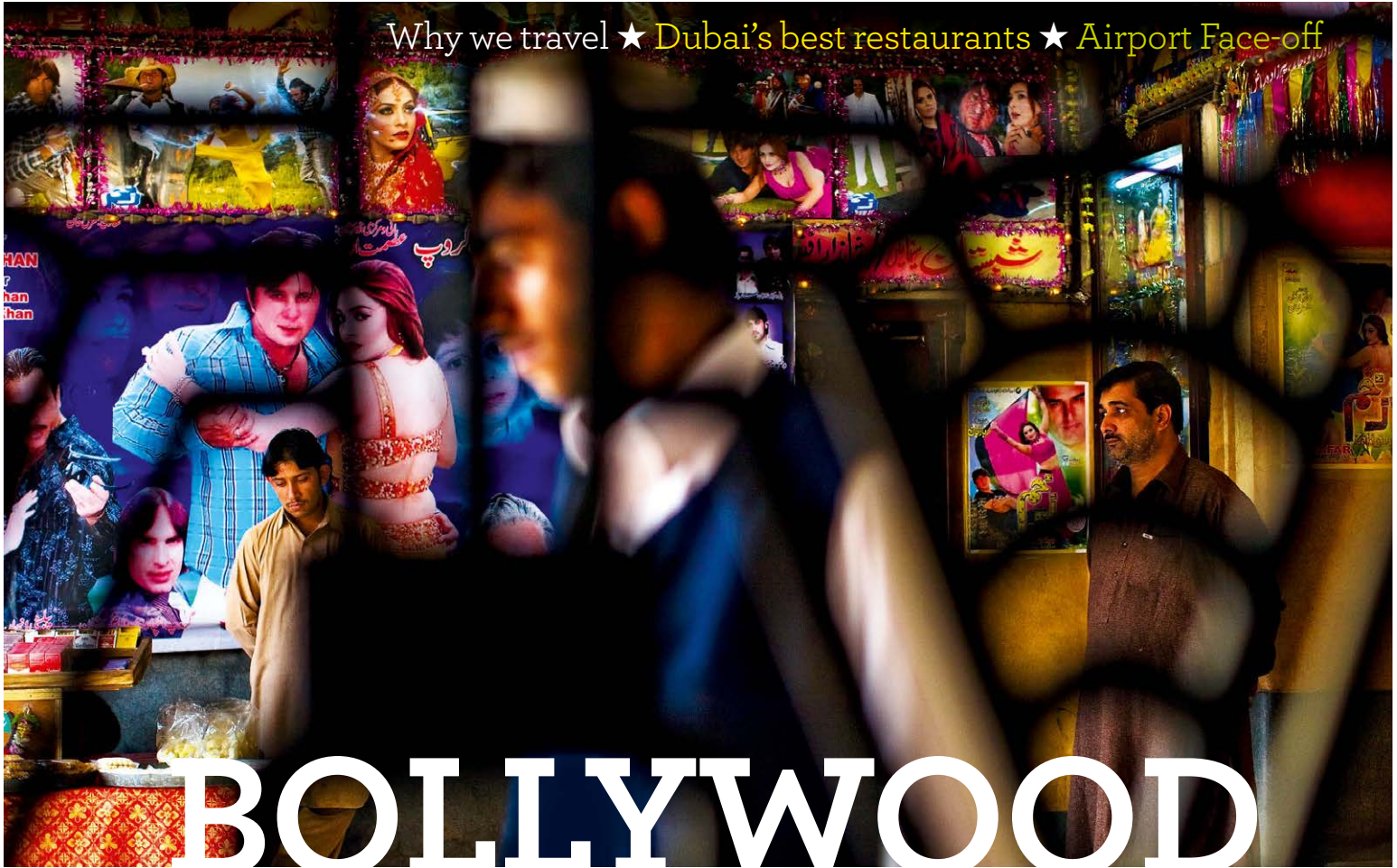


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BOLLYWOOD IN PAKISTAN

No matter what the political situation, the Hindi film industry has a remarkable ability to unite the people of India and Pakistan, says **Fatima Bhutto**

Peshawar has always been beautiful. Once the summer city of the Mughal emperors, it was also the seat of great Gandharan art under the Kushan king, Kanishka, and a respected centre of Buddhist learning. At the crossroads of Central and South Asia, Peshawar is a place of legends. The Buddha's begging bowl rested in the Gorkhatri neighbourhood, where centuries of yogis came to meditate. India's tallest stupa was built here—in an area now enveloped in shanty homes (according to local lore, it was in Peshawar that the Japanese and Chinese were inspired to build pagodas after pilgrims visited the stupa). It is the birthplace of the Taliban and the confluence of the politics that changed the face of Afghanistan

