



King of  
Bollywood

Shah Rukh Khan  
*and the Seductive World  
of Indian Cinema*

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# 11

## The Brave-Hearted Takes the Box Office

The Maratha Mandir Theater is an unlikely setting for history. It is located in a predominantly working-class locality in south central Mumbai. One of the city's biggest railway stations, Mumbai Central, and the State Transport bus terminal are nearby. Each day hundreds of trains and buses offload thousands of passengers who come from dusty, destitute villages in search of the fabled Bombay dream. The streets are lined with cheap hotels and roadside eateries. In recent years spiffy new skyscrapers have started to gentrify the landscape, but the area still retains the feel of an inexpensive first stop for immigrants.

The Mandir Theater, inaugurated on October 16, 1958, was once a Bollywood hotspot. In the 1960s and 1970s, glorious premieres were held here. Live bands played as stars in dazzling fashions descended from imported cars and the paparazzi tripped over each other to get a good shot. But over

the decades Maratha Mandir deteriorated. The more affluent viewers preferred to get their *masala* movie fix in snazzy multiplexes, and Maratha Mandir came to be patronized largely by what the trade calls the "masses," or lower-middle-class viewers. But since the mid-1990s, each day at 11:30 A.M. history is made in the vast thousand-seat theater: *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Brave-Hearted Will Take the Bride), the longest-running Indian film ever, plays one more time.

*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (abbreviated as *DDLJ*) was released on October 20, 1995. After the initial years, the audience at Maratha Mandir consisted mostly of "repeat" viewers, people who have seen the film before. As the story unfolds, they cheer, mime dialogue, and sing along. The screening resembles the performance of a well-known mythological tale in a village square. Scalpers outside the theater speak of favorite clients who have seen the film twenty to thirty times. Some saunter in half an hour late or leave after their favorite scene or song is over. The pleasure is no longer in the artful contrivances of the story; the audience only comes to partake in the telling of it.

*DDLJ* has become a Bollywood landmark. Since film business in India, especially in the hinterland, is often conducted in cash, box office reports tend to be as wildly creative as the scripts. But it is widely agreed that *DDLJ* has done business worth 600 million rupees (\$13.5 million). In 2001, *DDLJ* broke the continuous exhibition record of *Sholay*, the previous gold standard, which had run for five years. An estimated 25 million copies of the *DDLJ* sound track have been sold. The film ushered in a new age in Bollywood. It changed Hindi cinema creatively and commercially by opening up new markets overseas. Aditya Chopra was only twenty-three years old when he wrote and directed the film.

Through the making of *Darr*, Aditya and Shah Rukh had become friends. Yash, Sunny, and Juhi were clearly “seniors,” older and more successful players in Bollywood’s hierarchy. Shah Rukh hung out with Aditya and his younger brother Uday, who was also assisting. They would come up with wacky ideas and conspire about how best to convince Yash to use them. After the completion of *Darr*, Aditya had started thinking about his own directorial debut. He talked to Shah Rukh about a film called *Auzaar* (Weapon). Shah Rukh assumed that a film with such a high-octane name would necessarily be a “macho, cool dude” kind of movie. Instead, in 1994, Aditya came to Shah Rukh with *DDLJ* and offered him the lead role of Raj.

The film was a deceptively simple story set in London. The hero, Raj Malhotra, is a rich, second-generation British Indian. Born and raised in London, he is irreverent, loud, and flirtatious. But underneath the veneer of cockiness he is an inherently upright, good-hearted Indian boy. The heroine, Simran, is a middle-class girl brought up in the Indian ghetto of Southall. She is spirited but extremely conservative.

Raj’s father embodies the rags-to-riches immigrant story. He is a tenth-grade drop-out from Bhatinda who, through sheer hard work, becomes a millionaire. Flamboyantly dressed in chic pants and cravats, he is a permanently jovial man who wants his only child to enjoy all that money can buy. So Raj lives in a mansion and drives a Lamborghini. When Raj flunks his university exams, instead of reprimanding him his father pops champagne, saying that Raj has upheld a long family tradition of academic failure. In contrast, Simran’s father is a stern, frugal convenience-store owner who insists that his two daughters grow up in a traditional Indian home unpolluted by the corrupting West. Despite

twenty-two years in London, he continues to dress in Indian clothes, makes his daughters pray regularly, and frowns upon Western music and culture.

Raj and Simran take a trip on the Eurail with their respective friends. At first they fight, but thanks to missed trains and faulty car engines, they end up spending one night together—of course without any sexual contact—and ultimately they fall in love. The hitch is that Simran is already engaged. Her father has arranged her marriage with his best friend’s son in India. She will soon move to a country she has never visited to marry a man she has never met. Simran has made peace with her fate. When Raj questions her imminent marriage, she says, “*Hamare yahaan toh aisa hi hota hai*” (In our community, this is how it works). But her carefully constructed future falls apart when she falls in love with Raj.

