

The Film Visionary  
Contributed by Bertrand Moullier

Bobby Bedi  
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“It is unreasonable to suggest that—just because my property is not made of metal, cement or fabric, but is of a creative kind—it is not worthy of being protected in the same way. Theft of IP is theft and should be universally condemned.”

Bobby Bedi is amongst an elite group of Indian film industry leaders who believe passionately that to remedy the gulf between India’s vast film output and its share of the global economic benefit, it is essential to tackle the pandemic levels of copyright theft affecting Indian films worldwide.

### **Delivering Bollywood: Challenges and Opportunities**

The Indian film industry is the largest in the world, with over 1,000 films made each year and an increasingly global popularity. Everywhere in Asia and the Middle East, “Bollywood” films from Bombay’s bustling metropolis, as well as films from the Southern Indian states, have conquered local audiences. Cinema goes in Malaysia, Japan, Thailand, Singapore or the United Arab Emirates sing along rapturously to the plangent songs of Indian films and swoon at the flamboyant Indian stars with as much abandon as they do at their own local screen icons.

Yet for all its success and the sheer volume of its production, India’s prolific cinema today represents less than 1% of global film entertainment revenues. Many Indian films are produced entirely at risk, with producers sometimes willing to borrow money at crippling rates in order to fulfil their creative dreams. When films are released, many disappear without a trace. “It is not always because [the] films are bad”, Bedi underlined in a speech at WIPO in 2005, “It is usually because they only see a fraction of their dues; the rest is stolen from under their noses...” Bedi is also a passionate believer in the uniqueness of the country’s vast pool of original stories and the potential of its film industry to rise to the status of economic and creative IP leadership on a global scale.

Perhaps the most spectacular demonstration of his faith in India’s own creative capital is his current project to bring the *Mahabharata*, India’s sprawling epic of clashing pre-modern dynasties, to the screen. Bedi’s vision for the adaptation of the 75,000-verse poem not only entails matching the creative vision and production values of a *Lord of the Rings*, but also developing a multi-pronged approach aimed at maximising the IP value and creating a national and global brand: alongside the feature films, there will be a television series, merchandising, comic books, PC games and “The Vedic Experience,” a

theme park entirely dedicated to *Mahabharata*.

### **Choosing Film over Finance**

Considering his high profile both as a creative film producer and a tireless advocate for realising the value of India's creative IP, it is perhaps surprising to learn that Bobby Bedi did not start life with a vibrant interest in the film industry. A native of New Delhi, he chose to train in the less volatile field of finance. "I had two roommates," says Bedi. "Their names were Vijay Singh and Gopal Rathan Subramanian. On graduation, clutching our freshly minted MBAs, all three of us went into careers which had nothing whatsoever to do with film. Twenty years later, Gopal had become a successful screen actor (under the name of Mani Rahman), Vijay was the head of Sony Music India and I was a film producer!" Bedi sees this deliberate slide of three serious-minded and brainy graduates from conventional jobs to the film and music industries as a sign of the growth of opportunities in India's creative IP field over the past three decades.

By his own admission, Bedi's first steps toward becoming a bankable film producer had little to do with career planning and more with sheer luck, affinity, and a boldness that has always defined his approach to life. A stint at Sony as an equipment manager had given him informal contacts with the film world. These eventually led, in 1989, to his leaving the security of the corporate fold to try his luck with a low-budget production. The film, with the ornate literary title of *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones* was a labour of love for young director Pradip Prishen and his girlfriend, a young architect by the name of Arundhati Roy. Roy is now a celebrated novelist, whose internationally acclaimed *God of Small Things* won the UK's prestigious Booker Prize in 1997. "I was hired," says Bobby, "because these two said they wanted someone to help them put the project together, someone with an MBA..." The film, a bitter-sweet tale of Roy's youth as an architectural student, was made for a mere US\$20,000.

