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Bollywood make-believe rules the world

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CONAKRY is the capital of the Republic of Guinea, a little known nation in West Africa. Imagine Kuala Lumpur in the Fifties - that is how Conakry looked like.

You may think in a former French colony the best known movie stars there would be Gerard Depardieu, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Catherine Deneuve, Sophie Marceau or Charlotte Alexander. Wrong.

The most recognisable faces there were Hindi film stars Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgan and Kajol.

I discovered this when I was covering an official visit of our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad there a few years ago.

Some businessmen I met at the only three-star hotel in the capital came from neighbouring Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Burkina Faso. They, too, were more familiar with Hindi stars and films like Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, Taal and Baadshah at the time.

Remember, these countries are not part of the traditional "Indian belt". Elsewhere, people of Indian descent are the fastest growing diasporic communities in the world. There are some 11 million who have settled outside India.

These people are the target of Bollywood, the incredible dream machine and make-believe world known the world over as the Hindi film industry.

According to Vijay Mishra in his ground breaking study, Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire, some 900 films are shown every year in 13,000 predominantly urban cinemas in India, viewed by an average 11 million people daily and exported to at least 100 countries.

Since Raja Harishchandra, the first Hindi film was made in 1913 until now, Bollywood has produced some 19,000 movies. By 1983, it was India's sixth largest industry, valued at RM2.2 billion annually and employing some 300,000 workers directly.

Today, Bollywood employs more than two million people. Theaters worldwide sold some 3.6 billion tickets for Bollywood movies last year, compared to only 2.6 billion for movies from Hollywood.

According to Mishra, the dream culture in Bollywood is one built around a (male) North Indian Hindi-speaking subject, hardly representative of the 1.3 billion people who call India "home".

What is important, he says, is that Hindi film production and reception is shaped by the desire for national community and pan-Indian popular culture.

Yet Bollywood movies transcend race, religion and culture. They are as popular in Iran as they are in Surinam. The Malays in Malaysia enjoy them as much as the Japanese in Japan. When the Taliban lost power, the first sign of freedom was manifested by video tape peddlers selling Hindi tapes in the streets of Kabul.

The world was introduced to Hindi movies by such memorable films as Awara, Shree, Kismet, Upkar, Gunga Jumna, Mother India, Sangam and Sholay since the 1930s.

There is such a thing as a sure-fire formula for success in these film. Take Sangam, for instance. Two childhood friends fall for the same girl, and one of them has to make a sacrifice.

Look at any of the movies produced today - Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, Dil To Pagal Hai and Dil Chalta Hai - it is the same story retold differently.

Hindi film industry hardly reinvents itself. The movies are still

musical extravaganzas, no less.

If the movies are to be believed, India is a remarkable country where almost everyone sings and dances at the slightest provocation and in almost every situation.

Not only passionate lovers but grieving mothers, dejected sons, even men whose muscles put Sylvester Stallone to shame, burst into song-and-dance numbers.

Total strangers suddenly dance in perfect unison. They sing and dance around trees, in temples, on camel back, even on moving trains. Keep count; there will be at least five costume changes and 10 separate locations for a single song.

Do not bother about originality. You will see a Bollywood version of Reservoir Dogs (Kante), The Champ (Rishtey) and What Lies Beneath (Raaz) in no time. If The Matrix and Charlie's Angels rewrote the ways fighting scenes were choreographed in movies, you will soon see actor Akshay Kumar doing the Matrix-style flip in Awaara Pagal Dewane. Perfect gentlemen can turn into killing machines and lusty damsels in distress can put Datuk Michele Yeoh to shame with their karate chops and kicks.

You need only read the section on "Readers Don't Digest" in the movie magazine Filmfare to understand how continuity and common sense are often discarded for creative license. Shah Rukh Khan did not even bother to learn playing a violin to prepare him for the role of a violin teacher in Mohabbatein.

But Merryll Streep could play the violin in any orchestra after preparation for her role in Music of the Heart and Robert De Niro could play a saxophone in any Las Vegas hotel after his role as saxophonist in New York, New York.

Imagine the sets for Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham and Mohabbatein. You will see them only in movies. Or the brothel in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas.

At RM38 million, the much-hyped film is reported to be the most expensive Hindi film ever made. But even the star powers of Shah Rukh Khan, Ashwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit could not save it.

Many more films tanked. Reports say only nine films were considered box office hits in 2000, 14 in 2001 and 10 in 2002.

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