



THE LONELINESS OF BEING

*Rajesh
Khanna*

DARK STAR

GAUTAM CHINTAMANI

FOREWORD BY SHARMILA TAGORE



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To Tiny, for the Herculean task

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‘Fame is a bee. / It has a song / It has a sting / Ah, too, it has a wing.’

– Emily Dickinson

‘I know myself,’ he cried, ‘but that is all—’

– F. Scott Fitzgerald (*This Side of Paradise*)

FOREWORD

The last time I met Rajesh Khanna was at an event in Kolkata. I was late and the dignitaries were already assembled on the stage. As I hurried to join them, a khadi-clad man with longish hair stood up and extended me an elaborate greeting. With my focus on the audience, I put him down as a politician. And then I heard him say ‘Hi’ and saw him smile. With a shock I realized that this was Kaka. He was very thin but his eyes twinkled and his smile hadn’t lost any of that old Rajesh Khanna magic. For someone who had been a close witness to his stardom, it was heartbreaking to see him so frail.

It was on the sets of *Aradhana* that I first met Rajesh Khanna. He had just been discovered by the United Producers Combine of which Shakti Samanta was a member. Samanta was planning a big film with Shammi Kapoor but since he didn’t have his dates, he thought of making a small film with me and his new find. *Aradhana* turned out to be a colossal hit, and for Rajesh Khanna there was no looking back. Those were the days of star-pair craze and Sharmila Tagore–Rajesh Khanna became the newest addition. It was arguably the most popular on-screen partnership of the era, and one of the most successful partnerships in Hindi cinema ever.

Rajesh Khanna is remembered primarily as a romantic actor. He had a vulnerable, lost air about him that made women of all ages feel very protective. As a friend used to say, he made the old feel young and the young, frantic. I remember there were these long queues of women from nine to ninety outside the studios where we worked. Some garlanded his car, some married his photograph, and others sent letters written in blood. The hysteria was unprecedented. In films like *Safar* and *Anand*, he went beyond his romantic image. His sensitive portrayal of a man struggling against an unrelenting destiny with enduring humour and courage, will always be counted as amongst the finest. Although there have been better actors in India and in Hindi cinema than Rajesh Khanna, somehow these roles seemed custom-made for him and one felt nobody could have done them better.

There is nothing more difficult in Hindi cinema than ‘acting’ in a song, and film students can learn a lot by observing him lip-sync ‘*Chingari koi bhadke*’ in *Amar Prem*, a full six minutes in the confined space of a boat on the River Hooghly. How beautifully understated he is and how effectively he

communicates the turmoil and the contradictions of his situation. He probably didn't have the attributes that are normally associated with a hero; what he had was a disarming smile, youthful energy, an innate sense of drama and a well-modulated voice which he used to his fullest advantage. Dialogues such as '*I hate tears, Pushpa*' (*Amar Prem*), '*Zindagi badi honi chahiye, lambi nahin, Babumoshai*' (*Anand*), '*Main marne se pehle marna nahin chahta*' (*Safar*) have been absorbed in our everyday spoken language. Head slightly tilted, nodding on cue, and a voice guaranteed to wreak havoc in a female heart, he delivered some of the most cherished lines ever in Hindi cinema. He starred in fifteen consecutive hits, a record that still stands. The 'guru' shirt, his unbranded fashion statement, became a rage across class and gender. Undoubtedly, he was everyone's hero – and he was a phenomenon.

But all this adulation came to an abrupt halt. The tidal wave of the Rajesh Khanna craze receded as suddenly as it had begun. And like any elemental disaster, it left a scarred Kaka in its wake. One minute everyone was swooning over him, and another moment they had turned away. This too was a phenomenon. How could it happen? Perhaps the question is best left to film scholars to answer rather than a friend.

Rajesh Khanna was a man of contradictions and complexities. I have seen him being very generous with his friends and colleagues, showering them with expensive gifts. Sometimes he even bought them a house. But, in return, he expected far too much which ended up putting a strain on the relationship. But what affected me personally was his habit of coming late to work. I went to the studios at 8 a.m. and wanted to be back with my family by 8 p.m. But this was impossible since Kaka never arrived before 12 for a 9 a.m. shift. And we could never finish on time. As a result, the entire unit would pressurize me to work overtime and complete the schedule. This became the norm and since I had many films with Kaka, I found myself in a quandary. So, I opted to work with other actors more and more despite the fact that our pairing had been so successful. Probably even Kaka felt it was not such a good idea to have so many films with one actress – one runs the risk of becoming stale. Whatever it was, we found ourselves working together in less and less films. And I must confess it was a huge relief.

Like his friendships, Kaka didn't nurture his stardom and allowed it to slip from his grasp. He failed to notice that the audience was changing, and that the roles he had been doing were becoming less and less relevant. Kaka either couldn't or didn't reinvent himself to remain contemporary, so much so that he became almost a caricature of himself and people began to mock him.

I am glad that at last there is a book on Rajesh Khanna. If ever a Hindi

cinema star deserved a book, it is surely he. It is one of life's ironies that while other contemporaries of Kaka, Amitabh Bachchan in particular, continued to go from strength to strength, Kaka was rendered inconsequential. Over the last decade or so, songs from his films have been immensely popular on radio and TV channels which thrive on the music of that era. However, the rediscovery of these songs, while connecting R.D. Burman and Kishore Kumar to a new generation, somehow failed to do the same for Kaka. I am happy Gautam Chintamani corrects this aberration. It is refreshing that he concentrates on the cinema of Rajesh Khanna and does not delve into personal issues which seem to be the rage these days. In the process, the reader discovers the romance of the time and what it meant to be Rajesh Khanna. I am sure this book would have made Kaka happy and I wish he was here to enjoy it. It is infinitely sad that it took that final advertisement of Havells fans and his subsequent death to reinstate him in popular discourse.

It is apt what Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri says in his book *Icons from Bollywood* (Penguin Books India): unlike bigger icons and stars, 'Rajesh Khanna's claim to greatness basically lies in his achievements over a period of barely three years. There have been actors in the limelight for longer durations, more talented artistes who have shaped opinion and have continued to be talked about across generations. None of these hold true for Rajesh Khanna ... But on the strength of those three years, 1969 to 1972, he will always find a place in any discussion on Hindi cinema. For, in those years, *he* was Hindi mainstream cinema.'

I don't think there's another actor who can make the same claim on posterity. More than four decades after *Aradhana*, and over thirty years after his last hit, the consensus is that there has never been and never will be anything to remotely match the appeal of this man at his peak. It is only right that now we have a book which celebrates Rajesh Khanna, India's first-ever superstar.

SHARMILA TAGORE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have heard somewhere that writers believe that they choose their books, while, in fact, it is the book that chooses the writer. As someone who grew up on the cinema of Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna always belonged to the generation of my parents. The stories that one had heard from elders about *the* Rajesh Khanna were truly the stuff dreams were made of. Yet for some strange reason, the man was lost to memory. So much so that as a film buff I went from Bachchan to discovering Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt and Vijay Anand while stumbling across a *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* en route to a new Hindi cinema in the form of Aamir Khan, Mansoor Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, Sooraj Barjatya and Aditya Chopra. In a sense, Rajesh Khanna belonged to the lost years that I truly discovered via Kishore Kumar–R.D. Burman.

This book is not something that has been on my radar for years. Rather, it is a result of an emotional response to relive the story of an icon, who in spite of being unforgettable, had been readily forgotten on more occasions than one. Starting this book after Rajesh Khanna's death only underscores the irony that he became more relevant after he died. This also robbed the book of its primary source of information, that is, if he would have spoken at all. But unlike artistes such as, say, a Sahir Ludhianvi, a Dev Anand, or a Guru Dutt, it is still possible to discover Rajesh Khanna, the actor, without really exploring the person. Such an enterprise isn't imaginable only because it was *we* who created *the* Rajesh Khanna. No. This is possible because Rajesh Khanna, the star, changed Jatin Khanna, the man behind the colossus. Also, the rush with which stardom arrived for Rajesh Khanna and the haste with which it all fell apart ensured that very little of Jatin Khanna stayed intact.

In the course of researching and writing this book, I came across an equal number of people on either side of the extremes with which Rajesh Khanna is viewed. I tried speaking to Dimple Kapadia on a few occasions and even though she entertained my calls, Ms Kapadia chose not to speak. The stories of his largesse, his pettiness, his narcissism, his insecurities and his outlandishness could fill pages but this book steers clear of anything overtly salacious. Most refused to say anything on record and for every single tale there were two counterarguments. But more importantly, this book is a reading of Rajesh Khanna's cinema, his times and also my understanding of how he has been

viewed over the years. That is why, in many instances I have taken the pain to provide a synopsis of the films he has acted in, even though these are not the films that people remember Rajesh Khanna for. For, in these roles, we get a glimpse of the star struggling against his fate to reinvent himself, something his biggest rival, Amitabh Bachchan managed with such élan and which eluded Khanna. In the end, it is an effort to explore, through his cinema, what made Rajesh Khanna what he was and why, despite shining the brightest, he was destined to remain a dark star eclipsed by his own brilliance as well as that of those around him.

PROLOGUE

It had been a long time since Rajesh Khanna had ceased to be a superstar. Of his contemporaries, only Amitabh Bachchan continued to hog the headlines, and not always for cinematic reasons. A younger generation of actors was increasingly muscling its way into the spotlight.

Rajesh Khanna may have decided to move away from the arc lights that made him shine the brightest amongst all of Hindi cinema's stars, but he was still playing a role which, though it didn't rely on cues that he would need to respond to, had the potential of becoming his greatest. There weren't any cameras he was performing for and the absence of instructions from a director made it all too real for him. Khanna believed that his entire life was a lead-up to the new part he had undertaken and that, as a member of Parliament (MP), he would finally get to play a real *hero*.

It was a regular day in New Delhi, his constituency, and Rajesh Khanna, MP, was travelling in his official car. The vehicle had stopped at an intersection and Khanna was looking ahead at nothing in particular while waiting for the lights to change. He noticed a little girl and her chipmunk of a brother in the car that had stopped in front of his. The girl wouldn't have been a day older than seven; too young to know the eyes looking at her. Khanna continued to gaze. He knew that she'd have never known the superstar he once was. Yet, out of sheer habit, he smiled his smile. The tilt of the neck and the glint in the eyes followed automatically, making Rajesh Khanna the superstar appear for a brief moment. He had almost given up when the little girl recognized him and prodded her mother to turn back and look at the icon. Khanna waited. The girl continued to urge her mother to turn around, but the lady was too busy arguing with her husband to notice anything. The girl turned back and Khanna rewarded her by blinking his eyes in the manner that had made a million hearts melt. The little girl, who would later go on to become an acclaimed actor herself, made a face at him and looked away. The light had turned green and life was ready to move on. It could not have been better timed. Even otherwise, it wouldn't have bothered Khanna. Anyone else might have been affronted, but Rajesh Khanna had seen so much rejection that he just looked away.

1

CHILDHOOD, COLLEGE AND STRUGGLE

Prem Kahani Mein Ek Ladka Hota Hai

Sartre once said that all one needed to transform the most trivial event into an adventure was to start talking about it. The greater the success a person enjoys, the more detailed this exercise of talking about and recalling events from the past becomes. For has-been stars, this often ends up as a favourite pastime, for it gives them the opportunity to imagine the past in a manner they would have preferred it to have happened. For Rajesh Khanna, arguably the biggest star ever seen in Hindi cinema, childhood and the memories of life before he became a phenomenon were a tautological indulgence rarely burdened by facts.

Khanna was born Jatin Khanna in 1942 into a family of railway contractors who had moved from Lahore to Bombay a few years before his birth. In 1935, following a brief layover at Amritsar, where Jatin was born, the Khannas had shifted into present-day central Mumbai and set up home at Saraswati Niwas, a building nestled in Thakurdwar, Girgaum. The Khannas were a close-knit unit and, for Akrumal Khanna, the patriarch, the birth of a new grandchild was the only thing that could provide more happiness than the unbridled success the family had seen in business. Akrumal's three sons – Munni Lal, Chunni Lal and Nand Lal – managed the family business and, with nine grandchildren, there was never a dull moment in Saraswati Niwas.

While Munni Lal was blessed with three daughters, Nand Lal had four daughters – Chanchal, Vijay, Kamlesh and Manju – besides two sons, Jatin and Narendra. Jatin was Nand Lal's second son¹ and it is said that he inherited his mother Chandrani's genes as far as good looks were concerned. Even as a child, he was the favourite and it's hardly surprising that everybody who set eyes on him fondly called him by his pet name, Kaka. Being the youngest of the bunch, Kaka was pampered no end in the joint family set-up. He was the darling of his aunt, Leelavati, and uncle Chunni Lal who, being childless, adopted him at a very young age – a practice not uncommon in families of north India during that

time. In fact, it is said that Chandrani, Kaka's biological mother, had promised him to her sister-in-law even before his birth. Unlike with some families where, following such a development, physical distance would help demarcate boundaries, the Khannas continued to stay together. Kaka grew up surrounded by mothers, fathers and his own siblings for cousins. However, he seldom spoke of the relationship he shared with any of them. He mostly stayed in his own world and those around him found it difficult to be with him beyond a point. Kaka preferred to be by himself.

Years later, in an interview, Khanna glossed over the whole adoption within the family aspect of his childhood and said that his parents had him very late in the marriage. Khanna frequently chose different versions while talking to the press about his early childhood and once even mentioned that his naming ceremony was held in the temple of the family kuldevta near Karachi, though he was born in Amritsar and his family had shifted from Lahore in 1935.

The huge age difference between his adoptive parents and him tilted the dynamics of their relationship greatly in his favour and both Leelavati and Chunni Lal overindulged Jatin. His mother wouldn't allow anyone to go anywhere near his room in the mornings till he woke up on his own, and spent hours checking the finery of the intricate zari work on the custom-tailored clothes she would get stitched for her little prince. Once, Kaka demanded a bicycle and didn't stop howling till his parents gave in against their better judgement. A few months later, when he broke his promise and drove beyond the compound, Leelavati cried her heart out fearing the worst; but when he returned, she jumped to his defence even as Chunni Lal reprimanded their son.

The love showered by his parents would have spoilt any child and Kaka was no exception; from a very young age, Kaka couldn't help but think that he was a cut above the rest. In later years, Khanna would often joke about his spoilt upbringing by saying, '*Meri parwarish galat huee hai.*' He told friends that he would get ten rupees if he asked for five and even when it came to schooling he, more than anyone, would decide whether he wanted to attend classes or not. He held his privileged upbringing responsible for never being able to value money or time.

Like most children, he too entertained the dream of being a pilot for a short while, and even though it was a foregone conclusion that Kaka would eventually join his father's business, he got distracted by the charm of theatre. The neighbourhood kids would often set up stage and perform plays and, when he wasn't a part of the audience, Kaka loved to dress up and play colourful characters – such as a gypsy prince – whenever he got the chance. If these neighbourhood plays introduced him to the thought of being an actor, his

participation in school and later college plays strengthened his resolve. His only connection with the world of theatre was a distant cousin who was part of a group and who managed to get him a small walk-on part in one of the productions. Jatin royally botched up his only line in his first play and, years later, relived the moments of how he didn't stop running till he got home once he exited the stage.

Although a Bombay boy in every sense of the word, Jatin shifted to Poona's Wadia College to pursue his degree in Bachelor of Arts for two years before returning to K.C. College in Bombay. One of the reasons he shifted to Poona was the inclusion of Marathi as a compulsory subject in Bombay that might have necessitated paying more attention to studies. Like the better part of his childhood and schooling, Jatin continued to be selective when it came to interacting with others during his college days. Most of his teachers remember him as the reticent fellow who only came alive while on stage. Along with old school friend Ravi Kapoor, who joined Kaka in K.C. College – the two had also been together at St. Sebastian's Goan High School in Girgaum – he continued to follow his passion upon his return to Bombay. Like Jatin, Ravi harboured dreams of being an actor and on many occasions, both of them vied for the same part. Often coaching each other for auditions and screen tests, the duo took great interest each other's career and were certain that it was just a matter of time before the two cracked it.

The era in which Jatin started his struggle to become a Hindi film actor was very different. Unlike today, actors were seldom launched in a leading role with the kind of fanfare that has come to be associated with debuts. Most of them had to bide their time doing bit parts and sometimes it would be years (peppered with numerous flops) before anything of consequence came along. But the audiences were far too forgiving, the producers patient, and second chances were not unheard-of. Besides this endless wait, the shadow of the big stars of the day – like Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor – loomed very large. So large that every newcomer ended up modelling some aspect of his persona on one of them whilst trying his best to not look like a replica.

Jatin continued with whatever came his way but, while recognition escaped him, theatre did help him meet the first love of his life, gave him the chance to consider films as a career option and brought him face-to-face with his first real rival as an actor. Jatin met and fell in love with Anju Mahendru while working in a play together and the young lovers soon became one of the most talked-about couples in Bombay. In the 1960s, when dating wasn't something that actors were comfortable talking about, Jatin and Anju never tried too hard to keep their relationship under wraps. Anju – or Nikki as Jatin addressed her – was an

upcoming actress herself, who got recognition a little earlier than her boyfriend, thanks to roles in films like *Jewel Thief* (1967). But she would largely be known as Rajesh Khanna's girlfriend for the rest of her life. According to people close to them, both were madly in love; but if Jatin failed to recognize that Anju provided perhaps the perfect foil to his moody behaviour, Anju, too, at times pushed Jatin beyond the point of endurance. Both were prone to wild mood swings and, like many young lovers, broke up and got back together on a regular basis. This was interspersed with doing crazy things on the rebound, like Anju getting engaged to visiting West Indian cricketing star Garfield Sobers.

Jatin wasn't really keen on films till a chance meeting with Geeta Bali changed the way he approached his career. In an interview to a magazine,² Khanna recalled how he bumped into Geeta Bali, who had her production office in the same building where Khanna rehearsed for one of his plays. Seeing the young actor in a tearing hurry across the staircase, Geeta told Khanna that his was just the kind of face her next production, *Ek Chadar Maili Si*, was looking for. Although Jatin never got the part, and the film was shelved following Bali's untimely death, those words made the thought of being a film actor germinate within Jatin.

For someone who went for auditions in the latest sports car when most strugglers would walk, and enjoyed a monthly allowance of a thousand rupees while other aspiring actors often went without money and even food for days, Jatin had his own share of troubles during his 'struggle'. For one, he would watch rivals like Hari Jariwala – who would later take on the screen name Sanjeev Kumar, and go on to become one of Hindi cinema's finest actors – score over him thanks to his association with IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), a more prominent group. Even classmate Ravi managed to pip him to the post with a lead role in V. Shantaram's *Geet Gaya Pattharon Ne* (1964) and the screen name Jatin desired, Jeetendra. To make things worse, Jatin was subjected to humiliation by people calling him names like 'gurkha' and 'Nepali naukhar' to his face. In spite of putting in the effort and doing things that were expected of an aspiring actor, Jatin's future seemed dim. His aimlessness had begun to attract the attention of his father and Chunni Lal issued an ultimatum: make a mark within five years or join the family business. Chunni Lal and Leelavati, however, continued to support Jatin financially as well as emotionally by landing up at every performance of his.

The safety net of a family business to fall back on notwithstanding, Jatin's struggle was as serious as that of any other struggler doing the rounds of studios in Bombay. Like every other aspirant, Jatin left no stone unturned in his quest for screen success and had no qualms about participating in a talent hunt

organized by *Filmfare*. For almost two decades since they were constituted, the Filmfare Awards had come to be acknowledged as one of the country's most coveted film awards and, even though the publication had also organized a few talent hunts in the past, the Filmfare–United Producers Combine Talent Hunt hoped to shake things up like never before. Jatin was one of the thousands who were shortlisted but, like those around him, he didn't make much of the call, for it was hardly any different from the usual auditions he was summoned to. But unknown to both him and the people who were organizing the talent hunt, the definition of usual was about to change forever.

2

THE CONTEST

Maine Tere Liye Hi Saat Rang Ke Sapne Chune

The basic idea behind the Filmfare–United Producers Combine contest was simply to introduce new talent to Hindi cinema. It wasn't that Hindi cinema wasn't attracting fresh talent, but most of the new names were throwbacks, shadows and even imitations of yesteryear actors. Perhaps like the audiences, the men who made films too were looking for someone who could break the shackles of the past and look beyond the troika of Dilip Kumar–Dev Anand–Raj Kapoor, who formed the first generation of Hindi cinema's mega stars after India's independence and who showed no signs of slowing down even a couple of decades down the line.

The second rung that followed the fabled three were cast in the same mould and most of them fancied doing the same thing, albeit a little differently. Hence, a Rajendra Kumar or Manoj Kumar couldn't look beyond Dilip Kumar, while Shammi Kapoor, despite succeeding in carving a niche for himself that nobody has challenged, spent a large part of his career trying to better Dev Anand. Dilip Kumar not only motivated Harikrishna Giri Goswami to become an actor, but even inspired him to take on the screen name Manoj Kumar after one of his characters; and Shammi Kapoor practically owed his career to Dev Anand, who refused *Tumsa Nahin Dekha* (1957), the film that made Shammi an overnight sensation after nineteen forgettable films.

At the time it was created, The United Producers Combine featured the who's who of the commercial Hindi cinema fraternity. Between B.R. Chopra, Bimal Roy, Devendra Goel, F.C. Mehra, G.P. Sippy, H.S. Rawail, Hemant Kumar, Nasir Husain, J. Om Prakash, Mohan Saigal, Shakti Samanta and Subodh Mukherji, it was a healthy blend of film-makers who covered not only a wide variety of cinema amongst them, but also featured a nice mix of experience. Some of them – like Bimal Roy and B.R. Chopra – were already stalwarts, while the likes of Shakti Samanta and J. Om Prakash were on the

verge of their second, more successful, innings. There had been a few talent contests in the past, but what set this one apart was that the winner would get cast as the lead in a film produced by each member. Additionally, the Filmfare–United Producers Combine Talent Hunt aspired to provide new blood on a collective basis and, therefore, depending on the need, the members would cast the runners-up in their productions as well.

The contest attracted thousands of aspirants from all over India. Such was the lure of Hindi cinema that the participants tried all sorts of things to edge past the competition. Some, like Leena Chandravakar, even filled in the form from Madras in the hope that she would stand out in the initial stages if the application came from a place other than Maharashtra. Jatin had filled the form for a lark and never really believed that he would get a call, let alone that he'd be one of the six finalists.

J. Om Prakash, the only living member of the United Producers Combine at the time this book was being edited, found Jatin exceptionally gifted, with a real flair for emotional scenes. The producer of films such as *Aas Ka Panchhi* (1961), *Ayee Milan Ki Bela* (1964) and *Aaye Din Bahar Ke* (1966) had a feeling that he'd surely make it to the final round.

If getting the call for the talent hunt surprised Jatin, reaching the finals absolutely shocked him. There might have been six finalists, but the focus was squarely on Jatin and Vinod Mehra; and so close was the contest that no one knew which actor would pip the other to the post. For the final test, the six were given a scene to enact. And while everyone else took off to prepare, Jatin stood there with the scene in his hand. He took his time studying it – a scene in which a young man confronts his mother. Even after a few readings, Jatin couldn't place his finger on the character. He looked up and saw G.P. Sippy standing in front of him. He inched a few steps closer to Sippy and asked him to tell him more about the character he was supposed to enact. Jatin wanted to know the background of the character and thought some extra information would help him get an insight.

A bewildered Sippy looked at the young man and asked a simple question that meant a whole lot more than the three words it contained: '*Theatre se ho?*' The young aspirant nodded. Before Sippy could say anything more, Jatin shot off a volley of queries – how old was the character, where did he come from, what was his relationship with his mother like, was he raised by her alone, what about his father, and was he well off or poor. The barrage proved a little too much for Sippy who took the paper from Jatin and said, '*Kuch bhi kar do.*' For a thoroughbred film man, Sippy couldn't engage with an upstart from theatre. As far as he was concerned, Jatin could do anything he liked.

When his turn came to present the scene, Jatin walked up and enacted a monologue from one of the plays that he had performed. The scene was about a young man who was consumed by his shortcomings and couldn't get over the fact that a girl – any girl – could love him. He was a poor boy who wasn't even blessed with good looks, and yet he had someone loving him. In the scene, the boy questions the girl and prods her to find out the real reason for her affection. The girl remains silent and listens to the boy, who lets his complexes get the better of him while questioning her. He questions her motives and her emotions, and even accuses her of liking him only to feel better about herself. Jatin immersed himself in the character from the word go and the twelve men judging him found themselves getting more engrossed in the performance with each passing line. Like a seasoned pro, Jatin modulated his tone to perfection and took the audience along on the roller coaster of a performance. He tempered his pitch and was canny enough to be on the lookout for how the judges were keeping pace with him; and when they were riveted, he paused for a moment. Hooked, the judges were desperate to know what happened next, but Jatin wasn't ready to deliver the coup de grâce yet. He made them salivate for a while before delivering the final blow. He enacted the girl's lines without missing a beat. The girl finally reveals that she is blind and perhaps that's the reason why she could see beyond the appearances of the man she fell in love with.

J. Om Prakash remembers what followed next as clearly as if it happened yesterday. 'When he finished, we all ... Shakti (Samanta), Nasir Sahab and Chopra-ji looked at each other and knew that here was an artist who could deliver what the contest promised.' The producer-director recalls that, in spite of the mesmerizing performance, Jatin could only manage to beat Vinod Mehra by one point; and even though the contest was a close call, there wasn't any doubt in the minds of the judges about who the clear winner was. Along with Jatin, Farida Jalal – who in a few years would go on to co-star with him in *Aradhana* (1969) – was crowned the co-winner; and the then fifteen-year-old Leena Chandravarkar was adjudged the female runner-up.

The actor who cried his heart out the night of his first stage appearance had beaten over 10,000 participants to not only win the talent hunt but also land starring roles with twelve of the top producers in Hindi cinema. His seemingly endless wait for minor roles to transform into performances noticeable enough for something worthwhile to come along, was over. He was suddenly the master of his own fate. He wouldn't have to fan the egos of the powers that be to be allowed to get his foot in the door. The ones who had seemingly whistled past him, like Jeetendra and Sanjeev Kumar, were still a few years away from *Farz* (1967) and *Sanghursh* (1968), their breakthrough films.

With a new destiny awaiting him, Jatin Khanna decided to adopt a new screen name. Being addressed by everyone as Kaka, he was hardly used to his real name Jatin or its official version Jatinder. He had often thought of using 'Jeetendra' as his screen name, but Ravi Kapoor had already taken it. Although there was some confusion regarding who really gave him his screen name – his uncle K.K. Talwar or his father, or his elder brother Narendra – Jatin's destiny beckoned him to be more than *Jeetendra*, the conqueror of Indra, the prince of gods. He was to be 'Rajesh', the king of kings; and true to his adopted name, Jatin Khanna ended up becoming the king of the box office and outshone all the kings before and even those who followed.

3

THE ARC LIGHTS

Kitne Sapne, Kitne Armaan Laya Hoon Main

For someone who technically had twelve films in hand thanks to his winning the Filmfare–United Producers Combine Talent Contest, Khanna never imagined that his first release would be with someone who wasn't a part of the United Producers Combine. None of the producers who selected him had scripts that would suit him and there was little he could do but wait. He made the obligatory trips to the offices of G.P. Sippy and Nasir Husain, two of the producers who were almost ready with their scripts for him, but he wasn't expected to even consider meeting other producers at that stage. His struggle was officially over the day he signed his contract with the United Producers Combine, but Khanna's meeting with a producer who wasn't a part of the body ended up partially altering the course of things.

Chetan Anand was unlike anyone from the United Producers Combine. His debut, *Neecha Nagar* (1946), had won the Grand Prix du Festival International du Film at Cannes. With a strong background in theatre, Chetan, a firm believer in the Stanislavskian school of method acting, could even be considered a misfit in the Hindi film industry. He was someone who gave up the idea of directing *Guide* (1965), arguably one of India's greatest films ever, in the blink of an eye as soon as the Government of India gave him permission to shoot *Haqeeqat* (1964) in Ladakh. Based on the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962, *Haqeeqat* would always be a tough act to follow, and Anand knew this. To make things more challenging, his new film was a far cry from *Haqeeqat* or anything he had ever done. Ideally, for a director like Anand, finding a male lead wouldn't be difficult; but with the script centred on a fifteen-month-old toddler, things didn't look that easy. One of Anand's production executives in *Haqeeqat*, Dharamvir Varma, was a friend of Rajesh Khanna and got him to meet his boss during the period Khanna was waiting for G.P. Sippy's *Raaz* (1967) to commence. Varma knew that Anand was on the lookout and was convinced that Khanna, with his

theatre background, fitted the bill.

Anand was considering a few other names, but knew his search had ended the moment he saw the twenty-four-year-old Khanna walk in. Chetan Anand's son Ketan recalls how his father instinctively knew that this young man had something special in him and, following a brief meeting, signed him for *Aakhri Khat* (1966), which would ultimately become the future superstar's first theatrical release. The story of *Aakhri Khat* – a young sculptor from the city, Govind (Khanna), falling for a village girl, Lajjo (Indrani Mukherjee), while vacationing and leaving her behind to return to the city – wasn't very different from some films made earlier. Even what followed – the girl getting pregnant and coming to the city only to be doubted by her lover – wasn't unique in the realm of Hindi films of that period. But Anand's screenplay and the narrative structure made *Aakhri Khat* stand apart. A significant portion of the film revolved around the couple's infant son wandering around Bombay all alone after Lajjo's death. A better part of *Aakhri Khat*'s screen time featured Govind searching for his son after he reads Lajjo's final letter to him, in which she says that she'd leave the kid at his doorstep and kill herself. Unable to part with her son, Lajjo leaves the letter but not the child and ends up dying moments later.

Khanna plays the part of the troubled father with great finesse and keeps the performance subtle. In a film where for the most part he plays second fiddle to an infant, Khanna never looks out of place. The screenplay barely gives him space and restricts him to react to plot points, but Khanna rarely misses a beat. In many sequences, Khanna acts to long portions of Indrani Mukherjee's voiceover, reading letters addressed to Govind, and the scene where the eponymous 'aakhri khat' or the final letter is read runs almost over two minutes, but Khanna hits the right notes throughout the performance.

Chetan Anand had a unique way of dealing with his actors. A teacher at Doon School before he became a film-maker, Anand was closely associated with the IPTA in the 1940s. He often combined the teacher and the theatre actor inside him during his script-reading sessions and pressed his actors to go that extra mile while performing. A firm believer in rehearsing before and during the shoot, Anand pushed Khanna to imbibe the finer nuances of Konstantin Stanislavski's method school of acting for *Aakhri Khat*'s climax.

Unable to locate his son for over three days, Govind starts imagining the worst that can happen to a fifteen-month-old baby on the busy streets of Bombay and admonishes himself. Unable to sleep, distressed, boozed out and already proclaimed guilty by the hardworking policeman who is helping him, Govind is sitting in his studio all by himself. He appears as lifeless as one of his creations and, by some strange miracle of the heavens, his son ambles halfway across the

city and totters right up to his mother's lifelike statue and says, 'Mama...' What follows is Govind's catharsis in a series of expressions that range from shock to joy, from amazement to bewilderment, the tears that accompany displaying everything from abject pain to sheer joy. It's one of the most difficult climaxes that any actor could ever imagine, for there's nothing but 600 feet of silent film to fill with emotions.

Khanna might have been a newcomer but had convinced Anand that he was good enough to deliver with a little help. Anand kept Khanna awake for three days by calling him in the middle of the nights and talking to him; sometimes he made his assistants keep him up. Ketan Anand, who was in college when his father was shooting *Aakhri Khat*, remembers how the production crew was instructed by Anand to not allow Khanna to eat or meet anyone beyond a point. 'I remember my father telling them (the crew), "*Khaane mat do usey, baahar mat jaane do.*" And then, three days later when Kaka came to the sets, he was almost on the verge of a breakdown.' While shooting the final portion, Ketan says his father spoke to Khanna and 'Kaka replied by reacting and the result is a brilliant performance that is controlled and restrained, unlike the usual Hindi film over-the-top melodrama'.

Besides Khanna's impressive performance, the film had another silver lining in the form of a lilting Khayyam tune – penned by Kaifi Azmi and rendered by Mohammad Rafi – that would sow the seeds of Khanna's musical legacy. If one hears Rafi's 'Aur kuch der thahar' with eyes closed, it could easily be mistaken for a typical romantic Dev Anand number. But the song rather unknowingly ended up doing a lot. For the first time in Hindi cinema it was the hero who claimed an equal share in sensuality in a song and, looking back, it's hardly a surprise that Khanna went on to wreck havoc amongst female fans.

Aakhri Khat was a low-budget quickie that was lost amidst box-office smashes of the year like *Phool Aur Patthar*, *Teesri Manzil* and *Mera Saaya*. Commercially, the film didn't do well and failed to make any substantial noise critically. Even for a director like Chetan Anand, whose *Haqeeqat* was still fresh in the audiences' mind, *Aakhri Khat* was too experimental, with Jal Mistry's camera seeming to be more interested in following the little one around than anything else.

The failure of *Aakhri Khat*, however, didn't matter much to Khanna, for *Raaz* (1967), the film that was always intended to launch him, was just around the corner. Unlike *Aakhri Khat*, which portrayed him as an actor of promise, the prime objective of *Raaz* was to present to the audience the winner of the Filmfare–United Producers Combine Talent Hunt. Planned with the idea of

launching a future star, *Raaz* had a double role for Khanna, which ensured that he got ample opportunity to showcase every conceivable emotion expected from a Hindi film hero. Based on a story by C.J. Pavri, *Raaz* is the tale of Sunil (Khanna), an Africa-based Indian, who has recurring dreams about a woman calling out to him in an Indian town called Veeran Nagar. He's never been to Veeran Nagar in his life, but when Sunil reaches the town, not only does everyone know him but, for some strange reason, refers to him as Kumar. It turns out that Kumar (Khanna in a double role) was the local lad who had disappeared after he incurred the wrath of Sarkar Nath (Sapru), Veeran Nagar's bigwig, for falling in love with his daughter Sapna (Babita), the same mysterious woman who haunts Sunil in his dreams. Sunil gets more confused when a local, Bansi, tells him that he had witnessed Kumar's death at the hands of Sarkar Nath. Now Sunil must solve the mystery of a death that people believe to be his own.

A mix of suspense, comedy, songs and action, *Raaz* was every bit a regular 1960s' Hindi commercial film whose purpose was to entertain. What made it special was the intention with which it was made, and this is something that the opening credits of the film clearly stated. Rajesh Khanna's name is preceded by a title that reads 'G.P. Sippy Proudly Introduces', and this established the concept of a star launch decades before the term even entered Hindi cinema lexicon. It also showed the faith that United Producers Combine had in Khanna, and Satish Bhatnagar's screenplay affirmed the same in an extremely tongue-in-cheek fashion. Right from the start of the film, every character who sees Khanna already knows him and in fact awaits his arrival. This device is used so many times that it ends up becoming an in-film joke where comedian I.S. Johar, who played Khanna's sidekick Rocky, even mocks him for pretending to be someone new in the area.

For someone whom the audience had already seen in the highly skilled hands of Chetan Anand, Khanna looked completely raw and even uninspiring in the initial portions of *Raaz*. Under Ravinder Dave's direction, Khanna was at sea even in the dramatic scenes and, from the looks of it, Dave seemed to be more interested in photographing Khanna in the typical frames that good-looking stars are captured in than exploring his potential as a performer. He even structured the screenplay in a manner that neatly divides the film into segments that appear detached from each other. Major portions of the film – like a two-and-a-half-minute-long sequence where both Babita and Khanna recite poetry in voiceovers – ramble along incoherently, and the narrative is so disjointed that the entire third act of the film has more of I.S. Johar than Babita, who simply vanishes. But Khanna did enough to keep the United Producers' faith and, by the time *Raaz*

reached the halfway mark, he looked very much the young star they had imagined.

That Khanna understood the rhythm of a Hindi film song – something he had displayed with Rafi's 'Aur kuch der thahar' in *Aakhri Khat* – was underlined even in *Raaz* with Kalyanji–Anandji's songs like 'Dil sambhale sambhalta nahin' (Lata–Mukesh) and the two Rafi numbers, 'Sochta hoon ke maine tumhe' and the hauntingly mesmerizing 'Akele hain chale aao'.

If *Aakhri Khat* was an experiment and *Raaz* a typical Hindi commercial film, Khanna's third release *Baharon Ke Sapne* (1967) was a film so atypical of its maker that it remains an exception in his illustrious oeuvre. If there was ever someone in Hindi cinema who, apart from Manmohan Desai, came close to devising a formula that would never fail, it would undoubtedly be Nasir Husain. One of Hindi cinema's best-known entertainers, Husain's primary objective while making a film was that his audience should have fun. Having found success as a screenwriter at Filmistan, Bombay Talkies' breakaway studio, Husain's early hits as a writer included *Munimji* and *Paying Guest*. Working at Filmistan, Husain understood the mathematics of middle-of-the-path budget films that were packaged as entertainers and sold on the basis of the stars they featured. This was the formula that he applied to films made under his own banner, be it *Jab Pyar Kisi Se Hota Hai* (1961), *Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon* (1963), *Teesri Manzil* (1966), *Yaadon Ki Baraat* (1973) or *Hum Kisi Se Kum Nahin* (1977). But there was another side to the man that was far removed from the kind of films associated with him.

One of the first stories that Husain wrote while still in college was in stark contrast to the kind of films he ended up making. It dealt with a college graduate, Ramaiya, forced by circumstances to work the same menial job of a mill worker as his father. The story had even won him an award, but the man who once famously told Bimal Roy, one of his more illustrious contemporaries, that he'd make twelve films with the same formula and each would be a success, had never got around to translating his first story to screen. The discovery of Rajesh Khanna offered Husain the perfect opportunity to finally make a film that would be different from the breezy entertainers he had got used to.

Husain started working on *Baharon Ke Sapne* and the deeper he got into it, the more it consumed him. He was so passionate about making this small film that he even handed over the reins of *Teesri Manzil*, a typical Nasir Husain entertainer that was to reunite him with Dev Anand, to the star's younger brother Vijay Anand. Although *Baharon Ke Sapne* would be a departure from his usual films in terms of both style and content, Husain got R.D. Burman and Asha Parekh, the film-maker's favourite leading lady, on board. No one knew what in

the name of heavens had happened to Husain, least of all the people who were professionally associated with him.

Rumour has it that, following the lukewarm response to *Aakhri Khat* and *Raaz*, Asha Parekh, an established name in her own right, wasn't confident about either of Husain's choices – Khanna or *Baharon Ke Sapne* – but silently followed her mentor's cues. Somewhere, Khanna and the blank slate that accompanied him inspired Husain to believe this to be his chance to somehow, in a manner of speaking, salvage a bit of the passion that the writer in him had lost to the arc lights.

Husain had the habit of watching the first show of all his films along with the audience. In the darkened hall, he got to see the real reaction of his ultimate critics and that helped him with every subsequent film. But with *Baharon Ke Sapne* he was certain that he didn't care about the viewer beyond a point. This was a story that needed to be told just the way he had envisioned it years ago as a young man. The hardships of a mill worker's everyday existence and the hopelessness of it all were real and therefore Husain shot the film in stark black and white, without all the gloss that accompanied colour stock.

Unlike *Raaz*, Khanna got a script that didn't look at him as a hero in the conventional sense and, therefore, gave him enough meat to sink his teeth into. If *Aakhri Khat* and Chetan Anand had restrained him and encouraged him to underplay, here Khanna had ample scope to go all out or even overboard. But he paces his performance deftly enough and doesn't appear hurried. Khanna's Ramaiya portrays the dejection of the educated Indian youth of the 1960s with great familiarity – it is a stellar performance that would have made Husain proud. A better portion of *Baharon Ke Sapne's* script demands Khanna to be physically present in the scene but mentally lost in dreams that might never come true.

When it came to the lead performance, *Baharon Ke Sapne* was almost like a reprise of *Aakhri Khat*, and Khanna was once again tested in the worst way an actor can imagine – silently observing the drama around. Khanna's Ramaiya can be best described as a young Dilip Kumar-meets-Raj Kapoor, with a mix of just the right amount of idealism and youthful indignation. Interestingly enough, for the close viewer, Khanna's performance has nuances of 'the angry young man' that would make the career of the man who would eventually topple him, Amitabh Bachchan. With enough theatrics, peppered with a dash of romance, a co-star like Asha Parekh, a brilliant musical score, along with Nasir Husain's name attached, Khanna hoped that *Baharon Ke Sapne* would announce his arrival. But it was Nasir Husain's very name that ended up being the biggest hurdle between the film and success.

Husain couldn't believe the audiences' reaction to *Baharon Ke Sapne*. People flocked to the theatre in the hope that he would ensure entertainment and, while they were keen to see his monochromatic experiment with the new boy, they weren't ready for the heavy drama that played out. Nasir Husain's son Mansoor Khan – the director of films like *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988) and *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar* (1992) – couldn't forget his father's dejection after the first show of *Baharon Ke Sapne*. 'People came out of the hall cursing him and that's when he decided to change the ending.' A die-hard entertainer, Husain believed in the ending that he had shot for *Baharon Ke Sapne*, yet reshot a happier climax within two days of the film's release; but by then the film's fate had been sealed. A commercial washout upon its release, *Baharon Ke Sapne*, according to Mansoor, changed his father's perception about Indian audiences forever. He never again believed sad endings could work and even tried to change Mansoor's mind about the climax of his debut film *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*. Four decades later, *Baharon Ke Sapne* is best remembered as the first time R.D. Burman scored music for a Rajesh Khanna film, besides Lata Mangeshkar's lovely rendition of 'Aaja piya tohe pyaar doon' and the lilting Manna Dey–Lata number 'Chunri sambhal gori'.

With three films that didn't make a dent at the box office, the future of the one meant to infuse freshness into Hindi cinema didn't look too bright. Back then, it was expected of newcomers to fail a few times before coming good, but Rajesh Khanna wasn't just any newcomer. These three strikes were a little too many when one looked at the other releases of the year. If, with Dilip Kumar's double whammy in *Ram Aur Shyam*, and Dev Anand's brisk *Jewel Thief*, the old guard seemed in no mood to give up, the next generation of stars – which included the likes of Sunil Dutt, Manoj Kumar and Raaj Kumar – was doing just fine with *Milan*, *Upkar*, *Patthar Ke Sanam*, and *Humraaz*. Even old buddy Jeetendra had a great year with his breakthrough hit *Farz*.

But 1967 wasn't a complete washout for Khanna, thanks to *Aurat*, a remake of its leading lady Padmini's earlier Tamil hit *Chithi*. Khanna plays Suresh, an aspiring doctor, and the eldest of Parvathi's (Padmini) seven siblings whom she single-handedly brings up. Parvathi loves Anand (Feroz Khan) but ends up marrying Manoharilal (Pran), an elderly widower with six children, only because he promises to take care of her family and Suresh's education. A typical Tamil family drama adapted in Hindi, *Aurat* goes through a series of expected crests and troughs with Khanna missing from the proceedings for almost a third of the film and even the climax. His introductory scene – that had him in the background for almost five minutes before uttering his first dialogue – clearly established how limited his scope in the film would be. Ostensibly the second

lead, Khanna even has a sweet romantic track with Nazima, who plays Asha, Manoharilal's sister, and a couple of comic scenes with O.P. Ralhan. But the film's spotlight never really leaves Padmini and Pran.

In a film where he wasn't expected to do much, Khanna could have easily been overshadowed by old hands Pran and Padmini but ended up making the most of his ten scenes. He stands his ground confidently and looks equally at ease in the emotional scenes with Padmini and during the high drama with Pran. In a scene where Suresh tries to change his sister's mind about marrying the much older rich man, Khanna's acting is controlled and persuasive, in stark contrast to Padmini's grandiose histrionics. Besides an assured interpretation of the character, which signalled a new kind of hero, *Aurat* showed Khanna to be a natural when it came to romantic scenes. For the first time, he effortlessly displays the making of the archetypical Hindi film hero with the scenes where he romances Nazima, especially the prelude to the Rafi number, '*Shola ulfat ka bhadkakar*', Khanna's only song in the film, and the sequence where he draws Nazima to the terrace. His ease and effortlessness almost make *Aurat* look like a different film where he is the star.

Aurat is a precursor to two of his most well-known roles – the physicality of Suresh, particularly in the lighter scenes, is almost like a preamble to *Aradhana*, in which things finally fell in place for Khanna; and theoretically, there's hardly any difference between Suresh and Satyen Gupta from *Do Raaste* (1969).

Although United Producers Combine put up a brave face publicly, things weren't so rosy in the privacy of their offices. Their first two productions were as different as chalk and cheese, but were equally rejected by the audiences. While they began to lose confidence in Khanna, he confided in a few friends that he might have to look elsewhere for work. But *Aurat* gave him hope to carry on as, unlike his first three films, it didn't look like an experiment that he wasn't supposed to be a part of. Moreover, it appeared to be the ideal platform for a new actor in the 1960s rather than *Aakhri Khat*, *Raaz* or *Baharon Ke Sapne* which were made explicitly to launch Khanna. *Aurat*'s part would have suited any newcomer and, by making it uniquely his own, Khanna proved to the United Producers Combine that he was good enough to fit in. For Khanna's next film, his director wouldn't try to change things to suit Khanna. Rather, he would simply take the parts Khanna was good in and put them all together.

4

ARADHANA

Bagon Mein Bahar Hai

Like many directors who started in the 1950s, Shakti Samanta had originally wanted to be an actor but changed his focus within a few years of shifting base from Calcutta to Bombay. After a string of early successes as a director, he started his own production house in 1958 with the Ashok Kumar–Madhubala thriller *Howrah Bridge*. While the film was an average success, its music by O.P. Nayyar is still remembered for the two classics, ‘*Mera naam Chin Chin Chu*’ and ‘*Aaiye meherbaan*’.

In a little over a decade, Samanta went on to produce and direct *Chinatown* (1962) and *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), the film that introduced Sharmila Tagore to Hindi films. He had just finished his new film with the same team of Shammi Kapoor–Sharmila Tagore and Shankar–Jaikishen, and was certain to repeat the magic of *Kashmir Ki Kali*. It was a foregone conclusion that *An Evening in Paris* would be a hit, but no one could have foreseen a three-week-long all-India theatre owners’ strike just three days after its release. The film eventually ended up not only recovering its money but is also hailed as an evergreen musical, but upon its initial release, *An Evening in Paris* was a flop.

To make things a little more difficult, Samanta’s next film *Jane Anjane* (which would eventually release in 1971) with old favourite Shammi Kapoor and Vinod Khanna had also hit rough weather. The untimely death of his wife, Geeta Bali, had taken its toll on Shammi Kapoor, who had sunk into depression. Samanta and Kapoor were great friends and he decided to stall *Jane Anjane* till Kapoor felt good enough to return. Days turned into weeks and weeks became months, but Kapoor was in no shape to resume work. It was then that Samanta decided to make a quickie with the winner of the Filmfare–United Producers Combine Talent Contest.

