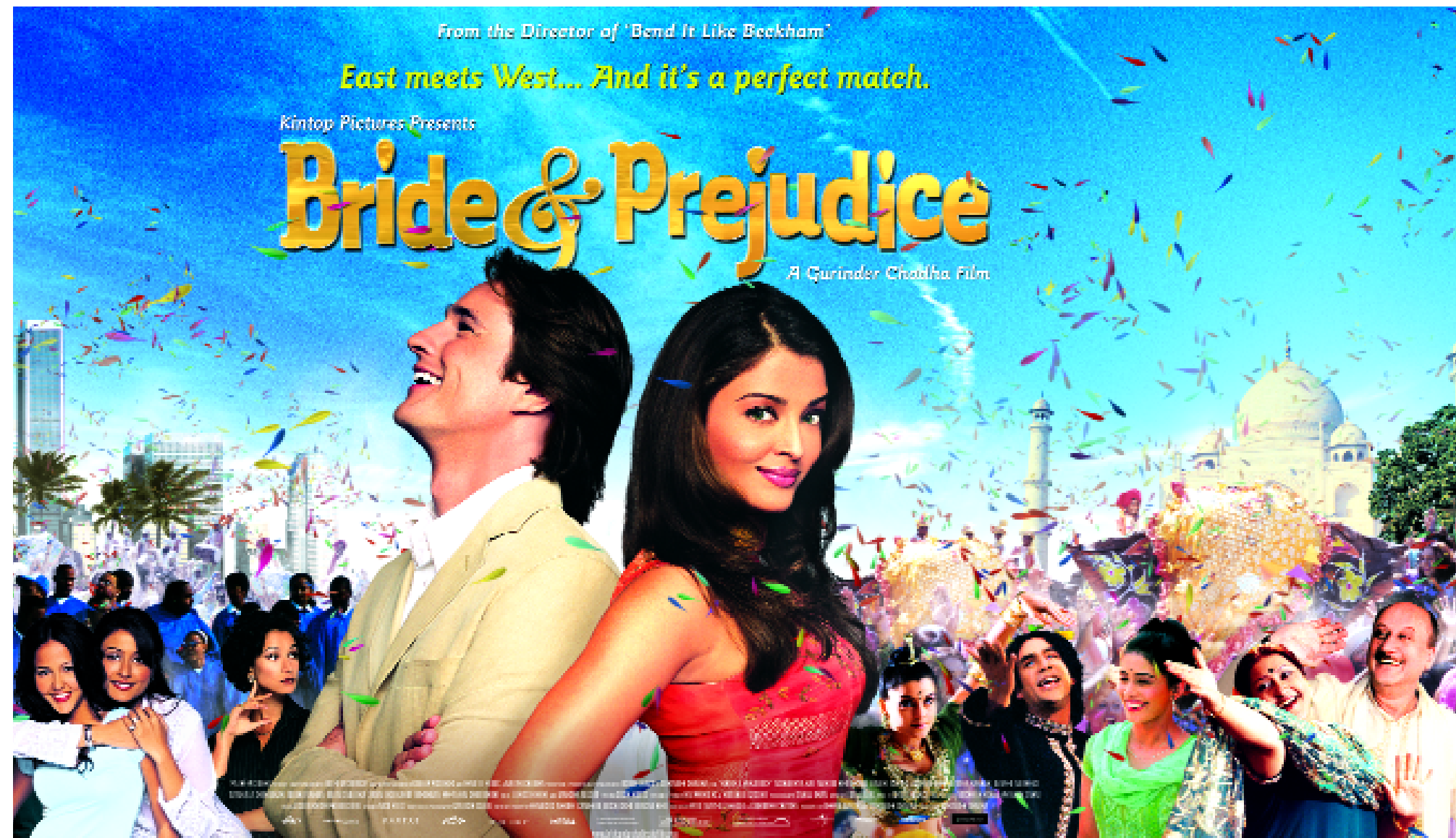


Hollywood Eyes Indian Cinema

The world's largest movie industry is in the midst of change. It is corporatising, multiplexing and witnessing the entry of megabucks. Will Hollywood join the party? **Shilpa Bharatan-Iyer** reports.



