

Money, money everywhere but Bollywood slipping

While the stars of the Hindi film industry are demanding and getting stratospherically high prices and entertainment conglomerates are registering over 200 percent growth, the quality of cinema seems to be getting ugly and Pagli.

The A-list stars are asking for anything between Rs.100 million (Rs.10 crore) to Rs.500 million for each film. Salman Khan has reportedly asked for Rs.500 million for "Amar Akbar Anthony" and Akshay Kumar demanded Rs.400 million for an Anees Bazmi movie, leaving Hrithik Roshan, who till recently was the highest paid actor, far behind.

One-film-old Imran Khan of "Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na" fame has a price tag of Rs.70 million and his contemporary Ranbir Kapoor who debuted with the not-so-successful "Saawariya" has been signed up by the who's who of Bollywood and quotes about Rs.60 million.

Even Darsheel Safary, who is the youngest star of Bollywood to get nominated for the best actor award, has been apparently offered Rs.7.5 million for a film.

Katrina Kaif, Mallika Sherawat, Shahid Kapoor, Emraan Hashmi, Shiney Ahuja as well as the likes of Ritesh Deshmukh and Aftab Shivdasani have all upped their going rates. No one is willing to talk anything below a couple of crores.

At the same time, the overall cost of film production is also at its peak with inflation pushing up expenditure on other essential inputs. Movie houses and corporate big daddies seem to be the only ones who can afford to make a film in today's scenario.

But one look at the hit-to-flop ratio and one finds that the success rate has not been too impressive.

According to news reports, the industry has suffered a loss of Rs.2.5-3 billion at the box office in the last six months. Clearly, the box-office is not robust which means audiences are not getting their money's worth. If filmmakers are still making money it is clearly because they are tapping into other avenues, which are now galore.

Little surprise then that this week Adlabs Films Ltd., announced a 217 percent growth in its consolidated revenue. It is not the only company doing well and has plenty of company at the top.

Though there is nothing wrong in everybody making money. But the influx of corporate funds into Bollywood had brought with it the promise of ushering in an era of new-age cinema.

Long mocked by serious international filmmakers for its formulaic scripts, dubbed voices and wooden acting, the influx of money had given the Hindi film industry a shot at credibility and bid for gravitas.

A Hindi film no longer needed to cater to the lowest common denominator in order to break even. A burgeoning multiplex-going population, lucrative overseas territories, increasing demand for content from new media like internet and mobiles, options like sale of satellite rights, music rights and so on, are all new revenue streams available to filmmakers. These should have freed them and given them the wings to go out and experiment.

Barring exceptional efforts like "Aamir" and "Mithya" which used to happen, albeit with much lower pitch, before dime-a-dozen corporate houses entered the Bollywood boulevard, the promise of revival of new wave cinema remains largely unmet this year.

Much hope was raiding on niche filmmaking companies like Pritish Nandy Communication for keeping the flag of off-beat cinema flying high. But going by the short-cuts taken in their latest release - "Ugly Aur Pagli" - it seems that they too have decided to invest in hype-generation rather than on content.

When there is easy money to be made then why would anyone spend time and effort by concentrating on content? To illustrate the point, "Ugly Aur Pagli" was made on a modest budget of Rs.50 million. According to news reports, Pritish Nandy Communications made a neat profit and sold it further to Percept Picture Company which is now on the verge of selling the satellite rights at an even higher price. All in all, the film has made money even before going on the marquees.

So while the country's media and entertainment industry is poised for a big leap with some of its segments expected to grow in double-digits annually, as revealed by PrinceWaterHouseCoopers (PWC), for cine-lovers it is still a long wait before quality takes precedent over quantity.

Priyanka Khanna (© IANS / India eNews)