

INTERVIEW: PRITISH NANDY

KISHORE BUDHA

Co-productions are one of the ways in which the Indian film industry will internationalise. Other means include direct involvement of Hollywood studios in India, the funding of international films by Indian entertainment companies, exports to new markets, or the exports to traditional markets that have sizeable Indian/South Asian immigrants. In this context, *Wide Screen* interviews Pritish Nandy whose company led the way with the film *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi* (Dir: Sudhir Mishra, 2003).



Figure 1 Still from *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi/ A Thousands Desires Such As These*

Kishore Budha (KB): What were the objectives of the co-production?

Pritish Nandy (PN): To create outstanding cinema at low investment risk. *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi (HKA)* bridged the gap between art house and commercially exploitable Indian cinema and proved PNC's theorem that the artificial divide created between the two by Hollywood can be easily bridged in a country like India where audiences understand only the difference between good and bad cinema, not art house

and commercial. The French brought very little to the table. But that was fine with us. We used a few of their technicians who they paid for. We were not expecting too much from them in any case. Indian cinema and Indian movie audiences are much stronger than European cinema or their audiences. The co-production was actually meant to give them an insight into how we work, how we make great independent cinema in India. People here do not have to depend on the studio system to produce films. Great cinema has its own producers, its own audience, its own critics.

KB: What were the practical and economic gains of the collaboration?

PN: Very little, as far as we are concerned. Even though *HKA* has been widely acknowledged as the finest Indian film ever made, by critics and other highly respected filmmakers like Shekhar Kapur and Ashutosh Gowariker, the French co-producers were not even able to get it into Cannes! Nor were they of any help in showcasing the movie worldwide, at other festivals. We had to do everything on our own. They could not sell a single territory either. But then, I did not frankly expect them to. They don't understand the power and the passion of great Indian cinema. For them it was just another co-production, another feather in their cap. For us, it was a matter of reaching a great film wherever we could. We are proud of *HKA*.

KB: What were the limitations of the film being a co-production?

PN: Frankly, none. They left us alone to do everything ourselves and we loved it that way. Their contribution was three members of the technical crew and they were good, not extraordinary. But they paid for them. That helped in a movie of this scale. Frankly, if the Indian Government was a little more proactive in terms of promoting its biggest export—Indian cinema, we would not need such tie-ins. We have no subsidies out here in India, no tax reliefs. In fact, what is worse, movies are punishingly taxed out here. For no half intelligent reason.

KB: Did you benefit from the film being a co-production in a way that you wouldn't have if the film had been entirely funded by Indian financiers?

PN: We were its sole financiers. We did not borrow money from any source to fund this film. In fact, we never borrow money to fund our films. Not as yet. We grow on the strength of our internal accruals. So, to answer your question specifically, no.

KB: What were the gains from exchange of technical talent?

PN: Very little. Barring the experience, which was fun, there was no actual sustainable benefit. We only hope that these technicians had a great time working with us and would like to return to India and work again, this time for others. It will enrich the global process of cultural integration. Nothing beyond that was attempted. Nothing beyond that was frankly achieved. India is the only country in the world whose cinema has withstood cultural colonisation by Hollywood and it makes sense for other nations, like France and Italy and Great Britain, to learn the art of survival from countries and cultures like us. *HKA* is a shining example of the brave new cinema emerging from countries like India and redefining world cinema, finding new global audiences, and challenging the oligarchy of the US studios.

KB: To what extent did the international collaborators influence the film and how? For example: style, content, form, structure (with specific illustrations from the film).

PN: In no way. It was our film, from start to finish. They worked as technicians on the film. We gave them appropriate credit. Period.

KB: What was the reaction from peers in the industry (in private and/or in public)?

PN: It did not matter to anyone in the least out here. As I said before, no one in the world of Indian cinema is much impressed by what the West has to offer. The annual box office take of international cinema in India has never exceeded 4 per cent despite their huge publicity budgets and enormous editorial coverage. We Indians are extremely self-sufficient in our cinema and we can keep it going forever without any help from anyone. Bollywood movies, in any case, sell 3.8 billion tickets annually as against 2.8 billion by Hollywood globally. It's just that our ticket rates have been traditionally low and our taxes, punishingly high. But even that is changing today. With multiplexes increasing at 80 to 90 per cent a year and screens doubling apace, ticket rates are also enhancing. I see India having outpaced the rest of the world in the next six to eight years, in size, product output, revenue collection, profit. Movies and IT make the perfect fit for the future.

KB: How did the co-production help the film internationally?

PN: In no way. We released it like a typically Indian film and succeeded in getting both acclaim and reach. I hope we could have made some money too but that is not always possible and we realise that good films don't always earn you profit. They earn you goodwill and respect among the community of film makers and that ultimately helps one build brand and shape a company's future.

KB: How was the film received internationally — as an Indian or Indo-French Film?

PN: Strictly as an Indian film. Otherwise, the few takers that were there would have vanished! People in different markets are increasingly responding to Indian cinema. They see it as the future. Films like *HKA* make Indian cinema respectable. Not *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna*. Not *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*. Indian film festivals can keep showing our trashy commercial movies as much as they want but the world still wants to see the real face of Indian cinema. That is why *HKA* worked. That is why *Chameli*, *Jhankaar Beats*, *Bow Barracks Forever*, *Kaante*, *Pyar Ke Side Effects* were such huge successes at international film festivals. At the end of the day, filmmaking companies like PNC are image leaders, not profit leaders. That's our agenda. That's what we have achieved.

About Interviewer: Dr Kishore Budha is one of the editors of *Wide Screen*. He has published a chapter on genre and nationalism in Hindi films in the book *Filming the Line of Control* (Routledge). His forthcoming book includes *Historical Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (Scarecrow Press).