Samanta had liked Khanna immensely in *Baharon Ke Sapne* and felt that, given the right subject, Khanna had the ability to not only shoulder an entire film

but also deliver hits. He had also decided that even though this ‘in-between’ film was a quickie, it shouldn’t make Khanna look out of place, something that the United Producers’ films hadn’t been able to manage so far. Ashim Samanta, Shakti Samanta’s son, remembers the evening Khanna came to their home for a narration of the stopgap film that eventually became *Aradhana*. Ashim and his high-school buddies were goofing around when Khanna drove in his Chevrolet, which seemed to attract more attention than him. Ashim was used to seeing stars like Shammi Kapoor and Sharmila Tagore waltz in and out of his house and, even though he didn’t think much of the young actor his father had decided to cast, he couldn’t help but notice his personality: ‘He had style even before he had become the big star he did.’ But it was Khanna’s sonorous voice that struck him the most as he led him to his father’s sitting room on the first floor of the house. That evening, Khanna heard Samanta and Sachin Bhowmick, the writer of *Aradhana*, narrate a film that would change his life; but the character that he was narrated wasn’t the only role that he eventually portrayed.

Like many great things in life, *Aradhana* was an accident that almost didn’t happen. The film’s story was partially inspired by *To Each His Own* (1946) and featured an air force officer, Arun (Khanna), who falls in love and secretly marries the local doctor’s daughter Vandana (Sharmila Tagore). A few days later, Arun dies in a plane crash and his family refuses to accept the pregnant Vandana since the marriage hadn’t been officially solemnized. All alone after her father’s death, Vandana gives birth to a boy, Suraj, and ends up becoming her own son’s nanny after he is adopted by a couple. One day, Suraj kills his uncle (Manmohan) in order to save Vandana from his advances, but Vandana protects her son by confessing to the murder. Years later, Vandana is released from jail and the benevolent jailor takes her home, where she meets his daughter Renu (Farida Jalal) and her fiancé, Suraj (Khanna in a double role), whose striking resemblance to her husband gives away the fact that he is her son. Suraj doesn’t remember Vandana and she forces her husband’s older colleagues to never let him know, for she fears that he’d be embarrassed of his mother’s reality. But once the son realizes the truth, he acknowledges his mother’s lifelong sacrifices.

Lead roles in Hindi cinema have primarily been male-dominated. Even though we’ve had films like *Mother India* (1957) and *Bandini* (1963) where things were different, the best that women artistes could expect were well-etched roles like Vyjayanthimala’s Rajni in *Naya Daur* (1957) or Waheeda Rehman’s Rosie in *Guide*; but such films were few and far between. In such a scenario, it was exceptional for a regular commercial script such as *Aradhana*’s to have author-backed roles for both male as well as female leads. From the script’s

point of view, *Aradhana*, in spite of the hero's double role, is a heroine's film right through. And as the film was originally conceived as a two-hero project, where Khanna was supposed to play just the father's role, Samanta wasn't fooling himself. He was considering a few names for Suraj's role but that wasn't high on his list of priorities. He needed an A-list female lead for the film to click. When the film was being made, Tagore was a much bigger star than Khanna. For someone who was barely twenty-five at the time, and who had had a series of hits, it must have been a daunting prospect for Sharmila to play the mother to a newcomer. Samanta apparently unsuccessfully tried approaching Aparna Sen for the role as well but maybe it was Samanta whom Sharmila couldn't say no to; maybe it was the role that swayed her. He needed her and, even though Tagore's wildcat bikini act was still fresh in the audiences' mind thanks to a *Filmfare* edition that had her on the cover, Samanta managed the impossible. He not only convinced Sharmila to don a deglamorized look for a large part of the film but to also play mother to a full-grown man!

With Sharmila in the bag, Samanta decided to start filming *Aradhana*'s initial portions and put the search for the second lead on the backburner. What Samanta didn't know and Khanna couldn't ever anticipate till a day before *Aradhana* commenced was that they would end up shooting a completely different film.

The day before *Aradhana* was supposed to start was just like any other day for Shakti Samanta. He was at his office in Famous Studios in Mahalaxmi when producer Surinder Kapoor, who had an office in the same complex, invited Samanta to see the last two reels of his new production. This was a common practice amongst film-makers of the day and Samanta just walked over to the screening room during lunch. Once the lights came on, Samanta realized that *Aradhana* and Kapoor's *Ek Shriman Ek Shrimati* (1969) – the film that he watched that afternoon – shared more than just the same scriptwriter. The climax of both the films was eerily similar. He went back to his office and called Sachin Bhowmick who tried, in vain, to convince Samanta that while the climaxes looked similar, they weren't the same.

Samanta was now in doubt about *Aradhana* and almost made up his mind to abandon the project. He went for a walk outside his office to clear his head and bumped into Madhusudan Kalelkar, the writer of his other film *Jane Anjane*, and Gulshan Nanda, the popular novelist whose previous work *Saawan Ki Ghata* (1966) had been adapted for the screen by Samanta himself a few years ago. Samanta asked Nanda if he had a story that he could use immediately. Nanda told him that he did have one that might interest him and enquired how soon he wanted to start filming. He was surprised to hear a wry Samanta mutter,

‘*Tomorrow.*’ They moved to his office and Nanda narrated his story, which engrossed Samanta. By the time Nanda finished the hour-long narration, Samanta had made up his mind to make this film instead of *Aradhana*.

But Nanda and Kalelkar pressed him to continue with *Aradhana*. It was now Samanta’s turn to narrate the story of *Aradhana*, and when he told them that the climax was almost the same as Bhowmick’s *Ek Shriman Ek Shrimati*, the two writers urged him not to give up on what they thought was a good subject. It was 4 p.m. when the three started brainstorming and by 10 p.m. they had reworked the entire second half, which now had the same actor playing the role of Arun and Suraj. In that one afternoon, Samanta not only found a solution to his problem of the second lead, but also found his next film; the story that Nanda narrated was *Kati Patang* and it became his next collaboration with Khanna.

Helping rediscover a fading star, Kishore Kumar, who had never really concentrated on being a full-time playback singer till now, *Aradhana*’s music also played a vital role in the making of Hindi cinema’s first superstar. Samanta had wanted Shankar–Jaikishen but opted for S.D. Burman due to the limited budget he had apportioned for *Aradhana*. Similarly, Samanta chose not to wait for Rafi, who had already recorded a song for the film, to return from his three-month-long world tour, and gave S.D. Burman the go-ahead to record with Kishore Kumar. Just like the changes that were forced upon the story, *Aradhana*’s music too saw many changes that ended up working in its favour.

Although R.D. Burman was credited as an associate music director, his contribution to the music – especially in the way three songs, ‘*Mere sapno ki rani*’, ‘*Kora kaghaz tha yeh mann mera*’ and ‘*Roop tera mastana*’ ultimately shaped up – was way more than the scope of the credit. Even though Samanta was in a tearing hurry for the songs, S.D. couldn’t be pushed beyond a point. When one of the musicians couldn’t get a particular riff on the guitar just the way he had envisioned it, S.D. the perfectionist almost cancelled the recording of ‘*Mere sapno ki rani*’. But R.D. saved the day by playing a soothing riff on the mouth organ himself, which has become one of the most famous intros to a song ever. Similarly, S.D. was pushing for a more folk-tune-like mood for the sensuous ‘*Roop tera mastana*’ but Kishore, upon R.D.’s insistence, gave it a more erotic arrangement, which Dada Burman eventually agreed to. R.D. even persuaded Samanta into believing that the tune of ‘*Kora kaghaz tha yeh mann mera*’ was different from the one he had initially rejected whereas it was the same – he just played it slightly differently on his harmonium. Even Kishore Kumar’s soulful humming that echoes and is one of *Aradhana*’s most memorable motifs is supposed to be R.D.’s creation.¹

No one expected much from *Aradhana* and it was looked at like the quickie

it was always supposed to be. The changes in the story, the reworking of the music directors ... for Samanta, it was just a means of making the wait for Shammi Kapoor's return a little more interesting. Anyone not associated with the mercurial nature of the film business would have been forgiven for believing that Samanta was committing career hara-kiri with *Aradhana*. Ashim reminisces how his friends thought his father had gone bankrupt as he was making a film with Rajesh Khanna and not Shammi Kapoor. Ashim says, 'I had to tell them that he was in fact making two films at the same time and, yes, one of them was with Shammi Kapoor.'

But Khanna didn't let this attitude seep into his work. Ashim recalls how, during the Manali outdoor, which he went along for during his school vacations, he would see Khanna practise delivering his lines in front of a mirror for hours. It was by observing himself in the mirror that Khanna zeroed in on the mannerisms – like flicking his neck just enough and closing his eyes for a split second – that would make him a rage.

Everything changed when the crew saw the first copy of the film. The music had given Samanta an inkling about the way the film could shape up; but what he saw was nothing less than magic. The first thing Samanta said after the screening was 'superhit' and there was hardly any doubt left in his mind. But there were some who didn't share his sentiment.

Back in the day before Hindi cinema became Bollywood, things were very different. Distributors were one of the biggest factors in the making of films and sometimes managed to get the entire film changed after seeing only a few reels. For many films, the distributor was the first hurdle; and for newcomers and unsuccessful heroes like the pre-*Aradhana* Rajesh Khanna, it could very well be the ultimate obstacle. The distributors absolutely loved the music and the film, and didn't mind Khanna, but offered Samanta enough money to reshoot the one thing that had convinced him to make *Aradhana* in the first place – they weren't kicked about the hero calling his heroine 'Maa' and asked Samanta to replace Khanna's second role with someone else. Samanta didn't budge and finally the distributors gave in.

Unlike today, when a simultaneous global release of film is a norm, *Aradhana* released in Delhi a week before Bombay and ended up being a portent of things to come. It just took *Aradhana*'s screen time at its Delhi premiere for Rajesh Khanna to go from *that* newcomer with hidden promise to *the* next big thing. By the time the first show ended, everyone in the theatre wanted to meet Khanna; and by the time the film premiered in Bombay, it had already been declared a smash hit. Half-a-kilometre-long lines in front of the box office were a common sight at every cinema hall where *Aradhana* was playing and it

became one of the first films to enjoy a 100-week run in non-Hindi-speaking cities like Madras and Bangalore.

Rajesh Khanna had looked most comfortable in the songs and romantic scenes in *Aakhri Khat*, *Aurat* and *Raaz*, and his entire role in *Aradhana* was centred on these two pegs. At its heart, *Aradhana* was a love story; and unlike the earlier films, the romance wasn't rushed, thereby giving Khanna enough time to do what he was good at. It's hardly surprising then that women instantly connected with him.

In Hindi films, traditionally, the heroes who excel at romantic roles end up having a larger fan base with the women, which explains why women prefer a Dev Anand to a Raj Kapoor. The more women saw of Rajesh Khanna, the more he charmed them. Here was an actor who appeared to be inspired by the past but, unlike the second generation of stars – like Rajendra Kumar, Shammi Kapoor or Manoj Kumar – clearly wasn't burdened by it, and that added to his appeal. By not totally imitating the nuances of the holy trinity of Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar, and being one of the first actors to openly acknowledge his live-in relationship with Anju Mahendru, he was a nonconformist both on and off screen. This attitude rubbed off on many of his characters, with *Aradhana* being one of the first instances where the hero Arun's reaction the morning after he and Vandana make love isn't one of ignominy or shame. It presented a hero who is just plain human and that made him all the more real. *Aradhana's* Arun and Suraj are the foundation upon which Khanna cemented many memorable characters who never let societal pressure dictate their actions.

For many actors, the extent of their initial success decides how soon roles would be written specifically for them and, up until *Aradhana*, Khanna had the distinction of being a rank newcomer for whom roles were written *before* he became a star. Like *Aurat*, *Aradhana* too was a film that might have found a perfect substitute for Khanna in actors like Sanjay Khan or Jeetendra and, like *Aurat*, he made *Aradhana* so uniquely his that it is hard to imagine anyone else in his place. One can't help but wonder how things would have played out had *Aradhana* continued to be the two-hero project it was initially imagined as. Khanna would have had the same iconic songs attached to him and perhaps even outshone the other actor who'd play his son, but would *Aradhana* have remained *the* film that transformed Rajesh Khanna? Fate might have played a major role in creating the heavenly concinnity of many factors such as Anand Bakshi's lyrics, S.D. and R.D. Burman's music and Kishore Kumar's mellifluous voice, besides Samanta adroitly managing it all, but to his credit Khanna managed to go way beyond the scope of the film. And this was just the beginning.

5

THE BIRTH OF A PHENOMENON

Peechhe Reh Jayega Yeh Zamana

No one knew how to react to *Aradhana*. Least of all Rajesh Khanna. He was plain thankful that the tide had finally turned and things were looking up and, more importantly, he was no longer just a contest winner or the sweet boy with Mongoloid features. A better part of the industry was shell-shocked at the kind of response that *Aradhana* got. No other film with an actor who wasn't an established entity had enjoyed such success. While the trade was coming to terms with the scale of the achievement, Khanna moved on to other projects. He got a glimpse of the extent of his popularity at his uncle K.K. Talwar's wedding. The young actor was running a little late and joined the baraat just before it reached the bride's house. Everyone was dancing around the groom. But the moment Khanna arrived, the entire procession made a beeline for him and, in the blink of an eye, relatives, friends and other guests left the groom stranded on a mare in the middle of the street without even the bandsmen for company.

A few months later, *Ittefaq* (1969) hit the screens and people got to see an entirely different shade of Khanna. A stark contrast to *Aradhana*, the songless feature is a taut suspense drama that takes place entirely within the confines of a house and stars just two actors, Nanda and Rajesh Khanna, for almost 90 per cent of the film. Made on a shoestring budget by Yash Chopra, *Ittefaq* was produced by B.R. Chopra, who also happened to be one of the members of the United Producers Combine. This film too was a stopgap project that was forced upon the Chopras – Saira Banu's unavailability had stalled the shooting of Yash Chopra's *Aadmi Aur Insaan* (1969). As a result of winning the Filmfare – United Producers Combine Talent Hunt, Khanna was contractually bound to be a part of a film that B.R. Chopra would produce, but he wasn't too keen on doing *Ittefaq*. The small and experimental set-up of *Ittefaq* was too reminiscent of *Aakhri Khat* perhaps.

In the film, Khanna plays a painter, Dilip, who kills his wife in a fit of rage.

Dilip escapes from a mental institution where he is sent for psychiatric evaluation before his imprisonment and takes refuge in the house of a terrified lone woman, Rekha (Nanda). With the police on the lookout, Dilip has every reason to hide; but through the course of the night he discovers certain things that Rekha would not want the world to know. The film might have owed its genesis to B.R. Chopra's songless courtroom drama *Kanoon*, but was largely inspired by the Joanne Woodward–Stuart Whitman thriller *Signpost to Murder* (1964). Shot in less than thirty days and released within three months of announcement, the film played alongside *Aradhana*. The double role of *Aradhana* and *Ittefaq* gave the audiences a chance to see the wide range of Khanna's prowess simultaneously. The actor was as much at ease playing a romantic air force pilot as he was portraying a mentally disturbed man guilty of murdering his wife.

His other releases in 1969 were *Doli* and *Bandhan*, two roles that were slightly more rooted in the Hindi film ethos. A tale of morality and Western depravity corrupting Indian consciousness, *Doli* had Khanna playing a man who refuses to go ahead with an arranged marriage when the bride's (Babita) father is arrested for embezzlement. Later, not aware of her identity, he falls in love with the same girl. The other film, *Bandhan*, featuring Mumtaz and Khanna together for the first time, is the story of a village simpleton Dharma (Khanna) who kills his father (Jeevan), and had Khanna playing the first of his many villager roles. The two films were different from all the roles Khanna had portrayed until then and, even though he put in decent performances, both films were dwarfed by not just *Aradhana* and *Ittefaq* but also the one that followed them.

It was not until Raj Khosla's *Do Raaste* (1969), a time-tested tale of the trials faced by a lower-middle-class family, that Khanna truly arrived as the bona fide next big thing. *Do Raaste* is the story of three brothers with clashing ideologies. Khanna has the author-backed role of the dutiful youngest son. Satyen (Khanna), a young college student, dotes on his family and looks up to his elder brother Navendu (Balraj Sahni) as the father he never got a chance to know. Their brother Birju (Prem Chopra) marries a rich girl, Neelu (Bindu), who tries hard to adjust in the joint family. Navendu takes a loan against their home for Birju and Satyen's studies, but when the time comes, Birju, at Neelu's behest, refuses to help the family with the repayment. Satyen seethes with rage but doesn't confront his sister-in-law out of respect for Navendu and Reena (Mumtaz), the girl he loves, and who happens to be Neelu's sister. Unable to live together, Birju and Neelu move out and, while they continue to live the good life, the rest of family goes through a tumultuous phase. Finally, it boils down to Satyen to resolve the problems and keep the family together.

Like his earlier film, *Aurat*, Khanna had the best role in *Do Raaste* and, unlike the former, this time around, the script was largely from his character's point of view. Satyen was a sign of the times – honest, conscientious and respectful towards elders but at the same time someone who didn't take well to nonsense and who could be abrasively straightforward. Khanna absorbed the character wholly, and his performance is an excellent display of a fine balancing act. In an era where the hero was supposed to be just a nice guy who'd rather die than show his weakness, Khanna surprised the audiences by playing Satyen as someone who is fully aware of his shortcomings and yet isn't ashamed of them. In fact, he uses his harshness and his rather I'm-always-at-the-receiving-end-of-everything-wrong-and-unjust attitude as his calling card. The intense, simmering rage that Khanna's Satyen held just beneath the surface, juxtaposed with lilting Laxmikant-Pyarelal tunes that went from the passionate 'Yeh reshmi zulfen' (Rafi) to the romantic 'Chhup gaye sare nazare' (Lata Mangeshkar, Rafi) to the agony-laden 'Mere naseeb mein aye dost tera pyaar nahin' (Kishore Kumar), made the whole package uniquely attractive.

Do Raaste ended up being a blockbuster and its success, along with *Aradhana* and *Ittefaq*, hardly left any doubt about Khanna's future. He might have been around for almost three years, but it was only now that he became an overnight sensation.



Rajesh Khanna was a star waiting to happen. The 1960s hadn't been a particularly good decade for India. The humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict had disappointed the entire nation. Along with becoming more doubtful about the schemes of the old guard, the nation was partially engulfed by a cloud of self-doubt. Everything – from the politics to the administration and functioning of the country, which took inspiration from the Nehruvian idea of India's tryst with destiny – was being questioned, and Hindi cinema too longed for change. Though the old school still inspired the second generation of post-Independence stars, shackles were waiting to be broken. The generation that followed Rajendra Kumar, Manoj Kumar, Sunil Dutt and Raaj Kumar was perhaps angry with the way things had turned out, and didn't want its heroes to be plain good men.

Shammi Kapoor's care-a-hoot attitude in *Dil Tera Deewana* (1962), *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), *Rajkumar* (1964) and *Teesri Manzil* (1966); Raaj Kumar's uber-cool Raja in *Waqt* (1965); and Dharmendra's shirtless number in *Phool Aur Patthar* (1966) were getting the audiences interested. This generation

was on the lookout for its hero and Rajesh Khanna happened to be at the right place at the right time. Khanna's winning the Filmfare–United Producers Combine Talent Hunt made him someone whom the average person could instantly connect to and his playing an everyman who wasn't a cardboard cutout made the affinity stronger. He was just what the doctor ordered for the country – a man who wasn't embarrassed of his past but who wouldn't allow it to crush him. In the two decades since Independence, Khanna was the first actor who was different in every sense of the word. His style might have been a throwback to icons of yesteryears, but it was exceptionally his own. He was a trained actor who understood the importance of mannerisms in movies and was nothing less than a cauldron where bits of Raj Kapoor, scraps of Dilip Kumar and crumbs of Dev Anand had commingled to create a new kind of persona that was destined to shine the brightest.

With his first release of 1970, *Khamoshi*, Khanna found a character that allowed him to be an actor as well as star. He played Arun, a writer–poet who suffers a breakdown following rejection in love. Although his nurse Radha (Waheeda Rehman) initially refuses to treat Arun as his case is very similar to that of a former patient (Dev, played by Dharmendra) she had ended up falling in love with, she relents and nurses Arun back to health. In the process, Radha falls in love again and loses her sanity. The film ends with Arun promising to wait for Radha.

The black-and-white *Khamoshi* was a remake of director Asit Sen's own Bengali film *Deep Jele Jai*, and featured some fantastic songs penned by Gulzar and composed by Hemant Kumar, who also produced the film. Khanna once again found himself faced with a heroine-dominated script that ended up being arguably Waheeda Rehman's finest performance after *Guide* (1965). In spite of Waheeda being the clear focus of the film, Khanna carved out a memorable performance whose impact, along with Kishore Kumar's haunting voice in '*Woh shaam kuchh ajeeb thi*', hasn't diminished with the passage of time. The film's bleakness, captured evocatively in Kamal Bose's award-winning, stark, monochromatic photography, and songs like '*Tum pukar lo*' (Hemant Kumar) and '*Humne dekhee hai un aankhon ki mehekti khushboo*' (Lata Mangeshkar) made *Khamoshi* a tour de force.

Khanna followed up *Khamoshi* with *The Train* (1970) which was an average grosser at the box office but was a departure from the kind of films he had been a part of. A remake of the Telugu suspense thriller *Neelagiri Express* (1968), *The Train* was Khanna's maiden genre outing where he played a secret agent. It was perhaps his first opportunity since *Raaz* to play the hero in clear terms. Khanna was cast opposite Nanda, who had in fact suggested his name to

Rajendra Kumar, the co-producer of *The Train*, and played a CID officer assigned to solve a series of murders that take place on a moving train. Shyam (Khanna) follows a hotel dancer Lily (Helen) as a lead but matters get complicated when his ladylove Neeta (Nanda) gets embroiled in the investigations as a suspect. Unlike Jeetendra's secret agent Gopal in *Farz*, Khanna's Shyam isn't flamboyant and never wears his heart on his sleeve even though he, like all cinematic super spies, enjoys cavorting. Both films shared the same director and writer – Ravikant Nagaich and Arudra, respectively – but *The Train* rose above the trappings of the genre and played like a classic pulp novel whereas *Farz* rarely looked beyond James Bond. R.D. Burman's music – with songs like '*Gulabi aankhen jo teri dekhi*' (Rafi) and the zany '*Meri jaan maine kaha*' (Asha Bhonsle, R.D. Burman), along with a background score that wasn't overtly dramatic – too has contributed to making *The Train* age better than *Farz*.



In most cinematic traditions around the world, the double role is a gimmick or even an actor's indulgence at best, but in Hindi cinema it is almost a rite of passage. While most actors have to wait to get an opportunity to play two parts in the same film, Khanna had started off with a double role in *Raaz* and donned it again for *Aradhana*. He even got his first Filmfare Best Actor Award for his double act in *Sachaa Jhutha* (1970). With mistaken identity, cops and robbers, diamond heists, jealous molls and divine canine intervention in the climax, *Sachaa Jhutha* was a fun-filled caper that featured Mumtaz and Vinod Khanna, along with a barrage of pleasant Kalyanji–Anandji tunes like '*Meri pyaari behaniya*' (Kishore Kumar), '*Yuhi tum mujhse baat karti ho*' (Lata Mangeshkar, Rafi), '*Dil ko dekho chehra na dekho*' (Kishore Kumar), and '*Kehdo kehdo*' (Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar).

Directed by Manmohan Desai, *Sachaa Jhutha* had Khanna playing Bhola, a village bandsman who comes to the city in order to make enough money to get his physically challenged sister married. In the city, he is mistaken for a rich businessman, Ranjit (Khanna in a double role). The real Ranjit sees this as an opportunity and hatches a plan to use Bhola as his double in order to shield his diamond smuggling business. Pradhan (Vinod Khanna), the police inspector investigating him, is convinced about Ranjit's reality and uses Rita (Mumtaz), an undercover agent, to get close to the smuggler. But she ends up tailing the village simpleton. Bhola's sister Belu comes to the city with her dog Moti in search of her brother, but Ranjit's men abduct her. Moti is separated from Belu but Pradhan finally rescues her and takes her home. After a series of missed

opportunities, the law finally catches up with Ranjit who pretends to be Bhola. It is Moti who eventually saves the day by identifying his real master.

Along with Vijay Anand's *Johny Mera Naam* (1970), which was also the biggest hit of the year, *Sachaa Jhutha* ushered in a new phase of breezy capers in the tradition of *Baazi* (1951), *Nau Do Gyarah* (1957), *Jewel Thief* (1967) and *Kismet* (1968). Khanna's artistry had made characters as varied as an undercover cop or a village bandsman appear familiar, but his next film, *Safar* (1970), gave him the opportunity to avoid being typecast. Like *Do Raaste*'s Satyen, *Safar*'s Avinash – a terminally ill man who sits back and lets the woman he loves, Neela (Sharmila Tagore), walk away from his life because he doesn't want her to suffer once he's dead – was more rooted in reality than some of his recent characters.

Safar is the film that started Khanna's streak of celebrating death on screen. The success of *Safar*, and subsequently *Anand* (1971) where he played a similar character, prompted him to believe that his on-screen death ensured a sure-fire hit. Some consider Khanna to be the only star who attained superstardom without much help from one-liners but with dialogues like '*Mere liye maut bhi ek latifa hai*' (For me death too is a joke), '*Main reng reng ke maut ki taraf nahi jaoonga*' (I don't want to crawl towards death) and '*Marne se pehle marna nahi chahta hoon*' (I don't want to die before death). There's truth in this claim.

The audiences were mesmerized by the panache with which Khanna made Avinash look forward to death. Following the success of *Sachaa Jhutha*, Kalyanji–Anandji came up with an equally dazzling set of songs for *Safar*. Penned by Indeewar, all the songs – '*Jeevan se bhari teri aankhen*' (Kishore Kumar), '*Jo tumko ho pasand*' (Mukesh), '*Hum the jinke sahare*' (Lata Mangeshkar) and '*Nadiya chale*' (Manna Dey) – were hits, but the album's pièce de résistance was the contemplative Kishore Kumar number, '*Zindagi ka safar hai yeh kaisa safar*', which became an instant classic. Many years later, Khanna would recall the flood of angry fan mail that poured in after the film was released. His fans were upset with him for 'dying'. In his own words, the reaction to *Safar* confused Khanna and made him realize how fans expected certain things, often the impossible, every time their hero appeared on screen. Regardless of the film's gloomy storyline, *Safar* attracted the audiences thanks to some wonderful acting and the good music.

Khanna had two more successful films before the year was out: *Kati Patang* and *Aan Milo Sajna*.

Kati Patang was yet another woman-centric subject thrust upon him and he whined about it for a major portion of its making to director Shakti Samanta, saying he was stuck with heroine-oriented films and missing out on heavy-duty dialogues like the ones Vinod Khanna and Shammi Kapoor mouthed in *Jane*

Anjane. Written by Gulshan Nanda, *Kati Patang* had impressed Samanta right from the time Nanda had narrated the subject on the eve of Samanta beginning work on *Aradhana*. Madhvi (Asha Parekh) runs away from her home to avoid an arranged marriage but is heartbroken to see her lover Kailash (Prem Chopra) frolicking with another woman. She decides to leave town and chances upon her friend, Poonam, and her infant child on the train. A young widow, Poonam is on her way to meet her in-laws who have never seen her, but when the train meets with an accident, Poonam dies, entrusting Madhvi with her baby. Madhvi assumes Poonam's identity and starts a new life with her friend's in-laws, only to meet Kamal (Khanna), the man she was supposed to marry. Unaware that it's Madhvi/Poonam whom he resents for rejecting him, Kamal ends up falling in love with the woman he hates. Madhvi's life is turned around when Kailash and his lover Shabnam (Bindu) enter the scene and start blackmailing her.

Based on *No Man of Her Own* (1950), *Kati Patang* rekindled the magic of *Aradhana* largely due to R.D. Burman's music that had Kishore Kumar singing four solos for Khanna. Written by Anand Bakshi, the songs – ‘*Yeh shaam mastani*’, ‘*Pyar deewana hota hai*’, ‘*Yeh jo mohabbat hai*’ and ‘*Aaj na chhodenge*’ – helped increase the romantic appeal of Rajesh Khanna. His Kamal had a guy-next-door kind of personality that would appeal to any woman, but Madhvi's rejection and later her realization of her folly amplified his charm.

Somewhere, Kamal's resentment towards the faceless entity who spurned him was a mirroring of Khanna's real-life situation with Asha Parekh. The shooting for *Kati Patang* had started before the release of *Aradhana* and Asha Parekh was given the star treatment over Khanna. During the film's outdoor in Nainital, she was put up in a fancier hotel while Khanna cooled his heels in a smaller property. Throughout the shoot, Khanna maintained a distance from his co-star and usually opted to be alone till summoned for the shot. In the course of the production, not only did *Aradhana* change his status but his ensuing films turned him into a star, got him awards and transformed him into a hot commodity. Khanna could have been nursing some angst from the time of *Baharon Ke Sapne* where Parekh had appeared aloof but he never misbehaved.

For all his aloofness when it came to Asha Parekh, Khanna formed a great pair with her and enjoyed another hit in *Aan Milo Sajna* in 1970. Directed by Mukul Dutt, *Aan Milo Sajna* had a plotline similar to *Kati Patang*, with Asha Parekh playing Deepali, a young woman hired by a spoilt brat, Anil (Vinod Khanna), to pretend to be his fiancée in order to convince his mother, Savitri (Nirupa Roy), that her ne'er-do-well has finally mended his ways. Although she keeps up the pretence, Deepali ends up falling for the local upright farmer Ajit (Rajesh Khanna), who can't stand Anil or his family. Anil shares Ajit's

sentiments as his father was killed by Ajit's father and just wants Deepali to maintain the charade till his job is done. Impressed by her prospective daughter-in-law, Savitri makes Deepali the sole heir to her wealth, which infuriates Anil, prompting him to frame Ajit for murder. The film was a 'musical' hit that saw the famous phrase '*Achchha toh hum chalte hain*' enter the average Indian's dictionary.

Call it the perks of stardom or the licence to do whatever one wants that success provides, but Khanna was by now indulging in one-upmanship. During the making of *Kati Patang* in Nainital, he would do small things like handing over a half-lit cigarette to Gulshan Nanda to hold while he completed a shot or refuse to accompany Shakti Samanta and the rest of the crew for a meal to the collector's house just to get his kicks.

Brahm Dev Chauhan, a young lecturer from the (then) Thakur Dev Singh Bisht College, who hung out with Khanna for almost a fortnight during the outdoor, says Khanna was extremely picky about the people he spent time with. Even on location, where he hardly knew anyone besides the crew, Khanna formed a group of people not connected with the film and preferred to spend time with them. Chauhan recalls how Khanna loved his drink and would often invite him and others over to his room where booze would flow copiously through the evening. The lecturer was assigned by the college to keep the students from hounding the sets. While on his job, he found Khanna possessing an inflated sense of self. 'He didn't think twice before saying no to the collector of Nainital but had no problems in agreeing to an insignificant restaurant owner's invitation for breakfast,' says Chauhan. On the day they were to depart from Nainital, Khanna had a couple of drinks in the afternoon and wanted to drive the car himself, but gave in when Samanta, who was to accompany him, put his foot down.

Though the five releases Khanna had in 1970 differed thematically from each other – a murder mystery (*The Train*), a caper (*Sachaa Jhutha*), a tear-jerker (*Safar*), a romantic drama (*Kati Patang*) and a fun-filled typical song-and-dance routine (*Aan Milo Sajna*) – within them, he found the template that would help him deliver one monstrous hit after the other in the next couple of years. Khanna managed to perfect and replicate the common thread that ran through his 1970 releases: a story with a little novelty, characters that looked like they belonged next door, screenplay that didn't allow any single actor to dominate and, most important, easy music that people couldn't have enough of. These then were the typical 'Rajesh Khanna' elements that made him a success like never before and never since.

But the factor that contributed the most towards the actor's meteoric rise

was his female fan following. For the men, Khanna represented the average man around the corner they could identify with, but for the women he embodied something that they hadn't seen on screen ever before. Khanna was labelled a romantic star on the lines of Dev Anand as he often played the same urban guy prototype that the evergreen star was synonymous with. But Khanna upped the ante. He was the first Hindi film star to bring to the screen the sensuality and even sexuality of the hero without making a hue and cry about it. And he did this without having a physique to flout. Amidst the sea of change and liberation of the 1960s, women found Khanna a pillar of certitude, the regular guy with that special something.

Right from his first release, *Aakhri Khat*, where he has a child out of wedlock, to *Aradhana* where he couldn't care less for societal approval to consummate a relationship, to *Kati Patang* where he's the only one not bothered about the fact that the woman he falls for is a widow, Khanna did things on screen that wouldn't usually be associated with a leading hero. Women saw him as someone who wouldn't let anything come in the way of doing the right thing when it came to the matters of the heart – even if what he did was not acceptable to society. He could tell the heroine that it wasn't a big deal to make love without being married (*Aradhana*) or even slap her for being petulant (*Do Raaste*) and yet not come across as immoral or a misogynist. He was the guy who made the bad look invitingly good and, unlike Dev Anand, he never seemed to lose interest in the heroine. It's hardly surprising then that Khanna could generate the kind of frenzy that could only be dreamt of.

It is perhaps unimaginable to gauge the extent of Rajesh Khanna's appeal today for the simple reason that every two-bit star who delivers a couple of hits is considered the next big thing. The madness of Khanna's streak of success between 1969 and 1972 can be ascertained from the fact that he was the first Hindi actor whose films ran to full houses for months on end in non-Hindi speaking areas. He became the first Hindi film star to have golden jubilee hits in cities like Madras, Bangalore and Hyderabad. Everything he touched turned to gold and, while people had started to come to terms with the fact that maybe there wasn't anything that he couldn't do, Khanna carried on as though people had finally woken up to recognize who he had always been. The highs of success can make anyone feel like god, and Rajesh Khanna ended up taking the analogy a little too literally.

6

THAT GOD FEELING

Tere Liye Rasme Nahin, Kasme Nahin, Tu Kisi Ke Bas Mein Nahin

There couldn't be anyone better than Rajesh Khanna to personify the old adage that the ones who see the biggest rise are the ones to experience the worst fall. Though it had just been a little over a year since *Aradhana*, the madness surrounding Khanna was in overdrive and things like *Star & Style's* five-part profile of him – something that no actor had enjoyed ever before – were regular acknowledgements of it. If one film glossy, *Filmfare*, turned Jatin into Rajesh Khanna, another, *Star & Style*, transformed him from a successful actor to a star in a matter of months.

The five-part profile had features by the likes of Bunny Reuben, a noted PR guru, but the finale was reserved for the diva of film journalists who supposedly came up with the term 'superstar'. Like Khanna, Devyani Chaubal was born into a well-to-do family that was into horse racing. She began her writing career under Gulshan Ewing in *Filmfare*. There were only a handful of topics that film journals of that time focused on, and Devyani's beat included shootings and parties. When a senior correspondent at *Filmfare* refused to meet Khanna as he felt the actor wasn't important enough, the story was handed over to Devyani. Devi, as she was popularly known, and Khanna hit it off instantly, with Devi eventually getting along famously with Khanna's then girlfriend Anju Mahendru as well. After their first meeting, Devi made her entire piece a personal insight into this new actor.

Perhaps it was her instincts or even her genes that helped her know a winning horse the moment she set her eyes on Khanna, for, since then, the actor managed to make his way into each and every column that Devi ever wrote. Like the first piece she wrote on Khanna, Devi's contribution to *Star & Style's* five-part series painted him as a thinking, reticent actor. She took it upon herself to create a mystery around Khanna and presented him as someone who was well

aware of his superstardom (part of which, till that stage, was created by Devi's words) and remained unaffected by it all.

Impressive as it was, Khanna's spectacular success was also attributed to luck. The pace at which he went on to dominate the trade – five of the top ten releases of 1970 featured him – and the ease with which he perched himself at the top, made the whole thing look like a walk in the park. Irrespective of the play of fortune, Khanna still had to put make-up on, stand in front of the camera and deliver his lines on cue; but one big reason for the luck factor to be considered so prominent in his case could be that, no matter what the input, the result was the same – unparalleled success. Looking at his releases, it doesn't seem he had any particular criteria for picking up a specific role. He chose some for the sake of the director, some for the banner, some because he couldn't refuse the offer and some, well, for reasons beyond comprehension. Yet, irrespective of the role or the production house, film after film ended up becoming a hit beyond expectations. The winning spell made him, and everyone around him, think that it was he who made it all possible. To his credit, many of the films that Khanna did in this period were much more than just mega commercial successes. His roles in films like *Andaz* (1971), *Anand* and *Amar Prem* (1972) went beyond the obvious and attained instant cult status, making him believe that the rules of the game didn't apply to him.

With just a few films, Khanna had begun symbolizing a new hope for thousands of fans and, with *Anand*, he created a character that would be etched forever in the hearts and minds of most who loved Hindi cinema. Dedicated to the city of Bombay and its indomitable spirit, Hrishikesh Mukherjee had come up with the story of *Anand* as an ode to Raj Kapoor. Thick as thieves, Kapoor and Mukherjee had been friends for a long time and the idea of a gravely sick man who lives his life to the fullest in the little time he had left germinated within Mukherjee when the showman had fallen ill. Mukherjee thought that Kapoor might not make it but unlike the character he inspired, Raj Kapoor went on to live.

Produced by N.C. Sippy, *Anand* was to originally feature Mehmood and Kishore Kumar, but a change in the casting ensued following a misunderstanding with the eccentric singer.¹ It is rumoured that Mukherjee was driven out of Kishore Kumar's house as the singer was angry with a 'Bengali' for delaying some payment due to him, and had instructed his guards to throw out any 'Bengali' who dared to enter. Mukherjee then decided on Shashi Kapoor though one version of industry lore credits a casual mention of the film's outline by Gulzar to Khanna during a visit to the star's home as the reason for Khanna coming on board. Khanna took the distribution rights for Bombay territory as his

fee and eventually ended up making more money from the success of the film than he would have from his usual remuneration.

Khanna played Anand, a cancer-stricken man living on borrowed time, who comes to Bombay from Delhi to meet his doctor, Dr Kulkarni (Ramesh Deo). Full of life and not willing to let go of even a single moment before his time is up, Anand's 'live life to the fullest' attitude while staring death in the face shocks everyone he meets, including Dr Bhaskar Banerjee (Amitabh Bachchan), a friend of Kulkarni. Reserved to the extent of being shy around people, Bhaskar is Anand's polar opposite but the two hit it off. Anand makes Bhaskar understand that the essence of life doesn't lie in counting days but in making each day count; and even though Bhaskar can't save Anand, he makes sure that each day they spend together is better than the one gone by.

While Khanna exemplified the Raj Kapoor-inspired north Indian to perfection, it was the two-film-old Amitabh Bachchan who made the Bengali doctor modelled on Hrishikesh Mukherjee stand equally tall. *Anand* was shot in less than a month on an extremely modest budget, but ended up becoming a milestone in the careers of everyone associated with the film, especially Khanna who, for the first time, gave the viewer a tangible character that in many ways came to define Khanna's persona in their minds. The film swept most of the major awards and got Mukherjee the Filmfare Award for Best Story and Editing, while Khanna and Bachchan walked away with the honours for Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor respectively.

Salil Chowdhury composed *Anand*'s music to lyrics penned by Yogesh and Gulzar, who also wrote the film's dialogues. While the songs didn't feature Kishore Kumar as Khanna's voice for obvious reasons, Mukesh and Manna Dey filled in admirably. The songs captured the various moods of Anand, with Mukesh's '*Maine tere liye hi saat rang ke sapne chune*' (Gulzar) showing his endless hope and '*Kahin door jab din dhal jaye*' (Yogesh) catching him in a poignant frame of mind. But the album's mainstay was '*Zindagi kaisi hai paheli*'. This time around, it was Yogesh, who wrote the pathos-filled lyrics, and Manna Dey's mellow vocals that gave Khanna yet another 'zindagi' song that spoke of a dying man's unfulfilled desire to understand life a little better before it left him.

Anand gave Khanna something much more than mere commercial success or critical acclaim. It bestowed upon him his greatest and most enduring on-screen character, besides creating his much-celebrated never-say-die on-screen persona. *Anand* also brought Khanna face-to-face with Amitabh Bachchan, the lanky newcomer who in the years to come would become his biggest challenger. Born Amitabh Shrivastava, the elder son of poet laureate Harivansh Rai

‘Bachchan’ took his father’s pen name when he decided to leave a well-paying corporate job in Calcutta to pursue a career in films. Bachchan landed in Bombay with a letter of recommendation from then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi and started his struggle. He did odd jobs like a narration for Mrinal Sen’s *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) in which, still undecided about his surname, he is credited as Amitabh, before becoming one of the seven bravehearts in K.A. Abbas’s *Saat Hindustani* (1969). The film fetched him a National Award for the Best Newcomer; but a commercial washout, *Saat Hindustani* did precious little for him.

It was the legendary comedian Mehmood who advised Bachchan to make the most of *Anand*. The young actor took the words of his friend Anwar Ali’s elder brother seriously and planned his whole performance around Khanna’s death scene in *Anand*. Mehmood told Bachchan that the entire nation would be riveted as Khanna’s *Anand* breathed his last – and that’s when he should unleash himself. Bachchan did just that and, for someone who was written off even before he got a fair start, ended up becoming the talk of the town.

Bachchan had been signed on to play the male lead opposite future wife Jaya Bhaduri in *Guddi* (1971), but Mukherjee replaced him at the last moment and, while he featured in a cameo in the final film, the episode almost killed Amitabh’s dreams of becoming a film star. Such was Bachchan’s insignificance before *Anand* that Khanna didn’t even bother asking Mukherjee about his co-star and although he, like the rest of the world, did more than notice him in *Anand*, he snubbed Bachchan on more occasions than he cared to remember.

Khanna’s next few releases were films that had started before his superstardom. While some like *Maryada* (1971) benefited from his presence, others like *Chhoti Bahu* (1971) didn’t.

Squashed between Raaj Kumar and Mala Sinha in a double role, in *Maryada*, Khanna played Rajan who befriends Raja Babu (Raaj Kumar) in a train and assumes his identity so that Raja can look for his child and estranged wife, Laxmi. Despite a confusing plot, and a screenplay and production design typical of films from the late 1960s, where everything seemed out of place, *Maryada* – shot at some great locales and featuring songs like ‘*Gussa itna haseen hai to pyaar kaisa hoga*’ (Kishore Kumar), ‘*Mohabbat ke suhane din*’ (Rafi) and ‘*Zuban pe dard bhari dastaan*’ (Mukesh) – became a surprise blockbuster, adding considerably to Khanna’s stature.

Khanna followed *Maryada* with Ramesh Sippy’s *Andaz* (1971) where he had an even smaller role, perhaps the smallest of his career, and yet ended up making the biggest impact. *Andaz* featured Khanna in just a song and exactly two scenes, but that one song – ‘*Zindagi ek safar hai suhana*’ – was enough to

forever associate him with the film and immortalize the image of the happy-go-lucky man brimming with life that Khanna had created with Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anand*. Produced by G.P. Sippy, *Andaz* is a mature love story of a widow (Hema Malini) and widower (Shammi Kapoor). Khanna played Raj, the uber-cool rich kid who, in flashback, bursts on the scene with ladylove Sheetal (Hema Malini) on an Enfield racing through the roads of Bombay. With not a worry in the world, Raj sings a song that embodies his attitude of living every moment to the fullest.

Andaz is perhaps the only film one needs to study in order to make sense of Khanna's popularity. With less than ten minutes of screen time, he walked away with all the glory. His mere presence made the film a much bigger hit than it would have become otherwise. Looking at the movie today, and especially the length of Khanna's role, one could mistakenly believe that *Andaz* was a film the actor signed before *Aradhana* and, with G.P. Sippy being one of the members of the United Producers Combine, the actor was contractually bound to do the film. But that was not the case. The length of the role was never in doubt and the character was specifically developed with Rajesh Khanna in mind by two writers who, while still relatively unknown, would go on to change the manner in which Hindi cinema looked at screenwriters.

Still a few years from becoming *the* Salim–Javed pair, Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar were two of the many names whose screen credit was often devoured by a title card that read 'Sippy Films Story Department'. The writers were told that the character of Raj was a cameo that needed to suit the presence of someone larger than life, such as Rajesh Khanna. The two scenes by themselves didn't pack in as much punch as the Hasrat Jaipuri–Shankar–Jaikishen song managed to with a little help from Kishore Kumar. Kishore's vocals and Khanna's on-screen antics infuse their buoyant charm into not just the song, '*Zindagi ek safar hai suhana*', but the whole film. Besides giving him a great cameo and another of his many 'zindagi' songs, *Andaz* brought Khanna in contact with Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar, who would go on to write his next film that got Khanna a piece of everlasting glory.



With each film of his becoming a bigger hit than the one preceding it, Khanna started believing that he was a king of sorts. But, deep within, he seemed to know that factors unseen and unknown played a great role in how things had shaped up. It was perhaps this feeling that prompted him to make a beeline to buy Rajendra Kumar's bungalow, 'Dimple', when the jubilee star put it up for

sale.

Kumar had come to Bombay following Partition and it was his dream to purchase a house in the city that had given him recognition. He had initially refused B.R. Chopra's songless experiment *Kanoon* (1960), but when he got to know about the availability of the bungalow, he readily agreed to do not just *Kanoon* but also two more to pay for the house. When Kumar bought the house, it was said to be haunted, even referred to as 'bhoot bangla', but upon Manoj Kumar's advice, Rajendra Kumar performed a series of pujas before shifting in. He named the house 'Dimple' after his daughter and went on to become the 'jubilee' star after he moved in. In the late 1960s, Kumar built another house and put Dimple on the market.

Like Kumar, Khanna agreed to do a film for a south Indian producer that featured him and an elephant, only to get the money to buy the house. Khanna wanted to retain the name 'Dimple' in the hope that the house and Rajendra Kumar's luck would rub off on him, but Kumar had already named his new house 'Dimple' and refused to allow Khanna to retain the name. Khanna christened the house 'Aashirwad' and, to be on the safer side, performed a havan to ward off any leftover negative energy before moving in.

Once Khanna moved into Aashirwad, the façade of being a king was complete, with the garage of the house turned into a huge bar where Khanna held court. Khanna made tens of producers wait endlessly outside the fabled durbar, granting audience only once they had done time. He would emerge in his famous silk lungi-kurta and take his position at a chair that was conspicuously placed a little higher than the others to differentiate between the king and his subjects.² Only a select few had access to the inner sanctum and many a times, those waiting outside would tell the ones who passed by to put in a good word. Johny Bakshi was one such person.

Bakshi had met Khanna on the sets of *Do Raaste* where he was a production controller and recalls how Khanna enjoyed being starry because he could get away with it. Bakshi remembers more than a handful of occasions when Khanna wouldn't entertain a phone call from even someone like Shakti Samanta on the pretext of being 'busy', while in reality they would be sitting inside and gossiping. 'He would say, "*Keh do sahab busy hain ... ek ghante mein phone karein*" when he could easily take the call.' Sometimes, Khanna would pick one person and make him the joker of the pack. Johny Bakshi ascribes this particular trait to Khanna's attempt at emulating Raj Kapoor. 'There were only two people in films whose feet Khanna touched – one was G.P. Sippy and other was Raj Kapoor – and like the showman, Khanna, too, would go for one person.'