When Simran’s father finds out that his daughter has broken his rules, he ships the family back to India. He doesn’t count on Raj’s tenaciousness. Raj follows Simran back to the Punjab in India. With Bollywood’s typical disregard for realism, despite not having her address, Raj effortlessly finds her village and house. But unlike generations of Bollywood lovers before them, Raj and Simran don’t elope. Simran is willing to run away from her family but Raj refuses, saying, “I might have been born in England but I am Hindustani [Indian]. I’ve come to make you my bride. I’ll take you only when your father gives me your hand in marriage.” Raj stays in the village under a false identity and endears himself to every member of Simran’s family. Eventually, after many tears and a little blood have been shed, Raj even wins over Simran’s father. *DDLJ* asserts that familial approval is essential for love to thrive. A love marriage must also be arranged. Only then does the brave heart take the bride.

As a director, Aditya inherited the Yash Chopra style. Rich emotions, sumptuous songs, and Switzerland were part of his cinema legacy. But he was also greatly influenced by another young film director named Sooraj Barjatya. Sooraj was a third-generation Bollywood director. His grandfather, Tarachand Barjatya, had set up Rajshri Productions in 1962. Tarachand's three sons and several grandchildren followed him into the business. They belonged to the ultra-conservative Jain community and lived in a joint family, never touching meat or alcohol. They were such staunch vegetarians that their films and television serials did not even have references to eggs. In the decadent and lurid movie world, they were an anomaly.

At the Barjatya office, the brief for movies was simple: "Producing wholesome and musical entertainers aimed at the family, which are Indian in content and spirit." Like Yash Raj, Rajshri also offered family values, but with less opulent packaging. Their films were more homely. In 1989, the company was floundering after a spate of flops when the twenty-four-year-old Sooraj made his debut with *Maine Pyar Kiya* (I Have Loved). *Maine Pyar Kiya* was a romance so chaste that when the boy applies medicine to the girl's sprained calf, he closes his eyes because her ankles are exposed. The film was a monstrous success. Aditya liked it so much that he saw it twice in back-to-back shows. His diary entry reads, "A mind-blowing film, a complete entertainer, deserves all the success it gets."

As it turned out, *Maine Pyar Kiya* was only the warm-up for Sooraj's second act, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* (Who Am I to You?). In this film, Sooraj extended two weddings and a funeral into over three hours of celebrations of Indian rituals, nuptials, and the united Hindu family. In

*Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !*, the numerous characters—in-laws, friends, aunts, uncles, even the hired help and the pet Pomeranian—are relentlessly cheerful. There is little plot, dramatic sweep, or character development. The film is mostly a series of happy bonding scenes held together by fourteen songs. Critics savaged it as a "wedding video" but viewers embraced it with such ardor that it became the highest grosser in recent Bollywood history and single-handedly revived the theatrical business. *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* articulated a value system that *DDLJ* would echo a year later: that the extended family is sacrosanct. It is the foundation of all that is properly Indian. It is what makes Indian culture morally superior. Therefore, individual desires must be sacrificed at the altar of greater social good. *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* was released in August 1994, a month before Aditya started shooting. It reinforced his conviction in his own story.

Shah Rukh, however, didn't share Aditya's vision. "I didn't like those romantic films from the beginning," he said. "I didn't want to go on a picnic or go to college." The other two Khans, Aamir and Salman, were playing these lover-boy roles with great success and Shah Rukh was happy to be regarded as different. His third attempt at playing a negative hero in a dark, grossly violent film called *Anjaam* (Conclusion) had flopped, but he had a clutch of films in hand. The press positioned him as the "hottest star." The December 1994 edition of *Movie* magazine had Shah Rukh's picture on the cover next to that of Amitabh Bachchan with the headline, HEIR APPARENT?

Traditionally, Bollywood heroes make their debut with a *DDLJ*-style romance. The time-honored formula is simple: Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl, and they walk

into the sunset hand in hand. The plot is designed to give the actor enough opportunities to show that he is worthy of being a star. He romances, dances, fights, and lip-synchs melodious songs. Bollywood wisdom dictates that the love story is the safest way for a new face to win over viewers. But Shah Rukh had already had fourteen releases before *DDLJ*, three of which featured him as a decidedly unromantic and un-heroic character. Which was why Aditya wanted him.

