What ails the Kannada Cinema?

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Abstract:

Kannada cinema won national and international acclaim for producing classic films in 70s and set the new wave trend in the history of Indian cinema. Kannada films competed with exemplary films made in Bengali and Malayalam and carved a niche in the movie industry. Unfortunately, that trend did not last long and Kannada cinema slipped back to its commercial formula ridden films sounding death knell to the industry. Finding financiers for Kannada films especially with their low rate of returns is an insurmountable task. The distributor-exhibitor coterie is swindling the producers and is holding the film industry to ransom. Ironically, the contribution of distributors and exhibitors to the growth of Kannada cinema is nothing yet they are the sole beneficiaries amidst the ailment.

Introduction:

The Kannada film industry, one of the most prolific film making industries is ailing. Karnataka, once a leading southern movie making state is today in bad shape and slipping back further. It is unfortunate that after reaching new heights in cinematography and producing a wide array of good films, the industry is now making a desperate bid to survive.
Kannada cinema was born five decades ago and has witnessed many a happy occasion. During the period when the film goers’ attention was pre-occupied with the Bengali films, it was Kannada cinema which successfully stole the show by bagging many national and international awards.

Veterans like the late Gubbi Veeranna, Nagendra Rao, B.R. Panthulu and Subbayya Naidu made the Kannada film industry both rich and popular. During its five decades of existence, Kannada films made remarkable progress and cornered a prestigious place in the annals of cinema history.

It was the art films which put the Kannada cinema on the national map. The winds of change gradually wafted down to the Kannada film industry and the result was astonishing. A host of film producers-Girish Karnad, B.V. Karnath, Puttanna Kanagal, Lankesh and Girish Kasaravalli treated audiences to films brimming with finesse. The new wave began with the film Samskara. This bold and brilliant film won the President’s Gold medal. Chomana Dudi, another milestone in the history of Kannada cinema won the ‘Swarna Kamal’. Leading actor Shankar Nag won the best actor award at the international film festival held at Delhi for his brilliant performance in Ondanaondu Kaladalli. But this glory has been transitory. No trace of its rich past is visible in the current movies.

Today, Kannada film audiences are reluctant to see Kannada movies. This is not because something is wrong with the audience but because current films fall far short of the high standards set by the earlier art films. Those films drew capacity crowds all through the state. After Ghatashraddha
which won the *Swarna Kamala* there is hardly any *Kannada* film worth the name which could be considered for a national award.

*Kannada* films are rarely screened outside the state. In Karnataka itself there are about 1021 cinema halls (Including 450 mobile theatres) of which 110 are in Bangalore alone. Due to the heavy concentration of theatres in urban centres, the films do not reach the remote corners of the state. Exhibitors have a hard time trying to screen *Kannada* films in and around North Karnataka and in places bordering Maharashtra.

The lack of theatres willing to screen *Kannada* films is the crux of the film industry’s problem. Exorbitant theatre rentals have discouraged the producers since their films are no match commercially for Tamil, Hindi and Malayalam films. *Kannada* films have suffered a setback with the spurt in the screening of other language films in the state. Many Kannada films awaiting release are gathering dust for want of theatres. As a remedy the State Government is thinking in terms of nationalising the cinema theatres.

Even after five decades of existence, the *Kannada* film industry is in its infancy as far as studio facilities are concerned. The industry relies a lot on Madras for studio, recording and dubbing purposes. The lack of full-fledged studio facilities discourages producers. There were five studios once Abhiman, Chamundeswari, Kanteerava, Premier and Sujatha Studios. Of these, premier studio, owing to financial loss was recently closed down and Sujatha studio exists in name only. The state Government took over the Kanteerava Studio though less said about the facilities the better. The other two studios are also ill-equipped. It is shocking to know that there is no
recording facility in the state. However, there is a colour processing laboratory in Bangalore. As an incentive to encourage local facilities to grow the Karnataka Government is offering 50% tax exemption for the films shot entirely in the state. This move has paid dividends.

To promote the cause of Kannada cinema, the Karnataka Film Development Corporation, KFDC, was launched in 1969 by the State Government. This government agency has the dubious distinction of financing only the third rate flops! Well-known cine artist B. Saroja Devi is the Chairman of KFDC.

Finding financiers for Kannada films especially with their low rate of returns is an insurmountable task. The distributor-exhibitor coterie is swindling the producers and is holding the film industry to ransom. Ironically, the contribution of distributors and exhibitors to the growth of Kannada cinema is nothing yet they are the sole beneficiaries amidst the ailment.

The recent formation of the Kannada Film Producers Association amply indicates the producers’ concern for the sick industry. The artistes too have come together to promote the cause of the Kannada cinema by mobilising public opinion. The controversial Gokak Committee report has proved to be a blessing in disguise for the Kannada artistes. Though the report has nothing to do with the films, it was the film artistes led by matinee idol Dr.Raj Kumar who conducted the state wide jatha and won the battle.

Making quality films is the only lasting solution to the problems of the Kannada film industry. The KFDC should build mini theatres facilitating the screening of small budget, entertaining Kannada films. Attempts should be
made to release the film industry from the clutches of self styled movie
moguls— the distributors— by regulating the distribution and exhibition policy
of Kannada films. A comprehensive exhibition policy will have a telling
effect. Producers instead of making old, formula-ridden, rotten films might
think of making clean, wholesome entertainment films and save the
industry from a premature death. One ray of hope is that there is plenty of
talent in the Kannada cinema. But the industry is desperately trying to keep
economically sound and a comprehensive film development policy is
necessary to keep the industry going.