

Lights, camera, collaboration: tips on creative teamwork from Indian cinema

Indian actor Rahul Ravindran offers a backstage glimpse into how creative teams collaborate to realize a blockbuster.



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Business people often look to India for insight into entrepreneurship, *jugaad* innovation, ICT and CRM solutions. But there is another source of inspiration from India related to how creative teams collaborate to realize a blockbuster: Indian cinema.

Although Hollywood may have more instant name recognition, India is actually the world's No. 1 producer of box-office entertainment, releasing almost twice as many movies and generating around a billion more ticket sales than Hollywood every year.

Indian movies — whether Hindi-language films from Mumbai, popularly known as Bollywood, or Tamil-language films from Chennai — are famous for their colorful song-and-dance routines. But for actor [Rahul Ravindran](#), mastering the dance steps is not nearly as complicated as learning to work in sync with the different management styles and personalities of the industry.

In Indian cinema, as in business, the first thing you need to be able to do is learn how to deal with different kinds of people. Ravindran offers a backstage glimpse into working with star players and getting the most out of talent.

Understanding your director

To deliver a successful performance, you first need to understand the role you have to play. And to do that, you need to understand your director and adapt to different styles of direction.

“The first thing I do is try to have a lengthy chat with the director — about the story, about the role,” says Ravindran. “This gives me a very good idea of the director’s sensibilities. For a newcomer who is not yet a big star, it’s important to deliver what the director wants.”

Once he feels he has a handle on the director, Ravindran tries to view the story and the role through that lens.

If the project isn’t exciting, or if he feels there is little chemistry with the director, he won’t go through with the project.

If, on the other hand, the project is inviting, he will listen to the story over and over again. If there are places where he has doubts, he will keep asking the director to explain. This way, he develops a deep understanding of the character, knowing what the character would and wouldn’t do — all in keeping with the director’s vision.

Broadly speaking, Ravindran believes you can put directors into two categories.

- First, you have the meticulous type who tells you exactly what to do. “I’ve worked with directors who are very sure about what they want. They might want me to

mirror certain things that they would show me. They'll say, 'I want your hand coming up to 45 degrees and no more. I want you to raise your eyebrows by 12 degrees and no more'."

- At the other end of the spectrum, there are directors who will give you a lot of freedom. They are flexible and open. They might establish the scene and mood for you, and tell you roughly what they expect, but they also leave a vacuum for you to fill yourself. "They'll never direct you. They'll never tell you exactly what they want. They'll never act it out for you."

In either case, Ravindran feels it is best to surrender total trust to the director, as long as you are convinced they have the right priorities, and you are fully confident that the only thing the director is worried about is delivering a good film.

Acting the part

Apart from direction, it's about how you project yourself. Even though you are constantly playing different parts, it's important to find the truth in your role, says Ravindran. Otherwise, if your outward projection strays too far from your real self, you will come across as disingenuous.

The importance people place on outward appearance varies from person to person, and is a question of individual priorities. It depends on how audience-focused you are.

"There is a breed of actor who will approach every shot and every scene from the point of view of how the audience is going to see it, and whether they are fulfilling audience expectations," he says.

Such actors approach a tragic scene and think, "Okay, it's a tragedy scene, so I'm supposed to cry." Then they focus on how it looks to cry, and after filming the shot, they go to the monitor to see if they looked convincing when crying.

"I'm not saying it's right or wrong," says Ravindran. "A lot of people have made a good name with this approach, and audiences become comfortable. In commercial mainstream cinema, it's very important that you make audiences comfortable, that you give them what they expect."



But Ravindran himself opts for a different technique — one that is less focused on the outward aesthetic, and more on his understanding of what that character would do in that particular situation. “This way, you are being slightly more honest to a role,” he says.

If you spend enough time understanding your own character’s motivations, feelings and responses, you will get to a point where you will be able to play that person very naturally.

