

As critical darling – and surprise commercial hit – *Slumdog Millionaire* racks up Golden Globe awards and Oscar nods, western audiences are primed for more Indian-influenced fare. Then again, we're already off to a disastrous start with *Chandni Chowk to China*. Which upcoming Bollywood and Indiewood hits will crack the top ten at the international box offices this year? SONA CHARAI POTRA assesses the odds.

# Ka-Ching?

## Will Bollywood Break Through in '09?



The Contender:

## New York

Due: Spring 2009

Star Power: John Abraham, Katrina Kaif, Neil Nitin Mukesh, Irrfan Khan

**The Lowdown:** Directed by Kabir Khan who helmed 2006's critically-lauded box office bomb *Kabul Express*, *New York* starts out as the happy tale of three friends in the city that never sleeps. But their world is upended when the events that shattered the city on September 11, 2001, threaten to destroy their façade of a friendship. As terrorist allegiances – or the illusion of them, anyway – bubble to the surface, Irrfan Khan steps in as a hard-boiled investigating officer assigned to the case.

**The Odds:** Slim. Judging by the tepid reception of *United 93* and *World Trade Center*, Americans aren't ready to brave 9/11 on the big screen.

The Contender:

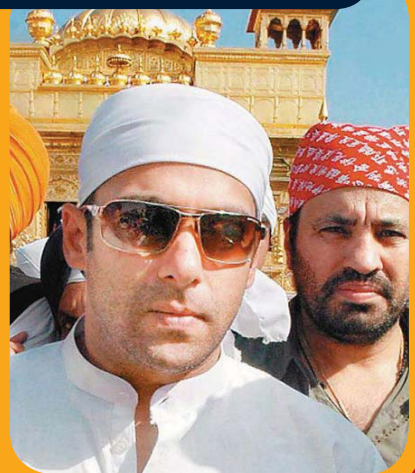
## London Dreams

Due: Spring 2009

Star Power: Salman Khan, Asin, Ajay Devgan

**The Lowdown:** After the success of *Namaste London*, producer-director Vipul Shah seems to have a soft spot for the city. But he takes a break from his favourites Akshay and Katrina to try the new hot combo of Salman and Asin in this story of two childhood friends from Mumbai who struggle to become rock stars in London.

**The Odds:** So-so. Salman hasn't had a hit in a while after a disastrous couple of years with *Partner* being the only bright spot. But Asin is Bollywood's new darling, fresh off her success in *Ghajini*, and Vipul Shah hasn't had a flop yet.





The Contender:

## Hiss

Due: Summer 2009

Star Power: Mallika Sherawat, Irrfan Khan

**The Lowdown:** This take on the classic *nagin* tale, helmed by *Boxing Helena* and *Surveillance* director Jennifer Lynch (who's also director David Lynch's daughter), is the first Bollywood effort to be directed by Hollywood quantity. On hand for the film's extra-special effects is legendary FX wizard Robert Kurtzman (*Wishmaster*, *Hulk*, *Hostel*) who turns sizzling Mallika Sherawat into a stunning snake-woman. Irrfan Khan steps in, once again, as the investigating police officer. Perhaps it's time someone had a chat with the otherwise-adept actor about a little thing called typecasting?

**The Odds:** Poor. Yeah, Mallika as a snake-woman has a weird appeal. But this sounds like a C-list creature feature that can't be saved by A-list talent. What was Irrfan thinking?



The Contender:

## Heaven on Earth

Due: Debuted in November 2008, wide release in 2009

Star Power: Preity Zinta

**The Lowdown:** Irrepressible Punjabi *kudi* Preity Zinta finds herself married off to an Indo-Canadian stranger who kills her spirit with domestic abuse. Hmm...haven't we seen that one before? Deepa Mehta's follow-up to the much-acclaimed *Water* debuted as the featured presentation at the Mahindra Indian American Arts Council festival in November, and star Zinta took a trophy for best actress at the Chicago International Film Festival. Still, with a familiar story about domestic abuse (recall Aishwarya Rai's battered turn in Gurinder Chadha's *Provoked*) and Mehta's signature fantastic elements, *Heaven* is a hard sell.

