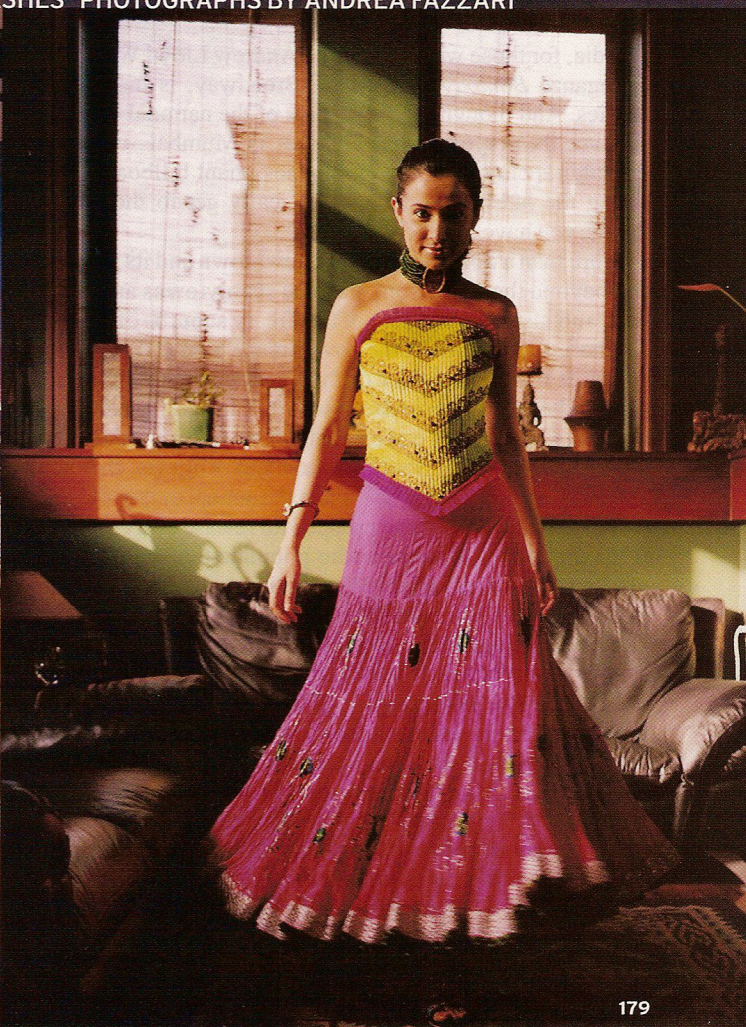


# SALAAAM BOMBAY

ROMANCE! MELODRAMA! ADVENTURE! BOLLYWOOD, ON-SCREEN AND OFF, IS LARGER THAN LIFE AND COMING TO A CINEPLEX NEAR YOU BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA FAZZARI



# A CANTANKEROUS

black and gold cab cuts off a sputtering *tuk tuk*, nearly ramming straight into a wandering cow. A stream of packed buses honk and dodge, cockily navigating the dust-clogged streets as my cab inches forward past earth-encrusted beggars and dhoti-swathed holy men. A child clutching a baby taps at the window to fix me with her pleading gaze. To a newly arrived Westerner, it is overwhelming.

Several hours later, I find myself wondering whether it wasn't all just a dream. Stretched out on a soft chaise longue by the bougainvillea-scented pool of the J. W. Marriott hotel, I'm savoring an arctic-cold Kingfisher beer. Off to the right—is that heartthrob du jour Hrithik Roshan (fresh off his star-making turn in the sci-fi musical *Koi... Mil Gaya*), dishing over cappuccino and croissants with his wispy costar Preity Zinta? Back beyond the tiki torches—do I spy Karan Johar, director of the blockbuster romance *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, informally casting among the young lovelies reclining in the late-afternoon sun? The mile-high palms and manicured lawns of the Marriott are as luxe and exclusive as the fabled mansions that line Sunset Boulevard, and arriving here after a two-hour drive through clamorous downtown Bombay (or Mumbai, as it has been rechristened in a deanglicizing thrust of Hindu nationalism) is like entering another galaxy.

India, for those who missed the Andrew Lloyd Webber extravaganza *Bombay Dreams* on Broadway, is mad for the movies. And though there are hints of the national obsession all over the frayed metropolis that is Mumbai—uniformed schoolgirls clutching movie fanzines, giant billboards trumpeting the latest melodramas—to really get to the heart of things, you have to get out of town.