Besides having fun at the expense of one particular person throughout the course of an evening, like Raj Kapoor, Khanna also liked the idea of flunkies, yes-men and chamchas hanging around. Shyam Keswani, a lawyer who came in contact with Khanna through Shakti Samanta, was one of the regulars and recalls how he'd see grim-looking producers sitting outside as if it were a government office.

Khanna's rise even inspired chants such as '*Upar Aka, Neeche Kaka*' (God in the heavens, Kaka on earth) that left little doubt about the hallowed position Khanna enjoyed. The unfortunate producers who had to conform to Khanna's godlike status simply appealed to anyone who could enter the sanctum sanctorum to put in a kind word. Inside, copious amounts of whisky would flow endlessly through the night and most of those present would sing praises of King Kaka.

At times, Khanna would be mystified by his own success and seek approbation from all quarters. He would constantly look for people who could tell him that he was good and even deserved his success. He might not have taken his fame and popularity seriously enough, but took the adulation it brought a little too seriously. Those who didn't agree with him or presented a somewhat contrarian point of view, even for the sake of argument, were often shown the door. The manner in which Khanna supposedly banished people from his *court* was nothing less than high theatrics; he would weigh the words that didn't meet his approval and proclaim, '*Aapko humara durbar chhodna padega*' (You'll have to leave my court).³

Night after night, the same saga continued and the mornings that followed would usually begin long after the sun was up. In an interview given in the early 1990s, Khanna himself recounted how reaching the sets on time was a challenging task. It is hard to imagine, but Khanna had reported late for the first day of shooting *Raaz*. Now that he was the brightest star on the horizon, it'd be laughable to expect punctuality from him. Ketan Anand believes that while Khanna never really troubled his father Chetan during *Aakhri Khat*, much was made of Khanna's late-coming. He maintains that, barring a few stars, none reported on time, especially if it was a 9 a.m. shift, and perhaps Khanna was singled out because of his infamous all-night binges. Ashim Samanta doesn't remember his father or any other senior film-maker ever being a part of the *darbar* either.

However, much like Khanna's renown, the stories of his drinking attained notoriety. But no one seemed to mind Khanna's shenanigans as long as he delivered at the box office. He could be as late as he felt like, but once he was in front of the camera, everything seemed fine. He would never differentiate

between producers, irrespective of the banner, and treated everyone equally. Many a times, he even forfeited pending dues in order to let his producers release their films.

If the activities within the confines of Aashirwad suggested the presence of a king, the throng of fans lined up along Carter Road in front of the house only validated the sovereign's existence. Fan mail written in blood, chewing gum stuck to Khanna's lips on pictures and posters for hours before being consumed, women marrying an absentee Khanna with his photographs doing the needful, and girls covering his white cars with red lipstick spoke of the level of adulation he enjoyed. On the other hand, men wanted to be like him and even started dressing up in the fabled 'guru' kurtas that Khanna popularized. Crafted by Baldev Pathak, who designed Khanna's costumes till 1979, the guru kurta was a rage among not just men but also women. Pathak's store Shrimaan Costumes would attract customers from as far as Calcutta and he once sold over 2,000 pieces after Khanna wore it.

Much like the actor's popularity turned his address on Carter Road into a tourist spot, Aashirwad also did more than its needful to feed the legend of Rajesh Khanna. Every day, thousands of visitors to Bombay would be carted to the bungalow and, if luck favoured, they would be treated to an appearance by Hindi cinema's first superstar. The house was playing its role, but Khanna wasn't inspired to keep his end of the bargain.

One of the films he had signed specifically for the money to buy the bungalow was Chinnappa Devar's *Haathi Mere Saathi* (1971); but even after some rewrites, the script, involving elephants, didn't offer anything meaningful to the star. In a bid to get something substantial, Khanna asked Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar to take a shot at *Haathi Mere Saathi*. The duo was looking for independent credit, which was the least of the reigning superstar's worries. He assured Akhtar that if the two came up with something decent, he would not only get them a solo screen credit but also give them more money than they had been making at Sippy Films. All Khanna wanted was a halfway decent script that wouldn't embarrass him on screen, which he was to share with a parade of elephants.

Originally called *Pyaar Ki Duniya*, *Haathi Mere Saathi* is the story of Raju (Khanna), an orphan who grows up with a bunch of elephants who had saved his life. Raju starts performing with the elephants and with the passage of time, becomes rich enough to open a zoo called *Pyaar Ki Duniya* where he lives happily with his animal friends. Raju is closest to one of the elephants called Ramu, who is also instrumental in making Raju and Tanu (Tanuja) fall in love. The two marry, but Tanu feels neglected and becomes jealous of the elephants,

especially Ramu, and, following the birth of their child, fears that someday the animals might injure the infant. Tanu walks out on Raju when he chooses his elephants over her and his child, but Ramu makes the ultimate sacrifice to bring the couple together.

The first officially credited work of Salim–Javed, *Haathi Mere Saathi* became not only the biggest hit of the year but also of Khanna’s career. Although the film was based on a story written by Chinnappa Devar himself, it was the screenplay that got Khanna excited about the project. Salim–Javed’s treatment of the subject and the screenplay helped the film cut across to children, a demographic which was often neglected but drove parents repeatedly to the theatres. Tanuja recalls how her young daughters – then a six-year-old Kajol and three-year-old Tanisha – didn’t speak to her for weeks, holding her responsible for Ramu the elephant’s death.

In typical Rajesh Khanna fashion, the film’s songs – composed by Laxmikant–Pyarelal and written by Anand Bakshi – went on to become the rage. Even though the album had two soulful Lata–Kishore duets, ‘*Dilbar jani chali hawa mastani*’ and ‘*Sunja aa thandi hawa*’, it was the gleeful title track ‘*Chal chal mere haathi*’ (Kishore Kumar) and the heart-rending ‘*Nafrat ki duniya ko chhod ke*’ (Rafi) that stood out.

There were many firsts attached to *Haathi Mere Saathi*, but the one Khanna never forgot was how he ensured that he was on time for most of the making of the film. The star recounted how he saw the producer, Chinnappa Devar, cane a young boy as soon as he arrived on the sets. When this continued for a few days, Khanna enquired about the matter. Devar told him that since Khanna was a big star who chose to come whenever he fancied, he felt helpless as the producer, and so took his anger out on the boy who, much like producers of films featuring stars, had no choice but to endure. The incident shook Khanna up and he never arrived late on the sets of *Haathi Mere Saathi* ever again.

The combination of commercial success and critical acclaim that *Anand* and *Haathi Mere Saathi* garnered signalled the arrival of a new phase in Khanna’s career. As silently as *Aradhana* had heralded his rise, the all-round accomplishment of the two films quietly ushered in a plateau. It was in the last few months of 1971 with *Chhoti Bahu* and *Mehboob Ki Mehndi* that Khanna faced his first slump at the box office after a glorious run. Unlike *Maryada*, *Chhoti Bahu* (1971) couldn’t make a mark at the box office in spite of featuring the biggest star of the day and a successful on-screen pair. Featuring Sharmila Tagore in the titular role, *Chhoti Bahu* was based on a Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay novel, *Bindur Chheley*, and was blessed with great acting from an all-round impressive cast that included Nirupa Roy and Shashikala in

supporting roles.

Bereft of excesses, Khanna's acting in *Chhoti Bahu* is subtle and complements Sharmila Tagore's prodigality as Radha with poise. His performance has what it takes to be remembered as a memorable one, but the film's descent into an overdramatic mess marred its box-office fortunes and hampered its chances of being discovered by posterity.

Following *Chhoti Bahu*, Khanna didn't end 1971 on a particularly good note with *Mehboob Ki Mehndi*, a film that he co-produced with Harnam Singh Rawail, one of the producers from the United Producers Combine. An immensely popular genre through the 1960s, the Muslim social was a favourite with many actors and production houses. As a genre, it had enjoyed immense success even though it was often accused of a heightened depiction of the segment of society it claimed to portray.

Yusuf (Khanna), a wealthy nawab, stays with his father Safdarjang (Iftekhhar) and hires Shabana (Leena Chandravarkar) as a home tutor for his mischievous nephew. Much to everyone's delight, Yusuf and Shabana fall in love, but Shabana happens to be a courtesan's offspring and her dubious parentage threatens to ruin everything. Featuring a dapper-looking Khanna, the top star of the day, performing in a role that was a marked deviation from his usual brand of films, there were great expectations from *Mehboob Ki Mehndi*.

Though there had been a dip in the popularity of the genre of late, it continued to enjoy a soft spot in the audience's hearts and, with all the features typical of the genre such as opulent visual treatment and a handful of melodious songs, *Mehboob Ki Mehndi* was being touted as the genre's revival but ended up being a lavish letdown.

But Khanna's next release bore fruit for the star's efforts to do something that was different and yet not totally unrecognizable.



Often, the presence of a star not only kills any semblance of reality but also renders the character he/she portrays a cardboard cutout. At the same time, the ability to take something extremely commercial and alter that into some sort of an art form is one of the foremost qualities that separate a star from any other actor.

Dushman (1972) is the story of a truck driver Surjit Singh (Khanna) who, after a night of rampant drinking and revelry at dancing girl Chameli Bai's (Bindu) pad, drives recklessly to make up for lost time. He accidentally kills Ram Din, a farmer, and the humane judge orders the killer to replace the dead

man. Against his will, Surjit is sent to the dead man's village to become the man whose life he took. Horrified by the judgment and overwhelmed by circumstances that demand him to be a father to two young children, a son to old parents, a brother to an unmarried sister, and the sole breadwinner of a poor family, Surjit attempts to run away, but fails. Additionally, he is confronted by stifling anger from the family of the deceased who label him 'dushman chacha' (enemy uncle). But with some help from Phoolmati (Mumtaz), the woman he falls in love with, Surjit slowly wins over everyone, save Malti (Meena Kumari), Ram Din's widow. After a series of incidents where Surjit proves to be the enemy who is better than a friend, Malti too gives in and Surjit, now a reformed man, stays in the village.

Based on a novel by Veerendra Sharma, *Dushman's* unconventional story made it a rather unusual – but at the same time challenging – vehicle for a star. Barring *Bandhan*, Khanna had so far played urban characters and barely underwent any kind of physical change for a role. But *Dushman* presented him with a great opportunity to do that. In the initial part of the film, he plays a typical hardened trucker who is straightforward and believes in getting down to business right from the word go. The scenes where Surjit confronts the family whose sole breadwinner he has killed, might appear to be theatrical with the passage of time, but Khanna's physicality – the moustache, the pronounced impolite gait and body language – was in stark contrast to the image his audience was familiar with. The film was a great success at the box office, and the Laxmikant–Pyarelal–Anand Bakshi–Kishore Kumar collaboration gave Khanna yet another anthem of sorts in '*Sachai chhup nahin sakti banawat ke usoolon se*'.

Regardless of the magnitude of his success, Khanna's knack for picking up roles continued to be instinctive. He happily nestled himself between class acts such as Om Prakash and Ashok Kumar's in *Dil Daulat Duniya* (1972) or pestered Shakti Samanta till the director let him play a supporting role in *Anuraag* (1972). Khanna was sure of the film-makers that he wanted to be associated with, and ensured that he got a part in their ventures, no matter what the price. He was aghast when he discovered that Samanta didn't have a role for him in *Anuraag* which featured Vinod Mehra and Moushumi Chatterjee. Khanna's Gangaram, a flower vendor, was at best a token role, but ended up winning him a lot of praise and accolades.

Like *Anuraag*, Samanta nearly made *Amar Prem* with another actor, as he wasn't sure if Khanna could afford the dates. Samanta had wrapped *Jane Anjane* following *Kati Patang* and was toying with the idea of starting *Amar Prem* as soon as he made up his mind about the lead. When Khanna learnt of Samanta's plans, he barged into his office and asked him how he could even consider

taking someone else. ‘Where do you have the dates?’ quipped Samanta. Khanna paced around the film-maker’s office, trying to solve the issue in his head. His date diary was in a mess and there was no way he could take out any time for *Amar Prem*. The actor ultimately told Samanta that he’d give him half a shift, four hours, every night for *Amar Prem* after he packed up the other films he was shooting.

Based on a story by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Amar Prem* was a remake of the classic Uttam Kumar film *Nishipadma* (1970) and the last in a trilogy of sorts that followed *Aradhana* and *Kati Patang*. Besides being the last super-hit that the director and actor enjoyed together, *Amar Prem* in many ways is also the most iconic of Shakti Samanta–Rajesh Khanna films. The story of dying human values and trying relationships, *Amar Prem* is the saga of the undying love between a prostitute and a businessman trapped in a loveless marriage.

Pushpa (Sharmila Tagore) is thrown out of her home after her husband remarries. Her mother too disowns her and she decides to end her life; but fate intervenes and she ends up being sold to a brothel by her uncle. On the job, Pushpa meets Anand Babu (Khanna), a rich businessman condemned to keep up the appearance of matrimony. Anand and Pushpa fill the void in each other’s lives and fall in love. Pushpa gets a son in Nandu, the neighbour’s boy who is ill-treated by his stepmother, and soon finds happiness in the façade of a family that she has with Nandu and Anand Babu. Nandu’s father doesn’t like his son meeting Pushpa, a woman of ill repute, but feels indebted to her when she saves his life. Nandu leaves the neighbourhood but before going away, plants a tree in Pushpa’s house. A tearful Pushpa promises to take care of the tree. Years later, Nandu (Vinod Mehra) returns to the village and locates Pushpa with Anand’s help and takes her to his home.

If *Anand* gave Khanna the character that would make him immortal, *Amar Prem* gave him a character that would make his persona unforgettable. With such restrained ease does he portray a man who finds the pointlessness of life and society’s pressures almost liberating that, by the end of the film, he mesmerizes the viewer into smiling, sanguine of finding happiness even in the darkest hour. Like Anand, Khanna’s character in *Amar Prem* never loses his love for life and happily accepts whatever comes his way. The film also gave Khanna his iconic line ‘I hate tears’ that became something of a calling card.

Few actors in Indian cinema have conveyed existential angst as well as Rajesh Khanna. Though *Anand* is of course the most celebrated of this kind of role, he was equally good, if not better, in *Baharon Ke Sapne*, *Amar Prem* and *Safar*. In his hands, they acquired a dimension few others have managed. It was

as if he was born to play these. No wonder then that some of the most memorable songs that talk of life and the pathos of living have been shot on him: ‘Zindagi kaisi yeh paheli hai’, ‘Chingari koi bhadke’, ‘Zindagi ka safar hai yeh kaisa safar’, ‘Zindagi ke safar mein guzar jaate hain jo makaam, woh phir nahi aate’.

Following the tradition of their previous projects for Shakti Samanta, the R.D. Burman–Anand Bakshi combination came up with a stunning set of songs that featured some of their greatest creations. *Amar Prem*’s music had three solo gems from Kishore Kumar – ‘Chingari koi bhadke’, ‘Yeh kya hua’ and ‘Kuchh toh log kahenge’ – besides two Lata Mangeshkar solos ‘Raina beeti jaye’ and ‘Bada natkhat hai yeh’ and S.D. Burman’s ‘Doli mein bithai ke’. Anand Bakshi used the anguish of strained relationships as a motif in his lyrics throughout the film and encapsulated the entire film in a single song.

Although ‘Chingari koi bhadke’ wasn’t originally composed for *Amar Prem*, Samanta created a situation for it the moment he heard Bakshi narrate the first few lines. The lyricist’s son Rakesh Anand Bakshi mentions how his father was mesmerized by the visual of a burning matchstick being doused by pouring rain and was immediately inspired to pen the song. Filmed on a set in Bombay, the song is one of the very few examples where the all-round brilliance of everyone attached to it – R.D. Burman, Kishore Kumar, Anand Bakshi, Rajesh Khanna, Sharmila Tagore and Shakti Samanta – was filtered into a single magical piece that continues to be as spellbinding today as it was forty years ago. The song was a perennial favourite of not only Khanna but also Anand Bakshi who often sang it in a completely different style amongst friends.

Khanna delivered yet another hat-trick of hits with *Apna Desh* (1972), a remake of the 1969 M.G. Ramachandran-Jayalalithaa Tamil smash hit *Nam Naadu*. Brimming with loud filmic moments, over-the-top drama, wild costumes and foot-tapping R.D. Burman numbers like ‘Duniya mein logon ko’ (Asha Bhonsle, R.D. Burman), *Apna Desh* was a pulsating roller-coaster ride. Khanna played Aakash, an upright government official who is sacked for not falling in line with his corrupt seniors. Tired of how the honest of the nation are made to suffer by a handful of crooked businessmen, Aakash and his sweetheart (Mumtaz), a tender-coconut vendor, vow to punish the enemies of the state. *Apna Desh* joined the list of Khanna hits that at the time of their release created quite a splash but were forgotten in a few years. But like many hits of this period, *Apna Desh* had a few things that went on to become not just the film’s but even the era’s most celebrated memories.

Dressed in vibrant silken hues along with wigs that could put the circus to shame, the hypnotic ‘Duniya mein logon ko’ had Khanna and Mumtaz

masquerading as rich amoral swindlers who fool the villainous trio of Om Prakash, Madan Puri and Kanhaiyalal. These elements from the song could very well be considered the beginning of the item number, the typical Bollywood masala imagery recognized around the globe, and the iconic R.D. growl in the intro of the song is now nothing less than a hallmark of the genre.

The law of averages finally caught up with Khanna. His remaining six releases of 1972 – *Dil Daulat Duniya*, *Bawarchi*, *Mere Jeevan Saathi*, *Joru Ka Ghulam*, *Maalik* and *Shehzada* – were a mix of flops, washouts and average grossers, but when judged in the light of the two years that preceded their release, they were all considered unmitigated failures. Still, the so-called box-office duds didn't necessarily suggest an error of judgement on the actor's part as far as his choice of roles went. He might have been compelled to do some of those films, but there wasn't anything drastically different in a *Mere Jeevan Saathi* (1972) or a *Dil Daulat Duniya* (1972) from any of his successful films. Speaking with a certain wisdom that comes with hindsight, it's clear that the kind of euphoria Khanna inspired couldn't have lasted forever. It was impossible for him to maintain the winning spell, the films to uphold the same track record and, most importantly, his fame to sustain the same level of madness. Today, most of the six films would be termed average grossers, but they fell short of how Khanna had come to define success. Close on the heels of *Anand* and *Haathi Mere Saathi* or *Amar Prem* and *Apna Desh*, they looked dismal and shook the very foundation on which Khanna's stardom rested.

While *Dil Daulat Duniya*, *Maalik* (1972) and *Shehzada* (1972) have been forgotten, *Bawarchi* (1972) and *Mere Jeevan Saathi* have found their own place in the pantheon of Rajesh Khanna films. With R.D. Burman's mesmerizing musical score set to Majrooh Sultanpuri's lyrics, songs such as '*Chala jata hoon kisi ki dhun mein*' (Kishore Kumar), '*O mere dil ke chain*' (Kishore Kumar) and '*Deewana leke ayaa hai nazrana dil ka*' (Kishore Kumar) have helped *Mere Jeevan Saathi* being reminisced regularly. Again, in hindsight, the failure of this film, of all the flops in 1972, can be seen as heralding the end of the Rajesh Khanna blitzkrieg at the box office for all times. By all considerations, this should have been a sure-fire success what with the classic musical score and patented Khanna mannerisms. Riding on its songs, which in keeping with the norms of the time, were released ahead of the film, it was heralded in the promotions leading up to its release as the next blockbuster, and its failure shook the industry and Khanna.

Bawarchi – the actor's second full-length role for Hrishikesh Mukherjee and one for which Khanna was almost again passed over by the director for Shashi Kapoor – has attained some sort of cult status. Mukherjee told Pintu

Baba, his own nickname for Khanna, that the film's budget couldn't afford the star, but like in the case of *Anand*, Khanna wouldn't take no for an answer and asked Mukherjee to pay him whatever he deemed fit.

Belying its name, Shanti Niwas (House of Peace) is a hellhole where the grand old patriarch Daduji (Harindranath Chattopadhyay) stays with his three sons, their wives and their children. The love that the family members had for each other has been lost in the mad scramble called life and now they can't stand each other. Things reach a boiling point when their domestic help takes off without warning. Just when it couldn't get any worse, in comes Raghu (Khanna), the new bawarchi (cook). With over a hundred skills, there isn't anything that Raghu can't seem to do and soon he binds everyone by making them understand the joy of being a family. Raghu also helps Krishna (Jaya Bhaduri), Daduji's orphaned granddaughter who is always treated like an outsider, come into her own. But all isn't what it looks like and Raghu seems to be harbouring an evil plan. One day, he takes off with Daduji's jewellery box and everyone realizes how the charlatan fooled them. Sometime later, Krishna's lover turns up with the stolen box and tells everyone that he retrieved it from Raghu who was on the run. The family that had previously opposed Krishna's choice now takes a shine to him. Everyone continues to badmouth Raghu and finally Krishna's lover spills the beans and reveals how Raghu got him to bring the box back so that he'd be accepted into the family. He also tells them how Raghu goes from house to house, saving families like theirs that are on the brink of separating.

In its initial run, *Bawarchi* couldn't manage much, but over the years, the film has come to be recognized as a classic. The ensemble cast and simple storyline is blessed with some strong performances by Khanna, A.K. Hangal, Durga Khote, Usha Kiran, Kali Banerjee, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Asrani and Paintal, who is in a pleasing cameo. The great on-screen camaraderie between these characters makes *Bawarchi* an enjoyable experience. Like Anand Saigal from *Anand*, Raghu too goes about spreading joy without expecting a payoff. Khanna's Raghu is a brilliant reprise of Anand who instilled hope and perhaps that's why *Bawarchi* often finds itself mentioned in the same breath as *Anand*.

In spite of a decent cast, along with a more than adequately funny script, it was sheer bad luck that *Joru Ka Ghulam* (1972) ended up as yet another unexceptional performer. A situational comedy about Kalpana (Nanda), a rich girl marrying Rajesh (Khanna), an ordinary artist, and then lying to her rich father (Om Prakash) about their fortunes, *Joru Ka Ghulam* has funny set pieces that are put to use when Kalpana has to create a fake rich existence to convince her father who drops in unannounced. Rajesh is forced to act as Kalpana's

servant, for she gets a friend to temporarily pretend to be her husband, hoping that her father would leave before Rajesh would even get to know about her prank.

Revisiting the film today reveals a decently amusing script and one can even tell that it inspired *Housefull* (2010), which ironically featured Khanna's son-in-law Akshay Kumar; but at the time of its release, *Joru Ka Ghulam* fared below par. Signing off the year with two more failures – *Maalik* and *Shehzada* – Khanna went from the superstar who delivered fifteen consecutive hits to the actor who had managed six straight flops. Had it been some other actor, the success of the year's three earlier films would have overshadowed the six non-starters. But Khanna wasn't any other actor. For someone who believed himself to be a cut above the rest, Khanna had started looking more human than he'd have preferred. Like his success, his failure too was being seen as something unparalleled.

No other actor had posed a serious threat to Khanna's stardom since he burst upon the scene. In the course of the three years of his extraordinary run, he ensured the end of the Dev Anand–Raj Kapoor–Dilip Kumar era, and almost wiped off the fledgling careers of others like Jeetendra who had started with him. Barring Dev Anand with *Johny Mera Naam* (1970) and *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971), Dharmendra and Manoj Kumar were the only other stars who enjoyed some success during Khanna's ascent. While they were never seen as threats to Khanna, both managed to ruffle him on two totally different fronts.

Dharmendra's hits might not have been as monstrous as Khanna's, but he was more consistent and, in 1972, he had three films – *Seeta Aur Geeta*, *Raja Jani* and *Samaadhi* – in the list of top hits of the year. On the other hand, Manoj Kumar managed to walk away with the year's top acting honour for *Beimaan* (1972) from right under Khanna's nose. It is quite another matter that the Filmfare Awards *Beimaan* garnered, including one for its music (in a year that also saw the release of *Pakeezah* and that had films like *Amar Prem* in the running), created a huge controversy, with Pran refusing to accept his award in the film in protest against Ghulam Mohammed being overlooked for his score in *Pakeezah*.

For Khanna, an award for *Amar Prem*, one of his best performances till then, would have been a message that even though his winning streak at the box office had faltered, all wasn't lost. The recognition would have been the stamp of approval that he was desperate for. In those days, Filmfare Award winners were intimidated in advance and Khanna got to know that Manoj Kumar had pipped him to the post. A livid Khanna decided to sabotage the gala function in a manner that no one would dare forget.

Legend has it that he instructed his staff to throw a party and invite the entire industry to Aashirwad at the very time that the Filmfare Awards were slated to start. The news spread like wildfire and, by early evening, it was clear that most of the stars had decided to abandon *Filmfare's* sky to shine in the one that was still the brightest. At first, the magazine didn't pay much heed to the news, but once it became obvious that Khanna wasn't bluffing, panic set in. For the first time since its inception nearly two decades ago, the awards were under threat, and from very unlikely quarters at that. The magazine's top brass managed to cajole Khanna into cancelling his party just in time and the star marked a sullen presence at the ceremony. He gave everyone the glares but was mostly well behaved as he oscillated between putting up a brave face and pretending as if nothing had happened.

By the time 1972 came to an end, Khanna would have hoped that the worst was over. Success had come to him almost in the blink of an eye and it was threatening to abandon him with the same lightning speed. Khanna's flops were beginning to outnumber his successes. But this was not what hurt him most. Soon, it would come to a point where his failures wouldn't hurt him as much as the success of others. A man he had shrugged off as a non-entity (Amitabh Bachchan) and two whom he had never truly appreciated and had rubbed the wrong way (Salim-Javed) were about to become the change that Hindi cinema would embrace. No one could have imagined that things would change beyond recognition for Khanna, but Hindi cinema's first superstar had already begun his downward spiral and he wasn't even thirty.

7

CRACKS AND TREMORS

Sholon Pe Chalna Tha, Kaanton Pe Sona Tha, Aur Abhi Ji Bharke, Kismat Pe Rona Tha

Although Rajesh Khanna missed out on the Filmfare Best Actor Award for *Amar Prem* and started 1973 with a high-profile flop, *Raja Rani* (1973), his stature as Hindi cinema's biggest star was still intact. The cracks had started appearing and some of his actions had begun to resemble a cat's on a hot tin roof but there was still a lot left.

Describing him as someone with the 'charisma of Rudolph Valentino, the arrogance of Napoleon', the BBC's documentary *Bombay Superstar* (1973) reinforced the tag that Khanna had got used to. Produced as a part of BBC's 'Man Alive' series, *Bombay Superstar* was not just a profile of Hindi cinema's biggest draw, Khanna, but also a document that chronicled how the business worked at the time when Khanna was at the top of his game. The documentary's presenter, Jack Pizzey, had no clue about the extent of Khanna's popularity. He recounts how his boss had visited India a few months before and thought Khanna would make for a very good subject. Shot over a period of three weeks, *Bombay Superstar* remains a fascinating portrayal of an Indian actor as seen from a neutral eye.

The documentary starts with Pizzey on the sets of *Namak Haraam* (1973), trailing a restless Hrishikesh Mukherjee who is running out of ideas to kill time while waiting for Khanna to show up. Mukherjee tells Pizzey that although delays mean a loss to business, the cost of labour is so cheap in India that in the long run it doesn't make a difference. Finally, a sheepish-looking Khanna arrives on the sets, but Mukherjee isn't interested in making up for lost time. He makes Khanna wait till the star relents and comes over to apologize. Mukherjee hugs him and instructs him to forget everything and give a good shot.

In a telephonic interview, Pizzey relived the events that took place forty years ago and recalled how Khanna's regal antics made it difficult for the crew

to access the star. ‘When one shoots with kings, the courtiers make you run around; but in Rajesh’s case, he’d give us time and when we’d show up, he’d give us the slip,’ says Pizzey.

The crew followed Khanna as he shot for films (*Aap Ki Kasam*, *Namak Haraam*), attended award functions (Filmfare, 1973), a film premiere (*Daag*, 1973), and when he was at home; and yet, Pizzey believes that he never got to see the real Rajesh Khanna. ‘I never found him to be honest for a single moment.’

Pizzey follows up this statement with an example from the outdoor shoot of *Aap Ki Kasam*. While shooting the song ‘*Suno kaho*’, Pizzey found Khanna missing his mark and giving numerous retakes. When he asked the actor if the repetitions troubled him, the star said that he loved it. Pizzey found the answer too politically correct and well rehearsed. He feels that throughout the filming of *Bombay Superstar*, Khanna behaved according to his own idea of what a star should be. Pizzey also couldn’t get over the fact that Khanna feigned ignorance and called his infamous parallel event on the day *Filmfare* overlooked him for a third consecutive Best Actor Award for *Amar Prem* a mere coincidence. Irrespective of how one chooses to view *Bombay Superstar* today, considering that it was made by a foreign crew with little or no prior knowledge of Khanna or Hindi cinema, it successfully explored a realm that was seldom seen – what happens behind the scenes and in the life of a Hindi film superstar. Despite Khanna refusing to step out of his image, *Bombay Superstar* ironically still remains the only real readily accessible glimpse of the man behind the star in a world that existed before the Internet or 24×7 media.

The year that perhaps changed it all for Khanna – and for mainstream Hindi cinema in general – started with yet another average performer for the actor. *Raja Rani* teamed him with Sharmila Tagore, the leading lady of his first blockbuster, and was written and directed by the man who had penned *Aradhana*. Writer Sachin Bhowmick’s only film as a director, *Raja Rani* works through a long-winded web of mistaken identity, lost-and-found and other typical Hindi film elements, besides including a little homage to O. Henry’s short story, ‘The Gift of the Magi’.

The film, featuring Khanna as a petty thief, was expected to repeat the magic of the Rajesh-Sharmila pair, but the only thing that stood out was the Asha Bhonsle song ‘*Jab andhera hota hai*’. *Raja Rani*’s bland run at the box office saw Bhowmick return to writing and Khanna scrounge around for a hit.

Khanna never seemed to deliberately follow a formula while picking roles. Furthermore, his ability to look at his role in isolation and not the whole package often helped him do films that another star would avoid. In keeping with his

decision to do unusual films such as *Anuraag* and *Dushman*, Khanna signed up for Yash Chopra's *Daag* (1973), which too proved to be a milestone in his career.

Like Vijay Anand before him, it wouldn't be wrong to think of Yash Chopra as one of Hindi cinema's most prodigious talents. The younger sibling of film-maker Baldev Raj Chopra, Yash decided to go independent after directing five films for his brother's banner. In *Daag*, he had a subject that could have proved to be a disaster if handled improperly. Yash's impressive filmography till then included Hindi cinema's first multi-starrer *Waqt*, its first true anti-hero in the form of Feroz Khan's character in *Aadmi Aur Insaan* (1969) and the songless thriller *Ittefaq*, but it'd be the Rajesh Khanna-Rakhee Gulzar-Sharmila Tagore starrer *Daag* that would cement his reputation as being one of the most promising directors to watch out for.

Based on 'Maili Chandni', a story by Gulshan Nanda, *Daag* was also largely inspired by Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and featured Khanna as Sunil who, on his honeymoon, kills the man (Prem Chopra) attempting to rape his wife Sonia (Sharmila Tagore). Sentenced to death, Sunil meets with an accident on the way to the prison and is presumed dead. Years later, Sonia, now a single mother and a teacher, meets Sunil in his new identity of Sudhir and finds out that he is married to Chandni (Rakhee Gulzar). Sunil had survived the accident and met a pregnant Chandni on a train while on the run and attained a new identity by marrying her after her lover abandons her. Like his past, the law catches up with Sunil as well, and he is accused of bigamy.

The runaway success of the film established Yash Chopra as a leading film-maker in his own right and helped him come out of the shadow of his 'Bhai Sahab'. More than the success of the film, it was the audiences' acceptance of *Daag* and its bold storyline that showed Khanna to be in a league of his own. As he had done when he had agreed to *Aakhri Khat* and *Aradhana*, Khanna took a risk with his on-screen actions, which wouldn't be considered befitting of the typical Hindi film hero, and the pay-off was huge. The entire premise of *Daag* rested on the bigamy angle and that is what made the script stand apart. One of the things that made the film tick was its screenplay which never allowed it to become preachy or self-deprecatory. The only absolution it sought was in the form of Sahir Ludhianvi's poem 'Main toh kuchh bhi nahin'. Never before had commercial Hindi cinema so openly explored the subject in any film and, even after *Daag*, it would be years before films like *Vansh* (a remake of Mani Ratnam's *Agni Natchathiram*), *Saajan Chale Sasuraal*, *Gharwali Baharwali* and *Sandwich* would attempt to broach the topic – of these only *Vansh* with any sensitivity or delicacy.

With his popularity credited largely to luck and good timing for too long in his career, *Daag*'s triumph proved that Khanna's super success wasn't just coincidence. It is difficult to imagine any other actor from that period besides Khanna who could convincingly portray Sunil. He made the complexity of the character look effortless and never let the film look implausible. The success that Yash Chopra would enjoy following *Daag* with films like *Deewar* (1975), *Kabhi Kabhie* (1976) and *Trishul* (1979) ultimately pushed *Daag* into the background, from where it would largely pop up as the film that ushered in a new phase in his life.

The film also went on to create an urban legend that remains one of Hindi film industry's most romanticized myths. According to a cross section of people from within the film industry, especially Khanna's close confidants, Rajesh Khanna and Yash Chopra had an unofficial agreement that *Daag* would be a coproduction between the two. Even though Yash Chopra, like his brother Baldev Raj Chopra, was officially Yash Raj Chopra, the presence of 'Raj' in Yash Raj Films banner is believed by many to stand for 'Rajesh'. If stories are to be believed, the circumstances in which Yash Chopra started his production house were far from rosy. It had been a decade since he started directing, and all his films had been for B.R. Chopra's production house, and it was Khanna, along with producer Gulshan Rai, who helped Yash in more ways than one when he decided to go independent.

Khanna's presence in the film helped Yash put the project together with less difficulty than it otherwise might have entailed, because when *Daag* was beginning to be filmed, Khanna was at the peak of his popularity. The falling out between Khanna and Yash Chopra following *Daag* that resulted in the actor not featuring in any of the director's ventures over the next decade and a half and Khanna teaming up with B.R. Chopra adds to the mystery surrounding the whole issue. But the perceived veracity of this tale depends largely on which side one chooses to view the whole affair from, as the bigger the myth, the more sides a story tends to have in the world of Hindi cinema.

Irrespective, the success of *Daag* should have ideally inspired a creative partnership between Rajesh Khanna and Yash Chopra, who had seen a successful collaboration with *Ittefaq* too. But that wasn't meant to be. And while Chopra went on to helm *Deewar* which, in a way, sealed Khanna's fate, Khanna not only had to contend with seeing Yash collaborate with the very man who would take away his crown, but was also at the receiving end of the wrath of Salim-Javed, the writing duo he practically discovered.

Till *Zanjeer* (1973), *Anand* was Amitabh Bachchan's biggest achievement; and he wouldn't have got the film had it not been for fate. A name associated with flops, Bachchan wasn't even on the radar of Prakash Mehra or Salim-Javed. Had it not been for the horde of names that refused *Zanjeer*, they wouldn't have noticed him. Raaj Kumar, Dev Anand and perhaps even Dharmendra had refused the script that would eventually give Hindi cinema one of its most loved characters. Salim-Javed had followed up on the promise shown in *Haathi Mere Saathi* with *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972) and *Yaadon Ki Baraat*, but were finding it difficult to get an established star for *Zanjeer*. It was Pran and Om Prakash – both of whom incidentally played important roles in *Zanjeer* – who pitched Amitabh Bachchan to Prakash Mehra. Mehra wasn't too kicked and asked the writers to take a look at Bachchan in *Bombay to Goa* (1972) which was playing at the time. The climatic action sequence convinced Javed Akhtar that Bachchan could, in fact, make for a very good Vijay and, to quote a cliché, the rest was history.

Zanjeer was not the kind of story that one would associate with Khanna but, for the sake of argument, if Mehra could actually entertain the idea of Dev Anand being cast as Vijay, surely, the thought of Khanna as the lead isn't sacrilegious. But despite owing their break to the star, the writers never thought of Khanna for any film they wrote. According to Salim Khan, one of the reasons that the duo never professionally associated with the star after *Haathi Mere Saathi* was to do with Khanna's attitude. 'He believed that he was the reason why his films did well and never really appreciated the people who worked with him.'

Constituting one half of the team that changed the way writers were perceived in Hindi cinema, Salim says that Khanna didn't maintain relationships that he ought to have taken care of and, in many ways, he isn't wrong. When *Haathi Mere Saathi* was being made, Salim-Javed were paid a mere ten thousand rupees which, though a giant leap from the monthly salary of Rs 750 that they were paid at Sippy Films, was still a pittance compared to Khanna's remuneration, which was around Rs 5 lakhs. Salim believes that despite Khanna's legendary king-like demeanour, the star didn't show large-heartedness where it really mattered. 'We didn't get the kind of support (from him), so we thought we'd support someone else,' he says.

It's hard to imagine Khanna as the troubled inspector Vijay who ends up taking the law in his own hands, but Bachchan's casting proved to be a turning point in the actor's career for, by virtue of that, he became the embodiment of the angry young man character who would invariably end up being at the centre of almost all Salim-Javed scripts that followed *Zanjeer*.

You often meet your destiny on the road you take to avoid it. Many things had changed by the second time Khanna and Bachchan came together for a film. Although Khanna was still the bigger star by miles, in *Namak Haraam*, he wasn't as self-assured as he was while filming *Anand*. More than the change in Khanna's stature, it was the alteration in Bachchan's status that made all the difference. He was no longer the pariah that he used to be and was turning out to be quite a dark horse. Khanna had come to *Namak Haraam* as the most important entity in the film but by the time it was seen by the audience, he recognized the new direction the winds were blowing in.

Inspired by the troubles of Bombay's textile mills in the early 1970s, and based loosely on the classic 1964 film *Becket*, starring Peter O'toole and Richard Burton, *Namak Haraam* was directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee and was the first mainstream Hindi film to feature trade union politics as a central theme. A carefree young man Vicky (Amitabh Bachchan), who also happens to be the son of a rich businessman (Om Shivpuri), is forced to temporarily run his father's business. Vicky would rather spend his time with Somu (Rajesh Khanna), his friend who comes from a humble background, than attend to matters of business. One day, the hot-headed Vicky has a confrontation with Bipinlal (A.K. Hangal), the trade union leader of his father's mill, and feels insulted when his father makes him apologize to the lowly workers' leader. When Somu learns of Vicky's insult, the two hatch a plan wherein Somu would infiltrate the union pretending to be a worker and make life hell for Bipinlal. Things go according to plan initially, but the more time Somu spends with the workers, the more he realizes their hardships. Somu is transformed and becomes the union's poster boy – another Bipinlal for Vicky, who can't get over his friend's betrayal. When Vicky's father finds out the truth, he sets in motion a chain of events that makes Somu and Vicky sworn enemies.

When Khanna was offered *Namak Haraam*, he was to play Vicky, the spoilt brat, but he opted for Somu, the conscientious poor man, for he is the one who dies in the end. Following the success of *Safar* and *Anand*, Khanna's superstition about his on-screen death warranting a hit came up once again and he asked for the script to be rewritten so that Somu would suit his persona. Again, like *Anand*, he wasn't bothered about Bachchan being cast as Vicky. His decision to play Somu changed the screen length of the role. With his role now not only the longer of the two but also author-backed in every sense, with enough histrionics and punches as far as dialogues went, and some brilliant songs to be shot on him, Khanna was sure that the result would be on the lines of *Anand*. Vishwas Pandya, son of Jayendra Pandya, one of the three producers of *Namak Haraam*, recalls how Khanna was confident that he would walk all over Bachchan – or

anyone else, for that matter.

When the film was finally released, the outcome was different. Bachchan ended up walking away with most of the glory. As compared to *Zanjeer*, the film that had initiated the concept of the Angry Young Man, it was *Namak Haraam* that contributed more to shaping the image that Bachchan would further explore in films such as *Deewar*, *Trishul* and *Kala Patthar*. Bachchan's Vicky was a marked departure from his Bhaskar in *Anand*; and the change in his off-screen status also influenced his portrayal of Vicky. While *Anand*'s Bhaskar becomes Anand's friend, he, much like the actor who played him, continues to be in awe of Anand, while in *Namak Haraam*, Vicky and Somu are equals, which made the camaraderie different. It is also obvious that Khanna had already achieved dizzying heights; so even a sterling performance could do only so much for him. But, for Bachchan, this was just the beginning. In the climax of *Anand*, when the audience saw Khanna die on-screen, it didn't bother about anyone else; but in *Namak Haraam*, Khanna's cinematic death ended up giving Bachchan a new lease of life.

For audiences and critics alike, if *Anand* was largely about Khanna, *Namak Haraam* ended up being mostly about Bachchan, although it was the other way round for the director of both the films. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the only director for whom both Khanna and Bachchan delivered stellar performances on every outing, believed that Bachchan was the scene stealer in *Anand* while Khanna was the one who shined more in *Namak Haraam*. A quarter of a century after both the films, Mukherjee, in an interview to film critic Namrata Joshi, said that Bachchan's role in *Namak Haraam*, like Khanna's in *Anand*, was an author-backed role and hence easier to execute. As a director, he had a ringside seat to judge and so, unlike the average viewer, he believed *Anand* to be Bachchan's and *Namak Haraam* to be Khanna's film.

The year 1973 proved to be a watershed for both Khanna and Bachchan. *Namak Haraam* had changed the equation between the superstar and Bachchan, and Khanna wasn't unaware of this. It was apparently Khanna himself who, at the premiere of *Namak Haraam*, told Hrishikesh Mukherjee that his time was up and that Bachchan was the new superstar. It's possible to imagine someone in a weak moment admitting the obvious, but people like Shyam Keswani, who knew Khanna at his peak, and film journalist Ali Peter John, who knew Khanna all his life, find it impossible to believe that Khanna could have been so generous.

Keswani simply rubbishes the idea and says that the Khanna he knew in the early 1970s didn't have it in him to even acknowledge Bachchan's *presence*, leave alone hailing him the next superstar. Ali Peter John witnessed Khanna repeatedly insulting Bachchan when the actor used to visit Jaya Bhaduri on the

sets of *Bawarchi*. Ali recalls how Bachchan, who wasn't hot property yet, would usually hang out with then girlfriend Jaya and other friends like Asrani at their shoots. On one occasion he saw Khanna taunt Bachchan – who maintained his distance as well as his calm – endlessly. It was when Khanna called him manhoos or ill-fated that Jaya decided that she had had enough. She walked up within Khanna's earshot and proclaimed that one day the world would see where this man (Bachchan) would be and where Khanna would be. Jaya Bhaduri's prophetic words came true, thanks to the success of Salim–Javed and Bachchan becoming the mainstay of their scripts. It was more than apparent that the writers had decided to bet on Bachchan, and with the spotlight inching away from him, Khanna needed something drastic to turn it back.

In true Rajesh 'the King' Khanna style, he decided that nothing could be more dramatic than the news of the country's biggest star's wedding and he decided to marry a starlet who was half his age. Khanna's relationship with Anju had been going through a rough patch. His overnight success had tilted the balance between the lovers and they had started fighting a lot. Anju was the only one who didn't seem to be affected by the change in Khanna's status; he continued to be the same Jatin for her. There were rumours that Khanna had wanted to get married for some time but Anju wasn't too keen to settle down, which ended up souring the relationship. The constant bickering led to them breaking-up almost on a daily basis and one fine day Khanna decided to walk out forever. He came home and found Chunnibhai Kapadia, Dimple's father, waiting for him at Aashirwad. Kapadia was some sort of an acquaintance who, upon seeing Khanna in a bad mood, asked him if everything was all right. Legend has it that Khanna mentioned his desire to settle down, to which Kapadia suggested his daughter's name. About to be launched by Raj Kapoor opposite his son, Rishi Kapoor, in *Bobby* (1973), Dimple was just fifteen and had no idea about the conversation that transpired between her father and future husband. Suddenly, the news spread like wildfire.

In *Bombay Superstar*, Devi even says on record that Khanna called her in the middle of the night to tell her that he'd be giving her the scoop of the century. Khanna's nephew Rajeev, the son of his elder brother Narendra, remembers how his chacha came to get him from school on the morning of the wedding. Khanna barged into Rajeev's classroom and took him and his sister straight to a boutique to get some fancy clothes for his wedding later that evening. Rajeev says, 'I couldn't believe that he was getting married and kept asking him if it was for real.' True to Khanna's expectations, the news of him tying the knot ended up becoming the biggest event of the year. Hordes of women were left heartbroken. Some of them went into a state of shock while

some who had previously ‘married’ his photographs decided to wear white to symbolize widowhood!

In spite of the hurriedness of the entire exercise, Khanna, who seemed to be relishing it all, didn’t let go of any chance to send veiled messages across. It is said that he compelled his wedding procession to change course so that it passed Anju’s house just to spite her and, of course, to make the whole thing more newsworthy.

Madhu Talwar, Khanna’s aunt by marriage to his maternal uncle K.K. Talwar, recalls the hullabaloo surrounding Khanna’s wedding and, although her memory fails her about the details of the *baraat*’s passage, she insists that everything happened according to ‘Kaka’s wishes’.

The whole affair seems straight out of one of the films Khanna could have very well been part of. Khanna told Devi that he fell in love with Dimple while rescuing her from drowning in the sea; later, he went on to change the details of how the two met, leading Devi to tell Jack Pizzey during *Bombay Superstar* that the whole thing was like a big sham. Short of calling Khanna delusional, Devi summed up the entire act of his wedding to Dimple as nothing more than a publicity stunt.

For whatever it was worth, the Rajesh Khanna-Dimple Kapadia marriage did generate a lot of buzz, but Khanna couldn’t exploit it beyond a point. He even had to postpone his honeymoon as Dimple had to be back in the studios to finish *Bobby*. Khanna had made it amply clear to Dimple that he preferred a homemaker for a wife and not an actor and Dimple agreed to give up acting once *Bobby* wound up.

If matrimony terminated Dimple’s promising acting career even before it could take off, it didn’t help Khanna’s as much as he had wanted. His first film after the wedding, *Humshakal* (1974), met a response that Khanna was getting used to. Basically a murder mystery and a case of mistaken identity, with a double role by Khanna, *Humshakal* had a few pleasant R.D. Burman tunes like ‘*Hum tum gum sum raat milan ki*’ (Asha Bhonsle, Kishore Kumar) and ‘*Kaahe ko bulaaya*’ (Lata Mangeshkar, Rafi), but sank without a trace.

By now, Khanna’s insecurity had started taking a toll on him. As a person who was, by nature, highly insecure and continually sought positive reinforcement from those around him, Khanna had surrounded himself with yes-men. Those who were with him during the making of *Safar* remember how difficult he made it for Feroz Khan and the director, convinced that the young actor was stealing the show from right under his nose. Salim Khan recalls an incident where an irate Khanna came to meet him, seeking clarification for an interview he had given to a film magazine. When asked about the current crop of

actors, Khan had told the magazine that Sanjeev Kumar was one of the best ones around. This didn't go down too well with Khanna. Khan remembers Khanna coming over to Mehboob Studios and summoning the writer. 'I went to meet him and saw him sitting on the bonnet of his car with the magazine in his hand,' Khan vividly recalls the scene. Khanna enquired if he had actually hailed Sanjeev Kumar as one of the brightest actors around and was dumbfounded when the writer said he had. 'Kaka was expecting me to say that the magazine had misquoted me or taken the whole thing out of context; but when I agreed, he went quiet.' After a while, Khanna asked him if Kumar was better than him. Khan replied that the answer depended on the role; but Khanna insisted on knowing who amongst the two was better. Khan refused to budge and ultimately Khanna just nodded silently before taking off. Salim Khan hasn't been able to forget the entire episode to this day and says, 'Kaka was extremely insecure and highly possessive. He took our decision to work with others as a betrayal of sorts.'

