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## Films

### Beyond Mumbai's Melodramatic Mishmash

Bollywood may seem like 100% Indian, but there's plenty of great cinema outside it



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There is cinema beyond Bollywood as there is life after Bombay became Mumbai – though mercifully Bollywood has not flown out of this renaming roulette. For several years now, Bollywood has become stiflingly synonymous with Indian movies, and the city's Hindi films are often considered – worse, even projected – as the only ones of consequence representing a nation of a billion plus people speaking innumerable languages and making movies in all of them.

Walk on the streets of Paris or Amsterdam or Berlin or New York or Melbourne and most people would invariably quiz you about Bollywood, seldom though about cinema from other parts of India such as Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu or Bengal. It is an Amitabh Bachchan or a Shahrukh Khan or an Aishwarya Rai from Bollywood who would get hearts fluttering and heads swaying. Not Rajnikanth, Kamal Hassan, Mammooty or Mohanlal, all superstars who often earn as much or even more than the Bollywood celebrities.

However, it was not always like this. For over three decades since the mid-1950s when Satyajit Ray's "Pather Panchali" (Song of the Little Road) opened up Indian cinema to the world (despite the monumental work being given a near-miss by the Cannes Film Festival jury that eventually honoured it with a minor prize) Bollywood remained fairly innocuous,

certainly outside Mumbai. Ray, Mrinal Sen and Buddhadeb Dasgupta from Bengal and Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Aravindan from Kerala were among a few who gained fame in foreign shores with their meaningful cinema. Indian critics like the late Iqbal Masud and Amita Malik, who just passed away at age 87, not only had a fascinating feel for sensible and sensitive movies, but were close to the leading directors of their time. Malik and Ray were on the first name basis, and Adoor still remembers his "friend" Masud with great affection and respect.

With Ray's death in 1992, a precious part of Indian cinema was lost. Although there were several interesting names who worked outside Bollywood or the city's big studios, there really was none who could command the kind of awe and attention that Ray did, with his six-foot-four-inch height and a booming baritone voice. Not that the others did not produce significant work, often auteur driven. But they just did not have the charisma of Ray and, frankly, there has not been another Indian director of such calibre.

It was this void that Bollywood capitalised on by weaving melody and drama into a melodramatic mishmash to mesmerise the globe. Bombay became the magic metropolis before it became Mumbai. When Cannes, arguably the queen of festivals, chose Sanjay Leela Bhansali's "Devdas" in 2002 as part of its prestigious official sections, the enthrallment seemed complete. Even French fans were delirious at the sight of Aishwarya Rai, the picture's leading lady who paraded around the French Riviera.

However, not everyone was hypnotised by the sheen and shimmer. Some understood that there was magnificent motion and movement beyond Mumbai's essentially Hindi cinema. In 2003, the Melbourne International Film Festival had a special section called Beyond Bollywood where I introduced Dasgupta's "The Tale of a Naughty Girl". There were half a dozen Indian entries there.

Germany's Stuttgart has been holding an annual festival of Indian films called "Bollywood and Beyond" since 2004. Last year saw a number of Hindi movies that were not typically Bollywood with songs and dances, chases and fights and venom and villainy. They formed part of an expanding group of films whose directors have made a concerted and conscious effort to break away from the time-tested formula. Their craft and treatment were quite different from the big-budget Mumbai dream products. And the Festival Director, Oliver Manh, kept emphasising that "Stuttgart is not just about Bollywood, but also about the cinema that rolls out of Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and so on".

The Stuttgart Festival opened with Umesh Vinayak Kulkarni's debut feature, "Valu - The Wild Bull". In Marathi, it is an entertaining, no doubt highly dramatised, account of a village and its problems. Though "Valu" is a comical tale of the villagers' attempt to capture a marauding bull, the film examines the secrets, the vanities and the conflicts that drive the society.

Deauville on the French Atlantic coast hosts a festival of exclusive Asian cinema every March, when Indian movies outside Bollywood are shown. Last March, Adoor's "Four Women" (Malayalam) - four stories poignantly painting their dreams and dilemmas - proved a big hit. This year, Nandita Das' "In Such Times", an incisive look at those brutalised by the 2002 Gujarat communal riots, will open the Festival. Also this March, the Fribourg Festival will screen Adoor's "A Climate of Crime" (Malayalam), set in pre-independent princely Travancore (now part of Kerala), and Girish Kasaravalli's "Gulabi Talkies" in Kannada that probes inter-religious disharmony in a tiny fishing hamlet.

These smaller festivals have undoubtedly done a world of good for non-Bollywood fare from a country that produces more than 1,000 films every year. In 2008, out of a total of 1,321 films a mere 248 were from Bollywood. Telugu cinema churned out 285 films, Tamil 175, Kannada 161, Marathi 116, Malayalam 86 and Bengali 66.

Despite this, Bollywood bullies the rest. Often, it uses its money and muscle to crush its poor country cousins, much like Hollywood's invasion of Europe and most of Asia that forced the French, Italian and Spanish to start a crusade to save their own cinema. Grand promotions, savvy public relations and astute business sense help Bollywood bigwigs to get plum exhibition slots in swanky multiplexes, and, thereby, big bucks, while achievers like Adoor, Kasaravalli and Dasgupta struggle to find distributors, sometimes even in their own territories. The opening of Nandita Das' debut work, though in Hindi, has been delayed by several weeks, because big Bollywood releases now have left little space for anything else.

It's evident Bollywood does not care, for it believes itself to be the only Indian cinema that matters. But if the experience of Stuttgart is anything to go by, this vanity may prove short-lived.

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