



GRAINEY P I C T U R E S

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

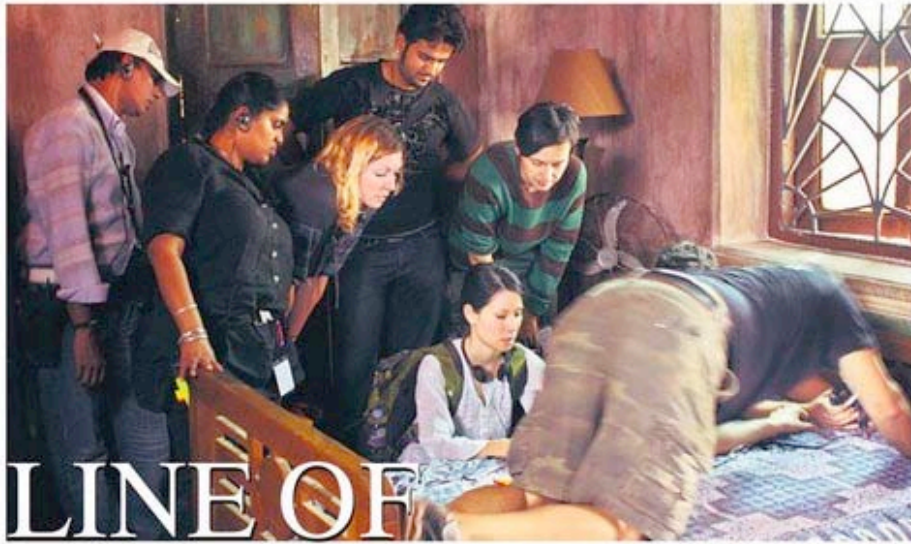
Line of Control  
May 14th, 2010

The Indian EXPRESS  
www.expressindia.com

CINEMA

5

MUMBAI Newsline | FRIDAY | MAY 14 | 2010



(Clockwise from top) India Take One's crew with the team of *Eat, Pray, Love* in Delhi; Noorani with British actor Julian Sands on the set of *Bollywood Hero*; Lucy Liu and Amin's team shoot in Mumbai slums

# LINE OF CONTROL

A *Slumdog Millionaire* won't be possible without line-producers, the real heroes of all international productions shot in India

DIPTI NAGPAUL-IPSOUZA

LINE producer Harish Amin strictly follows a pre-shooting ritual. Once on the location, he sends his spot boys marching around, checking for possible sources of sound. "All it takes to disrupt a shoot being done in sync sound is for one crew member to rip open a pack of tobacco. India is a chaotic country and most international productions are shot in sync sound," says Amin, the founder and head of Speaking Tree Pictures, who has been working as a line producer for international productions in India for nearly three decades.

This is only one of the minor challenges faced by Amin and his counterparts who frequently shoot ads, films and documentaries with international

crews in India. Their job, apart from ensuring that the shoot goes smoothly, includes budgeting and scheduling the shoot, scouting for locations, arranging for the local cast and crew, and arranging government paperwork and visas for the visiting crew members.

Though Academy Award-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* has brought India under the spotlight, international productions are by no means a recent concept—a number of Merchant Ivory films date back to the '80s as does Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* and the Oscar-winner *Gandhi*. Though the early '90s did witness a slump, India found its feet as soon as it began to establish itself as an economically viable option.

According to a member of the Information and Broadcasting ministry, this year alone seven to nine projects,

chiefly ad films, have been cleared by the government. There is a rise in the number of proposals after *Slumdog*'s success. Last year saw 30-plus projects coming to India, a 10 per cent rise when compared to 2008.

Tabrez Noorani, a partner in India Take One Productions, which line-produced *Slumdog*, says, "The slump happened because the Western world believed that shooting in India was too problematic and even unsafe. Things have changed enormously now." Most foreigners filmmakers' first preference is to shoot at Rajasthan, Kerala or Mumbai. "And a line-producer's job begins with offering them other options," smiles Amin.

For an outsider, making a film in India can prove intimidating since the difference in cultures is astounding. "In



the US, you can pay for it and book the Brooklyn Bridge and the police will cord off the area for you. But here, despite sanctions, payments and bribes, you can't be sure the shoot will go as planned," says Srila Chatterjee, producer, Highlight Films, which chiefly works on ad films.

Line producers often double as local guides. Noorani recounts, "While shooting for *Eat, Pray, Love* with Julia Roberts, we had to let the people at the ashram feel involved in the film by keeping them in the loop about our work. In India, it's about keeping people happy but that doesn't always mean with money. It's upon us to make foreigners understand that."

Apart from allocating a handful of spot boys to plug the noise sources, Amin assigns one especially to deal with

the various police officials who land up at the set threatening to disrupt the shoot unless bribed well. "If you are shooting in a city, you are likely to spend up to Rs 50,000 bribing despite having the requisite permissions and having paid the location charges." More than the harassment, says the producer—who has worked on *Salaam Bombay*, Oscar-nominated short film *Kavi* and recently Lucy Liu's directorial venture—the problem is explaining to the client these miscellaneous expenses. So he attributes it to location charges in the shooting budget even when he, ironically, is taxed by the government.

Then there is the government paperwork, which Chatterjee describes as a relay race. "The I&B ministry prefers that we submit all documents together—the script, the details of the foreign crew members who will fly down and the equipment list being imported. We submit the script during the early stages of planning and the rest is tentative. It takes four to six weeks to clear the paperwork and there is no transparency whatsoever in the process. So we have to devise various contingency plans in case the crew member's visa application is rejected."

Despite these problems, India continues to be the preferred destination for many foreign productions. But Chatterjee warns that Sri Lanka and Nepal may emerge as contenders. "They have their systems in place and leverage upon the possibility of generating revenue. We lost four projects last month because we couldn't arrange for visas for the crew members."

But Varun Shah, a freelance line-producer who has worked in both Hollywood and in India, feels that

there is a huge improvement over earlier systems. "Earlier, the I&B Ministry took eight weeks to clear the paperwork. Obtaining the various permissions wasn't easy either. The ministry has now set up a panel to go through the scripts and does not like foreigners to show only the poverty and corruption through their work, which is apt."

Noorani, who recently line-produced *Maharishi*, David Lynch's documentary on Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, adds that the foreign productions give Indian technicians a chance to learn and showcase their talent. "There are many systems in Bollywood now—like that of having the first AD manage the set—that have been adopted from the way films are made internationally."

What also works for foreigners is that in India, things can be worked out despite the hurdles. Gunjet Monga who co-produced *Kavi*, recounts that during the pre-production, the team had zeroed in on a brick kiln for the shoot but when they returned four months later, the kiln had shut shop. "We had to beg, borrow and buy broken and disposed of bricks from other kilns in the vicinity. Director Gregg Helvey and his team were surprised to see that we managed to put everything in place on schedule and within the budget," she smiles.

What makes Amin happy is the fact that foreign productions are now open to hiring local talent. "When we shot in Wai for *Kavi*, we could hire most part of the crew from there. This helped bring down the costs. If there is anything that *Slumdog* has done for India, it is having brought our technicians the recognition they deserve."