

## FROM BOMBAY TO BOLLYWOOD: 50 YEARS OF INDIAN CINEMA

“India has done as much for the movies as America, and there are as many great Bollywood films as there are great Hollywood films. Not to have seen **MOTHER INDIA**, **PYAASA** or **SHOLAY** is not to have seen **GONE WITH THE WIND**, **CASABLANCA** or **STAR WARS**.”-- Scott Jordan Harris, Rogerebert.com

### A Brief History of Indian Cinema

Cinema came to India in 1896, a mere six months after the first film premiered in Paris. Adoption of the art form was rapid and prolific. The first Indian films captured documentary images of day-to-day life as well as important historical events, and the first narrative short films depicted some of the most well-known stories from Hindu mythology. Feature-length Indian-directed films began to screen in 1912, and industry centers, largely organized around the production of films in each area’s regional language, began to emerge thereafter. Though today the term “Bollywood” has become a sobriquet for the whole of Indian cinema, it actually refers specifically to the Hindi-language cinema produced in Bombay (now Mumbai). Mumbai hosts the largest of India’s regional film centers, but is just one of many thriving cinematic hubs within the country.

*From Bombay to Bollywood: 50 Years of Indian Cinema* begins just after India’s independence from Britain in 1947, a time which produced an enormous wave in creative output from its cinematic artists. Indian filmmakers began to develop the sensibilities of style, showmanship, social awareness and romance that would eventually become globally synonymous with Indian cinema.

### 1950’s: The Golden Age

Perhaps no artist better embodies the popular, commercial side of Bollywood’s post-Independence “Golden Age” of cinema than director-star Raj Kapoor, described by film critic Richard Corliss as “Cary Grant and Cecil B. DeMille in one handsome package.” A wunderkind with both an auteur’s artistic sensibility and a keen nose for business, Kapoor opened his own studio, R.K. Films, at the age of twenty-four.

Kapoor’s 1951 film **AWAARA** (translated as “The Vagabond”), introduced Kapoor’s “tramp” persona, which he would develop over the course of several films. Though undeniably influenced by Charlie Chaplin’s iconic character, Kapoor’s tramp was more swagger and charm than endearing slapstick. As India struggled to find her footing post-independence, Kapoor’s tramp would eventually come to represent his country’s proud spirit even as he also embodied the harsh realities of India’s poor and working-class. **AWAARA** grossed a record amount at the box office upon its release and was nominated for the Grand Prize of the 1953 Cannes Film Festival. As with many of Kapoor’s films (most of which carried distinct leftist social messages) **AWAARA** was embraced outside of India in countries such as the Soviet Union and China—in fact, Chairman Mao once named **AWAARA** as his favorite film, and

“Awaara Hoon” his favorite song.

One of Kapoor’s contemporaries was Guru Dutt, whose sensitive and lyrical approach to cinematic storytelling stood in contrast to Kapoor’s more robust form of entertainment. Dutt’s creative career was plagued with highs and lows, which may have contributed to his possibly self-inflicted premature death at the age of thirty-nine.

Handsome and charismatic, Dutt began his career as an actor before turning his hand to directing. After directing a series of successful films, Dutt released **PYAASA** in 1957. Well-received upon its release, **PYAASA** is viewed by many as Dutt’s masterpiece, as well as his most autobiographical film. It tells the story of a frustrated poet whose work is only appreciated after his supposed death--similarly, Dutt’s abilities and technological accomplishments as a director were recognized retroactively by audiences who, at the time, mostly valued him as a matinee idol.

In 1959, Dutt released **KAGAAZ KE PHOOL**, which proved to be a critical and commercial disappointment, but has since been resurrected as a cult classic. Dismayed by the failure of the film, Dutt never directed again and in 1964 died of an overdose of sleeping pills and alcohol. Dutt’s legacy as the most lyrical of Golden Age directors has only increased since, and his films have become staples at international film festivals and retrospectives.

The social and political upheaval following India’s independence is encapsulated in the 1957 film **MOTHER INDIA**, directed by Mehboob Khan. This allegorical tale about a poor village woman struggling to survive against many hardships encapsulated the sort of idealized patriotism prevalent in India’s popular culture in the years after independence. **MOTHER INDIA**’s layers of allegory and allusion have led to myriad critical and scholarly interpretations of its meaning and significance. The title of the film was chosen as a direct rebuttal against Katherine Mayo’s 1927 polemical book of the same name--a book which claimed, among other things, that the weakened sexuality of India’s male population was the reason for all of the country’s social problems.

