

# Teaching India's History and Contemporary Society Through Film

By Thomas Lamont

Indian films, traditionally known as Hindi films but today more commonly referred to as “Bollywood” films, named in honor of Bombay (Mumbai today), offer a wonderful opportunity to teach students about the history and culture of India and South Asia. There are dozens of movies about Indian historical subjects and cultural issues that are accessible to American students. Many of the movies are typical Bollywood fare that include lots of upbeat songs and dancing. However, some, especially of late, are more nuanced and sophisticated, and reflect both technical advances and emerging attitudes among Indians as their country undergoes dramatic changes.

Since the 1920s, India has had a flourishing movie industry, and for at least two decades, India has produced more studio films than the United States. By the 1930s, there had emerged two fairly distinct types of Indian films: Bollywood films and art house films. Bollywood and Hollywood are the epicenters of Indian and American filmmaking, respectively. Both Hollywood and Bollywood are unabashed moneymakers, but Bollywood is heavy on romance, song, and dance, all intended to leave the audience in a good mood. In contrast, art house films have long targeted a much smaller and sophisticated audience that prefers movies that challenge their intellect rather than their emotions. From roughly 1955 until 1992, the great Indian director Satyajit Ray made many outstanding art house films about India, including his masterpiece *Pather Panchali* (1955). Occasionally, Bollywood produces a film that captures the essence of India at a particular time in history. The classic *Sholay* (1975) is a case in point.

Since 1991, India's dramatic economic growth and attendant social changes have profoundly affected India's film industry. With the emergence of a much larger middle class, the line between art house film and Bollywood film has blurred. Today, more and more filmgoers in India, especially urban India, prefer films that avoid the simplistic, formulaic plots of traditional Bollywood fare but also pack the kind of visceral intensity and fast pace that traditional art house films have shunned. In essence, Indian film is becoming more like American film. Yet Indian film remains in many ways more surprising and diverse than American filmmaking because the rapid pace of change in India is encouraging, if not requiring, Indian filmmakers to think more broadly and perhaps more creatively than their American counterparts. What follows is an annotated list of films about India that may be useful for teachers and instructors in a number of different survey courses. Most but not all of the films in the essay are Indian.

The list is far from complete, and teachers should share with each other which Indian films they use and how. I rarely show any of these films in their entirety, given how long they are. Instead, I show one or two excerpts, perhaps ten to fifteen minutes each, that reflect important historical attitudes and perspectives, and allow for constructive discussion. Many of my students become so intrigued by the films that they go on to watch the films in their entirety. Most Indian films are easily available with English subtitles as DVDs or through subscription-based online streaming services such as Netflix. Many free streaming services such as YouTube may have clips of an Indian film (sometimes the entire film is available), but often films do not have English subtitles and are thus less useful.

## Recommended Films on Indian History

### *Bandit Queen*



PRODUCED BY BOBBY BEDI  
DIRECTED BY SHEKHAR KAPUR  
WRITTEN BY RANJIT KAPOOR AND MALA SEN  
119 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI  
KALEIDOSCOPE ENTERTAINMENT, 1994

It is hard to believe that this brutally realistic movie was made when it was. The film includes no songs or dancing, as has been the Bollywood tradition. Instead, it portrays several vicious murders, as well as some especially disturbing and graphic rape scenes. Based on a true story, it recounts the early life of Phoolan Devi, a low-caste village girl who is married off before reaching puberty. For the next few years, she suffers a series of brutal rapes both at the hands of her husband and the higher-caste men in the village. Finally, Devi runs away and joins some *dacoits* (bandits), whom she soon comes to lead on a series of vengeful raids against her former tormentors. In the film, as in real life, she becomes popular for her exploits and is able to negotiate favorable surrender terms from the government. This film is appropriate only for older, mature students who can process the content. Many Indians have criticized the film as a widely exaggerated version of events and a Bollywood “sexploitation” film. But while *Bandit Queen* is indeed shocking, it does a laudable job of portraying the traditional role of gender and caste in Indian society at the village level. A professor of Indian Literature and Culture at Brandeis University told me that the film is essential for any serious student of India. I concur.

