

Chapter 4: Culture and Food

India is an immense cultural smorgasbord. When a foreigner visits the country, they can be overwhelmed by the sensation. From every direction there is the sound and smell of unfamiliar music, dance, films and food. It is certainly too much to absorb in a single business visit, though this chapter aims to give a flavour of what to expect.

One thing you can't avoid on a busy schedule is the food. Eating is essential for everyone. Though it is possible to avoid Indian food in the major cities, it is not advisable as the local food is too good to resist. During a business trip you may have little time to absorb some of the other cultural influences, however make time to open your eyes if you can. India is certainly worth it.

Bollywood

India leads the world in film production with an output of more than 800 feature films a year. The Mumbai-based Hindi-language film industry, known as Bollywood (a contraction of Bombay and Hollywood), produces at least a quarter of these Indian movies. The remaining 600 or so are regional films in languages such as Tamil, Telugu or Kannada.¹

Based on output alone, Bollywood far exceeds Hollywood, however almost all Bollywood films lack a Hollywood production budget. In his analysis of the industry for potential investors, George Darley-Doran notes: "The total aggregate budget of every Indian film produced in 1998 did not equal the cost of that year's mega-blockbuster *Titanic* something in the region of US\$1bn. And in terms of value, India still accounts for less than 2% of the global entertainment market."²

However, we are all aware that production budget alone does not make a great movie. Writing on the demise of cinema in the west, Sukhdev Sandhu, author of *London Calling: how black and Asian writers imagined a city*, comments: "Anyone who has ever made the mistake of going to see *Charlie's Angels* or *Bad Boys II* will know the rage that mediocre films can induce. You stand outside the picture house afterwards feeling sullied and despoiled."³

Sandhu makes a valid point and recognises that many western writers and directors are now looking east for their inspiration. He said: "Certainly Bollywood, even though it is generating few new hits in India itself, is becoming more familiar to western audiences through such creolisations as *Moulin Rouge* and *The Guru*."

Many Bollywood films follow a predictable Romeo and Juliet type story where girl meets boy, family pressure forbids their relationship and after much angst it all ends in tears or joy. Along the way they get to sing and dance in various locations with a backing chorus and play with some gentle no-touch sexual allusions.

This formula has worked for many years though it has become a stereotype that many writers and directors are trying to escape as they reflect the realities of life in the 21st century. Films such as *Jism* and *Kwahish* are now redefining the boundaries of cinema in India.⁴ *Kwahish* features 17 kissing scenes and a young couple purchasing condoms on their wedding night. *Oops* is about a hidden world of male strippers and *Mumbai Matinee* features a 30-year-old man on a quest to lose his virginity. These new features are no longer limited to scenes of dancing around broad tree trunks with fast cuts to crashing ocean waves.

Some Bollywood stars are managing the transition to the world of western cinema. In 2002, former Miss World Aishwarya Rai was at the Cannes film festival to promote her movie *Devdas* and she returned again in 2003 to sit on the jury for international films. Rai is the reigning queen of Bollywood and has even been tipped as the first Indian female lead character in a James Bond movie.⁵ In 2004 Gurinder Chadha, director of *Bend it like Beckham*, wrote and directed an updated Indian version of the Jane Austen classic *Pride and Prejudice* (renamed *Bride and Prejudice*) with Aishwarya Rai in the lead role.⁶

Devdas is a good example of Indian cinema as it is to date the most expensive Indian-produced film, yet George Darley-Doran notes that the total cost was in the region of \$10m. The fee for Hollywood A-list stars is about double that figure, regardless of other production costs.

The director of *Calendar Girls*, Nigel Cole, has teamed up with London-based actor and writer Sanjeev Bhaskar to produce a comic love story about call centre agents in India who pretend to be English for their callers.⁷ Bhaskar is well known for his work on *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No. 42*. This film will take Indian culture and the issues regarding offshore outsourcing to a mainstream audience through humour.

These crossover movies will certainly bring Bollywood to a wider audience and some of the revered stars in India, such as Aishwarya Rai or Amitabh Bachchan may yet become household names outside of the Indian community. My local cinema in London (www.phoenixcinema.co.uk) has even started showing films such as *Veer Zaara* with Shah Rukh Khan and Preity Zinta. Regardless of where you live, who can resist the charms of Preity Zinta?

Music and Literature

Most popular music in India is linked to the film industry. Film songs are immensely popular and the production is as classy as that used by any non-Indian pop singer. In fact, Britney Spears has stepped into the Asian zone with her latest album, featuring Bhangra beats, sitar strings and finger cymbals woven into her synthesised pop tracks.⁸