



# Bollywood

Henry James Foy charts the Indian film industry's irresistible journey west

Boy meets girl. Preposterously society-defying courtship ensues. Flashes of innocent eyes and longing stares. Antagonist steals girl. Girl goes crazy during pre-marital dressing session. First of many dreamy song-and-dance sequences supported by thousands of handily choreographed house servants. Rain. Faux-kissing. Dancing. Rain. More dancing. Happiness in the form of marriage, societal breaches reconciled, suitor despatched.

There's usually some form of Romeo and Juliet plot in traditional Bollywood movies, but who cares? Revered suave-talking, hydraulic-hipped actors and stunning, fair-skinned high-pitched seductresses have made for an unbeatable combination – enthralling billions across the sub-continent.

But Bollywood has overgrown its geographical and cultural constraints and is taking the international market by storm. The Indian diaspora, rooted in the UK, the US and the Middle East are changing the Bollywood ball game.

Last year's *Slumdog Millionaire* achieved what Bollywood has been threatening for a decade. A "homage to Indian cinema," according to Co-Director Loveleen Tandan, its writer studied the Bollywood genre prior to penning the script, and its plot, soundtrack and audience-winning formula is

undeniably Indian.

From London to New York, packed theatres were enthralled by the rags-to-riches love story from the slums of India, and people across the globe were humming its hinglish pop-bollywood musical offspring, *Jai Ho*.

Written by legendary Indian composer A.R. Rahman and performed by US supergroup the Pussycat Dolls – more famous for records such as *Don't Cha* and *Stickwitu* – it sold over 1.7 million copies worldwide, and *Jai Ho* – Hindi for 'Victory, Hooray', will compete with 73 other entries, including 'Slumdog' to become the millionth word of the English language on June 10th.

Danny Boyle's movie, which scooped 8 Oscars, is not the first to realise the Bollywood potential. Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice*, and Daisy Mayer's *The Guru* all borrowed heavily from the Indian genre, while 2001's *Monsoon Wedding*, focused on a New Delhi marriage, was a huge success worldwide.

As a result, the gulf between Indian and the Western film is shrinking dramatically. Oscar-winner Penelope Cruz has gushed over prospects of figuring in a Bollywood movie, stating: "I am a great fan of Indian cinema and I would love to work with Shah Rukh Khan," while

supermodel Naomi Campbell, after wowing casting directors at a Mumbai fashion show, is planning a return to India to audition for a Bollywood movie.

In turn, British-born Bollywood actress Katrina Kaif, star of 2007 movie *Namaste London*, has recently signed a deal with toy company Mattel to be the new face of Barbie for the doll's 50 birthday.

*Slumdog*, *The Guru* and *Monsoon Wedding*, however, are British movies with Indian aspirations. It was more Salman Rushdie than Vikram Chandra – and anyone who has actually visited Mumbai would immediately see *Midnight's Children*-like embellishments in *Slumdog*.

Yet Bollywood movies, shot by Indian filmmakers using Indian actors are making just as much noise in the West. Bollywood is shrugging off its immature tag, and the home market is enjoying the change. While rain-soaked dance routines are by no means a thing of the past, directors are tackling far more serious topics than the traditional boy-meets-girl script.

In 2006, *Rang De Basanti*, about India's struggle for independence, made a profit of over £15 million, despite having a tragic conclusion, no glamorous female lead and a very small dosage of singing and dancing. In fact, the film's heroine was played by a white

British actress.

*Om Shanti Om*, which premiered in London and grossed over \$3.5 million at the US box office, the highest ever for a Bollywood movie, parodies the Indian film industry, while Ghajini, incidentally the highest-grossing Bollywood movie ever, is an Indian twist on the 2000 Hollywood film *Memento*.

As a result, over 90% of *Om* and Ghajini's revenues were from worldwide box office receipts.

If there's one man who represents the sheer value of Bollywood's potential export, it's *Om Shanti Om*'s star, Shah Rukh Khan. The 43-year-old actor, director, producer and Indian demigod, is the undisputed king of Bollywood. Think George Clooney meets Brad Pitt, with liberal dashings of Jonny Depp and Leonardo DiCaprio. Ultimately, any comparisons fall short – you have to see, nay feel, SRK's deity-like persona in India.

Reportedly charging over Rs 300 million (£4 million) per movie,

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Bollywood's largest paycheck, SRK – as he's fondly referred to back home – and his films are constantly smashing box office records and scooping awards.

His most recent blockbusters, *Don*, *Chak de India*, and *Om Shanti Om*, in which he plays a James Bond-like renegade, Indian hockey's only saviour and a biographical-like film superstar respectively, earned a combined \$31 million outside of India, a testament to his international superstar status.