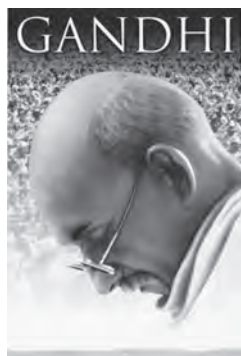
### *The Chess Players*



PRODUCED BY SURESH JINDAL  
DIRECTED BY SATYAJIT RAY  
WRITTEN BY SATYAJIT RAY, BASED ON A STORY  
BY MUNSHI PREMCHAND  
129 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI,  
URDU, ENGLISH, 1977

Directed by the legendary Satyajit Ray, this art house film is a fairly slow but interesting take on Mughal society on the eve of the 1857 Revolt. The plot follows two well-to-do Indian Muslim men who are oblivious to the drama unfolding around them. Their obsession for the game of chess is a metaphor for the British machinations against the unsuspecting Mughals. I show the first thirty or forty minutes, which is quite good history and includes an appearance by Richard Attenborough, the director of *Gandhi*, as a conniving British East India Company official.

## Gandhi



PRODUCED BY RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH,  
DIRECTED BY RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH  
WRITTEN BY JOHN BRILEY  
188 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: ENGLISH  
GOLDCREST FILMS, INTERNATIONAL FILM INVESTORS, NATIONAL FILM DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION OF INDIA, INDO-BRITISH FILMS, 1982  
Although technically not an Indian movie, this excellent biopic was filmed in India, includes many excellent Indian actors, and was a labor of love by the director, Richard Attenborough, who spent many years in India. In other words, it is as

good a film about India made for a Western audience as one might find. Winner of eight Academy Awards including Best Picture, the film is a spectacular epic about the role of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian independence movement. Overall, its history is quite good, though it spends too much time on some episodes and eras while virtually ignoring others. Critics also complain that it is more hagiography than history. Yet I show most of the film (skipping some parts) over eighty to ninety minutes of class time. Some editions of the DVD come with a bonus disc that includes classic newsreel footage of Gandhi (some of which can also be found on YouTube).

## Gandhi, My Father



PRODUCED BY ANIL KAPOOR  
DIRECTED BY FERAZ ABBAS KHAN  
WRITTEN BY FERAZ ABBAS KHAN, BASED ON A BIOGRAPHY BY CHANDULAL DALAL AND NEELAMBEN PARIKH  
136 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, GUJARATI, ENGLISH, BENGALI  
ANIL KAPOOR FILMS COMPANY, EROS INTERNATIONAL, 2007

This is a very interesting art house film about the complex and tragic relationship (or lack thereof) between Gandhi and his eldest son, Harilal, who

worked closely with his father during their time in South Africa but then drifted away from his father and finally was disowned by Gandhi. Harilal died alone and destitute on the streets of Bombay a few months after his father's assassination. The film is a useful counterpoint to the hagiography of Attenborough's *Gandhi* and captures well the effect of Gandhi's obsession with social justice on his family. Most of the film recounts Gandhi's life in South Africa and is based on Harilal's memoir. I show a few scenes to give my students a more nuanced view of Gandhi the person than that given by *Gandhi* the film.

## Haqeeqat

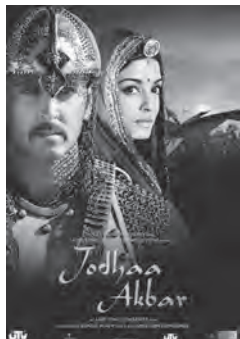


DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY CHETAN ANAND  
184 MINUTES, BLACK AND WHITE,  
LANGUAGES: HINDI  
HIMALAYA FILMS, 1964

This black and white film is about a small Indian army platoon fighting Chinese troops in Ladakh during the 1962 Sino-Indian War. The film is hopelessly sentimental and unrealistic, but it is an excellent example of Indian nationalism during the mid-1960s. The Indian heroine, who looks more Italian than Indian, is assaulted by Chinese

men that are racist caricatures of the worst sort, and the end of the film has a rousing sequence full of Indian anthems, military might, and other symbols of "Mother India."

