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The Bollywood effect in South Florida: Lights, camera, ka-ching!

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PETER ANDREW BOSCH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Prashant Shah, one of the producers of an Indian Bollywood movie coming to Miami.

Bollywood plans a Miami encore this spring.

Less than a year after two of India's favorite actors decamped for Miami to film a romantic comedy, Bollywood mega-star Shahrukh Khan is preparing to make the same trip to shoot one of his country's first big-budget superhero movies.

Ra.One promises to bring imaginary mayhem to South Florida as Khan's character, a Miami software engineer, accidentally gives life to a video-game villain. And while the movie's announced \$3 million local budget is modest by Hollywood standards, local production officials see Bollywood's quick return to Miami as a milestone.

Just nine months ago, production officials were touting Miami's first major Bollywood movie: *Dostana*, the comedy starring Abhishek Bachchan and Priyanka Chopra that went on to blockbuster status in India. Now there's another Bollywood production coming -- this one with a larger budget and an actor *Newsweek* last year dubbed the world's biggest movie star.

And though *Ra.One* won't start shooting until February at the earliest, another Indian movie crew this week was filming in Miami -- a far smaller production with an estimated budget of about \$300,000 that officials still see as part of an

encouraging trend.

"We used to joke that we were Hollywood East," said Graham Winick, Miami Beach's film coordinator. "Now we're Bollywood West."

Like *Dostana*, *Ra.One* won't bring the kind of windfall a Hollywood feature delivers to South Florida's production industry. India makes movies for far less money than the United States does, and *Ra.One* plans on bringing crews from Mumbai to avoid the higher wages demanded by many of Florida's unionized production workers.

Ra.One does plan on some local hires for its cast and crew of about 80, and the hundreds of extras needed for scenes will come from South Florida, producer Prashant Shah said.

And it will be the first major movie based in South Florida since *Marley & Me* wrapped in May, said Robert Parente, head of Miami's film office. "This is an anomaly," Parente said of *Ra.One*. "It's a pleasant one."

Ra.One is slated to start shooting just as Florida's biggest production -- the cable series *Burn Notice* -- resumes filming its third season in Coconut Grove.

The two productions will bring a burst of activity for an industry that saw a sharp drop in business in 2009. The culprits: a global recession and cuts in Florida's movie and TV subsidy fund from its 2007 peak of \$25 million to this year's \$11 million.

Burn Notice is expected to get \$4 million of that this year, with none left for *Ra.One*, though the Indian film plans to apply for state dollars.

Tourism officials hope the biggest payoff will come not from *Ra.One*'s production dollars, but from its audience.

With a rapidly growing middle class, India vies with China as the travel industry's favorite emerging target.

And given India's famous devotion to its movies, placing Miami as a backdrop in two Bollywood blockbusters is seen as a global marketing coup.

Past studies credit the "Bollywood Effect" for bringing Indian travelers to obscure destinations in Europe and the Pacific picked as locations for Indian films. Now with India's 1.1 billion population increasingly producing affluent families, the Bollywood Effect is seen as more lucrative.

"Bollywood becomes a virtual form of tourism, and always has," said Itty Abraham, director of the South Asia Institute at the University of Texas at Austin. "The difference is now people have the income to travel to different places."

Before this year's budget cutbacks, Miami-Dade's tourism bureau pursued India as a new market for Miami vacations (though *Dostana* filmed throughout South Florida, the locale was always portrayed as "Miami.")

Part of that campaign included special screenings of *Dostana* for Indian travel agents, and a meeting with Bollywood producers in Mumbai to encourage more use of Miami as a backdrop.

"It's a huge market and language is not a barrier, as it is in China," said Rolando Aedo, senior vice president of marketing for the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, which is mostly funded by county taxes on hotels. "The fact that we've got this movie that's going to deliver more media impressions than I could ever afford to buy, even in the best of times -- the timing is extremely fortunate."

While *Dostana* portrayed Miami as a glamorous place to fall in love, *Ra.One* plans a more ominous take on the city. Khan's Shekhar must take the form of a video-game hero in order to battle the technological monster he created: a powerful being called Ra.One.

Movie producers have tentative approval to close portions of Brickell Avenue twice on Sundays in

late February or March for a car chase relating to the monster mayhem caused by *Ra.One*. And film officials say the fights and chases will stretch into South Beach, the Miami River and other parts of downtown Miami.

But for all the planned destruction, it was Miami's postcard backdrop that lured *Ra.One* to South Florida, said Prashant Shah, a New Jersey-based Bollywood producer behind both *Dostana* and *Ra.One*.

``All of the big films with superhero looks always were shot in Gotham City," Shah said of Batman's grim hometown. ``I said, `Why don't we do something different?''

Shah said he urged Khan, *Ra.One*'s top producer, to bring the movie to Miami, instead of the other cities in the running: London, Tokyo, Prague or San Francisco.

``Superhero films are always take place in a very dark city," Shah said from his temporary office in Miami's Doubletree Grand Hotel, both *Dostana* and *Ra.One*'s base of operations. ``Here we'll have the Art Deco, the blue sky, the pastels -- that's what I want to capture."

Bollywood blogs already are buzzing about *Ra.One* and its Miami plans. Most of the attention centers on Khan, a Bollywood mega star often described as a cross between Brad Pitt and George Clooney in terms of fame and popularity.

``He's known as the king of Bollywood," said Amanda Sodhi, a blogger based in Washington, D.C., who writes for various Indian movie sites, including PlanetBollywood.com. ``Anything starring Shahrukh is a big deal."

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