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India  World



The controversial subjects of caste and teenage sex are explored in *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha*, the movie's director, Dibakar Banerjee, below

INDIAN CINEMA REVEALS A DARK SIDE



The country's new wave of directors are rejecting Bollywood's glitz for grittier, real-life themes. **Andrew Buncombe** reports

When the camera took their cutting-edge scenes to Dibakar Banerjee's latest film, the Indian director was not particularly surprised when they decided to tear and trim a controversial sex scene. But when they chose to exclude an episode in which one of the characters refers to the low caste of another, he was both stunned and disappointed.

"The objection in the room was caste," said Banerjee, whose film *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (Love, Sex And Betrayal) features Indian cinema's first, albeit shortened, sex scene. "They would rather than complaint is not done, but it is."

The Delhi-born Banerjee is one of a small clutch of directors who experts say represent an important new wave in mainstream Indian film-making, an industry that for decades has been obsessed with thin, mass-market productions featuring glamorous stars, glib costumes and extraordinary set-piece song-and-dance routines that almost always have a happy ending. For this new group, preferred subjects are sex and relationships, commercial and

caste turmoil, and the increasing divide between a thriving consumer class and the traditional rural poor – topics that rarely if ever feature in Bollywood. As one Indian reviewer said after watching Banerjee's latest film: "Half path, *Womans* to adulthood, Bollywood."

The 41-year-old Banerjee, whose film is to receive its international premiere tonight when it arrives at the first London Indian Film Festival, insists he has not made a conscious decision to reject the typical Bollywood formula. "I make the films I want to make and that fit into the commercial context of Indian cinema," he said. "It's not that I don't like Bollywood, but I did not want to spend my time on that. I'm trying to tell certain stories."

Those stories come from the turbulence created in a country that is being pulled and pushed in some of it, at least, undergoes rapid transition. The film was partly inspired by a notorious real-life "scandal" in which a 17-year-old from Delhi filmed his girlfriend performing a sex act and then distributed the video through his mobile phone. Banerjee said he was most struck by the dynamic between people who lived in booming large cities and those in the rural hinterland. "Films that

don't say anything are OK. They do serve a function," he said. "But if you looked back to 80 years' time and picked up a Bollywood film, I don't think it would tell you very much about what was happening."

Another of the directors whose work is being showcased, Mahesh Manjrekar, is also concerned with real stories. His movie, *City of Gods*, is set against the true backdrop of the painful 2008 strikes by Mumbai taxi workers and their subsequent struggle for survival. Once the mall owners decided the factories were unprofitable and decided to shut them down, they announced they would not pay the dues owed to the workers.

Like Manjrekar, he is not inherently opposed to the films of Bollywood but he says the plight of the Mumbai taxi workers is a story audiences have been waiting more than 20 years to hear.

"There is enough space for everyone. But realize: those have had to take a back seat because of the occupation," said Manjrekar, who is

also an actor – he recently played the role of a minister in Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*. "If you see the number of independent movies coming up and the number of job offers, somewhere you also hope that real cinema and real stories will also have a real future," he says.

A recent report by KPMG suggested that in 2009 the entire Indian film industry – is still far from Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai (Bollywood) and Kolkata also produce huge numbers of films – was worth \$2.5 billion. That is expected to grow by 9 per cent a year to reach \$3.5 billion by 2011.

Industry experts estimate around 10 per cent of the industry is based on independent productions. Yet independent directors and producers have long complained that the vast bulk of Indian films, and those which receive the most national attention, are Bollywood blockbusters featuring big-name stars such as Shah Rukh Khan and Amitabh Bachchan. "When questioned about the type of films he chose to appear in, Bachchan once grumbled in an interview: "It's called capitalist cinema. Why should somebody pay to see a film with poverty in it when there is poverty in their neighbourhood every day? People don't wish to

be reminded where they live. Nobody will pay to see a film like *On The Waterfront*."

