharing bonds of culture and language, film lovers and industry insiders here say 'Taare Zameen Par' represents a 'golden era' of exchange of films and can be a major step towards long-lasting peace in the region.

'This is good for the industry but best for the people of the two countries,' actor-director Samina Pirzada told IANS.

According to her, the way people had been waiting for 'Taare Zameen Par' indicated that the film was going to be a huge hit in Pakistan.

Cinema owners said Indian films, which have always been hugely popular in Pakistan with a thriving trade in pirated DVDs and CDs, were like a life saving drug for their dying businesses.

In the absence of locally produced quality films, many had converting their cinemas to shopping plazas, parking lots and even CNG and petrol stations.

'I think now is the time that we should continue with the cinema business,' said Afsar Khan, manager of Xeros Productions.

There is a flip side too.

There were some who fear that the unconditional import of Indian films would expedite the demise of the Pakistani industry. Many film directors, actors, choreographers, technicians and other support staff said high-quality movies from India could render them useless.

'I welcome this move of showing Indian films in Pakistan but I believe that this should be reciprocal and our films should be shown in India,' said Pirzada, confident that the quality of Pakistani films would improve once Indian cinemas start screening them.

'Khuda Ke Liya', a Pakistani film by director Shoaib Mansoor, is being screened in India these days to a widely appreciative audience.

According to Shahzad Gul, owner of Evernew Studios, Lahore, even a random visit to a film studio would expose how the industry was fighting for survival.

'You will find them stranded, in search of a job and desperate,' he said.

Pakistani film studios, he said, had never been utilised to the full. Even during a boom, only 60-70 percent of the facilities were used. This had now dipped to a mere one to two percent.

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