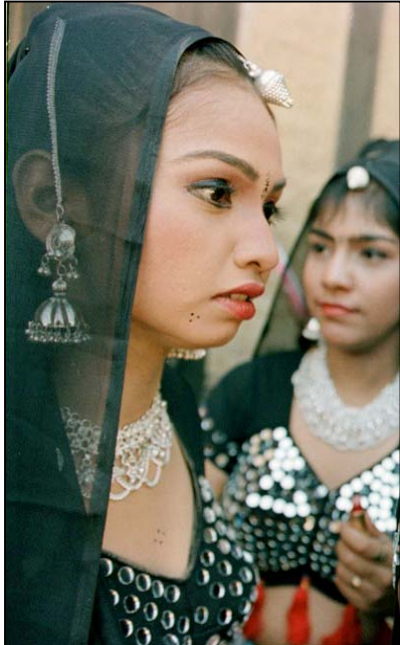


## **Bollywood:** the shrine of modern India

*By Danny Jeyaseelan*



*Cinemas are the modern relics of India, and Bollywood—the imperious godfather of Indian films. The latter’s global appeal has propelled the celluloid dream-world right across the Western landscape. But is the enshrined Hindi film really the status quo of Indian cinema? Come with us backstage for a sneak peek behind the hype...*

Picture by Jonathan Torgovnik

From the top, four-three-two-one! As the tabla beat starts, the set explodes in technicolour when a band of beautiful young girls flood the scene with their brightly coloured silk saris. The girls run out and grab the lead actress in mid-flight, ushering her out of the house and into the road. A girl begins to mouth the words of the song that starts playing, and she dances towards the lead actress and whispers into her ear. Giggling in response, the lead actress swings her hip, shoving the cheeky girl to the side. And then in one fluid motion, they collectively break into song and dance ...

Picture by Jonathan Torgovnik

### **Lights, camera, action!**

The above scene is all too familiar to many people and



even nostalgic for some. Song and dance sequences are a formulaic cliché of Indian movies, but they are the most defining and distinctive feature of the Indian film. Music director Kalyanji says, “In India life begins and ends with music. For instance a newborn baby is greeted into the world by songs ... there is a song and dance when he weds and dies.”

Leading choreographer Farah Khan believes, “What is saving Indian cinema from being engulfed by Hollywood is our song and dance routines, because they just can’t imitate that.” Still, there must be more to the film than simply song and dance. After all, 12 million people in India alone visit the cinema everyday, making it the most-viewed motion picture industry in the world. So what is it that makes it such a compelling view? Well, cinematic idol Shahrukh Khan explains the reason: “It has so much in it, there are songs, dances, emotions and fights, and yet the format is very simple ...”

## **History of Hindi cinema**

Early Hindi cinema in the 1920s was founded on the mythological film—the fight of good and evil, the importance of sacrifice in the name of truth. One of the most versatile actresses in Indian cinema, Shabana Azmi commented, “Hindi cinema tends to take its basic material from Indian mythology, which plays a very dominant part in our lives today in terms of what our heroes do and what our duties are.” In the 1930s, when sound invaded the Indian screen, the all-singing, all-dancing film became widely celebrated. In the 1960s, the multi-genre film was the order of the day, where romance was followed by comedy and family drama by action. By the 1970s, cinema productions settled into the formula mode: a love story, an action hero, a vamp, a villain and a happy ending. According to writer Nasreen Munni Kabir, the typical Hindi film has always been a product of cultural pickings, aimed to appeal to a pan-Indian audience. He claims, “The Hindi film always reverts to tradition, demonstrating the respectful return to the status quo that the audience demands.”

## Bollywood sparkles overseas

Picture by Jonathan Torgovnik



Bollywood's appeal hasn't stopped with the Indian market. Kabir notes "The appeal and success of Bollywood movies has become a worldwide phenomenon." His sprightly comment is a true reflection of Bollywood's

sensational success in the international scene. Business Week magazine estimated in 2002 that the global annual revenue in tickets and DVDs for Bollywood was around US\$1.3 billion, compared with Hollywood's revenue of US\$51 billion. However, it was estimated that Bollywood sold 3.6 billion tickets, versus Hollywood's 2.6 billion.

