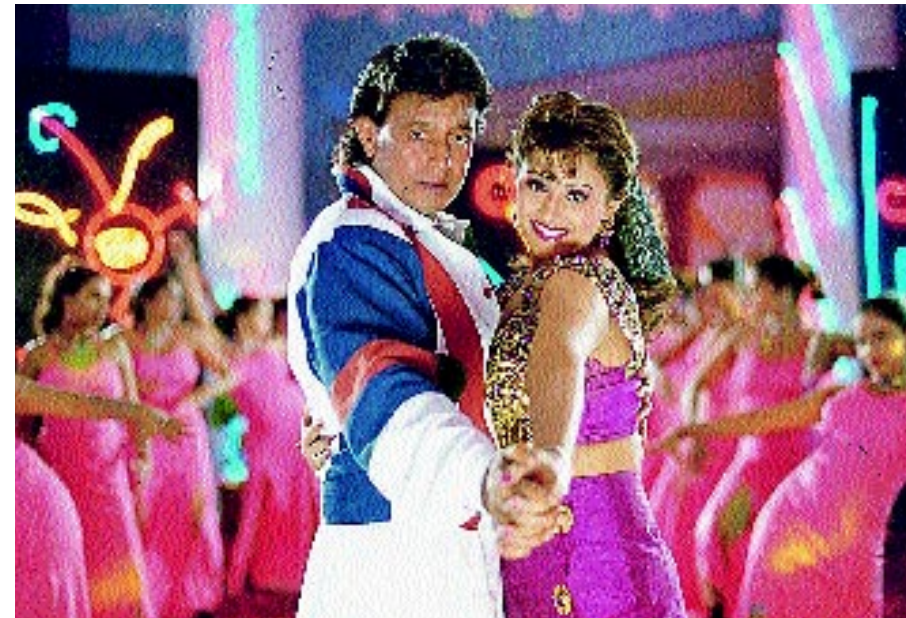


Despite a record 30 flops in the past five years, he's still going strong and is today Bollywood's walking movie miracle

By ANUPAMA CHOPRA

IF YOU MISSED THE LAST MITHUN CHAKRABORTY action saga with a hackneyed name like *Jodidar*, *Kaliya* or *Dadagiri*, don't panic. Chances are there will be another one releasing next month. *Shapath*, an action drama, in which Chakraborty played a wronged cop seeking revenge against arch-villain, Gulshan Grover, released in December. *Sher-e-Hindustani*, in which Chakraborty played a wronged cop seeking revenge against arch villain, Grover, released in January. And *Chandal*, starring Chakraborty and Telugu film heroine, Smeha, releases in March. What's the story? "Run-of-the-mill stuff," says *Chandal*'s producer-director Rajiv Babbar, who also produced *Shapath*, *Sher-e-Hindustani* and will be launching *Harfan Maula* with Chakraborty and Jackie Shroff in February. "You know, an honest cop, his family is murdered, so he seeks revenge against the villain."

Chakraborty is a movie miracle. The actor—who started his career with Mrinal Sen's arthouse classic *Mrigayya*—today is Bollywood's B-grade king. Every year, a slew of similar Chakraborty sagas—which have the three-time National Award winner beating up the baddies, romancing voluptuous unknown Southern heroines and eventually triumphing over evil—release and, often, sink without a trace. He had eight releases last year. This year, one film has already flopped and five more action films await release. Despite a record 30 flops in the past five years, Chakraborty still has



USTADON KA USTAD

Director: T.L.V. Prasad

Cast: Chakraborty, Madhoo, Shroff

Budget: Rs 3 crore

pleted in four months flat. This super-efficient working system kept Bollywood's exorbitant interest rates and the budget in check. The outcome? Low budgets equal low selling prices equal a safe investment.

THE formula stills works. Today, a Chakraborty film costs around Rs 2 crore to Rs 2.5 crore (the hero whose charges are a rumoured Rs 45 lakh to Rs 65 lakh is the most expensive component) and is sold for Rs 25 lakh to Rs 45 lakh per territory. Compare this to the average Shah Rukh Khan starrer, which can cost Rs 6 crore plus and sells for over Rs 1.5 crore per territory. With low investment, the Chakraborty film, which

three films under production and an astounding 14 signed. In a high power-high stakes Bollywood, where multi-crore budgets are marginalising the smaller players, Chakraborty is thriving—he has already completed 300 Hindi and Bengali films as hero. Says *Film Information* editor Komal Nahta: "He is minting money in his worst period."

