

## India projects its 'soft power' through Bollywood

Almost a century after film pioneer Dadasaheb Phalke made 'Raja Harishchandra' in 1913, the Indian cinema and entertainment industry has spread its wings worldwide - not just winning accolades from its widely dispersed diaspora and international audiences and earning huge profits abroad but also luring foreign investment.

Billed as the world's largest film industry, churning out more than 1,000 movies a year, Hindi as well as other Indian language films like Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, etc are being premiered simultaneously in the country and across the globe. While presenting the budget this year, Finance Minister P. Chidambaram described the entertainment industry as India's 'soft power' - the expression coined by Harvard economist Joseph Nye to describe a nation's cultural assets.

From the time Phalke first visited England in 1912 to scout for equipment to make his films and visited again in 1914 to organise trade shows for his movies, Bollywood is now throwing its weight in the global village as the Indian movie and entertainment industry grows at a phenomenal rate.

While Ashutosh Gowariker's 'Jodhaa Akbar' was released in 26 countries and 1,100 screens worldwide, Aamir Khan's 'Taare Zameen Par' was released with 385 prints. Sony released about 600 prints of Bollywood musical 'Saawariya' in India and 900 more globally.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 'Saawariya', starring newcomers Ranbir Kapoor and Sonam Kapoor, marked a new beginning for Bollywood. It was the first film co-produced and distributed by a major Hollywood studio, Sony Pictures.

According to entertainment website Hollywood Reporter, 'Saawariya' was released internationally in 13 markets and outperformed Tom Cruise's 'Lions for Lambs', grossing more than \$5 million in the first week of its release late last year.

Although Hindi movies have not entered the foreign drawing rooms abroad, they have started catching the attention of the Western media and gradually journeying beyond the diaspora.

When 'Saawariya' opened in 85 theatres in the US and Canada, the press labelled it as a visually enchanting extravaganza.

'Eye and ear candy for fans of Indian musical cinema, it is 2 hours 11 minutes - bracingly compact by Bollywood standards - of wide-screen close-ups, fanciful sets, colourful costumes, bellybuttons, almost-kisses and 10 pumped-up, achingly sweet songs,' wrote A.O. Scott, a film critic for The Times.

The Los Angeles Times headlined its review of 'Saawariya' as 'Bollywood grace - in a crazy way'.

Over the past decade, Bollywood has become a lucrative market for foreign investors too with the Western world's perception of the Hindi film industry undergoing a change. Today it recognises the worth of this Rs.100-billion (\$2.5 billion) industry set on a fast-track growth.

According to Hollywood trade magazine Variety, Hollywood investors are now 'reassessing their previous cool attitude' towards India and major players like Viacom, Universal, Dream Works and

Warner Bros. prefer to invest in the Indian entertainment industry, compared to China.

Although 'Saawariya' was not a blockbuster, international investors continue to be upbeat about entering India's film trade. Sony has signed an agreement with Eros International, one of the leaders in the market, under which they plan to make four to six Indian films a year.

Major Hollywood studios, like Viacom, NBC, Universal and Dream Works, besides Warner Bros., Sony and Disney, have already made sizeable investments in India's entertainment sector.

While China is still wary of allowing foreign companies significant stakes in its entertainment sector, Indian entertainment corporate entities are welcoming foreign direct investment (FDI) and entering into joint business deals with their foreign counterparts with a vengeance.

Warner Bros., for example, recently called off a deal it had signed with a Chinese production firm. Media baron Rupert Murdoch put it succinctly when he told Variety: 'Trying to build an entertainment business in China is simply too hard.'

Hollywood media giant Walt Disney Company is poised to invest Rs.13.14 billion (\$330.4 million) in two UTV group firms.

Prithvi Nandy Communications Ltd (PNC) has struck a Rs.1.8 billion (\$45 mn) deal with DQ Entertainment (DQE), one of the world's leading animation and gaming production companies, to co-develop and co-produce six animation movies over the next three to four years.

PNC had also signed a five-movie deal with Motion Pixel Corporation (MPC), a Florida-based animation company that has its animation studios, Estudio Flex, in Costa Rica.

Viacom - which controls Paramount Pictures - and Indian television entrepreneur Raghav Bahl have created a new movie investment fund to capture 20-25 percent of the Bollywood market. Already talks are on for the production of four big budget films.

With the changing global business environment, Disney too has changed its international strategy with content more geared to local markets, rather than selling its US products the same way in each international market.

Following Sony Pictures, Walt Disney Co has signed a joint venture deal with Yash Raj Films to make animated films. The venture will make at least one animated film a year.

Top Hollywood star Johnny Depp is expected to star in US-based Indian filmmaker Mira Nair's 'Shantaram'. Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan too will play a vital role in it. Depp's presence in an Indian movie is widely perceived as a sign that Bollywood has gone global.

Some individuals too are making a credible effort and taking the Hindi film industry to a greater height.

Music composer A.R. Rahman first had a successful stint with the 'Lord of the Rings' musical on London's West End and recently Sanjay Leela Bhansali directed the 1923 opera ballet 'Padmavati', written by Albert Rousselan, for the prestigious Theatre Du Chatelet in Paris.

Not only that, the West appears to be increasingly welcoming Bollywood stars. First it was Mallika Sherawat for 'Unveiled', then Akshay Kumar was taken for 'Australian Bandstand', Salman Khan featured in 'Marigold' and recently Aishwarya Rai finished working in 'Pink Panther'.

And not to forget Shilpa Shetty's big victory on Britain's reality show 'Celebrity Big Brother' in 2007.

Among all the Indian stars, it is Shah Rukh Khan who is making a big impact abroad. According to a report, he is recognised by 3.2 billion people across the world while only 2.7 billion know Tom Cruise.

Tom Cruise starrer 'Lions for Lambs' released about the same time as Shah Rukh's 'Om Shanti Om'. While 'Lions for Lambs', made at a budget of \$35 million, garnered \$10.3 million in 45 markets in its opening weekend, Shah Rukh's movie grossed \$19 million worldwide in its opening weekend.

The Bollywood Badshah's star power was more than evident when people from across [Europe](#) descended on Berlin to see their favourite star making an appearance at the Berlinale for the screening of 'Om Shanti Om'. His popularity was even compared to that of the Pope.

Early this month, veteran Bollywood actor Anupam Kher launched a London chapter of his Actor Prepares, making it Britain's first official Bollywood acting school. The school, to be based in the West London neighbourhood of Ealing, will charge students a steep 6,000 pounds for a three-month course.

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