



\* Kamal Hassan and Andrea Jeremiah in their forthcoming release *Viswaroopam*.

# Woes of *Viswaroopam*

By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**A** new beginning has since time immemorial been frowned upon, resisted or dismissed outright. When the apple fell on Newton's head, and he thought that it

must be gravity, the world looked at him in disbelief. When the railway steam engine puffed in, its hiss forced people to hide. To them it looked like a huge dark monster bellowing smelly smoke. When Aristotle said the earth was round, the Greeks were ready to kill him.

Similarly, when Satyajit Ray's doctor hero in *Ganashatru* found that the holy water of a

temple was causing diseases, he was warned of dire consequences, his house was pelted with stones and he was branded an Enemy of the People.

Now, when one of India's ablest actors, Kamal Hassan, was all set to release his latest film, *Viswaroopam* (scripted and helmed by him), in the Direct-To-Home (DTH) format on January 10, a day before its worldwide theatrical opening, he was stopped from doing so at the eleventh hour.

After much defiance and deliberation, Hassan had to cow down to the distributors and exhibitors — and agree to their demand to have the DTH premiere a week after *Viswaroopam* hit the big screen on January 25. Now, Hassan has been promised a maximum number of theatres for his work by the same men who had earlier said they would not let *Viswaroopam* play in cinemas if it was screened on television earlier.

Days before the originally planned January 10 DTH opening, Hassan began getting hate mails and threats. He was warned not to show it on television, and if did so, he would find pirated discs of *Viswaroopam* flooding the market. There was also a rumour of sabotaging power supply to those halls bold enough to screen the movie a day after it had been seen on television.

The one-time DTH screener of the film was to have been available for Rs1,000. Once viewed, the movie could not have been stored

in the DTH set-top boxes. So there was no question of replaying it, Kamal had assured his sceptics during the run-up to the January 10 opening.

Hassan went to great lengths to explain his novel step. In an audio cast on a social networking site, SoundCloud, he averred: "This is targeted at a niche segment that wants to be entertained in the comfort of their homes. It is purely for the excitement of watching it on the first day. The cinema hall experience is still something else," he said. "The majority is still going to enjoy the film in cinema halls. We have recorded the sound in world-class technology (auro sound). That was done to get people to theatres. Running scared of DTH is like the majority of 99% getting scared of the 1%," he sounded convincing.

Dispelling the fears of the Tamil Film Producers' Association that this DTH move will lead to video piracy, Hassan quipped that moviemakers must be allowed to explore all legal avenues of earning money. This was one way of fighting piracy.

But his assurances did not convince theatre owners or distributors or producers. In the end, Hassan was forced to step back and put off *Viswaroopam's* opening date, and, later, to give up his plan to premiere the picture on television, not in the cinemas.

Now, why did Hassan abandon what seemed like a revolutionary idea? Probably, he himself was not sure whether home telecast would lead to piracy. I do not know the technicalities of this, but as a layman, I have been wondering why someone cannot record the film when it was playing on the small screen and quickly get thousands of illegal copies out in the market.

In India, there is a whole industry doing this, and doing this very systematically.

I know for a fact that movie pirates are a deadly force to reckon with. And incidentally, Pondicherry — a two-hour drive from Chennai through the picturesque East Coast Road — is said to be the piracy capital of India.

However, piracy is a global phenomenon. Whether it is the souks of Marrakech or the bazaars of Hong Kong, pirated copies — and excellent quality at that — of films are there for the asking, and at throwaway prices. I have seen the latest hits on such DVDs.

Although, Hassan's DTH scheme may have had little to do with piracy per se and more with earning extra revenue through home screening, illegal copying is here to stay unless producers take bold steps. Tamil producers in particular.

While Bollywood has drastically cut down the time between a theatrical release and video/DTH opening, Tamil Nadu still takes months before it allows a movie to be out on DVD. This is ridiculous, given the fact that most films make their money in their first or second weekend. As for towns and villages, I wonder whether any revenue is generated at all, given the fact that just a few days after a movie begins its run, pirated discs priced between Rs20 and Rs40 each are in circulation. And the volumes are large.

So how does one tackle video piracy? Producers must not only cut down the window period, but also factor in video rights in their agreements with distributors or make disks of their own films at rates that will stop consumers from peeping into the pirate's den. Why would anybody pay three or four times the price of a pirated disc to buy a genuinely legal one?

Hassan may have failed to get his idea off the ground, but he has succeeded in evoking the debate on video piracy — all over again.

*(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and foreign cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanb@hotmail.com)*

