

« Letters for July 23 Alameda Labor Dispute Hinges o... »

[Login / Create Account](#)

NEWS » FEATURE

July 30, 2008

Namastey East Bay

Muhammad Irfan wants to make Bollywood-style movies. His goal is not as far-fetched as it might once have seemed.

By Irene J. Nexica

0

[Tweet](#)

It's 2:30 in the afternoon and Muhammad Irfan is napping on one of the leather couches in the atrium of the Santa Clara Hyatt. There's a Gujarati wedding scheduled here today, and as the videographer, he was the first member of the entourage to arrive this morning. He'll also be among the last to leave when the dancing ends after midnight. Irfan shoots many of the Bay Area's high-end

[Share](#)

Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh weddings, and his business is growing

beyond his ability to take on clients. But while many entrepreneurs would delight in such a problem, Irfan can't wait to leave the field.

By this time next year, he plans to have no weddings booked. Instead, he hopes to be directing his first feature film, from a script that he penned, written to the conventions of commercial Indian cinema. His debut will be low-budget, but that doesn't mean there will be no song-and-dance numbers. Since Irfan aspires to commercial success, he's scripting four.

The Pakistani native didn't set out to be a filmmaker. He trained as a mechanical engineer, and then studied marine engineering in London before joining the merchant marines. But that didn't suit his gregarious personality and he left after four years. In 1995, he followed family to the United States. "I landed here because my family was here," he said. "I've gotten used to it."

His path to filmmaking began, appropriately enough, at a movie theater. In 1995, he lived by the Fremont's Naz Cinema, which shows Indian films in Hindi with English subtitles. Theater owner Shiraz Jivani was bringing in Indian and Pakistani musical tours, and few locals had sound-mixing experience. Enter Irfan. "I was the one, freshly came from Pakistan, and I knew how and what they required," he recalled. When Jivani found out that Irfan sang, he eventually also asked him to perform.

By 2000, Irfan had decided to record his own album and a music video. A cameraman and friend filmed it locally and Irfan took the footage to Pakistan for editing. When he didn't like the end result, he decided to learn the software and edit it himself. As a result, his friend started hiring him to edit wedding footage. Soon his friend was asking him to *film* a wedding. Feeling obliged, Irfan rented a camera and got some tips. "Just shoot shoot shoot shoot," he recalls his friend advising. "Whatever's up on stage, just keep shooting. Try to put the camera on a tripod." In the end, Irfan's editing skills and the quantity of footage made the video work. And he began filming an increasing number of weddings.

For the past six years, he has divided his year between wedding videos and tax preparation. But he has long hungered to get into filmmaking. "It's like I was meant to be a filmmaker," Irfan said.

His goal is not as farfetched as it might once have seemed. In many ways, Irfan is a harbinger of changes afoot throughout the East Bay's Indian film scene. Due to increased immigration, continuing interest from children of South

Asian immigrants, and increasing attention from other Americans, the audience for Indian films is growing, especially in the East Bay and Silicon Valley. And the Indian cinema industry and South Asian film community are increasingly using the East Bay as a resource to make films that share more with Bollywood than Hollywood.

A vibrant community of people is working to realize such dreams. For stalwart and emerging filmmakers from India; second- and third-generation Indian Americans; and immigrants brought here by currents of migration, some of whom made their cash in Silicon Valley before turning to artistic pursuits, the East Bay has much to offer — including talent and locations. Optimism pervades the scene. But hopes are tempered with an awareness of the issues that will have to be overcome before dreams like Irfan's can reach fruition.

According to the International Indian Film Academy, India produces more films than any other country in the world. In 2002, *BusinessWeek* estimated the audience for Indian cinema at 3.6 billion people, one billion more than the audience for US films. And early this year, India's Information and Broadcasting Minister announced an official government scheme to promote the export of Indian films.

Four years ago, the contemporary Indian director Karan Johar asked Amitabh Bachchan, one of the most influential Indian film stars of all time, what he would say to Western critics who deride all Indian cinema as inconsequential *masala* films that, like the spice mixture of the same name, have multiple ingredients including drama, romance, comedy, stunts, and dance. "In five years, they will eat their words," Bachchan replied. And he was right: Indian films of all varieties are becoming a force to be reckoned with.

Commercial Indian cinema's first forays into the United States, such as Karan Johar's 2003 *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Tomorrow Might Not Be), focused mostly on the East Coast, particularly New York and Pittsburgh. "Unfortunately, in India we have sort of a herd mentality," said Kunal Kohli, a popular Indian director whose films have enjoyed wide success. "When one person goes to New York to shoot, everyone goes shooting in the same places, stays in the same hotel, and uses the *same* caterer. I'm, like, 'God, please run away!' Because with the same location managers, everything is exactly the same. And they all go and shoot in Times Square. People living in New York don't go to Times Square. They walk *around* Times Square, but they will not go *through* Times Square. They do everything to avoid Times Square and the tourists."