Nargis, the star of **MOTHER INDIA**, was 26 at the time she agreed to play the archetypal character of Radha, who ages many decades over the course of the film. This was one of the last films she made before retiring to marry co-star Sunil Dutt (who in the film plays her rebellious son, Birju.) Due to the epic scope of the film’s story, as well as the socio-political themes of its narrative, **MOTHER INDIA** is often compared to **GONE WITH THE WIND**. **MOTHER INDIA** was the first Indian film to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

### **1960’s: India’s Parallel Cinema**

At the same time that commercial entertainers such as Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt were producing mass-market hits, “arthouse” filmmakers such as Bimal Roy and Satyajit Ray were pioneering the Parallel Cinema movement in India, similar to the French New Wave or Italian Neorealism movements. Parallel Cinema largely began in the Bengal region of India, and, as

with other alternative cinema movements of the 1960's and '70's, dealt with a naturalistic approach to cinematic storytelling.

Bengali director Satyajit Ray was arguably India's greatest cinema *auteur*--a gifted and visionary director influenced by the work of Akira Kurosawa and Jean-Luc Godard. When pressed to name a favorite from among his own films, Ray chose **CHARULATA**, released in 1965, which he said had "the fewest flaws" of any of his work. As with many of Ray's films, the story of CHARULATA is deceptively simple--a lonely housewife finds herself falling in love with her husband's visiting cousin--but is incalculably elevated by Ray's sensitive, complex portrait of Charulata (compellingly portrayed by Madhabi Mukherjee) and by his beautiful black-and-white cinematography.

### 1970's: The "Angry Young Man"

In the 1970s, Indian cinema belonged to Amitabh Bachchan. The tall, lanky actor arrived in Mumbai in the late 1960s and by 1973 his star was on the rise with ZANJEER--an action-adventure film that was a sharp departure from the romantic, sensitive films that had dominated Indian cinema in the previous decades.

In the 1970s, India was suffering from low economic growth and widespread political corruption, and the thematic tide of India's cinema shifted to reflect the disillusioned and conflicted attitudes of its citizens. The characters portrayed most memorably by Bachchan at this time were violent, brooding and explosive, rather than sensitive and poetic--so much so that Bachchan became known as "The Angry Young Man;" a human incarnation of 1970s Indian zeitgeist.

In 1975, Bachchan starred in seven films, among them DEEWAR and **SHOLAY**, both of which reinforced his status as a cultural icon throughout India and the Asian diaspora. SHOLAY is the story of two charismatic outlaws (Bachchan and Dharmendra) who are recruited by a retired army officer to capture a ruthless bandit. The film, directed by Ramesh Sippy, drew heavily upon the tropes of American and spaghetti westerns to deliver an idiosyncratically Indian *mélange* of action, adventure, comedy, pathos and romance that is popularly known as a "masala film," after the mixture of spices used in Indian cooking--and helped to invent its own genre, the "curry western."

Critically panned upon its release, SHOLAY nevertheless drew upon positive word-of-mouth to grow into one of the most successful films in Indian cinema history. Dialogue from the film has been incorporated into the general lexicon of Indian culture, and its soundtrack, which helped propel its box-office success in 1975, became one of the top-selling soundtracks of the entire 1970s.

### International Acclaim

The gangster-led popular Indian cinema of the 1970s continued throughout the 1980s, where violence and the criminal underworld held sway. The most critically acclaimed film of the

1980s, however, had more in common with the Parallel Cinema of Satyajit Ray than it did the over-the-top action of SHOLAY. In 1988, documentarian Mira Nair made her feature film debut with **SALAAM BOMBAY!**, which chronicled the lives of a group of street children in Mumbai. Drawing upon the experiences of her stars (all of them actual street children), Nair's film won accolades around the globe for its verisimilitude and unflinching portrayal of the harsh life faced by Mumbai's displaced and homeless youth.

