

# BUILDING DREAMS

**Bollywood director Prakash Jha is on a different trip these days. His company is setting up malls, multiplexes, budget hotels and factories across Bihar and Jharkhand, reports Moinak Mitra**

THIS is retail in 70mm. Stars may wear IPL stripes, but the director's cut rules supreme in hinterland retailing. Simply put, Prakash Jha, the maker of films such as *Hip, Hip, Hurray*, *Gangajal* and *Apaharan*, has sniffed an opportunity far away from the strobes of Bollywood — in Bihar, euphemistically dubbed the heart of darkness. At 54, the film-maker is changing the face of Bihar by setting up agri-malls in each of the state's districts replete with multiplexes and education hubs for farmers. Besides, the multiple national award winner is busy setting up hotels in Bihar and Jharkhand, the first sugar factory in the state after Independence, and an institute in Patna to spawn and source mall management talent — all for about Rs 1,100 crore. As foreign investors are queuing up to garner stake in Jha's infrastructure company, brands like Big Bazaar, Adlabs, Raymond's and Siyaram have already expressed venture tie-up interest.

If all goes according to plan, 30 mall-cum-multiplex-cum-coaching centers will crop up in as many districts of the state and neighbouring Jharkhand. Twelve of them are ready to roll, and construction work is on at other sites — Jamshepur, Dhanbad, Patna, Hajipur and Darbhanga. "Most of the metro retail space is getting saturated and with growing thrust in Tier II and III towns, Jha's projects are cost-effective. If it costs Rs 800 crore to set up a mall in Mumbai, he's setting up 30 malls at the same cost in Bihar," says Bapaditya Basu, associate director of Jones Lang Lasalle Meghraj, realty and retail consultants to Jha's project company.

Prakash Jha, along with log-time associate Manmohan Shetty, has founded P&M Infrastructure, where both are investors in a team of five. "An Irish realty firm has expressed the desire to pick up 40% stake in our company, and we're waiting for FIPB clearances," informs Jha. According to Jha, the valuation of his mall projects alone stood at Rs 200 crore six months back, which has risen three times as of today.

It augurs well for a film-maker like Jha, who already possesses a production and distribution arm, to set up cineplexes. "That'll complete the trioka in movie-making, with production, distribution and exhibition from the same studio," claims Jha, seconding a trend that is becoming rampant nowadays, a la Adlabs or PVR. "We will have 100 screens in Bihar and Jharkhand in 2-3 years, and the tickets would vend at Rs 30-40 a pop," adds Jha.

A 200-room hotel-cum-hypermarket-cum-multiplex worth around Rs 175 crore is also on the anvil in Patna. Now Jha plans to replicate the Patna model in each of his 2-3 acre properties, with a 40-room budget hotel that may charge anywhere between Rs 750-1,000 per night.

Jha's structures are an amalgam of entertainment, shopping and education, and the latter sure sticks out like a sore thumb. But Jha has his reasons: "Education must be commercially viable and Biharis are high on value-added education but there are hardly any opportunities in the state. Besides, an IIT is coming up in Patna and with the Nalanda University, our institutions should complement that growth."

Jha is also credited with starting Bihar Institute of Human Resources Development in Patna six months back. "Here, we train security personnel, mall management staff, hospitality management people and paramedics, and have even bagged an ISO-9001 certification," claims Jha. This would also act as a talent sourcing opportunity for P&M Infrastructure in its state-wide endeavour.



The film-maker is also setting up the first sugar factory in the state since Independence—over 250 acres of land in Champaran—the place of his birth. Jha will be pumping in Rs 245 crore to the project and is unfazed about returns. "The Green Revolution hasn't touched Bihar, and Champaran produces so much sugar that the crop rots. It will be profitable," he predicts.