Irfan doesn't know why that same phenomenon hasn't yet manifested itself in the Bay Area. "A lot of movies were shot in New York, so New York became a Bollywood hub," he observed. "Here, I don't know why, the Bay Area should be a hub but isn't yet. We have locations, crew, resources. We have everything here."

But California is slowly becoming a destination for Indian cinema, whatever the growing pains of the nascent local industry. Sylvester Stallone is currently shooting a role in Los Angeles in *Kambhakt Ishq* (Incredible Love), the largest-budget Indian film ever made, where he is costarring with Kareena Kapoor, from the fifth generation of the Kapoor film dynasty, and Akshay Kumar, now the highest-paid Indian actor. Karan Johar's highly anticipated next feature, *My Name Is Khan*, based on an actual event in which a Muslim man was detained on a US flight because of his name, is due to film in LA this fall. On the flip side, Walt Disney Studios has paired with Yash Raj Films to develop animated kids' films in India. *Roadside Romeo* is slated to be released this October as the first offering.

Director Kohli also featured California in his latest film, *Thoda Pyaar, Thoda Magic* (A Little Love, A Little Magic), which just played at the Naz8 Cinema. As

he recalled, there were pluses and minuses to the experience. "What's nice about California is it is very scenic and picturesque. Because Hollywood is already there it is very shooting-friendly. It's very easy to get any kind of equipment there you want. But that also is a slight negative because the rates are a little high. So it is not cheap to shoot in California, it is very expensive to shoot in California. I think if California wants to attract film tourism, for lack of a better word, you have to give package deals. Like a lot of cities and countries do that. Singapore gives very good deals if you go and shoot there. You have a one-stop clearance shop and they give you discounted airline tickets and hotels."

Ami Zins of the Oakland Film Office knows firsthand some of the obstacles to bringing foreign filmmakers here and supporting independent local projects in the style of commercial Indian cinema. Her office is charged with promoting and marketing Oakland as a filmmaking location. As of yet Zins has not targeted the Indian cinema industry or local South Asian filmmakers, but she is keen to start soon. She's looking to increase her office's outreach to local ethnic-oriented filmmakers and to promote its concierge services.

Although there currently are no direct financial incentives offered for shooting in Oakland, Zins said that on a case-by-case basis she can arrange for discounts on the use of city-owned facilities. In October, a city council subcommittee will meet as a result of her lobbying to consider making permit and parking fees more filmmaker-friendly. With lower fees in place, she said, her office plans to launch a marketing plan to alert the international and local film communities. In addition to the already high quality of local crew members, she believes these factors would increase the odds that locals and foreign filmmakers can find a way to get their projects done.

Such changes bode well for helping people like Irfan support their creative goals. "The East Bay is ready if we can combine our efforts," he said. "There are people doing things on an individual basis, but any film is a team effort. If I want to do this film myself, I can't do it, regardless of my confidence. We can facilitate the producer/director coming from India because the East Bay will be a hub. People who are into this need to come together. I have met some people from India coming through for the shows, and they want to film here but they don't see a lot of good studios, and there are some in LA. Nobody's coordinating."

One of the things that got Irfan thinking beyond small-scale videography occurred when he ran into someone whose wedding he had videotaped five years prior. They told him "whenever we watch it, it's still fresh. It looks like a TV drama." The endorsement made Irfan wonder whether he had the chops to make a film.

He wanted to go to the New York Film Academy, but personal circumstances tied him to the East Bay. So he attended Ohlone College in Fremont, where he was mentored by Lawrence Iriarte, whose technical credits include *The Matrix* and two Tim Burton features. Irfan did a short piece related to the stage shows at the Naz, a documentary on a transgender immigration attorney, and a piece based on a relationship he'd had.

Soon after he finished his studies, a photographer friend introduced Irfan to Indian cinema star Javed Jaffrey, who has a prestigious Indian Filmfare award under his belt for the film *Salaam Namaste*, and is one of the stars of the highly anticipated *Singh Is Kinng*, which is coming to the Naz in August. After they became friends, Jaffrey helped Irfan break into the industry.

"I asked him if he ever comes to the States to, 'Help me out; get me into it. I can be a production assistant or anything!' And he was signed up for a movie. I was there to help out on the set. Mostly I was observing how they were

shooting, how they were scheduling."

That film was 2007's *Ta Ra Rum Pum*, starring Indian film stars Rani Mukerji and Saif Ali Khan as husband and wife. He's a race-car driver who falls from success and makes an attempt to get everything back with one final race. A major production from the stables of Yash Raj Films, whose company is among the top 30 distribution houses in the world, this was a large-scale production shot in New England, with a second unit from the US film *Talladega Nights*. The experience supplemented Irfan's self-taught skills and his classroom studies with real-life film experience.

