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Hollywood Loves Bollywood

But why is it that India arrives only when the West says it does?

BY MIRA NAIR

We were gypsies, Sooni and I. Two sisters in saris surrounded by tuxedoed strangers. But instead of taking our Banjara bullock cart to the nearest water hole, we were in a limo en route to the Oscars, where our first film, *Salaam Bombay!*, was nominated as Best Foreign Language Film. It was 1989, before private media exploded in India, before the government even recognized filmmaking as a legitimate industry. Armed with just good wishes and some telegrams from family and friends, we spent a riotous few days in the luxury of the Beverly Wilshire, being taken to lunch by Billy Wilder, joking with Pedro Almodóvar and his transgendered entourage, gate-crashing Spanish and Danish parties, not really minding that we were neglected by our own country. When it came time for our award, Jacqueline Bisset and Candice Bergen tripped and stuttered through the foreign names. As Jackie and Candy announced the winner in another miasma of mispronunciation, Sooni leaned across and said, "India is still too far."

It was back then. In 1976, when I'd trekked across Radcliffe Yard to the Charles River to meet the person who would become my lifelong collaborator, screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala, we were among only a handful of Indian undergraduates at Harvard. As an Indian filmmaker in New York City in the 1980s, I would ride the Greyhound with my documentaries, showing my films to anyone who'd have me. I would have to tolerate audiences who would ask whether there was tap water in India and how come I spoke such good English. Later, raising money for *Mississippi Masala*, starring Denzel Washington, a studio head asked me to "make room for a white protagonist." Back home, my films were also alternative. Mired in the reality of the streets, faithful to the idea that truth is always stranger and more powerful than fiction, they were the opposite of Bollywood and I was an outsider. The publicity campaign for *Salaam Bombay!* was a horse-drawn carriage stuffed with the street kids from the film, re-enacting scenes through megaphones. The breakthrough was *Monsoon Wedding*—an intimate family flick, a love song to my Delhi and an ode to *masti*, the Punjabi intoxication with life. I wanted to capture my India, a place that has always lived in several centuries at once, an India of cell phones and peacocks, where housewives play the stock market, Cuban cigars are savored, and a marigold-eating tent-man reinvents himself as an event manager only to be undone by love. Little did I know then that people from Iceland to Hungary to Southern California would claim the Vermas as their family, and our wedding as theirs. Released in 2001, *Monsoon Wedding* won several awards and is still one of the highest-grossing foreign movies ever in the U.S.

That film was followed by *Lagaan* and *Bend it Like Beckham*—two breakout hits by fellow Indian directors—and by my own movie, *Vanity Fair* with Reese Witherspoon. Today Bollywood is on as many screens in Times Square as in Jackson Heights. The literary world has learned to pronounce Vikram and Amitav and Jhumpa, and an Amrita Sher-Gil can fetch as much as a Warhol at auction. A click on the Internet instantly conveys the burgeoning scope of South Asian cultural confidence, yielding details of hundreds of art galleries, concerts, readings, plays and indie films. When I was invited back to Harvard for a South Asian night in 2001, I was ushered into a hall brimming with 1,500 heads of shiny black hair. "They'd better be careful," I quipped. "Soon this country will be run by people who look like us."

But the real question is: Why is it that India arrives only when the West says it does? The reality is our movies have nourished half the world for a century, as every Russian cabdriver in

Manhattan will tell you. Plus, if the West is now waking up to our energy and confidence, will we be tempted to change? Will Oscar fever mean we temper our spice to suit Western palates? Will the few Indian actors and directors cherry-picked by Hollywood shove the *khadi* and brocade under the carpet and make chick flicks on 5th Avenue?

The key to every seesaw is balance. For me, that means Harry Potter, no, a feature documentary on the Beatles in India, yes. My latest film is based on *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel of migration and displacement, which is itself a seesaw between two great cities, New York and Calcutta. Appropriately the film will premiere simultaneously in both cities in November, with a sophisticated marketing strategy and no horse carriages in sight. For my next film, *Gangsta M.D.*, Hollywood will, for the first time, pay good money to buy rights from Bollywood, transplanting to Harlem the beloved story of a Bombay gangster, Munnabhai, who pretends to be a doctor when his parents visit.

The brilliant thing is that there's room for all of us—for our four-hour Bollywood extravaganzas and for my independent work—because we come from a place whose heart is as big as the ocean. And to those who worry about us filmmakers becoming more international than Indian, I say this: It is because my roots are so strong that I can fly.

Indian director Mira Nair lives in New York City. Her latest film, *The Namesake*, will be released in November