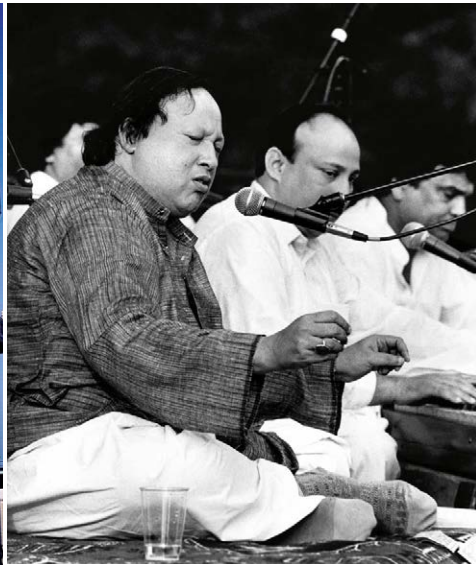
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY MAP: RADHIKA MAHESHWARI



Top: A cinema showing Bollywood films in Peshawar

and Pakistan 30 years ago. But one of its greatest legends is one that both India and Pakistan share: Bollywood.

Dilip Kumar, once Muhammad Yusuf Khan, was born in the city's Qissa Khwani Bazaar and—before he left for Pune and Mumbai, where he worked as a fruit seller—it was in this frontier city that his family planted its orchards. In the nearby Dhaki Nalbandi area, Raj Kapoor, another one of Peshawar's famous sons, was born. And in all the decades that have gone past, these legends have never dimmed. Dilip Kumar's cousins still reside in the city and Raj Kapoor never forgot the taste of Pakistani mangoes (or so Pakistanis insist). Even Shah Rukh Khan has a bit of Pathan in him; his father was from →



Clockwise from top left: Dilip Kumar with Raj Kapoor; a poster for *Om Shanti Om*; Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan; a minaret in Peshawar

“We never turned against Indian cinema, no matter how bad the situation was between our countries”

— SABEEN, BOLLYWOOD FAN FROM PAKISTAN

the same area as Dilip Kumar and was an activist in the freedom movement alongside Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi.

For Pakistanis, Bollywood is a demilitarised zone. As tense as India and Pakistan’s politics are, and as wounded as both countries were by the horrors of Partition, Pakistan has long maintained a love affair with India through its cinema. “We grew up on Indian films,” says Mohsin Sayeed, a 44-year-old satirist and social commentator from Karachi. “We see ourselves in their heroes; we identify with the characters in their films (in our heads we are all Aishwarya Rai Bachchan); we have a history of collaborating on music and lyrics; and we even recite dialogue from our favourite films in everyday conversation.”

Saadat Hasan Manto, one of Pakistan’s greatest Urdu writers, was a young man when he moved to pre-Partition Bombay to write film scripts such as *Kisan Kanya* (India’s first indigenous colour film) and *Apni Nagariya*. To think of the subcontinent as being as culturally fractured as its borders is a mistake. Our language is the same, our food made from the same grains and spices, and our fixations and longings often shared. Think of how many star-crossed lovers have danced in the rain and across snowy mountaintops to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s haunting melodies. It’s natural then that Pakistan sees itself in Indian films.

But it’s not just your sentimental neighbours who feel this bridging of cultures through cinema; even the academicians agree. Vamsee K Juluri,

the author of *Bollywood Nation*, explained Pakistan’s overwhelmingly positive perception of Bollywood as partially due to it being ‘dominated by Punjabi and Sindhi culture’, which overrides any perceived national differences. “Plus,” Juluri says, “having three Khans at the peak of the star pantheon perhaps doesn’t hurt...”

To a generation of Pakistanis too young to have lived through our wars and aggravations, Bollywood speaks to the possibility of an open future and communion between the two countries. My brother Zulfikar, now in his last year of studying art in college, pads around our home in Karachi singing ‘Mera Joota Hai Japani’ to himself as he works. He is the Bolly-expert in the family. There was a period where ‘Rang Barse’ was the only music we were allowed to play at home and I’m quite sure he taught his university flatmates all the words to ‘Dum Maro Dum’. “Bollywood removes the other,” he swiftly replied when I asked him what he thought of India after a lifetime’s exposure to its syncretic cinema.

Though the world portrayed in Hindi films is fantasy heavy—Bollywood today has traded its populist, anti-elitist messages for ones obsessed by brands, materialism and power—the scope for positive influence is enormous. But it could do better. The baddie needn’t always have a connection with Pakistan or run a brothel in Karachi. Art, more than politics or sport, liberates people from prejudice. It is a safe space in which to foster compassion for those we are not used to empathising with. In a hyper-connected world, where borders are increasingly breaking down, where hundreds of millions of people belong to online communities, and where global information travels at the click of a button, nationalism feels wildly outdated.

“We never turned against Indian cinema, no matter how bad the situation was between our countries,” my friend Sabeen, another Bollywood aficionado, says. “Bollywood has brought us face-to-face with our commonalities and what is possible when we collaborate. We watch people just like ourselves, in cities so similar to ours, so naturally we build an affection for them. How can we hate India after all this? Whatever the political situation, in those three hours, the films have our full attention.”

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