

June 11, 2006

China Bait

A couple of years back, a money changer in Shanghai startled me by bursting into Raj Kapoor's *Awaara Hoon* on recognising my Indian ethnicity. My efforts to return this cultural overture by whistling a few bars of *Erquan Spring Reflecting the Moon*, a soul-stirring Chinese tune, made no impression on him because Chinese youth seem to care little for their fine artistic tradition. The legacy of the Cultural Revolution, which decimated the arts, hangs heavy.

The encounter left me a little surprised because I had assumed the Raj Kapoor craze was mostly confined to Russia. But no, it appears Indian movies were quite the rage in China too. As late as the 1980s, a Chinese friend told me, she had watched a video of *Sholay* in Beijing. She vividly recalled Hema Malini singing on glass shards. More recently, *Lagaan* had a public release in Beijing. Bollywood DVDs, pirated of course, are easily available in China.

I was mulling all this while watching at a suburban Washington DC movieplex the interminably long *Fanaa*, which after the first hour held together by the incandescent *Kajol*, went steadily downhill in a mish-mash of song and subterfuge. As it turned out, a diplomat from the Indian Embassy was also at the movie that evening, and we commiserated with each other during the intermission, a luxury afforded only in Indian movies because of their length. "Two movies for price of one," he remarked sourly.

Fortunately for the movie and its makers, larger public taste is more rewarding than disparaging mandarins and hacks. The word out of India is that *Fanaa* is a box office hit, thanks I suspect in part to the publicity from efforts to muzzle it. I invited a Pakistani friend for the movie with the bait that it was being boycotted in Gujarat. "Is that so?" she hissed. "Then I'm coming."

Bollywood seems fixated in recent months with the theme of terrorism. Fanaa of course took it to a different level with nuclear triggers (a device that looked suspiciously like a hair trimmer), Kashmir etc. Now they are going further afield to Afghanistan with a movie called Kabul Express. I guess in due course we will get to Iraq and Zarqawi too.

But here's my \$ 0.02 suggestion to Bollywood -- Go East, my friends. My own sense is the big untapped market is China. Some months back I home-screened the movie Dil to Pagal Hain to my Chinese friends and lived to regret an overdose of Shah Rukh Khan for the next several days.

The Chinese make elegant movies, and anyone who has seen Zhang Jimou's masterpieces will admire his cinematic finesse. But my Chinese friends complain their movies lack the energy of good Bollywood movies (read song, dance and romance). "Ours movies are so bleak... it's all grey and when there is colour it is only red," one friend grumbled.

The world movie-making business is huge, estimated at around \$ 25 billion, and mostly driven by Hollywood. China, with over 5000 movie halls, is now considered a big market. Lately, studios such as Disney and Sony are backing Chinese potboilers. Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon raked in \$ 200 million and Stephen Chow's Kung Fu Hustle made \$ 100 million, lot of it in China.

By contrast, teen millions is a big take for Bollywood as it ignores the vast East Asian market. The first producer to drum up an Indo-Chinese romance on the lines of Veer-Zaara, I predict, will make a killing -- in China at least. I hope they will remember to send me a cheque.