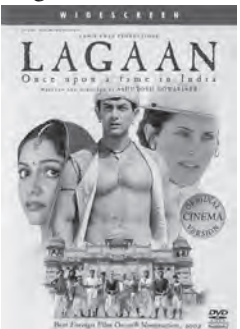
## Jodhaa Akbar



PRODUCED BY RONNIE SCREWVALA  
DIRECTED BY ASHUTOSH GOWARIKER  
WRITTEN BY K. P. SAXENA,  
STORY BY HAIDAR ALI  
213 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, URDU  
ASHUTOSH GOWARIKER PRODUCTIONS, UTV MOTION PICTURES, 2008

This recent epic is about the romantic relationship between the young Emperor Akbar (reigned 1556–1605) and a Rajput princess, Jodhaa. The film sparked significant controversy in India upon its release because Hindu nationalists generally dismiss the notion that Akbar, regarded by historians as one of India's greatest historical figures, was "Indian" and are uncomfortable with the notion that a Muslim leader was devoted to a Hindu princess and vice versa. I show the first thirty or forty minutes, which includes a graphic battle scene and gives a sense of the divide between the Muslim Mughals and their Hindu subjects. One song in the middle of the film depicts a performance by Sufi mystics as the famous "whirling dervishes."

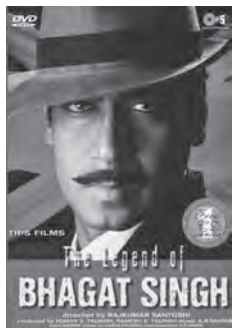
## Lagaan



PRODUCED BY AAMIR KHAN AND MANSOOR KHA  
DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY ASHUTOSH GOWARIKER  
WRITTEN BY ASHUTOSH GOWARIKER AND K. P. SAXENA  
224 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, ENGLISH, AWADHI, URDU  
AAMIR KHAN PRODUCTION, ASHUTOSH GOWARIKER PRODUCTIONS, JHAMU SUGHAND PRODUCTIONS, 2001

Despite the spirited dancing, a few overblown stereotypes, and the centrality of cricket to the story, this film is also decent history. Set in the last decade of the nineteenth century when drought and famine stalked much of the northern Deccan and the Gangetic plain, the story is about how a small village grapples with British demands that it pay the *lagaan*, Hindi for land tax. Produced by and starring one of Bollywood's biggest current stars, Aamir Khan, the film was nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Best Foreign Film. The first thirty to forty minutes are particularly instructive, though there is one very long romantic scene that can be skipped over.

## The Legend of Bhagat Singh



PRODUCED BY KUMAR TAURANI AND RAMESH TAURANI  
DIRECTED BY RAJKUMAR SANTOSHI  
WRITTEN BY RANJIT KAPOOR, PIYUSH MISHRA, AND ANJUM RAJABALI  
155 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, ENGLISH, BENGALI, PANJABI  
TIPS FILM, 2002

There are a few films about this famous figure of the Indian independence movement, but this is likely the best one. Like some more recent Bollywood fare, there are no upbeat songs or dance routines but rather a serious approach to the subject. The film does a good job of showing how and why during the 1920s and 1930s many Indians rejected Gandhi's espousal of nonviolence and instead embraced violence in the pursuit of Indian independence. Thus the film offers an interesting counterpoint to Gandhi.



## Mughal-E-Azam



PRODUCED BY SHAPOORJI PALLONJI  
DIRECTED BY K. ASIF  
WRITTEN BY K. ASIF, AMAN, KAMAL AMROHI,  
EHSAN RIZVI, AND WAJAHAT MIRZA  
197 MINUTES, BLACK AND WHITE, LANGUAGES:  
HINDI, URDU  
STERLING INVESTMENT CORPORATION, 1960  
The film is about the tortured relationship between an elderly Akbar and his son and successor, Jahangir. Although it is considered a Bollywood classic, the sets and the acting have not held up well, and I would not show very much of this except for a few scenes. It is more interesting as a representation of Indian nationalism in postindependence India.

## Mother India



PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY MEHBOOB KHAN  
WRITTEN BY MEHBOOB KHAN,  
WAJAHAT MIRZA, AND S. ALI RAZA  
172 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI  
MEHBOOB PRODUCTIONS, 1957  
Although not a film about a specific historical topic or individual, this classic epic melodrama is an important example of how shortly after inde-

pendence Indian society tried to build national pride. The movie remains one of India's top-grossing films of all time but is far too long and turgid for most students. However, teachers would benefit from watching it.

