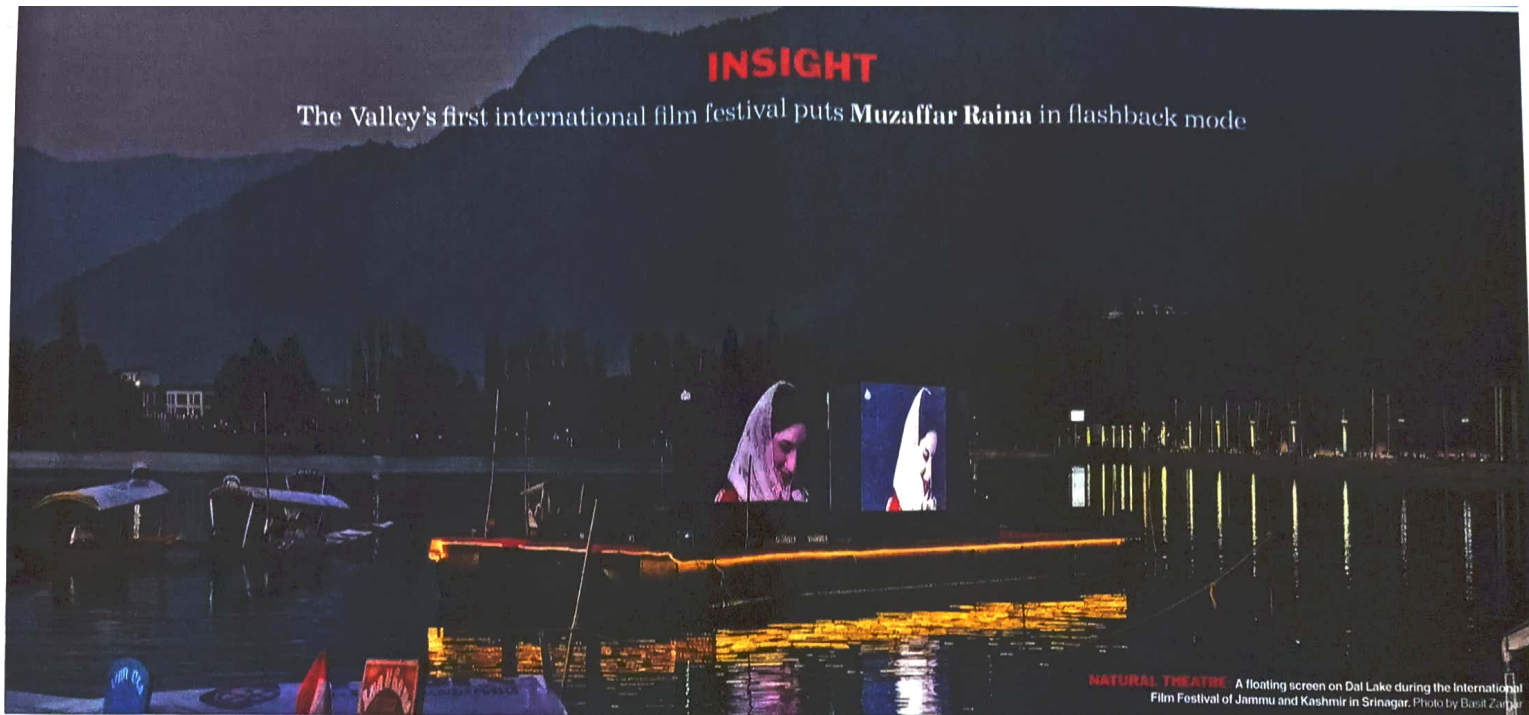


INSIGHT

The Valley's first international film festival puts Muzaffar Raina in flashback mode



NATURAL THEATRE A floating screen on Dal Lake during the International Film Festival of Jammu and Kashmir in Srinagar. Photo by Basit Zargar

THE KASHMIR FILTER

Mushtaque Ali Khan, a local filmmaker, wondered what made it the first international film festival. After all, he had personally organised five such festivals in Srinagar since 2017. That said, the four-day Rang-e-Cinema organised by the government of Jammu and Kashmir earlier this month in Srinagar was an ambitious project. One hundred and thirty films from 30 countries were screened at the Sher-e-Kashmir International Convention Centre on the banks of Dal Lake.

Local filmmakers and artists complained they had been kept out of the loop, but leading Bollywood filmmakers and industry voices from Imtiaz Ali to Ramesh Sippy, Vidhu Vinod Chopra to Sunidhi Chauhan to Pankaj Tripathi were in attendance.

Chief minister Omar Abdullah said it marked "a new chapter in J&K's rich and enduring relationship with cinema". Music composer A.R. Rahman, who was not a participant but came to Srinagar soon after to shoot an advertisement, said Kashmir has the potential to become one of India's major cinema destinations.

... The sight of a film festival beside the Dal Lake brings back memories of a time when cinema was not something Kashmir was trying to attract. It was part of everyday life.

My relationship with cinema began, like many of my generation, not inside a cinema hall but in front of a television. When I was in Class VI, I kept pestering my father to take me to a cinema hall. After much hesitation, he relented. We went to Regal Cinema first and then to Palladium, both in the heart of Srinagar. Both were packed.

We stood in queue for some time before being told that the tickets were sold

out. We came away disappointed. That was the early 1980s. Some years later, an older cousin took me to Firdous Cinema.

