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Less bump and grind in Indian cinema

By Keya Acharya

BANGALORE - The voluptuous heroine playing a coy hide-and-seek game of love around a tree in Indian cinema has produced derisive scoffs from Western audiences and sophisticated film buffs at home and abroad.

But equally, the bump-and-grind routines accompanied by catchy tunes have fascinated a host of foreigners, from leaders like Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser to ordinary Arabs, Malays and non-Asians. The southern movie idol, Rajnikant, known for his

impossible stunts and dialogue deliveries in the Tamil language, has a fan following in, of all places, Japan.

But India's celebrated director, Shimit Amin, believes Indian audiences are ready for change. He blames Indians, specifically affluent expatriates and those of Indian origin who reside all over the world, for stifling the industry's creativity.

"Non-resident Indians are the worst audience for Indian cinema," says Amin, director of the film *Chake de! India*. "They want Indian cinema to look as it was when they left; they encourage the garish part of our industry. Meanwhile, the rest of India has grown and wants change," he said.

Chake de! India is about the members of an all-women's field hockey team pulling themselves together from grassroots scratch to international success under the motivation of their coach played by Indian superstar Shahrukh Khan.

The film, which has none of Indian cinema's usually loud and mawkish song-and-dance numbers and features 90 Australian players and over 9,000 Australian extras, unexpectedly won an Australian Best Film award at Sydney in October 2007.

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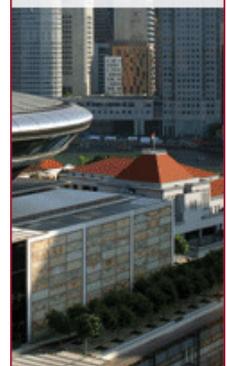
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International awards are unusual for Indian films because, despite being produced by the world's most prolific movie industry, they are generally not taken seriously by international film juries.

But India's new crop of film directors are "different". Young, talented, passionate and committed, resembling unsung writers instead of wealthy "filmies", money has not been their motivating force.

"I don't own a car, I don't own a house," says Anurag Kashyap, director of more banned than screened films, including the banned *Black Friday*, on the Mumbai terror bomb blasts of 1993. "But I own the largest personal library in the country," he says.

Indian television, on the other hand, has more money in its hands than it knows what to do with. With 463 different channels, many with collaboration from foreign television channels, India's TV industry, in its bid to compete with each other, is sometimes sensational, outrageous, flauntingly rich.

"Don't worry about the money at first," Rohit Jaisingh Vaid, chief creative officer of Contiloe Pictures which produces popular national television serials, told an audience of media students from the Bangalore-based Convergence Institute of Media, Management and Information Technology (COMMIT).

"It will come in truckloads in time; you won't know how to spend it. We have, you won't believe it, over 300,000 vacancies in the television industry today, and we're able to fill just 30,000 of these currently," Vaid told Inter Press Service (IPS).

But while Indian TV seems to compete within itself by sensationalism, Indian cinema is curiously turning closer to reality. "People living their lives and making movies on them is now a part of Indian cinema," says Amin. "There is a sizeable segment of Indian society that is snobbish about the garishness of Indian cinema, but will go to see a good movie if we can give it to them."

Anurag Kashyap's films seem to get banned for dealing honestly with sensitive current issues in India, driving India's Censor Board into nervous tizzies and the young director into debt. "I have almost cleared my debts," Kashyap told IPS. "I write scripts for regular movies and charge a 'packet' for them," he grins.

Kashyap, a zoology graduate whose latest film *Hanuman Returns* is an intelligent animated feature on the Hindu mythical monkey god which also deals with global warming, told IPS that Indian cinema has "absolutely no idea" about environmental awareness.

But nevertheless, Kashyap, like Amin, believes that realistic and well-made Indian cinema holds great potential. "We're moving into a golden period," he says. "There is now a space in India for art-house theaters to come up. These need to be tax-free with government incentives for encouraging audiences."

"We are gods in waiting," Rohit Vaid told the COMMIT students in Bangalore. "Just step out with that belief and it will work." Amin though, had a parting shot: "If you think you can become a superstar, it's terrifically impossible."

Meanwhile, it's debatable whether Egyptian, Arab and Asian audiences will take to the new incarnation of Indian cinema.

(Inter Press Service)

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