THE MAKING OF A STAR

The life story of one of India's most loved actors woven into a racy account of the evolution of Hindi cinema

By Chandan Mitra

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Shah Rukh Khan has two defining characteristics: astonishing vitality, which is an outward show of the powerhouse of intense energy he carries within, and a disarming self-belief that often expresses itself as incorrigible self-praise. His philosophy of life is perhaps best expressed in a song he lipped for a 1990s quickie, Yes Boss: "Jo main chahoon aye main paas hone/saari duniya par main chhaoon/baas tina sa kharab hai (I have just this teeny-weeny dream that I should get everything I wish for and tower over the world.)."

The song continues with the refrain, "I'm the best, I'm the best..."

India's foremost contemporary actor has always believed he is indeed the best. As Anupama Chopra quotes him telling a magazine in 1994, "I have already picked up three (Filmfare Awards). I intend to add at least one to the collection every year. And why not? I'm one of the best actors on the scene today." There could not have been a better biographer of Shah Rukh Khan than Chopra, who is among India's most intelligent and perceptive film critics. She has not penned a hagiography of the actor she evidently admires. The book is not just a narrative of Shah Rukh's life story; it is a broad canvas depicting the world of Hindi cinema, its evolution reflecting changes in value systems; fascinatingly woven into her racy account is India's transformation into a self-confident economic power. Chopra has fused Shah Rukh's life story into that of post-Independence India.

While the actor’s phenomenal rise to superstardom is relatively well known, Shah Rukh’s early life is something he doesn’t talk about much. I have always thought this be a measure of his self-conviction: he never tries to peddle his middle class background as a selling point to garner sympathy. But Chopra tells his early life story poignantly—his father Meer's migration from Pakistan leaving the bulk of the family behind because of a passionate belief in India, Meer's failure to establish any worthwhile means of existence, his mother Fatima’s struggle to give the children a good upbringing theatre teacher and TAG founder Barry John, his natural flair for drama—give remarkable insights into his evolution as India’s most loved actor today.

Even more than what he learnt from his teachers, he internalised life or even chance comments from seniors. Chopra refers to producer-director Lokh Tandon once telling him that while dying onscreen one must never give the screen death a new definition.

The book helps every lover of Shah Rukh’s passionate screen depictions to understand what lies behind his throbblingly infectious energy and that touch of impulsiveness. That’s why he was so realistic in Dronagir and Darr, playing roles most actors would not touch.

Clearly, Chopra has targeted an international audience. The introduction may read somewhat simplistic to avid followers of Hindi cinema in India. But the author has written an eminently readable book, which I believe would be read and loved by everybody.