

*February 1, 2004*

---

## **Bollywood needs a new act**

For all our boosting of Bollywood as an international force, the world's largest filmdom will not cast a shadow, nor cause a ripple, at this year's Academy Awards. Dredging for a desi connection in the just-announced Oscar nominations, you come across a remote one. *My Architect*, nominated for best documentary, is partly shot in India. It is a story about the architect Louis Kahn, among whose designs is the IIM building in Ahmedabad.

Wait, wait, there is another Indian connection. One of the nominees for best actor is Ben Kingsley -- of "Gandhi" fame -- for his role as an exiled Iranian army officer in the film "In the House of Sand and Fog." Kingsley's original name, just in case you had forgotten, is Krishna Bhanji. He is half-Gujarati.

Incidentally, from the same film, Iranian actress Shoreh Aghdashloo is nominated for best supporting actress -- the first for Iran. Meanwhile, we are still palpitating over whether Aishwarya Rai will be cast in the next 007 film, and if she will kiss James Bond.

Wow, so much for world's biggest movie industry.

Films -- and the arts and entertainment in general -- are increasingly being recognized as major assets in the global war of ideas and influence. Soft power, they call it. For India, Bollywood would have to do much better than offer turgid tamasha to expats in U.K and USA and the diaspora in South Africa and Surinam. Think what an Indian movie that wins a clutch of Oscars can do to Brand India.

If brand building is a hard sell, think money. Movies are becoming humongous money earners on a scale unheard before. Of the 100 top grossing films of all time, 35 have come in just the last three years. In 2002, ten Hollywood films grossed over \$ 200 million each, raking in a combined

\$ 3 billion. The three-part Lord of the Rings, with bells and whistles, earned a staggering \$ 3 billion, the GNP of a small-sized country.

In contrast, Bollywood's best make teen (rpt teen) millions. Piffle.

In fact, for all the brouhaha about the animation industry in India, Bollywood is yet to even make a single decent children's film, a massive opportunity that lies unattended.

Hollywood, on the other hand, is feeding the segment till it gurgles with happiness. Fox raked in close to \$ 1 billion with the two Star Wars movies. Universal made \$ 400 million with ET (while we were debating if the story was filched from Satyajit Ray).

Those movies were grown uppy? Try this. Buena Vista made \$ 450 million from the two Toy Story films, \$ 312 million from The Lion King, and over \$ 1 billion from Aladdin, Tarzan, A Bug's Life, Pocahontas, 101 Dalmatians, Mulan and the evergreen Jungle book combined. Finding Nemo has made \$ 350 million (more than Infosys' profit last year) and is still going strong.

Why should Indian kids 5-10 year old be watching just Shrek or Monsters Inc on DVD? Isn't there a single Indian film maker capable of taking a stab at the many marvelous stories in Panchatantra? Or are we waiting for Disney and Pixar to do it – and then whine about intellectual property rights?

Running around trees trilling about love is fine, but it really is time for Bollywood to grow up (even with children's movies). It has the legacy, money and talent. It is limited only in by its vision and ambition. The million dollar mush it turns out just isn't enough. There are billions to appeal to – and billions to be made.

---