

Revisiting vintage films

India's film restoration labs are a runaway hit at home and abroad. The market is poised to touch Rs 900 crore in three years

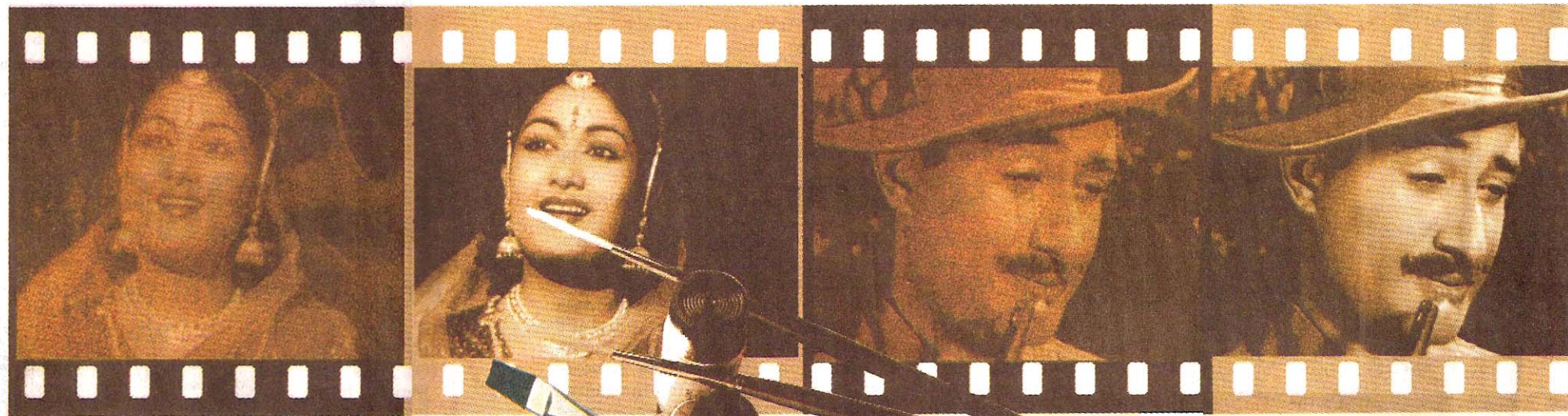
THEY can be real spoilsports. That big scratch appearing out of the blue across Sharmila Tagore's innocent face in *Apur Sansar* (1959); the white blotches that pepper Rhett Butler as he kisses Scarlett O'Hara against the backdrop of the fiery conflagration (*Gone With The Wind*, 1939); or the red blur obscuring the plight of the rich protagonist (Chandra Mohan) who dies of thirst in the desert, his car full of gold ingots (*Roti*, 1942).

Classic movies are veritable treasures. But they are also immensely vulnerable—they catch dust easily, get scratched with slight mishandling and fade and warp over time. Indeed, many Indian movies produced in the 1930s and 1940s have been lost due to poor storage conditions and neglect.

But fret not, movie buffs. This story too has a happy ending or beginning, should we say.

With many film museums and filmmakers keen to see their movies get a fresh lease of life, film restoration is fast becoming a much sought-after trade. Simply put, film restoration is the process of repairing damaged films, whether in celluloid film or videotape, either by physical or by the digital restoration process, finally presenting a sequence of images as close to original as possible. Of course, it often costs as much to restore a classic film as to make it in the first place or more. But that isn't going to dampen the spirit of those rooting for a makeover.

Says Hiren Gada, director, Shemaroo Entertainment, Mumbai, "Though it's at a nascent stage, movie restoration has a bright future as filmmakers are waking up to the potential of restoring age old classics." Take this for proof. When K Asif's 1960 hit *Mughal-e-Azam* was digitally restored, pigmented and released to audiences in November 2004, theatres in Mumbai reported over 90 per cent ticket sales in the first week and 80 per cent in the second. Its box-office collections in Mumbai and Delhi



topped Rs 1 crore in the first two weeks. According to estimates, the movie grossed Rs 79-lakh-plus in Mumbai and Rs 31 lakh in Delhi.