Aditya had scripted Raj as a slightly *tedha* (crooked) character. He believed that a touch of impudence is far more attractive to women than the straitlaced piety of most Bollywood heroes. Raj is a transgressor. In an early draft of the script Aditya had him buying condoms, but he later decided that might be going too far and he changed it to beer. Raj flirts outrageously. He is, on the surface, a spoiled, rich jerk. Raj's nobility is revealed when Raj and Simran spend a night together. Simran is in a drunken stupor. When she wakes up the next morning, Raj convinces her that they have made love. But when she breaks down sobbing, he tells her the truth. He shakes her and says, "I'm not scum, Simran. I am Hindustani and I know what honor means for the Hindustani woman. Not even in my dreams can I imagine doing that to you." This scene changes the tenor of *DDLJ*. Aditya believed Shah Rukh could do Raj better than anybody else because he would bring an edge to the role—in this critical scene, at least for a moment the audience would think that Shah Rukh, with his history of bad behavior, could have crossed the *Lakshman Rekha* and had premarital sex.

Over three weeks and several meetings, Aditya tried to convince Shah Rukh to do the film. In their fourth meeting, Aditya told Shah Rukh that he was indeed a star, but he could never become a superstar unless he became every

girl's fantasy lover, every sister's brother, and every mother's son. Till then he was, as Aditya put it, "the autorickshaw driver's hero." As Shah Rukh dithered, Aditya thought of alternatives. But one day at Mehboob Studios, on the sets of *Karan Arjun*, Shah Rukh agreed to do *DDLJ*. He still didn't believe in the film, but he loved the climax in which the stern father finally lets go of Simran's hand and allows her to leave with Raj on an outbound train. Many industry pundits were skeptical of Shah Rukh's switch to the lover-boy persona. Shah Rukh drove to the premiere of *DDLJ* with Ratan Jain, who had produced *Baazigar*. "Don't mind," he told Shah Rukh, "but this film will never work. People will not accept you as a romantic hero."

In the movie business, as William Goldman famously remarked, "nobody knows anything." Viewers had responded to Shah Rukh's negative persona with unexpected applause. They now embraced the lover boy with greater fervor. In Mumbai, barring one Saturday evening show, every show in every theater in the first week of the film's release was full. Distributors reported record collections across the country. The critics were equally besotted: In the *Times of India*, critic Khalid Mohamed wrote, "Popular, high-cost cinema has come of age." *Screen*, a trade weekly, headlined the review with: A YOUNG MASTER ARRIVES.

*DDLJ* became Bollywood's Energizer Bunny—it kept going and going and going. The film took on a life of its own and stayed on the big screen. Each time a milestone was reached—5 years, 300 weeks, 10 years—a flurry of media descended on Maratha Mandir to mark the occasion, but largely the film continued as if on autopilot. It needed no marketing. In the ensuing years, Shah Rukh had several more blockbusters and two children; Aditya got married,

divorced and set up a studio; the heroine, Kajol, got married, had a daughter, retired for three years, and returned. All the while, *DDLJ* continued to play.

*DDLJ* set up a new heroic prototype. Raj replaced Vijay; Amitabh's Angry Young Man image was buried and gone. Raj wasn't an anti-establishment rebel. He was a yuppie who worked the system to get the desired results. He was an articulate global Indian who was equally at ease in a nightclub in Paris or in a village in the Punjab. Raj was trendy and traditional. Depending on the situation, he could be progressive or conservative. He played by the rules but also tweaked them when necessary.

Unlike Vijay, Raj wasn't larger than life. He was scripted, as Aditya put it, "as life. The *herogiri* [heroism] was gone. It was the age to be chilled out." Dramatic dialogue was an essential ingredient in Vijay's heroic persona—decades after the films were made, fans can quote Amitabh Bachchan's powerful lines from *Sholay* and *Deewaar*. But Raj spoke in normal, everyday language. Though he still single-handedly beat up several bad guys, he wasn't overtly macho. In *DDLJ*, Raj sits in the kitchen and peels vegetables with the women of the house. When Simran does *Karva Chauth*, a North Indian ritual in which women keep a daylong fast for the good health and prosperity of their husbands, he starves along with her. In his participation in these rituals and his ease in traditionally female spaces, Raj is unlike the swaggering he-man heroes of the past. He is sensitive, vulnerable, and not afraid to cry. But he also has the strength and guile to outwit the more blatantly chauvinistic men in the film: Simran's father and her boorish fiancé. Raj was the new Indian man.

While making *DDLJ*, Aditya instructed Shah Rukh to

take off his mask. Unlike *Baazigar* and *Darr*, there was to be no showy actor's business—stammering, wounds, or ultra-violence—that Shah Rukh could use. Aditya wanted Shah Rukh to "show himself." Raj, witty and irreverent but also sensitive and insightful, was an extension of Aditya and Shah Rukh himself, who Aditya believed was, underneath the brash attitude, an inherently nice man. Despite his frontier Peshawar roots, Shah Rukh was not a proponent of high-testosterone virility. Barring his C-Gang school friends, he preferred the company of women. Even the male friends he made later in life were, in his words, "not the most macho" (one reason, perhaps, why rumors of homosexuality have dogged Shah Rukh from the time he joined films). Shah Rukh was proud of not cloaking his feminine side. He described himself as a "Pathan who can cry."