## Partition



PRODUCED BY TINA PEHME AND KIM ROBERTS  
DIRECTED BY VIC SARIN  
WRITTEN BY PATRICIA FINN, VIC SARIN  
116 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: ENGLISH  
PARTITION FILMS, ASTRAL MEDIA, KHUSSRO FILMS, MOVIE CENTRAL NETWORK, MYRIAD PICTURES, SEPIA FILMS, TELEFILM CANADA, IMX COMMUNICATIONS, 2007

Although this is not a Hindi film since the dialogue is in English and the film is a Canadian, British, and South African production, it remains

a very good depiction of the terrible events of Partition and is very accessible to American students. The plot centers on a young Muslim woman who finds herself protected from marauding mobs by a young Sikh man who has lost his own family.

## Pinjar



PRODUCED, DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY CHANDRA PRAKASH DWIVEDI  
BASED ON AMRITA PRITAM'S BOOK *PINJAR*  
188 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, URDU, PUNJABI  
LUCKY STAR ENTERTAINMENT, 2003

Based on the 1950 novel of the same name by the Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam, this film sensitively depicts a tragic love story that occurs in the midst of sectarian conflict in the Punjab during Partition (1946–1947). The first thirty minutes of the

film seem like a typical Bollywood production. Then, the kidnapping of a young Hindu woman by a Muslim catapults the film into a far more serious and disturbing realm that is ultimately engrossing and rewarding.

## Rang De Basanti



PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY RAKEYSH OMPRAKASH MEHRA  
WRITTEN BY RAKEYSH OMPRAKASH MEHRA, RENZIL D'SILVA, AND KAMLESH PANDEY  
157 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, PANJABI, ENGLISH  
ROMP, UTV MOTION PICTURES, 2006  
This film can teach about India on two levels. First, it depicts and speaks to India's current generation of materialistic, nationalistic, and privileged youth, and their search for meaning as they confront corruption and apathy. Second, it recounts the story of Bhagat Singh and his fellow young revolutionaries who carried out a campaign of assassination and terror against British colonial officials during the 1920s. This latter group of young Indians becomes an inspiration for the former, and the result is a surprisingly violent and somewhat-depressing dénouement to the film. Yet the film's story illuminates the dichotomy present in the history and historiography of the Indian independence movement, namely the contrast and relationship between Gandhi's nonviolent movement and that of other Indian "freedom fighters" who embraced violence. The film also reflects the desires of today's young middle-class Indians who hope for a country that is strong and virtuous.

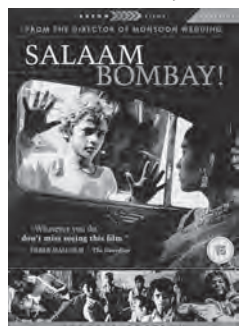
## The Rising: The Legend of Mangal Pandey



PRODUCED BY BOBBY BEDI, KETAN MEHTA, AND DEEPA SAHI  
DIRECTED BY KETAN MEHTA  
WRITTEN BY FARRUKH DHONDY AND RANJIT KAPOOR  
150 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, URDU, ENGLISH  
KALEIDOSCOPE ENTERTAINMENT, MAYA MOVIES, 2005

A Bollywood epic that recounts the role of Mangal Pandey, a *Sepoy* (an Indian soldier in the army of the British East India Company) who is credited by some historians for having played a significant role in inciting the 1857 Uprising. In early 1857, the British hanged Pandey for refusing to bite the wrapper off a rifle cartridge that Pandey believed was greased with cow fat, a sacrilegious act to Hindus. Pandey's principled stand may have inspired other Sepoys to mutiny during the ensuing months. The film avoids easy caricatures of the British, and perhaps that is one reason the film was protested by some Indians, especially Hindu nationalists who also complained that Mangal Pandey's devotion to Hinduism was downplayed in the film. One has to skip through some songs and romantic filler to get to the parts that are relevant. But students certainly enjoy this film.

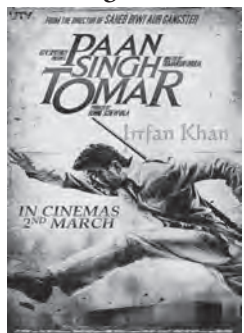
## Salaam Bombay!