High school came with its own perks. One such was the shift to S.P. Higher Secondary School in the city centre. It was close to the Women's College and the Girls Higher Secondary School at Kothibagh, but most importantly, the school was in the same neighbourhood as a clutch of cinema halls.

We needed very little encouragement to bunk classes.

Those years were also when Kashmir was beginning to change in ways none of us could understand. The separatist sentiment was gathering force. Protests were becoming frequent. There were bomb blasts. But typical of teenagers perhaps, the lot of us remained wrapped up in our own small world of friends, school, gossip and films.

In 1988, *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* came to Broadway. The excitement among young people was enormous. My cousins and I persuaded the elders that the whole family should go together

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to watch it. It would have been the first time we did something like that. But the rush was too much. We returned without tickets.

A few days later, I finally got to watch the film with my schoolmates. I did not know it then, but the same year Kashmir was beginning to move towards something far more disturbing. Several bomb blasts rocked an already fragile normal.



OFFSCREEN: Palladium cinema, a part of which operates as a security bunker; a mall is coming up where Regal used to be. Photos by Muzaffar Raina

Many could not believe that Kashmiris were behind them. Some thought it to be the work of Khalistani militants. Others spoke of conspiracy theories.

Militancy still seemed like something that belonged somewhere else. But the mood was changing. And cinema, strangely enough, was one of the places where you could sense it.

... Some years earlier, Regal had screened Anthony Quinn's *Omar Mukhtar: Lion of the Desert*. It was about the Libyan resistance leader who fought the Italians. The film had a powerful resonance with young Kashmiris. I too went to see it.

I remember protesters burning pictures of Sheikh Abdullah and comparing what they regarded as his betrayal of Kashmir with the uncompromising resistance of Omar Mukhtar.

Looking back, the juxtaposition seems extraordinary. Inside the cinema, young Kashmiris were watching a story of resistance against foreign rule. Outside, political anger in Kashmir was becoming increasingly visible.

And yet, at the same time, life seemed



remarkably normal.

Tourists continued to arrive. Dal Lake remained crowded. Film crews came from Bombay and other parts of India to shoot against the Valley's mountains, lakes and meadows. Kashmir was still one of India's favourite film locations.

Some of the films that used Kashmir as a backdrop have now become part of popular memory — *Jungle, Arzo, Kashmir Ki Kali* and *Kabhi Kabhie*. For years after, there was a literal drought before a modest comeback much later in films such as *Mission Kashmir, Halder, Highway* and *Raazi*.

For us, watching a film shoot was almost as exciting as watching a film.

One time we bunked school and went to the banks of Dal Lake upon hearing that Dharmendra was shooting there.

The lawns were packed with people. In one corner, an organiser was calling out the names of those who had some role in the film. "Aljaz," he called out. For a good while nobody responded.

Now, one of our friends was also called Aljaz. In my excitement, I pointed towards him. He raised his hand. For a

few seconds, he believed he had got himself a role in a film. And then the real Aljaz appeared.

We insisted that our Aljaz was the man the film people were looking for. The argument turned into a fight. We were beaten up. Our Aljaz, in particular, took several blows. Somehow, we still managed to sneak into the shooting area afterwards.

Aljaz is now a doctor and we occasionally run into each other on the banks of the Jhelum during the cross-country runs organised by The Mallinson School, where our daughters study. Nearly four decades later, I find myself looking at the same Dal Lake and wondering how much has changed. Not that there were no attempts before to revive the elusive relation with films, some even soaked with blood.

... I remember Farooq Abdullah trying to woo filmmakers back to Kashmir in the late 1990s. Militancy was still raging and it was said that his efforts were merely attempts to project normalcy.

In 1999, he announced with fanfare the re-opening of three cinemas — Broadway, Regal and Neelam, all in Srinagar. He offered the owners incentives to do so.

That year on September 24, many people entered Regal to watch *Pyar Ki Khel Nahin*. Hours later, barely 100 metres from Regal, an explosion ripped the air. Somebody had lobbed a grenade as moviegoers streamed out, huge security presence notwithstanding.

That day, one person died and a dozen were injured. Regal did not open its doors again. Years later, the owners razed the cinema to the ground, and now, a big shopping complex is coming up on the spot.

Broadway, located in the cantonment area of the army's 15 Corps headquarters, functioned for some time before it too closed down for lack of viewers.

Palladium still stands in ruins and part of it continues to house the armed forces. Khayam Cinema, two kilometres away, is now a big medical facility.

For years, Neelam remained the only operational cinema but was never profitable. The owners had leased it to a Jalandhar-based firm.

Dozens of viewers had a narrow escape on September 7, 2005, when militants attacked it. Two militants and a policeman lost their lives but the cinema, close to the heavily fortified civil secretariat complex, continued to operate.

In 2011, I dropped by to see how it was

One time we bunked school and went to the banks of Dal Lake upon hearing that Dharmendra was shooting there

operating following the 2010 summer unrest, only to find it shut. "The hall had never seen a full house and, on most occasions, only a handful of people turned up. There was hardly any money to pay even the salaries of employees," a former employee told me.

No mainstream cinemas have operated here for over a decade until Vijay Dhar's family — they are Pandits and owned Broadway cinema — made a fresh bid in 2022.

They opened the Valley's first and only multiplex theatre — INOX — in Srinagar's high-security Shivpora neighbourhood. The 520-seater multiplex, with three movie theatres, was the venue for the screening of the films shortlisted at the IFFJK.

But truth be told, for me and a lot of other Kashmiris, it has been one long cinema drought.