Shah Rukh was, as Aditya said, "nakedly honest" in his performance. Even though Amitabh had earlier elicited the same passion, fans rarely thought of Vijay and Amitabh Bachchan as one. Vijay was working-class, seething, and sometimes brutal. Amitabh, in person, was highly cultured and sophisticated. But with Shah Rukh, the distance between actor and image blurred. The audience believed that Shah Rukh *was* Raj. He became, as Aditya had said, every girl's fantasy lover, every sister's brother, every mother's son. In short, a superstar.

Just as Vijay embodied the angst of 1970s India, Raj resonated with the aspirations of a post-liberalization 1990s India. Shah Rukh became the personification of the collective ideals and longings of a country undergoing social upheaval. The decade was a curiously uncertain time in the nation's history. The economic rebirth set off by liberalization created a surge of growth in urban India. The reforms created

an air of optimism and confidence. After almost fifty years of economic exile, an unshackled country rushed to catch up with the world, which beckoned from television sets. Lifestyles, attitudes, and social mores underwent cataclysmic change. “*Yeh dil maange more*” (This heart wants more), insisted a commercial for Pepsi-Cola that was launched on August 15, 1990, and soon become a ubiquitous symbol of modern India. Middle-class Indians increasingly aspired to the good life, and the economy offered the opportunity to make at least some of their dreams come true. Unlike previous generations, the new middle class had no guilt or inhibitions about money. Being rich was the principal ideology of the 1990s. Greed, as Gordon Gekko so memorably declared in *Wall Street*, was good.

But the torrent of Western goods and ideas that flooded the country also brought a new morality. Sexuality was firmly out of the closet. Mainstream magazines and newspapers reveled in sleek, semi-clad bodies, while on television middle-class Indians engaged in passionate debates on adultery, homosexuality, and premarital sex. Surveys and media reports revealed that a generation of Indian teenagers was no longer waiting for marriage to find out what the fuss was all about. The media marketed sex and also breathlessly recorded the “*amrit manthan*,” or cultural churning, in urban India. Color supplements, crammed with the latest parties, fashions, and indulgent lives of the rich and famous, became *de rigueur*. A celebrity-obsessed populace eagerly read the society pages of national newspapers, thus creating the Page Three Culture (the *Times of India* featured its gossip and celebrity items on the third pages of its editions). Consumerism was king.

The new seductive ethos altered all the rules. In the cities, children imbibed Western values and affected a language of

cool that was incomprehensible to their parents. The family unit faced the added pressure of double-income parents, women’s dissatisfactions with their conventional roles, and their desires for autonomy. The old order offered stability but the new was more enticing. New freedoms brought with them new confusions and uncertainties. In the push and pull of a globalized society and economy, the definition of what constitutes Indian was reworked.

This rush into globalization was paralleled by a retreat into a comforting cocoon of conservatism and family values. There was a political resurgence of right-wing Hindu politics with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party). The BJP offered an unapologetically narrow definition of Indian culture. The debate about what is and isn’t Hindustani was pursued in the media, sometimes aggressively on the streets, and in political agendas and government policies. So in Mumbai, the BJP’s political ally, the Shiv Sena, annually denounced Valentine’s Day as “against the ethics and culture of Indian society” and routinely disrupted the commerce of romance by burning Valentine’s Day cards and trashing offending shops. In 1998, Hindu nationalists trained their ire on *Fire*, director Deepa Mehta’s film about two lonely, neglected sisters-in-law in a middle-class Delhi neighborhood who find love and sexual satisfaction with each other. Cinema halls screening the film were stormed in Mumbai. A leader of the Shiv Sena’s Women’s Wing, Meena Kambli, told the media that “films like *Fire* have a bad influence on Hindu culture. The majority of women in our society do not even know about things like lesbianism. Why expose them to it?” These culture wars continued through the decade.

The economic optimism and buoyancy of the new, shiny

India was punctured by communal violence and terrorism. The Mumbai riots in December 1992 and January 1993 and a series of horrific bombings that followed two months later altered the ethos of India's most cosmopolitan city and India itself. In these complicated times, *DDLJ* offered an uncomplicated solution: fusion. Like fusion clothes and fusion food, *DDLJ* suggested a fusion lifestyle. Shah Rukh as Raj was the best of the East and the West. He became all things to all people. He was a yuppie hero whose cool clothes and cooler personal style made him a youth icon. But he also unabashedly celebrated and perpetuated homespun *swadeshi* values. He was moral without being tediously pious. Like millions of urban Indians in the 1990s, Raj negotiated between tradition and modernity. But unlike most real-time struggles, Raj's conflicts were beautifully resolved without any permanent heartache or unsanctioned sex. In Aditya's utopia, the contradictions of past and present, rich and poor, urban and rural, non-resident Indian and local, could comfortably co-exist and enrich each other.