PRODUCED BY MIRA NAIR AND GABRIEL AUER  
DIRECTED BY MIRA NAIR  
WRITTEN BY HRIDAY LANI, MIRA NAIR, AND SOONI TARAPOREVALA  
113 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGE: HINDI, ENGLISH  
CADRAGE, CHANNEL FOUR FILMS DOORDARSHAN, FORUM FILMS, LA SEPT CINEMA, MIRABAI FILMS, NATIONAL FILM DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION OF INDIA, 1988  
Nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, this is a very slow, depressing, and yet also absorbing art house

movie about slum children in Bombay (Mumbai) in the 1980s. It serves as an excellent contrast to *Slumdog Millionaire*; while *Slumdog Millionaire* is ultimately optimistic and shows many of the positive effects of modernization in India today, *Salaam Bombay!* presents an India desperately poor and hopelessly stagnant. Although the film is not about a particular historical event or figure, it is a powerful portrayal of India on the eve of the reform era. This is the only film that I show in its entirety, and my students always express appreciation for having seen it, once they have wiped away their tears.

## Paan Singh Tomar



PRODUCED BY RONNIE SCREWVALA  
DIRECTED BY TIGMANSHU DHULIA  
WRITTEN BY TIGMANSHU DHULIA AND  
SANJAY CHAUHAN  
135 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGE: HINDI  
UTV SPOTBOXY, 2012

This serious and solid film works on two levels. First, it tells the true story of a young man who becomes a champion distance runner in India shortly after independence but turns to banditry to avenge attacks on his family and is then killed by the police. Second, it speaks to the current dissatisfaction in India with government corruption. In this respect, it is similar to both *Bandit Queen* and 1975's classic film *Sholay*, though not quite as searing as the former or as sentimental as the latter. There are no cheery songs with dancing, nor is it an uplifting film. But it is well done and provides some insight into rural Indian society during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, especially the pull of Indian nationalism despite the prevalence of official corruption.

## Recommended Films about Contemporary India

Most of the films on this list deal with the clash of tradition and modernity, usually through the prism of generational or gender divisions and usually in the context of marriage or family relationships. Unlike films on Indian history, these films are best viewed in their entirety, which, of course, raises the question of how to make the time available. One option is to have each student watch one of them and present a summary to the rest of the class. At the very least, teachers would benefit from watching these films.

## Dhobi Ghat (Mumbai Diaries)



PRODUCED BY TSHEPHEL NAMGYAL, AAMIR KHAN, AND DHILLIN MEHTA  
DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY KIRAN RAO  
95 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, ENGLISH  
AAMIR KHAN PRODUCTIONS, 2011

Much more an art film than a Bollywood production, this film represents a trend in Indian filmmaking toward more films that deal with serious topics and avoid sentimentalism and over-the-top dance sequences. This Aamir Khan production portrays three young people making their way in today's Mumbai. Crucially, unlike an earlier film with a similar theme, *Dil Chahta Hai* (see below), this film features a central character that is poor. The city of Mumbai, warts and all, is also central to this beautifully shot and thoughtful film. In many ways, this film is an Indian response to *Slumdog Millionaire* in that it attempts and perhaps succeeds in showing a more balanced perspective about India today. Thus, this film could be used to show American students what urban India today is like, if one is adverse to the notion of using *Slumdog Millionaire*. The fact that almost half the dialogue in *Dhobi Ghat* is in English suggests that the

producers had this possibility in mind from the start. But be aware that although *Dhobi Ghat* is not as long as most Indian films, the film does not have the fast pace and suspense of *Slumdog Millionaire* and thus may be better suited to older students.

## Dil Chahta Hai



PRODUCED BY RITESH SIDHWANI  
DIRECTED BY FARHAN AKHTAR  
WRITTEN BY KASSIM JAGMAGIA AND FARHAN AKHTAR

183 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, ENGLISH, URDU  
EXCEL ENTERTAINMENT, 2001

Translated as "The Heart Desires," but billed in English as *Do Your Thing*, this blockbuster, featuring the star Aamir Khan, focuses on the coming-of-age of three young upper-class residents of Mumbai. The film was criticized for depicting only the upside of modernization and the "winners" in a globalized India. However, most people saw the film as an accurate depiction of the ideals and lifestyles of upwardly mobile young Indians who yearn for greater personal freedom and prosperity.