More than a dozen miles from downtown and its skyscrapers, beyond the waterfront, past the shantytowns and the airport, and just the other side of the dreary suburbs of Juhu and Andheri, sits Film City, the government-owned dream factory that is the nerve center of the geographically amorphous megaindustry known as Bollywood. It is here, among high-walled movie-mogul estates that dot neighborhoods with all the visual appeal of South Central Los Angeles, that some 900 productions (nearly half again the annual output of Hollywood) are shot, edited, and prepped for release every year. And when the men and women who populate this world wander off the sets, they invariably land in the exclusive playground that is the J. W. Marriott (the “J-dub” to those in the know).

Brahmin elegance in Bombay has long been the purview of its five-star hotels, where Continental restaurants do double duty as special-occasion splurges for the local elite and expense-account canteens for the sorts of jet-lagged executives responsible for McDonald's Chicken Maharaja Mac and Pillsbury Naan. But the J-dub is something else entirely. Nowhere are the country's economic extremes more blatantly on display than here inside the walls that cut the hotel off from the teeming moviegoing masses.

Every day in this country, some 14 million Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and Parsis crowd

together in dark, unventilated theaters, laying aside their worries to lose themselves in color-drenched musical spectacles, slapstick comedies, and overwrought tales of star-crossed lovers and brooding bandits with matinee eyes. And the world they see on-screen—a place where the streets sparkle and the houses are huge, where love-struck young couples flirt through spit-shined classrooms and Starbucks-like cafés that might have been plucked from teen dramas on the WB—isn't all that far from the one I see right here by the pool, a fantasyland of dream peddlers thriving in an air-conditioned sanctuary of cellphones, Wi-Fi, and chauffeured SUVs.

Bollywood is a world apart in every sense of the word. A gated community with no star maps or studio tours, it is all but completely impenetrable. Film City shoots are rapid-fire operations closed to the public and the media alike, so that despite weeks of letter-writing and lobbying I nearly didn't make it through the gates. It is thanks only to the dogged efforts of a young production assistant, who graciously leads me around the dank, mosquito-swarmed bunker chatting in Hindi with one middle manager after another, that I finally encounter someone who gives me permission to roam. “I told him you're a director from New York,” my guide explains. “Scouting locations.”

We traipse through thick brush, stumbling upon the abandoned hull of a plywood building that I recognize, even in its advanced state of decay, as the colorful resort hotel from the Hindi farce I'd seen on the plane trip over. Farther up the road, a pair of fake khaki-clad cops man a bogus roadblock. Down an alley, a bored starlet in an elaborate sari languishes between takes, blandly talking into her cellphone under the thatched roof of a primitive hut. At the top of a hill stands

a prefab Hindu temple, and on a nearby grassy plateau, a bunch of young men and women simulate a summer-camp fight scene, limbs flying in roundhouse kicks.

It's all in a day's work for the employees of this cinematic assembly line. Bollywood stars may be a coddled bunch, but they work hard. Often as many as 50 shoots are taking place here at one time, and even the most illustrious performers tend to be on endless production schedules, appearing frequently in several films at a time. And for all their hard work they expect great rewards.

"The masses have bestowed a godlike status on these film people, and some of them are very spoiled," Malini Akerkar tells me one evening over dinner at Indigo, the downtown hot spot she runs with her chef husband, Rahul. "When we first opened we had all the big stars. And they came in expecting handouts." Indigo, one of the few Bollywood places where the food is as interesting as the buzzy crowd, still draws big stars. But they play by the Akerkars' no-free-lunch policy. On the night I dined there I spotted an acting icon with his daughter, the wife of a famed crossover director, and a songwriter, a broadcast journalist, and a costume designer who are major industry players, along with a swarm of publicists and photographers hanging on their every move.

These people are certainly a breed apart. Fardeen Khan, a model turned leading man on the hopeful verge of A-list stardom, is typical of the bunch. A well-bred, foreign-educated, Euro-styled party boy with gym-toned pecs, gel-slicked hair, and a brooding camera-ready glower, he's like a parody of Bollywood hunkdom. Chatting over drinks at the J-dub one afternoon, we are interrupted by a slew of fans and hangers-on, among them a tiny young woman baring her midriff who stops by to flirt with this bachelor voted, or so he says, the country's most eligible. "When are you going to call me?" she teases, casting an over-the-shoulder glance on her way out the door. But Khan has other things on his mind. Mainly, he needs to get back to his condo (courtesy of the black Bentley he's got on promotional loan) to freshen up for the evening's parties and photo ops.

**BOLLYWOOD** nightlife, a roving carnival of dusky-haired bombshells and the dark-eyed actors (and, these days, nouveau riche outsourcing titans) who court them, is centered

around a handful of velvet-roped restaurants that dot these depressing northern suburbs like mirages in the desert. The night we drop by Olive, a stylish Indian-inflected Mediterranean place in Bandra, the place is on fire, a casting-call crush of barely-there skirts and skin-tight pants. The drinks are flowing—whiskey, vodka, and cheap Aussie wine—and as the lounge music kicks in, the young advertising, film, and music business hot shots start to groove. I am told there may be a few headliners buried within the frenzy (Aneesha Baig, the on-air correspondent for NDTV's *Night Out*, the broadcast version of Bollywood's newsprint party pages, is here with a camera crew, set to go live in silk and pearls and enough pancake makeup for the Kabuki stage), but this is apparently a B-list crowd. The most lustrous celebrities reserve their big nights out for more selective—and totally PR-driven—gatherings.