No one ever knew how Khanna would react to a situation and, as long as everything was going fine for him, he never considered the emotions of others; but now that things were changing, he tried to make amends. Neither Salim nor Javed has ever disclosed what went wrong between them and the superstar, although in the course of an interview for this book, Khan suggested economics and clash of interests as the culprits. He hints that Khanna might have had some differences with his partner (Javed Akhtar)¹ and perhaps the lack of respect, along with differing views on 'reasonable remuneration', led to the souring of relationships between the two parties. But the fact that Khanna was simply too difficult to work with made it all the more tough.



Like rats deserting a sinking ship, the crowds that were a usual sight wherever Khanna made an appearance were beginning to thin. Ali Peter John attributes the presence of a major chunk of this crowd to Gurnaam Singh, Khanna's secretary from the period. Not wishing to take away from the star's massive fan following, which often took its adulation so seriously that Khanna would get fan mail in blood along with a doctor's certificate vouching for its authenticity, the journalist nonetheless says that Gurnaam often orchestrated such jubilation.

While accepting that Gurnaam could have organized some of it, Johnny Bakshi attributes a better part of the euphoria to Khanna's stardom. 'Some people are just blessed,' says Bakshi and remembers an incident where a young Salman Khan asked him to give an insider's take on the extent of Khanna's

popularity. In the days prior to the advent of cellular phone, many actors shooting in Mehboob Studios would frequent his office to make landline calls. Bakshi told Salman that one time word got out that Khanna was shooting at the studio and that day he couldn't get a cup of tea either from the in-house canteen or the Irani café outside the studio as everything was sold out. Such was the magnitude of Khanna's popularity that Bakshi and a few of his friends couldn't manage tea or snacks even after walking the entire stretch of Bandra's Hill Road because the crowds that had gathered had consumed everything.

In an interview given almost a decade and a half later, Khanna recalled how the period between the last few months of 1973 and early 1974 was the loneliest phase of his life.² Khanna believed his success would stay forever; so when his films began to fail, he didn't take it as just a transitory phase. His confidence plummeted further when people around him started to abandon him. The sudden change in the situation made him irritable and edgy. In the same interview, Khanna also says that he had built a wall around himself and never allowed anyone to help. He didn't trust people and distanced himself even from Dimple, in whom he never confided anyway as he found her too young and inexperienced to handle such a crisis. Khanna went on to say that he had even contemplated suicide, but never saw it through as he didn't want the world to remember Rajesh Khanna as a failure. Even the film press that had contributed to the creation of the Rajesh Khanna phenomenon started looking elsewhere. Khanna still expected to be the toast of the town while their jibes reflected the shifting loyalties of film journalists.³

But not all had given up on Khanna, and chief amongst them was Devi. Bordering on erotomania, Devi continued to be obsessed with the star and ensured that every article of hers – irrespective of whom she was writing about – mentioned Khanna. More importantly, her writing belittled Bachchan in every possible way.

It wasn't just Devi and Khanna's staff who kept him afloat during this phase. There were still a few film-makers, such as J. Om Prakash and Shakti Samanta who couldn't look beyond Khanna and continued to believe that he would soon weave the old magic. After years of being a producer, J. Om Prakash had decided to direct and had developed a script based on a Malayalam film, *Vaazhve Mayam*, whose rights he had bought a few years ago.

Aap Ki Kasam (1974) featured Khanna in a role that was a throwback to the kind of characters that had helped him become an icon. Kamal (Khanna) is happily married to the love of his life Sunita (Mumtaz) and couldn't have asked for more. But when his friend Mohan (Sanjeev Kumar) begins to spend a lot of his time at their place, he begins to question his wife's fidelity. Mohan's loveless

marriage endears him to Sunita who treats him like an elder brother, but jealously consumes Kamal beyond repair and he doesn't stop till his suspicion ruins all their lives.

J. Om Prakash was one of the members of the United Producers Combine and had been planning to make a film with Khanna for years. The producer-director who had spotted Khanna's potential and even witnessed his meteoric rise to superstardom, finally found in *Aap Ki Kasam* not only the ideal subject to work on with Khanna, but also thought the story a good choice for his own foray into direction. Khanna confessed to J. Om Prakash that even though Kamal's was a character he didn't agree with on a personal level and found him to be the 'villain' of the film, he would take up the challenge and play him like a tragic hero. In the final third of the film where he practically goes from being a happily married man to a homeless destitute cursed to aimlessly wander and squander away whatever life he has left, Khanna packed in a very convincing performance.

Khanna was J. Om Prakash's favourite actor and the octogenarian filmmaker's eyes shine as he narrates a tale of Khanna's brilliance as an actor. For one reason or the other, the director had to retake a particular scene seven times. It is the scene where Kamal, realizing his mistake, rushes to Sunita's house to get her back and is confronted by her father (Rehman). It is an emotional scene where Kamal learns that Sunita has remarried and her father makes him pledge that Sunita's name will never escape his lips till there's any life left in him. Besides being highly dramatic, the scene was well choreographed, with intricate camera movements, and J. Om Prakash remembers how Khanna started his lines with his eyes on the floor, lifting them right on cue as the camera on a crane inched towards him into a close-up as his lips quivered and a single teardrop escaped a speechless Khanna's eyes before he turned and walked away.

Khanna had nailed the shot in the first go, but an uneven crane movement forced the director to call for a retake. He asked Khanna for a retake and the star happily obliged. For six takes, something or the other besides Khanna ended up ruining the shot, but the actor delivered every take with the same gusto. Even after forty years, J. Om Prakash can't get over the ease with which Khanna matched his emotions for all of the seven takes and says, 'It was a delight to be behind the camera to direct him ... In each of the seven retakes he could just take himself to the same place and deliver it all – the lines, the emotions as well as the tear.' The director found Khanna to be one of the rare actors who appreciated his co-stars' space and someone who was god-gifted as far as talent went.

Aap Ki Kasam was one of the last big hits Khanna had before his downfall

started and the director ascribes his failure to destiny. The film's music featured four gorgeous Lata–Kishore duets ('*Karwaten badalte rahe*', '*Jai jai Shiv Shankar*', '*Suno kaho, kaha suna*' and '*Paas nahin aana*') besides the scintillating Kishore solo '*Zindagi ke safar mein*' that joined the pantheon of all-time great Rajesh Khanna songs. Lyricist Anand Bakshi's son Rakesh Anand Bakshi recalls J. Om Prakash telling him how he didn't need to shoot some extra scenes with Khanna to convey Kamal's plight in the end because his father's poignant poetry managed it so brilliantly.

Looking back, it's almost surreal how Anand Bakshi's words for '*Zindagi ke safar mein guzar jaate hai jo makaam woh phir nahin aate*' summarized as well as predicted not just Kamal's but also Khanna's life. The manner in which Bachchan was pulling the rug under his feet was evoked in '*aadmi theek se dekh pata nahin aur parde par manzar badal jata hai*' (before you know it, the scene on the stage changes), his insecurities can be gauged from '*doston, shaq dosti ka dushman hai, apne dil mein ise ghar banane na do*' (suspicion can ruin relationships; don't let it find place in your heart) and the lines '*rok lo, rooth kar unko jaane na do; baad me pyaar ke chahe bhejo hazaron salaam, woh phir nahin aate*' (don't let loved ones walk away for, tomorrow, no matter what, they will not return) eerily forewarn about his future estrangement with Dimple.

Khanna's next release saw him reunite with Shakti Samanta and writer Gulshan Nanda for a part romantic drama, part thriller and part murder mystery, *Ajnabee* (1974). Told in flashbacks, *Ajnabee* starts off as a thriller in which a station master, Rohit (Khanna), meets a mysterious woman, Sonia (Yogita Bali), on the run, on a rainy night while on duty. She has some precious jewellery, which she insists isn't stolen, and tells him that she is worried about its safety. Rohit helps her by offering the shelter of his quarters and returns to the station. Back in his office, he slips into a flashback of his past where he, as a carefree young man, had run away from home and married Rashmi (Zeenat Aman). Intercutting between the present and the past, *Ajnabee* follows Rohit's journey as he goes from being an ad man to a station master to a man charged with Sonia's murder.

Best remembered for its R.D. Burman compositions like '*Hum dono do premi*' (Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar), '*Bheegi bheegi raaton mein*' (Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar), and the Kishore Kumar solo '*Ek ajnabee haseena se*', *Ajnabee* was a moderate success that would have fared better had it not meandered so much. The romantic drama aspect of Gulshan Nanda's script makes for engrossing viewing, with Rohit and Rashmi undergoing marital troubles, Rohit doubting Rashmi of cheating on him, Rohit being consumed by jealousy when Rashmi wins the Miss India crown and Rohit walking out of the

marriage believing that Rashmi had an abortion in order to continue being a model. However, the script flounders once it enters the whodunnit territory. *Ajnabee* was the first time that Khanna and Zeenat Aman were paired and their on-screen chemistry would have made the film much better had the screenplay not been burdened by the unnecessary suspense element.



With Bachchan becoming the flavour of the season, Khanna's situation vis-à-vis the offers coming his way were nothing less than a polylemma, but he managed to maintain a fine balance while picking films. He could do something like *Prem Nagar* (1974), a typical masala remake of a smash Telugu hit, with as much ease as he could portray an urban middle-class man in the throes of marital discord in *Avishkaar* (1974). Remade after enjoying success in Telugu and Tamil, *Prem Nagar* had Khanna playing a wealthy prince who is an alcoholic and a womanizer thanks to being neglected as a child.

Like *Aap Ki Kasam*, both the film and its music were a big hit, but in a departure of sorts it was S.D. and not R.D. Burman who composed the songs. Barring *Anuraag*, where he made a special appearance, it was Dada Burman's first score for Khanna after *Aradhana* and, as irony would have it, in spite of Khanna being closer to R.D., it was his father who composed 'Yeh laal rang kab mujhe chhodega' (Kishore Kumar), the song that Khanna considered his favourite.

For a star who was the paragon of hope in the face of despair, Khanna would usually be considered a miscast in a film like *Avishkaar* which dealt with abject hopelessness. The second of Basu Bhattacharya's trilogy on urban marital discord, *Avishkaar* followed *Anubhav* (1971) and was shot entirely in the house that the director and his then wife, Rinki, lived in. Basu would have gone ahead and cast Sanjeev Kumar – an actor he was very comfortable with both in reel and real life – for the film had it not been for Sharmila Tagore who not only suggested Khanna but also got him on board for the project, much to Basu's surprise. According to Rinki Bhattacharya, who designed the costumes for *Avishkaar*, Basu couldn't have imagined casting a big star like Khanna, but once the actor signed on, he surprised everyone with his demeanour and enthusiasm.

In *Avishkaar*, Amar (Khanna) and Mansi (Sharmila Tagore) are a married couple. On their second wedding anniversary Amar, an ad man, prefers to go out for a film with his colleague Rita, who questions the very need of marriage, while Mansi entertains Sunil, Amar's childhood friend at their home. Mansi is convinced that Amar won't make it home in time and is even unsure about him

remembering their wedding anniversary. Amar, who has left the film halfway because of Rita trying to cosy up to him, overhears Mansi's comment and throws away the flowers he's carrying for her. Amar enters the house and feigns surprise when Sunil congratulates him. Once in love and happily married, the husband and wife now have only the shards of their happy memories to fall back on and revisit their past in the course of the night. The next morning, Mansi answers the door for the milkman and notices the flowers that Amar had brought for her; she looks back and finds Amar standing next to her and they hug.

The manner in which Khanna and Sharmila bared themselves while portraying Amar and Mansi is what makes *Avishkaar* extremely real and visceral. Amar's shortcomings make him suspect Mansi with Sunil, and Khanna as Amar walked the thin line between being organic and being actor-like with great care. He kept his famous mannerisms at bay and slipped easily into the role of the busy husband. *Avishkaar*'s script never explains the reasons for Amar and Mansi drifting away and, much like life perhaps, there weren't any real reasons for the couple to fall out of love.

Besides the house, a lot of things about *Avishkaar* were inspired from Basu Bhattacharya's own life. Rinki says, 'Sharmila wore my saris and the screenplay was largely Basu's and my life.' Like Amar and Mansi, Basu and Rinki were also going through a rough patch and, ironically, while fictionalized events inspired by their life found a happy resolution, Basu and Rinki weren't so lucky. Rinki remembers how her arguments with Basu, when the camera wasn't rolling, would be turned into scenes for the film and it reached a stage where Basu simply ended up writing their real lives into the screenplay.

Watching Khanna and Sharmila together in *Avishkaar* is almost like watching a couple you know fall apart right in front of your eyes. The actors were not just extremely comfortable with each other but also shared a mutual fondness – one of the reasons why Sharmila recommended Khanna for the film. Khanna liked the role so much that he didn't bother about his fee and gladly accepted whatever the production could spare. From the time he landed on the sets, Khanna delivered better than Basu's expectations and felt so much at ease that he started considering Basu and Rinki his friends. Khanna's performance in *Avishkaar* remains one of his most heartfelt and fetched him his third, and final, Filmfare Best Actor Award and almost got him the Best Actor citation at the National Film Awards.

A Delhi-based journalist, Gautam Kaul, remembers the whole thing differently.⁴ Kaul, who claims that he knew Basu well enough to be considered a friend, mentioned in an article he wrote following Khanna's death in 2012 that *Avishkaar* was a compromise between Khanna and Basu for the troubles the star

had caused the film-maker over his film, *Daku* (1975). Kaul wrote that a jilted Khanna, following his break-up with Anju Mahendru, who supposedly featured in *Daku*, bought out all the prints and even the negative of the film to ensure that it never saw the light of day. In an interview with this writer, Kaul, a former IPS officer, said that Khanna had been vindictive towards his former lover and agreed to act in *Avishkaar* as a pay-off to the film-maker.

Rinki remembers nothing of this episode; in fact, she doesn't even recall Kaul, forget the troubles that he – who also happened to be a part of the body that recommended a tax exemption for *Daku* which was based on Amrita Pritam's book – elucidated in his article. Even Kabir Bedi who starred in *Daku* says that Kaul seems to be confusing the film with some other movie.

Rinki recalls how Khanna was cooperation personified throughout the fifty-day schedule, spread over a few years. 'Barring the odd clash of dates, there wasn't any trouble from Rajesh,' she says and adds that the star never threw his weight around. In fact, Rinki even goes on to say that Sharmila, who was a close friend of hers, charged more money and seemed somewhat unobliging compared to Khanna. For Khanna, the entire set-up came across as very personal and so close to reality that he felt at home. Like Basu trying to find some sort of catharsis for his real-life troubles, Khanna might have been searching for answers himself.

While he was shooting for *Avishkaar*, Khanna was still dating Anju, and Rinki recalls how the biggest star of Hindi cinema was actually, at times, petrified of his ladylove and her mother. Rinki remembers a particular evening when they were shooting till late in the night. Finally, when Basu announced pack-up, the actor asked the couple to accompany him to Anju's place. Khanna told them that it was Anju's birthday and he was 'terrified to go alone'. Rinki says that Anju's house in Versova, which was then sparsely populated, was one of the only ones in the area, and was completely financed by Khanna. Rinki says that she saw the whole affair from the sidelines and was around even when Rajesh married Dimple out of the blue.

Being the daughter of Bimal Roy and therefore as someone who grew up watching stars like Dilip Kumar walk in and out of her house, Rinki wasn't really overawed by stardom. Basu and she were not in the same social league as Khanna, but Rinki got to spend a lot of time with the star during the making of *Avishkaar*, largely because Khanna had taken a shine to Basu.

One of the few people Khanna idolized was Raj Kapoor, and Basu's film with the Showman, *Teesri Kasam* (1966), had a profound impact on Khanna. He would usually invite Basu and Rinki over to 'Aashirwad' for his famous drinking sessions and, even though they never drank alcohol, the two would sit

back and endure being part of Khanna's revelries till the wee hours. Sometimes, the two would have to wait till two in the morning before Khanna would serve them dinner. It was during one such session that Rinki got a rare insight into Khanna. 'Rajesh was extremely insecure and highly suspicious of everything and everyone,' she comments, and adds that he was in constant need of positive reinforcement. One evening when he had a little too much drink, he walked up to Rinki and looked her straight in the eye and said, 'I'm not a bad man.' A little worried by the condition Khanna was in, Rinki, not knowing what to make of the statement, simply told him that she knew. Khanna was silent for a while. He weighed his words briefly before telling her that he could see in her eyes that she didn't believe he was a good man and told her again that he wasn't a bad person.

Khanna's next and last release in 1974, *Roti*, ended up being significant on a number of counts. In addition to being an all round hit, it also earned the distinction of being the last of the colossal Rajesh Khanna hits. Directed by Manmohan Desai and produced by Khanna's mama K.K. Talwar, *Roti* had Khanna playing a character that, much like *Anand* and *Bawarchi*, furthered Khanna's never-say-die on-screen persona.

The film starts with a young boy caught stealing a roti. Years pass and the boy grows up to become Mangal Singh (Khanna), a hardened criminal. A thorough entertainer, *Roti* had all the hallmarks of a typical Manmohan Desai film and, unlike a few of his ventures before *Roti*, Khanna seemed to enjoy playing Mangal. A typical star vehicle that fitted Khanna like a glove, Mangal is a character who knows that he is living on borrowed time but never lets that reality dampen his spirits. Even though he is a criminal, his crime is limited to filling the coffers of his boss (Pinchoo Kapoor). As someone who took to crime on account of hunger, Mangal isn't interested in harming honest people and therefore readily assumes the role of a leader who sets wrongs right by exposing a black-marketing grocer (Jeevan), a corrupt police constable (Jagdeep), and saving a prostitute from a mob that is baying for her blood. The film's songs, penned by Anand Bakshi and composed by Laxmikant-Pyarelal, featured a song to suit each of *Roti*'s myriad moods and situations: romance ('*Gore rang pe na itna*' sung by Lata and Kishore), frolic ('*Yeh public hai*' by Kishore Kumar), morality ('*Yaar hamari baat suno*' by Kishore) and the plight of hardworking people ('*Naach meri bulbul*' by Kishore).

Roti as a script might have been a straightforward story devoid of much nuance, but a closer look shows how Khanna could have envisaged *Roti* as a good film on which to sign off his stardom. Mangal's character was oddly reflective of Khanna's situation – both found themselves pushed after enjoying a comfortable run, both were forced to become people they weren't, and, while

putting on a show, their real persona came out.

In the wake of action films gaining prominence, Khanna was beginning to try something different, but his starchy mannerisms and even Mangal's signature oneliner – that he'd be safe as long as it wasn't a Tuesday – which he delivers in the face of imminent danger, seemed like a reflection of Khanna's real-life attempt to brush off the threats from challengers.

Looking through the prism of time, *Roti* appears to be Rajesh Khanna the superstar's swansong of sorts, and the manner in which he signed off didn't make him look too bad. In the four years while he was at the top, a handful of the characters that Khanna portrayed in films like *Anand*, *Amar Prem*, *Avishkaar* and *Roti* endeared him forever to audiences. The man who played them might have been besieged with a million shortcomings, but the characters he played reduced the huge gap that would otherwise exist between a complex film star and the man on the street.

Summing up Khanna's stardom and its aftermath is both an easy as well as an onerous task. His screen presence, fresh boy-next-door looks along with roles such as Anand made him the change that Hindi cinema was crying out for. Even though he was never a versatile actor, his ability to pick varied roles without worrying about their length or other market factors enabled him to never get typecast and even aided his stardom. And yet, the magnitude of his success in a relatively short span of time made him look like a fluke. With his luck running out, he was getting desperate to try anything that could help turn back the clock. The success of his last few releases might have convinced him that he was back in the running, but his fate echoed *Aap Ki Kasam*'s plangent line, '*Zindagi ke safar mein guzar jaate hain jo makaam, woh phir nahi aate*'.

8

THAT SINKING FEELING

Yeh Kya Hua ... Kaise Hua...

Kab Hua ... Kyon Hua

The high of fifteen consecutive box-office hits and being compared to God on a daily basis couldn't have left any normal person unscathed. A lot of people believed that his unparalleled success had changed Rajesh Khanna beyond recognition, but they were people who didn't know the real man well enough. Like his incredible success, Khanna's failure brought about a bigger change in people around him than in Khanna himself. There's little doubt that the kind of success Khanna had seen in a matter of a couple of years would have brought on a series of changes, but the fact remains that even though his personality might have undergone a few changes, Khanna essentially remained the same. His acquaintances – including those who were not part of the film industry and who knew him before, through and after his superstar years – vouch for the personality type.

Shyam Keswani, the lawyer introduced to Khanna by Shakti Samanta, is certain that 'Kaka could have been a railway contractor like the rest of his family, or even a clerk and he would have been the same'. Keswani maintains that Khanna was always as impetuous as people believed he had become after the string of hits that followed *Aradhana*. 'Success changed the attitude towards him and, till the time the hits were piling up, no one seemed to mind his brashness.'

While everyone works hard to create something and to be successful, some need to toil harder in order to keep it all intact. But Khanna came out as someone who never bothered about guarding the success he had found. In fact, he appeared to be hell-bent on destroying it.

One of the biggest factors that contributed to hastening the process of Khanna's downfall was his strained relationship with Salim-Javed. The advent of the Angry Young Man or even Amitabh Bachchan's portrayal of Salim-

Javed's greatest creation wouldn't have troubled Khanna as much as the duo's almost unflinching stand of not working with Khanna. Salim Khan remembers Khanna as a difficult man, and this character trait extended beyond his professional sphere. 'It was difficult working with him because one never knew what he'd do or how he would behave the next instant,' says Khan about the superstar. He is of the opinion that sometimes people with limited or even mediocre talent managed to have a long successful career, but Khanna, despite his talent, couldn't get over his insecurities and allowed them to spoil things. 'It's simple,' says Khan when asked about the kind of self-doubt that plagued Khanna. 'Imagine ten people in a room and nine praising you to the skies. Kaka would automatically expect the worst from the tenth person, who might just be quiet for he doesn't care about such banter, and limit his interaction with that person.'

It is difficult to understand why the hottest writers on the block, discovered by the then biggest star in town, never thought of writing something specifically for him. Khan said that the success of the Salim-Javed pair warranted the freedom to develop the kind of scripts they were interested in and their subjects simply didn't suit Khanna. Although Khan doesn't deny the undercurrent of tension between the duo and Khanna, he is dismissive of rumours that he and Akhtar went out of their way to ensure that Khanna would never be a part of their films. On his part, Khanna did lobby for Salim-Javed on more than one occasion, but things never worked out.



Besides being one of the panellists on the Filmfare-United Producers Combine Talent Hunt that had discovered Khanna almost a decade ago, producer F.C. Mehra had a few more things in common with Shakti Samanta. Like Samanta, Mehra too preferred to work with his favourite star and had produced five films with Shammi Kapoor since he started his production house Eagle Films in 1958. Like the other members of the panel, Mehra always had the option of casting Khanna in a production, but didn't think about making a film with the superstar till Shammi Kapoor decided to turn director.

With his days as leading man behind him, Kapoor was getting ready to direct *Manoranjan* (1974) that Mehra was to produce for him. The film was a remake of Billy Wilder's *Irma La Douce* (1963) and Kapoor's first choice for the lead was the very actor who, just a few years ago, had stolen the show from right under his nose. Besides being amongst Kapoor's last outings as the leading man, *Andaz* had also been one of the first films where Khanna's draw as a star

was seen in its full glory. Kapoor had been fascinated by the West End production of the original French musical that he had seen years ago and wanted to play the lead but, by the time the project became a reality, he knew he was way past his prime. He thought of Khanna in his version of the musical that, in a departure from the norm in Hindi cinema, would look at prostitution in an extremely light, even frivolous manner.

Kicked about the prospect of playing the naïve cop, Khanna was looking forward to being a part of Kapoor's whacky and naughty interpretation and suggested Salim–Javed's name as writers. Kapoor, however, had already begun working with veteran writer Abrar Alvi, whose credentials included most of Guru Dutt's classics such as *Pyaasa* (1957), *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959) and *Sahib, Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962) and wasn't interested in Khanna's suggestion. Khanna, nonetheless, continued to push for Salim–Javed and even suggested that the duo could work on the screenplay while Alvi could furnish the story, but Kapoor wouldn't have any of it and cast Sanjeev Kumar instead.

While Khanna tried to get Salim–Javed associated with his projects, the two were more interested in doing their own number. Unlike others, Salim–Javed weren't ready to put up with Khanna's high-handedness though they kept the relationship as professional as possible. When Shakti Samanta was planning a film on the life of Palay Khan, the Koshti tribal leader who fought the British across the North West Frontier Province in the 1930s, Khanna was an automatic choice to play the lead. Once again, Khanna suggested Salim–Javed and Samanta agreed to meet the duo since he wasn't committed to any writer. The two met with Samanta and heard the kernel of the idea that had inspired Samanta. At the end of the narration, they told Samanta that Palay Khan, being an action-oriented film, didn't suit Khanna and he should look at someone like Dharmendra for the lead. Just as Salim–Javed left the project, the idea too left Samanta and it would be over a decade before the film would see the light of day with Jackie Shroff portraying the revolutionary. Though many projects such as these never worked out for Khanna, they didn't hurt him as much as the next film that the writer duo would write and which could have featured Khanna.



By 1975, it was clear that both Amitabh Bachchan and action films were here to stay. By his own admission across sources, Khanna had realized this as well. Following *Zanjeer* and *Namak Haraam*, Bachchan was no longer the lanky struggler who occupied the end of the spectrum that had Khanna on the other extreme. Bachchan's thirteen flops weren't even being discussed when Khanna

was delivering hit after hit; but now, with Salim–Javed batting for him, Amitabh was a totally different entity. With each subsequent release and its success, Salim–Javed were becoming as big as the stars who featured in their scripts. The first writers to have their names on a film’s poster, the two were treated like royalty and got as much attention as the biggest stars of the era and, in some cases, made more money than the actors they wrote for. But what made them truly exceptional was that no writer before or since has had the kind of vetoing power Salim–Javed enjoyed when it came to casting.

Yash Chopra was supposed to direct *Deewar* and, while the script was still being finalized, the idea of casting Khanna as Vijay and Navin Nischol as his younger brother Ravi was thrown in the air. People close to Khanna, such as Bhupesh Raseen, friend and frequent business associate since the late 1990s, recall how Khanna was an integral part of the script’s initial stages. ‘Many of *Deewar*’s iconic moments were discussed with Kakaji and his input was sought at almost every stage.’

But Salim Khan remembers it differently. ‘The production house had already signed Khanna for a film and, in that sense, producer Gulshan Rai was keen on casting him in their next production,’ says Khan, but insists that they never considered anyone besides Bachchan for Vijay. The political unrest that consumed the nation charged Salim–Javed with passion that they hadn’t experienced ever before and they finished *Deewar* in eighteen days flat once they got down to writing it.¹ They took even less time when it came to finalizing the casting. The two were adamant that *Deewar* could only work with Amitabh Bachchan as Vijay and no one else. They stuck to their gut instinct, but the stand they took looked more like a case of dismissing Khanna than batting for Bachchan.

In a joint interview with Bachchan for a film magazine fifteen years later, Khanna minced no words in saying that although Yash Chopra wanted him, he had no choice but to settle for Bachchan as Salim–Javed refused to part with the script if he (Yash Chopra) didn’t cast Bachchan.² Looking back, Bachchan makes more sense than Khanna playing Vijay; but the whole episode also made one thing very clear – that Salim–Javed’s success only increased the distance between Khanna and the throne that he once occupied.



The achievements of his films had prompted him, with a little help from well-wishers like Devi, to propagate the whole numbers game as a new tool to gauge success, but he never realized that one day the same yardstick would be applied

to him. By the end of 1974, there was hardly any doubt left that, regardless of hits like *Aap Ki Kasam*, *Prem Nagar* and *Roti*, Khanna's stream of hits had dried up. The only major release he had in 1975 was *Prem Kahani* (1975) and it was, at best, an average grosser, if not a flop.

With Raj Khosla as the director, *Prem Kahani* reunited the *Do Raaste* team in the form of Khanna, Mumtaz, Anand Bakshi and Laxmikant–Pyarelal. Featured together for the eighth time, Khanna and Mumtaz were one of the most successful pairs in Hindi films, and none of their films together ever failed at the box office. If Khanna was looking for a lucky charm, it couldn't get better than this, and there was Shashi Kapoor along with Vinod Khanna in an extended special appearance thrown in for good measure.

Like in *Do Raaste*, Khanna and Mumtaz played lovers from different social classes. Only the setting this time was pre-independent India. Unlike his elder brother who is actively involved in the freedom struggle, Rajesh Narain (Khanna), a poet newly graduated from college, is only interested in marrying Kamini (Mumtaz). Kamini's father (K.N. Singh) is a British government servant, but she doesn't let that stop her from being with Rajesh, who joins the freedom movement after his brother dies during a protest rally. Having dedicated his life to the nation, Rajesh lies and unceremoniously dumps Kamini so that she can move on with her life. A few months later, fate brings a badly injured Rajesh face-to-face with his old love when he seeks refuge in her house as the man she has married, Dheeraj (Shashi Kapoor), happens to be Rajesh's old friend and a police officer who doesn't know of their past affair.

Prem Kahani's music was nothing less than vintage Laxmikant–Pyarelal, with the Lata–Kishore magic in full flow. Like *Do Raaste*'s '*Bindiya chamkegi*', *Prem Kahani* had the titular '*Prem kahani mein*' right at the beginning, displaying the classic Rajesh–Mumtaz chemistry. Khanna's favourite lyricist Anand Bakshi's pen rekindled the familiar charm of '*Jai jai Shiv Shankar*' from *Aap Ki Kasam* in '*Chal dariya mein doob jayein*', but Khosla seemed to lose his grip over the script as the film progressed for, once the romance angle gave way to the comparatively serious core, it became a different film. With the intensity accelerating as the film progressed, there was enough drama to maintain the interest levels. But a weak screenplay made the already privy audience wait endlessly for Dheeraj to catch up with Rajesh and Kamini's amorous past, rendering the actors the only three people affected by high tension while the audience yawned its way out of the cinema hall.

Khosla does have moments in *Prem Kahani* that are very effective but he miscalculated in thinking that great dialogues delivered with the right punches would make everything fall into place. In retrospect, *Prem Kahani* isn't a bad

film but it lacks the finesse of a *Do Raaste* or *Aradhana* and isn't even intimate enough to work its magic, which could be a major factor in its failure to become as big a hit as it could have been.

Prem Kahani wasn't a romance film in the strictest sense, but it wasn't as if Khanna is miscast as the soft-spoken poet who turns into a revolutionary. He had walked a similar path in *Namak Haraam*, but things were different here as *Prem Kahani* was a shoddy enterprise. Besides the insipid screenplay, it suffered from a careless production design, with college students from the 1940s dressed up like they belonged to the 1970s. Add to this the lackadaisical direction and editing, for example, in one sequence, four extras dressed as cops rush to board a jeep and one of them questioningly stares at the camera when left behind; this scene made it to the final print.

If *Deewar's* authentic locations packed in more punch than *Prem Kahani's*, Salim-Javed's other major release of the year, *Sholay* (1975), simply redefined production design for Hindi films. In the light of *Deewar* and *Sholay*, a film such as *Prem Kahani* automatically paled when it came to drama, and its own shortcomings didn't make anything better.

Prem Kahani was Khanna's only release in 1975, besides a friendly appearance in J. Om Prakash's *Aakraman* (1975) where he played Karnail Singh, an amputated former soldier who is seen in a few scenes but is largely remembered for the song '*Fauji aaya jab gaon mein*' – an ode to the spirit of the soldier penned by former army man and Khanna's beloved lyricist Anand Bakshi.

To make matters worse, Bachchan wasn't just having a great year but, after *Sholay*, was being hailed as the new king and not just the challenger. Everything that Bachchan did made Khanna's efforts look worse than what they were, and the cracks that had started appearing with *Namak Haraam* were now more than visible. With *Maha Chor* (1976), Khanna tried making a conscious effort to change in order to keep up with the times, but luck didn't seem to share his enthusiasm.

Khanna plays the orphan Raju, a petty thief who steals in order to help the residents of a lower-class colony in Bombay. He puts in great effort and his Raju, like much of *Maha Chor*, is essentially enjoyable. For the better part, *Maha Chor* resembles a typical Manmohan Desai film with some great set pieces and a few genuinely hilarious Kader Khan dialogues. Usually, Khanna's films always provided him with a few light scenes in which he displayed decent comic timing but, *Bawarchi* notwithstanding, he never really did a full-fledged comedy film. In that context, *Maha Chor* made no effort to hide the fact that it was a funny film right from the very first scene in which we see Khanna dressed

as a Bombay police constable in shorts, looking straight into the camera and commenting '*Baap ka maal hai*' as an overweight businessman (Pinchoo Kapoor) walks out of a bank.

Perhaps the film would have fared much better had *Maha Chor* featured some other actor. Khanna didn't fall short on any account in playing the impish streetwise crook with a heart of gold, but when the going isn't good, everything seems wrong. In the same year, Prakash Mehra's *Hera Pheri* (1976) featured Bachchan and Vinod Khanna playing similar characters in a film that had quite a few things in common with *Maha Chor*, but while the former is hailed as a classic, the latter seems to have been wiped out of the average viewer's memory.

Maha Chor also has a scene which is an offshoot of the iconic *Deewar* scene where Vijay confronts God, and director Narendra Bedi's execution of Khanna questioning God is eerily similar to Yash Chopra's. This raises an interesting point about the extent of Khanna's involvement in Salim-Javed's scripting process. Similarly, a scene in which Khanna is put in the same lock-up as the members of Prem Chopra's gang and picks on a fellow prisoner to save himself seems to be the inspiration for the scene where Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan) nudges Shetty in the police van in *Don* (1979) which was still three years away.

The film's music by R.D. Burman has a couple of hummable tunes like '*Main tumse pyar karti hoon*' (Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar) but in hindsight the bigger contribution, albeit unheralded, of the film's music is hidden in a line from the title track. Anand Bakshi's lyrics for '*Mera naam yaaron maha chor hai*' (Kishore Kumar) has a couple of lines in which English words were, maybe for the very first time in Hindi films, blended in as regular Hindi words. Bakshi penned '*Main galiyon ka raja woh mahlon ka king, Main chandi ka challa wo sone ki ring*', with much aplomb, almost twenty years before Gulzar made it fashionable in '*Aankhen bhi kamaal karti hain, personal se sawaal karti hai,*' in *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005). Bakshi also doubled up as the playback singer for Khanna in '*Sun Banto baat meri*', a duet with Asha Bhonsle.

Perhaps an abject lack of subtlety ailed *Maha Chor*, for the film played unapologetically to the gallery. It also packed in a lot of pro-Congress (the political party in power at the time) propaganda with graffiti that says 'Vote for Congress' in one of the scenes and Khanna promising a less-fortunate child that the present government would make the world a better place for the likes of him. This scene, playing in theatres during the days of the Emergency, made *Maha Chor* come across as a glaring aberration to the social environment of the era that inspired films like *Deewar* and *Aandhi* (1975).

It was ill luck that *Maha Chor* didn't enjoy much success at the box office,

for it could have given Khanna something to hold on to. The film might not have worked as he had expected, but it did make him think about doing comedy and light-hearted roles as a way of getting back into the fold. If irreverence towards the status quo was the tool that action films had applied to great effect, Khanna decided that amusement and jest would be his delivery mechanism for the same.

Manoranjan's abysmal performance at the box office didn't deter Shammi Kapoor from donning the director's mantle once again for *Bundal Baaz* (1976) and didn't stop Khanna from agreeing to be part of it. The big difference this time around was that Khanna never suggested anyone's name and simply signed on to the project.

Written by K.K. Shukla, *Bundal Baaz* featured Khanna as Rajaram, a poor daydreamer who imagines a parallel world where he's not only the coolest one but also the smartest and the richest. Whenever reality snaps him back, Rajaram flaps his gums and continues to live in a make-believe world. He becomes a kabadiwala, a waste collector, with the elderly Suleiman (Johnny Walker), who doubles up as a surrogate father. One day, a genie (Shammi Kapoor) appears from one of the bottles Rajaram picks up and offers to serve him, but Rajaram insists on making an honest living. The genie is, however, hell-bent on serving him.

At a time when films like *Aandhi*, *Deewar*, *Sholay*, *Chupke Chupke* (1975), *Chhoti Si Baat* (1975) and *Mausam* (1975) were ushering in a new kind of Hindi cinema, *Bundal Baaz* happily regressed on both substance and style. The film is filled with tacky special effects and jokes that must have appeared funny to only the actors enacting them. Khanna suits the role of the happy-go-lucky man in distressed times, mostly because K.K. Shukla's screenplay and Kader Khan's dialogues sounded like they spoke for the star's personal condition. Rajaram's line, '*Yeh shareer zaroor kisi gareeb ka hai lekin iske andar jo atma hai, woh kisi raja ki hai...*' (My body might be a poor man's but the soul inside is that of a king) is oft repeated, more like a plea to remind the viewer that Khanna was still the king. *Bundal Baaz* appeared to be tailored for Khanna – the protagonist is someone who has great potential to be a success, even manages to become one on the first day of his job, yet seems to have run out of luck and desperately needs a miracle to set things right. While waiting for things to turn around, he rarely lets go of an opportunity to reiterate the line, which at first seems like a reminder to those who have forgotten him, but later comes across as a self-motivating plea. Khanna's signature white bush shirt styled by Baldev Pathak at Shrimaan, which stays spotless regardless of Rajaram's situation or condition in the film, somehow ends up further equating Rajaram to the superstar.

The script hardly had any scope for Khanna besides playing the affable

youngster busy concocting a bizarre world where he imagines himself to be the Phantom in the opening scene of the film, chasing bank robbers on a horse down Bombay's Marine Lines in the middle of the day. He tries to be earnest but, surrounded by infantile set pieces and Shammi Kapoor's buffoonery, the supposed fantasy ends up feeling like a nightmare.

Was this the best that Khanna could think of when considering an image makeover? True, he was becoming somewhat irrelevant to the scheme of people who were calling the shots. And maybe following the trend in whatever came along was his way of signalling he was still around. Also, Khanna had changed the way things were done and it would have been awkward for someone of his stature to go asking for roles. Moreover, it simply wasn't in his nature. He wasn't going to lobby or pitch himself. He had attempted two different roles, probably the best that had come his way, but the results were the same, with *Maha Chor* and *Bundal Baaz* drawing the same tepid response from the viewer. His efforts to try something varied might not have met the mark but, for Khanna, the glass was still half full.

An incident during the shoot of *Prem Kahani* showed that some of the frenzy he had once inspired still remained. Khanna was shooting at Mithibai College and a fakir in the vicinity went about begging for alms from the crowd in the name of Rajesh Khanna instead of God. Surely, it showed what he was still capable of. Maybe it was just a question of going back to the drawing board and who could help him better than the man who knew best what he was good at?

9

FREE FALL

Majhi Jo Nao Duboye Usey Kaun Bachaye...

Mehbooba (1976) was Shakti Samanta's sixth film with Rajesh Khanna and brought together the team that Khanna was most comfortable with. Written by Gulshan Nanda and based on his own novel, *Mehbooba* was about lovers reincarnated, a theme that repeatedly inspired Hindi cinema and with uncanny success too. This was almost the thing that Khanna was looking for – a story that wouldn't be too different and, more importantly, safe when it came to audiences.

Produced by Mushir-Riaz, who had previously worked with Khanna on *Safar*, *Mehbooba* starts with a successful singer Suraj (Khanna) recalling his past life while stranded in a resthouse during a storm. Suraj remembers that he was an emperor's court singer, Prakash, in his previous birth, who fell in love with Ratna (Hema Malini), a courtesan in the same court, but was tragically separated from her. Suraj then comes face-to-face with a gypsy named Jhumri (Malini), who is Ratna reincarnated. Much like the emperor who separated them in their earlier incarnation, Suraj and Jhumri's love is challenged by Appa (Prem Chopra), the gypsy prince, who won't rest till he has separated the lovers once again.

A love story that spanned lifetimes, *Mehbooba* marked Khanna's return to romance but by the time he got to the film, a lot of water had flown under the bridge. Khanna's care-a-damn attitude that had previously got him into trouble with the income tax authorities and messed up his date diary during *Amar Prem*, had claimed a new victim. His fascination for whisky and love for food started showing more than he would have liked. The first thing that Ashim Samanta recalls of the shooting of *Mehbooba* is how Khanna had put on weight on his face. 'A romantic hero has to look nice, but Kaka didn't take care of his health,' he says. But Khanna believed that the familiar territory of romance would once again inspire destiny. And he had good reason to believe so too as, with him playing a singer across births, music was sure to be *Mehbooba*'s mainstay. And

with Samanta, R.D., Kishore and Anand Bakshi in the same room, he simply had to sit back and watch them weave magic.

Today, *Mehbooba*'s music is the only thing that people remember and Kishore Kumar's version of '*Mere naina saawan bhadon*' is considered a highpoint of the Rajesh Khanna–Kishore Kumar association. Based on the intricate Raga Shivranjani, in fact considered by many as the finest exponent of the raga in films, along with Shankar–Jaikishen's '*Jaane kahan gaye woh din*' in *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), the song was a great mix of the conventional mode of the raga and a very modern arrangement that established the different times of the story. The song was almost passed over by Kishore Kumar as he felt he wouldn't be able to do complete justice to it. R.D. cajoled him and finally Kishore relented when it was decided that he would record after Lata Mangeshkar had rendered her version.¹ Kishore practised for days, listening to Lata's recording, and ended up singing a number that clearly outshone the film and Lata's rendition too.

The other numbers '*Parbat ke peechhe*' (Lata Mangeshkar–Kishore Kumar) and Manna Dey's classical '*Gori tori paijaniya*' were equally popular and made *Mehbooba*'s songs an instant hit. The songs rekindled the memories of previous R.D.–Shakti Samanta collaborations *Amar Prem* and *Kati Patang*, but couldn't change the fate of the film.

The audiences weren't kind to *Mehbooba* and the film tanked. In just seven years since they first worked together, the Rajesh Khanna of *Aradhana*, *Kati Patang* and *Amar Prem* was such a distant memory that even Samanta couldn't help find him. The film-maker was experienced enough to know that this was just a phase that Kaka would get around soon; but something happened during the making of *Mehbooba* that convinced him otherwise. Wanting to maintain the intensity of Prakash's reaction to Ratna's death, Samanta had planned an elaborate scene and wanted to shoot it in a continuous take. A master when it came to emotional scenes such as the one at hand, Khanna rattled the dialogues and emoted on cue. But Samanta wasn't too happy with the take and asked for one more. He didn't want Khanna to go overboard and asked him to keep the drama in check. Such a request being a normal drill for any high-power scene, and being the consummate artist when it came to emotive scenes, Khanna should have simply walked back to the starting point and got on with it, but didn't. Rather than looking to improve the second take, he looked Samanta straight in the eye and said, '*Isse better performance aap ko India mein koi nahin dega.*' Samanta soaked in what he had just heard and decided to break for lunch. While walking with Khanna to his office in Natraj Studios, where they were shooting, Samanta said, 'Kaka, Rajesh Khanna is finished ... he is dead.' Taken aback, all

Khanna could say was, ‘Kyon, Shakti Sahab?’ and Samanta told him that if he believed that the third-rate shot he had just given was great, obviously his mind wasn’t working, and this was the sign of an actor’s end.

The two carried on with lunch and, once they got back, Khanna asked Samanta for a second take; but this time it was the director’s turn to refuse. Samanta told Khanna that if he believed it was a great shot, it must have been one, and carried on with the next scene. Ashim regrets that his father’s ego trip caused great damage to the film and believes that, had they shot the scene again – in an understated manner, with a restrained Khanna – like Samanta had wanted, *Mehbooba* would have had a little more resonance.

This incident showed how Khanna’s mind was plagued by the insecurities of his projects failing. Only a couple of years ago, he had willingly gone for seven retakes for a scene in *Aap Ki Kasam*, where he hadn’t even been at fault. Now, he wasn’t willing to listen to his most trusted director advising him to redo a scene which he had not handled well. Obviously, things had changed. Although Khanna might not have taken the success or failure of his films seriously beyond a point, he couldn’t apply the same detachment to the things that came with them. If his unrivalled success led him to believe that he was bigger than the medium, his failures showed him just how fallible he really was.

It was also around this time that the death of Gurnaam left a void that the slipping star found impossible to fill. Gurnaam had been more than a mere secretary who had managed not just Rajesh Khanna, the star, but also the man within, and with his passing away, a little bit of the old Rajesh went too.²



It had been three years since *Aap Ki Kasam*, but J. Om Prakash wasn’t unaware of what was happening to the star. In spite of having seen him right from the time he took his first steps as an actor, the film-maker maintained limited social interaction with Khanna and wasn’t part of his infamous darbars. But he knew him enough to see that something was wrong. ‘We were friends when shooting films. Other than that, I didn’t belong to *that* circle of friends who would meet in the evenings,’ he says. He believes that the role Khanna was living in his real life had started to impact his work: ‘You live a character in real life. So your general behaviour, your concepts, your general attitude towards your profession and people play a very important role.’ The film-maker thinks that at some point during this phase in his life, Khanna’s off-screen troubles seeped into his approach towards work.

He might believe that he wasn’t close enough to Khanna, but J. Om Prakash

seems to have read Khanna's predicament correctly. He was still popular enough to attract roles, but the repeated failure of his films was making him look second rung. Also, the disappointing performance of his films wasn't being observed in isolation. Once again, his performance appeared worse when magnified against the kind of films the other big stars were doing.

Khanna and his films had ceased to make history for some time, while Bachchan was busy rewriting it. One such film that highlighted the changing wheel of fortune between these star-crossed stars was Yash Chopra's *Kabhi Kabhie* that, for the first time, had Bachchan playing a character that aged from a young man to a father of a twenty-something girl. Inspired by a Sahir Ludhianvi poem, *Kabhi Kabhie* featured Bachchan as a poet, Amit, who withdraws from poetry once he loses the love of his life. Years later, he comes face-to-face with the same woman, Pooja (Rakhee), and her loving husband, Vijay (Shashi Kapoor), who is clueless about their past.

There was little difference between *Kabhi Kabhie's* plot and the second half of Raj Khosla's *Prem Kahani*. In fact, both films have Shashi Kapoor playing almost the same role of the husband whose love for his wife is strong enough to accept her past. Bachchan brought his Angry Young Man intensity to the romantic lead he was portraying. Though *Kabhi Kabhie's* screenplay that spans two generations, along with its star-studded cast and the potent Khayyam–Sahir combination, erased any resemblance to *Prem Kahani* that it could have been accused of, there is still a strong affinity between the films and one could even possibly conceive of Khanna as the lovelorn poet instead of Bachchan.