Yet Tarun Arora, a leading film critic, said directors such as Banerjee and Manjrekar, as well as Anirudh Kashyap, whose movie *Day D* is also featured in the London festival, had shown that films could achieve both commercial success and critical acclaim, especially containing the low production costs of independent films, which rarely feature big names. "These films are a complete departure from what we have had in Bollywood," he said. "Bollywood is evolving, in terms of characters and storytelling. Mass audiences are not going to change overnight, but there is a process."

The organizers of the five-day festival are determined to prove to an international audience that there is more to Indian cinema than sequenced acts and high-octane songs. Carey Bevilacqua, the festival's director, said there had been a conscious effort to challenge the stereotype of what films from India could be. "We are trying to push down the barriers," said Bevilacqua, a fan of the celebrated late Bengali director Satyajit Ray. "These films do not have stars. They are strong stories, telling of modern life in India today."

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"The elephant in the room was caste," said Banerjee, whose film *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (Love, Sex And Betrayal) features Indian cinema's first, albeit shortened, sex scene. "They would rather that elephant is not there, but it is."

The Delhi-born Banerjee is one of small clutch of directors who experts say represent an important new wave in mainstream Indian film-making, an industry that for decades has been obsessed with thin, escapist productions featuring glamorous stars, glitzy costumes and extraordinary set-piece song-and-dance routines that almost always have a happy ending. For this new group, preferred subjects are sex and relationships, communal and

caste turmoil, and the increasing divide between a thriving consumer class and the traditional rural poor - topics that rarely, if ever, feature in Bollywood. As one Indian reviewer said after watching Banerjee's latest film: "Hell yeah. Welcome to adulthood, Bollywood."

The 41-year-old Banerjee, whose films is to receive its international premiere tonight when it launches the first London Indian Film Festival, insists he has not made a conscious decision to reject the typical Bollywood formula. "I make the films I want to make and that fit into the commercial context of Indian cinema," he said. "It's not that I don't like Bollywood, but I did not want to spend my time on that. I'm trying to tell certain stories."

Those stories come from the turbulence created in a country that is being pulled and pushed as some of it, at least, undergoes rapid transition. The film was partly inspired by a notorious real-life "scandal" in which a 17-year-old from Delhi filmed his girlfriend performing a sex act and then distributed the mini-video through his mobile phone. Banerjee said he was most struck by the dynamics between people who lived in booming large cities and those in the mud-but hinterland. "Films that

don't say anything are OK. They do serve a function," he said. "But if you looked back in 30 years' time and picked up a Bollywood film, I don't think it would tell you very much about what was happening."

Another of the directors whose work is being showcased, Mahesh Manjrekar, is also concerned with real stories. His movie, *City of Gold*, is set against the true backdrop of the painful 1980s strikes by Mumbai textile workers and their subsequent struggle for survival. Once the mill owners decided the factories were unprofitable and decided to shut them down, they announced they would not pay the dues owed to the workers.

Like Banerjee, he is not inherently opposed to the films of Bollywood but he says the plight of the Mumbai textile workers is a story audiences have been waiting more than 20 years to hear.

"There is enough space for everyone. But realistic films have had to take a back seat because of the escapism," said Manjrekar, who is

also an actor - he recently played the role of a mobster in Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*. "If you see the number of multiplexes coming up and the number of pot-boilers, somewhere you also hope that real cinema and real stories will also have a real future," he says.

A recent report by KPMG suggested that in 2009 the entire Indian film industry - in addition to Mumbai, Hyderabad (Tollywood), Chennai (Kollywood) and Kolkata also produce huge numbers of films - was worth \$2bn (£1.3bn). That is expected to grow by 9 per cent a year to reach \$3bn by 2014.

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Yet Taran Adarsh, a leading film critic, said directors such as Banerjee and Manjrekar, as well as Anurag Kashyap, whose movie *Dev D* is also featured in the London festival, had shown that films could achieve both commercial success and critical acclaim, especially considering the low production costs of independent films, which rarely feature big name stars. "These films are a complete departure from what we have had in Bollywood," he said. "Bollywood is evolving, in terms of characters and storytelling. Mass audiences are not going to change overnight, but there is a process."

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