Then, earlier this year, after attending a cousin's wedding in Bangalore, Irfan visited Jaffrey in Mumbai, where he had just started work as a featured actor in *Shaurya*, a film about a Muslim army member accused of terrorism. Irfan ended up part of the crew.

"I bought this camera because I was trying to learn still photography and become a cinematographer," he said. "I was clicking all these photos on the set." When the director saw a picture of him and Jaffrey that Irfan had snapped, he was surprised to learn that the photographer was not just an unskilled bystander. Irfan said the director showed the photo to his camera crew as inspiration for how to shoot a scene, and soon he was asked to come on board as a crew member. "Next thing I knew, I was assisting the direction team!" he said. In the end, Irfan composed shots for the film and served as an actor when a crucial scene involving the Pakistani army was undercast.

Like Irfan, Rashmi Rustagi is looking for her break in film. Originally from Lucknow in northeast India, she has participated in theater, radio plays, TV, and film since the age of nine. But after she married and came to the United States in the mid-'80s, she found there were no theater outlets for brown people in her first homes of Buffalo and Birmingham. "You had to be either black or white to get into theater," she said. "There were no plays written for our color or ethnicity. So I didn't even attempt it." To keep a foot in the game, she would emcee music and dance shows aimed at the Indian community when they came into town.

When her husband's job finally moved the family to the Bay Area in 1997, she found Naatak, a thirteen-year-old Sunnyvale theater group that produces plays and films in Indian languages and English, and began taking acting classes. Rustagi discovered the huge theater community here. These experiences help her when she is auditioning for film roles, which she's been pursuing for several years. "When directors see your theater background, they are impressed," she said.

Three years ago, she appeared in *Khanda*, a movie set in Oakland and aimed at an Indian audience. But so far such acting is a passion, not a profession; she said the director made it clear that he was not going to pay her whether or not the film ever made any money. "In fact I paid out of my pocket for the makeup and the wig and everything," she recalled. "We end up spending our own money to be in an independent film." The film's Berkeley-based director wants to release it in London, Hollywood, and Mumbai, but as far as Rustagi knows nothing has yet come of those plans.

Earlier this summer, Rustagi auditioned for a yet untitled major Indian film that started shooting in the Bay Area on July 25. It is to be directed by Imtiaz Ali, whose 2007 hit *Jab We Met* (When We Met) garnered seven nominations and two trophies at each of the Filmfare and International Indian Film Academy awards. The story follows a professional who moves from India to the US, and sees a counselor for cultural adjustment and love problems. Rustagi vied for the counselor role, and last week got a second callback to meet the director, who impressed her by graciously offering tea. Ali told her he's here

because the lead character builds bridges, and the Bay Area has nice bridges. Rustagi's casting agent said it's good that Ali saw so much local talent.

Rustagi said such opportunities seem to be growing. "There is some stuff beginning to happen in the Bay Area," she said. "It has its charm as a location. There's a whole generation in the East Bay of emerging Indian theater that are intellectuals and people who want their voice to be heard."

These productions are usually small-scale. "There is an independent Indian film scene in the Bay Area," Rustagi said. "More and more people are doing it, more and more engineers who came with eight dollars in their pockets from India, and have had companies go public and are very comfortable in their financial life, started doing cinema or creative arts that they always had a passion for but never had the time or the money. More and more people are trying to do that. They're doing it and then the second- and third-generation Indians that have families here, that have grown up here, are also doing stuff. It's definitely an emerging scene and I would say that ten years from now, there would be a big scene, maybe just in the Bay Area, or between LA and all of California."

However, it's still tough for films to be made and distributed in the East Bay. In 2006, Rustagi was cast locally in a Bollywood-style film with songs and dancing called *It's a Mismatch*. The film featured two ubiquitous Indian actors, Anupam Kher (the father in *Bend It Like Beckham*) and Boman Irani (a popular comedic actor in India). It was received well at US festivals, but didn't get a distribution deal. "People *are* making Bollywood films here, just not as much," Rustagi said. "It comes to big budget. Those films are big-budget films in Bollywood. The singing and dancing and choreography and music just puts an extra layer of financial strain on them."

It was probably a letdown for Irfan to come back in 2007 and resume his tax business after a taste of the creative world of Indian filmmaking. So he started musing about writing a script based on his own ups and downs. Ideally, he'll mix comedy and light entertainment. His film will be *masala*, but with an underlying moral he'd like the audience to remember. "When I see all these Indian movies today, it's like they are lacking the social subject," he said. "Even in Hollywood they are lacking the social subject. Nowadays it's all like special effects and some weird stuff like the Earth is falling apart."

