

Asian Corner | Gautaman Bhaskaran

PIRATES ON THE HIGH STREET

Years ago when I was at college, I associated piracy with what happened on the high seas. My image of pirates emerged primarily from what I had read in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island", and so I pictured evil looking men, sometimes with a black cloth patch to cover a bad eye.

It was much later that it occurred to me that pirates could be the friendliest of men, clean-shaven, smooth talking, well dressed and running the shop on the corner of your high street, selling knick-knacks and hundreds of video cassettes. The perfect looking disks that play popular and current films hide beneath their jackets a grim truth – piracy. The cassettes are all pirated or unlawfully copied from a legal tape or sometimes, as happens in India, from a theatre even as the movie is going on. Disks made in this way are called camera prints and are invariably of terrible quality.

But who cares about quality in India, which now has the unenviable reputation of being one of the world's leading centres of video piracy. Here is a fact to ponder over: according to Ernst and Young's 2008 report on the effects of counterfeiting and piracy on India's entertainment industry, "the Indian film industry lost \$959m and 571,896 jobs because of piracy."

Piracy in Indian cinema is now a whopping \$250m market. It is an industry employing thousands of people. A recent Bollywood movie, "Kaminey (The Scoundrels)," was downloaded more than 350,000 times on Bit Torrent with around two-thirds of the downloaders living in India alone! Hundreds of disks would then have been burnt and sold at next to throwaway prices.

Cinema is still, undoubtedly, the cheapest form of entertainment in India, but illegal VCDs or DVDs are cheaper by far, and obtained at a fraction of what a movie ticket costs nowadays. And a whole family or



A scene from "Gandhi to Hitler"

several friends can watch the film at that price! Surprisingly for such a huge business, piracy in India is generated from tiny makeshift structures using little more than a desktop computer. And the pirate's reach is quick and wide.

Some years ago, when I was researching modern cinema in Japan, I found to my shock that a pirated disk of a Hindi (commonly referred to as Bollywood) or other Indian language picture was sometimes available a day before the film actually opened in Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai or Kolkata (once Calcutta). In North Africa, particularly in Morocco, I have seen the latest Bollywood hits in the souks for as little as \$3.

And I've noticed this in Hong Kong, too, where piracy is also a fine art. The quality of the movies is superb. How do they do that? I really wonder.

In contrast, an established store in India would sell the same film, legally

produced, at 10 or 15 times the price of a pirated one. It is strange that Indian business houses seldom think of cutting prices and increasing volumes. Most buyers may not mind paying two or three times the price of a pirated disk to get a legitimate one.

Just the other day, three Bollywood films, "Khap" (on honour killing), "Bubble Gum" and "Gandhi to Hitler", were released in Mumbai, Delhi and other northern Indian centres. But they failed to get a theatrical opening in southern India, perhaps much to the joy of pirates. The markets, as expected, are flooded with unauthorised DVDs of these movies. These films may be available in the north, but ticket prices in cities such as Mumbai and Delhi have become so astronomical that many families now prefer spending a dollar and watching a film in the comfort of their living room.

Probably the best way to tackle piracy is to reduce the window period between theatrical and video



A scene from "Bubble Gum"

release. Big producers could include video rights in their agreements with distributors, or make disks of their own movies at prices that will stop consumers from peeping into a pirate's shop.