BOX OFFICE LEVITATION: Superstar Amitabh Bachchan in his recent film, *Kyun Ho Gaya Na*

As in many parts of the world, across India too Hollywood evokes a strong emotive appeal. English may be just one among 16 major languages spoken in the country. But India's strong movie-going — and movie-making — tradition has ensured that Hollywood remains the benchmark for indigenous cinema.

Though every major trend that Hollywood set has been lapped up with gusto by Indian producers, Hollywood traditionally displayed little interest in the Indian market. But, now, all that is changing. In an effort to increase their global revenue earnings, Hollywood companies are looking afresh at business opportunities in India.

Until recently, Hollywood distribution companies were content with distributing films produced by their US studios and by other producers which they had taken for distribution. But they have moved from just handling such English productions to mainline Hindi and regional language films too.

Columbia TriStar has tested three diverse markets. Prime among them is the huge Hindi cinema, or Bollywood market, with its pan-India appeal. The term 'Bollywood' is a takeoff on 'Hollywood' and coined by the Indian film buffs to refer to Hindi films made by producers in Bombay, the cradle of Indian cinema, now renamed Mumbai.

Next was the Punjabi film market — mainly confined to the northern parts of India — and the Bengali film market, which is centered around eastern India. 20th Century Fox, for its part, has preferred to confine itself to distributing Hindi-language,

Bollywood films with their pan-India appeal.

While executives of the Hollywood studios remain tight-lipped about their future plans to enter the co-production arena, long-time industry watcher, Indra Mirani, editor of *Box Office* magazine, opines, "I definitely think that it is a prelude to actually co-production of Indian films. But, then, at this point I must emphasise that the money in the market has to be lucrative enough for them to actually bother with making a film that appeals to Indian sensibilities."

Though Hollywood is synonymous with cinema, it may come as a surprise that India is the biggest producer of films in the world. India's largest and most famous brand of cinema is the Mumbai-based Bollywood film industry, which produced 246 Hindi films in 2003 and grossed just over a billion dollars in revenues. India accounts for 73 per cent of the Asia / Pacific admissions currently estimated at \$ 2870 million. Due to its low-priced tickets, the box office market, though relatively small in India, has more than 22 times the admission in China.

The other large film production centres are the southern cities of Chennai, Hyderabad and Kochi, which cater to audiences in the languages of Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam respectively.

To be sure, Bollywood has a long history, almost a century long. Its affair with the silver screen began in the silent era with R G Torney and N G Chitre's 1912 production *Pundalik*. The following year, Dada Saheb Phalke produced the first full length silent feature film *Raja Harishchandra*. The first movie with synchronised talking was in



COLUMBIA TRISTAR

1931, Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*. And, then, in 1953, Bollywood embraced colour with Sohrab Modi's *Jhansi ki Rani*.

Bollywood's hallmark is a kitsch of love and romance musicals with generous doses of filial devotion, sacrifices, etc. Such fare is avidly lapped up not only in India — where producers of regional cinema make clones in their languages — but also in West Asia, Russia and parts of Africa. Even Hollywood has its share of the faithful; prominent among them being directors Steven Spielberg and Baz Luhrmann. The latter paid a memorable tribute to the Bollywood style of filmmaking with his acclaimed *Moulin Rouge*.

Despite the size of the Indian movie business, India remained a stepchild of the Hollywood circuit until about four years ago. Audiences had to wait for a minimum of six months before a major Hollywood film was released in India. Some films took about two years to swim through the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Hollywood began taking a closer look at India some years ago when it had to fight the 24-hour television channels, and the friendly neighbourhood video distributor, for eyeballs. The mass television audiences were clued on to the latest offerings from Hollywood, and began demanding the latest releases which were now available in convenient VCD/DVD format, thanks to the progress of technology.

So, to survive, Hollywood majors were forced to rework their somnolent business strategies. To cash in on the worldwide hype a release generates at the time of its commercial release, they began bringing major releases to India just a few weeks after their worldwide launch. Now, several releases, such as the recent *Matrix Revolutions*, are routinely launched in India alongside the rest of the world.

After streamlining their imports and distribution network, Hollywood companies decided to enlarge their share of the entertainment market revenues. While they were hitherto releasing Hollywood films in the original English version, the humongous market in Hindi and other regional languages remained untapped. Sensing a market opportunity, the Hollywood companies have begun releasing their films in several dubbed languages.