Khanna had previously worked with Chopra on two occasions, in *Ittefaq* and *Daag*; and the director admired Khanna enough to try and reason with Salim–Javed during *Deewar's* casting. Legend also has it that Chopra had pitched *Kabhi Kabhie* to Rakhee on the sets of *Daag*, and the actress had agreed to it in the blink of an eye. Even though the director fought hard to lure Rakhee back into *Kabhi Kabhie* after she had decided to quit films following her marriage to Gulzar, Khanna was never really on Chopra's radar. This was ironical, and infinitely sad for those who matured on Rajesh Khanna films during his heyday, because even a couple of years ago, Khanna would have been a shoo-in for the poet's role. Chopra would have wanted *Kabhi Kabhie* to look different from his earlier effort in the genre, and what better than presenting an actor known for his action image as a reticent man lost in the memories of a love that died decades ago?

The initial few days of *Kabhi Kabhie* suggested that the audience was wary of accepting this version of Bachchan's Angry Young Man and a few in the trade had even proclaimed it a flop. The trade winds carried on to Khanna and he

is rumoured to have thrown an impromptu bash to celebrate *Kabhi Kabhie's* dismal opening. Ali Peter John says that he had known Khanna to behave in a similar manner on a few other occasions.



Khanna's poor run at the box-office continued with the release of *Tyaag* (1977) and *Karm* (1977). For all the horror stories of making producers wait outside his den endlessly on a stone bench at Aashirwad, Khanna had a habit of showering benevolence in the most unexpected manner. When he learnt that Sharmila Tagore was helping out her long-time secretary N.S. Kabir by co-producing a film for him, Khanna not only accepted the film, but decided to waive his fee as well. The last film Rajesh and Sharmila would do together, *Tyaag* was also the penultimate film to feature S.D. Burman's music. For some reason or the other, the production took ages and it shows in the atrocious continuity of Rajesh Khanna's hair throughout the film.³

Written and directed by Din Dayal Sharma, *Tyaag's* is an unlikely love story for the time it was made. Chetan (Khanna) is a penniless writer who loves Sunita (Tagore) but can't marry her even when she forsakes her rich parents for him. Chetan reasons with her and tells her that he'd only marry with the blessings of her family, lest she regret her decision to marry against their wishes some day. Sunita is unable to fathom why Chetan can't sacrifice his lofty ideals when she's willing to leave everything for love and walks out on him. She marries the man of her father's choice; but when she tells him about her past, he leaves her with his parents and takes off to England for further studies. Sunita brings up her son who craves his missing father more with each passing year. One day, the young boy runs off in search of his father and meets Chetan, now a well-known writer, who brings him back only to meet Sunita again. There is a lot unsaid between Sunita and Chetan and they start getting closer when her son starts seeing the missing father in Chetan; but things get complicated when Gopal, her husband, decides to return.

Tyaag saw Rajesh and Sharmila looking every bit the lovers they were portraying and, like in *Aradhana*, Dada Burman's songs only made it better. It is sad that the film's box-office failure also eclipsed its music comprising some lilting duets by Kishore Kumar, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle. Both the lead stars displayed brilliant chemistry and complemented each other well, so that even the inept writing of the scene where they part ways as lovers looks real. This is a typical Hindi film situation where lovers take off without missing a heartbeat, and Khanna had played this one out earlier in *Ajnabee*; but *Tyaag*

prefers to interpret it differently, which is what makes it stand out. While Sharmila has it relatively easy in the scene, portraying a regular reaction to Khanna's overemotional need to stick to his so-called principles, it is Khanna who shows us just how good he could be as he makes the viewer feel sorry and even hate Sunita for being normal. Two decades later, the scene would be reinterpreted by Aditya Chopra in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* wherein his Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) says the same thing to Simran (Kajol) and surprisingly the girl, unlike Sunita from the 1970s, gives in without any opposition.

Tyaag has its share of theatrics – it starts with Chetan serving a life sentence for a murder, and the story is narrated in flashback. But even the right ingredients couldn't prevent it from looking jaded upon its release, and it sank in a fraction of the time it took to make it.

Like *Tyaag*, *Karm* had the makings of a very different love story and, unlike *Tyaag*, it didn't look antiquated. Produced and directed by B.R. Chopra, *Karm* was probably the first Hindi film to depict a live-in relationship years before *Shakti* (1982), the film credited for being the first to do so, was made. The son of a respected retired judge, Arvind (Khanna), a lawyer himself, and Asha (Vidya Sinha), the daughter of a highly regarded astrologer, are in love and both families couldn't be happier. Everyone is looking forward to their wedding, but Chintamani (Manmohan Krishna) predicts Arvind's death if the wedding were to take place and forbids the union. Arvind wants to go ahead irrespective of the prediction but Asha refuses to comply, fearing her fiancé's death. Much to the chagrin of their fathers, they end up living together. The families sever ties with the two and society refuses to acknowledge their relationship.

Things start to look up when, after much difficulty, Arvind manages to land a job with a reputed law firm and Asha becomes pregnant. Arvind goes to Delhi for a case and meets Neelam (Shabana Azmi) who falls for him, thinking him to be unattached. Asha realizes that her inability to marry Arvind and his unwillingness to be without her has brought nothing but ill luck to both of them and so walks out of the relationship. After a while, Arvind ends up marrying Neelam. Years later, Arvind is posted to Dehradun as a judge where he meets Asha, now bringing up their young son and employed as a nurse in a hospital. As luck would have it, Neelam miscarries and Arvind tries to adopt his own son through Asha; but when Neelam discovers the truth, she leaves Arvind, convinced that he had been cheating on her.

Similar to a few films from this period that ventured against the done-to-death action or caper themes, *Karm* kicked off very well and remained engrossing till the last quarter where it entered the territory of high melodrama and never really recovered. All through his career, B.R. Chopra swam against

the current when it came to not just picking up subjects, but also treating them with the right attitude. In his hands, *Karm* marked a stark contrast to many so-called path-breaking films that often pretended to be much more than what they really were. He handled the subject with such subtlety that the unconventional storyline seems completely natural and believable. Even Khanna and Sinha playing college students in the early part of the film doesn't jar as much as one would have normally expected it to. Arvind and Asha's defiance isn't something new for Hindi cinema, but the manner in which Chopra approaches it makes *Karm* a very watchable film. Arvind's father (Iftekhhar) doesn't believe in their relationship as it is not legal and Asha's father doesn't accept it because it's against tradition and the rules of society. As such, the young couple's love struggles to find a place in the sanctimonious world that surrounds it.

Had Chopra dwelt on the moral and emotional dilemma of the three characters when they encounter each other and not succumbed to typical over-the-top Hindi film resolution, the film might not have looked as insincere. Moreover, had *Karm* been made a few years earlier, it might have also fared better at the box office because such a sensitive film never really stood a chance around films like *Amar Akbar Anthony*, *Dharam-Veer*, *Hum Kisi Se Kum Nahin*, *Dream Girl* and *Khoon Pasina*.

Taking a cue from Yash Chopra and *Kabhi Kabhie*, Khanna's next role was something that wasn't totally up his alley. If with *Kabhi Kabhie* Bachchan tried his hand at a role that Khanna could have done in his sleep, Khanna decided to finally do something that, in his view, would be more in tune with the times. Since Ian Fleming's James Bond made his big-screen debut, the concept of the super spy had fascinated Hindi cinema and was even successful with films like *Farz*, *Humsaya* (1968), *Aankhen* (1968) and *Yakeen* (1969). While Khanna had played an undercover cop in *The Train*, he finally got to play the nameless secret agent who is good at everything he does.

Directed by erstwhile actor Joy Mukherjee, *Chhaila Babu* (1977) became a surprise hit and ended Khanna's box-office drought. Khanna plays the titular Chhaila Babu who is the knight in shining armour that Rita (Zeenat Aman) keeps bumping into. He saves her from the faceless baddie Scorpion who wants Rita to crack the secret code her father tells the police before dying. Written by Shomu Mukherjee, *Chhaila Babu* was the archetypal 1970s 'thriller' that was blessed with a great pace and an extremely campy appeal. Laxmikant-Pyarelal's music too packed in the standard '70s sound and they came up with some foot-tapping tunes for Anand Bakshi's zany lyrics like '*Kal raat sadak pe ek ladki ... ladki ne mujhko awaaz dee ... TAXI, TAXI*', '*Main babu chhaila*', and that foot-stomper, '*Yaar dildaar tujhe kaisa chahiye, pyar chahiye ke paisa chahiye*'.

In *Maha Chor*, Khanna had showed a knack for comedy that went beyond the kind seen in his lighter Hrishikesh Mukherjeeesque moments in *Namak Haraam*, *Anand* or *Bawarchi*, and in most scenes of *Chhaila Babu* it's this effervescence that makes it a fun film. If the success of *Aradhana* gave him a chance to do more of what he was good at, playing the romantic hero, *Chhaila Babu* ended up doing a similar favour for his comic flair. By combining the elements that stood out in a few of his previous films that had failed at the box office, along with a little smearing of the season's flavours, *Chhaila Babu* became a frothy entertainer that was ultimately great fun.

Whoever said that too much of a good thing could be bad probably had Rajesh Khanna in mind. The success of *Chhaila Babu* prompted him to repeat the formula, hoping to see the same results, but *Chalta Purza* (1977) went down in a very bad way. Besides being a concerted effort on Khanna's part to act in the kind of films that were popular at the time, Bhappie Sonnie's *Chalta Purza* also happened to be one of those typical 1970s films that the West attached to the cult of Bollywood. The eternal question of rich versus poor; the apathy of the haves towards the have-nots; the degradation of the soul; guns; gambling; cabarets; gangsters in fluorescent shirts and plaids, along with upright men and women compelled to become morally corrupt, albeit temporarily, are themes that a chunk of films articulated in the period that spanned from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. In fact, it won't be amiss to say that the morality that mainstream Hindi cinema attaches to itself even today is a result of the simplistic, and even escapist, code of ethics from the commercial films of the 1970s.

With gangsters, pretty maidens (Parveen Babi), and stolen diamonds accidentally handed over to a little girl who takes a shine to the protagonist Amar (Rajesh Khanna), *Chalta Purza* had more turns than a game of labyrinth. Khanna's motivation – to act in a movie that had the flavours of the season in plenty – is the only thing clear about the film and he sleepwalks through it, paying little or no attention to the proceedings.

Rather than mull over *Chalta Purza*'s dreadful reception at the box office, Khanna moved on and immersed himself in *Anurodh* (1977), a remake of another Uttam Kumar starrer in Bengali, *Deya Neya*, directed by Shakti Samanta. *Anurodh* was essentially made to help Simple Kapadia, Khanna's sister-in-law, find her footing in the business. Samanta wasn't too keen on making the film with Simple as the female lead as he knew that Indian audiences would never accept the hero's real-life sister-in-law as his heroine, but the director couldn't refuse Khanna and went ahead with the film. Both the actor and the director forgot their argument during *Mehbooba*'s climax, but R.D. Burman, the other person Khanna had fallen out with after *Mehbooba*, wasn't extended

the same courtesy by the star. Samanta signed on Laxmikant–Pyarelal for the job as Khanna wasn't too keen on R.D., and the duo more than delivered.

Anurodh's script was constructed to accommodate the hero–heroine's off-screen relationship and ensured that even though he sang love songs for her and she pined for him, they never crossed a certain line; but the audiences weren't fooled.

Shakti Samanta knew the fate that awaited *Anurodh* and once the film tanked at the box office, he lamented that had the film featured some other actress it wouldn't have flopped – and he wasn't wrong. Who in their right mind would pay to see the king of romance avoid his lady-love while serenading her in picturesque locales? Khanna's charm, especially in the lighter scenes, is more than infectious and *Anurodh* comes across as pleasingly entertaining and, once again, the songs are a bonus. The Anand Bakshi–Laxmikant–Pyarelal combo gave us two memorable Kishore Kumar tracks – '*Mere dil ne tadap ke jab naam tera pukara*' and '*Aate jaate khoobsurat awara sadkon pe*' – that get played almost on a daily basis on radio channels across the country even today. And '*Aapke anurodh pe*' ranks alongside the finest of the Kishore–Rajesh combination.

Though confronted with the uphill task of convincing the audiences to look at a real-life jeeja–saali as reel-life lovers, everyone attached to *Anurodh* had a reason other than the film that kept them going: Khanna was doing his sister-in-law a favour, Samanta was looking forward to finishing the film, and Laxmikant–Pyarelal, somewhere, wanted to outdo musical expectations arising from a Rajesh Khanna–Shakti Samanta film; but sadly, the viewer didn't have any such obligation. After *Anurodh*, it would be six years before Samanta would work with Khanna again. Like many others, he too opted for Bachchan for his next film, *The Great Gambler*. Meanwhile, Khanna simply went from a familial obligation to a family holiday with his next film.



Along with guns and molls, films set in exotic foreign locales were what attracted the most attention in the mid-1970s. And it didn't come as a surprise that in his search of the elusive lost connect with the audience, Rajesh Khanna plumped for *Aashiq Hoon Baharon Ka* (1977). That it was produced by the *Roti* team of K.K. Talwar and Raj Bhatija and directed by J. Om Prakash, would only have made the project more interesting. The film was shot mostly on location in Switzerland.

The whole set-up of *Aashiq Hoon Baharon Ka* feels forced and one can

never let go of the impression that the film-makers were counting on the neat packaging of action, emotion and song-and-dance routines along the scenic Swiss Alps to see the film through. Danny Denzongpa had feared this and even mentioned it to Khanna, but all he got as response was, '*Nikal jayegi*' (It'll run). The film might have felt like a paid vacation to the cast and crew, and for Khanna, with mama K.K. Talwar around, it was in fact very much a family outing. Khanna even got homemade food in Europe, kind courtesy Madhu Talwar, his mami, who was known for her culinary skills. Khanna had a fondness for her mutton curry and dal makhni and she remembers how she practically took over a section of the kitchen in the Hyatt in order to cook 'ghar ka khana' for Kaka. An unlikely film that still sticks out like a sore in J. Om Prakash's filmography, there was little anyone could have done with *Aashiq Hoon Baharon Ka*, and it joined the growing list of Khanna misfires.

Khanna did a complete turnaround in his next release, going from the urbane scientist to a villager in K. Balachander's *Aaina* (1977), in which he had a longish special appearance. The film was not just the last one Khanna did with Mumtaz but also happened to be the actress's final film. Khanna had just four scenes in the film, a Mumtaz show all the way where she plays the eldest daughter of a Brahmin family that is down on its luck.

A remake of Balachander's own Tamil film and a major inspiration for *Laga Chunri Mein Daag* (2007) in which Rani Mukherji reprised Mumtaz's role, *Aaina* was probably a little too archaic to succeed in the late 1970s. Interestingly, it featured Kamal Haasan in an uncredited cameo as an assistant director on a film shoot that takes place in Shalini's (Mumtaz) village.

Khanna must be the rare Indian superstar whose on-screen avatars were often indirectly proportional to his stature as a star, and his role in *Palkon Ki Chhaon Mein* (1977) is a perfect example. Besides being a charming story, *Palkon Ki Chhaon Mein* is also a wonderful social statement about an educated young man Ravi (Khanna) who cannot find any job commensurate with his education and status. He visits a post office and is mistaken for a candidate for the position of a postman. He ends up bagging a job as a postman in a village. On the job, Ravi meets a bunch of colourful characters and, being a postman, the harbinger of news both good and bad, he ends up becoming a part of everyone's lives. He misinterprets Mohini's (Hema Malini) keenness towards his daily visits and falls in love with her, only to realize that she is actually waiting to hear from the army man (Jeetendra, in a special appearance) whom she is secretly married to. The war had taken him away from her and now, with the war over, Ravi helps Mohini in her attempts to locate her husband. In due course, Ravi learns of the soldier's death but doesn't know how to break the news to Mohini.

Written by Gulzar and directed by his erstwhile assistant Meraj, *Palkon Ki Chhaon Mein* is classic Gulzar all the way and has his stamp all over. An understated Khanna pitched in a very credible performance that is effectively poignant but the film still tanked. In hindsight, one could say that Khanna's larger-than-life stardom could have been responsible for not allowing the viewer to accept his – and in that sense the film's – honesty, but that wouldn't be totally correct. For a superstar, Khanna had always excelled in playing characters who were as common as they got. His entire oeuvre largely comprises films that have him playing the man next door. And so, if one can attribute the failure of, say, Hrishikesh Mukherjee's sensitive *Alaap*, to the audience's refusal to accept Bachchan's ailing singer/rickshawala act, the same does not hold for Khanna. He had made a career of the ordinary man.

The film suffered from basic problems such as continuity troubles – Khanna's hair and stubble grow miraculously as he crosses a street – but such things were a routine feature in films of that period. Again, it can be conjectured that the film just came at the wrong time in Khanna's career. Years later, the story's basic premise would inspire Shyam Benegal's surprise hit *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008), but the reinterpretation lacked many things that the original had, least of all Gulzar's evocative lyrics set to music by Laxmikant–Pyarelal. *Palkon Ki Chhaon Mein* is worth watching just for the wonderful 'Dakiya dak laya' in which Kishore Kumar's genius in translating words into emotions is at its best.

At a time when fast-talking city slickers and characters dealing with urban middle-class dissonance were what attracted almost every actor worth his salt, Khanna boldly played a village postman, the epitome of things ordinary. After *Palkon Ki Chhaon Mein*, he carried on with it and even partnered with a filmmaker who understood the everyman a few shades better than anyone else.

Basu Chatterjee and Rajesh Khanna is as unlikely a combination as the film that they did together. Khanna had played the everyman on numerous occasions and had even become synonymous with the term in a way. But the everyman assumes an entirely different definition when someone like Basu Chatterjee undertakes the task of showing one. He had after all defined the everyman in the characters essayed by Amol Palekar in films like *Rajnigandha* (1974), *Chhoti Si Baat* (1975) and *Chitchor* (1976), heralding a whole new movement in Hindi cinema, albeit briefly.

In *Chakravyuha* (1978), Chatterjee cast Khanna as Amit, the quintessential office-going Bombay man who finds himself in a situation bigger than he had bargained for. Amit loves Chhaya (Neetu Singh) but can't get around to marrying her. He is a sweet man, totally committed to her, and even enjoys

spending time with Chhaya's parents and younger siblings but keeps postponing the wedding date, much to her annoyance. His neighbour, Raman (Vinod Mehra), happens to be a secret agent who unearths a plot to assassinate a visiting foreign dignitary but can't leave the building as the gang behind the plan is watching him from across the building. Raman fakes his suicide and seeks Amit's help to distract the enemies enough to sneak off to Delhi and foil the conspiracy. Amit agrees to help but finds Raman dead in his house and also stumbles upon his secret diary which contains the details of the attack. Unwillingly, Amit ends up taking on powers much bigger than him and embarks on a mission to save the foreign delegate.

It's equally difficult and easy to imagine Khanna in this reworking of Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935). In the Indian context, where a star is bound to an image, it would always be tricky for a star like Rajesh Khanna, with his set of identifiable, patented mannerisms, to be a Hitchcockian ordinary man ending up in an extraordinary mess; but if that be the case, Alfred Hitchcock always made stars like Henry Fonda or Cary Grant play commoners who display uncommon valour. Khanna looks comfortable in Amit's skin and might have consciously decided to arouse the actor within him who had long since made way for the star. He and Neetu Singh come across as a very believable couple and Khanna manages to control his mannerisms to a great extent, as he had done in *Avishkaar*. In fact, this is one of the very few films where he doesn't play Rajesh Khanna till the very end.

But an interesting experiment as it may have been, *Chakravyuha* just didn't work with the audience. Going forward, Khanna would evidently play two types of characters – one where people expected him to be Rajesh Khanna and the other where they'd want Rajesh Khanna to be someone else.

Bhola Bhala (1978) and *Janta Hawaldar* (1979) followed *Chakravyuha* and both showed Khanna's new approach towards roles. *Bhola Bhala* saw him in a double role in which, as Ram, he played a straightforward insurance agent who is an anomaly and accidentally ends up selling a policy to a dacoit named Nathiya (Khanna, again). Khanna might have physically played two roles, but his execution is entirely bereft of any nuance that can differentiate between the two. He is Rajesh Khanna in both. And the audiences' reaction was what it had been to Rajesh Khanna over the last few years.

Mehmood, who made *Janta Hawaldar*, was known for his unusual directorial choices that had a strong message attached and, this time around, he wanted to show a faceless man on the street as the hero. And who better than Khanna to be the embodiment? *Janta Hawaldar* saw him play a character who differed from him in physicality, but the unassuming loser was every bit the

superstar Rajesh Khanna.

In the mid-1970s, Mehmood had approached Khanna for a cameo in his *Ginny Aur Johnny* (1976) and was impressed with the way the then megastar had treated him. Khanna agreed to shoot the very next day, showed up on time, worked without displaying any starry airs and also refused to take any money. But working full-time with Khanna proved to be a harrowing experience for Mehmood. 'I had worked with stars much bigger than Rajesh Khanna,' recalled the legendary comedian and couldn't help but think that signing Khanna had been a mistake. Before the film was completed, a frustrated Mehmood even beat up Khanna. This was his way of making it clear to Khanna that he was no Shakti Samanta or Roopesh Kumar who would go on pleasing him. Mehmood added that it was the company Khanna kept that destroyed his career.⁴

Written by Abrar Alvi, Mehmood's film paired Khanna opposite Yogita Bali and was a disappointment that is best remembered for the song '*Hum se kaa bhool huee*' sung by Anwar who was the first of Rafi's clones that littered the landscape in the 1980s.

When *Naukri* (1978) released after inordinate delays, it was a critical and commercial disaster that surpassed Khanna's worst fears about the project. Having delayed the film for almost half a decade, Khanna in any case had no expectations from the film that had names like Raj Kapoor and Hrishikesh Mukherjee attached to it. In the film, Ranjit's (Khanna) inability to come to terms with the reality of losing the good things in life drives him to take his own life. Later, as a ghost, he meets Captain (Raj Kapoor), an angel who is the only one who can see him. Through him, Ranjit realizes how much those around him loved him while he was still alive. It could have almost been the story of his life. Perhaps this was the unnerving reality that Khanna saw coming true when he started the film and that is why he wanted to shun it. His apathy towards the film that might have started as a fantastical journey but turned out to be a testimony of his sorry state as a commercial actor, was evident in every single frame.

Based on a story by music composer Salil Chowdhury, *Naukri* was such a big letdown that the passage of time has simply erased it from the memory of the viewer, and the Rajesh Khanna–Hrishikesh Mukherjee association is remembered for *Anand*, *Namak Haraam* and *Bawarchi*, and rightly so. Sharing the screen with Raj Kapoor, whom he revered, might have been one of the incentives for Khanna to do this film but, ironically, people remember the two together more in the memorable moment they shared on screen in the song '*John Jani Janardan*' from Manmohan Desai's *Naseeb* (1981).

During the same period, Khanna lost an opportunity to be directed by Raj Kapoor in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (1978) when, strangely enough, the

showman of Hindi cinema was coerced by his family into casting his brother Shashi Kapoor instead. Ali Peter John mentions that although Raj Kapoor gave in, he used to lament his choice of lead actor as Shashi was too busy. In fact, given Shashi Kapoor's propensity to sign a film with almost everyone who approached him, Raj memorably said it was as if 'he was working with a taxi', who could be hailed at will by anyone passing by.

Raj Kapoor always had a soft corner for Khanna and the actor's close confidant Bhupesh Raseen says that Khanna often remembered the lost opportunity fondly. According to Raseen, Khanna used to mimic the manner in which Raj Kapoor broke the news to him. On one of his birthdays, the patriarch of Hindi cinema's first family landed up hours before anyone could arrive, with flowers, and the moment he saw Khanna, he folded his hands and said, '*Kaka, main bachchon ke saamne haar gaya.*'

If the prospect of working with one legend slipped through his fingers, Khanna almost made up for the loss when he announced *Majnoon* with Kamal Amrohi. A few days before the mahurat that would coincide with Khanna's birthday, a huge billboard went up in Worli informing all and sundry about the launch at Mehboob Studios. Visualized as a costume drama with the usual Amrohi embellishments, *Majnoon* had a lavish mahurat where both Khanna and his leading lady, Rakhee, revealed themselves in character and later went heavenwards amidst thunderous applause from onlookers. For days after the show, the entire industry was talking about the mahurat and, for his part, Khanna made sure that he asked whomever he met what they thought of the event.

Besides Khanna and Rakhee as the immortal lovers Laila–Majnoon, the cast was supposed to have included both Raj and Shammi Kapoor but like many of Amrohi's larger-than-life projects, this one too dissipated into thin air and all that was left behind were the still images. Had this film materialized, it would have been interesting to see Amrohi, a regular man whom many mistook for an emperor, and Khanna, a mortal who ended up believing that he was God, on the same platform. One can only imagine how these two personalities would have managed to get work done, especially with Amrohi's penchant for taking forever to translate the written word to screen.



How would Khanna have felt watching himself being discarded by those who would once not look beyond him? Samanta had moved on to Uttam Kumar and Amitabh Bachchan and so had Yash Chopra, who never cast Khanna even in the films produced by his company, a banner that Khanna played a vital role in

establishing. Despite being one of the busiest stars of the 1970s, a certain negativity had got attached to him, made apparent by projects getting shelved and roles being passed on to others. In just ten years, Khanna had gone from being the golden boy to just someone trapped in a gilded cage. People say that one had to see the extent of Khanna's success with their own eyes in order to comprehend it fully; but the fact that it took almost two decades for him to slip out of public memory in spite of his string of flops gives us an idea of the kind of sensation he was. As the decade came to an end, Khanna wasn't even in the top bracket of actors.

And then Khanna made his presence felt with an unexpected hit in the form of *Amar Deep* (1979). A remake of an old Sivaji Ganesan film, it saw Khanna play the lead more as star than as actor. He used his star baggage with mannerisms *et al.* but somehow it ended up working in favour of the film. *Amar Deep* happened out of the blue and it might have tempted Khanna to look forward to a new decade and a new phase. But like the song from *Amar Prem* goes, '*Majhi jo nao duboye usey kaun bachaye*', who can save a boat whose boatman is hell-bent on drowning it?

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Hazaar Rahein Mud Ke Dekhin

Even though most actors and film-makers in the industry were the same as in the decade that preceded it, there was a marked difference in the films of the 1980s. For Rajesh Khanna, the decade would be more than just the busiest in his career. He had signed off the 1970s on a decent note in the form of *Amar Deep* but his hits weren't a threat to anyone. From being a contender to the one who took the crown, Amitabh Bachchan had covered a lot of ground between 1975 and '79 and was on his way to becoming a one-man industry. In that same time, Khanna, almost unimaginably, would come achingly close to Bachchan in terms of being the highest paid actor, but even his highest of highs didn't matter any more.

Khanna entered the '80s with a film that was extremely unlikely for him. Horror as a genre has never really attracted the top stars in Hindi cinema and was the bastion of select actors, much like the action films of the 1950s or the '60s. Even the success of films like *Bees Saal Baad* (1962), *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964) and *Gumnaam* (1965) couldn't get leading stars to grace horror films and the genre's segregation was complete once the Ramsay brothers entered the fray. Khanna's first release of the decade was a horror film directed by Danny Denzongpa and featured a more than passable R.D. Burman soundtrack. Today *Phir Wahi Raat* (1980) might seem like a typical horror film in the tradition of the Ramsays, but at the time it was made, Khanna was still a marquee name.

Khanna plays a psychiatrist, Vijay, whose girlfriend Asha (Kim) has recurring nightmares of her insane aunt (Shashikala) strangling her. She is haunted by the image of her aunt killing her mother, and Vijay takes her back to the same mansion where, as a child, she had witnessed the incident. Asha's friend Shobha (Aruna Irani) accompanies them and is joined by Ashok (Danny Denzongpa), Asha's brother. With some help from the local cop (Suresh Oberoi), Vijay solves the mystery of Asha's nightmares and unearths the truth. For a first-time director, Denzongpa packed in enough to make sure that *Phir*

Wahi Raat rose above the usual trappings of the genre. It had some good songs like Lata Mangeshkar's 'Naina tarse', and even a decently baked parallel comedy track with Jagdeep. Ideally, a star's presence should have saved the film and, in Khanna, Denzongpa had a star; but sadly Khanna's presence heavily burdened *Phir Wahi Raat*. Right from the scene that introduces him to the viewer – wearing a safari suit with a sash – to the climax, Khanna sticks out. For the first time in his career, he was paired with a newcomer and ended up looking old enough to play her elder brother. But what stood out the most about *Phir Wahi Raat* was that, even in the songs, Khanna looked completely out of his element and, no wonder, the film was forever lost to memory in a few years.

Unlike Dilip Kumar before him and Amitabh Bachchan after, Khanna was perhaps the only actor–star who wasn't fully able to change the basic character he played. He did experiment with his look in films like *Bandhan* and *Daag*, but roles like in *Dushman* where he underwent a physical transformation were exceptions. However, it'd be unfair to believe that the actor in him wasn't challenged by the star. What separated him from a Dilip Kumar or a Bachchan was that he never really needed to rely on physicality to interpret a character differently. When required, a simple change in nuance could see him interpret a familiar character so differently that the result would be nothing less than mesmerizing, as he would prove with his next film.

Written and directed by Esmayeel Shroff, *Thodisi Bewafaii* (1980) was Khanna's first big success of the new decade and showed traces of the vintage Khanna. Arun (Khanna) is a rich jeweller's son who falls in love and marries Neema (Shabana Azmi), but misunderstandings arise between the couple. Neema also spots Arun with another woman and assumes infidelity, leading to separation and the custodial battle over their son, which Neema wins. Years later, fate brings Arun face to face with his son when he comes to Bombay for his studies and, finally, their son reunites the two.

In *Thodisi Bewafaii*, Khanna's Arun could have been mistaken for Arvind from *Karm* or even Vijay from *Phir Wahi Raat*, but with nothing more than a little restraint in playing him, Khanna made Arun a throwback to the characters he played during his heydays. Khanna limited his signature gestures so that Arun comes across as a credible presence; the star did not overpower the actor. He made the viewer accompany him on the character's journey to such an extent that even when Arun transforms into a near egoistical man in the second half, the viewer still roots for him. Arun's belief that Neema must suffer before he can consider pardoning her made him say mean things to her, but one still cannot stop sympathizing with him. Interestingly enough, Arun is almost an inversion of Kamal from *Aap Ki Kasam* and his interpretation of the character displays

Khanna's brilliance as an artist. While in *Aap Ki Kasam*, Khanna ensures that the audience hates Kamal, even though Sunita (Mumtaz) is missing from the climax, in *Thodisi Bewafaii*, he manages to keep the viewer on his side despite his attitude towards Neema in the end.

Thodisi Bewafaii's narrative featured Khanna and Shabana Azmi in equal parts, but the screenplay was structured in such a manner that Khanna's screen time seemingly reduced as the film progressed. This is probably the reason why the role is often seen as that of the lead as well as a character role. Maybe, there was a hint here that Khanna could have done well to consider: it was time to start looking at strong character roles than half-baked leading ones. Though the film's resolution, brought forth by their son Nandu's accident, might be predictable, it is far from weak, thanks largely to seasoned pros such as Khanna and Shabana Azmi playing their parts to perfection.

The film fetched Khanna a hit at the box office and both Kishore Kumar and Gulzar Filmfare Awards for the song '*Hazaar rahein mud ke dekhin*'. Khayyam's music is the soul of *Thodisi Bewafaii* and, though the decades that followed might not have been as kind to the film, its songs, such as '*Aankhon mein humne aap ke*' (Kishore Kumar, Lata Mangeshkar), '*Aaj bichde*' (Bhupinder), and '*Mausam mausam lovely mausam*' (Anwar and Sulakshana Pandit), with a young Padmini Kolhapure as Nandu's love interest, continue to be popular. If *Thodisi Bewafaii* expressed the desire of the actor within Khanna to seek characters that offered a chance to circumvent the star, his next film would establish it beyond doubt.

As far as stars went, the range of characters Khanna played was one of the most interesting. With *Red Rose* (1980), he took his variety a few notches higher, for it was unimaginable that in that era any star but Khanna would accept a film where the lead was a psychopath. His decision to play the protagonist could be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, Khanna might have wanted to make his already varied and interesting body of characters more exciting; on the other, he might have lost the fear of losing. The stage that his career was in made it easy for him to accept any challenge, while there was no way someone like Bachchan could, at the time, have even considered a film like *Red Rose*. In fact, the Khanna of the early '70s would have shied away from it too.

Red Rose's Anand, a psychopath who rapes and kills young women, is as far removed from the eponymous Anand that Rajesh Khanna is most well remembered for. He is a sadist who has had one bad experience too many at the hands of the female sex. His adoptive father shares a similar experience and trains Anand to lure and torture women before killing them. Anand records his acts on video so that his father can watch him elicit revenge on every woman he

comes across. But Anand falls for a charming salesgirl Sharda (Poonam Dhillon) and marries her. On their first night together, Sharda stumbles on his dark secret and even finds out about Anand's father, who stays in an outhouse. She tries to escape but Anand chases her into a graveyard where he injures himself. Sharda is saved as the police arrives just in time. Anand loses his mental balance and forgets everything about the past, barring Sharda's name which he keeps repeating in his prison cell.

A remake of P. Bharathiraja's Tamil film, *Sigappu Rojakkal* (1978) which featured Kamal Haasan and was a hit, the Hindi version failed at the box office. *Red Rose* would have always found it difficult to strike a chord with Hindi film audiences for the simple reason that they weren't used to seeing their heroes ending up as deranged lunatics. To its credit, *Red Rose* never compromised its integrity on account of a mainstream star playing the psychopath. Unlike in typical Hindi films, Bharathiraja doesn't justify the actions of Khanna's character beyond the necessity of the script, thereby making it exceptional.

In spite of the audience having access to epics like the Mahabharata, in which almost all characters function in shades of grey, Hindi cinema – especially the popular variety – has rarely allowed the hero to function beyond black or white. The anti-hero of *Aadmi Aur Insaan* (Feroz Khan) or the negative hero (Amitabh Bachchan) of *Parwana* (1971) is the maximum leeway that it allowed for the hero who wanted to function outside the gambit of the romantic lead.

In that sense, Khanna's role in *Red Rose* was one of the rare examples where a Hindi film protagonist operated without a moral compass and even though the film failed at the box office, it remains a fascinating piece of film-making. Bharathiraja's blocking, shot-taking and editing make *Red Rose* look like an Indian version of a Japanese Pink film – a theatrically released soft-core pornographic film. The hallmarks of Pink films – such as a limited budget and a minimum number of sex scenes – are all there in *Red Rose*, but its ability to offer an insight into the complexity of the human mind is what makes it so close to the genre.

Khanna added his flamboyance to the character he played and even plastered his celebrated mannerisms all over the character but it'd be unfair to say that he was over the top. This was a time when the villain was expected to be anything but subdued, but Khanna still managed to mute his starry traits enough to appear as if he were stuck in a vacuum. R.D. Burman's spellbinding background score adds to the film's campy, cultlike appeal. One way of looking at *Red Rose* is that it was way ahead of its time and the fact that it later had a Japanese remake, as mentioned in a few websites, is testimony to the film's closeness to Pink films.

Before the year ended, Khanna did two more films – *Bandish* (1980) and *Aanchal* (1980) – that were commercially more in sync with the kind of roles expected of a Hindi film star. *Bandish* paired him with Hema Malini and was producer D. Rama Naidu's second production with the two after *Prem Nagar*. It's difficult to imagine a thirty-eight-year-old man playing a medical college student and Khanna's problem was compounded by the fact that he never bothered about maintaining his physique or even general fitness levels. The film had Khanna and Hema Malini as college lovers with Danny Denzongpa playing the irate classmate. Like *Bandish*, *Aanchal* too was high on melodrama. The film is completely set in a village, giving Rajesh Khanna yet another opportunity to play a non-urban role. Both films were average earners, with *Aanchal* faring slightly better and, like most Khanna films, the music of these films lingered longer than the films themselves.



A glance at Rajesh Khanna's filmography reveals how the star was never really interested in doing multi-starrers till very late in his career. The concept of the multi-starrer originated in Yash Chopra's *Waqt*. It became immensely popular in the 1970s, with Amitabh Bachchan being one of the prominent actors endorsing the genre. Manmohan Desai, Bachchan's favourite director of the era, perfected the art of the multi-starrer, and it is interesting that the people who scripted and made the defining multi-starrers of the era – Salim–Javed (*Sholay*, *Shaan*), Yash Chopra (*Kabhi Kabhie*, *Trishul*, *Kaala Patthar*), Prakash Mehra (*Hera Pheri*, *Khoon Pasina*), Ramesh Sippy (*Sholay*, *Shaan*) and Manmohan Desai – were all part of the Bachchan 'camp'.

Most of Khanna's films were solo projects and, even the ones that had a second hero, featured them only in a supporting role, Sanjeev Kumar (*Aap Ki Kasam*), Vinod Khanna and Shashi Kapoor (*Prem Kahani*) being examples. Once the euphoria of the '70s died, the multi-starrer became a necessity for film-makers in the '80s to beat the scourge of video piracy. The only way to ensure footfalls in theatres in the 1980s was to cram the films with as many as three to four big stars.

In spite of being one of Hindi cinema's biggest stars ever, Khanna was never a part of the group of film-makers who now backed Bachchan and, even though he could still have managed to continue with the template that was uniquely his, he realized the need to change. His first crack at the genre saw him accost a film-maker rather than be approached by one. He approached the man who gave him his first film.

The first true multi-starrer Khanna signed up for was Chetan Anand's 1981 film *Kudrat*. Accustomed to producing his own films, Anand, while working on the script, wasn't keen on making *Kudrat* the big-budgeted opus that it ultimately became. B.S. Khanna, an independent producer, had signed Rajesh Khanna for a film and was asked by Rajesh to try and get Anand on board. Chetan Anand's son, Ketan Anand says, 'He (B.S. Khanna) came to my dad and said, "Kaka ke saath ek film karni hai aur woh chahte hai ki Hema (Malini) bhi ho uss mein."' (Let's make a film with Kaka. He would like it to feature Hema Malini too.) Chetan Anand was working on a script that had reincarnation as a theme and he narrated it to Khanna who leapt at the project.

Anand had made films featuring a multitude of characters, like *Haqeeqat*, but this would be the first time he'd employ some of the biggest names in the business. Besides Raaj Kumar and Priya Rajvansh, his favourites, Anand had Vinod Khanna, who was at his peak, and Hema Malini. With R.D. Burman, arguably the biggest composer in the industry at the time, setting the music, the film had all the makings of a big-budget blockbuster.

Shot in Shimla, *Kudrat* is a love story and a sweeping revenge drama that doesn't get bogged down by the trappings of the reincarnation theme. Chandramukhi (Hema Malini) visits Shimla for the first time with her parents but suspects that she's been there before. She starts liking Naresh (Vinod Khanna), a doctor whom she meets with her parents, but feels an instant connection with Mohan (Rajesh Khanna), a lawyer whom she accidentally bumps into. Mohan is engaged to Karuna (Priya Rajvansh), a lawyer too, and the daughter of his benefactor Janak Singh (Raaj Kumar). Chandramukhi starts having nightmares featuring a man called Madho (Khanna), her lover from a previous birth who was killed by a zamindar's son. She realizes that she was Paro in her earlier birth and the zamindar, after killing Madho, had raped and murdered her. Along with Naresh, Mohan and Chandramukhi discover that the zamindar is none other than Janak Singh. Mohan takes Janak Singh to court and an unaware Karuna defends her father.

Kudrat brought together stars as well as acting styles that differed a great deal from one another. The result was an interesting film that is more nuanced than your regular multi-starrer. The film's success at the box-office as well as at the year's Filmfare Awards – where it lapped up a statuette for Parveen Sultana (Best Female Playback), Jal Mistry (Best Cinematography) and Chetan Anand (Best Story) – told a very different story from what had transpired behind the scenes.

Although Rajesh Khanna had approached Anand through the producer and not only agreed to the casting but also the story, he felt that the film's climax

leant in favour of Priya Rajvansh. He mentioned this to Anand, who told him that he wasn't going to change the original story, because the whole drama centred upon Karuna paying for her father's sin (he was cursed by a dying Paro and, in the climax, Janak Singh finally realizes that he is a criminal in the eyes of nature or kudrat, a court bigger than the one of men). But Khanna wasn't convinced by the reasoning and along with the producer, who happened to be his man, decided to push Anand a little.

A lot had changed since *Aakhri Khat*, and Khanna wasn't the rank newcomer Anand had directed then; and although his fortunes were on the decline, he was, nonetheless, a big star. Sorab Irani, one of Anand's associates from the period, who also happens to be a friend of Ketan Anand, recalled what followed in great detail on his blog, following Rajesh Khanna's death in 2012.¹ Irani writes that Khanna and the producer forced the editor to re-edit the climax behind Anand's back and refused to allow the director any say in the final cut. A distraught Chetan Anand even approached the Bombay High Court and asked for the release of his own film to be stopped. The judge, according to Irani, however chose to rule against Anand.

Like in the case of Gautam Kaul's tirade against Khanna for his alleged harassment of Basu Bhattacharya following *Daku*, Chetan Anand's son doesn't make much of the incident. He says that Khanna did have some trouble with him not getting the spotlight in the end but, beyond asking his father to reconsider the ending, the star didn't create trouble during the shooting. Once the film was ready, Khanna did make another attempt but, like Ketan says, 'no one could arm-twist my father' and Khanna simply gave up. Ketan does remember his father and Khanna having a series of meetings in which the matter was settled amicably, but insists that nothing as dramatic as approaching the Bombay High Court ever happened.

Irrespective of which version one believes, it's quite possible for Khanna to have tried getting his way. Even in other films like *Namak Haraam*, he had tried to exercise the power of his position by forcing rewrites or delaying films. In fact, *Naukri* was delayed to such an extent that two of the three original producers left the business for good. But such things have been the norm in Hindi cinema.

In *Kudrat*, Hema Malini and Rajesh Khanna might have enjoyed more screen time, but it's Raaj Kumar and Priya Rajvansh who have the author-backed roles. But as Khanna was the lead and, by definition, the one to profit most from the film's success, he did reap the benefits in the form of having another box-office success in his kitty and a Best Actor nod from the All India Critics Association. The film's music was a standout, especially both versions of

the spellbinding '*Hume tumse pyaar kitna*'. Although the Parveen Sultana version is more classically rooted in its composition, and bagged the Filmfare Award, Kishore Kumar's rendition became more popular. Penned by Majrooh Sultanpuri, the song continues to remain one of the most memorable songs of everyone associated with it.

Besides changing his approach towards films in the 1980s, Khanna also initiated major changes in his personal life. One of them was banning Devi from visiting his sets. In addition to being an unwavering devotee, Devi was also someone who possessed an acerbic pen and a sharper tongue. Devi's name was not usually at the top of anybody's good lists and she was once reportedly chased by Dharmendra across a studio when she wrote unsavoury things about Hema Malini; the gentle giant, of course, didn't harm her. Her continual rant about Khanna's married life and topics that he was clearly not comfortable being written about saw him snap ties with the journalist who had played a great role in propping up his superstar myth. Khanna rarely spoke to her after this and refused to visit her even on her deathbed.



Almost every big star, right from Ashok Kumar, is credited with creating a particular type of character that almost became a template for those who followed. Dev Anand inspired the charming impish lover boy who, when the occasion demanded, could become a socially conscious individual. Dilip Kumar made the complex and brooding tragedian his calling card. Raj Kapoor set the tone for the nameless common man. Those who came after them simply, and regularly, aped these aspects of their personas. In his initial years, Khanna was credited with being the ultimate lover boy without a worry in the world and most of his characters were modelled on the same personality type. In the 1970s he played them as simple men who were compassionate and sought love, while in the 1980s he started portraying a little more complexity in them.

One might not think of Khanna as being an inspiration for the kind of character Shah Rukh Khan played in films such as *Baazigar* and *Anjaam*, but it wouldn't be incorrect to think of his roles in *Amar Deep*, *Red Rose* and *Dhanwan* (1981) as the starting point in shaping the characters played by Shah Rukh. *Dhanwan* is a lot like *Anjaam* (1994) without the blood-and-gore climax of the latter.

Khanna plays Vijay, an unkind rich man who takes a fancy to Asha (Reena Roy) and covets her. He believes that his money can buy anything he desires but can't get over Asha spurning him for a lowly clerk Anil (Rakesh Roshan). A few

years later, Vijay loses his eyesight and learns that money isn't the answer to all the troubles in the world for he, like everyone else, has to wait for a donor to restore his eyesight. The wait makes him a humble person and he completely transforms when Anil, the very man he loathed, ends up donating his eyes to Vijay.

Dhanwan is one of Khanna's lesser-known films from the period but is one of his more interesting roles. The coldness with which Khanna plays Vijay in the first half makes this film worth viewing. Khanna's smug Vijay here is a precursor to Shah Rukh Khan's Vijay Agnihotri from *Anjaam*. In fact, Reena Roy's defiant widow act in the second half could very well be a precursor to Divya Bharti's in Khan's debut, *Deewana* (1992).

Close on the heels of *Kudrat*, Khanna and Hema Malini paired up yet again for *Dard* (1981) that had Khanna in a double role. *Dard's* screenplay gave Khanna a great deal of screen time, and the father-son dual role ample opportunity to bring the house down with his histrionics. In the broadest sense, *Dard* was a typical Rajesh Khanna film in the mould of an *Aradhana*, *Amar Prem* or *Kati Patang*, where the heroine undergoes a lifetime of trauma to make someone else's life better; but the only difference was that, here, Khanna was playing the role which was usually reserved for his heroine.

Filled with enough theatrics to see four movies through, *Dard* was nothing less than a treat for Khanna's fans who got to see him in vintage mode. An emotional roller coaster, with Khanna playing two distinctive characters, *Dard* was also blessed with Khayyam's music that helped rekindle the warmth of *Aradhana* and *Kati Patang*. The film was not as big a hit as the ones Khanna had seen a decade ago, but it did enough to keep the distributors happy with the star.

Before the year was over, Khanna's special appearance in the song '*John Jani Janardan*' in Manmohan Desai's *Naseeb* saw him briefly share screen space with Amitabh Bachchan for the last time. Bachchan plays a singing waiter who entertains guests, who include film stars like Raj Kapoor, Dharmendra, Sharmila Tagore, Shammi Kapoor and Khanna. Although everyone else seems to be enjoying themselves, Khanna, who plays himself, appears conspicuously restrained around Bachchan. When looked at closely, even after three decades, the disdain that shines in Khanna's eyes seems far too real to be ignored; he also seems oddly cold towards the others in the frame.

Fifty-Fifty (1981) was Khanna's last film of the year and, although the film and everything about it pushes the boundaries of plausibility, it's nonetheless an entertaining film. It was on the sets of this film that Khanna met Tina Munim, his future paramour. They shared a great on-screen chemistry that made the little moments of *Fifty-Fifty* come alive.

Like Dimple Kapadia, Tina Munim was a Khanna fan but, unlike Kapadia, she was an established heroine by the time she met Khanna. The casting, by most yardsticks, especially age, came across as inappropriate, but what helped the chemistry was that Khanna wasn't the same star Tina had grown up on.

The film was a regular masala entertainer about infants being swapped at birth, mistaken identity, thieves, swindlers, and a princely state with treasures worth millions. *Fifty-Fifty* is one film from the early 1980s where Khanna seems to be having had a blast. A breezy potboiler, it was a decent success and, besides bringing Khanna in contact with Munim, also laid the foundation for the last of Khanna's successful on-screen pairings.



