

cinema

Big Brother Bollywood

The long shadow of the overpromoted Hindi film industry is hard to escape, rues **Gautaman Bhaskaran**



* Hindi film actress Neha Dhupia presents a creation by Indian designer Jaya Rathore during the Wills India Fashion Week Autumn-Winter 2010 in New Delhi in March. Designers in India have taken to getting Bollywood stars to model their clothes in a bid to increase the attendance figures.

The October Commonwealth Games in New Delhi will not have any Bollywood faces. Suresh Kalmadi, Chairman of the Games Organising Committee declared this the other day. The prestigious event will now have the face of sportsmen. What a blessed relief.

But a few weeks ago, Kalmadi was the man who had said that “we would go with a film (read Bollywood) star who will not charge us to play brand ambassador”.

The face that popped up immediately then was Amitabh Bachchan’s. No surprise here. Bachchan Senior has been exhibiting himself with little reason or restraint.

He has been promoting men’s suiting, health tonic, cement and just about anything else that can be sold. He has been Tweeting silly — blaming editors for son Abhishek’s poor performances — and throwing around comments, all in an effort to keep the floodlights on his face.

However, the committee felt a little later that a younger face would serve the sporty event better, and Akshay Kumar’s name was suggested. Big B’s ego must have been deflated.

I have personally nothing against Amitabh Bachchan, but I find it demeaning that Bollywood has been allowed take over our lives in a way that it suffocates us. Traditional forms like Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi

among others, and several folk arts have been borrowing Bollywood beat and steps in an effort to make the dances popular among the young.

Bollywood’s (of course blatantly copied by the other “-woods” in India) robotic movements on the floor, senseless lyrics and high-pitched background score seem to get people swaying today. Some feel that these alone will help endear traditional arts to a generation that has little patience or inclination for history and culture.

(The generation craves for fast food, faster music and still fast cars. It loves a form of entertainment that happens in a flash. Frames on the screen cannot pause to let you ponder. They have to flee, aided and abetted by a fidgety camera that shifts constantly. A classic example of this, that most people would be familiar with, is Danny Boyle’s *Shumdog Millionaire*, where the images move in death-defying motion.)

Bollywood has crept into many other areas. Walk into a salon, and one would, in all probability, be asked, whether one wants a Preity Zinta look or a Shah Rukh Khan haircut. (Of course, nobody mentions a Madhavan or a Padmapriya. They live in the south’s ‘backwaters’, but they are now trying hard to swim into the main river by acting in Hindi movies.)

Walk into a marriage reception, and invariably Bollywood numbers

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are being crooned by live bands or blasted out of huge speakers. It is not music to soothe your soul. It is noise to up your blood pressure, shatter your eardrums and shake you out of your sanity.

Fashion designers must have film stars walking the ramp during shows. Otherwise crowds will not come. The result: nobody looks at the dresses. I remember designer Tom Ford once telling me that he would not like to have very good looking models. “You know where the eyes would then wander off”, he quipped.

A reputable five-star hotel in Chennai wanted to invite top stars for the launch of my biography on Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Adoor would have been appalled by this. But, yes, the crowds would have made their way to the hotel, though not to listen to Adoor or me or even to buy a copy of the book, but to ogle the stars. I politely declined the offer.

Visit Mysore or Ooty or Mussoorie, and the local guide will tell you less about the palace’s or the garden’s history and more about the movie that was shot there. And he would rattle off the names of actors who had passed by the beautifully carved structures or the 100-year-old banyan tree!

Forty years later, guides in

Mussoorie still talk about how Shammi Kapoor and Asha Parekh sang and danced at the Park Hotel there.

Bollywood’s grip is almost vice-like. India has sent more than 40 pictures for a possible Oscar nomination since 1956, when the Best Foreign Picture category was established. Most India movies have been in Hindi, and the only three nominees — *Mother India*, *Salaam Bombay* and *Lagaan* have also been in that language. There have hardly been entries from other Indian states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh or Bengal.

Obviously so, because Oscar selection is made by a small panel set up by the Mumbai-based Film Federation of India. It has remained singularly oblivious of the fact that of the 1,000-odd movies India produces every year, a mere 250 or so come from Bollywood. The Tamil and Telugu industries, for instance, make as many films each, if not more.

Fly into Cannes, and walk into the India Pavilion, put up by the Union Government and others, and you would seldom find a poster of a Malayalam or a Tamil or a Bengali movie. This year at Cannes, renowned documentary filmmaker S Krishnaswamy, though officially invited, was largely ignored at the pavilion. Instead, “celebrities” like Shahnaz Husain and Arindam Chowdhury were feted and favoured. And, they have had nothing to do with cinema. Husain

is a beautician, and Chowdhury is a management guru!

The compere at the Pavillion’s inaugural function failed to even mention Krishnaswamy’s name, and horror of horrors, forgot to acknowledge the presence of Union Information and Broadcasting Secretary Raghu Menon. Not only was he sitting on the dais, but Menon understands cinema and is a keen student of it.

Last year, the India Pavillion opening show was hijacked by Abhishek Bachchan. Wife Aishwarya Rai has remained a permanent fixture at Cannes since 2002, when her *Devdas* was screened there.

A French film critic working for Reuters in Paris asked me whether India had no star other than Rai. The sarcasm was loud and clear.

This year, Venice will show Mani Ratnam’s Hindi version of his latest work, *Raavan*, though it has been widely accepted that the Tamil edition was far better. Last year, Venice had three works, and all were from Bollywood. I will not be surprised if an Italian critic were to ask me if India made only Hindi cinema. I am bracing myself for this shot of sarcasm.

But Bollywood and those who peddle its wares could not care less!

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