## Fashion



PRODUCED BY MADHUR DHANDARKAR, DEVEN KHOTE, RONNIE SCREWVALA, AND ZARINE MEHTA

DIRECTED BY MADHUR BHANDARKAR  
WRITTEN BY AJAY MONGA, MADHUR DHANDARKAR, NIRANJAN IYENGAR

161 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI  
BHANDARKAR ENTERTAINMENT, UTV MOTION PICTURES, 2008

This star-studded and serious film follows the trials and tribulations of a young Indian woman who wants to be a fashion model. She falls into a life of drugs and alcohol as the stress and temptations of the job and its lifestyle take their toll. Eventually, she finds redemption and success after finding out what really matters—family, friends, and God. The film is surprisingly graphic and depressing at times, and is considered an important film that pushed the boundaries of Indian filmmaking by taking a realistic look at the dark side of modernization, including sexual attitudes and behaviors in Bollywood. Social conservatives in India lambasted the film for showing actual kissing (a no-no for decades) and almost-naked couples in beds. Like many new serious movies coming out of Bollywood, there is little or no dancing but rather some long sequences with background music.

## Munna Bhai, MBBS



PRODUCED BY VIDHU VINOD CHOPRA  
DIRECTED BY RAJKUMAR HIRANI  
WRITTEN BY VIDHU VINOD CHOPRA, RAJKUMAR HIRANI, LAJAN JOSEPH AND ABBAS TYREWALA  
156 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI  
VINOD CHOPRA PRODUCTIONS, 2003

This is the first of two blockbuster musical comedies about a *goonda* (Hindi for gangster) who despite his illegitimate business activities apparently has a heart of gold. In this film, he tries to convince his parents who are visiting from their village that he is a successful doctor. The film is a fun and amusing look at India today and the near-obsessive desire of Indian parents to have their



children become doctors or engineers. The film is also interesting in that the lead actor was recently convicted and imprisoned briefly for his role in the Mumbai bombings of 1993. Some believe that this film series was backed in part by the Mumbai mafia.

## Lage Raho Munna Bhai



PRODUCED BY VIDHU VINOD CHOPRA  
DIRECTED BY RAJKUMAR HIRANI  
WRITTEN BY RAJKUMAR HIRANI AND  
VIDHU VINOD CHOPRA  
144 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES:  
HINDI  
VINOD CHOPRA PICTURES, 2006

In this second and more popular of two blockbuster musical comedies about an affable goonda, the protagonist falls in love with a radio DJ but can win her love only by learning all about Gandhi, *satyagraha*, and becoming a better person. The film is a fun and amusing look at India today and Indians' understanding, or lack thereof, of their history. I show this to the class at the end of the year while sharing samosas and chai.

## Monsoon Wedding



PRODUCED BY CAROLINE BARON AND  
MIRA NAIR  
DIRECTED BY MIRA NAIR  
WRITTEN BY SABRINA DHAWAN  
114 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI,  
ENGLISH  
IFC PRODUCTIONS, MIRABAI FILMS, PANDORA  
FILM PRODUCTION, PARADIS FILMS, BARON  
PICTURES, DELHI DOT COM, 2001

Although not a purely Indian production, this well-received and classic movie centers on the significance and grand scale of a typical Punjabi wedding in Delhi. The film focuses on the intense and complex relationships between family members and the persistence of traditional attitudes in India. It also deals with the lives of NRIs (nonresident Indians) who return to India for the wedding. The film is an excellent portrayal of the clash of modernity and tradition in today's India.

## No One Killed Jessica



PRODUCED BY RONNIE SCREWVALA  
DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY RAJ KUMAR GUPTA  
136 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI,  
ENGLISH  
UTV SPOTBOY, 2011

Unlike typical or traditional Bollywood fare, this is a serious and solid political crime drama that tells the true story of a young, educated woman who was murdered in 1999 at a Delhi bar by the son of a well-connected politician who then tried to shield his son from the law. Eventually, the family of the murdered woman finds a reporter who uses the press to rally support among the broader public and win justice for Jessica and her family in court. The film reflects the critical role of India's vibrant press and emerging middle class in pressuring the government to stamp out corruption. Like many new movies coming out of Bollywood, there is little to no dancing but rather some long sequences with background music.