"It's about rescuing a decaying print by removing dirt, dust particles and frame perforations," says C Jagan Mohan, business unit head, media services, Goldstone Technologies Ltd, a Hyderabad-based company that recently restored Dev Anand's ever-green *Guide*. The restored version was screened at the Cannes Film Festival this year under the Cannes Classics category.

According to Mohan, the advent of high-definition television (HDTV) and the spread of direct-to-home TVs, Internet protocol television (IPTV), digital cinema and HD DVD

Cost and time

- It takes anywhere between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 1 crore, depending on the length of the film and the extent of damage, for audio and video restoration. If you add colourisation, the cost can go up to Rs 5 crore; a period or mythological film would cost more than a social drama.
- It also depends on the medium for which it has to be restored.
- The standard definition (television format) is the lowest, cost-wise. Then comes the hi-definition. Next is 2k resolution, which is the highest in terms of cost.
- It takes three months to two-and-a-half years to restore a film. Again, much depends on the film's length and the extent of damage.

calls for prints in the cleanest form and with minimum imperfections. Until now the only way to get rid of imperfections, say experts, was to have someone sit with a mouse and painstakingly take the dirt out. Now, much of the process is automated, ensuring enormous savings in time and costs. "The restoration market in India is expected to touch Rs 900 crore in the next three years. We hope to capture about 50 per cent of this market," says Mohan. About 70 per cent of the business remains untapped.

On its part, Shemaroo has restored only Hindi films, such as Amitabh Bachchan's *Mahaan*, *Kasme Vaade* and *Pukar* so far. *Mahaan*, for instance, had not been telecast for 15 years because of bad film quality. Sony telecast it after Shemaroo restored it. "It took us three months and it cost Rs 45 lakh to restore it," adds Gada.

Shemaroo will start work on foreign films shortly, says Gada, adding, "Some experimentation and sample restoration work is going on now."

Goldstone Technologies—which is listed on the BSE & NSE and posted revenues of Rs 97 crore in 2006-07—has done a couple of south Indian classics besides Hindi classics. Says Mohan, "Restoration and colourisation of Dr Raj Kumar's Kannada classic *Satyaharish*

Chandra, restoration and colourisation of Dev Anand's all time hit *Hum Dono* and the restoration and colourisation of NT Rama Rao and A Nageshwar Rao's Telugu classic *Sri Krishnarajuna Yuddam* are among our ongoing projects."

Many Hollywood films have also been restored in India. Prasad EFX, a Chennai-based company, has restored international feature films such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *The Harder They Come* (1972), *That's The Way Of The World* (1975) and *Le Fantome Qui Ne Revient Jamais* (French, 1930). Prasad EFX, part of the 50-year-old Prasad Group, has the largest integrated post-production facility in Asia.

It takes anywhere between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 1 crore, depending on the length of the film and the extent of damage, to restore the audio and video of a movie. Says Gada, "Restoring a movie in the US, for example, would take five times as much. Given the cost advantage, India may emerge as the destination for low-cost restoration work."

The makeover job, a classic tale India's film restoration labs are a runaway hit at home and abroad. The market is poised to touch Rs 900 crore in three years

The basic process of digital film restoration in six simple steps:

- **Pre-production:** It involves two steps scanning and scope conversion. Scanning can be done either from the original negative or from a print, whichever is in good condition. Scope conversion includes converting a print from 35 mm to cinema scope.
- **Frame restoration:** Restoration is done through frame by frame quality checks. It comprises repairing or rectifying physical damages, ripped or removed perforations, open or faulty splices, tearing and ruptures. This process depends on the age of the film, the storage conditions, including temperature, relative humidity and the damage in terms of physical dimensions.
- **Colourisation:** It is done frame by frame. Colour correction is done on colour frames that have faded over time due to reasons like storage and climatic conditions, deterioration of chemicals etc.
- **Audio restoration:** It converts a mono track (single speaker) to Dolby digital (seven separate channels/speakers).
- **Special effects if required:** This relates to the film backdrop, such as war, fire and smoke. For instance, in *Hum Dono*, a number of special effects were added to a war scene, such as bomb blast, smoke and flame.
- **Recording:** This involves conversion of the digital format to a negative and from the negative to the final product on print.

Source: Goldstone Technologies

■ Arunima Mishra