Statistics indicate the West has been feverishly consuming Bollywood. Hindi movies now regularly enter the box office charts overseas. Films like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1996), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Taal* (1999) created a record of sorts by climbing into the US, Canada and UK top 20 charts. Hindi movies including *Hari Om* (2004), *Raincoat* (2004) and *Lakshya* (2004), have also become a visible part of the West's media landscape through premières in international film festivals.

The big export markets of Hindi movies include the Middle East, Malaysia, Fiji, and Singapore. But interestingly, they have all been gradually suspended by markets in the UK, US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. An increasing number of Hindi filmmakers shoot large portions of their films in lush locations in Africa, Australia, Europe, and North America. These elaborate sets and locations provide the undeniable appeal of big budget films. About 100 films have so far been either made partly or wholly in Australia alone. Box office success, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), was shot in India and Britain while *Dulhan Ham Le Jayenge* (2000) was shot in Europe. These filmmakers consciously

seek wider audiences outside India, and have opened distribution offices in New York, New Jersey, and London.

## **Bollywood bias in the West**

What's the Bombay guy doing? "He's having food in China Garden, having Chinese food, talking in Hindi, thinking in English, and flirting with a French girl for all you know. You see the whole thing is cosmopolitan as a word. The whole environment is such. Don't you think that could be one of the major reasons why our movies are more articulate even abroad?" - *Shammi Kapoor in his interview with author Tejaswini Ganti, 1996.*

Hindi films are fairly cosmopolitan, unlike their Tamil counterparts, as Bollywood thrives on Western pop-dominated cultural forms. However, writer Ashish Rajadhyaksha argues, "Bollywood is *not* the Indian film industry or at least not the film industry alone." According to him, it merely occupies a space analogous to the film industry. In fact, the distinctive features of popular Hindi cinema, which include song and dance, melodrama, lavish, production values, emphasis upon stars and spectacle—are common to films made in southern Indian industries as well. Also, everyone in India knows the Hindi film industry has been remaking successful Tamil movies for a very long time.

Picture by Jonathan Torgovnik



People in the West are generally unaware of regional films from India, which are produced by the hundreds annually. The limited coverage regional cinema receives is evident in that few movies from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu or Kerala ever filter into the western landscape. The biases in coverage transcend cinema space as they also affect the distribution of Indian DVD titles in Australia.

With the exception of Dandenong, the distribution outlets in Melbourne's inner suburbs (Glenferrie, Footscray, and Brunswick) and the city indicate a strong disparity in the number of Hindi and Tamil films. In each store, about 90% of the DVDs for sale or rental are Hindi films. Most of them carry a much smaller range of Tamil films and a handful of films in Telugu and Karnataka. Regional films are simply not as readily accessible as Hindi films in Melbourne and possibly most of Australia.



## The great divide

Picture by Jonathan Torgovnik

The significant divide between Hindi and Tamil cinema is reminiscent of the polarised receptions Bollywood gets from its rural and city audiences. The changing values and modern heroes depicted on screen do not reflect the social reality across the country. Also lavish dance routines tend to make Hindi film narrative more episodic, as the

songs do not relate to the physicality and texture of Indian life. The Indian tradition of the travelling tent cinema continues today in the poorest and most remote areas of the country, in states including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. Around 10 rupees (30 cents) is charged for a ticket to see a film in a circus tent, set up by operators moving from village to village in an old, well-travelled truck. Director Karan Johar's film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, painted a particularly rosy picture of the Indian society, alienated from the shame of the motherland's poverty. It bombed out in villages as it did not reflect the reality of India as a whole. "We are restricted as Indian filmmakers. We have to cater for the Indian yuppie in New York and the man in rural Bihar. I always say the most difficult thing to do is make a universally commercial Indian film," he says.