Nair has enjoyed one of the most successful "crossover" careers of any Indian director. After SALAAM BOMBAY!, Nair went on to direct Denzel Washington in MISSISSIPPI MASALA and in 2001 released MONSOON WEDDING, which grossed \$30 million worldwide--at the time the most financially successful Indian film ever released. Since then, she has directed Reese Witherspoon in 2004's VANITY FAIR, and turned down an offer to direct HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX in favor of 2007's THE NAMESAKE.

### A Return to Family Values

The 1990s signaled a shift of the cultural tide away from the rough and violent themes of the 1970s and '80s, to stories designed to appeal to the up-and-coming Indian middle class. The 90s films were family-friendly and chaste; conservative enough to appeal to the traditional mores of the older generation and romantic enough to capture the imaginations and hearts of their children.

Along with 1994's HUM AAPKE HAIN KAUN, 1995's **DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE** helped to usher in this new family-centric era of Indian cinema. DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE (or "DDLJ" for short) tells the story of two young non-resident Indians living in London who meet on a sightseeing tour around Europe and fall in love. The girl, Simran, (Kajol) is already betrothed to another man, but this doesn't stop Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) from pursuing her back to India to try and win over her parents and take home the bride. The film grapples with issues of Indian identity and pride and presents an irresistible combination of family loyalty and filial obligation while at the same time championing the desire to follow one's heart. The formula worked; thanks to the charm and chemistry of the film's leads, a hit-filled soundtrack and the broad appeal of the film's themes, DDLJ proved to be such a success that to this day, twenty years after its initial release, it is still shown at the Maratha Mandir theatre in Mumbai.

### The Rise of Mumbai Noir

While the 1990s heralded the return of family values to the cinemas of India, **SATYA** presented audiences with a flip side of the coin. Made on a shoestring budget, SATYA was the surprise hit of 1998 and ushered in a new genre: *Mumbai noir*. Directed by Ram Gopal Varma, SATYA tells the story of a mysterious young man who arrives in Mumbai and is pulled into a gangland turf war.

While some American audiences may see the film and then wonder what the fuss is about, upon closer consideration SATYA is remarkable for a number of reasons. SATYA inhabits a

clever middle ground between the *cinéma vérité* of SALAAM BOMBAY! and the broad, cartoonish gangster entertainment popularized in the 1970s and 1980s. Gone are the charming (albeit unrealistic) outlaws characterized by the likes of Amitabh Bachchan--naturally, there are still musical numbers, but the violence in this film is harsh and realistic. Varma spent years researching real-life Mumbai gangsters to help bring a sense of realism to the film and staunchly refused to justify the motives of his characters. The cinematography by American cameraman Gerard Hooper lends the film a free-flowing grace; on his days off Hooper wandered the streets of Mumbai shooting footage on his own, his outsider's perspective mirroring that of Satya, the titular character portrayed with sphinxlike restraint by J.D. Chakravarthy.

### The Modern Era: 2000 and Beyond

**LAGAAN**, according to director Ashotosh Gowariker, was almost impossible to make—it was a period piece, and didn't feature the over-the-top elements of violence, drama and improbable romance that characterized most mainstream Bollywood hits of the time. Actor Aamir Khan, who had risen to prominence as one of the new wave of young romantic leads of the 1990s alongside Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan, was eventually persuaded to produce the film as well as play the lead role. With his input, production was finally able to commence.

Set during the British Raj (colonial occupation), the film's story revolves around a high-stakes cricket match between villagers in a poor, drought-ridden town and the officers of the local cantonment. It is the universality of this relatively simple underdog story that contributed to LAGAAN's worldwide appeal. While it was a box-office success in India, LAGAAN had an even more impressive showing in overseas markets—particularly the United States, where it was broadly embraced by critics and nominated for 2002's Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. The high quality of the film's production, combined with a standout soundtrack from composer A.R. Rahman (who would go on to win two Academy awards for 2008's SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE), set the bar for Indian productions to follow and helped LAGAAN become a point of entry for many Western audiences who had previously been unfamiliar with Indian cinema.

Though not as successful as LAGAAN in the overseas market, 2002's **DEVDas** was nevertheless a high water mark for Indian cinema of the new millennium. At the time, it was the most expensive production in Indian cinema history--one of its period sets featured over 12,000 pieces of stained glass, and some of the ornate costumes worn by Madhuri Dixit (who plays the courtesan Chandramukhi) weighed over 66 pounds.

