

## Asian Corner | Gautaman Bhaskaran

## BEYOND BOLLYWOOD

**M**uch like Hollywood has been invading European and Southeast Asian shores with its big bucks and unrelenting publicity, Bollywood dominates outside of India, intimidatingly so at times.

Bollywood's larger-than-life image has a grip that is almost vise-like. Since 1956, India has submitted more than 40 movies for Oscar nomination consideration. Most of these have been in Hindi, and the only three nominees to date – "Mother India", "Salaam Bombay" and "Lagaan" have all been in that language. Meanwhile, there have been few entries in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh or Bengal. Scandalous as it may sound, not one of Satyajit Ray's works was sent by India for possible inclusion in the Oscar short-list. It's not surprising though, as the selections are made by a small panel set up by the Mumbai-based Film Federation of India, which has its own interests to fulfil, and not the interests of the nation.

I am often asked whether there is any cinema in India beyond Bollywood's essentially Hindi language movies that are churned out with factory-



Aishwarya Rai and Rajinikanth in "Endhiran" (Robot)

line precision in Mumbai (formerly Bombay, hence the Bollywood title). At Venice, Cannes and Berlin, journalists and others seem mildly surprised when I tell them that of 1200-plus films that pop out of Indian cans every year, a mere 250 are made in Mumbai. The rest come from other major movie centres in the country – Chennai, Madras, Hyderabad, Trivandrum, Bangalore, Kolkata or Calcutta. These films are in different languages and traditions, and they trace, discuss and argue a variety of issues, sometimes specific to the regions. At other times, they are pan-Indian, even universal, plotting romances, crimes, psychological traumas, gang wars, revenge and other societal ills. Three recent Tamil works, "Angadi Theru" (Market, about young workers in Chennai's super-store), "Aaranya Kaandam" (Jungle Chapter, about an impotent, aging don played by Bollywood actor Jackie Shroff) and "Mynaa" (an unconventional love story), got the cash registers jingling.

Happily, there are people and organisations that understand the important difference between Bollywood creations and those from

the rest of India. There is an interesting annual movie festival in Stuttgart, Germany called Bollywood and Beyond, which screens India's other types of cinema as well. Deauville's Asian Film Festival held in March also largely promotes works made outside of Mumbai.

At this year's Venice International Film Festival, Gurvinder Singh's Punjabi movie "Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan" (Alms for the Blind Horse) was screened in the experimental Orizzonti or New Horizons section. Scripted by Singh and based on a novel by Gurdial Singh, the movie is set in a Punjab village and follows the trials of a husband, wife, son and daughter as they get caught in a vicious web of events.

Last year, Venice did include in its programme Tamil director Mani Ratnam's "Raavanam".

Recently, the awareness of India's "other cinema" is also being seen amongst production houses. Firms like Reliance Big Pictures, UTV and even some in America are beginning to enter the non-Bollywood Indian market. Fox Star Studios will make two movies



"Angadi Theru" (Market) tells the story of about young workers in Chennai's super-store

for Tamil director A.R. Murugodoss, and Warner Brothers has signed an agreement with Chennai's Ocher Studios, headed by Tamil superstar Rajnikanth's daughter Soundarya, to make a series of films in the language. Disney's Telugu language fantasy-adventure "Once Upon A Warrior", hit the screens recently, and did well in areas that spoke the language. Kerala's "Traffic", on the queasy topic of organ transplants, attracted large audiences.

American companies understand the enormous appeal that south Indian language films hold among the masses, in regions where movie stars are treated as demi-gods and temples are sometimes built for them. Rajnikanth's fan-club base is far bigger than Bachchan's, but ironically it is Amitabh who is better known outside of India.

Cinema has also been a particularly effective route to politics in southern India. In Tamil Nadu for instance, Dravidian parties used the medium to create a buzz about caste inequalities in Hinduism in the 1950s and 1960s. That buzz became a scream, causing somewhat of a social upheaval.