Bedi's true baptism of fire came in 1992 with his second project *Electric Moon*, another low-budget affair almost wholly financed by the UK's most *avant garde* television broadcaster, Channel 4. The film would be the first in the history of Indian cinema to be shot using synchronised sound (Indian film dialogue is generally post-dubbed by the actors in a studio after filming). Bedi to his own inexperience. Four days into the chaotic shoot in the small town of Pachmarhi in Andhra Pradesh, Bedi received an unwelcome visit from the film's completion guarantor,<sup>1</sup> Graham Easton. Easton, a well-respected professional in the international film industry, coolly estimated that – unless the production schedule was radically re-organised – it would overrun by 100 days. Instead of shutting the movie down and taking it over, the guarantor calmly proceeded to show Bobby how it was done: "Over the next two days, as we sat under a local tree, Graham peacefully and meticulously taught me how to produce a film." Today, Bedi's Kaleidoscope Entertainment and Graham Easton's Film Finances are partnering each other, offering a completion guarantee service to a fast-maturing Indian film industry.

### **Ushering India's Film Industry into a New Era**

Bedi's next adventure in the world of film was the making of him, setting the qualitative benchmark for the rest of an eventful career and single-handedly ushering India's film industry into a new era. *Goddess of Flowers*, as the project was called then, had been nurtured from London by Channel 4's flamboyant Anglo-Indian commissioner for multicultural programmes, Farukh Dondhy, a published essayist, screenwriter and novelist. Initially conceived as a very low-budget "docu-drama," the project ran into major difficulties soon after principal photography began in Southern India. Dondhy, having brought Bedi in to rescue the film, agreed with his assessment that the priority was to re-write a weak and confusing script. The two men set off for a two-week intensive writing stint in the secluded atmosphere of the small French village of Saint Vivien du Médoc, nestled in the heart of the Bordeaux valley. Living on bread and cheese, they also developed a taste for good vintage and, as Bedi puts it, "We walked out of there after two weeks with a crate of wine and a finished script." Bedi flew on to India where he and the fledgling director got the film back on track. The events that followed are now a part of the rich mythology of the international film world: screening for a select audience of industry professionals at a small preview theatre in the heart of London's Soho, the completed film seduced the selector for Cannes, the world's most prestigious competitive film festival.

*Bandit Queen*, as the film was eventually titled, went to Cannes 1994 and won critical acclaim the world over. Its director, the outspoken Shekhar Kapur, went on to become one of the most successful Indian directors of his generation. The film broke away from decades of Bollywood mainstream restraint with a provocative and unflinching portrayal of Phoolan Devi, a real-life female "bandit" who became a figure of legend after taking up arms against the remorseless exploitation of India's poorest citizens before being caught and serving a 10-year sentence in prison. Though never exploitative, *Bandit Queen* contained scenes of both nudity and violence which savaged the puritanical codes of the Bollywood mainstream and challenged the industry to cease focusing exclusively on escapist fare. It also established Bedi as a maverick with a strong creative vision and an international sensibility.

<sup>1</sup> In order to receive the final go-ahead, the film required a *completion guarantee*. This form of insurance is unique to the film industry. The guarantee, or "bond," covers the risk of the film not being completed by the production company (for a host of reasons which may include death of a main actor, major schedule overrun or severe incompetence in the management of the production). The completion guarantor, who issues the bond in exchange for assuming the financial risk in the event of non-completion, will have rights to take over the running of the production if he has legitimate reasons to suspect the film will not be completed.

## **Realizing a Vision**

The years since *Bandit Queen* triumphed on the world stage have seen Bedi acting consistently with his vision, both as a creative producer and an IP entrepreneur. With *The Rising*, a 2003 historical epic about the rebellion of native *Sepoy* soldiers serving under British rule in the late 19th century, Bedi attempted a bold synthesis between colourful Bollywood spectacle and serious historical narrative. Although reviewers were divided over the result and audiences were disorientated by the film's ambition, *The Rising*, like *Bandit Queen* before it, broke new ground in its attempt (rarely seen before in Bollywood), to convey a serious message through popular entertainment.

Today Kaleidoscope Entertainment, the production company Bedi started in 1989, is a multi-media enterprise with a presence in all segments of the audiovisual value chain as well as in publishing. It has a busy film production slate, has begun to distribute films internationally, and partners Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation in the Indian news channel Star News. Additionally, Kaleidoscope prides itself on having been the first production company in India to produce audiovisual content specifically for the mobile phone, in the shape of short video narratives.

*“All of what we are building here, myself and my other colleagues  
in this vast cultural industry, none of it will be sustainable in the long term  
unless we can protect the intellectual property we generate and  
get a fair price for our content.”*

Bobby Bedi