

# Death in Mollywood BOMBAY/ MUMBAI

**From Yakety Yak: Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle  
by Russell McGilton**

On my past travels I have noticed how residents of each country have a different way of going to the cinema. In Thailand, patrons stand with hands on hearts when the King's picture is screened, while in Pakistan, locals face their country's flag and sing their national anthem. But in India ... people run!

Swarms of people were squashed up against the padlocked steel gate of the Regal Cinema, an Art Deco building crumbling silently in the night. When the gate opened it was on for young and old and I felt the crush of bodies push past. Over ten million people across India go to the cinema in a single day, and at this moment it felt like they had all decided to come to this one. I shrank up against the wall, spilling my soapy tea, while old ladies jostled and elbowed their way as if to reclaim a dowry from a recalcitrant daughter-in-law. I didn't understand the rush; fifty rupees got me a reserved seat, didn't it? I soon realised my mistake: the seat numbers had worn off over the years of attentive neglect but no one had bothered to mention this to management, who were happily giving out numbered tickets and dutifully directing patrons to their seats.

*You're sitting right here ... up shit creek.*

Inside, chaos led the way. People were jumping, running and throwing themselves into chairs, then valiantly fighting off newcomers. Whole families were involved in this coup d'état. One man was barking directions, pointing at vacant seats and waving what appeared to be his immediate family, his extended family and his extended-extended family through to fill the row. Or maybe there were just a lot of people following one guy; it was hard to say.

Up in the stalls, I jumped into the nearest seat and languished in my dilapidated comfort until a curt-bordering-on-rude voice said, 'This is not your seat.'

I looked up, prepared to sneer at any seat-bumpers, but instead it was the usher.

‘How do you know? There are no seat numbers.’

The usher ignored my protests and led me upstairs where, with some dowsing insight, he conjured up my magical seat – up the back and right next to a gang of jabbering youths.

‘How do you know this is the right seat?’

‘It is on your ticket,’ he said as if I were a blind idiot.

‘But there’s no seat number on the seat!’ I protested but he was gone, moving people who were, to their surprise, in the wrong seat.

A family of five stood in confusion at my row. Another usher came up to me and demanded to see my ticket. He flicked his torch on it.

‘Your seat is not correct.’

‘It is correct! The usher just put me here.’

‘No, this is the wrong number to the seat.’

‘What?’

‘The ticket is correct but the seat is not. Come with me.’

He deposited me on the far left of the cinema behind a pillar.

‘This is your correct seat.’

‘Are you sure about that? There are no seat numbers here. How can you give me the right seat if there are no numbers? Hmm?’

His body rocked like a wave.

‘It is correct,’ he said and floated away into the darkness, delivering people to their seats willy-nilly with an unnerving self-assuredness.

The trailers began. Screeching, distorted noise hurt my ears as a community film about residents not rubbishing their neighbourhood clunked across the screen. We saw a man about to spit, another about to urinate, girls throwing rubbish on a beach, and a housewife liberally turfing scraps out of her house onto the street. The solution to this terrible depravity was to put the rubbish in a bin, which in India seemed to be like trying to find a vindaloo curry that wasn’t hot.

I was here to see *Raju Chacha*, a typical Bollywood film. As a genre, Bollywood created itself out of other film styles; this genre is known as the ‘masala format’ (named after a culinary term for a mix of several flavours in a single dish). Everything is thrown in – musicals, comedy, horror, action, romance, cartoons and even science fiction. All except pornography. In fact, the most you’ll ever see of that kind of business is a wet, gyrating sari or a naked shoulder. You’re lucky if there’s even a kiss. In fact, the leading actors seem to be pulled out of shot by stagehands just as their moist lips are about to daringly meet.

*Raju Chacha*’s claim to fame was that it was made with one of the biggest budgets in Bollywood history: 35 crore, the equivalent of US\$7.22 million. Like Hollywood films, however, a bigger budget didn’t necessarily mean a better script. I sat trying to piece together threads of the story amid its tiresome slapstick (‘Oops! I’ve knackered myself on a stair railing again!’), but am still to this day not entirely sure what I saw.

I vaguely remember something about a rich architect widower and his three brattish kids living in a garish pink-and-gold mansion with a rainbow-gravel circular driveway and Graceland-style guitar steel gate. It did beg the question: should the set-builders have dropped the acid *after* they built it and not before?

The story was hatched along the lines of ‘evil relatives plot to kill father and take over his millions’. One minute we were watching the father (who had an uncanny resemblance to Darryl Somers) dance around the house, then, in the next second he had suddenly morphed into a Lion King cartoon. During the duller moments the audience talked loudly, got up to stretch, went outside, noisily banged doors, sang to themselves or yawned.

By the third intermission I had had enough, so I jumped in a taxi and headed back to my hotel. As the taxi sped through the empty, dark streets, *wallahs* cleared rubbish onto small carts pulled by donkeys.

Mumbai seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. People slept on pavements, taxi drivers slept in or on their taxis. The cow I had met earlier was still sitting at the same corner chewing on the same plastic bag. When I got out of the taxi I tried doing a *Ruja Cha Cha* dance at it, but it feigned disinterest and left me to walk alone to my hotel.