The next year, 1982, had Khanna making another concerted effort at an image change. This time around, he combined action and multi-starrers, the two genres that were partially responsible for his downslide in the mid-1970s, and did three films that might not have been on his radar some years ago. Perhaps the positive response to *Kudrat* made the idea of sharing screen space with others more appealing to Khanna or maybe he found the shared pressure of multi-starrers inviting, but he was inspired enough to do three such films back to back, and all three ended up being successful in varying degrees at the box office.

Umesh Mehra's father F.C. Mehra had been a part of the United Producers Combine but, apart from Shammi Kapoor's failed attempt at casting Khanna in *Manoranjan* which he had produced, F.C. Mehra hadn't thought of a project with Khanna. The younger Mehra had assisted Shammi Kapoor on *Bundal Baaz*, during which time he had observed Khanna at close quarters and promised himself that one day, he'd present the star in a completely different avatar. Umesh Mehra pitched the idea of *Ashanti* (1982) to the actor, who agreed to do the film within ten minutes of the narration.

Umesh had seen Khanna during the dizzying heights of superstardom and, even though the young director was at the receiving end of Khanna's mind games during the making of *Bundal Baaz*, the desire to cast Khanna in a role that would do away with the myth of him being someone who couldn't go beyond being the romantic hero or an emotional actor, compelled him to go ahead.

Mehra recalls that growing up around the legendary Shammi Kapoor, who was one of his father's closest friends, he was never awed by Khanna. 'Working with him in *Ashanti* was a cinch,' says Mehra, and believes that 'the energy of working with a bunch of youngsters, with him [Khanna] being the only name, along with three heroines, kept Khanna in good spirits'.

Ashanti featured Khanna as a disgraced policeman, Kumar, who is believed to be a co-conspirator in a bank robbery which he actually foiled. The robbery not only strips him of his rank but also leaves him crippled and imprisoned for a crime that he never committed. Upon his release from prison, Kumar teams up with three women (Zeenat Aman, Parveen Babi and Shabana Azmi) and a local goon, Shankar Dada (Mithun Chakraborty), to punish the men responsible for ruining his life.

Khanna wasn't as apprehensive about the young director – or even the role – as he was about changing his look for the film. Mehra coaxed him to sport a beard for the film and says that was 'the only serious reservation [Khanna] had, but when he saw his look, he wore it'. Mehra remembers how Khanna would taunt him every day of the shoot that he wouldn't do this for anyone else. Mehra says, 'Kakaji, till the end, really did not *bend* for anyone ... though he was swayed by flattery.'

Besides *Anand* and *Namak Haraam*, the only time Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan came close to being cast together was for Vijay Anand's *Rajput* (1982). One of the few directors from Hindi cinema's golden period who never really got his due, Anand had worked with Dharmendra and Bachchan in *Ram Balram* (1980) and was keen to cast both of them along with Khanna for his magnum opus that was to showcase the valiant Rajputs. Had things worked out, it would have been interesting to see Khanna and Bachchan in the same frame ten years after *Namak Haraam*. For someone who never really associated himself with the genre of action films, Khanna looked very much at home portraying a Rajput with Dharmendra and Vinod Khanna. The film's huge canvas also featured Hema Malini, Tina Munim and Ranjeeta Kaur.

In spite of being well mounted and replete with all the elements of a potboiler, *Rajput* somehow fell short. It isn't the kind of film that one would associate with Vijay Anand, the maverick behind classics such as *Tere Ghar Ke Saamne* (1963), *Guide*, *Jewel Thief*, *Teesri Manzil* and *Johny Mera Naam*, among others. Devoid of the Vijay Anand signature touch, be it the sensitivity in the treatment of the characters, the smoothness of the narrative or even the song picturization, *Rajput*'s sweeping canvas seemed burdened by the expectations generated by its huge star cast. Additionally, it suffered from a lack of detailing across the board. Even though the film is set during the period around Independence, it looks like standard 1980s fare, thanks to its high drama and loud action.

Surprisingly, Khanna comes across as one of the brightest spots of the film and, unlike the others, his character is better etched. In the initial scenes where Dhiren (Khanna) travels to meet Janki (Hema Malini), the girl he was engaged to

as a child, Khanna's legendary effervescent charm is on full display. For a forty-year-old man, Khanna manages to look devilishly coquettish quite effortlessly in the song '*Mere sang-sang aya teri yaadon ka mela*' (Kishore Kumar) and outdoes both Vinod Khanna and Dharmendra, who were more popular than him at the time.

While Khanna was busy trying to fit himself in multi-starrers, Amitabh Bachchan managed to not just find but also stand his ground in probably his penultimate two-hero project. *Shakti* (1982) pitted Bachchan against Dilip Kumar and in spite of not having the author-backed role, usually his for the taking in a Salim-Javed script, he more than justified his superstar tag. Khanna, on the other hand, wasn't too impressed with Bachchan's effort. He is rumoured to have quipped that he was happy to see Dilip Kumar still commanding a fan following that was queuing up to see the thespian's latest release.

The next multi-starrer that Khanna attached himself to was *Dharam Kanta* (1982). Though he had played a dacoit in *Bhola Bhala*, this time round, he was directed by the man who became synonymous with the genre. Between 1973 and 1995, Sultan Ahmad made six films that had the daku as the central character. Almost like a rite of passage, he directed major stars playing the dacoit across generations, such as Sunil Dutt in *Heera* (1973), Amitabh Bachchan in *Ganga Ki Saugand* (1978), Mithun Chakraborty in *Daata* (1989) and Sanjay Dutt in *Jai Vikranta* (1995). Although Khanna didn't really play a dacoit under Ahmad's supervision, the film had a backdrop of Ahmad's favourite character (with Raaj Kumar playing the reformed daku). It featured Jeetendra as Khanna's lost brother and paired Khanna once again with Raaj Kumar and even had Waheeda Rahman, one of his first heroines, playing his mother.

The film barely escaped the usual trappings of the daku genre – i.e., being loud and melodramatic – and suffered from a mishmash of themes, from vendetta to lost and found. The music, composed by Naushad, in a break from what was the norm, didn't feature Kishore Kumar as the voice of Khanna and, much like the film, enjoyed limited success.

One of the things worth recalling in *Dharam Kanta* is the Raaj Kumar-versus-Rajesh Khanna histrionics where both tried to outdo each other as far as dialogue delivery went. Both actors possessed a natural flair for indulging in theatrics, but Raaj Kumar had the advantage of being able to stay in character even when the filming stopped. In all seriousness, he would insist on getting done with the shots of the others, especially the 'junior artists', before the attention shifted to him. Khanna aficionados wouldn't be amused to learn that the junior artists that Raaj Kumar referred to were usually the superstar and Jeetendra!

Along with the large-scale multi-starrers, Khanna managed to squeeze in a couple of 'smaller' films. In *Dil-e-Nadaan* – a remake of the Tamil film *Ilamai Oonjal Aadukirath* – he and Shatrughan Sinha partook of some heightened dramatic squabbling in a story of two friends falling for the same woman, Asha (Jaya Pradha). There were a few special appearances as well, such as in *Disco Dancer* where he played Jimmy's (Mithun Chakraborty) guru. Like 'Zindagi ek safar hai suhana' in *Andaz*, he got a hit number, 'Goron ki na kaalon ki, duniya hai dilwalon ki' (rendered by Suresh Wadekar), in *Disco Dancer*, and made his presence an indelible memory in a film that, essentially, defined the trajectory of Mithun's career. Even though he became part of a number of two-hero projects following *Dharam Kanta*, Khanna steered clear of the multi-starrer for a while. He moved away from the genre almost as suddenly as he had got into it and, in the six years till his next multi-starrer, he almost returned with a bang loud enough for everyone to sit up and notice.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

*Yaaron Utho Chalo Bhaago Daudo, Marne Se Pahle
Jeena Na Chhodo*

‘Diary khali hai. Jo dates chahe likh lo.’

The voice on the other end of the phone was familiar, but Saawan Kumar Tak took some time recalling the face it belonged to. Eight long years had passed since he had first approached Rajesh Khanna for a film and now, even the superstar’s voice seemed unrecognizable. By the time Kumar responded, Khanna had broken into a laugh and told him that he was at home and free to do his film. In true Hindi film-maker style, Saawan Kumar told him, *‘Main aa jata hoon phir. Mehfil saja denge.’*

Best known for directing *Gomti Ke Kinare* (1972), Meena Kumari’s last release, Saawan Kumar had made a name for himself by making women–centric films like *Saajan Bina Suhagan* (1978) and *Saajan Ki Saheli* (1981). He had been intending to make *Souten* (1983) with Khanna for quite a while and had relentlessly chased the superstar – who kept pushing the project – for almost half a decade. The writer-director’s five-year-long wait ended within five minutes once he narrated the subject; Khanna agreed readily. Saawan Kumar still remembers the smile Khanna broke into when he accepted the proposal. He says, *‘Ajeeb si hansii thi uski ... it was beautiful and mesmerizing.’* Khanna told Kumar that he could pay him whatever he deemed fit and immediately got involved in all aspects of *Souten*, right from the casting to costumes. Parveen Babi and Padmini Kolhapure were signed on to play the leads and concurrently Saawan Kumar got together with writer Vijay Kaul to work out the screenplay.

Souten was a modern interpretation of the Krishna–Rukmini–Radha triangle and Saawan Kumar felt that, barring Khanna, no other actor could handle the conflicting emotions he wanted to portray. Upon the suggestion of Rajendra Kumar, who had become a friend since they worked on *Saajan Ki Saheli*, Kumar decided to base the film in Mauritius which had a strong Indian diaspora. During

the location recce, Saawan Kumar even walked into then Prime Minister Seewoosagar Ramgoolam's house and sought his blessings to shoot in the island state. Ramgoolam, whose family hailed from Bihar, was fondly called Chacha and he not only promised to extend all help but also assigned an administrative officer to the director during the forty-five-day schedule.

Like *Aradhana*, the film that ushered in the golden phase of Khanna's career, *Souten* underwent a major overhaul just before filming was about to commence. Fifteen days before the principal photography was to begin, Parveen Babi walked out of *Souten*. A distraught Saawan Kumar drove over to Aashirwad and informed Khanna who, according to the film-maker, suspected foul play. Three decades later, while talking for this book, Saawan Kumar spoke about the politics and subtly hinted that Parveen Babi abandoned *Souten* at the behest of the biggest star of the day.

Khanna called Zeenat Aman and offered her the part, but she couldn't spare a month and a half at a stretch for the film. It was then that Tak thought of Tina Munim as the female lead. Tak had bumped into Tina as a young starlet many times over the years, as her sister, Jharna, used to stay in the same building as him. He recalls how Tina constantly urged him to cast her in one of his films and now, driven by necessity, he was convinced that she would be ideal for *Souten*.

Souten was the perfect film for a consummate thespian like Khanna. It pulled out all the emotional and dramatic stops that one could expect of a commercial Hindi film and the casting made it more appealing. Khanna played Shyam, an upright man who dreams of making it big as a shipping tycoon in Mauritius. He approaches a bank to finance his business, and its president (Pran) not only helps him but also pushes him to marry his daughter Rukmini (Tina Munim). Rukmini's stepmother (Shashikala) and her uncle Sampatlal (Prem Chopra) try their best but are unable to stop the wedding. After the wedding, Shyam's success becomes a sore point with his mother-in-law and she poisons Rukmini's mind about her husband's growing fondness for his accountant's daughter Radha (Padmini Kolhapure). The distance between the husband and wife widens when Rukmini undergoes a surgery to prevent pregnancy and is eventually unable to bear children. Shyam finds a shoulder to lean on in Radha, while Rukmini is convinced of her husband's infidelity. She separates from him and, egged on by her stepmother, vows to ruin Shyam's life.

Souten was just the kind of film where Khanna could let go of himself. And let go he did, both on and off screen. Treated like royalty right from the moment he landed in Mauritius, by everyone from the island state's prime minister's office to Saawan Kumar, Khanna had the time of his life on the film's shoot. After a long time, he had a script that offered him a chance to sink his teeth into

a character's emotional turmoil. But what made the film a milestone in his life was the manner in which reel and real life collided.

Accompanying her husband on location, Dimple had a ringside view of Khanna's growing closeness with Tina Munim. Saawan Kumar recalls that it was during *Souten* that the Khanna–Munim intimacy mushroomed into a full-blown affair. The growing differences between Khanna and Dimple were part of industry lore and hardly a secret. Like Dimple, who married Khanna when she was on the threshold of stardom, Munim too, according to numerous interviews given by Khanna, was a fan of his who, incidentally, was nursing a broken heart. Rumour was rife that Tina had split with Sanjay Dutt, her co-star in *Rocky*, and couldn't help but fall for teenage crush Khanna.

Unable to take it any more, Dimple, according to Kumar, returned to India and Khanna went full steam ahead with Munim. Khanna complicated matters further when he decided to let the developments in his real life inspire the reel role he was playing. He told Saawan Kumar that he felt some conflict with the way his character was shaping up and wanted to change the script. Kumar says, 'Khanna felt that if Shyam's wife doubted him and had left him, there was nothing stopping him from marrying Radha or even having an affair with her.' The director couldn't understand why it was so difficult for Khanna to comprehend the morality of the characters. 'I had modelled the triangle on Krishna, Radha and Rukmini; and here he was, saying that he wanted Shyam to have *fun* with Radha, if nothing else,' says Saawan Kumar as he remembers the argument. The director explained to the actor that if he listened to Khanna and gave up whatever semblance of morality his characters possessed, the entire film would fall like a house of cards.

But Khanna didn't give up and even suggested that they could change the names of the characters during post-production while dubbing, saying, '*Koi farak nahi padega.*' His dogged insistence that a mere change in the name of characters will settle everything didn't go down well with Saawan Kumar, who decided to stall the filming till Khanna returned to his senses. The unit came back to India without completing the film and it'd be four months before things moved forward.

Saawan Kumar says, 'Khanna sent me feelers through the writer, but I told Vijay Kaul that I'd rather burn the negative than give in to Khanna's whims.' One day, a beaming Kaul entered Kumar's office and asked him to call Khanna but the director refused. Kaul dialled the star and handed the receiver to Saawan Kumar and, without any provocation, Khanna chastised him for not keeping in touch for the past four months. Khanna spoke as if nothing had happened and told the director that he would come over for a drink, following which they

would leave differences aside and resume *Souten*.

Though Khanna had returned to work without any demands, the drama surrounding *Souten* was far from over. Four days before the premiere of the film, a trial was held for the crew at Dimple Theatre. Khanna had invited Shakti Samanta and Ramanand Sagar as well. During the interval, Samanta and Sagar made a beeline for Saawan Kumar and praised him to the skies; but when the film got over, the veterans quietly walked past him and huddled with Khanna in the garden outside the preview theatre. Saawan Kumar saw them discussing something for almost half an hour. The two directors took off without looking back and Khanna summoned Saawan Kumar to Aashirwad for a discussion.

During the drive, Kumar confessed to Vijay Kaul that the discussion between Khanna, Samanta and Sagar at this stage could only mean one thing – change; and he was sure that he wasn't going to budge. Once they reached Khanna's home, they were made to wait for over an hour before Khanna emerged, all bathed and dressed in his favourite silk lungi–kurta. Saawan Kumar says, 'Khanna looked shocked that we were without our drinks and quickly fixed one for everyone present.'

One by one, Khanna asked everyone around what he or she felt about *Souten*. The first one to go was the wife of Ambrish Sangal, the director of Khanna's *Dard*, and she said 'Zabardast!' but her husband didn't share her enthusiasm. A minor argument ensued between the couple and finally Saawan Kumar asked Khanna what was wrong. Khanna told him there was a problem and that's why he was taking everyone's view.

Saawan Kumar had had enough and asked Khanna to tell him the mistake. Khanna replied that a mistake would still be fine, but he had committed a blunder. Khanna told him in no uncertain terms that he looked like an idiot in the climax while the two 'women' seemed to be stealing the show. He went on to add that he was a superstar and, if he wasn't doing anything in the end, the hero looked like a zero and that wasn't acceptable to him. Saawan Kumar looked Khanna straight in the eye and told him that this was the ending that was planned and in fact narrated to him and reminded him that Khanna himself had praised him on the fantastic resolution. He also said that while he respected both Samanta and Ramanand Sagar, he didn't agree with their point of view that *Souten*'s second half was uncomplimentary towards Khanna. Like the time when *Kudrat* was being made, Khanna tired his damndest best to coerce the director to reshoot the climax, but Saawan Kumar didn't surrender. He remembers, 'I told him, be practical. The prints have been delivered and the premiere is in three days. So no one's changing anything.' Khanna then threatened to give the premiere a miss and Saawan Kumar responded saying it was entirely Khanna's

decision to make, and left.

Khanna's whimsical demands probably suggested that he worried that if *Souten* failed, he would end up copping a major portion of the blame as both the leading ladies weren't as big draws. At the same time, maybe he was concerned that if it succeeded, his contribution could be overlooked given that the women protagonists had such important roles to play. Khanna's insistence on giving the hero more prominence could have been his craving to gain more from the success of the film. It was a project he believed in strongly.

For the next three days, Khanna receded into a shell and didn't contact Saawan Kumar. Kumar too told Vijay Kaul (who, in spite of being close to Khanna, refused to see logic in his argument) that he wasn't interested in appeasing Khanna's ego. Tina Munim cancelled her appearance for the Delhi premiere on account of Khanna and even Prem Chopra backed out, saying there's no point in going if the hero was missing. A day before they were to leave for Delhi, Khanna sent Vijay Kaul as an emissary and informed Kumar that he would come for the premiere. On the day of the premiere, Khanna and his entourage called distributors all over the country from the hotel room in Delhi to get the initial feedback about *Souten*. His mood changed the moment he learnt that a week was booked in advance; and when the group finally arrived at Sheila Theatre for the 3 p.m. show, he saw something that laid all his doubts to rest.

The matinee show had got over and when the audience got wind of Khanna's arrival for the next show, the crowds thronged the car that ferried Khanna. Suddenly, it was yesterday all over again. The mad frenzy that used to accompany almost all his releases had ceased for almost a decade, and now a part of it was back. Khanna watched the show with the audiences and couldn't believe their reaction. Saawan Kumar walked up to Khanna and quoted Sahir's couplet that best described the moment: '*Le de kar fakat ek nazar hi to hai humare paas; kyon dekhen zindagi ko kisi ki nazar se?*' (I had made my films the way I saw life. Why would I ever choose to see things from someone else's perspective?) *Souten* enjoyed a great run at the box office. It had all the elements of a classic Khanna film of yore in the form of high drama and chartbusting music boasting of songs like the playful Lata-Kishore duet '*Shayad meri shaadi ka khayal dil mein aaya hai*' and the soulful '*Zindagi pyaar ka geet hai*'. Its success proved that Khanna could still deliver.

Although, looking back after thirty years, parts of *Souten* might appear to be highly contrived, it has aged decently and the set-up demanded the kind of execution it had. One of the reasons why the film does not seem tacky is the subtle portrayal of Khanna's Shyam as the proverbial outsider in the narrative.

Throughout his career the roles Khanna essayed were drawn from real life and yet, somewhere, he displayed an acute sense of detachment in his portrayals. This indifference is a trait often ascribed to actors destined to be stars like Khanna in the case of *Raaz* and *Aradhana*, or stardom that usually misplaces the actor within like in the case of *Bundal Baaz* where the emotional distance between his character and him is more than visible. Ironically, the times he played an outsider – like in *Anand*, *Bawarchi* and *Dushman* – he appeared more intimate. In *Souten*, the Khanna–Munim chemistry is undeniable, but so is Shyam’s detachment from Rukmini; and it is maintained throughout the film.

The industry was surprised by the magnitude of *Souten*’s success, but Rajesh Khanna was not done yet. There was another surprise hit waiting for him around the corner and this one, too, came in a manner most unexpected.



The kind of films Mohan Kumar liked to make weren’t the kind that would have resonated with the audiences of the 1980s. Perhaps this was why the man who had directed *Aas Ka Panchhi* (1961), *Anpadh* (1962), *Ayee Milan Ki Bela* (1964) and *Aap Aye Bahaar Ayee* (1971) hadn’t made a film for seven years since *Aap Beati* (1976). He now decided to take an actor who could connect to people and thereby compel the audiences to give his kind of story a chance. Mohan Kumar had signed Amitabh Bachchan and was all set to start *Avtaar* (1983) with the reigning star, but surprised everyone when he opted for Khanna. This was one of the rare instances when a film-maker went against the standard industry practice and chose Khanna over Bachchan. If Raj Kapoor had shocked him on his birthday a few years ago by dropping him from *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, Mohan Kumar gifted *Avtaar* to Rajesh Khanna on his birthday. Kumar was attending Khanna’s birthday bash and something came over him that evening when he simply decided on Khanna as Avtaar Krishan, the middle-aged factory worker forced into hardship by his thankless sons.

The industry wasn’t as shocked at Kumar’s decision to cast Khanna as it was about him dropping Bachchan. While talking about the casting, Kumar hints at signing Bachchan largely for economic reasons (distributors would pay more for a Bachchan film) and says that he felt happier when he went with Khanna. *Avtaar* brought Khanna and Shabana Azmi together again and saw them as leads in a manner that was hitherto unexplored in popular commercial Hindi cinema.

Unglamorous and unrecognizably common, *Avtaar* and *Radha* weren’t the hero and heroine in the conventional sense of the word and, while this wasn’t something out of the ordinary for Shabana Azmi, Khanna had rarely been seen in

such a role. The audiences embraced the film, and the story of a couple let down by their children, struck a chord among a cross section of viewers.

In an era when Hindi cinema was divided into three broad categories – commercial, parallel and Amitabh Bachchan – the success of Khanna's *Souten* and *Avtaar* briefly created a fourth quadrant. Khanna had tried doing the multi-starrers, the run-of-the-mill a-little-bit-of-everything kind of film, and everything else that was demanded of a hero, but found himself a misfit of sorts in both categories as far as audience affirmation went. Khanna's *Avtaar* was in a way a throwback to the kind of films expected of a leading man and, impressively, the acceptance of his character suggested that commercial Hindi cinema could in fact look at heroes beyond a certain age. A year before *Avtaar*, Dilip Kumar had found a role that suited his age in *Shakti* (1982) but unlike the thespian, Khanna was from a different generation and, at forty, had convincingly played father to an actor who was just ten years younger than him in real life.

Two decades later, Bachchan, in a surreal coincidence, eventually got to play an *Avtaar*-esque role in Ravi Chopra's *Baghban* (2003). Produced by B.R. Chopra, who had initially thought of making the film with Dilip Kumar in the 1960s, *Baghban* was almost a remake of the Mohan Kumar hit and both Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar ended up collaborating on the screenplay, although separately. While Bachchan requested Javed Akhtar to polish his lines in the climax, Salman Khan, who played a role loosely based on Sachin's character from *Avtaar*, got his father, Salim, to look over his dialogues.

Avtaar was a sentimental social drama far removed from that era's staple action-and-venedetta films. The film was structured on the lines of a simplistic stage play, which made the performances the sole looking point for the audience. Spared from distracting ploys like heightened production design and costumes, *Avtaar* delivered – and still manages to, after thirty years – a sublime account of anguish within the boundaries of a cinema that often failed to look beyond the mindless. Khanna played the part with sincerity and the story of a man obsessed with making the best of a half shot at a second chance had an uncanny resemblance to his own situation. The film gives one the feeling that Khanna understood *Avtaar*'s torment, inflicted by the likes of his sons, the heirs apparent, who waste no time in being spiteful towards someone who no longer served any purpose.

The film's music by Laxmikant–Pyarelal gave Khanna a fresh anthem of sorts in '*Yaaron utho chalo bhaago daudo, marne se pahle jeena na chhodo*' (Kishore Kumar, Mahendra Kapoor) and the nation a new bhajan, '*Chalo bulawa aaya hai, Mata ne bulaya hai*' (Mahendra Kapoor, Asha Bhonsle, Narendra Chanchal), besides a signature Rajesh Khanna duet '*Din, maheene,*

saal' (Kishore Kumar, Lata Mangeshkar).

The year only got better for Khanna with Lekh Tandon's *Agar Tum Na Hote* (1983), his third success in a row. Khanna pitched in another tender performance as a rich industrialist whose wife (Rekha) dies after complications during childbirth and leaves him helpless with a young daughter who craves for her mother.

Agar Tum Na Hote too stood out amidst the action films and the mindless 'entertainers' from the south featuring Jeetendra that were the trend of the time. The film's strong sense of moral codes was in stark contrast to the prevailing bankruptcy that laced most films of this period. Under Lekh Tandon's direction, Khanna's Ashok came across as the calm centre surrounded by emotional conflict. R.D. Burman's music and Gulshan Bawra's lyrics gave listeners an unforgettable Kishore Kumar song in the title track which continues to sound fresh. Like *Mehbooba* and *Kudrat*, the film had two versions of '*Humein aur jeene ki chahat na hoti*' but, unlike the songs in those two, Kishore Kumar's version here is matchless.

Inspired by the hat-trick of successes, Khanna decided to go for the kill. In order to make things the way they once were, he would have to rope in the very people who had helped him take his first steps. But before that could happen, Khanna had to mend some fences and rebuild a few bridges. One of the first people he went to meet as soon as he embarked on the mission, was Shakti Samanta, the man who not only knew what the actor was capable of but also knew how to make that happen.

After *Anurodh*, Samanta had made five films, but none of them featured Khanna in a full-length role. Samanta had since made two films with Amitabh Bachchan and one each with Uttam Kumar, Sanjeev Kumar and Mithun Chakraborty, and didn't seem to be missing Khanna. He had featured Khanna in a brief appearance in *Ayaash* (1982), but had no plans of making a film with the actor he had turned into a star.

Samanta was all set to begin *Awaaz* with Dilip Kumar and Anil Kapoor when Khanna came calling. Khanna, R.D. Burman, Anand Bakshi and Samanta used to be a foursome who regularly spent long evenings in each other's company. During these sessions, creativity in the form of music and stories took precedence over alcohol. But those evenings were a thing of the past as far as Khanna and Samanta were concerned.

Ashim Samanta recalls Khanna dropping over unannounced to catch up with his father. In spite of the way things had turned out, Khanna always thought of Shakti Samanta as more than a colleague, in fact as a close friend. Ashim says, 'He considered my father his mentor and that evening he sat down on the

carpet in front of him and refused to get up till my father agreed to cast him in his next film.’ Ashim narrates how his father told Khanna that Dilip Kumar had already committed his dates and that he’d develop a story for him once *Awaaz* finished, but Khanna wouldn’t take no for an answer. Ultimately, Samanta the film-maker lost to Samanta the friend and, by the end of the evening, the Khanna–Samanta team was back in business.

Originally, the script of *Awaaz* offered nothing to the ‘Rajesh Khanna’ Samanta was used to, but once the actor came aboard, the director had to make changes to the script in order for it to suit Khanna. Try as he might, Samanta couldn’t imagine Khanna in the role as it stood – that of a lawyer who defends criminals simply because their crime doesn’t affect his existence, and who undergoes a transformation when his client’s son rapes his (the lawyer’s) wife and sister. Most galling was the fact that the role had no place for the hero to sing and dance.

The inclusion of songs in the film to accommodate Khanna’s persona triggered off a chain of events that, sadly, sealed its fate. Anil Kapoor walked out of the film as he couldn’t see himself in the same role opposite Khanna instead of Dilip Kumar; and Samanta had to settle for Rakesh Roshan. Most of the songs that were supposed to be filmed on Anil Kapoor were now split between Khanna and Roshan, who was playing the role of Vijay, a college student who joins the police force to avenge the death of his brother, Inspector Amit (Suresh Oberoi), the man who tries to warn Jayant (Khanna), the lawyer, of the risks he ran. With Dilip Kumar in mind, Samanta had planned a film that was completely different from how *Awaaz* ultimately turned out. The box-office response was lukewarm as well.

Ashim Samanta believes that the film would have been a success had his father not taken an emotional decision. For once, even R.D. Burman failed to live up to the expectations that a Samanta–RD pairing usually roused and, barring Suresh Oberoi, the film had hardly anything to recommend it.



In some sort of an irony, 1984 saw the release of three films that were almost a salute to George Orwell. Parallel cinema had dedicatedly explored societal decay and malaise through films like *Nishant* (1975) and *Aakrosh* (1980), but mainstream Hindi cinema thought it best to ignore reality. Even when it chose to depict what was happening, it was usually presented in a stylized way. Maybe the success of Govind Nihalani’s *Ardh Satya* (1983) inspired a change in attitude, and commercial Hindi cinema decided to venture into new territory and

tried to interpret the society it catered to.

Inquilaab, *Yeh Desh* and *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar* – all hitting the screens in 1984 – featured three of the biggest stars of the era taking on the establishment and delivering instant justice. In *Inquilaab*, Amitabh Bachchan played an honest policeman who is sucked into the vortex of dirty politics. In *Yeh Desh*, Jeetendra portrayed a trade union leader imprisoned on a false murder charge; upon release, he finds adjusting in a morally ambivalent society difficult. Nestled in between was Khanna playing a simple village barber who becomes the chief minister of a state in *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar*.

Remarkably enough, all three films were helmed by directors from south India. These were men who had witnessed popular cine stars like M.G. Ramachandran and N.T. Rama Rao successfully enter politics at the highest level. The timing of these films for the two directors – T. Rama Rao (*Inquilaab* and *Yeh Desh*) and Dasari Narayana Rao (*Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar*) – was also interesting. Both hailed from Andhra Pradesh where N.T. Rama Rao had become the chief minister in 1983.

Usually, films with such strong socio-political statements were seen as a stepping stone for actors who fancied entering politics but, unlike Bachchan who stood for parliamentary elections in December 1984, Khanna had no such plans. At least not yet. *Inquilaab* had rousing dialogues and clearly larger-than-life aspirations and had Bachchan, a chief ministerial candidate, killing the entire cabinet of corrupt ministers; but *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar* played more like a B-grade film that explored the working of the nation's degraded political system.

Two powerful village politicians Gauri Shankar (Om Shivpuri) and Makhanlal Kesari (Madan Puri) can't stand each other and are forced by the party to pick a consensus candidate for the one seat they are eyeing. They end up choosing Ramavtar (Khanna), an illiterate barber, as a compromise candidate, who wins the elections. Ramavtar doesn't take long to become a bloodsucking corrupt politician. He plays his cards well and becomes the chief minister but alienates his wife Sushma and his children. He also incurs the wrath of Kranti Kumar (Shatrughan Sinha), a revolutionary he had saved once. Things reach a tipping point when Sushma and Kranti, along with an elderly politician named Balmukund Tripathi (A.K. Hangal), galvanize the people on the streets and demand his resignation. Cornered by the masses, Ramavtar accepts the people's charges against him, but not before making them realize that it's they who create monsters like him.

A hurried remake of a Telugu film, *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar* didn't do as well as *Inquilaab* and even looks comical when compared to the latter, but the film had more than its moments. Both films traversed the same broad ground,

but differed on many counts, with the physicality of the leads being one distinctive factor. Khanna's get-up in the film was very different from the recognizable star that he was and charted the journey of Ramavtar in two distinctive parts. The more successful Ramavtar becomes as a politician, the closer his persona resembles Khanna's real-life persona, with the mannerisms and nuances becoming more pronounced. Unlike Khanna, Bachchan left nothing to the imagination in *Inquilaab* where there's hardly any physical discrepancy between the actor and the character.

At the time of their release, both films tried making strong social statements, but with Bachchan embarking on a political career following the release of *Inquilaab*, a large part of the attention was diverted not just from *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar* but also from Khanna's performance.

With its implausible but, in a sense, heroic climax, *Inquilaab* offered the perfect escapist foil to *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar*'s simple resolution. *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar*'s highpoint is a nearly ten-minute monologue delivered by Khanna towards the end, which encapsulates the degeneration of India's political system. It voiced the mood of the nation during the film's release and, sadly, sounds more than relevant even after thirty years of its release. Ramavtar tells the crowd baying for his blood that he isn't the first corrupt minister and that it's the people's fault that so much corruption has been allowed to seep into public life. Voters don't value the power of their ballot and select the wrong candidates. He argues that if an illiterate like him could sway everyone around him to make him the CM of a state, there was probably no hope left for the nation. He admonishes the very people who are raising placards against him and says that it is they – the morally bankrupt populace – who elect corrupt leaders. He describes the cyclical nature of corruption that is endemic in India where politicians make money to buy votes and then loot the voters to do it all over again. Ramavtar leaves it to the people to deliver justice to the members of his cabinet, unlike *Inquilaab* where one man single-handedly 'cleanses' the system.

The almost prophetic tenor of Dr Rahi Masoom Reza's dialogues make revisiting the film three decades later only better. It wouldn't be completely incorrect to say that *Aaj Ka M.L.A. Ramavtar*, despite its commercial and critical failure, set the tone for the popular representation of politicians in most Hindi films that followed in the 1980s in films like *Arjun* (1985), *New Delhi Times* (1986), *New Delhi* (1987), *Bhrashtachar* (1989) and *Main Azaad Hoon* (1989).

Khanna had further failures in *Asha Jyoti* (1984) and *Naya Kadam* (1984), and enjoyed his last super-hit in the form of *Maqsad* (1984) before the year ended. If Khanna the actor was having a reasonable run, Khanna the star was enjoying the spotlight that had partially returned to him; but things were far from

ideal for Khanna the householder. After a decade of being with him, Dimple Kapadia walked off with the children, leaving behind her husband who imagined it to be a temporary upheaval. Many believe that Khanna's insistence that Dimple not work in films caused the two to look at things differently and it was only a matter of time before they separated. Along with the reversal of his fortunes at the box office, Khanna's growing closeness with Tina Munim gave him some hope in spite of the turmoil at home.

Much like his superstardom, all things good in Khanna's case came with a short shelf life; but irrespective of the duration, their luminosity was blinding. Similar to his reign at the top, Khanna's real-life romance with Tina Munim outshone most affairs in Hindi cinema. And though he never again saw the kind of success he did in the 1970s or briefly in the first half of the 1980s, the second half of the decade would be the busiest time of his life.

12

END OF DAYS

Zindagi Ke Safar Mein Guzar Jaate Hai Jo Makaam Woh Phir Nahin Aate

At a time when almost every actor stuck to the tried and tested, Rajesh Khanna did the most varied roles of his career. He didn't mind participating in multi-starrers and readily indulged the remakes of southern films – something of a norm for most actors during the 1980s. His remakes were not as successful as Jeetendra's; and even though his filmography was peppered with Hindi versions of popular southern hits right from the early days – *Aurat*, *The Train*, *Prem Nagar* – it was Jeetendra who ended up being the poster boy for this phase in Hindi cinema that was primarily loud, garish, boisterous and senseless.

The other end of the spectrum had Amitabh Bachchan who had now become a colossus none had dreamt of. In spite of films that would appear to be regressive and even misogynistic in content today, Bachchan's off-screen persona was so overpowering that anything he did was acceptable. The outsider who appeared from nowhere and pulled the rug from under superstar Khanna's feet, Bachchan had been such an underdog that when he finally became the king, it wasn't just his victory. Unlike Khanna whose stardom fuelled his persona, Bachchan's aura fanned his stardom and the millions who associated with his on-screen Angry Young Man avatar found his off-screen humility something they could identify with. This is one of the reasons that anything Bachchan did during this period not only gained acceptability but also attained a veneer of respectability.

Although he pushed the envelope by playing a host of diverse roles that most of his peers would avoid, Khanna wasn't able to resuscitate his career. The presence of younger actors like Anil Kapoor, Sunny Deol and Jackie Shroff only made the going tougher; but he managed to manoeuvre himself into the most active phase of his acting life.

With fourteen releases – including special appearances – 1985 was the

busiest year Khanna ever had. He played a lawyer (*Durgaa*), an orphan who avenges his benefactor's death (*Oonche Log*), an enraged army officer seeking to avenge his wife's rape and murder (*Insaaf Main Karoonga*), a successful doctor whose life is disrupted by a lookalike (*Hum Dono*), a village schoolteacher (*Masterji*), a police officer (*Zamana*), a sensitive writer who inspires a woman to come into her own (*Aakhir Kyon?*), a rickshaw puller (*Babu*), a playback singer (*Alag Alag*), a man who marries a woman younger than his son because she resembles his dead lover (*Awaara Baap*), the object of a woman's obsessive love (*Bewafai*), all in the gap of twelve months.

Most of these films were instantly forgotten, barring *Aakhir Kyon?*, *Masterji*, *Babu* and *Alag Alag*. *Zamana* (1985) got Khanna and Rishi Kapoor together for the first time and even had Salim Khan writing for him after *Haathi Mere Saathi*. Khan had gone solo after his split with Javed Akhtar and felt that Khanna would suit the character of the police officer whose estranged younger brother (Rishi Kapoor) is a criminal and who falls for the same woman his brother loves. The film's script had far too many Salim–Javed elements – lost and found, vendetta, mistaken identity – and almost cheated the viewer by rehashing standard Salim–Javed fare. Khan's decision to work with Khanna nonetheless quelled the rumours about the writer's problems with the irascible star in the past and also led to further speculation that Akhtar was the one who had taken a dislike to Khanna.¹

Khanna also reunited with J. Om Prakash for *Aakhir Kyon?* (1985) and did a role that was beginning to define him in mid-career. Khanna plays a writer, Alok, who becomes the pillar of strength for Nisha (Smita Patil) who is gathering the pieces of her life after her husband Kabir (Rakesh Roshan) leaves her for her younger sister Indu (Tina Munim). His elegantly simplistic Alok lacked the obvious theatrics of Kabir and Nisha and charmed the audiences, even though the role was in the nature of an extended cameo. At places, it felt unreal and resembled the theatrical tools of the ancient Greeks, à la deus ex machina, but Khanna, at home with such characters, kept Alok afloat.

Like the way most of his on-screen characters never worried about societal pressures when it came to matters of the heart, Khanna started living in with Tina Munim, making the blossoming romance the talk of the town. Flaunting romantic liaisons was not new for Khanna, and his relationship with Tina in the 1980s was as conspicuous as his car when it was parked overnight under Anju Mahendru's flat in the late 1960s.² When probed about the extent of their closeness, the two famously said that they shared the same toothbrush.

Khanna had already done a few films with Tina and wanted a classic love story to capture their romance forever. He approached Shakti Samanta to direct

Alag Alag (1985) and the couple even offered to produce it. Love is known to make people do crazy things, but producing a film wasn't as irrational an idea as Khanna's desire to play a young playback singer opposite Tina. Khanna plays Neeraj, who aspires to be a successful playback singer but meets one roadblock after the other in the course of his journey. Meanwhile, Chandni (Tina Munim) escapes her village in order to marry the first nice rich man she finds and mistakes Neeraj for a rich man when she sees him standing next to a car. But she dumps him the moment she learns the truth and comes across Dr Rana (Shashi Kapoor), an elderly widower who allows her to stay in his house. The convoluted tale meanders its way to a tortuous climax where the lovers meet.

Samanta felt that, physically, Khanna was way past his prime to even think of playing Neeraj and suggested that the superstar essay Rana's role. But Khanna could not see beyond being his ladylove's on-screen lover as well. Had Neeraj been played by a younger actor like Anil Kapoor, not only would the character have seemed real, but even the film's story, which goes through every imaginable emotion, might have appeared plausible. Khanna manages to keep pace with the bubblier Tina but, in places, comes across as a man refusing to accept his age. The part where he's wearing a kurta-pyjama and serenading Tina with '*Tere bina nahin jeena*' (Kishore Kumar) is especially jarring. For the better part of *Alag Alag*, Khanna appears to be battling midlife crisis and desperate to be accepted by the audiences along with his new love.

Along with Samanta, Khanna got all his other favourite people – right from R.D. Burman to Anand Bakshi and Kishore Kumar – to collaborate on *Alag Alag*, but nothing helped. Anand Bakshi penned some soulful lyrics like '*Kabhi bekasi ne maara, kabhi bekhudhi ne maara*' (Kishore Kumar) and Kishore Kumar, a stickler for remuneration who rarely crooned for free, even refused to accept money for the project because it was *Aradhana* and Khanna who gave him a fresh lease of life as a singer. (Rajesh Khanna would later return the favour by doing a special appearance in Kishore Kumar's final production, *Mamta Ki Chhaon Mein* [1989], which released after the singer's death.) Upon its release, however, none of this goodwill could save *Alag Alag*. But Khanna sought refuge in the fact that his affair with Tina didn't share the fate that *Alag Alag* suffered at the box office.

The same year saw Khanna's estranged wife get back to acting with Ramesh Sippy's *Saagar* (1985). Written by Javed Akhtar, *Saagar* gave Dimple Kapadia her second shot at films – something that wasn't an option as long as she was with Khanna. Had the twenty-eight-year-old mother of two continued acting post-*Bobby*, she would have been relegated to character roles by the time *Saagar* happened; but destiny had a totally different script in mind for Dimple.

Written with the idea of re-launching Dimple, *Saagar* got her rave reviews along with a new identity. There were murmurs from some quarters that Khanna wasn't too happy with the kind of role she played, but his opinion didn't matter any more.

No amount of experimentation with either the variations in roles or their duration could detach the 'has-been' tag from Khanna. Even though he was one of the busiest stars who made as much money as the top draws despite not being an assured box-office attraction, he no longer had roles specifically written for him like Bachchan. By the mid-1980s, names like Manmohan Desai and Prakash Mehra – directors who had generously contributed to the creation of Bachchan's one-man-industry persona – had lost the magic touch and the younger directors flooding the scene did not find Khanna as interesting an option as actors their own age.

Most of his films during this period – *Shatru*, *Mohabbat Ki Kasam*, *Angaaray*, *Adhikaar*, *Nasihah*, all releasing in 1986 – were merely products of the environment and, soon, even the weight his name carried, when attached to a project, started diminishing. His off-screen shenanigans didn't help him either, and an incident of him allegedly molesting a fifteen-year-old Sabiha made things worse. Khanna reportedly harassed Sabiha, the daughter of former actress Amita, during the making of *Anokha Rishta* (1986); and while such allegations weren't new to the film industry, Khanna's supposed actions brought forth a facet that no one associated with him. He had been thought of as a complex and insecure person who was often consumed by jealousy and, even though at times he hinted at affairs with co-stars, this allegation put him in a different league. But strange as the ways of the world of Hindi cinema were, it was Sabiha and not Khanna who bore the brunt of the incident. She was ostracized by the trade and the incident became more of a footnote that was referred to when similar incidents – like Pooja Bedi accusing Aditya Pancholi of raping her domestic help, or Jackie Shroff harassing co-star Farah Naaz's then teenaged sister Tabu – came out in the open.

Unperturbed by most of what was transpiring around him, Khanna continued to go through the motions of being a professional actor. He tried his best to maintain the symbolic Khanna *character* he had perfected over the years. He got together with Mohan Kumar for *Amrit* (1986), a film that could have very well been a sequel to *Avtaar* if one imagined Radha (Shabana Azmi) and not *Avtaar* (Khanna) dying at the end of the film. In *Amrit*, Khanna played the titular role of an elderly man who, after being thrown out of his own house by his children, forms a bond with Kamla (Smita Patil), a woman undergoing the same trauma. *Amrit* tried to relive *Avtaar* in word as well as spirit and garnered some

critical acclaim, but it fell short of enjoying the same success as its inspiration.

Unlike 1985, when Khanna had fourteen releases in a single year, the next few years saw him drastically reduce his work, partially due to the emergence of younger stars. While Bachchan's *Mard* (1985) and *Geraftaar* (1985) were hits, his only release in 1986, *Aakhree Raasta*, was a limited success. With *Pyaar Jhukta Nahin* (1985), *Aandhi-Toofan* (1985), *Swarg Se Sunder* (1986) and *Dilwaala* (1985), Mithun Chakraborty's box-office draw got better. Further, having followed up the surprise success of *Meri Jung* (1985) with *Karma* (1986), Anil Kapoor was almost a star as well. Amongst Khanna's releases in 1987, only *Nazrana* and *Awam* were noticeable, and even these barely so. While *Nazrana* saw Khanna play a music director who has three women vying for his attention in some form or the other, in B.R. Chopra's *Awam* he is an army officer trapped in an espionage racket.

Imitating the directionless nature of his professional life, Khanna's personal life too hit a bend. After *Souten*, the Rajesh–Tina pair hadn't been able to live up to expectations; and the abysmal box-office performance of *Alag Alag* and *Adhikar* (1986) made the pair hit a dead end. But what bothered the couple more was the fact that things had started falling apart in the personal sphere as well. While Tina often asked what lay ahead for the two of them, Khanna did not look beyond the present. He convinced Tina to do Saawan Kumar Tak's *Souten Ki Beti* (1989), hoping that its success would act as a shot in the arm for both their on-screen pairing and the wilting romance. But it was not to be. The two had got together while working on a Saawan Kumar film, *Souten*, and ironically enough it was while working on a movie with the same film-maker that they went their separate ways.

Saawan Kumar had already shot a considerable portion of the film when the two broke up. After this, Khanna declared that he was not in the mood to continue working with Tina while she wasn't interested in the film as long as Khanna was part of it. Saawan Kumar felt cheated that Khanna kept him in the dark about the uncertain state of their relationship. 'He told me, "I thought once we started working, things would be fine,"' recalls Saawan Kumar.

For a man whose affair with Tina forced his wife to walk out of a decade-long marriage with their two girls in tow, Khanna didn't seem to be in a rush to settle down once again. Unlike Tina who, according to the grapevine, was insistent upon marriage, Khanna refused to take things to the next level. He had patched up with Anju Mahendru following his marriage to Dimple and, much like his reunion with Anju, his estranged wife had, at least publicly, accepted Tina's presence.

For anyone looking from outside, Khanna's arrangement with the women in

his life was interesting, to say the least. In a photo from the late 1970s or the early '80s, in which Khanna and Dimple share the frame with Anju Mahendru, he seems to be equally at ease with both the women. In fact, it is Dimple who looks like an outsider between the former lovers. Ironically, in a similar photo from a few years later, Dimple and Khanna appear to have hit a comfortable spot post-separation while Tina, who is also featured in the photo, resembles the eager-looking Dimple from the earlier picture. Tired of his noncommittal attitude, Tina gave him an ultimatum and finally walked out when Khanna didn't budge.

For popular consumption, Khanna maintained that he didn't want to divorce his wife and subsequently marry Tina because of the detrimental impact it might have on his two girls. Perhaps there is some truth in the assertion. The two were hitting an age – thirteen and ten – when stories about their father would have started making an impression. But this concern for his daughters never stopped Khanna from talking about his affair in great detail. Khanna had often talked of divorcing Dimple to Tina Munim but never got around. Some people in the know believe that when he actually asked for a divorce, Dimple refused to comply but then Khanna never tried wholeheartedly enough, thereby forcing Tina to walk away from a futureless relationship.

In an interview to Shobhaa De, given some years later, Tina reportedly said that Khanna wasn't capable of loving anyone but himself. He tried hard to keep her from leaving him, but a heartbroken Tina not only left him, but lost interest in films as well. She planned to pursue higher studies in the US, but instead met and married Anil Ambani, the scion of Reliance Industries, during a sojourn in 1991.

