

Not Just a Showman: Raj Kapoor Gave Us Four All-time Great Films Within Six Years

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*This being the birth centenary year of **Raj Kapoor** many writings remembering his contributions have appeared recently and the most frequent tribute paid to him has been to remember him as the greatest showman of the Hindi film industry. In the process, however, attention has been diverted from some of the most memorable and artistic films Raj Kapoor and RK Films gave us (which may not have been his biggest successes at the box office). In fact, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Raj Kapoor's and RK Films' contribution is that at the peak of their creativity, they gave us four all-time great films within a time-span of just six years 1954-60, something that few if any film-makers can match.*

These four all-time great films are—Boot Polish, Jagte Raho, Shri 420 and Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai. Raj Kapoor was the hero in the last three films. He directed only one of these films, Shri 420.

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If the essence of Raj Kapoor's greatness is to be captured in just two statements, then these are as follows.

Firstly, take up an important social theme, but present it in a very entertaining way with superb songs and dances, trying to reach as many people as possible.

Secondly, try to collect the best talent in your film unit, giving big breakthroughs even to those from humble background, respecting their talent and providing them conditions in which their exceptional talent can flower.

Thus it is that at a very young age Raj Kapoor could assemble some of the most talented lyricists, composers, playback singers, actors, cinematographers, technicians and story and dialogue writers in RK films. Thus it is that he could assign some of his most promising films to other directors considered more suitable for these films, despite his own undoubted talents as a director. If only Raj Kapoor's contribution to supporting the emergence of Shailendra as a lyricist in Hindi films is considered, this just by itself is such a great contribution as this resulted in some of the most memorable songs ever written for Hindi cinema.

Shri 420 is about the problems of homeless people on the one hand, and the clash between honesty and 'getting ahead somehow' tendency at another level. Its songs including the title song "Mera joota hai jani, ye patlun Englishstani, sar pe lal topi roosi phir bhi dil hai hindustani" have been a big hit ever since. Raj Kapoor and Nargis in leading roles were simply superb.

'Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai' (The country in which the Ganges river flows), directed by Radhu Karmakar, is about a simple street singer getting caught in a dacoit gang and then making efforts for them to return to a life of peace. It was inspired by the real life efforts of some Gandhian activists for the surrender of Chambal valley dacoits. The lead character played by Raj Kapoor to perfection is one of the most memorable characters ever created on Hindi film screen—a very simple homeless man who can endanger his life, go to any lengths for love and peace. He wears strange dresses, the most unlikely dresses ever worn by a Hindi film hero, yet looks most adorable and even handsome.

Jagte Raho (Stay Alert) film, directed by Amit Maitra and Sombhu Mitra, is about a migrant worker who does not have a place to sleep when night falls and searches around a lot for some water to drink. When trying to quench his thirst in an apartment block he is mistaken for a thief and chased. What follows is insightful, poignant comment on urban social norms which has its moments of humor and fun as well. The film ends on a note of hope, with Nargis making a short but memorable appearance, her last in an RK film. Raj Kapoor has played a great role in this film which is entirely and far removed from any signs of glamor. No other superstar of Hindi films would have agreed to play the role of a migrant worker dressed in rags all through the film, and this further confirms that Raj Kapoor is much more than a showman.

Boot Polish, directed by Prakash Arora, is about two children thrown into very difficult circumstances on the streets of Bombay, and their search for a life of dignity. This film has a very memorable role by David, and the two child actors Baby Naaz and Master Ratan are superb.

Even before these films were made Raj Kapoor had shown his great talent by his earliest films like Aah, Aag, Barsaat and Awara, the last two achieving great box-office success. Awara in fact also came quite close to being an all-time great film. He worked very hard in his youth to learn various aspects of film-making and then to set up his film unit RK Films

which has a very important place in the history of Hindi cinema.

Coming to his later films, Mera Naam Joker is great but only in some parts. His last film Henna is also very good but he died before completing this. His sons did a great job in taking it ahead and completing it. Some of the films which he did not produce but instead contributed only with his lead roles are also remembered as very good films as well as for his acting, including Anari and Phir Subah Hogi (based on 'Crime and Punishment').

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The writers have worked together on popular culture and recently written a book 'Hindi Cinema and Society'.

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