This approach can land you with good or bad reviews. But personally, Ravindran prizes his artistic integrity above any critical response. “I think it’s important to forget all of them and just be honest to the shot you are doing.”

Teamwork and creative conflict

Cinema requires a high level of collaboration among creative types who sometimes work better on their own, in their own space and on their own terms. Yet in making a film, everyone is forced to work together. In such a highly strung environment, conflict can be unavoidable.

Ravindran’s advice is, first of all, to make sure you’re not the cause of the conflict. Then, so long as it doesn’t affect your performance, try to mediate the conflict. If that doesn’t work, as a last resort he finds it may be best to close himself “in a cocoon.” If the relationship with the director is not good, you may just have to grin and bear it. “You stick to your lines and focus on doing your job.”

As Ravindran doesn’t come from a family with many personal contacts in the industry, as

others do, he says, “The only way I’m going to get work is by being highly professional, being cordial with everyone on the set, listening properly to the director and putting in 100%.”

Basically, the easier you are to work with, the more work that will come your way. And the whole job becomes a lot easier when the other artists are tugging in the same direction. “Those are the co-stars I get along with the most,” he says.

It’s not all creative conflict. The film set can also be a friendly environment. Yet even when there is good camaraderie, it’s still vital to set boundaries.

Ravindran recommends staying 70% inside the mental zone, where you’re still reading the character, and you know where you are in the story.

“I’ll be friendly with co-stars, but at the same time, you know there’s a certain line. If you cross that line, then there are too many distractions, and it becomes difficult for you to suddenly switch on and off before a shoot.”

When friction flares, it’s best to steer clear as much as possible. “Quite simply, it’s a creative field, and it requires so much concentration. If you fill yourself with negativity, it becomes difficult to perform. It makes it that much harder to stand in front of someone professing love to them. You don’t want to get into that situation.”

The solution? If you get the feeling you’re not going to hit it off with someone, “make sure you don’t interact too much with them. Always be friendly, but maintain a professional distance so that your work isn’t affected. If you do that, you’ll be fine.”

Navigating hierarchies

A central element of surviving in the Indian film industry is being able to read nuances in status, and respond accordingly.

Hierarchies on the set don’t necessarily correspond to traditional structures. The “top dog” is usually the most accomplished person within the industry, not necessarily the director.

“The cameraman might be a respected veteran who has received many awards, so in that case, the cameraman would be at the top of the hierarchy.”

Even though it is usually the director who calls the shots, sometimes a young director will have an associate or assistant director with a lot more experience in the field, and who can

be almost as important as the director. Other times, if a big star is involved, he or she commands the most respect and attention. “You have all these little equations on the side,” he says.

As a newcomer, you have to be able to read all these subtleties. For example, if you are overly reverent of the cameraman and show less respect to the director, you may create discord, and “he’ll take it out on you later.”

How can you avoid accidentally stepping on a landmine? Ravindran offers this simple advice: Be nice to everyone, from the highest and mightiest director to the lowliest assistant — absolutely everyone.

Dealing with frustrations

You can be the nicest person in the world, but organizational politics can still end up stifling talent and blocking innovation.

Ravindran gives an example of the kind of thing that can happen: a director who had himself in mind to play the lead role, but no one would fund it like that, so he ended up casting you and he hates you for it.

“In any industry, you can get a boss who doesn’t like you for any number of reasons — because you dress better than him, or maybe because he’s genuinely an idiot.”

There are many situations like this beyond your control, in which you may end up feeling suffocated or restricted, making you unable to deliver to your full capacity.

“Sometimes you can resolve it,” says Ravindran. “You can sit down and tell them why you’re uncomfortable. Other times, you can’t.” Either way, you just have to “pull your socks up and try to make a good job of it.”

Such unshakeable optimism shines through everything Ravindran does. It’s important to harness your passion, he says, so that you can get the most out of your performance and derive the utmost satisfaction from the work that you do — because ultimately, “you want to keep playing characters that you like, and you want to like everything that you do.”

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