Production houses in the U.S. know that the south Indian language cinema could be a virtual goldmine. The Tamil language movie industry is the second largest in India after Bollywood, catering to 70 million people worldwide, including those in North America and the UK. "Endhiran" (Robot) starring Rajnikanth, was released in Tamil, Telugu and Hindi, and the movie raked in \$88m in global sales, one of the country's highest grossers.

Admittedly, the success of "Endhiran" was driven by Rajnikanth, but south Indian cinema is keyed in to good directors and technical competence. Some of the studios in the south are the first in India to introduce new technology. Hyderabad's Ramoji Rao Studios were built along the lines of Rome's Cinecittà. At Ramoji, one can walk in with a script and walk out with the film cans. It even provides locales that range from a New York street to the Alps to Amsterdam's tulip gardens. Chennai is the home of A.R. Rahman, the Oscar-winning composer of Danny Boyle's "Slumdog Millionaire".

Hopefully, Bollywood's monopoly will not hold on for long.

## A FILM AGENDA

# HOLLYWOOD'S CANINES

MOHAMMED KHAN

While some believe the American dream of becoming rich can be achieved at gambling tables in Las Vegas or stock markets on Wall Street in New York, others look to Hollywood for money and fame. But succeeding in Hollywood is tough and the road to fame is full of frustrations and challenges. Talent is the passport to success, some might think, but success occurs only in exceptional cases. The Hollywood I am writing about is the Hollywood studios which are only subsidiaries of global institutions and have nothing to do with art and cinema. We can't deny that Hollywood is a window to the world of fame, but while success means wealth, failure leads to complete loss. Everybody talks about successful people, but I have chosen a story that reflects both success and despair.

In April 1996, the Scottish director Donald Cammell committed suicide by shooting a bullet in his head, causing slow bleeding before he died. While he was dying, he asked his wife to put a pillow under his head so as not to soil the carpet he laid on. Whilst his devastated wife rushed to contact the ambulance, Cammell picked up a small mirror to watch the expressions on his face as he left his life; he was a director until the end. Cammell's first interaction with cinema was "Performance" with Nicolas Roeg in 1970. The film dealt with transformations in British society and moral rebellion (such as sex and marijuana) amongst young people, and the film earned wide fame across the ocean in Hollywood.

During his flagrant beginning, Cammell announced his rebellion against the mainstream cinema. In 1977, he directed "Demon Seed", starring Julie Christie which tells the story of a woman impregnated by a computer. This science-fiction film widened the gap between the director and Hollywood. Despite its modest earnings, the film was popular amongst fans, and Europeans critics cited it as a work of art.

Nine years passed before Hollywood gave Cammell a chance with his thriller film "The White of the Eye". But Cammell's dark style imposed itself on the film, and since Hollywood eventually only cares about profit, Cammell was marginalised. After five years, he managed to find a producer for his film "Wild Side" in 1992 – and it was his last.



"Wild Side" maintained his unique style of creating an atmosphere of tension by mixing sex and crime; he introduced a film that seems traditional but is very special. The tragedy was not on the screen, but in real life when Cammell discovered his production company (New IMAG) ignored him and re-edited the film to highlight the sexual aspects. It was only distributed to video stores, leading to the frustration and depression that prompted Cammell to end his life. What he unfortunately did not live to see was that, four years after his death, another production company bought the rights of the film and edited "Wild Side" to represent Cammell's original vision.

Hollywood, which originated from the textile trade and ended up in the dreams trade, has grown up with the policy that the commission rate is the basic method of trading. Commissions have become the coronary artery of the film industry there, with fees for agents of artists and technicians, production companies and distribution companies, the owners of theatres and sometimes even lawyers. In the end, everything is settled by commission. So many governments have toppled because of money, but Hollywood lives and breathes money.

Another absurd example is the experience of British director Mike Figgis and his film "Leaving Las Vegas" which in 1996 earned actor Nicolas Cage an Oscar for his role. The budget of the film was about \$3m because the director filmed the movie in four weeks, and used a 16 mm instead of a 35 mm camera to save costs. Despite the huge success of the film, Hollywood maintained the film made no profits, saying that what they spent in marketing was double the film's budget. But the truth is that a series of commissions leaked into the pockets of many beneficiaries.