With films shot in prosperous locations, the Hindi film is more than capable of spinning your deepest fantasies for three whole hours. Bollywood readily offers

the West, relief from India's abject poverty, conflict and misery. But its lack of poetic justice has ensured it can never win over every heart in India.

### **For the first and only time in Australia ...**

*Bollywood Dreams*, an exhibition by New York based photographer Jonathan Torgovnik, turns the camera on India's massive film industry, giving exclusive insights into the culture and stories behind the clapper-board. It has toured extensively in Australia.

The exhibition pays tribute to the stars, filmmakers, technicians and movie-goers, and explores the power of cinema in India as both entertainment and social phenomenon.



It includes 44 original colour photographs and documentary film footage revealing:

- The people behind the projector who present films in cinemas across India
- The making of Bollywood films and on-set action
- The Indian experience of going to the movies
- Actors and their characters
- India's touring tent cinemas, where millions of the mostly young male audience see Bollywood movies every year

*Bollywood Dreams* the book available at several art gallery stores.



## Want to be a Bollywood star?

Tania Zaetta is Bollywood's prettiest import. She's worked as a model, TV presenter, and starred alongside David Hasselhoff in *Baywatch*. The Victorian face of *Who Dares Wins* made quite a splash in Bollywood in two huge Yash Raj films, *Bunty Aur Babli* and *Salaam Namaste* (this film was made in Melbourne). You could call her the most successful foreign actress in Bollywood. After all, the saying goes, "If you get a Yash Raj film, then you've arrived." The gorgeous Australian who moved to India four years ago is a self-confessed lover of Bollywood films. She reveals nine exclusive tips for breaking into the Hindi film industry:

1. Speaking Hindi—unless you can speak Hindi fluently, it's impossible to land a huge part in a traditional Bollywood film.
2. Dancing is an essential—you could start classical Indian dance classes.
3. You need to understand the Indian culture.
4. Spend time in India to make contacts—get yourself known to film makers.
5. Get some acting training.
6. The population of India is about 1.1 billion and most of them want to be a star? Perfect everything before you go and search for a job in Bollywood.
7. It's all about who you know and which parties you're at.
8. Landing a role depends a lot on your profile; you need to have a good profile before you consider going into the Indian film industry.
9. It's very competitive—they'll only hire you if they're certain you can attract more viewers.

For more information about Tania Zaetta, see [www.tania.com.au](http://www.tania.com.au)

## **Bollywood's biggest ambassadors!**

### **Amitabh Bachchan**

- Bachchan is without question, the most famous male actor in Hindi film history.
- Also known as Big B, his long and illustrious career spans over four decades (1969-2006).
- Armed with an arts degree, he worked as a freight broker in a shipping firm before giving it all up for the big stage.
- In 1984, Bachchan briefly entered politics in support of Rajiv Gandhi, who was the ninth prime minister of India.
- In 1999, he was named BBC Superstar of the Millennium.
- He will be heavily involved in about 12 films over the next two years. His most recent film appearance was in *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (2006).

### **Aishwarya Rai**

- Born in South India, Aishwarya Rai is rumoured to be the highest paid actress in India.
- In her early days, Rai studied architecture and began modelling at the same time.
- In 1994, she won the Miss World contest.
- Rai debuted in Mani Ratnam's Tamil language film, *Iruvar* in 1997.
- Since then she has acted in numerous Hindi films and will be involved in nine films, which are set for release in the next few years. Her last film appearance was in *Umrao Jaan* (2006).

## **Sugar, spice and everything nice**

The variety of flavours offered in an Indian film is amazing. What's equally impressive is the fact that over 14 official Indian languages are spoken in the Indian subcontinent. Hindi is the most widely spoken language among them, not to mention one of the five most widely spoken languages in the world. A staggering 800 feature films are produced annually in this country, in cities like Madras, Bangalore, Calcutta and Hyderabad. Of this incredible number, only 150-200 films are produced in Bombay, in a perfect blend of Hindi and Urdu. Madras and Hyderabad, which are home to the Tamil and Telugu language film industries, are just as, or more prolific than the Bombay industry.

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