

# Bollywood's new literary inspirations

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It is arguably one of the best times for a new wave of writers in India. Not only are their books topping bestsellers list, several are virtually getting a second life with Bollywood adaptations.

Last month's Kai Po Che, featuring rank newcomers, got a good opening, largely by virtue of being the big-screen adaptation of The 3 Mistakes of My Life, written by India's highest-selling English-language novelist, Chetan Bhagat. May 1 will see the release of Shootout at Wadala, based on crime journalist S Hussain Zaidi's Dongri to Dubai: Six Decades of the Mumbai Mafia.

Karan Johar has bought the rights to Bhagat's 2 States: The Story of My Marriage and scooped up Amish Tripathi's Immortals of Meluha, the first in the author's Shiva trilogy. Blogger-writer Judy Balan's Two Fates: The Story of My Divorce has been optioned to a Bollywood production house and is also being adapted as a Malayalam film. (Optioning a book means the film rights stay with the producer/production house for a specific period. If production of the film does not commence within that period, the contract may either be renewed or the rights passed on to another party.)

The news to trump them all is Sunil Bohra pocketing the rights to Zaidi's latest book, Headley & I, which he co-authored with Rahul Bhatt, for more than ₹1 crore.

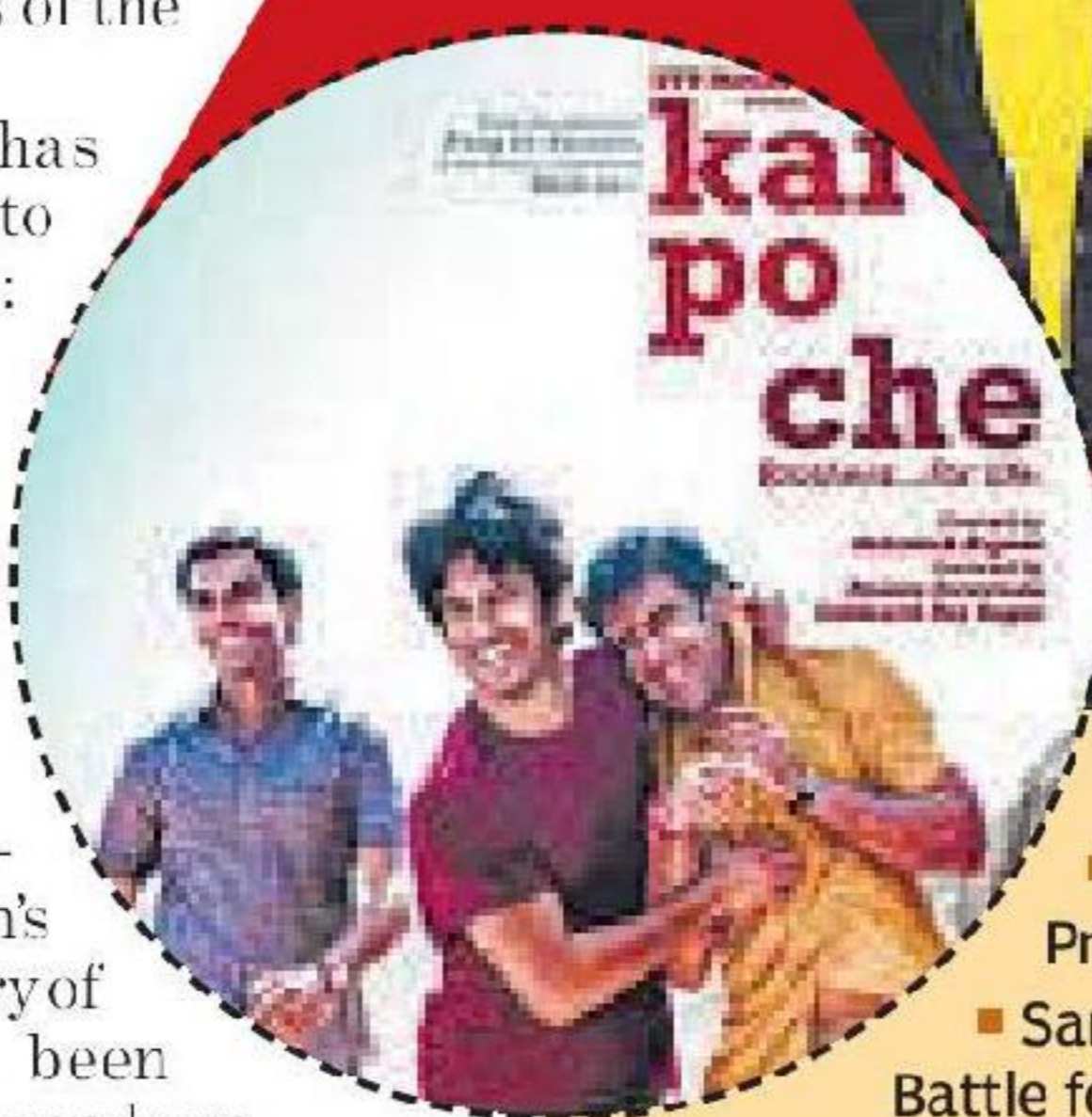
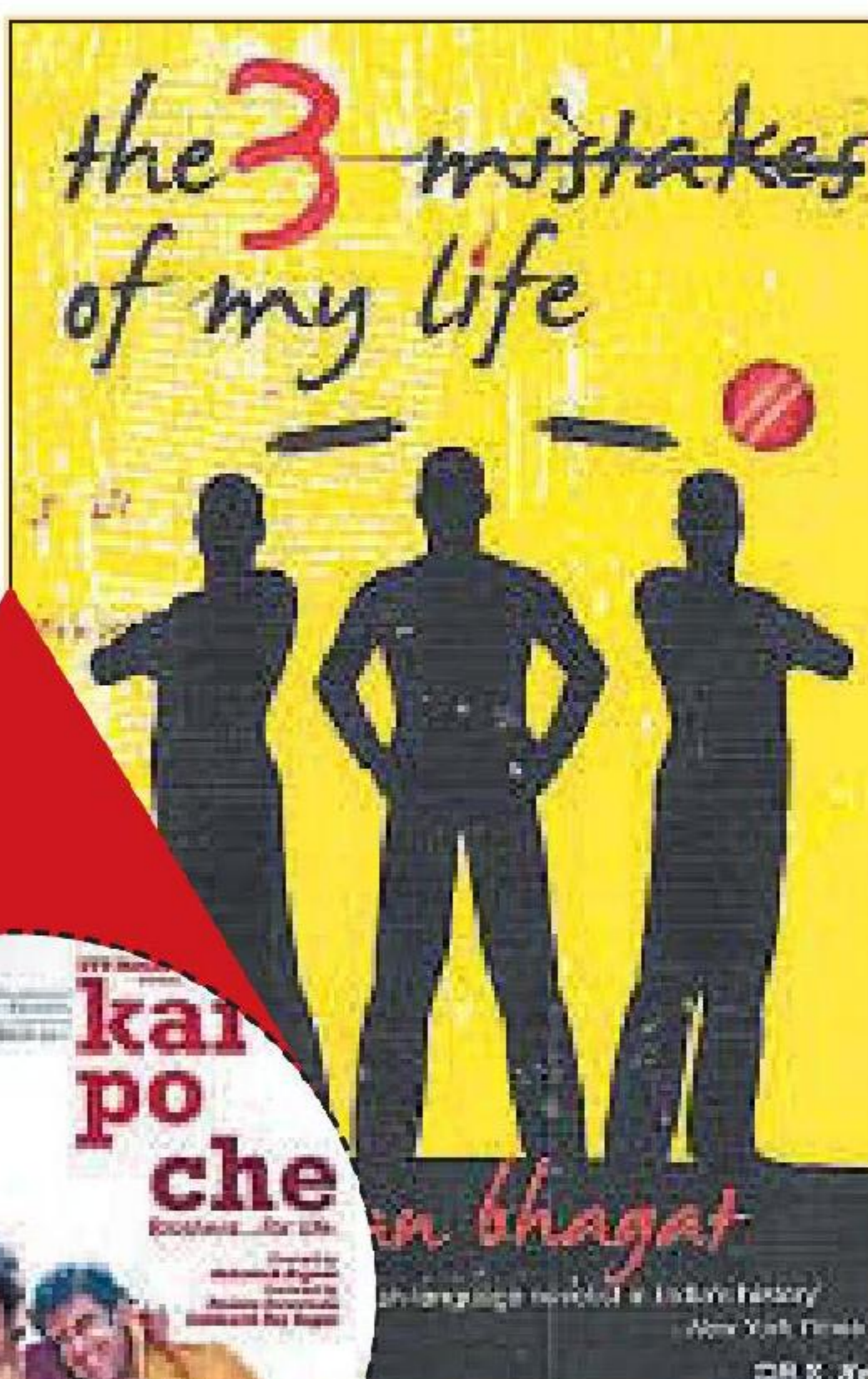
What has brought about this change in Bollywood, which earlier just reinvented classics such as Devdas? "There has been a huge change in the audience's expectations," says Ashwin Sanghi, author of Chanakya's Chant, which UTV is adapting for the screen. "Earlier, films were driven by star power; today one needs star power and a great script."