DEVDas is an adaptation of the famous 1917 Bengali novella about a tragic pair of star-crossed lovers, and features three enormously popular Bollywood stars as the leads: Shah Rukh Khan as Devdas, Aishwarya Rai as Paro and Dixit as Chandramukhi. In addition to directing films such as DEVDas and 2005's BLACK (which adapted the story of Helen Keller and starred Amitabh Bachchan in the role of the teacher), Sanjay Leela Bhansali also directed

a 2008 stage adaptation of the 1923 opera *Padmavati*. It is interesting to view DEVDAS in a similar light--an operatic tragedy of Shakespearian proportions in which every emotion and gesture is played to its full height; the sets and costumes unimaginably opulent; the stars impossibly beautiful.

### Crossover

Even with the international recognition of films such as DEVDAS and LAGAAN, mainstream Indian cinema still has yet to officially “cross over” to Western audiences. Elements of commercial Bollywood cinema are appropriated, abbreviated and adapted into Western productions—MOULIN ROUGE being one example—and while stories featuring Indian characters and Indian stories have resonated with Western audiences (SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE, LIFE OF PI), these productions are often directed by non-Indians and are not considered to be the products of “Bollywood.” Interestingly, films from India’s Parallel Cinema movement (THE APU TRILOGY) continue to be popular mainstays of America’s independent film circuit—perhaps because their directors, heavily influenced by Western avant-garde film movements, embrace a filmmaking style more familiar to Western audiences; largely devoid of the musical numbers, melodrama, and *masala* genre-mixing that characterize so many of India’s great commercial blockbusters.

By featuring blockbusters alongside the sensitive works of directors such as Ray and Mira Nair, we at the Northwest Film Center hope that this series will give Portland audiences a well-deserved chance to experience the delights of some of Indian cinema’s most enduring classics—and will offer an opportunity for members of Portland’s Indian community to share these films in a theater with friends and family. We hope that this overview (and the “suggested viewing” list on the following page) provide some historical and cultural context for this series, and that *From Bombay to Bollywood: 50 Years of Indian Cinema* will open a door for new audiences to discover the joys of one of the largest and most dynamic film industries in the world.

### Song and musical numbers in Indian film

Songs and music have long played an important role in Indian storytelling tradition; therefore, it was only natural that when stories began being told through film, songs would be soon to follow. Almost as soon as sound film began being used (roughly around 1930), singing on film began making an appearance as well. As in American film, songs are utilized to “heighten a situation, accentuate a mood, comment on theme and action, provide relief and serve as interior monologue” (Mehta). Additionally, some songs are used as opportunities to feature a cameo performance by a popular star, drawing additional press and audience interest to the film.

Unlike many of the musicals produced in Hollywood, Indian filmmakers made no attempt to hide the identities of the playback singers (most songs are not sung by the actual actors). To this day, popular singers such as Lata Mangeshkar and Udit Narayan are as revered by Indian audiences as are the films’ actors, and are as successful in drawing audiences to the cinema. Hit songs performed in a film take on a life of their own and contribute greatly to the commercial success and cultural visibility of the film.

### Suggested Viewing

If you liked **AWAARA**: Try **SHREE 420** (1955)

If you liked **PYAASA**: Try **KAAGAZ KE PHOOL** (1959)

If you liked **MOTHER INDIA**: Try **MUGHAL-E-AZAM** (1960)

If you liked **CHARULATA**: Try **DO BIGHA ZAMEEN** (1953), **MAHANAGAR** (1963)

If you liked **SHOLAY**: Try **DEEWAR** (1975), **ZANJEER** (1973)

If you liked **SALAAM BOMBAY**: Try **MONSOON WEDDING** (2001)

If you liked **DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE**: Try **HUM AAPKE HAIN KOUN** (1994), **KUCH KUCH HOTA HAI** (1998)

If you liked **SATYA**: Try **COMPANY** (2002)

If you liked **LAGAAN**: Try **CHAK DE! INDIA** (2007), **RANG DE BASANTI** (2006), **3 IDIOTS** (2009)

If you liked **DEVDAAS**: Try **JODHA AAKBAR** (2008), **DEVDAAS** (1955)

Also recommended: **OM SHANTI OM** (2007), an extremely silly film which (lovingly) pokes fun at the Indian film industry and many of its tropes, while still managing to include a murder mystery/reincarnation plot.

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