**The Odds:** Low. Mehta may have scored an Oscar nod with *Water*, but *Heaven on Earth's* retreaded woman-in-domestic-peril storyline doesn't have the same freshness or art

The Contender:

## Kambakkht Ishq

Due: 2009

Star Power: Akshay Kumar, Kareena Kapoor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Carmen Electra, Brandon Routh, Denise Richards, Holly Valance

**The Lowdown:** Akshay Kumar plays a Bollywood stuntman who makes a big splash in Tinseltown, but alas, is forlorn because he can't find love. Sound too familiar? With cameos by a Hollywood Who's Who, this classic Bollywood romantic comedy turns up the star power big time. But Hollywood action heroes – even if they're past their prime – don't come cheap. At \$22 million and counting, the movie is reportedly the Indian film industry's most expensive to date, thanks to fat cheques for Sly and the gang. "As a producer, these stars are expensive," said the film's money man Sajid Nadiadwala. "But as their fan I feel money is of no consequence."

**The Odds:** Strong. It's action hero heaven for Bollywood and Hollywood fans alike. And despite *Chandni Chowk to China's* dismal showing, Akshay's winning streak should carry him through 2009.



The Contender:

## Amelia

Due: Oct. 23, 2009

**Star Power:** Hilary Swank, Ewan McGregor, Richard Gere

**The Lowdown:** With the hotly-anticipated Johnny Depp-starrer *Shantaram* (in perhaps permanent) backburner, director Mira Nair forges ahead. Next up is her long-awaited biopic of legendary American pilot Amelia Earhart, who disappeared in 1937 while trying to fly around the world, and it's guaranteed Oscar bait. "A true epic in scope," Nair has said about the film. And as for her Oscar-winning star Swank, Nair said, "She's amazing! A fantastic actress. She has an uncanny resemblance to the original character. I mean she could've been Amelia Earhart."

**The Odds:** Sky-high. This will score big at the box office. Plus, Mira's sure to get an Oscar nod for director, and talent like Swank and McGregor ain't too shabby, either.



The Contender:

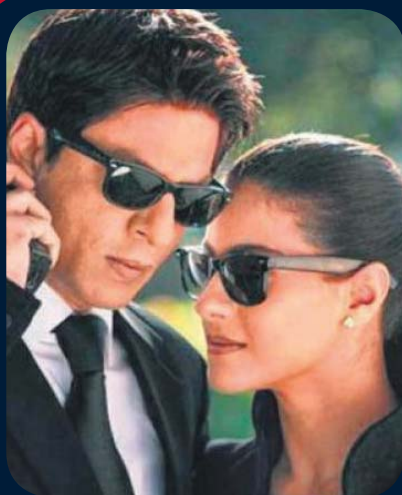
## Bhopal: Prayer for Rain

Due: 2009

**Star Power:** Kal Penn, Mischa Barton, Martin Sheen

**The Lowdown:** Directed by Ravi Kumar, *Bhopal: Prayer for Rain*, which tracks the intersecting lives of people affected by the Union Carbide industrial disaster that instantly claimed 10,000 lives in Bhopal in 1984, features heavyweights like Martin Sheen and Kal Penn. It also stars Mischa Barton who replaced actress Sienna Miller in the role of a foreign journalist who was in India when the tragedy occurred. But lest you feel that *The O.C.* star – and frequent tabloid staple – doesn't have the chops, she insists she's grown up a bit. "I'm interested in all kinds of things. I did this film for moral reasons," she told press in January. "I felt the story needed to be told. I feel that this is going to be an important film."

**The Odds:** A longshot. While the meaty subject matter and star cast should draw an audience, Americans have long forgotten the international impact of the Bhopal disaster.



The Contender:

## My Name Is Khan

Due: November 2009

**Star Power:** Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol

**The Lowdown:** Taking his NRI-fantasy to the West Coast for a change, Karan Johar's latest epic power trips big time, reuniting dream team Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol. The heavyweight script – said to echo the Tom Cruise/Dustin Hoffman classic *Rainman* – tells the tale of Rizwan Khan (SRK), an autistic man whose suspicion-arousing symptoms, a result of Asperger's syndrome, cause police to think he's a terrorist. Jimmy Shergill steps in as the slick, preoccupied brother who must manage his sibling's suddenly serious situation. With timely themes, a solid storyline and surefire star power, this drama, currently shooting in L.A. is unusually serious fare for the uber-slick Johar. Still, the film could succeed if it maintains Johar's deftly light touch – especially if he brings his signature understated comedy to this unusually heavy material.

**The Odds:** The heavyweight champ. With Karan Johar at the helm directing Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, this one has box office smash written all over it – at least, in India.