Like Amitabh Bachchan and Vijay, Shah Rukh and Raj were a perfect fit. Aditya said, "What comes across most strongly is Shah Rukh's desire to please. Most actors want adoration but they want you to love them for how they look or how they act. Shah Rukh doesn't want you to love him as a star. He is trying in a very strange way through his acting to make you love him. It has a lot to do with the loss of his parents. They aren't there anymore and he's reaching out and substituting their loss with the world."

Two years after *DDLJ*, Yash Chopra directed Shah Rukh in *Dil To Pagal Hai* (The Heart Is Crazy). Like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !*, *Dil To Pagal Hai* had little by way of plot. It was a typically Yash Raj essay on romance. The film's big idea

was that love is destined. Every person is born with a soul mate. God has already decided who your life partner is—it is just a question of finding him or her. The tagline was: "Someone . . . somewhere . . . is made for you." So almost till the intermission, the hero and heroine speak of each other, imagine each other, and pass by each other without ever meeting. The emotional intrigue is further complicated because the hero's best friend is also in love with him. The heroine, Madhuri Dixit, meanders in verdant fields wearing white chiffon while the best friend, Karisma Kapoor, dances in tight leotards. The film is love-lite with an unmatched Western gloss and foot-thumping music.

Shah Rukh played Rahul, the hipper avatar of Raj. Rahul is a flamboyant theater director who lives in a Manhattan-style loft space somehow transported to Mumbai, complete with graffiti on the walls and a Pepsi vending machine. At first, Rahul is a sniggering cynic, but slowly, as he falls in love, he comes to believe that someone indeed is made for him. *Dil To Pagal Hai* had little depth, but that didn't prevent it from becoming a smash hit. Shah Rukh became the poster boy of the sunshine cinema of the 1990s. One year after *Dil To Pagal Hai*, the trendy-yet-traditional formula was refined and taken several notches higher in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something Is Happening), the debut film of Karan Johar.



# 12

## A Global Icon

**K**aran Johar was a key player in the construction of Shah Rukh Khan as a global icon. For Bollywood, the West had largely functioned as a philosophical conundrum (and, occasionally, a flashy backdrop for songs), but after *DDLJ* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, it evolved into a market and plot. The U.K. and the U.S.A. became a fount for both full-blown narratives and millions of viewers who paid handsomely in dollars and pounds to watch them. By the turn of the millennium, Hindi films were as likely to be based in New York as in New Delhi.

As the market share became larger, canny directors started to design “overseas-friendly films.” These were big-star cast movies with extravagant songs, lavish production, romantic plots, and minimal action. Violence and gore were sidelined by family values. The non-resident Indian wanted, as Karan put it, “one big Indian joyride with good-looking faces, in good-looking clothes, saying beautiful things and preaching the right morals for their children.” Shah Rukh’s films fit the

bill perfectly. *Dil Se* (From the Heart: 1998), ironically an unqualified flop in India, became the first Bollywood film to break into the U.K. top-ten charts. In 2003, a Nielsen EDI survey reported that seven of the top ten Hindi films in the U.K. from 1989 onward starred Shah Rukh.

For the 20 million-odd Indians scattered overseas, Hindi films have always been more than entertainment. They were a way to bind the community, maintain an emotional chord with a distant motherland, and buy, inexpensively, a dose of Indian culture for second-generation children who were growing up as hyphenated hybrids. In 1970s London, a Bollywood film was a social event, a chance for the ladies to flash their silk saris and twenty-four-karat gold jewelry. The *samosas* and *chai* served during interval were as critical as the film itself. Through the 1980s, video and cable decimated the theatrical business both locally and overseas. Non-resident Indians now lapped up the latest Hindi films at home or at the corner Indian grocery store, which doubled as a video parlor. But even though they passionately consumed Bollywood product, non-resident Indians very rarely saw themselves in it.

Hindi films traditionally portrayed the West as *kala pani* (black water), a spiritual and cultural exile. Its corrosive effects could be seen on the non-resident Indian, who was, more often than not, scripted as an irreparable debaucher who had made a Faustian bargain, exchanging his morally superior Indian soul for material comforts. This disapproving tone was set by a 1970 blockbuster called *Purab Aur Pachhim* (East and West), in which a decadent Indian family in London—the son is a hippie and the daughter a nightclubbing tart—is set right by a staunchly upright Son of the Soil, who, in case the audience missed the point, is named Bharat (the Hindi name for India).