Khanna tried getting back on track and drew some inspiration from his contemporaries like Dharmendra who, with seven hits, had one of his best years in 1987, and Vinod Khanna who made a successful comeback with *Insaaf* (1987). More than that, for the first time since he outshone Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan had started showing signs of slipping. In a joint interview given to *Movie* magazine, Khanna told Bachchan that every time he saw him falter, he couldn't help but smile as he had seen how things such as stardom play out.³ On the face of it, Khanna's statement might be interpreted as his familiarity with the script of fickle superstardom. But for someone who in the same interview confirmed the veracity of the famous incident where, during his descent from unparalleled heights, he stood on the terrace of Aashirwad during a downpour and asked God if he had tested him enough, and who during his own reigning days had been keen to insult Bachchan, it might be safe to assume that he was pleased with Bachchan's state. But before Khanna could do anything concrete to

resurrect his professional life, the playing field changed once again – and perhaps this time forever.

With *Tezaab* (1988), Anil Kapoor staked a claim to the crown that wasn't resting as easily on Amitabh Bachchan's head as he had been used to. But more than that, the year witnessed the debut of a new kind of star. *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (QSQT, 1988) ushered in a new heart-throb in the form of Aamir Khan and also pressed the reset button on commercial Hindi cinema. It took all the done-to-death classic elements of popular Hindi films – romance, songs, high drama, warring families – and yet managed to come up with a new kind of storytelling. The success of QSQT and *Maine Pyar Kiya*, which followed the next year, changed the way audiences looked at films. Suddenly, the standard fare of the 1980s wasn't going down well with the audiences any more and they didn't spare even stars like Amitabh Bachchan who tried to continue doing the same old number in films like *Ganga Jamuna Saraswati* (1988), *Toofan* (1989) and *Jaadugar* (1989), three films which ended his reign at the top for good and, for the first time since *Zanjeer* in 1973, put a question mark on his ability to draw audiences. It would take years for the industry's faith in him to be restored.

The advent of Aamir and Salman Khan also created a new template for stars. The initial euphoria surrounding the two, especially Salman, was somewhat reminiscent of the frenzy that Khanna had created with *Aradhana*. Fans might not like the idea of these two scenarios compared and, even though the level of Aamir and Salman's popularity could quantitatively never be seen in the same light as Khanna's, the truth is that their stardom has lasted much longer. Even after two-and-a-half decades, the two leading men continue to be as popular, and perhaps even bigger draws than they were during their initial days, which for the sake of argument would imply Khanna enjoying the same or more popularity in the mid-1990s as he did in the early 1970s. In fact, Khanna was almost out of circulation by then.

Two decades after *Aradhana*, Khanna saw himself being relegated to character parts and even the bigger roles he got were far from being the pick of the lot. Besides a series of special appearances – *Main Tera Dushman*, *Mamta Ki Chhaon Mein*, and *Paap Ka Anth* – Khanna tried his luck in horror once again and played the leading man to Farah Naaz in B.R. Ishara's *Woh Phir Aayegi* (1988). With a premise that had more than a passing resemblance to his earlier *Phir Wahi Raat*, *Woh Phir Aayegi* also featured Moon Moon Sen and a young Javed Jaffrey; and like his earlier horror outing, Khanna looked older than everyone else. Having nothing apart from a Jaffrey dance number to recommend it, the film didn't do too well.

If the changing scenario was compelling Bachchan to experiment with films

like *Main Azaad Hoon* (1989), which was inspired by Gary Cooper's *Meet John Doe* (1941), it made Khanna play Rishi Kapoor's father in Yash Chopra's *Vijay* (1988), a pointless reworking of Chopra's own *Trishul*. Although Khanna's role was more of a special appearance and he was absent from a major portion of the film, he still played father to a contemporary like Rishi Kapoor. *Vijay* was more of an act of desperation on Chopra's part and he even confessed that it was perhaps 'the only film he made for an audience that he imagined' – a fact that didn't help anyone, least of all Khanna.⁴

In *Ghar Ka Chiraag* (1989), Khanna reprised Balraj Sahni's role from *Ek Phool Do Mali* (1969), playing a rich businessman yearning for a family after his wife's death. He marries a much younger Kiran (Neelam) to save her from the stigma of unwed motherhood following the death of her lover, Ravi (Chunky Pandey). Barring Bappi Lahiri's rehashed Malkit Singh tune '*Tutak tutak tutiyan*', *Ghar Ka Chiraag* didn't make much noise.

Khanna tried to revive his production house and got B.R. Ishara to direct *Police Ke Peeche Police*, but shelved the project midway. Tina Munim's exit made one thing very clear to Khanna – that his association with Dimple would continue in some form or the other. He finally came around to Dimple's decision to return to acting and cast her opposite himself in *Jai Shiv Shankar* (1990). Directed by S.A. Chandrashekhar, *Jai Shiv Shankar* was a multi-starrer featuring Jeetendra, Chunky Pandey, Poonam Dhillon and Sangeeta Bijlani besides Khanna and Dimple, and aimed to make up for the loss of *Police Ke Peeche Police*. By the time filming began, it was clear that reactions to a Rajesh Khanna project had undergone a major transformation and, had it not been for the prospect of Khanna and Dimple sharing the same frame, the film would not have attracted any attention. The film never enjoyed a theatrical release but, for the time it was in production, the Rajesh–Dimple casting coup was enough to keep the project in the news.

By the time the '80s ambled to an end, even Bachchan's downfall did not mean much to Khanna. He might have found solace in the fact that Bachchan had much more to lose than him but, unlike most of the class of actors from the 1960s and '70s, Bachchan continued to be the first choice for many of the younger film-makers. In 1990, Mukul Anand's *Agneepath* gave Bachchan's Angry Young Man a makeover and introduced the star to a whole new generation of viewers. For his part, Bachchan tried to shift things around by changing his popular baritone in order to create a specific character. More than Khanna, Bachchan had become a victim of his own image and, although at the time of its release *Agneepath* was a commercial letdown, it allowed the actor in Bachchan to break out of his mould. The film brought Bachchan his first

National Award for Acting and has since attained cult status.

Just as unexpectedly as Bachchan eased into the 1990s with *Agneepath*, Khanna had his career's last hit in David Dhawan's *Swarg* (1990). Written by Anees Bazmee, *Swarg* was also David Dhawan's first big hit and helped establish Govinda as a star who could shoulder a film by himself. *Swarg* reinterpreted Khanna's *Avtaar* and had him in a similar character. This time around, he is cheated by his own brothers.

To a large extent *Swarg* was *Avtaar*, told from the point of view of the servant, played by Sachin in the original; but Khanna had enough to do. He played a character that was not only close to his age but also suited him, and the joy was visible every time he came in front of the camera. In the initial weeks, *Swarg*'s young cast and crew – for whom Khanna was *the* Rajesh Khanna – felt a little intimidated, but Khanna put them all at ease by blending in. Bazmee recalls how he and Dhawan – who was well known to Khanna thanks to his stint as an editor on *Souten* and later *Alag Alag* – etched out scenes that would do justice to the image of Khanna that they had in mind. Most of the actors found Khanna's aura to be more overwhelming than the man himself, but the icon made everyone feel at ease. The shooting was a mega picnic.

Khanna also enjoyed the camaraderie and tried to complement his co-stars in every possible manner. He was more than patient when an emotionally charged Govinda, having grown up watching Khanna, saw in a confrontational scene between his Krishna and Khanna's Sahabji his opportunity to prove that he was as good, if not better, than the iconic star, and tried to take the scene to some other plane with his histrionics. Khanna allowed Govinda his multiple takes, and even let him change the mood of the scene with each new take he tried; but when the younger actor's overzealousness refused to see reason, he simply walked up to him and reminded him that he was still *the* Rajesh Khanna and, if he desired he could effortlessly walk all over the younger actor in the scene. Khanna let Govinda shadow-box him all through the scene and, even though he barely speaks in it, the scene remains a standout in *Swarg*.

The immense success of *Swarg* and even the manner in which it showcased Khanna could not do much for the star who was unable to translate it into more such – or better – roles befitting his age and stature. Bachchan embarked on a second phase of the Angry Young Man with a surprise hit in *Aaj Ka Arjun* (1990) and an inspired Mukul Anand, who topped *Agneepath* with *Hum* (1991). More than Khanna, it was the kind of cinema that he excelled in which was on its way out; and, while the new lot of film-makers like Mukul Anand and J.P. Dutta were keen to present Bachchan and Dharmendra in a new light, for Khanna, the road ahead looked dark.

He continued to do films but decided to try the one role at which even Bachchan had failed. Following his campaigning for them, he had got feelers from the Congress party to join active politics, and finally took the plunge in 1990. Consumed by jealousy for a large part of his professional life, Khanna believed that he had found the one place where he could finally outshine Bachchan.

OF BROKEN DREAMS

Sapna Salona Tha, Khatm Toh Hona Tha

Strangely, when it came to the very society that it claimed to represent, Hindi cinema never cared about its reality beyond a point. Although it fed the viewer a regular diet of patriotic as well as war films, political films as a genre did not exist in mainstream Hindi cinema. Most films that dealt with the idea of the nation centred on heroes, real as well as imagined, and were happy telling the popular version of events such as Independence, Partition or conflicts with neighbouring countries. Unlike the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu where the profile of a cine star's political identity was directly proportional to his or her on-screen popularity, Hindi stars either kept away from active participation in politics or, at best, opted for a superficial engagement.

The Emergency imposed by Mrs Indira Gandhi further alienated popular Hindi film stars from politics. It's not that the Emergency didn't touch the lives of film artists. For the government, film actors were no different from the millions of ordinary Indians and it issued as many diktats to actors as it did to the faceless people who lined up every Friday to watch them. The government coerced popular names from cinema to speak in its favour and also compelled them to perform on their command, failing which they were either banned from state-controlled media platforms or troubled in other ways.

Unlike the thousands of nameless Indians who stood up against the government's autocracy, only a handful within the industry had it in them to oppose. The most vocal opposition came from someone very close to Rajesh Khanna. Kishore Kumar's refusal to be a stooge who performed on Delhi's command got him barred from All India Radio and Doordarshan. Similarly, Shatrughan Sinha, one of the busiest stars of the era, was banned from state-run platforms because he openly supported Jayaprakash Narayan. In his autobiography, *Romancing with Life*, Dev Anand recalled how he and Dilip Kumar were tricked into attending a rally for the Youth Congress, where they

were 'requested' to praise Sanjay Gandhi's dynamism. Anand refused and then saw his films being banned and his name blacklisted on state media. He sought time with the then I&B minister to question the clearly dictatorial actions of the government and was told that it was 'a good thing to speak for the government in power'. Dev Anand later floated a political party, the National Party, to oppose the government's high-handedness.

Somewhere, the industry's latent anger towards the system found an outlet in films like *Deewar* that Javed Akhtar has claimed to be inspired by the events that were transpiring around.¹ But even then, *Deewar* was not a straightforward depiction of the political turmoil that engulfed the nation and neither was *Aandhi*, a film allegedly based on the life of Indira Gandhi or Tarkeshwari Sinha depending on how it was viewed. Popular Hindi cinema maintained a healthy distance from the reality of the day and the passage of time increased this gulf. Even parallel cinema, which was born during these years, fell woefully short of depicting the plight of ordinary men and women during the Emergency. In spite of its constraints, popular cinema put in a joke or two about the Emergency, like in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Naram Garam* (1981) where Om Prakash, the pandit, is told to hurry on account of some emergency and he, surprised, asks, 'Phir se?' Or for that matter his *Khubsoorat* (1980) which transported the political emergency to a delightful family story.

Khanna might have spent many an evening during that period with Kishore Kumar, a victim of state haughtiness, but he was the only popular actor of the time who openly propagated the Congress's cause through films like *Maha Chor* and the scene in the film that sermonized about the virtues of the said government with a graffiti proclaiming 'Vote for Congress' visible in the background. Even Amitabh Bachchan, with his well-known proximity to the Nehru-Gandhi family, never publicly associated with the state's functioning during the Emergency.

Till Bachchan and Sunil Dutt both of whom contested the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, actors in Hindi cinema seldom took a clear stand when it came to the state. Actors like Prithviraj Kapoor and Nargis were relegated to the Rajya Sabha. Appointed the sheriff of Bombay in 1981, Dutt's entry into politics was a natural progression from his well-known social work that ranged from entertaining troops posted at the borders to raising money for charitable causes; but Bachchan was utilized by the Congress in the only manner politicians used film stars.

In politics, the strongest contender for a seat is usually a natural choice over the rest, but sometimes Indian political parties pick a contender just because of the perception that he/she is capable of defeating a stronger candidate. The

Congress unleashed Bachchan on Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna, a veteran in Uttar Pradesh politics, and the manner in which the superstar thwarted the former state chief minister made it clear that only the end mattered, not the means. Bachchan was a close confidante of Rajiv Gandhi and, according to the actor, he forayed into politics only because of his childhood friend's emotional plea.

The manner in which Dev Anand went about his political party made the Congress sit up and take notice as it was during the same turbulent years that M.G. Ramachandran was sworn in as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu for the first time. Unlike Dev Anand, MGR had an astute political mind and had been a member of the legislative assembly for over a decade. The government could have feared that, like MGR, who remained the chief minister of Tamil Nadu for three successive terms till his death in 1987, Dev Anand – or any popular star who joined politics against it – could spell trouble.

When Bachchan entered politics, he was at the peak of his popularity. He might also have been a part of the Congress's agenda to keep future threats like Dev Anand's political party and other such at bay, for by getting him, the Congress had netted the biggest star of the day. But Rajiv Gandhi didn't expect Bachchan to leave things midway in order to clear his name, as well as his brother Ajitabh's, which had been marred because of the Bofors controversy. '*Kahin tum kuchh galat to nahin kar rahe?*' (I hope you aren't doing anything wrong?) asked Dr Harivanshrai 'Bachchan' of his son; and it was this innocuous query from his father at the breakfast table that made the star decide to quit politics and fight the Swedish daily that had claimed that the Bachchans were involved in the Bofors kickbacks.

Rajiv Gandhi didn't take too well to Bachchan's decision and saw it as abandonment. It was also during this time that the Congress was ousted from power. Rajiv was looking for new friends and he saw Rajesh Khanna as not only a replacement for Bachchan, but also as someone whose proximity to him would spite Bachchan. Those close to Khanna, such as Johny Bakshi, saw this as a retirement plan for the star but Khanna would have probably looked at it as an opportunity to prove that he was better than Bachchan. However, it is interesting that when Johny Bakshi asked Khanna about his decision to join politics, the star guffawed that politics was, in fact, truly the last resort for scoundrels.

Like the time he let loose Bachchan on H.N. Bahuguna, Rajiv pitted Khanna against Lal Krishna Advani – the man who would take the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from a two-seat entity to the main opposition party in the 543-seat Lok Sabha – for the New Delhi constituency. Having campaigned for the Congress in the past, Khanna wanted to fight from Thane or some place closer to Bombay; but Rajiv Gandhi believed that Khanna could spoil Advani's

chances in Delhi and picked him over Ambika Soni.

With Rajiv taking a keen interest in his political career, Khanna shifted base to Delhi and set off on the campaign trail. He was quick to don the standard neta attire of white kurta–pyjama and took to his new role like fish to water. Khanna might have been a star on the wane, but his popularity was intact and the public turnout for his speeches didn't surprise anyone, least of all the Congress. He cajoled Dimple as well as Twinkle, his elder daughter, into canvassing for him and started courting journalists so that they would take him a little more seriously. The danger of being perceived as just a matinee idol who didn't pose a serious threat to his seasoned adversary was very real. With each passing day, Khanna got more confident about not only doing well, but also beating L.K. Advani, who was still to become the political colossus that he turned into as the 1990s progressed.

It was around this time that Khanna came face-to-face with Bachchan for the first time in almost two decades. From the joint interview they did for *Movie* magazine, it was clear that Bachchan was hardly bothered about keeping up with the developments in Khanna's life; but it was the other way round with Khanna. Khanna revealed in the *Movie* interview that Rajiv Gandhi had asked him to join active politics a few years ago, but he didn't want to make a partial commitment to politics as he would take a few more years to finish his acting assignments. With Rajiv Gandhi, the man who had convinced Bachchan to join politics, betting on him, Khanna didn't want to let down the person who gave him his only shot at getting even in some sense with Bachchan.

Although the public mandate had been against the Congress in the 1989 general elections, it was a foregone conclusion that Rajiv Gandhi would make a comeback in the 1991 elections. In spite of his inability to stop the atrocities against the Sikhs following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, his miscalculation during Operation Pawan that resulted in the death of over a thousand Indian troops in Sri Lanka, and his alleged involvement in the Bofors gun kickback scandal, Rajiv was convinced that the couple of years he had spent sitting in the opposition were penance enough. But, unwilling to take a chance, he gave tickets to celebrities who could sway the crowds. His decision to field the likes of Rajesh Khanna and Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, former captain of the Indian Test cricket side (from Bhopal), didn't go down well with many people. Senior journalist Khushwant Singh even called Khanna, Congress's official crowd puller, 'some kind of a buffoon', and publicly boycotted the elections as well.²

On the day of the voting, Khanna was pleasantly surprised to see Rajiv Gandhi visit his constituency early in the morning along with his wife Sonia.

The photograph of Khanna looking like a dedicated lieutenant keenly observing Sonia Gandhi as she cast her vote and Rajiv overseeing the proceedings became one of the defining images of the 1991 general elections. Khanna must have hoped that once he defeated Advani, Rajiv would reward him well. Everything was going according to plan and Rajiv, as seen in the photo that captured the moment, looked pleased as punch; but no one had an inkling of what was about to ensue.

The next day, Rajiv was scheduled to address a political rally for the Congress in Sriperumbudur, a small town close to Madras in Tamil Nadu. He reached the nondescript town a little later than expected, but the crowd didn't seem to mind. The rapturous crowd greeted him in a manner that Rajiv had become accustomed to during his public appearances in the elections, but a louder explosion in the form of a human bomb silenced Rajiv Gandhi forever.

A squad of three Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) soldiers, led by Sivarasam, avenged Rajiv's actions in the island state of Sri Lanka. Rajiv's sudden death changed the game of the 1991 general elections and the Congress rode home on a sympathy wave. The grand old party might have found a new lease of life in Rajiv's death, but for Khanna it was nothing less than the end of the road. Ironically, the photo of Rajiv and Sonia casting their vote with Khanna and R.K. Dhawan, one of Rajiv's closest confidants, which gave Khanna a political identity of sorts even before he took his first steps, ended up becoming his biggest political achievement once the photo entered the annals of history as the last of India's sixth prime minister.

In spite of coming within a hair's breadth of defeating L.K. Advani, Khanna's utility for the Congress was over as soon as the ballots were counted. With Rajiv Gandhi dead and the Congress government led by P.V. Narasimha Rao, a far more discerning politician than Rajiv in every sense of the word, Khanna would end up being just another sitting MP. Although Advani had won the New Delhi seat, he, as expected, gave it up in order to retain Gandhinagar, the second seat that he had contested from. The by-election for the New Delhi seat saw another actor take on Rajesh Khanna. In Shatrughan Sinha, who fought on the BJP ticket, Khanna found an adversary who appeared to be impetuous and so, without any effort on Khanna's part, Khanna became the smarter choice. Following a less colourful campaign that was more of a formality, Khanna emerged victorious and made it to the Lok Sabha.

Khanna's neighbours in Sarvapriya Vihar, a south Delhi neighbourhood and Khanna's residence in Delhi, remember how he would surround himself with files at the crack of dawn. One of them, Susmita Dasgupta, had done her doctoral thesis on Amitabh Bachchan (which was later reworked into a book

published by Penguin) and recalls meeting Khanna during the time. In an article she wrote following Khanna's death in 2012, Dasgupta recalled that her prejudice against Khanna stopped her from studying the superstar during her doctorate on Bachchan.³ She remembers how Khanna would single-mindedly focus on his work files that were spread across his living room and wouldn't let anything break his concentration. Dasgupta says that when she finally met Khanna, he was angry with her for allowing Bachchan to convince her that he wouldn't want to meet her. Khanna had decided to move on from the world of films, but that afternoon Dasgupta became a confidante to whom, according to her, the former superstar poured his heart out and shared his resentment towards Bachchan and even Rishi Kapoor.

During his time in Delhi, Khanna was a completely different man and had returned to being Jatin Khanna, the boy who had been devoured by Rajesh Khanna. People who came in contact with the superstar during this phase, like Bhupesh Raseen, who considered himself Khanna's younger brother, found it hard to imagine Khanna as anything like the industry stories from the 1970s. Most of the people Khanna interacted with in Delhi thought of him as someone grossly misunderstood. For Raseen, Khanna was a man wronged on many fronts and, as an outsider, he blamed Khanna's family, both immediate and distant, for his loneliness. His belief was hardened when he saw Khanna take a personal interest in minor familial things like keeping track of his children's report cards and helping them with their homework. He saw these as signs of a man who craved emotional connection.

Khanna told Raseen that, being busy with films, he never got the chance to do regular things with his children as much as he'd have liked. Later, when Raseen's son shifted to Mumbai to pursue a career in films, Khanna was his official local guardian and even put him up at Aashirwad. The star-turned-politician also went out of his way to help people who were not known to him and, in one case, he sponsored a maidservant's medical treatment which included surgery. In a departure from his reputation of being tight-fisted, he funded her treatment and also paid her for the recovery period of three months, besides stocking her home with groceries.

Khanna spent a major portion of his day doing the things expected of a public representative. He juggled official duties and at the same time, dodged people, including political bigwigs, who pestered him to make appearances at their parties. Johnny Bakshi remembers visiting Khanna a few times at his official residence where the star would be berated by Congress top shots such as Madhavrao Scindia or Rajesh Pilot for opting for one's dinner bash over the other's!

Unlike his earlier conviction that he mustn't juggle two professions, Khanna continued to do films while in office. The seven films that he made during this period were so forgettable that even his die-hard fans would struggle to recall them. Irrespective of the reasons that prompted him to do these films, their fates were sealed at the onset as none of them featured a single A-list name anywhere in the credits.

In a single year, 1991, that saw a revival of sorts for the industry with a lot of hits – Bachchan's *Hum*; Aamir Khan's *Dil Hai Ki Manta Nahin*; Sanjay Dutt's *Sadak* and *Saajan*; Manisha Koirala's debut *Saudagar*; and *Phool Aur Kaante*, the launch pad of Ajay Devgn – Khanna's *Ghar Parivar*, *Rupaye Dus Karod* and *Begunah* never stood a chance. He followed up with *Khudai* (1994), *Kis Kaam Ke Yeh Rishte* (1995) and *Sautela Bhai* (1996), but the market had changed completely with Akshay Kumar, Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgn, Govinda and Sunny Deol dominating the charts along with Aamir and Salman Khan.

In 1995, Khanna's daughter, Twinkle, made her debut along with Dharmendra's younger son Bobby in *Barsaat*. The film did fairly well at the box office and although it was the sixth highest grosser of the year, in the end it amounted to nothing more than a regular star-son launch. Like in most such films, the heroine's role here was largely incidental. The Deols had planned Bobby's launch for years and were keen on Karisma Kapoor, also a star child, as the leading lady, but a series of false starts where directors (Shekhar Kapur, Karan Razdan), story ideas and even titles (*Jaan*) played musical chairs, bugged Karisma enough to walk out. It was then that Twinkle entered the scene. Her decision to act didn't surprise Khanna, but the timing did catch him unawares. Unlike the time when he proscribed Dimple from acting, Khanna was fine with his daughter's decision to become an actor and his argument was simple – he was the father and not the husband. He informed his daughter that had he not been in politics, he would have liked to be more actively involved in the production and would have even considered launching her himself. Although *Barsaat* mentioned Khanna as a producer alongside Dharmendra, it was more of a ceremonial credit for the two as it was Bobby's elder brother, Sunny Deol, who oversaw the entire production.

As the eleventh Lok Sabha came to a close, it was apparent that the electorate had lost faith in the Congress. Almost every high-ranking minister in the Rao government was tainted with corruption charges and an anti-incumbency mood had set in. However, Khanna had somehow deluded himself into imagining that he would be considered for bigger responsibilities and that the post of the party general secretary was his for the taking. The illusory post never

became a reality but he was given the ticket to try and retain his seat. This time around, the efforts were cosmetic in nature. In a world that was still untouched by 24×7 news channels or social media, Khanna and his family, at a press conference, stood on a stationary jeep for the benefit of photographers. *'Dimpy, zara wave karna,'* he told his wife. The entire family waved to imaginary crowds as the camera clicked.⁴

Khanna might not have dazzled as a first-time MP, but a close margin of defeat – 60,000 votes – to Jagmohan, the BJP candidate, suggested that his electorate did, after all, consider him serious enough. Even after he lost the New Delhi seat in 1996, Khanna remained a popular campaigner for the Congress, and the All India Congress Committee (AICC) headquarters at 24, Akbar Road, in Delhi used to be swamped with the demand from all corners of the country for Khanna to campaign. He continued to canvass for the party across elections and states, but never got rewarded like fellow party man Sunil Dutt who was ultimately made the Union sports minister under PM Manmohan Singh, or BJP's Shatrughan Sinha who went on to become the Union minister of health and family welfare and, later, shipping in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government.

Mirroring the odyssey of his fortunes in films, Khanna took a long time to get over the fact that, like films, he had passed his sell-by date in politics too. He maintained close ties with the Congress high command till the very end and believed that happy days were just around the corner. Every time a vacancy popped up in the Rajya Sabha, Khanna started preparing an acceptance speech, only to see his bag of broken dreams grow heavier. Looking back at the Khanna–Congress romance, many believe that the party misused or even abused Khanna; but the outcome isn't shocking if one has any idea of how politics operates in the world's largest democracy. Following his ouster from active politics, Khanna decided to take a hiatus; but three years into it, the arc lights lured him back. Fate intervened with the opportunity to deliver on a promise made to him almost two decades earlier. And Khanna couldn't refuse.

CURTAIN CALL

*Gila Maut Se Nahin Hai ...
Mujhe Zindagi Ne Maara*

Had Rishi Kapoor approached his work a little differently than he did during his peak, perhaps he might have been considered a greater artist or at least taken a little more seriously. In the four decades that he had been around, despite the commercial success Kapoor enjoyed, he rigidly adhered to his own rules regarding work, steadfastly refusing to shoot at nights irrespective of the director or even the demand of the script. In spite of being the only actor who survived the Rajesh Khanna phenomenon and even withstood the Amitabh Bachchan wave, Kapoor never really got his due as an actor. For someone who gave an impression that he was never serious about his career beyond a point, Kapoor has been phenomenally successful, not just having the longest innings as a romantic lead in commercial Hindi cinema, but also being perhaps the last actor to have a legacy of good commercial films and songs attached to his name. He hardly worried about his bulging frame as long as he could put on a colourful sweater to look the part. So confident was he of his abilities that he refused Yash Chopra a reading to convince the film-maker that he could play the younger Viren in *Lamhe* (1991) as convincingly as the middle-aged version; and his aversion to night shoots – which compelled him to refuse many films – is legendary.

By the late 1990s, the lover boy Rishi Kapoor, the romantic lead of frothy entertainers like *Bobby*, *Khel Khel Mein* (1975), *Kabhi Kabhie* and *Hum Kisi Se Kum Nahin* was past his prime. He had had two surprise hits in *Bol Radha Bol* (1992) and *Deewana* and was appreciated for his supporting role in Rajkumar Santoshi's *Damini* (1993), but it was a matter of time before he would make the switch to character roles. Kapoor's decision to turn director before the transition was somewhat of a standard practice for his generation where Feroz Khan, Rakesh Roshan and his own brothers, Randhir and Rajiv, had directed films.

Out of all his children, Raj Kapoor's second son was the only one who managed to carve his own identity that wasn't overshadowed by his father's larger-than-life persona. But even he couldn't escape his more illustrious father's influence when it came to making his own film. There is more than just a passing resemblance between *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* (1999) and *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* (1960), the film whose song inspired the title of Rishi Kapoor's directorial debut.

RK Films had been so intrinsically linked with the iconic film-maker that, for an entire generation that grew up in the 1990s, the banner had practically ceased to exist following the showman's death. The success of *Henna* (1991), Raj Kapoor's swansong ultimately helmed by Randhir Kapoor, hinted at a revival of the banner, but when Rajiv Kapoor's directorial effort *Prem Granth* (1996) failed, it was almost certain that Raj Kapoor's eponymous banner would not survive without the man himself.

With Sanjay Dutt being pursued to play the lead, *Prem Granth* was supposed to bring in a new phase in RK Films. Barring Raj Kapoor's experimental production *Boot Polish* (1954), this would have been the first time that a non-Kapoor would have played the lead in an RK film. Moreover, the casting of Nargis's son in a film produced and directed by Raj Kapoor's offspring would have made for some interesting trivia. But Dutt's alleged involvement in the Bombay bomb blasts of 1993 embroiled him in constant litigation and his incarceration cast a doubt on his availability, prompting the Kapoors to look homewards at Rishi Kapoor playing the lead.

The announcement of *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* with the young and more contemporary lead pair of Akshaye Khanna and Aishwarya Rai saw one of India's beloved film production houses finally change course. But it wasn't the freshness of the lead pair or even Rishi Kapoor's decision to direct a film that attracted the press and the public's attention towards the film. It was Rajesh Khanna's involvement in the project that suddenly made the enterprise a talked-about proposition. The trade could no longer be bothered with Rajesh Khanna trying to make yet another comeback, but Khanna's involvement in a RK production piqued curiosity, giving the film something of a PR profile.

Screenwriter Rumi Jaffery recalls names like Naseeruddin Shah being tossed around in the initial stages of the discussion; but Kapoor had decided on Khanna quite early on. In the two decades since Raj Kapoor's sons had vetoed the idea of Khanna playing the lead in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, a lot of water had flowed under the bridge. Though Khanna might have had some apprehensions, the Kapoors were done with bothering about the past. Even if he were nursing some old grudges against Rishi Kapoor, like what he seemed to

have mentioned to Susmita Dasgupta, he concealed his emotions well enough.

Even though it appeared to be a rehashed version of Raj Kapoor's *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*, *Aa Ab Laut Chalen*'s storyline was promising enough to result in a decent film that explored the plight of young Indian men and women who could not look beyond the US when they thought of their future. But the biggest culprit of the film was Sachin Bhowmick's antiquated screenplay which relied heavily on stereotypical situations and characters. Like the Raj Kapoor classic where Raju (Raj Kapoor) convinces a bunch of hardened brigands to return to mainstream society, the protagonist Rohan's (Akshaye Khanna) trials of surviving in the US shift gears to become a mission of bringing back his estranged father Balraaj (played by Rajesh Khanna).

For a film that celebrated RK Films' golden jubilee, *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* ironically ended up being more archaic than the forty-year-old film that inspired it. To his credit, Khanna put in a poignant performance and played the father with great earnestness. His embodiment of the character goes beyond mere physicality, for he lets the viewer observe a lifetime of tragedy through his silent gazes. Khanna's dialogues are kept to a bare minimum, at least till the climax, and he lets his eyes and facial expressions convey Balraaj's hurt, anguish and shame. But Rishi Kapoor's simplistic treatment never allows the film to rise above the clichés.

Khanna had lapped up the opportunity to feature in *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* in the blink of eye since, for him, very few came close to the exalted position Raj Kapoor occupied in his estimation, and here was destiny at its best, making sons deliver a promise made by the father two decades ago.

Khanna's latent desire to seek father figures often duelled with his penchant for moving on from one event of life to another without a second thought. The manner in which he interacted with Shakti Samanta, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Bhattacharya and even J. Om Prakash, was indicative of his search for an elder figure he could look up to. A large part of Khanna would always, like a constant sentinel, guard the level of intimacy; but when it came to Raj Kapoor, the rules were slightly different. He revered and almost idolized Raj Kapoor, and the heartbreak of *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* materializing without him lingered for a long period.

Even though Randhir Kapoor enjoyed a close relationship with Khanna, and was part of the fabled quartet that included Khanna, R.D. Burman and Kishore Kumar, Rishi was never too close to be comfortable with Khanna. Rumi Jaffery, who wrote the story as well as the dialogues of *Aa Ab Laut Chalen*, recalls that when Khanna's name was suggested for the role of Balraaj, Randhir warned Rishi that things would get difficult if Khanna turned out to be anything

like his reputation. But Jaffery, along with the rest of the crew, was pleasantly surprised by Khanna's professionalism. The writer hit off famously with the star during the making of the film and came close to him once Khanna learnt of an old connection that Jaffery never knew existed. Jaffery's wife happened to be Khanna's college mate's daughter, and even though he had lost contact with his friend Hussain, Khanna began treating Jaffery like a son-in-law once he became aware of the fact.

Like Jaffery, cinematographer Sameer Arya too found Khanna possessed with the enthusiasm that inspires a newcomer. He recalls how Khanna would end up coming to the sets even during his off days. 'We were shooting in Manhattan and I saw Kakaji turn up unannounced. Chintuji (Rishi Kapoor) and I looked at each other wondering if we had forgotten the details of the day's call sheet!' says Arya, remembering how Khanna treated *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* almost like his debut film.

It had been a decade since Khanna had acted in a major production and his eagerness to be accepted as a part of the industry's upper bracket endeared him to everyone around him. Jaffery remembers how Khanna would rehearse with him for hours in his hotel room. He would try the same lines in different moods and give tens of variations to each emotion, trying to find the right tone. The writer says he can never forget how Khanna prided himself on never using aids like glycerine to evoke tears while acting. 'He would ask you, "How many tears do you need?" and just turn around for a moment or two; and when he turned back, there would be tears in his eyes. You could wake him up in the middle of the night and he would just stand and deliver when it came to tears!' says Jaffery. Once Jaffery and Sameer Arya instructed Khanna to randomly shed a few tears in the hotel's lift lobby and Khanna readily dispelled a few before the lift emerged.

In addition to his time in front of the camera, the star also enjoyed the time after pack-up when he, along with Randhir Kapoor, would sit down for a few drinks and reminisce about the old days. The two would recall how R.D. Burman would use the dashboard of the car to create a rhythm for them and Kishore Kumar would sing as they took impromptu rides in the middle of the night. Rishi Kapoor joined them often, but the younger Kapoor was a disciplined slave to habit who preferred to eat his dinner after a couple of drinks. But, for Randhir and Khanna, food was always the second priority. Rumi Jaffery recounts how Randhir Kapoor boasted about choosing drinking over eating, as that was the one trait that separated men from beasts: '*Kutte sharaab nahin peete.*' Dogs don't drink alcohol!

In spite of his close association with Randhir Kapoor, Khanna never

undermined Rishi's role as the director. Most senior actors like to push around a first-time director almost as a rite of passage. This specially holds true if the actor in question happens to be an icon who has redefined stardom. Khanna did have a near run-in with Rishi Kapoor during the shooting of *Aa Ab Laut Chalen's* climax; but instead of reacting to the incident, the weathered thespian chose to shrug it off with a wistful smile, probably remembering how different it would have been in the 1970s.

Much to the irritation of Rishi Kapoor, an impassioned Khanna couldn't help but move his hands fervently while delivering his lines in the climax. Kapoor repeatedly instructed the star to keep his hands in check after each take but, try as hard as he would, Khanna just couldn't stop his hands from moving. The irritation in Kapoor's voice and his decibel levels rose with each passing minute and the director ended up shouting at the senior actor. There was pin-drop silence on the sets. Khanna kept quiet and, a few anxious moments later, nodded tersely as he made it back to his position. He maintained the pitch that Kapoor sought, but delivered the lines without being overly demonstrative as far as his hand movements went. Kapoor didn't react till the shot was over. Khanna looked for approval from Kapoor once he blurted 'cut' and only with the shot canned to his satisfaction did the director realize that he might have been too loud or rude.

Getting the director's endorsement for the shot, Khanna moved to his chair and waited for the next set-up. Jaffery, who by now had become Khanna's sounding board during rehearsals, walked up to the actor and tried to gauge his mood. Khanna told the writer that the director had all the right to demand what he desired from an actor, but he could not help smiling at the irony of situation. Khanna told Jaffery that a few decades earlier, after watching a trial of his film *Prem Nagar*, Raj Kapoor had complimented him on the use of his hands. Khanna told him how the ever-theatrical Raj Kapoor kissed his hands and said, 'Kaka, you have used your hands like swords.' Now he could only smile at the showman's son forcing him to sheath those 'swords'!

Khanna enjoyed the time he spent making *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* and hoped that it would usher in a new phase for him as an actor. A few years short of his sixtieth birthday, Khanna wanted the film to tell the world that he was neither shy of playing his age nor averse to playing character roles. Almost nine years earlier, he had portrayed a similar character in *Swarg* but, unlike the last time, he did not have alternative careers like politics beckoning him now. He was desperate to be back in a familiar world but *Aa Ab Laut Chalen's* failure ended up reducing his scope for the future.

Rishi Kapoor's detailing of immigrant life, the situations, as well as the

motley crew of characters, held enough promise to make *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* a strong social comment on the hundreds of Indians in the US as well as on the thousands who queue up in front of the US consulate in major Indian cities. Had *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* concentrated on juxtaposing Balraaj and Rohan's stories rather than going through the motions of the song-and-dance routine, the film would have been far more interesting. But its potential got lost in songs like 'Oh ta shi na ta' and so did Khanna's chance at making a comeback.

Hindi cinema was on the lookout for stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Dharmendra and Vinod Khanna to graduate into character roles and hoped that they would go beyond playing the typical elder brother or authoritarian father, and Khanna could have ushered in a new kind of senior star that was yet to happen to Hindi cinema. With Balraaj, Khanna almost took a character usually played by a Kulbhushan Kharbanda or an Amrish Puri to new heights; but once again, as luck would have it, Amitabh Bachchan would end up beating Khanna to the post.

Just like *Agneepath*, which gave Bachchan a second lease of life in the early 1990s, *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* held enough promise to allow its senior star to shift focus but it was ultimately *Mohabbatein* (2000) that finally completed the transformation. Had *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* been a bigger hit, perhaps Aditya Chopra's decision to replace Amrish Puri with Bachchan as *Mohabbatein*'s draconian high-school principal would not be seen as such a stroke of brilliance after all.

In the end, the film that delivered on a twenty-year-old promise and saw Khanna finally being a part of RK Films, was not only the banner's final production but also his last major release.

SILENCES AND DARKNESS

Zindagi Ek Banwas Hai Kaat Sabko Jaana Padega

The new millennium hardly brought much cheer for Rajesh Khanna. He had ceased to be relevant in the new scheme of things and had begun to come around to the fact that the world had moved on. He got used to the idea of insignificance that the last few years had bequeathed upon him; but for someone who had witnessed the zenith of popularity in the shortest time possible, the idea of obscurity remained a daunting notion. Right through the ups and downs of his career, Khanna had always remained convinced that everything would eventually fall into place. In the 1980s, when he delivered his first hit that looked to usher in a new Rajesh Khanna era, he had said in an interview: ‘Come September, and I will be back.’ Such was his optimism. He always believed that his charm would win over fate, but the debacle of *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* changed things for him. The film was Khanna’s comeback in the truest sense but unlike his *bête noire* Amitabh Bachchan, Khanna’s return to acting post-politics could not wring the same level of excitement amongst fans.

Along with *Mohabbatein*, the success of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the Indian version of the international television game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, resurrected Bachchan. Khanna’s most famous rival was enjoying the busiest phase of his acting career while the first superstar of Hindi cinema steadily slipped from public memory.

Even people around Khanna were undergoing changes. After fifteen years of mostly playing the glamorous lead, Dimple Kapadia transited into becoming a full-time character actor with films like *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) and *Leela* (2002). Khanna’s elder daughter Twinkle called it a day as far as acting was concerned once she had tied the knot with Akshay Kumar, a star in his own right. In 2002, the couple had their first son, Aarav, and becoming a grandfather for the first time brought some joy to Khanna.

Johny Bakshi recalls the cheer in Khanna’s voice the day his first grandson

was born. A little over a decade ago, when Bakshi became a grandfather, he was directing Khanna in *Khudai*. Watching him beam with joy, Khanna couldn't help but ask, '*Aaj chhalang mar rayho, ki hoye?*' (You are jumping with joy, what's the matter?) When Bakshi shared the good news, all he got from Khanna in the name of a reaction was a terse 'So...?' Bakshi told Khanna that he would know the feeling the day *he* became a nana. Bakshi was one of the first people Khanna called after he became a grandfather. Khanna found the joy divine and told Bakshi, 'I want to go to the top of the roof and shout, I am a grandfather!'

Khanna's first release in the new century was *Pyar Zindagi Hai* (2001) which failed to generate any interest. At a time when films were marketed on the basis of just the name of stars, the presence of Monish Behl, Vikas Kalantri and Ashima Bhalla could hardly change the destiny of *Pyar Zindagi Hai*. His next release, *Kyaa Dil Ne Kahaa* (2002), featured Tushhar Kapoor and Esha Deol, the children of two of his closest co-stars, Jeetendra and Hema Malini; and even though the film's story held some promise, its soap-opera-like treatment failed with the audiences. These successive failures saw Khanna join the club of his peers Dharmendra, Vinod Khanna, Jeetendra and Shatrughan Sinha who found themselves discarded. These actors had not been able to make a Bachchan-like switch and, for them, the early years of the millennium sounded a death knell. The only roles they seemed to be attracting were in films that could be best defined as B-grade.

For Khanna, things were a shade tougher as he found himself at the lowest ebb on the personal front too. He would call close friends like Anand Bakshi or Shakti Samanta and pour his heart out. The hollowness of his existence echoed endlessly in the silences of Aashirwad which was now just an address in the bustling metropolis. To the world that met him outside the confines of his bungalow, he was still Rajesh Khanna the superstar, and while interacting with people, he would never forget to pretend that they had caught him on a rare day off. He often unburdened his fears on Anand Bakshi and lamented how no one missed him enough to even call once in a while. Ashim Samanta recalls how Khanna habitually called his father on the telephone and got endlessly nostalgic about the glory days. Khanna would always make plans to drop by Samanta's place for a drink and then not show up. A few days later, he'd call again and continue ruminating about the past as if nothing had happened in the interim before signing off on the promise of coming over, but the same thing would happen all over again and he never turned up. This irked Samanta enough to share the incident with the press when scribes pestered him endlessly to comment on the status of his relationship with Khanna.

In his entire working career, there were only a few people that Khanna

formed a personal bond with; and like the deaths of Kishore Kumar and R.D. Burman, the passing away of Anand Bakshi in 2002 broke something within him. Shyam Keswani, who was a close friend of both Khanna and Bakshi in the early 1970s, hadn't been in touch with Khanna since the mid-1980s but remembered the actor looking shattered during the lyricist's last rites. He recalls Khanna as someone who never looked beyond himself on most occasions. But Bakshi was one of the very few people the actor respected immensely.

A sense of hopelessness started consuming Khanna and he sought something to look forward to. He even started spending more time in New Delhi and continued to offer his services to the Congress party; but, barring canvassing, nothing came his way. A staunch Congress loyalist, Khanna was one of the first members of the party to publicly support Sonia Gandhi during the opposition she faced on the grounds of being a foreigner. Khanna said that if Indians could treat Annie Besant and Mother Teresa as their own, there was nothing wrong with Sonia leading the Congress or for that matter, even India.¹ The Congress continued to utilize his services, but shifted focus when it came to things other than campaigning; but the hope of making a grand political comeback never left Khanna.

Besides bleak professional, personal and political prospects, Khanna was also reeling under some sort of financial strain. Rumi Jaffery's interaction with the actor had increased in the years following *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* and he recalls Khanna trading his imported car for a basic Maruti 800 and replenishing his signature 555 cigarette packs with much cheaper Gold Flake sticks. Jaffery chided Khanna for not doing anything about his state: 'I told him, "Kakaji, *marā haathi bhi sava lakh ke barabar hota hai* (even a dead elephant is worth lakhs), what's the point in holding on to the bungalow when you are in a mess?"'

Khanna would spend most of his time in his other flat and Jaffery believed that the star could tide over his troubles by selling *Aashirwad*. According to the writer, Khanna patiently heard him out while driving around and later dropped him off without saying a word. The next morning, he called Jaffery and told him that he was on his way to take him to the future. Khanna picked up Jaffery and drove him to Natraj studios to meet Shakti Samanta. Khanna informed the writer that he, Rajesh Khanna, was back and had decided that Jaffery would write the remake of *Aradhana* and it would be his and Samanta's next project. All Jaffery could do was shake his head in utter disbelief.

While Khanna was harbouring thoughts of launching himself all over again with a remake of one of his most loved films, the industry was preparing to transfer him into a different league. Early in the twenty-first century, Khanna started collecting his share of lifetime achievement awards, which was yet

another reminder that his time was up. Khanna received the Filmfare Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, long after Sharmila Tagore, Dharmendra, Jeetendra, Rekha, Mumtaz, Vinod Khanna, Hema Malini and Feroz Khan had been bestowed with the honour. This particular category of Filmfare Awards had started on a very strange note in 1991 when Amitabh Bachchan became the very first and very surprised recipient.

The same year, 1991, Khanna was given a special award for completing twenty-five years in the industry. Additionally, the irony of being felicitated for featuring in ‘maximum number of films as the leading man’ wasn’t lost on him. He reached the function a little late, only to be informed by a journalist that they had run out of reserved seats in the front row. Journalist Meera Joshi recalled years later how his daughter Twinkle wanted him to leave right away but Khanna quietly ushered his wife and daughter into the second row.² He wasn’t amused then and was definitely not fourteen years later when *Filmfare*, the very institution that had discovered him, found even Sulochana and Nirupa Roy worthy of the lifetime achievement honour before commemorating him.

The animosity that the industry nurtured against Khanna often manifested at these functions. At one such event, no one from the industry stood up to applaud him when the chief guest gave away the award. Sitting in the front row was a famous actor. One of Khanna’s erstwhile co-stars who was at the ceremony happened to be working with the actor at the time. Next day, at the shoot, when she asked him why he had not stood up – surely, if *he* had, the others would have followed suit – the actor just gave her a look that said it all.³

Not yet done with acting, the unexpected press for his next film, *Jaana: Let’s Fall in Love* (2006), mollified Khanna and even infused new energy into him. It had just been four years since his last release, but in the interim the Internet had grown unimaginably and the kind of attention showered on Khanna and his co-star Zeenat Aman across electronic media briefly brought the spotlight back on him. Both Khanna and Aman had special appearances in *Jaana*, essentially the acting debut of writer–producer Shahrukh Mirza’s son Rehan Khan; but the repairing of Khanna and Zeenat attracted the press. Khanna hadn’t seen this kind of attention from the press for years and went all out to enjoy it. With his streaked hair, he did most of the talking during the press conference of the film. The famous Khanna mannerisms and Zeenat charm were still there, but rather than taking a trip down memory lane, which both the actors would have enjoyed as much as the press, Khanna desperately tried to appease everyone present, lest they lost interest in him again.

For a better part of the early years of the first decade of the new millennium, troubled clouds had taken over almost every small pocket of

sunshine in Khanna's life. His financial state went from bad to worse and there were murmurs that he was finally on the lookout to sell Aashirwad. Like most rumours emanating from the world of Hindi cinema, no one knew how real the reports about his house being up for grabs were, but people believed them because Khanna looked troubled. The news that the income tax department had slapped a notice for arrears of over a crore and a half rupees on him finally made it all too true.