For PR is the engine that drives this town. Even the most ostensibly dour national broadsheets devote considerable ink to the arm's-length adoration of India's movie star gods—men (most actresses still marry young and retire early) who inhabit a place in society so exalted they are like Sinatra and Elvis at their peaks.

The stars are still unknown in America, but that may soon change. Over dinner at Indigo, Kabir Bedi, an actor best known here for his menacing portrayal of the turbaned assassin in the James Bond film *Octopussy*, tells me that the producers of *Taj Mahal*, which he's just finished shooting, are in the process of making an export-ready (read: "song-free") version of the film. Indeed, India's century-old movie business is set to make a splash on the international stage. Crossover charmers like *Monsoon Wedding* and the Oscar-nominated *Lagaan*, together with our growing fascination with all things South Asian, have readied Westerners for this highly colorful art form.

But does Bollywood really care? Perhaps not. "I'm happy where I am," says Khan, who was educated at the University of Massachusetts. We're at the J-dub, and he sips his Glenlivet. "Over there I'd be competing against the Pitts and the Cruises. Who needs that?"

Who indeed? A billion fans—and an ongoing fantasia of scantily clad starlets, free-flowing single malts, and Bentleys on demand—are plenty to keep even the most restless aspirational actor perfectly happy in Bollywood's embrace. >

## HURRAY FOR BOLLYWOOD

Bollywood can't be condensed to a handful of films, but these five—from the classic to the just released—offer an inviting sampler of India's national cinema in all its campy, musical, theatrical splendor.

*Mother India* (1957): A standard of midcentury Hindi cinema, this epic tale is often referred to as the Indian *Gone with the Wind*, with its strong female protagonist battling to hold on to the old ways and keep her family together. It's rural melodrama as symbolic story of Indian nationalism.

*Sholay* (1975): Perhaps the biggest Indian film of all time, the equivalent of *Star Wars* in its influence on pop culture, this action adventure—a sort of swashbuckling curry western—sent a burst of adrenaline into the Bollywood formula and helped launch the career of Amitabh Bachchan (or Big B, as his fans call him), at 61 still the country's greatest star.

*Lagaan* (2001): Set during the British Raj, the story pits downtrodden

Gujarati villagers against a cartoonishly sadistic British officer. To save their village they must defeat the Brits at their own game—cricket. Nominated for an Oscar, this campy epic is one of the few Hindi films that get much play on the American screen.

*Devdas* (2002): One of four film adaptations of the eponymous novel by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, this lavish production—among the most expensive Hindi films ever made—is a quintessential boisterous romance, rife with the usual clichés (boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy drinks way too much) and plenty of lavish song and dance numbers. An over-the-top costume drama set in the colonial era, the film stars contemporary heartthrob Shahrukh Khan.

*Maqbool* (2003): A sensation in Bombay last winter, this reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—transplanting the action to modern times and a Muslim organized-crime family—is the rare Bollywood movie with a serious script that even the music sequences can't diminish. Director Vishal Bhardwaj also composed the score. —J.C.

## BHEL POORI

Adapted from Gwen Oliveira

**SERVES 8 (FIRST COURSE)**

**Active time: 45 min Start to finish: 45 min**  
(includes making chutneys)

Bhel poori is a savory puffed rice snack that's usually served with crackers (we like to eat it with a fork). The recipe for this one, which combines a surprising range of sweet, tart, and spicy flavors, was given to us by our art director Erika Oliveira's mother, who is Indian.

The sev you buy should be thin but not very thin, or your bhel poori will be too mushy. For information about sev and Indian puffed rice, see *Kitchen Notebook*, page 196. For sources for the other Indian ingredients used in these recipes, see *Shopping List*, page 206.

- ½ lb white boiling potatoes
- ¾ cup finely chopped onion
- 1½ lb firm-ripe tomatoes, cut into ¼-inch dice (1¼ cups), then drained in a sieve about 20 minutes
- 1 (1-lb) unripe mango (preferably green), peeled, pitted, and cut into ¼-inch dice
- ½ cup coarsely chopped cilantro
- 2½ cups Indian puffed rice (2 oz)
- 2 cups unseasoned sev (thin crispy chickpea noodle pieces; 4½ oz)
- Sweet tamarind chutney (recipe follows)
- Spicy cilantro and mint chutney (this page)

▶ Peel potatoes and cover with salted water (see *Tips*, page 207) by 1 inch in a 2- to 3-quart saucepan, then boil, uncovered, until just tender. Drain in a

colander. When potatoes are cool enough to handle, cut into ¼-inch dice.