Eight years later, another film, *Des Pardes* (Home, Abroad), summed up London in a flurry of images of people kissing in the streets and pornographic posters. This blatant wickedness causes the film's heroine, a virginal village belle from India, to rush home in panic and sing a devotional song: "Kaise yeh nagaria, kaise hain yeh log, haaye sab ko laga prabhu besharmi ka rog" (What is this city, what people are these? O Lord, everyone seems to be without shame). These films offered local viewers the small solace that their foreign brethren might enjoy living in the comfortable, clean West, but it was they, struggling with heat and grime and flies, who actually had unpolluted souls.

The Chopras—Yash and Aditya—and their protégé Karan turned these stereotypes on their head and resuscitated the business. In 1997, at the insistence of Aditya, Yash opened a distribution office in the U.K. Their first release, *Dil To Pagal Hai*, netted £1 million. No Indian film had done even a quarter of this business before, at least not officially. A year later, they opened an office in the U.S. with Karan's debut film, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. It broke even *DDLJ*'s record, grossing over \$7 million worldwide. Karan's film hit the U.K. top-ten charts at number nine. In South Africa, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* raked in more money than *Titanic*.

*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* is the story of Rahul, a young widower, whose eight-year-old daughter takes it upon herself to reunite her father with his long-lost best friend Anjali. The first half of the film is an extended flashback to their college days, in which Anjali is an unkempt tomboy who beats Rahul at basketball and teases him about his several bimbo girlfriends. But this strictly back-slapping-buddy relationship changes with the arrival of Pooja, a gorgeous mini-skirt-clad vision with permanently windswept hair. Rahul is instantly

smitten. Only when Pooja and Rahul begin to fall in love does Anjali realize that she too loves Rahul. Anjali abruptly leaves college. Rahul and Pooja get married. Pooja dies soon after childbirth, but leaves behind letters for her daughter urging her to find her father's true love, Anjali.

Karan set this gossamer-thin confection in a Neverland that was quite disconnected from Indian realities. With its lockers, cheerleaders, and uber-cool skateboarding students, the college is a *Grease-meets-Archie-Comics* fantasy that doesn't faintly resemble any existing educational institution in India. The candy-floss American ambience only grows thicker in the second half of the film, which is mostly set in a children's summer camp.

Shah Rukh is once again Rahul, the college's coolest student. He's so cool, in fact, that he actually wears a necklace that spells out C-O-O-L. In this airbrushed world, accessories and clothes are a key element. Karan was a consummate fashionista. He had designed Shah Rukh's look in *Dil To Pagal Hai*, but the Rahul in that film hadn't discovered labels yet. In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, Karan aspired to set a new style standard in Hindi cinema.

Before shooting started, Karan and his designer friend, Manish Malhotra, made special trips to London for appropriate costumes. (When Karan first suggested this shopping spree to his father, who was producing the film, Yash Johar thought his son had "lost it," but he finally agreed to a budget of 5,000 pounds, which was later raised to 8,000.) To make sure that the audience recognized the effort and money involved, Karan and Manish deliberately chose clothes that prominently displayed their foreign-designer origins. Several had labels emblazoned across the chest. Anjali's first shot has her playing basketball in a DKNY tracksuit. Rahul, more

sartorially evolved than his earlier screen avatars, is partial to Polo Sport and Gap.

But these weightless fantasy landscapes of the film are rooted in oversized Indian emotions. Karan wept copiously in movies and he wanted his audience to do the same, so scenes are pitched to wring out every last drop of melodrama. Though the film is set in India, the characters, echoing *DDLJ*, are hybrids. They are modern, articulate people who, underneath the trendy Western labels, proudly preserve their Indian identity. Rahul goes to the temple every week (wearing Polo Sport, of course). Pooja, who has been raised in London and educated at Oxford, dresses like a fashion model, but when Rahul and his friends force her to sing in public, she breaks into a Hindu hymn. The boisterous crowd is stunned into silence. She says, "Living in London and studying and growing up there has not made me forget my roots, and don't you forget that."

In *DDLJ*, Simran's father compares second-generation non-resident Indians to the proverbial washerman's dog, who belong neither to the *ghar* (house) nor the *ghat* (riverbank). But these films assured non-resident Indians that in fact the opposite was true. They did belong. Living in the West had not robbed them of their roots. Indian values were portable and malleable. They could straddle both worlds, just as the characters in *DDLJ* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* did. Both films offered non-resident Indians a palatable India. The poverty, corruption, injustice—all reasons for leaving home, perhaps—were carefully edited out. Instead these films fed a nostalgia for an imagined homeland in which beautiful homes were filled with large, loving families; rituals and traditions remained intact; and children, despite their cool posturing, were happily subservient to their parents.