Rumi Jaffery remembers that it was around this time that Salman Khan called him and said that his brother, actor–producer Sohail Khan, wanted to discuss something with him. The younger Khan told the writer that they were interested in buying Aashirwad. Sohail said that Khanna could quote any price and not only would the Khans meet it, they would also take care of the IT arrears; and Salman would even do one film for Rajesh Khanna's film production company absolutely free. The Khans wanted Jaffery to help them cut the deal and, for his part, Jaffery felt there couldn't be a better arrangement.

The writer couldn't contain his excitement and told Khanna about the offer over the phone but was greeted by a stoic silence. When Khanna finally spoke, he asked him how he could even think of suggesting such a thing and accused him of stabbing him in his back. 'Kakaji said, "I consider you a son-in-law *aur tu mera ghar bikwana chahta hai ... Sadak par lana chahta hai!*" I had a tough time explaining that I was merely a postman delivering Sohail Khan's message,' Jaffery says. Khanna told Jaffery that no one, 'not even Ambani', could buy his house and the longer the conversation grew, the more philosophical Khanna became. He even mused that he'll die some day but Aashirwad would live on forever; and till such time, the world would never forget Rajesh Khanna.

The actor who was once called the 'King of the Box Office' and the 'King of Romance' always took such fancy titles a little too seriously and there wasn't any doubt in his mind that he was, in fact, a king of sorts. He would often be quoted saying, 'A king is a king whether on throne or in exile,' and in that context believed that Aashirwad wasn't anything less than his legacy that would outlast his lifetime. Jaffery was never allowed to forget the incident as long as Khanna was alive, and recalls that even Sohail Khan – who bumped into the actor a few years later and introduced himself as Salim Khan's youngest son – was castigated by Khanna for sending Jaffery to buy him out.

Johny Bakshi remembers the day he saw Khanna solemnly looking at the waves of the Arabian Sea hitting the edge of the road across his home. That day's newspapers carried an IT department notice regarding an auction of Aashirwad and Khanna was all but broken. Bakshi knew Vinay Kumar Sinha, a former IT officer who later joined Abdul Gaffar Nadiadwala's production house

and went on to produce *Andaz Apna Apna* (1994). He asked Khanna if he wanted him to seek some advice on the matter. ‘He just nodded his head and said, “*Gal kar...*”’



Irrespective of the troubles surrounding him, Khanna’s standing continued to grow with each passing year as every new generation discovered him through television reruns of *Aradhana*, *Anand*, *Namak Haraam* and *Bawarchi*. For the 65 per cent of Indians who were below the age of thirty-five, Bachchan’s character roles in films in the new millennium made him the senior citizen of Hindi cinema, but Khanna had been missing from the limelight for so long that, for them, he was a golden oldie.

The superstar’s initiation into the hallowed classic category was aided by the ever-growing popularity of R.D. Burman–Kishore Kumar songs across the nation’s radio channels. The mushrooming of hundreds of radio stations saw a surge in the number of R.D.–Kishore fans, which in turn led to a renewed interest in Khanna as some of the duo’s greatest collaborations had been with the actor. The legend of Khanna’s superstardom before the advent of the Bachchans, Aamirs, Salmans and Shah Rukh Khans of the world was something that the new generation was fed by their parents and grandparents; and while Bachchan’s newer body of work helped him reach out to younger generations, Khanna’s musical legacy via R.D.–Kishore endeared him to them. His name continued to attract legions of fans who made his appearances at functions an event to cherish.

Journalist Ali Peter John recalls how, a few years before his death, Khanna was doubtful whether anyone would even show up at a function organized by a women’s group in Kolkata where he was invited as the chief guest. But the organizers ran out of space as the number of attendees exceeded their wildest expectations. Each public appearance by Khanna became some sort of a trip down memory lane where the reality of his present was sheathed in the charm of his past, which was relived through the images of his youthful exuberance playing on giant screens at venues where he collected citations honouring a lifetime in films.

Along the time he started fading away from the memory of audiences, Khanna began existing on many planes. The more he was forgotten as Rajesh Khanna the actor, the more he returned to being Jatin Khanna; the more the Rajesh Khanna of yore became popular with audiences through the reruns of his films and songs on airwaves, the lonelier it became for the man himself as no

one wanted him the way he was. He may have fancied the idea of remaking *Aradhana*, but knew that he could not start all over again. He recognized that no amount of tributes could ever bring back what was once his for the taking, and desired a brand-new ending befitting not just his beginning but also the journey he had undergone.

Khanna had nothing left to prove, but the inability to sign off on his own terms nagged him and he started looking for a role that would test the actor in him and, at the same time, challenge the younger generation's perception of him. His decision to agree to *Wafaa: A Deadly Love Story* (2008) was largely based on the fact that the film's May–October relationship, replete with explicit lovemaking scenes, would showcase him as someone who wasn't afraid of pushing the envelope. In the bargain, he hoped to make a comeback.

Khanna plays a Bangkok-based businessman, Amritlal Chopra, who marries a much younger Beena (Laila Khan) but is unable to physically satisfy her. Beena finds intimacy in her driver, Raj (Sahib Chopra), and orchestrates Amritlal's accidental death. She pretends to be the suffering widow in front of the world while continuing her romp with Raj on the sly. But her best-laid plans are threatened by the appearance of a man claiming to be Amritlal (Khanna).

During the time *Wafaa* released, commercial Hindi cinema was going through a phase where it was fashionable to make a handful of films on the same subject. Following five films on Bhagat Singh in a span of two years, there were a couple of attempts to Indianize *Lolita*; and just a year before *Wafaa: A Deadly Love Story*, there was Ram Gopal Varma's *Nishabd* (2007) that explored the same theme. Box-office collections for *Nishabd* were at best average, but it garnered critical acclaim for Bachchan who played a morally ambiguous character in the tradition of *Parwana* and *Namak Haraam*.

Unlike *Nishabd*, *Wafaa* was an outright disaster and had no redeeming quality. Directed by Rakesh Sawant, best known as starlet Rakhi Sawant's brother, *Wafaa* looked worse than a B-grade soft-porn film. In spite of the controversial content that fetched it decent pre-release publicity, the film could only manage a 5 per cent opening in Mumbai. When compared with *Wafaa*, *Nishabd* looked like a masterpiece and even a great work of art, thanks to which Bachchan, once again, outdid Khanna. While Jiah Khan and Bachchan looked odd together, they were nonetheless shades better than Laila Khan and Khanna's pair, which looked sleazy.

Years before Bachchan mustered the courage to take on a role with questionable morality, Khanna had done *Anokha Rishta*, a film that in a way is a precursor to *Nishabd*. Despite his off-screen hijinks – including the alleged molestation of Sabiha, his fifteen-year-old co-star – *Anokha Rishta* didn't leave

Khanna as red-faced and embarrassed as *Wafaa* had. The entire film, especially the lovemaking scenes between Khanna and Laila Khan, looks gross and, in the light of *Nishabd*, Khanna might have never imagined the backlash he got for *Wafaa* because, in his mind, he was doing something similar.

Khanna had got the perfect opportunity to bid adieu on two previous occasions – in *Swarg* and *Aa Ab Laut Chalen*. But fate operates in mysterious ways and *Wafaa: A Deadly Love Story* was, sadly enough, destined to be Rajesh Khanna's last full-length role. Khanna realized that like his fans, he too was probably better off living on in memories.

In 2009, he accepted yet another lifetime achievement award, but this one was truly special. Khanna flew to Macau to attend the India International Film Awards (IIFA) and received the citation from the awards' brand ambassador who also happened to be his biggest rival, his most famous challenger and his ultimate usurper.

In his introduction, Bachchan spoke highly of the man who was a colossus when he started his career; and while the media pitted him as the one who'd walk away with the reigning king's crown, he recalled how the extent of Khanna's popularity made everything and everyone pale in comparison. Bachchan mentioned that those who did not get to see Khanna at his peak could never fathom the level of hysteria he generated, but because he had himself witnessed women take the dirt that the wheels of his speeding car left behind and wear it like sindoor, he could never forget the phenomenon that Khanna was.

Irrespective of how they felt about each other in private, the two embraced like long-lost brothers. The meeting was the first of its kind in years and would also end up being the last time the two icons of Hindi cinema shared a platform.

Khanna valued the IIFA honour more than any other award he had received, and it became the only trophy he displayed towards the end of his life. Ali Peter John mentions how, for the longest time, Khanna waited for a chance to stand against Bachchan so that he could show the world that he was, in fact, the better actor. He never got his opportunity, but the IIFA podium came closest to his dream and he was proud of not just himself but Bachchan as well. John says, 'Towards the end, he had got rid of all his awards but always kept the IIFA trophy on display.' And whenever the veteran journalist met him, the actor would proudly say, '*Ali, yeh award mujhe Amitabh Bachchan ne diya hai!*'

By the time the first decade of the new millennium ended, the world had lost interest in Rajesh Khanna. The newspapers still talked about his bankruptcy and his much younger alleged live-in partner, Anita Advani; but, like the star, these stories too lost their appeal all too soon. The reports of Akshay Kumar paying off Khanna's mounting debts took the speculation about his financial

troubles to a new level. The 24x7 television news media had a field day spinning yarns about Akshay Kumar buying Aashirwad but those close to Khanna deny the news.

Vinay Kumar Sinha doesn't like to talk about the time he came in contact with Khanna, but says that the actor had enough assets to take care of financial troubles. 'Gaffarbhai would often tell me to approach Kakaji for the land that he owned near Malad,' says Sinha, but Khanna never got around to finalizing the deal. According to Sinha, for a better part of his life the actor never bothered keeping a track of all the land that he possessed across the country. Rajeev Khanna, Rajesh Khanna's nephew, adds that his uncle had enough money to see himself out of any kind of financial trouble. Bhupesh Raseen even credits a certain PR firm for feeding an already eager media such tales while Rumi Jaffery agrees that nobody saved Khanna, least of all Akshay Kumar. The writer had got to know that Khanna had sold some land which he had acquired decades ago in Chennai and the proceeds of that sale went over a hundred crore rupees, which saw him tide over the crisis. He blamed Khanna's inept organizational skills for most of his troubles, financial and otherwise. In fact, various people interviewed for this book say that Khanna's net worth at the time of his death would at least be over Rs 500 crores. But the actor never made a big deal about it.



Khanna oscillated between being *Anand*, *Bawarchi*, *Avtaar* and the washed-out superstar whose name could still evoke a certain kind of frenzy. There were times when rumours of his sudden death flooded the Internet and saw his fans paying rich tributes on social media sites. Once, an infuriated Khanna walked to the main gate of Aashirwad in his favourite silk lungi-kurta with a cigarette and drink in tow only to prove to a journalist that, contrary to rumours, he was still alive. Just when he had given up on his dream of a goodbye that would be in sync with his stature of being Hindi cinema's biggest star, fate knocked on his door.

Call it karma or divine intervention, but the very man who helped his rival rediscover the actor in him, R. Balki, came with an offer Khanna couldn't refuse. Balki had given Bachchan one of his most-loved roles in *Cheeni Kum*, following it up with the award-winning *Paa*. He now cast Rajesh Khanna in an ad for Havells fan. The last time Rajesh Khanna faced the camera was for a forty-five-second commercial, incidentally Khanna's first television ad, that saw him relive the forty-five years over which he had been an actor. It was also his way of bidding his profession a bitter-sweet farewell.

PACK-UP

Achchha Toh Hum Chalte Hain

In the old days, most actors looked down upon advertisements. The bigger the star, the farther they stayed away from selling products, and the farther they remained, the brighter they shone. There were exceptions, especially the leading heroines, who looked at endorsing certain brands – such as Lux beauty soap – almost as a rite of passage; but by and large almost every Hindi film leading man tried to maintain a healthy distance from featuring in commercials. This was a pursuit best left to popular supporting actors such as Prem Chopra who endorsed Brylcreem in the 1960s and Amjad Khan who became the face of Parle-G Glucose Biscuits following *Sholay*, and stars who had long faded away, such as Ashok Kumar and Shammi Kapoor who bonded over their mutual love for Pan Parag.

Unlike today, when film stars wholeheartedly grace advertisements, till as late as the early 1990s, it was almost sacrilegious for big stars to feature in one. Such was the contempt for advertisements that popular models such as Deepak Parashar, Jackie Shroff and even Salman Khan – who went on to become immensely successful – were initially seen as lesser actors.

A then up-and-coming actor poised to become one of the biggest stars contemporary Hindi cinema would see, Shah Rukh Khan still recalls how Anil Kapoor advised him not to do ads if he ever wanted the world to take him seriously. But once again, it was Rajesh Khanna's old rival who forever transformed the industry's perception towards advertising. In the mid-1990s, while on a sabbatical from films, Amitabh Bachchan did a series of commercials for BPL which were well designed to include a star playing himself and yet crafty enough to maintain the allure of distance and sense of unattainability that are the primary reasons for the popularity of stars. The success of Bachchan's foray into advertising suddenly made the format respectable enough for others. Shah Rukh Khan followed, exuding the same exuberance in his ads that he

displayed in his film, and perceptions of stars with respect to ad appearances began to change. Ads also offered an alternative source of income that allowed actors to look at working on films for reasons beyond commercial ones. Save a print ad in the 1970s for Bombay Dyeing, Rajesh Khanna had never done any ads in his life and wouldn't have imagined that the only TV one he'd ever do would end up becoming his final goodbye.

When he approached Rajesh Khanna for a television commercial for Havells fans, R. Balki had become more than a genius adman. A celebrated name in Indian advertising, Balki had already directed Amitabh Bachchan in two roles that weren't just author-backed but challenged the actor unlike most roles in his much celebrated second coming. *Cheeni Kum* (2007), Balki's debut as a director, gave Bachchan one of the best roles ever in his career as he played not just the sixty-year-old man that he was in reality, but also unshackled him from the trappings of his larger-than-life persona. While in *Cheeni Kum*, Bachchan played an ageing chef in London who falls in love with a woman half his age, his second venture with Balki, *Paa* (2009), saw him play a thirteen-year-old child who suffers from a rare disorder called progeria that accelerates ageing.

If Bachchan's persona made Balki seek stories that box-office considerations didn't allow the actor to explore, in Khanna's case there was no other story that attracted the adman. 'With Rajesh Khanna, there was no other story after his stardom happened. He had the flair, the charm, the romantic touch that drove fans mad,' says Balki. Balki needed someone who had it all but lost it: 'He was at the top and he stopped being on top. There was no gradual decrease, but people still remember the pinnacle.' For him, it was not as much Khanna the actor, but Rajesh Khanna the brand that could be used even after forty years.

When viewed in isolation, Balki's concept for the commercial is witty and meets most parameters that define a good advertisement. An unspecified dapper man enters a stadium filled with adulating fans. He is basking in the loud cheering and deafening clapping, and takes a bow to a lifetime spent gathering such a following and his eyes thank his fans; but a few seconds later, we see that the 'fans' are actual fans – electrical appliances of all shapes and sizes. The man looks at the camera and smiles knowingly as he says, '*Mere fans mujh se koi nahin chheen sakta.*' (No one can take my fans away from me.) In its entirety, the concept is a specimen of sheer copywriting brilliance and is infused with a tinge of piteous nostalgia as soon as one realizes that it is Rajesh Khanna who is staking claim on his ever-faithful fans. Recalling the actor's response to his pitch, Balki remembers how Khanna laughed himself silly and said, 'This is the ad!' He even thanked the director for giving him an opportunity to convey to the world how he actually viewed his long-forgotten glory.

By the time this commercial came along, Khanna had ceased to attract any offer that stood out. He continued to look for something that could give him a chance to bid a proper farewell to his acting career and one of the roles that he looked forward to was in a film called *Riyasat*. But after a few initial moments of euphoria that he experienced while viewing the film's rushes, his enthusiasm went south. Bhupesh Raseen recalls Khanna losing interest once the director, Ashok Tyaagi, started tinkering around with the actor's character. Sensing that Khanna's presence wasn't really going to improve the film's prospects, the screenplay was reworked to bump his character midway and introduce a parallel track that had little to do with the initial draft that had attracted Khanna in the first place. Later, the production was also marred by some financial woes.

Rather than wallow in despair at the state of affairs, Khanna decided to concentrate on doing things that had escaped him earlier in his life. He would spend a major portion of his day catching up with his family that had by now mushroomed to include a few more grandchildren. Along with a few close friends and confidants, Khanna started taking regular holidays to Goa where familial bliss more than made up for the lack of professional highs.

An elder patriarch now, Khanna indulged his friends' children who had practically grown up in front of his eyes and were embarking on a career in films. Raseen recalls how Khanna took a keen interest in his son's progress in school, helped with his homework and insisted that the young man stay with him at Aashirwad during the days of his initial struggle. Similarly, he would give Ashim Samanta's son acting tips and never let go of an opportunity to ruffle the young actor's hair to give it that 'hero' look.

There were some old habits that refused to leave Khanna, though. It had been a few years since he had stopped going to his office in Versova and even though he operated from the one he had in Aashirwad, his famous lunch gatherings continued almost like a ritual. Convinced that Khanna preserved his 'office' largely as an excuse to catch up with friends, Johny Bakshi wistfully recalls how the actor's love to feed people never left him: 'I wasn't a regular at Aashirwad towards the later years, but whenever I went there, he would be overjoyed at the prospect of playing host.' Khanna's fondness for good food and, more importantly, serving people was legendary. Bakshi recalls how once in the 1980s Khanna invited a few friends for lunch but, true to his nature, arrived late. One of the guests, Satish Khanna, stepped out to grab a snack while others continued to wait for Khanna. Later, as he served them, Khanna got to know that Satish had already eaten something. The star almost had tears in his eyes and kept urging Satish Khanna to forgive him. 'He kept saying "Oye mainnu maaf kar de..."' says Bakshi and he wouldn't rest till Satish Khanna had a few bites.

Till the end, Khanna's face never ceased to light up when people enjoyed the food he served.

There was another reason behind Khanna's desire to enjoy the little joys of life. He had not been keeping good health and upon a visit to the doctor, realized that he was dying. According to Bhupesh Raseen, who was supposedly present along with Khanna and his elder daughter, Twinkle, the doctors informed Khanna that the damage to his health was irreversible. In the words of Raseen, Khanna was true to his larger-than-life public persona and asked the doctor how much time he had before his 'visa expired'. Although Raseen still refuses to talk about the specifics of Khanna's condition, he says that for nearly a year before his death, the actor emulated his beloved character of Anand Saigal from *Anand*. There are hardly a few who get an idea of how the world would remember them once they are no more and fewer still who get an opportunity to live out their legacy. Khanna knew he had very little time left and decided to live every single moment to the fullest with a little help from his illness which brought his family together.

While undergoing treatment, Khanna ushered in what would eventually end up being his last birthday. His close friends and family joined him and Twinkle, who shared her birthday with her father, on a holiday in Goa. The family had a blast of a time together amidst reports of Khanna's deteriorating health and murmurs of his supposed battle with cancer. With Simple Kapadia's demise in 2009, the family had already witnessed a cancer-related death. Twinkle had married Akshay in 2001, but Khanna's son-in-law too had lost his father, Hari Om Bhatia, to cancer in 2000. Everybody chose to remain quiet when it came to addressing the rumours about Khanna's health.

Along with being around the people close to him, Khanna also started putting his affairs in order. In the last few years, he had managed to sort out the financial mess that had engulfed him and decided to will everything to his daughters. In spite of never divorcing Dimple, who shifted back to Aashirwad during his last days, Khanna ignored his wife completely in the will he made a few weeks before his death. This would surprise even those who knew him well, for they knew Khanna to be extremely difficult but not really malicious. Like his habit of creating situations to repeat his pet dialogue, 'A king is a king, whether on throne or in exile,' Johnny Bakshi recalls how Khanna would keep repeating 'We are not divorced' a few times in a day when it came to Dimple. Even Rajeev Khanna, the estranged nephew who rekindled his contact with his uncle only towards the latter's last days, found his uncle's action unsavoury. 'My aunt is a much better human being than him (Rajesh Khanna) for sure,' says Rajeev, and finds Dimple's gesture of standing by Khanna till the very end to be a

testimony of her niceness.

In all the hullabaloo surrounding his health and his efforts to smoothen things out, Khanna perhaps saw Balki's offer as the one chance to set the record straight. Following Balki's narration, Khanna told him that although he may have said a few things here and there, overall, his feelings weren't those of bitterness and this ad would allow him to laugh at himself.

Rajesh Khanna knew that the Havells commercial was likely to be the very last time he would ever face a camera. His lifelong passion to perform had kept a glimmer of hope alive regarding his prospects. There were some rumours of him being offered a wild-card entry during the third season of the popular reality show *Bigg Boss* but Khanna refused to be a part of it.

Unmindful of his failing health, Khanna's heart was set on making his upcoming outing with the camera as memorable as possible and even a minor accident that restricted his movements couldn't dampen his spirits. A few days before he was to fly to Bangalore for the shoot, Khanna slipped in the bathroom and fractured his ankle. Although it resulted in just a hairline fracture, the fall caused protein drainage that led to a massive swelling in his ankle which, due to his failing health, aggravated the situation. Khanna didn't want to miss the shoot and decided to check into a hospital to help reduce the persistent swelling. 'He wanted it to come down to a level where he could slip into his shoes,' recalls Raseen, who had accompanied Khanna to the shoot. The medical attention made the pain somewhat bearable for Khanna as he drove straight from the hospital to the airport on the eve of the shoot.

Only the night before the shoot did Balki realize how bad Khanna's condition was. It had been just a month since he had met Khanna, but a lot had changed in the interim. 'I didn't expect him to be so frail and offered to postpone the shoot,' recalls Balki, recounting how, even in a frail state with a drip dangling from his arm, Khanna was raring to go.

The next morning, Khanna reached the location, an indoor stadium, on time – what a delicious irony in Khanna being on time for his last shoot – and reported on the floor in full make-up and costume, ready to take on the long day of hard work that lay in front of him. He was feeling breathless while manoeuvring his mark. The swelling in his ankle made it difficult for him to stand for more than half a minute and the state of his health made it worse. Yet, the instant he would hear Balki's call for action, something would switch on inside Khanna, and for the brief period of the filming, the face that couldn't smile smiled, the feet that hobbled waltzed and the eyes came alive. The arc lights shone on Khanna, but it wasn't the spotlight that illuminated him. Like it had happened a million times before, it was Khanna's soul that lit up the

moment he found himself in front of the lens, and for a little while he forgot about the pain.

Although the commercial was slated to go on air to coincide with the new season of the Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket series, Balki was worried about pushing Khanna beyond his point of endurance. He recalls how Khanna gave it his all for the duration of the shots, following which he would retreat to a wheelchair. 'I kept asking him if he wanted to take a break, but he insisted that we carry on,' says Balki. He adds that it was only at seven in the evening that Khanna mentioned he was tired. Even in his feeble state, Khanna surprised Balki with his cinematic instinct when he gently reminded the director about a few cutaways that he had missed. Khanna was aware that this would be his final hurrah and treated everyone present to an impromptu jig at the end of the shoot by enacting his ultimate farewell line, '*Achchha to hum chalte hain...*' from *Aan Milo Sajna*.

The parameter within which popular Hindi cinema operates understands only two things – rise and downfall. According to industry wisdom, anyone who rises must be proud and by that virtue the one who falls couldn't be anything but bitter. Almost three decades separated the wild frenzy that Rajesh Khanna generated and the Havells commercial that celebrated the whirl the actor caused. As expected, the television commercial generated a great deal of buzz and reactions covering an entire spectrum of emotions began pouring in. For millions of Khanna's fans and a huge majority of those who had an anthropological interest in him, the advertisement's tragicomedy was a little too surreal to digest. Khanna may have lapped up the chance to laugh at himself and to cock a snook at those who, believing him to be bitter about the hand that fate dealt him, expected a traditional nostalgic spin to the advertisement. But watching him saunter into the frame dressed in an elegant tuxedo and revelling in the adoration of thousands of die-hard 'fans', no one expected the comic turn in the end. To many fans, watching *the* Rajesh Khanna look right into the camera and equate the undying admirer to an electric appliance was nothing less than an acknowledgement that their idol had feet of clay. To some, the whole exercise reeked of desperation on Balki's part, for exploiting Khanna's longing to cling on to anything remotely reminiscent of his glory days.

Not just die-hard fans but even those who knew Khanna well once upon a time, such as his mami Madhu Talwar, felt that the commercial exploited Khanna as well as his fans. But the director rubbishes such viewpoints and questions the heartfelt response of certain people and asks where they were during the years when Khanna had been relegated to oblivion. He adds that when he made it clear to Khanna that the advertisement would seem to mock him as

well his achievements, Khanna told him that was the reason he liked the whole idea. The actor felt that it was, in fact, he himself who was making fun of his glory by coming out there and saying, '*Abhi mere paas kuch fans nahin, bas yeh hi hai*' (Now, these are the only fans I'm left with). Even during the shooting, Balki reiterated the possibility of the actor regretting doing the advertisement and confessed to the actor about feeling bad at the thought of Khanna being mocked in the ad; but the actor smiled knowingly and told him to carry on.

Balki believes that the advertisement's tragicomic essence came through so powerfully because it employed the truth to show a washed-out superstar whose sadness lay forgotten till he decided to address it. Divided between the many who detested the commercial and an equally vociferous lot that didn't find anything wrong with it, the ad nonetheless managed to get people talking about Rajesh Khanna in a manner not seen for over two decades. Balki says, 'He laughed. He laughed the loudest at every comment,' and adds that the actor was so confident of the execution that he didn't even bother to view the final cut before it went on air. The extent of interest the ad generated pleased Khanna and he enjoyed being talked about and discussed, smiling as yarns were spun about his alleged exploitation. 'People don't like others putting it the way it is and having a laugh at it,' says Balki and adds that if the ad were in negative light, Khanna's family would have been the first to point it out. The director says that, like Khanna, his son-in-law Akshay Kumar was thrilled, both at how the commercial shaped up and the massive response it generated.

Perhaps the real reason for the hysteria behind the Havells commercial was the way it changed the physical image of Rajesh Khanna forever. Till a few years ago, the smiling innocence of *Anand* or the lovelorn pathos of *Amar Prem* would be the first thing that came to mind when one thought of Rajesh Khanna, but his frailty in the advertisement transformed the physicality of the icon. In a day and age in which social media makes news travel faster than ever, it also makes bad news travel farthest, and the video of the making of the commercial that revealed the extent of Khanna's ill health went viral. Rather than confirm his joy about making his maiden commercial, Khanna's breathlessness while giving a sound bite revealed the state he was actually in. The more hits the video got, the more people discussed the life of the superstar; and with each page view, the search for material featuring Rajesh Khanna on video-sharing websites such as YouTube increased. For once, Rajesh Khanna had managed to time his exit to perfection.

But for his illness, the actor would have undoubtedly enjoyed the attention. His conspicuous shying away from the media further fuelled speculations about the magnitude of his illness. For his fans, any hopes of recovery were nearly

dashed when they saw a photo of Khanna flashing the victory sign from the terrace of Aashirwad.¹ On 21 June 2012, Khanna walked out to greet his fans and the media that had gathered on the street facing his bungalow. In the photo, Khanna, flanked by Akshay Kumar and Dimple, tried hard to suggest that there was still some hope; but even though his mind was ready for a second round, his debilitated body couldn't hide the truth any more. The deaths of Shammi Kapoor and Dev Anand a few months earlier had made the sad reality of Rajesh Khanna's impending death more difficult to come to terms with. Khanna had outlived most of the people who had contributed to making him an integral part of Hindi cinema's consciousness and, with his death, an entire generation was all set to lose Kishore Kumar, R.D. Burman and Anand Bakshi all over again. Khanna complained of weakness and exhaustion and was admitted to Lilavati Hospital towards the end of the month.² Although he was discharged a fortnight later, there was no major change in his condition.

Rajesh Khanna passed away almost a month after he greeted his fans for the last time.

The details of the superstar's ailment continued to remain hidden from the world even after his death. Strung from interviews and sound bites, it seems that the cause of Khanna's death was either cancer or multiple organ failure. In an interview following her favourite co-star's death, Mumtaz mentioned that although she and Khanna had lost touch for many years, she was happy that she managed to catch up with him before his death and recalled how they bonded over stories of fighting their respective cancers.³ In August 2011, nearly a year before his demise, the *Times of India* reported that Khanna was suffering from renal failure.⁴ Later, when he was admitted to Lilavati in June 2012, *India Today* also mentioned kidney failure and added that the actor had been undergoing dialysis three times a week.⁵ During the course of an interview to this writer, Khanna's nephew Rajeev said that he had offered to donate a part of his liver for a possible 'living donor liver transplantation' if needed. But it never came to that.

Similar to the manner in which the news of his illness brought Khanna's family together towards the end of his life, his death too got people from all walks of life together to bid him adieu. The night before the star's cremation, Balki had gone to pay his condolences. He says, 'I remember Dimple telling me that the funeral had to look like a party because this man (Khanna) is the ultimate showman.'

His constant competitor Amitabh Bachchan was one of the first to be by the side of the departed superstar and, along with the entire film fraternity, a sea of humanity turned up to accompany Khanna on his final journey. Neither the

incessant rain nor the colossal traffic jams of suburban Mumbai could deter nearly a million people who travelled from across the globe to catch one last glimpse of their idol. They refused to budge even after the police was compelled to resort to lathi charge to maintain order.

Apart from the commotion of the masses who dotted the route of the funeral procession, there was high drama surrounding the mortal remains of the man who thrived on theatrics. A little-known starlet Anita Advani, who declared herself to be Khanna's live-in partner for over a decade, sent him a legal notice a day before the actor's death and turned up at the funeral to stake her claim. Rajeev Khanna says that no one knew how to react to Advani's presence during Khanna's final rites and it was he who asked her to leave. Embittered by the family's reaction towards her during Khanna's funeral, Advani would later accuse Dimple Kapadia and Twinkle Khanna of forcibly taking Khanna's thumb impressions on certain documents during his hospitalization.⁶ Khanna's funeral pyre was lit by his eldest grandson, Aarav, in the presence of wife Dimple, daughters Twinkle and Rinkie, and sons-in-law Akshay Kumar and Sameer Saran, besides friends and family that included Anju Mahendru, who was present during the superstar's long illness as well.

Like his life and his stardom, Khanna's send-off too was regal – an ode to his 'A king is a king, whether on throne or in exile' dictum. Rarely had such a turnout been witnessed for an actor's funeral, but then rarely had the world seen a phenomenon like Rajesh Khanna.

EPILOGUE

People are often deceived by the image of a hero. It is easy to get misled by this image as it is often both present and out of reach at the same time. Nestled in the space between reality and our collective imagination, the idea of Rajesh Khanna is one such mirage.

The truth is that Rajesh Khanna happened, and so did the hundreds of stories surrounding him. But there is a difference between truth and a true story and, according to writer Salim Khan, it is somewhere between these two realms that we might find the real Rajesh Khanna. The writer found Khanna a strange fellow who existed beyond good or bad and, although he still remembers how difficult Khanna could be if he so wished, he can never forget the actor's large-heartedness.

While directing Khanna during his final appearance in front of the camera, R. Balki experienced the phenomenon unlike the tales he had heard. The filmmaker saw a side of Khanna that suggested that not only had the actor come to terms with the way his stardom deserted him, but also reached a point where it didn't bother him. On the other hand, in Salim Khan's opinion, all those who believe that the twist of fate didn't bother Khanna are going against primal human nature. In Salim's own words, Khanna often mused that no one could show him what he had witnessed once it all went away. There is little doubt that the star could not have been bothered by fame abandoning him but what hurt him most was the loss of opportunities.

Much like the perception of the degree of his popularity which increased or decreased depending on who narrated his tale, the extent of his alleged misdemeanours too waxed and waned according to the storyteller. Did he enjoy making producers wait on him as if he were some god? Yes, he did, but at the same time he worked for a pittance for those who couldn't afford him at his peak. Was he rude to colleagues or people who believed they were close to him? He once almost asked Randhir Kapoor to leave a party at his place when Kapoor questioned the presence of some not-so-famous members of a film committee who had also been invited to dinner by him. He once almost kicked out the daughter of a former employee who refused to vacate a flat owned by him but at the last moment changed his mind in spite of having the court order in his hands. Did he actually physically and emotionally abuse his wife? Some people this

writer interviewed not just confirmed the claim but also presented eyewitness accounts of the late actor's so-called transgressions. Counter-argumentatively, some point that only two people – Khanna and Dimple – could confirm the veracity of such claims, and one of them refuses to speak while the other is not among us any more.

Strangely, Rajesh Khanna became more relevant after he ceased to be a sensation. Reflecting the manner in which a deluge of stories surrounding him were refreshed or came to light after his death, this book is also inspired by the passing away of the phenomenon. While living, perhaps nothing much changed for Rajesh Khanna even after *Aradhana*, which ushered the era of Hindi cinema's first true superstar. But legends are created when stories are told and retold about an event. Khanna too was surrounded and engulfed by the yarns spun about him by others and perhaps, at some point, started seeing everything that happened through the prism of these tales. Perhaps he even began living his life as if it were a story. In fact, he is supposed to have said 'pack-up' before breathing his last. The performer even left behind a pre-recorded thank you message for fans and friends who attended his chautha, the ceremony that follows on the fourth day after death.

Such was the significance of Rajesh Khanna that even after he died, the stories around him didn't. The emergence of Anita Advani added another dimension to the myths and fables surrounding the man. The lady in question claims to have been a constant companion, a live-in partner, and even calls herself the dead star's 'surrogate wife'. But none of Khanna's close confidants remembers seeing her around as prominently as she would have us believe. In her own words, Advani was forcibly kissed by Khanna when she was a star-struck thirteen-year-old admirer and years later when she confronted him, the star sought her forgiveness and they embarked on a relationship.¹

Years before he died, during one of his afternoon soirees, Khanna noticed Viju Zaveri, a jeweller and a regular fixture at Khanna's famous lunch gatherings, engrossed in an obituary in the day's newspaper. Upon being asked about his keen interest in the item, Vijubhai sighed that unlike the death of celebrities, the news of his death wouldn't make it to any national or even local newspaper. He then looked at Khanna and said, '*Bade bhai, jab tum maroge toh tumhari photo Times of India ke front page pe chhapegi na?*' (Big bro, when you die, your photo would make it to the front page, right?) Khanna could only laugh at what he heard and patted Vijubhai's back, saying, 'And you call yourself my friend!' At Khanna's funeral a decade later, Vijubhai told Johnny Bakshi: '*Yeh toh bada bhai bhi vishwas nahin karega*' (Even big brother would not have believed this frenzy) and added how he wished Khanna were around to see the

news his death made.

Every time Khanna made an overseas trip, he returned with gifts. Sometimes he presented them to the people he had picked them up for and sometimes he forgot about them. Many a time, he didn't even bother opening the suitcases he returned with. After his death, almost sixty-four unopened suitcases were found strewn across Aashirwad – quite odd for someone who loved to play the host and lived to regale people he considered close. Rajesh Khanna's loneliness was not something that was locked or hidden from sight. Neither was it a burden left behind by unprecedented fame. As is evidenced by the unopened boxes, it was possibly ingrained deep within him. Locked up in the suitcase of his heart was the need to be alone – something that had always existed. But the world was either too blinded by the radiance of the star or too lost in the darkness surrounding it to notice.

[1.](#) Based on author's interview with Rajeev, Rajesh Khanna's nephew and son of Narendra

[2.](#) *g Junior* magazine, circa 1990

[1.](#) From Balaji Vittal and Anirudha Bhattacharjee, *R.D. Burman: The Man, The Music*, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2011

1. *Filmfare*, <http://www.filmfare.com/features/100-filmfare-days-32-anand-6219.html>

2. Shaikh Ayaz, 'The Loneliest Superstar', *Open Magazine*, 2012

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1. Javed Akhtar remained unavailable for comments
 2. *g Junior*, circa 1990
 3. K.N. Subramaniam, Filmfare, 1975
 4. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/gossip/article573866.ece>

[1.](#) Nasreen Munni Kabir with Javed Akhtar, *Talking Films: Conversations on Hindi Cinema*, Oxford University Press, 2006

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 2. K.N. Subramaniam, *Filmfare*, 1975
 3. <http://memsaabstory.com/2010/06/16/tyaag-1977/>
 4. Hanif Zaveri, *Mehmood: A Man of Many Moods*, Popular Prakashan, 2005

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 - [2.](#) Barbara Crossette, *New York Times*, May 1991
 - [3.](#) Susmita Dasgupta, *Bargad*, July 2012
 - [4.](#) Biswanath Ghosh, 'Life's Journey, What Kind of a Journey', 2012

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- [1.](#) Author's interview with Rumi Jaffery
 - [2.](#) Meera Joshi, 'To Kaka with love', *Filmfare*, July 2012
 - [3.](#) From interviews with people attending the function who request anonymity

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 3. Rediff, <http://www.rediff.com/movies/report/mumtaz-rajesh-khanna-was-very-close-to-me/20120718.htm>
 4. *The Times of India*, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/9567859.cms>
 5. *India Today*, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/rajesh-khanna-renal-woes-admitted-to-hospital/1/202132.html>
 6. *India Today*, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/anita-advani-claims-rajesh-khanna-sexually-assaulted-her-when-she-was-13/1/234988.html>

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 achievement award at India International Film Awards (IIFA), Macau character traits/highhandedness
 childhood, college and struggle downfall and flops, in politics/joined Congress/ as a Member of
 Parliament (MP) relationship with Anju Mahendru relations with Salim–Javed relationship with Tina
 Munim; Filmfare-United Producers Talent Hunt Khanna, Rinkie (daughter) Khanna, Satish Khanna,
 Twinkle (daughter) Khanna, Vinod Khayyam *Khoon Pasina* (1977) Khosla, Raj *Khudai* (1994) *Kis*
Kaam Ke Yeh Rishte (1995) Kishore Kumar Kolhapure, Padmini *Kora kaghaz tha yeh mann mera*
Kuchh toh log kahenge
Kudrat (1981) *Kyaa Dil Ne Kahaa* (2002) *Lamhe* (1991) Laxmikant–Pyarelal Ludhianvi, Sahir *Maalik*
 (1972) *Maha Chor* (1976) Mahendru, Anju *Main Azaad Hoon* (1989) *Main babu chhailla*
Main tumse pyar karti hoon
Maine tere liye hi saat rang ke sapne chune
Majnoon
Mamta Ki Chhaon Mein (1989) Mangeshkar, Lata Manju (aunt) Manoj Kumar (Harikrishna Giri
 Goswami) *Manoranjan* (1974) *Maqsad* (1984) *Maryada* (1971) *Masterji*
Mausam (1975) *Mausam mausam lovely mausam*
 Meena Kumari *Mehboob Ki Mehndi* (1971) *Mehboob Studio Mehbooba*
 Mehmood Mehra, F.C.

Mehra, Prakash Mehra, Umesh Mehra, Vinod *Mera Naam Joker* (1970) *Mera naam yaaron maha chor hai*
Mere dil ne tadap ke jab naam tera pukara
Mere Jeevan Saathi (1972) *Mere naina saawan bhadon*
Mere naseeb mein aye dost tera pyaar nahin
Mere sang-sang ayaa teri yaadon ka mela
Mere sapno ki rani
Meri jaan maine kaha
Meri pyaari behaniya
Mistry, Jal *Mohabbat ke suhane din*
Mohabbat Ki Kasam (1986) *Mohabbatein* (2000) Mohan Kumar Mukesh Mukherjee, Hrishikesh
Mukherjee, Joy Mumtaz Munim, Tina Mushir–Riaz *Naach meri bulbul*
Naaz, Farah Nadiadwala, Abdul Gaffar *Nadiya chale*
Nafrat ki duniya ko chhod ke
Nagaich, Ravikant Naidu, D. Rama *Naina tarse*
Nam Naadu (1969) *Namak Haraam* (1973) Nanda Nanda, Gulshan *Naram Garam* (1981) Nargis *Naseeb*
(1981) *Nasihath* (1986) *Naukri* (1978) *Naya Daur* (1957) *Naya Kadam* (1984) *Nazrana* (1987) *Neecha*
Nagar (1946) *Neelagiri Express* (1968) *Nishabd* (2007) *Nishipadma* (1970) *No Man of Her Own*
(1950) *O mere dil ke chain*
Oberoi, Suresh Om Prakash, J.
Oonche Log (1985) *Paa* (2009) *Paas nahin aana*
Padmini *Pakeezah* (1972) *Palkon Ki Chhaon Mein* (1977) Parekh, Asha Parveen Babi *Parwana* (1971)
Pathak, Baldev Patil, Smita *Patthar Ke Sanam* (1967) *Phir Wahi Raat* (1980) *Phool Aur Patthar*
(1966) Pizzey, Jack *Police Ke Peeche Police*
politics, as genre and mainstream Hindi films Pran *Prem Granth* (1996) *Prem Kahani* (1975) *Prem kahani*
mein
Prem Nagar (1974) Puri, Madan *Pyaar Jhukta Nahin* (1985) *Pyar deewana hota hai*
Pyar Zindagi Hai (2001) Pyarelal. See Laxmikant–Pyarelal *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (QSQT, 1988) Raaj
Kumar *Raaz* (1967) Rafi, Muhammad *Raina beeti jaye*
Raja Rani (1973) Rajendra Kumar *Rajput* (1982) Rajvansh, Priya Ramachandran, M.G.
Raseen, Bhupesh Rawail, Harnam Singh *Red Rose* (1980) Rehman, Waheeda Rekha *Riyasat* (2014) RK
Films *Roop tera mastana*
Roshan, Rakesh *Roti* (1974) Roy, Bimal Roy, Nirupa *Rupaye Dus Karod* (1991) *Saat Hindustani* (1969)
Sabiha *Sachaa Jhutha* (1970) *Sachai chhup nahin sakti banawat ke usoolon se*
Sachin *Safar* (1970) Sagar, Ramanand *Sahib, Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962) Sahni, Balraj Salim–Javed. See
Akhtar, Javed; Khan, Salim *Samaadhi* (1972) Samanta, Ashim Samanta, Shakti Sangal, Ambrish
Sanjeev Kumar (Hari Jariwala) *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (1978) *Sautela Bhai* (1996) Sawant, Rakesh
Scindia, Madhavrao Sen, Asit *Shakti* (1982) Shankar–Jaikishen Shashikala *Shatru* (1986) *Shayad meri*
shaadi ka khayal dil mein aaya hai
Shehzada (1972) Shivpuri, Om *Sholay* (1975) Shroff, Esmayeel Shroff, Jackie Sinha, Shatrughan Sinha,
Tarkeshwari Sinha, Vidya Sinha, Vinay Kumar Sippy Films Sippy, G.P.
Sippy, N.C.

Sippy, Ramesh Sonnie, Bhappie *Souten* (1983) *Souten Ki Beti* (1989) St Sebastian's Goan High School,
Girgaum Stanislavski, Konstantin *Star & Style*

Sultana, Parveen Sultanpuri, Majrooh *Sun Banto baat meri*
Sunja aa thandi hawa
Suno kaho kaha suna

Swarg (1990) *Swarg Se Sundar* (1986) Tagore, Sharmila Tak, Saawan Kumar Talwar, K.K.

Talwar, Madhu *Teesri Kasam* (1966) *Teesri Manzil* (1966) *Tere bina nahin jeena*

Thodisi Bewafaii (1980) *Train, The* (1970) *Trishul* (1979) *Tum pukar lo*

Tyaag (1977) Tyaagi, Ashok United Producers Combine Uttam Kumar Vajpayee, Atal Bihari Vijay (1988)

Vijay (aunt) Vyjayanthimala *Wafaa: A Deadly Love Story* (2008) *Waqt* (1965) *Woh Phir Aayegi*
(1988) *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964) *Woh sham kuch ajeeb thi*

Yaadon Ki Baraat (1973) *Yaar dildaar tujhe kaisa chahiye*

Yaar hamari baat suno

Yaaron, utho, chalo

Yeh Desh

Yeh jo mohabbat hai

Yeh kya hua

Yeh laal rang kab mujhe chhodega

Yeh public hai

Yeh reshmi zulfen

Yeh shaam mastani

Yogesh *Yuhi tum mujhse baat karti ho*

Zamana (1985) *Zanjeer* (1973) Zeenat Aman *Zindagi ek safar hai suhana*

Zindagi ka safar hai yeh kaisa safar

Zindagi kaisi hai paheli

Zindagi ke safar mein guzar jaate hai

Zindagi pyaar ka geet hai

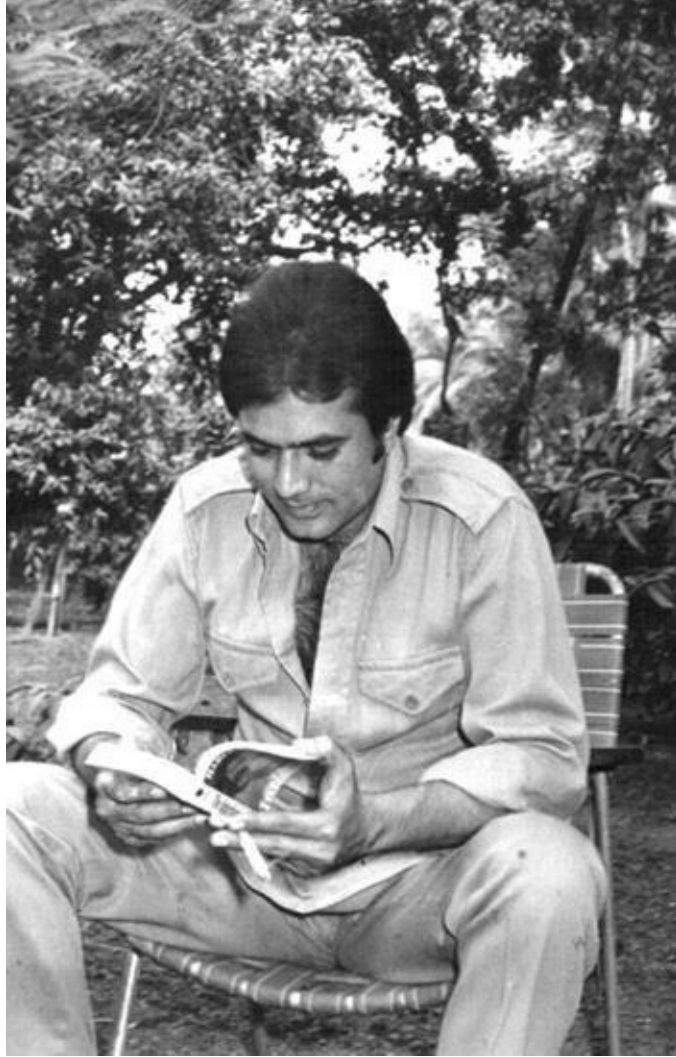
Zuban pe dard bhari dastaan

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COURTESY MAYAPURI

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GAUTAM CHINTAMANI is a born cinephile attuned to writing on all things cinema. A popular columnist across many leading national publications, Gautam's writing explores everything from world to Indian cinema and whatever exists in between. This is his first book.

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77-85 Fulham Palace Road, London W6 8JB, United Kingdom
Hazelton Lanes, 55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900, Toronto, Ontario M5R 3L2
and 1995 Markham Road, Scarborough, Ontario M1B 5M8, Canada
25 Ryde Road, Pymble, Sydney, NSW 2073, Australia
31 View Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10, New Zealand
10 East 53rd Street, New York NY 10022, USA