Indeed, Shah Rukh Khan's pres-

**Clockwise from left: posters from *Bride and Prejudice*, starring Ashwaria Rai; *Om Shanti Om*, starting Shah Rukh Khan; *Namaste London*, starring Katrina Kaif; a scene from *Slumdog Millionaire*; and *The Pussycat Dolls* in Indian-influenced dress**



ence in living rooms, multiplexes and village cinemas across Asia and the Middle East makes him Newsweek's 41st most powerful person in the world. Khan, a Muslim married to a Hindu, is an idol in countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan – where a ban on him by the mullahs have driven sales to the black market – and his secular nature sees him as the only other Indian on the magazine's powerlist with Congress leader Sonia Gandhi.

Today, India produces over 1000 films a year – around three per day – for a market of 3.6 billion cinema entrances every year. This clearly puts Bollywood ahead of Hollywood by one measure – approximately 450 films were released in the USA in 2007 with 2.6 billion viewers.

However, in terms of money, Bollywood is by far the poorer cousin. The industry is worth around \$1.5 billion, while in the US, experts predict Hollywood brings in around 40 times that figure.

Film songs dominate radio playlists and CD, ringtone and download charts. And then there's the multitude of endorsements, advertising deals and product placement that swamps the country.

After the team's shocking performance in the recent Cricket World Cup, advertisers pulled down billboards featuring cricket stars – the

country's other religion – and replaced them with Bollywood names overnight.

Vanita Kholi-Khandekar, Indian media consultant, states: "It is very easy to understand the Indian market if you know one immutable fact – that Indians love films. For the majority, entertainment means films and music means film music."

Bollywood movie soundtracks account for around 70% of India's music industry. For comparison, International music makes up barely 5% of the Rs 15 billion (£205 million) annual market.

It's simple. For Bollywood to get anywhere near it's US counterpart, it needs western cinema-goers and associated product consumers. Ticket prices in Mumbai start at around 8 rupees (10 pence), while a West End cinema is likely to charge nearer £10.

Filmakers are taking note. According to research company Neilsen, the UK has the largest audience for Indian cinema outside the sub-continent. Bollywood currently makes up around 1.5% of the UK gross box office, larger than the total of all European releases, while Indian films made up 16% of UK releases in 2006. British movies

made up 13%.

Today, a London premiere is standard for a big Bollywood movie with international dreams. Indian celebrities in the British consciousness, such as Shilpa Shetty, who became famous for enduring the late Jade Goody's racism on *Big Brother*, are valuable bridges to the press, while Bollywood superstars make the most of their invitations to the BAFTAs and other award ceremonies.

This is the international recognition that Bollywood craves. As directors and producers love to grumble, an Indian movie has never won the Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars, and only three – including *Lagaan* – have ever been nominated.

Not to be outdone, Bollywood created the Indian Film Academy Awards, held every year since 2000 across the globe, with all the glitz and glamour of its American cousin.

According to industry sources, the choice of venue for the 2007 event, which has never been held in India, was between the rain-soaked Yorkshire city and New York. The superstars may have had to hitch up their saris when wading through the puddles, but the North of England represents a sizeable target for the Bollywood marketers.

In fact, Indian film-makers are now looking towards the UK as both a place to film, as well as sell, their releases. Huge Bollywood hits, such as Shah Rukh Khan's *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* and Katrina Kaif's *Namaste London*, were shot in full or in part in the UK, where policy makers and industry heads are encouraging directors to visit.

As many as 60 Bollywood films every year now include scenes shot in London. No wonder that the city is now going all out to woo Bollywood like never before, and that's big business for the British industry.

Agreements between

government departments and the Film and Television Producers Guild of India make for money-saving accommodation, equipment and location deals for Indian filmmakers, while a tax-saving scheme for Indo-British movies is currently being worked on.

There's even a Bollywood acting school in the UK's capital. Specialising in dancing, singing and over-acting – one assumes – the Ealing Institute of Media provides a RADA-like introduction to the industry for £6,000.

But there are inherent dangers to Bollywood's seemingly irresistible quest for global parity with the Hollywood film machine. Bollywood's enduring charm lies in its unique acting style, bizarre plotlines and extravagant sets and songs.

For the hardcore fans, a certain amount of unintentional comedy and cringe-induced wincing is all part and parcel of the Bollywood appeal. SRK's *Don*, a self-aware parody of the western thriller genre works in a way that *The Bourne Identity*, with all its realistic gadgets and government agents, simply cannot.

The best Bollywood films are preposterous, over the top affairs about reincarnation, revenge and rejoicing – with lots and lots of consequence. It's no coincidence that the first movie to show in Kabul after the Taliban fled Afghanistan's capital was a Bollywood epic.

Thankfully, a time when Bollywood movies will compete with Hollywood's blockbusters for the big money is still far off. The \$40 million grossed worldwide by *Om Shanti Om* might get Indian moneymen rubbing their hands, but it pales in comparison with 2007's biggest release – *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, which took over \$950 million.

But don't write off Shah Rukh Khan, Katrina Kaif and India's other superstars becoming a very big part of the international film industry. 1.3 billion people can't be wrong. **M**