Shah Rukh was a star who blended, in perfect proportions, Indian and Western culture. So while the local Indians aspired to be articulate, designer-clad yuppies like him, the Indians abroad saw him as one of them. First-generation immigrants hoped that their Westernized sons and daughters would find the elusive cultural equilibrium that *DDLJ*'s Raj had. Second-generation children adored Rahul's suave negotiation of traditions in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. He was someone they could relate to—he looked like them and spoke their language (after *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* was released, the orange sweatshirts, which Rahul wears in the film, were sold out at the Oxford Street Gap store in London).

Unlike Bollywood heroes of the past, Shah Rukh wasn't verni, a derogatory term for somebody who had studied in one of those "vernacular" schools where an Indian language, not English, is the medium of instruction. He made everything look exceptionally cool, from wooing girls in Switzerland to nestling his head in his mother's lap. *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* helped to make Hindi films *au courant*. For several generations of Indians, Bollywood became a style guide and a way home.

In Karan, Shah Rukh found a filmmaker who instinctively understood that what was being marketed was not an actor but a personality. Karan further advanced the high-gloss, high-emotion style originated by Yash Chopra. But this evolution was also a sanitization. Despite their ostensible glamour many of Yash's films had dark undertones, but Karan and Aditya, both second-generation Bollywood kids, shared a more rose-tinted take on life. They had, as Yash's biographer, Dr. Rachel Dwyer, put it, "a less complicated view of human beings." Together they took the sting out of love and created comfortable, fluffy fairy tales for adults with Shah Rukh as Prince Charming.

Karan's success was especially spectacular because it was wholly unexpected. Unlike Aditya, Karan grew up without any film ambitions. His father, Yash Johar (who died in 2004), was a Bollywood veteran who had started in 1952 as a production controller and eventually, after working his way up the ranks, launched his own production company in 1976. But Karan treated Hindi movies with an aesthete's disdain. He was an unapologetic south Mumbai snob. Even as a child, he had a keen sense of style (he was pudgy and this made him so self-conscious that he sometimes refused to attend birthday parties). Karan knew Aditya and his younger brother Uday. They met at previews and birthday parties, but Karan told his mother that he couldn't befriend them because they spoke in Hindi about Hindi movies, which was just "too tacky."

But this upturned nose was only a front, cultivated perhaps to match the attitudes of his fashionable friends. Actually, Karan was a closet Bollywood buff. He grew up devouring Hindi movies and reading the trades, but he could never articulate his passion for his father's world. After finishing college, he worked in an export business the family owned, learned French, and made half-baked plans about moving to Paris for further studies.

Aditya laid those plans to rest. Sometime in 1994, a common friend re-introduced the two men. Their personalities were polar opposites. Aditya was an introvert, very guarded in his relationships. He was stubborn, intensely focused, and highly competitive—even losing at a board game would put him in a foul mood. Karan was giddily gregarious. He was hardworking but more relaxed. (The contrast would be underlined in their respective responses to success—after his blockbuster debut, Aditya remained an anonymous recluse.

He blocked out the media so effectively that the audience had little idea what he looked like. But Karan, after his debut, determinedly dropped several pounds and became a glamorous Page Three personality, even hosting a successful chat show called *Koffee with Karan*.) Aditya noticed in Karan what no one had before: a distinctly Hindi movie sensibility.

Aditya started bouncing script ideas off Karan. Eventually he convinced Karan to forget Paris and assist him on *DDLJ*. Karan was the all-purpose handyman on the film. Besides consulting on the script, he also had a small role. His chief responsibility was costumes. Aditya had a more prosaic sense of style, but Karan was obsessive about a film's "look." He was as skilled at ferreting fashions as he was with tweaking scenes. He spent hours trudging through the congested, grungy streets of Goregaon, a far-flung suburb of Mumbai, searching for perfectly matching bangles and *bindis*. He agonized over how to make the heroine, Kajol, look slimmer. Sometimes, between takes on the streets of Switzerland, Karan combed her hair himself.

Through the making of *DDLJ*, Shah Rukh connected with Karan in the same way he had connected with Aditya during *Darr*. Aditya was now at the helm of affairs. Harrowed by the myriad details of making a film, he was overworked and so wired that he barely ate. Karan became Shah Rukh's confidant. They thrashed out script details and improvisations. On the outdoor shoot in Switzerland, Shah Rukh, who had never felt the need to cure his insomnia, made Karan sit up with him on long nights, talking movies. Karan's baby face and fey mannerisms belied his sharp scripting instincts and arcane Bollywood knowledge. They shared a similar wacky sense of humor. Shah Rukh saw in Karan the same wide-eyed earnestness he had seen in Aditya. One day, over coffee

in Gstaad, Shah Rukh suggested to Karan that he make a film and said that he would be willing to act in it.