Irfan's message is a personal one. "Everyone seems to have this fake happiness shell around them," he said in explanation. "But when they're alone it's like they aren't happy with themselves. Most people are lying to themselves." He wants to convey that it's important to be honest with yourself and others in relationships. "When you start lecturing, people don't want to listen, but when you start joking around, people will laugh, but the message leaves some impact."

Irfan's screenplay will be set in the East Bay, in English, with what he describes as an "American mentality and background." But since he expects to shop it to Indian producers, he's hoping to adjust it to include dialogue in Hindi. "It depends on the opportunity. Now people in India are used to English. Films like *The Namesake*, more arty films, tend to be shown in English there." The catch is that he's planning to pitch his movie as a commercial production rather than an art film. "Commercial has more exposure," he notes.

Toward that end, Irfan knows he needs some musical interludes. "In a Bollywood movie you have to have music," he said. "If a guy and a girl aren't dancing, it's not a Bollywood movie."

While he is working on the screenplay for next year, Irfan will be busy coordinating another Indian film, this time a low-budget feature that's set in the East Bay and is expected to begin shooting this fall. After being recruited by

an old friend he ran into recently, Irfan has been the director's local point of contact. "I'm doing whatever's required," he said. "I was assisting the line producer. They are expecting me to assist the direction and pull some resources in terms of finding a crew and locations. If this goes well, I'll be ready for my movie, but at this point my weddings are piling up on me."

As far as Irfan knows, this will be the first project from India shot from start to finish in the East Bay. And the director is talking about using the East Bay in the future for other ventures once the production team is established here.

Mumbai-based producer Anubhav Anand cast his 2006 film *It's a Mismatch* in the East Bay. But he shot it in Riverside because that's where the investors were and because he felt that area had a lot to offer as a locale. "For an independent movie it's always good to have access to a lot of resources. The University of Riverside was very nice to provide us with a lot of their facilities."

Finding the talent was another story. "You don't have a lot of databases out there in America where you can get these Indian actors," Anand noted. "When we started casting for certain characters, we sent out casting notices all over America and fortunately there were some organizations, some theater groups in the Bay Area, and they suggested that they would have quite a few people who would fit the bill. We were fortunate that two very good artists came from the Naatak theater group, and one person who moved from Northern California to LA was also cast. In the process I found out that Northern California *does* have a good concentration of people involved in arts and entertainment and theater specifically."

Local resources are a key draw, especially for independent filmmakers on a budget. Ex-Berkeley resident Leena Pendharkar was in Oakland a couple weeks ago scouting locations for her first feature film, *Raspberry Magic*. While lamenting that California cut its financial incentives to filmmaking, she is still excited to film here. "We're poised right on the cusp of Silicon Valley and this is a great location to shoot because it's really beautiful and it's really film-friendly," she said. "There's an overlap between the Bollywood and South Asian indie film community. We're tapping into the Indian/South Asian network of professionals who wanna see the kinds of movies we're making get made. We've done meetings with investors here."

As Indian awareness of US resources grows, and local communities look to India for their films and finances, these types of cross-fertilizations are beginning to bear fruit.

At February's Berlinale film festival, Shah Rukh Khan, widely considered the world's biggest film star, was asked if he plans to work in Hollywood. "I'm not trying to be modest, but I'm 42 years old, I'm a little brown, I don't have any specialty as an actor," he replied. "I don't know kung fu; I don't dance the Latin salsa. I'm not tall enough. There is no space for me; there is no place for me. It's not my choice. It's not like I land at the LA airport and Steven Spielberg's waiting for me there. He is not."

Yet Khan may have spoken too soon. In June, just four months later, San Leandro's *India-West* newspaper reported that Spielberg himself is negotiating with Mumbai-based Reliance ADA for funding to start a new company that will generate about six films a year. In exchange, Reliance will own half of the enterprise, and also is funding production houses for Brad Pitt, George Clooney, Tom Hanks, and Nicolas Cage, among others.

The underlying message is that the two film worlds are orbiting more closely. For example, in one of the California scenes from Kohli's *Thoda Pyaar Thoda Magic*, the angel Geeta uses her magic powers to make the HOLLYWOOD sign read BOLLYWOOD. "It won't be long before an Indian studio might just buy

into a Hollywood studio," Kohli opines. "And you know, we *do* make more films than Hollywood. It is not an overtly aggressive message, but why not? We'd love to see a Bollywood sign like that. I think what I did — which appeared to be a joke — is not really a joke. I did it as a fun thing but, yes, you never know."

Such rapprochement can't come too soon for would-be filmmakers like Irfan. "There are so many companies looking for good material in India," he said. "They are already established. They have all the channels. They know how to do marketing, they know how much things are going to cost. All I have to do is present the idea to them and they'll hire me as the director."

Contact the author of this piece, send a letter to the editor, like us on Facebook, or follow us on Twitter.

« Letters for July 23 Alameda Labor Dispute Hinges o... »