▶ Just before serving, stir together potatoes and remaining ingredients except chutneys in a large bowl, then stir in ½ cup tamarind chutney and 2 tablespoons cilantro and mint chutney. Serve immediately with remainder of chutneys on the side.

## SWEET TAMARIND CHUTNEY

**MAKES ABOUT ¾ CUP**

**Active time: 15 min Start to finish: 15 min**

Use a block of Asian (Thai) tamarind rather than the Indian kind. It's usually thicker, softer, and easier to work with.

- 4 oz piece tamarind from a pliable block
- ¾ cup hot water
- ¼ cup packed jaggery date sugar (4 oz; if necessary, chop to measure) or packed dark brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon coriander seeds
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 1 teaspoon anise seeds
- ½ teaspoon hot chile powder (preferably Indian)
- ½ teaspoon salt

**Special equipment:** an electric coffee/spice grinder

▶ Gently mash tamarind with water in a small bowl until pulp is softened. Force pulp through a sieve into a 2- to 3-quart saucepan, pressing on and then discarding seeds and thick fibers. Add sugar and cook over low heat, stirring,

just until sugar is dissolved, then return mixture to cleaned bowl.

▶ Toast coriander, cumin, and anise seeds in a small skillet over moderate heat, stirring, until fragrant and a shade darker, about 2 minutes. Cool completely, then finely grind in grinder. Stir spices into tamarind mixture along with chile powder and salt.

**Cooks' note:**

Sweet tamarind chutney can be made 2 days ahead and chilled, covered.

## SPICY CILANTRO AND MINT CHUTNEY

**MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP**

**Active time: 10 min Start to finish: 10 min**

This chutney requires a lot of herbs. If the bunches at your supermarket are small, buy two or three.

- ½ teaspoon cumin seeds
- 1 cup firmly packed fresh cilantro leaves (from 1 large bunch)
- 1 cup firmly packed fresh mint leaves (from 1 large bunch)
- 5 to 7 fresh green Thai chiles (1½ to 2 inches long), stemmed
- 2 teaspoons amchoor (ground dried mango)
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

▶ Toast cumin seeds in a small dry skillet over moderate heat, stirring, until fragrant and a shade darker, about 2 minutes. Blend seeds with cilantro, mint, chiles, amchoor, and salt in a food processor until very finely chopped, then transfer to a small bowl and stir in lemon juice. 🍴

## THE DETAILS

### EATING THERE

The Bollywood scenesters may be lolling around the **J. W. Marriott's** five restaurants (*Juhu Tara Road; 22-5693-3000*), partying off their dinners at **Olive Bar and Lounge** (*Pali Hill Tourist Hotel, 14 Union Park, Khar; 22-2605-8228*), or posing over the delicious tandoori duck in cranberry glaze at **Indigo** (*4 Mandlik Road, Colaba; 22-5636-8999*), but you'll find some of the best food at the city's more humble dining rooms. Seafood standby **Mahesh Lunch Home** (*8-B Cawasji Patel Street, off PM Road; 22-2287-0938*) is a nautically themed downtown spot filled with families digging into spiny lobsters, charred giant prawns in chiles and garlic, and crisp, firm-fleshed fish barbecued in a 1,000-degree tandoor. At **Trishna** (*Ropewalk Lane, Kalaghoda; 22-2270-3213*), miniature fried fish and vibrantly spiced calamari curls lead to fluffy breads and earthy fish curries. Fiery Indo-Chinese cuisine heats up **Chinese Palace**

(*Bombay A. C. Market, Tardeo; 22-2352-4963*), housed in a Soviet-style low-rise office building, where Nepalese waiters dole out scalding strips of lamb and deep-fried shredded spinach on tofulike cubes of crisp corn curd. For a meatier indulgence, **Peshawri** (*Sahar; 22-2830-3030*), at the Grand Maratha Sheraton (one of the few big hotels worth a culinary detour), features succulent tandoor-roasted whole leg of baby lamb. In the end, though, this is a vegetarian city, and the paper-thin dosas and crunchy *bhel pooris* you'll find at countless snack shops around town are among the most satisfying things you'll eat. The most astonishing meatless meal I encountered in the city was at the alleyway **Thaker** (*31 Dadisheth Agyari Lane, off Kalbadevi Road; 22-2201-1232*), packed with office workers lunching on tiny eggplants with green plantains and mustard seeds, spicy okra, fragrant cauliflower, somosas, chutneys, dals, and rice *pulao* with cashews. —J.C.