

cinema

India is all over Cannes

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The Cannes Film Festival will unroll its 64th edition this evening on the scenic French Riviera. Traditionally, the playground of the rich and the famous, where dashing men fell in love with gorgeous women, Cannes now plays cupid for movie lovers, thousands of whom fly into the city to be part of the 12-day celluloid celebration that runs till May 22.

In recent years, India has tried, sometimes sincerely, sometimes desperately, to be associated with this carnival of cinema. Having been rather unsuccessful in getting its films into the official sections of the Festival — just about a couple in over a decade — India has been striving to make its presence felt in other ways.

Through the jury, for instance. We have seen Aishwarya Rai there. First though with her movie, *Devdas* — chocolate boyfriend Vivek Oberoi in tow. Later, on the jury, followed by her long L'Oreal campaign that got her into Cannes year after year. She was the face of this beauty product, and she is coming this year as well — probably hanging on hubby Abhishek Bachchan's arm. Ash, as she is fondly called, has been as permanent a fixture on the Riviera as the Festival's famed red carpet that she never misses treading every May.

The men with cameras have not got tired of her, not yet, and their flashbulbs faithfully continue to pop at the sight of Rai.

We have also had Nandita Das on the jury, sober, sensitive and somewhat out of place in the midst of all that glitz. She did not like the idea of having to repeatedly tell journalists on the eve of her departure for Cannes that she was more concerned with work than wardrobe.

She was not descending into that city to catwalk on the Croisette or brandish her Banarasi brocade sari, but to do serious work — to judge cinema made by a whole lot of intelligent men and women who came from all corners of the earth.

I do not know whether the Festival had bargained for a woman juror to push designer wear down the dumps. Probably, Cannes suffered Miss Das in silence as she threw her silk and smile out of the window, and got down to dressing her handwritten notes.

Cannes is notorious for infusing its jury with an ample measure of glamour. This year, we have the Argentinian beauty, actress Martina Gusman, and attractive American star, Uma Thurman, on the nine-member jury to be chaired by the brilliant Robert De Niro. No Indian on the jury this summer. No Deepika Padukone or Katrina Kaif for the oomph factor.

If it is not the jury, India sneaks into this French festival through its film launches. Indian movie production houses, directors, actors, scriptwriters and, who knows, even

light-boys and spot guys, would love to see their work of labour being promoted at Cannes to the tinkle of wine glasses.

India has been making up for its rather pathetic show in the Festival's official cinema sections by launching a product or two every year. Few years ago, Reliance Big Pictures brought Rakesh Roshan, son Hrithik and Mexican actress Barbara Mori to Cannes, and at a lavish party hosted by debonair industrialist Vijay Mallya on an island off the city, the movie, *Kites* was promoted. It is another story that the Anurag Basu-helmed film bombed at the box-office, despite a massive and expensive PR exercise. Later, Hrithik and Barbara, rumoured to have been in love, drifted apart with wife Suzanne making sure that the two stayed as far as possible from each other.

Last year, two movies were propped up at Cannes. Mani Ratnam's Reliance produced bilingual *Raavan* in Hindi and *Raavanan* in Tamil were given all the publicity. Ratnam could not be there as he was busy giving the finishing touches, mixing music I think, to his work. But his wife, Suhasini, and the lead actors from the film, Bachchan, Vikram and Rai were in attendance.

But Cannes seems to be a bit of bad luck for Reliance. Ratnam's movies disappointed critics and audiences, with the Tamil version (with Vikram) doing marginally better than the Hindi *Raavan* though.

Shekhar Kapur was another Indian filmmaker who announced his *Paani* last year. The movie about the global water crisis would soon go on the floors, he said. To inject a dramatic Bollywoodish element, he mixed the highly polluted water from the slums of Dharavi in Mumbai with drinking water, and served it to journalists and others at the Press meet. I do not know how many people actually drank that water, but Kapur did sip it. The question is, was the water really from Dharavi?

This year, we are sure to know more about *Paani* as Kapur will be presenting his latest work there. In what seemed like a consolation prize for Indian cinema, a documentary produced by him, exclusively for the 64th edition, will screen out of competition. Titled *Bollywood, The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* its inclusion in the Festival at the very last minute must have evoked a sigh of relief from a nation which never ceases to boast that it is the world's largest producer of motion pictures.

Bollywood, The Greatest Love Story Ever Told began with a conversation between Festival chief Thierry Fremaux and Kapur, a member of the Festival's main jury in 2010. Why not make a movie that brings together the most wonderful moments in the hundreds of Indian musical films, with all their pageantry and dance? Indeed, it is the song and drama that once led to the coining

of the word, "melodrama" (melody plus drama), a description that aptly fits most of Indian celluloid works.

Some months after this conversation, *Bollywood, The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* popped out of the cans. It is a swirling and poignant montage in which Kapur, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra (*Delhi 6, Rang De Basanti*) and Jeff Zimbalist (an American documentary moviemaker best known for his *Favela Rising, The Two Escobars*, and *The Scribe of Urab?*) paint their tributes to Bollywood, the Hindi language cinema that emerges from Mumbai, a city where dreams fly and flounder.

This year, some of Mumbai's merchants, who help dreams soar and look the other way, when they sink, will be at Cannes, Anil Kapoor being one.

He may be pushing his upcoming project,

Cities. Roger Donaldson-directed *Cities* will be launched at the Cannes Market, and Clive Owens will star in it along with Kapoor.

A press release describes *Cities* as "a cautionary tale about greed and ambition that takes place on a global scale in three colliding story lines set in the exuberant months leading up to the Dow Jones all-time stock market high".

There is a New York-based hedge fund manager (Owen), who has everything he wants — money, sex and power — but he wants more. There is a young couple in London that just wants to buy their first home, something that seems impossibly out of reach; and finally, we have a Mumbai cop who fights corruption involving his colleagues (one of whom will be played by Kapoor) and property speculators.

Filming will begin this October in London, New York and Mumbai. Kapoor, best known internationally for his role in *Slumdog Millionaire*, will be next seen in *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol*.

As for other Indian stars, Saif Ali Khan, whose mother Sharmila Tagore was on the jury two years ago, will also be seen at Cannes, possibly in a Tom Ford suit that girlfriend Kareena Kapoor has insisted on. Sonam Kapoor, Mallika Sherawat, Frieda Pinto and Minissha Lamba are also expected to fly down. It may well be a merry march of Indians on the Croisette, and who knows with "gol-gappas" and "bhel-puri" liberally strewn all over.

Well then, can anyone dare say that India is missing at Cannes?

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✿ Indian director, actor and jury member Shekhar Kapur arrives for the closing ceremony at the 63rd Cannes Film Festival on May 23, 2010 in Cannes. This year, Kapur has produced the documentary *Bollywood, the Greatest Love Story Ever Told* especially for the festival.