

Those good old poster boys

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A film unearths the master artists who gave us some memorable film hoardings, posters and cut-outs

For how long have we moaned and lamented about the disappearance of those mega-sized hoardings bearing larger-than-life figures of our favourite actors in all possible hues with the arrival of vinyl and flex prints. Once upon a time, these bright and loud banners, announcing the arrival of a new film, were entrusted with the responsibility of bringing the viewers into theatre halls. And the banners did the job without any help from social media, multi-city tours of the cast and crew and promotions on television and radio stations. But whose were those skilled hands and creative imagination, finds Manohar Singh Bisht of Films Division of India in Mumbai, in "In search of Fading Canvas", a one-and-a-half-hour film directed by him for Films Division of India where he works as the main engineer. At the ongoing Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the first rough cut of the documentary was shown as part of the Artists' Cinema in the section curated by film-critic CS Venkiteswaran.

"I begin the film with Chor Bazaar in Mumbai to harp on the irony of these hand-painted posters being collected and bought for so much money whereas the artists who actually made them languish in obscurity. I believe Shah Rukh Khan bought some film posters from an auction for some 25 lakh recently," says Bisht, who plans to wrap up the film by January and release it on the platform of Kochi-Muziris Biennale. It took the filmmaker two years to cover Delhi, Guwahati, Kolkata, Pune, Mumbai, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Chennai unearthing masters like D. Ambaji, Balkrishna, Satish, Ramachandran, K.Chinappa, Diwakar Karkare, Parvez, S.Rehman, Chityal Vinoba Ambaji of Hyderabad, G. Kamble. The film is produced by V. S Kundu and shot by Nagaraj Revenkar.

Now most of them without work, Bisht portrays the masters in their homes indulging them in recollections about their work, technique and the days of glory. If the film evokes pathos through poignant shots of these artists — like a long shot of 90-year-old Satish (he has done the banner of *Aan*, *Parwana* and *Madhumati*) sitting in a very modest space in Mumbai talking of loneliness — it also elicits laughter from the delightful footage of S. Rehman, one of the last practicing poster artists in Mumbai. Bisht shot Rehman in his studio at Alfred Theatre on Grant Road through the year painting the banners of films re-realising at the cinema. "He is one of the few who still has work because the owner of Alfred theatre is himself an artist and values what Rehman does but can't pay him much and Rehman is ok with it," reveals the filmmaker. The senior artist is shot painting and giving instructions to his assistants to fill in the colour. He jocularly explains the reasons behind painting the faces of actors especially the heroines, in garish unrealistic colours and how female actors would have more space in the banner as opposed to their male counterparts in earlier days. Once an assistant to M.F. Husain, S. Rehman rose to carve out a name for himself in the field. "But what passion these artists had! They have shared with me stories like death could wait but their work couldn't. Someone's parents died on a Thursday and he was working on a banner so he didn't go home before finishing the banner of the film releasing the next day," recalls Bisht, who studied editing at Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune.

In Lucknow, he shows Parvez, who once ruled the banner industry of the city, now painting the number plates of bikes. In the city of nawabs there is also one Madan who was consumed by his passion for painting the stars to the extent of having conversations with them while painting. "What is the alternative for such passionate people? He says I left everything for this, now how do I leave it and do something else.

These artists were not part of the film industry either. They formed a union which also disintegrated because of internal fighting."

It was Diwakar Karkare who visually realized the angry-young persona of Amitabh Bachchan, a persona given to the actor by Salim-Javed duo. Karkare would paint over the canvas with a knife which is what gave the superstar his famous rugged look starting from *Zanjeer*. "He says in the film that after doing the poster of *Bandini*, he called Bimal Roy to inform him the poster had been done and he will go and deliver it to which Roy said you are an artist in your own right. It is not your job to call up and tell us that the poster has been done. I will come and collect it." Karkare has done posters for some major Yashraj Films, R.K.Films, etc.

Moving down South, he shows Chinappa running Rajkamal Arts in Rajajinagar, Bangalore. In the business of painting cut-outs, hoardings and banners for films for the last 69 years, Chinappa talks of his journey from *Bedara Kannappa*, Rajkumar's first film, *Apoorva Raagangal*, Rajinikanth's first film and several cut-outs of Rajesh Khanna, Hema Malini and Rajesh Khanna. "There were a few like Sundaram, who made banners for several MGR's films, Balakrishna Laxman Vaidya, Ramachandran who anticipated the disappearance of hand-painted posters and became professional artists. They have exhibitions across the country and even abroad. Then the film also has people like Hinesh in Mumbai who are giving opportunities to banner artists to diversify and sell their work."

Keywords: [Film posters](#), [film hoardings](#), [In search of Fading Canvas](#)