How? A little bit of planning. In the early '90s, Chakraborty, then a fast-slipping star, decided to rework his career. He moved to Ooty, opened a luxury hotel, the Monarch Ooty and transformed from an artiste into a businessman. Chakraborty laid down certain working conditions—he doled out bulk dates for producers who were asked to shoot in Ooty (stay at his hotel, naturally) or neighbouring locations. The heroines, required only for the mandatory hip swivels were interchangeable bimbettes, usually from the South (Rambha, Smeha and others) and the film was com-

still has a loyal audience in the B- and C-class centres, becomes a safe film. Even the flops eventually recover their investment. "Other stars give the starting date of a film," he says proudly. "I give the completion date. Distributors are 101 per cent sure that the film will be completed, producers make a profit even before release. In the film industry, everybody is gambling. But if you do business, you don't gamble."

You specially don't gamble with the tried and tested. So in most of his films, Chakraborty plays an honest cop. Completion, not quality is the priority. Director T.L.V. Prasad, who in the past three years has made 10 films with Chakraborty, describes how a typical film is made: "When I'm shooting for one, I'm writing the next. The script takes one month and the music sittings one week. I shoot for 40 days and post-production takes 15 days." But even Prasad beat his own record with his latest, *Sher-e-Hindustani*, which he shot within an incredible 28 days.

The factory-like production creates shoddy cinema but few seem to mind. Says Babbar, a long-standing Mithun loyalist: "Everybody can't be a 5-star restaurant. You also need Udipi restaurants and the *beehwale log* (middlemen). *Hum beehwale log hain* (We are the average filmmakers)." Chakraborty, who is currently planning to open his fourth hotel (this one in Mysore) and the Monarch School of Management (a catering college) in Ooty, isn't complaining either. "I've already won three National Awards and two Filmfare Awards," he says. "What more can I ask for? It gives me great satisfaction that people are still coming to see my films. I'm the hottest selling star today. As long as I sell, producers will flock to me. The day I stop, they won't recognise me even if I live next door." Presumably, that's when the hotels will step in. Last heard, Chakraborty was advising Jackie Shroff, a fast-slipping star, on career moves. ■

■ MITHUN CHAKRABORTY

The B-Grade King

CHANDAL

Director: Rajiv Babbar
Cast: Chakraborty, Smeha
Budget: Approx Rs 2 crore

■ B-GRADE FILMS

Fringe World

THE MEDIA IGNORES THEM AND THE marquee rarely lights up with their names. They inhabit a cinematic no-man's land. They are Bollywood's B- and C-graders who routinely churn out quickies. Meet producer-director Rajesh Mittal and Dilip Gulati. Mittal hopes one day to become a household name but till then, he's a horror specialist making movies like *Pret Atma* (about an Adivasi girl who is gang-raped and takes revenge 20 years later). His latest, *Bhayanak*, was completed in nine days for under Rs 10 lakh. Gulati is the man behind *Jungle Beauty* and *Jungle Love Story*, which he describes as a "Tarzan type story". The film was shot in 15 days flat.

This is not, as *Film Information* editor Komal Nahta points out, "the Cielo crowd". For



JUNGLE LOVE STORY

Director: Dilip Gulati

Cast: Mickey, Sweta and Preet

Budget: Below Rs 30 lakh

fringe makers on tight budgets, every second counts. Working on profit margins of a few lakhs, these makers provide grist for obscure theatres in small towns. And hope, some day, success will seek them out. "Kisi din hamari bhi film *Jai Santoshi Ma ki tarah click ho sakti hai* (Some day, even our films may click like *Jai Santoshi Ma*)," says Mittal.

But lately, the B-Company has been facing rough weather. As film economics soar and a satellite-savvy audience demands more, distributors and patrons become scarce. Says *Jai Santoshi Ma* producer Satram Rohra: "The small film maker is going to be totally wiped out."

Perhaps not, but he is certainly on the endangered list. "I want to make at least one memorable film," says Mittal. Distributor Tolu Bajaj, whose last release was the Subhash Ghai hit *Pardes*, offers some "friendly advice": "You're wasting stock. Please stop making movies."