## ASIAN CORNER

## Bollywood stardust over festival



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

t's official, the king will soon be in Berlin. Badshah (or 'the king' as Bollywood actor, Shahrukh Khan, is often called) is all set to storm the German citadel of cinema, the Berlin International Film Festival that begins on 9 February 9.

Khan will fly into Berlin to promote his latest movie, "Don 2", directed by Farhan Akhtar, which screens at the festival. It is not surprising that the feature, produced by Excel Entertainment and Film Base Berlin and distributed by Reliance Entertainment, has been chosen, for a large part of the movie was shot in Berlin. Touristy locations like the Brandenburg Gate, Olympia Stadium, Ganderman Market and East Side Gallery will whizz past on the screen as Khan plots his moves against his enemy, Europe's powerful drug cartel. The producers decided on Berlin because they wanted a more realistic backdrop and not the usual picture postcard Swiss Alps or French chateaus.

Khan plays Don, a drug smuggler himself who angers the European mafia by undercutting prices. "Don 2", is a drag at 146 minutes that has been panned by most Indian critics. But who cares? The festival wanted it because Khan enjoys a

cult status in Germany, where the movie, made for US\$16.7 million and dubbed in German, opens theatre-wide on 16 February. Later, it will travel to Russia, Turkey, France, China and South Korea.

Will the German lisping Khan take Berlin by storm again? If one were to go by what happened in 2008 -when his Om Shanti Om played in the festival - it is quite likely that the Bollywood Badshah will attract hysterical crowds.

In 2008, German fans, mostly women, drooled over Khan and the country's media started singing a different tune. India was no longer riding on the bullock cart and one journalist even said that Khan was as popular as the Pope. "He is as popular as the Pope, but he (Khan) has more sex appeal," wrote Ekkehard Knoerer in the Berlin tabloid, Die Tageszeitung. The German daily, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, which was highly critical of India and Indians until the mid-1990s, when the world began to notice the South Asian country's economic and technological prowess, wrote that many people from all over Europe had descended on Berlin to see their favourite star.

Indian actors have always held a special fascination amongst foreigners. In the 1950s, Raj Kapoor, who often mimicked Charlie Chaplin, sang his way into the hearts of Russians. The words from his

song, "Mein Awara Hoon" (I am a tramp) were on just about every set of lips. In the mid-2000s, taxi drivers in Deauville (the city in France's Normandy renowned for its allied landings during World War II) gushed over how they had carted Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan across the region. In Marrakech, a whole square of people danced and clapped in glee watching Bollywood's Omkara (Othello). At the festival there, I could not believe when I saw young Moroccan girls dressed in saris and speaking Hindi (picked from Indian television serials and cinema) waiting for hours to catch a glimpse of Bollywood heroes.

Such is the power of Indian cinema. In recent times, Bollywood, and even the cinema inform other parts of India, has caught the fancy of major Hollywood studios like Warner Brothers, Colombia and Fox, who have begun to produce Hindi and other Indian language works.

What is more, Indian cinema has begun to inch outside expat groups in North America and parts of Europe. In the Middle East, Indian movies open a day earlier than they do in India. Aishwarya Rai remains the darling of Cannes, director Anurag Kashyap serves on the Venice jury, and actors like Irrfan Khan have begun to feature in Hollywood works like "Life of Pi", by Ang Lee.