

The 7-Star Artists

CONTINUING WITH OUR SERIES ON 100 YEARS OF INDIAN CINEMA

EVERY SUNDAY, WE PRESENT TO YOU THAT LOST AND EXTINCT TRIBE OF STREET-SMART VISUALIZERS, WHOSE WORK OF STREET ART COMPELLED YOU TO MOVE INTO A FANTASY GARAGE, WHICH WAS ALL YOURS FOR THREE-LONG HOURS. LOKMAT TIMES CRAWLED THROUGH THE BYLANES OF MUMBAI TO TRACE THE LIVES AND TIMES OF CINEMA POSTER PAINTERS, WHOSE PASSION WAS TO BREATHE LIFE INTO STORIES AND ACTORS.

MOVIES ARE ALSO MADE OF THESE...



Text: Hinesh Jethwani

Images courtesy : Indian Hippie

The pay for the strugglers and those whose work was average really was not worth it. One also had to multi-task on the day before the release by ensuring that the bill-board or canvas hoarding was properly fixed on the frame. Sweat-laden clothes, a headache from the stink from the paints and gnarled hands at the end of the day was routine. Yet, they produced that unforgettable visual razzmatazz, which turned Bombay of yore into the Mecca for making Hindi films.

It was not that the poster artists could demand a remuneration of their choice for their works. The payment in the earlier days naturally was in annas, the currency in vogue then. In 1970, new-comers would be paid Rs 2.50 per day, as artist Lucas Mondal (who is 60 years old now) recalls today. Stalwarts who had their own Art & Design Studio would command their own price from the big producers, who would pay up without a murmur.

They had chosen this for passion and some steady income. Hindi filmdom, though, has its vintage tales about the works of a chosen few, who would simply state a figure, which would be meekly accepted by the producer. One such instance is about Diwakar Karkare, who ran the famous Studio Diwakar in Central Bombay, and was known to charge Rs 50,000 for a single assignment in his heydays of the seventies. When handed the assignment for Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram in the late seventies, Diwakar is reputed to have told the legendary Raj Kapoor to leave the theme to him and not bother about it at all! Raj Kapoor didn't blink an eyelid and just nodded his acceptance!

In the early 90s, the creative derivative was now an irritant for the film producer. The exact was the ticket to success and the box-office crown. It was RIP for the Sharmas, Karkares, Galas and Husains. Slam.

FROM WALLS TO HOMES: Vintage Bollywood movie posters today serve as a subject of much curiosity for art lovers, historians, vintage & antique collectors, movie poster aficionados, interior decorators and premise owners. A fascinating journey over the years - from gracing walls outside cinema houses, barber shops, railway stations to spot-lit places in chic modern homes today.

The nineties were born with the gift of flawless digital printing. While newsprint survived its utility, canvas was totally out, and flex was in and how. Those who ironically had read the writing on the wall had returned back to their villages. Those still in love with Bombay, now Mumbai, stayed back, with some working as security guards or as a driver for a different life...

There were no shouts for "cut, end sequence and pack up!" Just that slow fadeout, which began two decades back. The retinal revolution has completed a full circle, thanks to computerization and digital printing. The human element was a must-discard from the publicity department at least.

In 1970, artists were paid ₹ 2.50 per day!

Lucas Mondal was only 14 years old when he ran away from his relative's house in Kanpur and landed in Bombay in 1970. But the city of dreams wasn't particularly kind to the teenager and he struggled before landing a billboard painting job.

"I was fond of drawing even as a child. So when I attended a workshop on hand painting boards, my billboard painting career took off," he said.

Initially limited to only letterings, Mondal's expertise soon became polished to include figures and invariably - Hindi film posters.

"I was painting all kinds of things: banners, posters, billboards, hoardings. In the beginning, I earned only Rs 2.50 per day and a plate of rice back then cost Rs 1.50," Mondal laughs.

From there, he went on to earn almost Rs 40,000 per month when advertising became the buzzword in the '80s and hoardings promoting all kinds of products started dotting the horizon. The '90s arrived, Bombay became Mumbai and in came the era of digital printing. "And with that, our source of livelihood collapsed," Mondal reminisces.

Almost two decades later, a 31-year-old computer engineer with practically no experience or proficiency in art, retail or product design started a collective that combines all three in an effort to save the dying art form of hand painted posters.

Hinesh Jethwani launched Indian Hippie in 2009, a profitable business along with the few remaining hand-painting poster artists. Challenges abound, first of finding the artists out of their hideouts, then of convincing them of his new venture.

Mondal today heads a dozen-strong team of artists. "We had all started doing odd jobs. But now we are back to doing what we love most," says Mondal. "Painting is our passion and we are paid fairly for our efforts here."

LOW COST, HIGH IMPACT



1 Invariably it is the labourer who is paid the most in an unorganized sector. It is a similar story about the now extinct community of poster artists. In 170, the pay would be as meager as Rs 2.50 per day, for a new-comer, who would have no recourse for bargaining.

2 However, as the artist's reputation spread, he could negotiate the terms. The payment then would figure around a certain sum for painting one square foot of the canvas.

