

a blockbuster called frustration

■ In the absence of any tangible help coming from the government despite commitments, the local movie industry is utterly frustrated and has decided to even stop producing movies to make their voices heard

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from Thimphu

Bhutanese movie lovers could be in for a shock. They may have to find a different pastime to spend their weekends as local moviemakers may stop releasing movies in the market for about six to seven months.

The announcement comes from a frustrated movie fraternity after the government has virtually failed to deliver its rosy pledges made to the industry in 2008.

"We have been left hanging in the middle," said the general secretary of the Motion Picture Association of Bhutan (MPAB), Sherub Gyaltsen referring to the indifferent approach the government has shown to address problems of the movie industry.

"We have given an ultimatum that if the government does not consider the three points we have raised, we will halt the production of the Bhutanese movies for at least six to seven months," said Sherub Gyaltsen. He said all movie producers have agreed to the decision.

He said "When there is a gap with no movies, the movie theatre owners would obviously bring in foreign

movies to screen. We want to see if government then takes any action."

The MPAB will raise the three points during the upcoming private sector development board on April 28.

The three demands are: a 10-year tax holiday to firms producing all Bhutanese films and not only for animated films; Bhutan Sale Tax (BST) on cinema tickets for local films to be scrapped from the current 10%; and the request for entertainment space allocation for screening of Bhutanese movies in all satellite towns in Bhutan.

Sherub Gyaltsen said even if all the three demands are not met immediately, the first two should be looked into.

The Fiscal Incentive, 2010, states: "A ten-year income tax holiday shall be provided to entities producing animation films and sales tax on cinema tickets of Bhutanese films shall be reduced from 30% to 10%," amongst others.

Sherub Gyaltsen says the 10-year income tax holiday should be for all Bhutanese films and not only for animated films. "If not 10, a five year tax exemption

would also do," he said.

"The policy talks about a full length animated film. Bhutan is still not ready for a full length animated films as there are hardly any animators in the country and the market is still very small," he said.

He added that a 15 to 20-minute animated film would cost 200 times more than the actual expenditure one incurs on a normal film. He explained that the Bhutanese movie 'Bardo' which had a short animation segment cost about Nu 100,000 a minute.

A reduction of sales tax on the cinema tickets of Bhutanese films from 30% to 10% as specified by the Fiscal Incentive, 2010, would not make much difference Sherub Gyaltsen said.

"We are asking the government to reduce the sales tax on cinema tickets from 10% to 0 until about 10 to 15 dzongkhags have proper cinema halls or at least till 2015," he said.

On June 02, 2008, the executive order that the MPAB received from the cabinet stated that the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (MOHCA) and the Ministry of Work and Human Settlement (MOWHS) should al-

lot government lands for the construction of town halls in all the 20 dzongkhags where such facilities do not exist and to include the constructions in the 10th FYP.

"However, nothing has been done and we have no idea why the land allocation is taking such a long time," said Sherub Gyaltsen.

"Most of the officials in the MOWHS have denied having government lands but a land has been identified at the Bajo town in Wangdue. That is all we got so far," he said.

Despite two to three investors showing interest to build movie halls around the country, the government not giving land has stalled the whole process.

Though the executive order gives directives to the two ministries to "facilitate venues, whenever and wherever possible, for screening of films until adequate private theaters are available in the cities and towns across the country," it is still a big problem for producers.

A producer said that screening movies in the dzongkhags depend entirely on their personal relations with dzongkhag officials and school principals. "It sometimes depends on the

mood of the Dzongdas," said another.

But that is not all.

Another major problem faced by the industry, Sherub Gyaltsen said, was the lack of access to finance with the financial institutions not giving loans to produce movies.

Another issue is the lack of a parent ministry for the movie industry.

While the executive order states that the home ministry shall be the parent ministry, Sherub Gyaltsen said the Media Act makes the industry fall under the information and communication ministry.

"This industry is left in a dilemma as we are not even sure who our parent ministry is," Sherub Gyaltsen said. Because of this situation, the industry has been referred from one ministry to another to raise their issues.

While no tangible help has materialized from the government, it has been showered with a lot of verbal applause for its contributions. "If words could be caught into something materialistic, then probably by now, we will have a building full of appreciations," Sherub Gyaltsen summarized the state of the Bhutanese movie industry.