## Paa



PRODUCED BY AMITABH BACHCHAN,  
ABHISHEK BACHCHAN, AND  
SUNIL MANCHANDA  
DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY R. BALKI  
133 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI  
MAD ENTERTAINMENT, AMITABH BACHCHAN  
CORPORATION, 2009

This is another more modern Bollywood film that deals with an unusual issue—progeria (the rapid aging disease that strikes children and is extremely rare)—while also covering the usual ones—family, marriage, etc. The film is perhaps overly sentimental in its depiction of the trials and tribulations of the young boy suffering from progeria. However, the film has a prominent subtext about democracy, political corruption, and the role of the media; and there is one scene in particular that focuses on these issues and thus might be of use in a classroom. For Hindi movie fans, the film is worth watching if only to see the “Big B” (Amitabh Bachchan) portray the stricken child while Bachchan's real-life son, Abhishek, plays his father.

## Peepli Live



PRODUCED BY AAMIR KHAN AND  
KIRAN RAO  
DIRECTED BY ANUSHA RIZVI AND  
MAHMOOD FAROOQUI  
WRITTEN BY ANUSHA RIZVI  
95 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI,  
ENGLISH  
UTV MOTION PICTURES, AAMIR KHAN  
PRODUCTIONS, 2010

This quirky little comedy did not succeed as well as it might have in India, perhaps because it is about the high rate of suicide among India's struggling poor farmers and the connection with government corruption and venality. Despite the apparent incongruity of the seriousness of the topic and the farcical nature of the film, the movie succeeds in portraying the dilemmas facing India's rural poor and their brave attempts to make sense of the challenges. With humor, sensitivity, and insight, the film boldly reflects and compounds the perception of Indian politicians as being largely corrupt or incompetent. As with other recent films that deal with serious topics, there are few, if any, traditional Bollywood-style dance sequences.

## Rang De Basanti

See the complete description of this film in the history section. The entry is also included here because the film has contemporary ramifications.

## Singh is Kinng [sic]



PRODUCED BY VIPUL AMRUTLAL SHAH  
DIRECTED BY ANEES BAZMEE  
WRITTEN BY ANEES BAZMEE, VIPUL BINJOLA,  
SURESH NAIR, AND RISHI VIRMANI  
136 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI,  
PUNJABI  
BLOCKBUSTER MOVIE ENTERTAINERS, BIG  
SCREEN ENTERTAINMENT, 2008

This screwball comedy is an excellent example of the effect of globalization on India's large diaspora, and it shows India's broad influence globally as well as Western influences upon India. It is about a Punjabi gangster in Sydney, Australia, who falls into a coma and is replaced as head of “the

organization” by his naïve, innocent, and clumsy little brother. I show my students the first ten minutes, which are completely over the top but speak to the loyalty of nonresident Indians (NRIs) to India and the persistence of traditions in Indian diaspora communities. At the end of the opening scene, the goonda’s girlfriend proudly announces that “the king scares all his enemies the way that Bollywood scares the makers of pirate DVDs!” American rapper Snoop Dogg performed the title track.

## Slumdog Millionaire



PRODUCED BY CHRISTIAN COLSON  
DIRECTED BY DANNY BOYLE AND  
LOVELEEN TANDAN  
WRITTEN BY SIMON BEAUFOY AND  
VIKAS SWARUP  
120 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: ENGLISH,  
HINDI, FRENCH  
CELADOR FILMS, FILM4 PRODUCTION,  
WARNER BROS., 2009

One might be surprised by how few American teenagers have seen this dazzling film about India today and how quickly during the next few years even fewer American teenagers will see this film. Despite the often-accurate criticisms of the film, especially its oversimplification of many of modern India’s ills, it remains a very engaging and useful period piece about the contradictions and potential of India today. Since much of the film is in English, it is especially accessible to American students. Many Indians protested the film when it was released, complaining that it exaggerated India’s dark side. Maybe more Indians praised it, especially after it won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Some would argue that it is important to note that the film, despite vividly capturing the essence of life

among the poor of Mumbai, is directed by an Englishman and is perhaps more of an English film about India than a truly Indian film. I would argue that since it was filmed in India with Indian actors, it is perhaps as good a film about today’s India as one could expect.