These dubbed versions have proved to be extremely popular with the non-English speaking masses of India. And their wide

RAKING IN THE RUPEES: The Hindi poster of Spider-man 2 which was a blockbuster in India

THE MULTIPLEX PHENOMENON



CATERING TO NICHE METRO AUDIENCES: Mumbai's new Inox multiplex

IN A COUNTRY where movie watching is almost a religion, theatres in cities were going to seed in the past decade as it was becoming uneconomical to maintain them. Most cinema halls, which were

built in the 1940-50s, had lost their appeal to the more sophisticated and upwardly mobile generation which preferred smart theatres with eating and other entertainment facilities. It was a

complete going-out experience that they were now seeking.

Enter the new brigade, such as Adlabs, a traditional film processing unit which has gone public, and film production company Shringar. They have built multiplexes with several amusement options; so going to the multiplex becomes a complete family experience and so much more fun than mere movie watching. Currently, Mumbai has 38 multiplex screens.

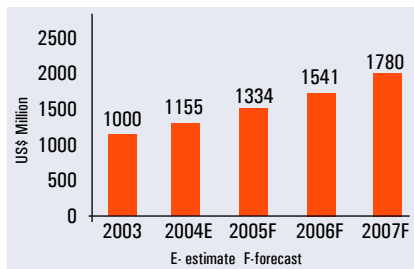
Along with these smaller capacity multiplexes has come the opportunity to make movies for smaller niche audiences. This kind of film — made in a tighter budget and time frame — caters primarily to sensibilities of a metro audience. Multiplex cinema has given fresh directors, and actors, the opportunity to explore different themes. Multiplex cinema often depends on content rather than star-power to pull in audiences.

appeal has resulted in enhanced box office revenues. Columbia TriStar, which handles the distribution for all Sony pictures, hit pay dirt with multi-lingual versions of the blockbuster *Spiderman*. It raked in revenues of \$ 6 million. This was much more than revenues from English prints. Its sequel *Spiderman 2* grossed \$ 7.44 million. Similarly, *Godzilla* — one of the early multi-lingual releases — also grossed over \$ 6 million.

Apart from commerce, there have been other reasons also for the discovery of India by Hollywood. Among them has been the fact that, in the past three years, several moviemakers who were hitherto running private fiefdoms, decided to corporatise their operations and go public. Companies like Mukta Arts — headed by helmsman Subhash Ghai who has been famous for his extravaganzas — and who has consistently produced good films, went in for an IPO. Sahara Media Communications, K Sera Sera Productions, Lucky Star Entertainment are other corporate players.

The face of the business has also changed with business houses investing in the production of films. An associate company of the \$ 6 billion Tata Group

Filmland's Revenues



Source: Industry estimates

produced two films in 2003. Now, the third largest business group in the country, the \$ 2.5 billion A V Birla group's Applause Entertainment, will soon be producing its maiden venture, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Black*.

If film production has seen a qualitative change, so has the last link in the chain — exhibition. With land prices in cities rocketing, theatres have given way for multi-screen cinemas, or multiplexes. These have smaller seating capacities and have, in turn, spawned the production of films for niche audiences.

Such developments have resulted in many young first-time movie directors blazing their small-scale endeavours on the silver screen — a scene not far removed

from the efforts of independent film-makers in Hollywood in the '50s, which broke the stranglehold of the large movie studios in the business.

The radical change in the movie-making business in India is being closely watched by the Hollywood companies; indeed, they are participants in the process of change. The projection is that by 2025, the largest audiences in the world will be in China and India. And India already has more speakers of the English language than any country. Speculation has been rife that the Hollywood majors will soon get into co-productions in India. Yet, they are tight-lipped on their future plans.

While actual co-production activities might take time to fructify, there are straws in the wind. Harvey Weinstein of Miramax visited Gurinder Chadda as she was shooting her *Bride and Prejudice*. While this part of his visit is well known, what was kept under wraps was the tête-à-tête Weinstein had with director Karan Johar; the man behind India's two biggest blockbusters in as many years — *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*.

As a visiting PR man from Los Angeles, Rex Weiner, said "Nothing Weinstein does is ever done quietly or without reason." 🌈