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Bollywood on Seine

One Dollar Curry is shot in English, Punjabi, Hindi and French - and stars a New Yorker. With crossover appeal like this, how can it fail? Amelia Gentleman visits the set in Paris

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If everything goes to plan, the owner of the Ganesh Cafe, halfway down rue Jarry in Paris's Indian district, could soon be sitting on a fortune. Over in Montmartre, the proprietors of an unremarkable cafe that was made famous by the film *Amélie* recently sold up, making a huge profit. Their local clientele has been replaced by tourists from Europe, Japan and the US, who sip expensive coffee as the film's tinkly theme tune is played on a loop.

Undoubtedly, the Ganesh is a harder sell. The Indian snack bar is far from the red-checked-tablecloth prototype of Parisian restaurants. Its walls are decorated with plastic multi-coloured fairy lights and posters of half-naked Indian body-builders; stacks of congealed onion bhajis are on display behind the glass counter. Outside, instead of the picturesque staircases of Montmartre, there are sari shops and Indian grocery stores with names like Wembley Bazaar, Faisal Fast Foods, Broadway Foods and Videos. It could be anywhere from New York to London - until you look up at the upper storeys and see window boxes with their red geraniums.

This anonymous, seedy stretch of the 10th arrondissement does not yet feature on the tourist track. But once Vijay Singh's *One Dollar Curry* is released early next year, bringing a flavour of Bollywood glamour to the area, these streets may attract the attention of guidebook writers, who may well encourage visitors to make a detour from the nearby Pompidou centre to sample the cheap € lunch menus under the cafe's garish strip lights.

Today, however, the presence of the film crew is causing nothing but disruption. Food deliveries have been halted and customers turned away, while actresses dressed as Russian prostitutes are lowering the tone. In Passage Brady around the corner (a French version of Brick Lane, with dozens of Indian restaurants squeezed into a narrow passageway), filming has

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proved altogether impossible because of turf wars between the rival restaurants. The shop and cafe owners are delighted at the attention their street has generated, but anxious for the chaos to be over.

Singh's comedy pays tribute to an undiscovered side of Paris, far removed from the saccharine vistas of the Hollywood myth. He is not interested in showing the Paris that decorates most blockbuster films about the city; there will be no Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire tap-dancing beneath the Eiffel Tower, no Woody Allen peering, misty-eyed, through garret windows, no Glenn Close and Kate Hudson discussing *Le Divorce* over a glass of pastis on Boulevard St Germain.

"I wanted to show a part of the city that has never been seen before," says Singh. Not far into his film, the audience is reminded that when you look up in Paris you find a city of gods; when you look down you realise you're in a city of dogs. "Paris is changing and this area has become an inescapable part of it." The film's artistic consultant, Sri Bhattacharya, says: "You see the occasional glimpse of the Eiffel Tower in the background, but only as a nod to the fact that the film is set in France. It isn't a Disneyland version of Paris."

One Dollar Curry tracks the progress of a young Sikh immigrant, Nishan, arriving in Paris, clueless and penniless, desperate to earn enough to survive. He begins by selling curry from a bucket on the street corner, but quickly discovers that sophisticated Parisians find this level of service repulsive. ("Here even dogs eat off Limoges plates," he learns.) But this is no gritty and bleak refugee drama. Singh prefers to illustrate the pressures on the country's immigrant communities through absurd comedy.

Nishan is quickly taken under the wing of a streetwise Jamaican (half people-trafficker, half pimp) who encourages him to market his curry more aggressively - advising him to invest in an auto-rickshaw and to invent wholly fictitious credentials for himself as the last in an illustrious line of chefs to the Indian aristocracy. While privately admitting that his curries taste like "spicy horse piss", Nishan rebrands himself as the maharajah of Indian cuisine and sets up Paris's first mobile curry kitchen. It takes off instantly.

Singh is hoping that his new work will match the success of his last film, *Jaya Ganga*, which portrayed a Paris-based novelist who goes home to India in search of a lost love. It received extraordinarily positive reviews despite its small release. The Guardian described it as "mesmerising", an "elegant and beautifully photographed novella of a film" and "one of the most authentic descriptions of everyday Indian magic ever screened". Jonathan Ross said in his BBC review: "It's so refreshing when a gifted film-maker introduces you to a new, intoxicating world that it's a pity if his film procures only the tiniest release." But the film's fame escalated by word of mouth; unpromoted and scheduled for limited showing in France, it ended up running for 49 weeks in Paris cinemas.

One Dollar Curry is made on an equally tiny budget (around €m, or £1.4m) but is already attracting the attention of big distributors, interested in its crossover appeal. It has the same

ingredients as *Monsoon Wedding*, *Salaam Bombay*, *Bend It Like Beckham* and *East Is East*, making it culturally accessible to lucrative markets in India, Pakistan and western Europe. "A good crossover film works as well for an Indo-Pakistani audience as it does for the Curzon Soho or the Odeon Piccadilly," Singh says.

One Dollar Curry received funding from America, Britain, France and India; the dialogue is mainly in English, but incorporates snippets of French, Hindi and Punjabi. Singh has consciously woven together elements for all target audiences into the fabric of the film. "There is an Indo-European soundtrack, which is very happening in Bollywood today. And one scene of Bollywood dance," he says. "I'd describe the film as Bollywoodesque but without the slightly trite and jocular spoof-like elements of Bollywood." The hero, played by novice New York actor Vikram Chatwal, experiences most of the nine rasas: the set of emotions (jealousy, anger, love, bravery etc) experienced by the heroes of Indian classical literature and many of the traditional Bollywood extravaganzas.

Filming in one of Europe's most expensive capitals on such a low budget inevitably forces compromises, but as Singh edits the film, he is pleased with his results. "We had to shoot it very fast, but when you work under such tension you have to get the best out of yourself and your actors."

Most of the problems were caused not by money but by other unexpected factors - such as the extraordinary heat wave that strangled France this summer (one actor vomited from the heat, another passed out with heat stroke). Then there were the actors' and technicians' strikes that shut down most of the country's summer festivals. Singh, an active militant during his university years in Delhi, called his film crew together for a vote on whether they should stop work. He himself voted in favour of strike action: "It was a difficult decision. I have a very good unit but it was awkward when we were getting money from third world countries."

Some of the more overt scenes addressing immigration issues - pointing up the fact that this is a France where National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen is enjoying a renaissance - were sacrificed to simplify the plot. "But the political context remains. There's one scene where a beautiful Indian woman is dancing and everyone is clapping. Then the police come in and stop everything to demand her papers. It's a scene of humiliation, and for me this is the definition of racism," Singh says. "This is a bit of a Buddhist film in that it shows the political realities of the situation, but tries to approach them with humour, showing the strange things that immigrants are forced to do to survive. I didn't want to go back to that Trotskyist rubbish of seeing the world in black and white."

Singh hopes to show the film for the first time next May at Cannes. Until then, the cafe owners on rue Jarry will have to wait and hope for their promised windfall.

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