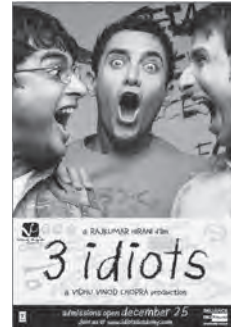
## Taare Zameen Par



DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY  
AAMIR KHAN  
WRITTEN BY AMOLE GUPTA  
165 MINUTES, COLOR, LAN-  
GUAGES: HINDI, ENGLISH  
AAMIR KHAN PRODUCTIONS,  
PVR PICTURES, 2007  
Translated as “Stars That Fall to  
Earth,” this touching but lively  
and surprisingly popular film

is about an eight-year-old middle-class boy who has dyslexia and suffers terribly at the hands of ignorant adults and peers until he finally finds solace in the support of a teacher who recognizes his condition. The star and director of the film, Aamir Khan, dyslexic himself, intended to use the film to improve awareness of the condition. The film deals with the often-unrealistic aspirations of parents in India’s emerging middle class. In 2011, Walt Disney Company bought the rights and rereleased the film, dubbed successfully in English, for American audiences. Middle school students might enjoy this film, especially the dubbed version, more than high school or university students.

## Three Idiots



PRODUCED BY VIDHU VINOD CHOPRA  
DIRECTED BY RAJKUMAR HIRANI  
WRITTEN BY RAJKUMAR HIRANI AND  
ABHIJAT JOSHI  
170 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI,  
ENGLISH  
VINOD CHOPRA PRODUCTIONS, 2009

Perhaps India’s biggest-grossing film of all time, this comedy starring Aamir Khan tells the story of three young men who attend university and find their way in today’s India. The film is based on the novel *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat, and it focuses on the theme of entrepreneurialism and ambition clashing with the values of equality and social justice. Your high school or university students, especially the boys, will enjoy the screwball humor and feel-good ending.

## Udaan



PRODUCED BY SANJAY SINGH, ANURAG  
KASHYAP, AND RONNIE SCREWVALA  
DIRECTED BY VIKRAMADITYA MOTWANE  
WRITTEN BY VIKRAMADITYA MOTWANE AND  
ANURAG KASHYAP  
134 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI,  
ENGLISH

TV SPOTBOY, ANURAG KASHYAP FILMS, SANJAY SINGH FILMS, 2010  
This film, which some have called India’s version of *Rebel Without a Cause*, is a fairly critical and even dark take on the obsession of middle-class Indians with education, especially engineering. It follows the story of a rebellious boy who refuses to fit into the narrow mold expected of students at his prestigious boarding school. He is expelled and must face the wrath of his disappointed and

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abusive father. The boy eventually runs away from home (with his younger brother) in the hope of starting out on his own in Mumbai. Although some American students might relate to the rebellious undertone of the film, most will likely find the pace a bit too slow or the tone depressing. There is no upbeat dancing.

**Veer-Zaara**



PRODUCED BY YASH CHOPRA AND ADITYA CHOPRA  
 DIRECTED BY YASH CHOPRA  
 WRITTEN BY ADITYA CHOPRA  
 192 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI, URDU, PANJABI  
 YASH RAJ FILMS, 2004  
 The top-grossing film of 2004 in India, this romantic and fairly traditional

Bollywood production tells the story of two star-crossed lovers, a rich Pakistani woman and an Indian air force pilot (superstar Shah Rukh Khan) who finds himself in prison in Pakistan after being shot down while accidentally flying over Pakistani airspace. The film deals poignantly with the politics of the Indo-Pak relationship and reflects the desire of many Indians to put the conflict behind them and perhaps Bollywood's desire to make inroads into the Pakistani film market.

**Kai Po Che**



PRODUCED BY RONNIE SCREWVALA AND SIDDHARTH ROY KAPUR  
 DIRECTED BY ABHISHEK KAPOOR  
 WRITTEN BY CHETAN BHAGAT AND ABHISHEK KAPOOR  
 120 MINUTES, COLOR, LANGUAGES: HINDI  
 UTV MOTION PICTURES, 2013  
 Based on the novel, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* by Chetan Bhagat, this fine film is the story of three young male friends trying to make their way in the city of Ahmedabad during 2000–2002. The

film is a very good depiction of today's rapidly changing India and nicely illuminates many of the challenges that Indians, especially the young, currently face. The movie focuses on the social and economic aspirations of the main characters, and an important part of the storyline is the game of cricket. Most interesting, the film takes a critical look at communalism, and the climax of the film centers on the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat. It is more serious than a lot of Bollywood productions, though it is very sentimental and has its share of music video montages. ■

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