Amar Butala, creative director (studios) at Disney UTV, admits there is a dearth of good writers in Bollywood. "But there is no dearth of good stories," he says. "We are negotiating for the film rights of two English fiction and an old Bengali novel."

"The growing popularity of mainstream fiction has brought the worlds of films and books together," says Mainak Dhar, whose Herogiri has been bought by Rhea Kapoor of Anil Kapoor Films Company. Tripathi says reason for books being lapped up by Bollywood is their stories being rooted in the "real India" — be it life in the call centres, contemporary issues or mythology.

Some Indian writers have also bagged deals with film production houses abroad. Bollywood, often accused of 'stealing' ideas from other films, is shelling out good money to acquire the film rights of books — and writers are making a fortune. Tripathi, a former banker from a middle-class family, could afford to quit his job when his publisher offered him an advance of ₹5 crore for his next yet-to-be-written series!

Publishers, too, have realised the financial potential and have film rights agents in Mumbai to promote their titles. Neelini Sarkar, commissioning editor and rights coordinator at HarperCollins Publishers India, says they keep film companies and agents informed about their book releases.



## NEW DEALS

- Anurag Kashyap: Gyan Prakash's Mumbai Fables
- Saregama: Anuja Chauhan's Battle for Bittora (optioned)
- Pooja Shetty's Walkwater Films: Anuja Chauhan's The Zoya Factor (bought over from Shah Rukh Khan's Red Chillies Entertainment, to which it was optioned earlier)
- Vidhu Vinod Chopra: GD Bakshi's Siege of Warwan
- Planman Motion Pictures: Mukul Deva's Lashkar
- Sahara Motion Pictures: Ipsita Roy Chakraverti's The Loving Doll
- Puja Bedi of Owl Village Films: Anirban Bose's Bombay Rains, Bombay Girls

Vikas Swarup, the writer of Q&A that was adapted into the Oscar-winning Slumdog Millionaire, explains the book-film tie-in. "If a film doesn't do well, a writer will just get the lump sum promised when principal photography begins." The amount varies, he says, but could match or exceed the amount the writer would get from the initial publishing contract. If the film becomes successful, he/she also gets a small share in the income from the film."

However, Bloomsbury Publishing India publisher Diya Kar Hazra points out that many writers — including first-time ones — who have agents are holding on to the film rights of their books, so that they don't need to share the money they receive from such a deal, with the publisher.

Most writers are comfortable with giving a free rein to directors to adapt their stories, provided the essence is preserved. Sanghi is not involved in any capacity with the film that will be based on his book while Tripathi is available as a consultant for Johar's production. However, Bhagat, who was not happy with how he was credited for 3 Idiots, has turned screenplay writer with Kai Po Che.

Not every new writer is enthused. Advaita Kala (Almost Single, 2007), says she retains creative control over her book because "someday if I want to write a sequel, I might not be able to do that had I signed away the rights". She says copyright laws in India need to be more supportive of the creator's content. "Abroad, a writer like Rowling can sign away the rights to her book, but still retain character rights. In India the two are usually bunched together."

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