

That's Bollywood, darling!

Mumbai is the most business-friendly city in India and the capital of both its white and black economies, it is also the home of the giant Hindi film industry now known as Bollywood. Everyone in India knows that if your dreams go beyond your birthright, then Mumbai's the place for you.

by Chandrahas Choudhury

Late in the year 2000, the muscular, arrogant Bollywood superstar Salman Khan was on set one day when a swaggering man walked in. Bollywood stars in India are tracked wherever they go – hundreds of youngsters clamber outside Salman's house in Mumbai night and day to catch a glimpse of the actor –and it is usually very difficult to breach the security on a film set.

But the visitor's confident swagger took him straight up to the star. Salman was handed a mobile phone, and told to answer. Even Mumbai's most powerful film actor couldn't tell the rude visitor to get lost. After all, the person on the other end of the line was the notorious Chhota Shakeel, Dawood Ibrahim's right-hand man, the most powerful gangster Mumbai has ever produced. By the time the call was over, Bollywood had seen its bit of big business for the day. Chhota Shakeel had decided to produce a film for the first time, and Salman was to be the hero – whether he liked it or not. Bollywood's biggest draw had just been singled out by the Mumbai mafia to make a bit of money for them.

It's a law of human societies that money, power, beauty and fame are inexorably attracted to each other, often bending the rules

that hold back lesser mortals. When these tendencies are hemmed in by the rules of a socialist economy, as India was between the years 1947 to 1991, then the system spurs men and powers to seek the wealth generated by the parallel economy, relying on both violence and political patronage to protect their gains.

So it was in Mumbai from the nineteen-seventies to the early part of this century. To this day, dozens of young men and women pitch up in Mumbai every day with a suitcase, a picture portfolio and the dream of landing a role in a Bollywood film. In neighbourhoods such as Oshiwara and Versova in the northern suburb of Andheri, close to some of the major



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film studios, every café, salon, and clothes store is full of Bollywood hopefuls and hushed conversations in the private language of the Bollywood subculture. In a country where literacy is still low, the material poverty and lack of hope of millions of lives generate a love of escapist entertainment that Bollywood duly provides with its larger-than-life stories.

For a couple of decades, in the seventies and eighties, Bollywood and the underworld in Mumbai were familiar with one another but kept a safe distance. Occasionally an underworld don might fall in love with an aspiring actress and arrange a lead role for her in a film he agreed to produce (at a loss) as a token

of his love. But that was about it. The two spheres had similarities, as they offered daring individuals the chance to beat the rules of the game in a very restricted and hierarchic society. They both enjoyed the darkness of night and the cover it afforded. While the giant, congested, noisy city throbbed from dawn to dusk with the efforts of labouring millions, the powerful figures of Bollywood and the underworld often worked and played by night.

Then, in the nineties, things changed. As the underworld expanded and the number of players increased, they began to look for patrons who could pay them “protection money”. Slowly, some of Bollywood’s richest producers got

☒ A cinema in Mumbai. In a country where literacy is still low and poverty widespread, the many escapist films produced by Bollywood are very successful.



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A hoarding in Hyderabad, in the state of Andhra Pradesh. From the Nineties onwards the Bollywood film industry has developed close ties with the Mumbai mafias.

sucked into the mafia's web of alliances and rivalries, and became backers of one camp or another. It was not long before matters hotted up further. When clashes broke out between the gangs, the hostility slowly spread towards other targets, including sponsors. Suddenly some of the leading lights of the film industry became targets for audacious assassination attempts, simply because they were held to be part of a rival 'camp'. That was why, when the underworld came calling, you couldn't just tell them to get lost – as Salman Khan was well aware.

In the nineties, when I was a schoolboy living in Mumbai, not a week went by without a front-page report in the newspapers of an attempt on the life of a prominent Mumbai film producer or builder. When the police force tried to crack down on the underworld, often it found that there was only so far it could go before it was stymied. After all, the dons had their friends in the corridors of political power as well. A phone call from the right politician could lead to a troublesome police officer being shunted into a department where he could no longer do any harm.

Slowly, as the virtual world advanced, the underworld became like a web of giant multinational corporations controlled from remote locations. Their heads – such as Dawood Ibrahim – fled the country and ran their operations from places such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Kuala Lumpur. However, Mumbai's more determined crime reporters have managed to keep track of the links between the underworld, the film world, and politicians, thanks to networks of informants comparable with that of the most powerful Don.

It was to these sources that one turned for 'the story behind the story'. It is an open secret in Mumbai's journalistic community that when Dawood made an offer to hand himself over to the Indian government in the mid-nineties after being accused of masterminding the terrible Mumbai bomb blasts of March 1992, certain powerful politicians in Mumbai and Delhi worked overtime to ensure that this did not happen. What Dawood might reveal under interrogation could finish off their careers.

Bollywood, too, has become a more professional, corporatised world since the turn of the century. Once, a handful of powerful families ruled the film trade, just as a handful of men headed the mafia. The two groups naturally had dealings with one another. Now film finance often comes from the big business conglomerates. When a gangster wants a taste of glamour today, he doesn't try to make a film – he sets up a grand "entertainment show" in Dubai or Malaysia instead, where thousands of expatriate Indians gather to watch their favourite stars sing and dance on stage, and later he invites the stars to a party. Perhaps the heyday of the nexus between the Mumbai underworld, its film industry, and its politicians is past. But in this city that thrills to the spectacle of power and glamour, shadowy dealings and mysterious alliances can never completely be written off. **E**