"Slumdog" helps usher in Hollywood's Indian era

By Zorianna Kit

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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Maybe it's the success of "Slumdog Millionaire." Perhaps it's because corporate outsourcing is now a very real -- and frustrating -- part of Westerners lives. Or perhaps it's because India is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and its influences have finally spread to Hollywood.

Whatever the reason, Indian actors have officially taken Hollywood by storm, both on and off screen.

Currently, U.S. television boasts more than a dozen Indian actors who are regular cast members on popular shows like "The Office," "30 Rock," "Community," "Chuck," "Royal Pains", "The Big Bang Theory," and "Covert Affairs".

Aziz Ansari, a stand-up comedian who plays a wise-cracking office worker in "Parks and Recreation", was given the coveted job of hosting the MTV Movie Awards in June.

And British-born, Mumbai-raised Archie Panjabi, who plays an investigator in the hit drama "The Good Wife," is nominated for a best supporting actress Emmy Award this weekend.

Capping it all is the upcoming new TV comedy "Outsourced", about an American novelty goods maker whose customer service center is moved to Mumbai. The cast is comprised almost exclusively of Indian actors.

Vik Sahay, a first generation Indian actor on "Chuck," said the rise of Indian actors in Hollywood has been a "gradual growth that crystallized in the a-ha moment of the success of 'Slumdog Millionaire.'"

The 2008 film, which won eight Academy Awards including best picture, has certainly done its part.

"It gave confidence to the U.S. studios that a film taking place in India can work in so many different markets," said Christina Marouda, the executive director of the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles.

BUMPY ROAD FOR 'OUTSOURCED''

"Outsourced" executive producer Ken Kwapis says the success of "Slumdog" had a direct effect on his show getting made.

Kwapis had initially pitched the idea for "Outsourced" after seeing a 2006 independent film it was based on. The development process "was a bumpy road for a while," according to Kwapis, until "Slumdog" hit.
"The film really came along at a great moment in our show's development," said Kwapis. "It confirmed that an American audience would find a show about Indian characters compelling."

Not to mention the show's subject matter itself.

"Outsourcing has made the world a smaller place," said Kwapis. "We live in a global economy and this is a global issue."

As a result of globalization, having Indians part of the Western population is now common enough that Hollywood is casting them in roles that often have little to do with their ethnicity.

Take Sahay's character of Lester Patel on "Chuck," an employee at the local computer and electronics store. It was a role that was wide open in terms of ethnicity during the audition process. "They added his last name, Patel, after I was cast," said Sahay.

"What you're seeing now is that Hollywood and the general population has accepted that not every Indian is (stereotypical convenience store clerk) Apu from 'The Simpsons,'" says Rekha Shah, vice president of distribution and co-production at Canadian-based CCI Entertainment.

BEHIND THE CAMERA

The new crop of Indian actors bring something extra to the table because they are often first generation Indians whose parents were immigrants.

"They have this morphed world with sensibilities from another country influenced by North American values and pop culture," said Shah, a first generation Indian herself.

It's not just in front of the camera. The Indian invasion has taken over behind the scenes as well.

Last summer, Indian conglomerate Reliance ADA Group closed a financing deal with Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks studios on a three-year, $825 million pact for up to six films.

The Mumbai-based Reliance also has production deals with some of Hollywood's top stars including Tom Hanks, Brad Pitt, Jim Carrey and Nicolas Cage.

Reliance is currently in talks with Universal Studios to build a $1.5 billion theme park and resort in India.

"All of that has to do with India having come out of its socio-economic doldrums and being seen as a world power," says Krishnan Menon, CEO of Los Angeles-based branded entertainment company Phenomenon. "When that happens, respect spreads to multiple industries. The entertainment industry is the first one to take on a halo effect."

It continues to spread. Last week, Reliance Broadcast Network Ltd. signed a deal with CBS Studios International to launch three new English language television channels to be broadcast across the Indian subcontinent later this year.

The joint venture will bring such CBS shows as "Hawaii Five-O" and "CSI" to India.

"It's a demographic that cannot be ignored," says Marouda. "At least no longer."

(Editing by Jill Serjeant)