3 Poster work, for a good artist, would be regular and with re-releases and box-office records or awards, the posters would have to be re-done. Other sources of income, were cutouts during premiers of big banners and also during political campaigns.

4 But the cream of the artists, like Diwakar Karkare was known to command a price of Rs 50,000 per poster during the seventies - quite a big amount then.

THE SUCCESS POSTERS

Local distributors and theatre-owners would collude and design their own re-release movie posters to to announce the awards won or the number of weeks it has been running. Characters who assumed popularity, after the release and a good run, would now feature on such posters. This was a clever move to fill in the cinema theatres once again and their own coffers as well!



ICONIC STROKES

The vivid use of colours on the hand-painted posters captured the shades of characters and reflected the intensity and drama behind the scenes they represented. Many artists used specific colours to portray negative or positive shades of characters (green for evil and red signifying anger or revenge). In the sixties and seventies, huge hand-painted billboards and cutouts outside theater were an unforgettable visual treat. The definition of movie poster art was now beyond mere publicity - it was now a cultural icon.

Families of at least 50 persons would earn their livelihood from one hand-painted movie poster. It was not just the effort by artists like us. At the end of the day, painters, their assistants, artists, calligraphers, carpenters, their assistants, unskilled heavy work labourers were part of the team. For 40 long years, the film industry was their bread. Better printing and photography techniques in the eighties and the entry of digital printing sounded the death-knell for this wonderful tribe of Bombay, now Mumbai.

— Haidar Gala, son of late Rahatali Gala, both artists-painters of movie posters

They were the magnets which pulled you into a world far away from the real world - but for the creators of these magnets, aka hand-painted film posters, it was the happy ending to hours of stoic endurance of the stink of death! In India, in the early thirties, movie poster artists had to rely on a variety of natural products to produce paints of their liking and suitable for their art. They would use crushed cattle bone-powder as the base for their paints, along with locally available natural colours, all mixed with linseed oil. Their work of art, therefore, was a painful and routine journey, one which not only released the creativity in them, but was also a constant reminder of the odour of death. Thus were born these canvases of hope, dreams and fantasies.

This must be quite a dull moment, for young readers (and specially those who are hooked to their like-minded brethren digitally). Folks, this is nostalgia, deeply tinted in sepia. And, yes, this too was much before the times of your parents as well!

Flashback to 1924 and the city of Bombay - it is twelve years since the first Indian movie, *Raja Harishchandra*, stunned, enthralled, wowed India. Followed by *Alam Ara*. Skipping the chronological order, we move to 1924, when another film, not quite well-known, called *Kalyan Khajina* hit the screens modestly, but with a new twist. The film's advent was a first for the film production business. The method of communication was new and novel - hand-painted posters used as publicity for a movie.

Every week now saw this busy tribe of artists perched on ladders in crowded markets creating either a poster or a canvas board to advertise yet another new film. In fact, this led to a new gawk culture, with tea stalls ringing up better and better sales as film-crazy audiences took to such spot-pilgrimages and planned their week accordingly.

Did the art evolve or did the method of communication prove successful? Whatever it may have been, but producers went crazy as did the audiences. The friendly and frenzied jostle outside cinema theatres to stare at the posters was just the stuff which translated into steady moolah to boot for the producer/distributor.

Kitschy? Bohemian? It mattered the least as broad visible brush strokes with a striking array of colors and typography brought alive the key premise of the film or the aura of that actor or actress. A new economy was born. Artists, painters, assistants, paint-makers, calligraphers, brush-suppliers, poster-stickers, carpenters, unskilled labourers who would be brave enough to raise canvas hoardings on frames on the top of the theatres... Yes, Bombay once again proved that no matter what, one never went hungry on its streets. Something or the other new would crop up to ensure that you could have at least one meal during the day.

Who then were artists? Pandit Ramkumar Sharma, Rahatali Gala, Diwakar Karkare... these are the few names which our brief trawl has thrown up. Oh yes, mark down one Maqbool Fida Husain as well. These

frankly are those notables which today's fickle memory-banks among the silver-haired film producers have thrown up during recent conversations.

Now, quite logically, the poster themes themselves faithfully followed the social order of that decade. The film producer had



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to predictably follow the pulse of the society. First came religious and moralising films. The poster artists faithfully followed these themes. Women were not in the limelight and therefore posters for quite some years were male-dominated. Socially-relevant movies were slowly followed by hesitantly-romantic ones.



The seeds of the death of this tribe were sown sometime in the early seventies. Photography methods and printing techniques were now become cheaper and commercially available.

The romantic theme then blossomed fully and couples began featuring in the posters. Came the era of drama, action and comedy films, and it was creative revolution at its best.

But trouble was lurking around. The film producer, the master puppeteer of this game, was aping the west and counting his rupees too.

The method for mass production of film posters was simple enough. The artist would be briefed by the producer, given a copy of the storyline with a deadline for producing the

enough technique and, quite a short-cut with that move. Another innovation, which happened because of this, was the birth of the bright photo-window displays. Many a samosa was lost and drinks spilled as audiences would pour into the theatres after being let in and head straight for this displays and point out excitedly as they saw their favourites in one scene and more.

(Raghavendra K N with inputs by Hinesh Jethwani and Shreesha Wagle)