Six months later, Karan went to Rajasthan, where Shah Rukh was shooting, and, sitting on the steps of the Amber Palace, he narrated an underwritten romance about a widower who goes in search of his first love. God, played by some suitably heavyweight senior actor, would have a walk-on part. Karan was petrified that Shah Rukh wouldn't like it, but Shah Rukh didn't discourage the nervous, fumbling boy. "I figured," he said, "if Aditya could be so fantastic, even his assistant director would be good. I was very confident about the way Karan described some scenes. We would have the same team, Yash Johar, Kajol, and we would figure something out."

On October 21, 1997, Karan started filming *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. The night before, his mother came into his room and hesitantly asked if he knew how to look through a camera lens and frame a shot. She couldn't believe that her "*pallu ke peeche*" (painfully shy) son was going to direct a movie. Her question was valid. The first day of the shoot didn't go well. The crew was young and raw. Karan and his assistants barely knew which lens to use or how the scenes would finally cut together. Shah Rukh was explaining the technicalities, such as camera right and camera left, on the set. He said, "Karan makes no bones of the fact that his technical knowledge of filmmaking wasn't at its peak when he made the biggest hit of the decade." It hardly mattered. Six months after the film's release, Karan was inundated by Best Director awards. He told the press that Shah Rukh would be featured in every film he made henceforth.

This enduring professional and personal proximity led to rumors that Shah Rukh and Karan were lovers, to which

Shah Rukh replied with his typical wit, "So how did I have two children? Heavy petting?" In fact, Karan was closer to Gauri. Karan treated Shah Rukh with a near-fanatical reverence, but Gauri was his mate. Karan helped her navigate the treacherously shifting loyalties in Bollywood and adjust to her newfound status of superstar wife. "It was easy for me because Karan was there," she said. "I didn't miss Shah Rukh at all. With Karan, time just passed."

The roller coaster of stardom did not shake Shah Rukh and Gauri's relationship apart. After the first few years, Gauri stopped giving interviews. She was a fashionable presence at the city's A-list parties. Occasionally she lent her name to boost a favored designer or friend, but mostly she basked in her husband's glory. Their son, Aryan, was born on November 12, 1997. Three years later, on May 22, they had a daughter named Suhana. Unlike many Bollywood stars, Shah Rukh wasn't dogged by romantic scandal. Gossip magazines occasionally linked him to his heroines and industry grapevine mostly linked him to Karan, but there were no sustained stories of extra-marital dalliances. "There are some promises in my heart about our relationship," Shah Rukh said, "and those I think I have maintained."

On October 8, 1995, Shah Rukh gave Gauri a spectacular birthday present: a sea-facing heritage bungalow built in 1896, sitting on a 26,300-square-foot plot of land. In a city where a cramped 500-square-foot apartment is considered eminently livable, a stand-alone bungalow speaks of serious wealth and power. The property had often been used for film shoots and was hideously run down. But over 4½ years architects and interior designers turned it into a Mumbai landmark.

Mumbai law forbids restructuring of heritage properties so

the exteriors and elevation were left untouched, but the interiors were converted into a sleek, awe-inspiring star home. M. F. Husain, India's most famous living artist, created a painting to match the white-and-cobalt-blue living room. The den had a bar, pool table, juke box, and, like so many of Shah Rukh's films, a cola-vending machine. The family moved into the house in 2000. Five years later, a six-floor building with a movie theater and a swimming pool was built in the open space behind the house. Shah Rukh and Gauri called their home *Mannat* (Wish).

Within *Mannat*, Shah Rukh and Gauri endeavored to maintain a semblance of normalcy. But it was difficult to disconnect the man from the pedestal entirely. The media reported on the minutiae of their lives, from how often Shah Rukh dropped his children off at their school to the salon where Gauri preferred to get her hair styled. Shah Rukh's opinion now carried so much weight that he usually had two. Gauri called him Shah Rukh One and Shah Rukh Two, which she explained as "two sides; one is saying one thing, the other is saying the complete opposite, and both in the space of a minute." Which once prompted writer Javed Akhtar to ask Gauri casually, "How are they?"

This split personality was essentially Shah Rukh's way of dealing with his canonization. He said, "There are two Shah Rukh Khans. Gauri's relationship with the superstar Shah Rukh is strange. She doesn't know him. I don't think she even likes him too much. I don't bring him home and she is very clear that she doesn't want to know him either. But her relationship with her husband Shah Rukh is fantastic. I think superstar Shah Rukh is the only competition she has accepted and settled with. That is a big sacrifice. That is how she's dealt with it. It is a good way. I like the joke in it.

"I have also made sure that superstar Shah Rukh doesn't do anything which disturbs the other Shah Rukh's life. I have never disregarded my personal life. I do believe that Shah Rukh is more important than superstar Shah Rukh and because of that belief the superstar keeps prospering. Because I think my heart is in the right place and that is what you require as an actor. I am just an employee of the Shah Rukh Khan myth."