CHAPTER- 4

THE PERIOD OF AAMIR KHAN AND HIS STATUS AS AN ICON OF INDIAN CINEMA IN 21ST CENTURY

4. Introduction:
The day was Sunday, March 14th 1965. Towards the West of the world, twenty years after the Second World War, the nations of Israel and West Germany formally established diplomatic relations. But on the Eastern side of the world, something else was about to happen. The Holy Family Hospital in Bandra was witness to the birth of Mohammad Aamir Hussain Khan; little did the medical staff know that they had helped bring one of the biggest icons and filmstars into this world. Born to Tahir and Zeenat Hussain in a film family, Aamir Khan spent his childhood facing some tough financial conditions. At the tender age of eight, Aamir Khan played a cameo in his uncle's Nasir Hussain’s legendary film YaadonkiBaaraat and then another cameo as a child artist in Madhosh. As a leading man, he made his debut in Qayamat
se QayamatTak in 1988, which was a huge success. Since then, Aamir Khan has never looked back.

4.1 A Profile of Aamir Khan’s films

In a career spanning more than two decades, Aamir Khan has done over 40 films, some of which have been blockbusters and milestone films.

In the late 80s and the early 90s, almost all the movies that Aamir Khan was a part of were romantic movies. In the aforementioned period, Aamir Khan’s films revolved around young love, college-going youngsters and adolescents, their aspirations and their travails. A very strong underlying sub-theme in a significant majority of these films, the underlying sub-theme was the emotional turbulence of teenagers. Take the example of Jo JeetaWohiSikandar. Aamir Khan’s character, Sanjay Lal Sharma, was a carefree teenager, enjoying the free pleasures of life, like any other teenager. However, when the going gets tough, Sanjay has to step up to take the mantle, sacrificing his own dreams to fulfill those of
his loved ones. This dilemma was exactly the kind of issue that the adolescent generation of 90s faced.

The year 1994 was where Aamir Khan ventured into all-out comedy for the first time. His film AndazApnaApna and his character Amar Manohar in that film are still regarded as one of the best in terms of comic timing. During the rest of the 90s, Aamir Khan ventured out of the romantic genre, exploring additional themes. While his films like Raja Hindustani, Akele Hum Akele Tum and Mann explored the flipside of romantic lives and highlighted important marital issues, films like Baazi, Sarfarosh and Earth focused on societal issues.

With the turn of the new millennium, Aamir Khan became more selective with respect to the films he was going to do. Almost all of his movies in the first decade of the new millennium had some strong social message. Be it Rang De Basanti, Mangal Pandey: The Rising, Lagaan, 3 Idiots or TaareZameen Par, Aamir Khan’s movies were not only commercially successful, but also societally impactful. Since
2010, Aamir Khan’s movies have made a shift from societal focus to commercial focus. The two full-fledged movies that Aamir Khan did were *Talaash: The Answer Lies Within* and *Dhoom 3*; both of which were commercially successful yet no meaningful, social issue to deal with.

As a producer, Aamir Khan has been much more balanced and consistent. Since 2001, Aamir Khan Productions (his production house) has produced and co-produced 10-odd films; with the exception of *Delhi Belly* and *Talaash: The Answer Lies Within*, all his productions were movies of social import.

In detail, following are the sketches of some of Aamir Khan’s major films:

1. **Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak**

On 29th April 1988, erstwhile famous filmmaker Nasir Hussain’s *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* was released. The pre-release promotion of this movie was unprecedented – a teaser ad campaign. The campaign began with the slogan “Who is Aamir Khan?” The final ad revealed launched the poster of
QSQT along with the face of the leading star of the movie. Like many other contemporary movies, the movie was set against the backdrop of family rivalry. There were two key issues that could be involved in the profiling of this movie: the love between the two central characters and the rebellion of those lovers.²

2. Dil Hai Ki Manta Nahin

This 1991 movie was based on the love of PoojaDharamchand, a rich heiress who ran away from the riches and empire of her father and Raghu Jetley, a young newspaperman who found her on the way. There are two primary themes in the movie – one, the love that fosters despite social inequalities and two, the feeling of infatuation among youngsters (the reason why Pooja ran away from her home was because she was infatuated with a filmstar).

3. Hum HainRahiPyaarKe

Again a Mahesh Bhatt film (1993), this movie was the story of Rahul Malhotra, the problems that he faces in handling various aspects of his life and in the middle of all, his
unexpected love story. While this story no doubt revolved
around the love story of Rahul Malhotra and Vaijayanti
(played by Juhi Chawla), there were issues like the bonding of
unwilling family members, social disparity forcing the choices
of people in the backdrop of the movie.

4. Akele Hum Akele Tum

30th November 1995 released one of the most intense movies
Aamir Khan has ever been involved in. A remake of the 1979
movie Kramer vs Kramer, this movie actually revolved
around two major issues, which were not very prevalent in the
society. The first issue was that of two working parents and
their travails in handling a family. The second issue was that
of a post-divorce family, something which was not a common
occurrence in the society.

5. Raja Hindustani

One of the very popular movies that Aamir Khan did was Raja
Hindustani. In his role of a simpleton, the chemistry of Raja
and Aarti (played by Karishma Kapoor) highlighted the kind
of impact an artificial family can have on the family life of two people who have fallen in love.

6. Earth

Released in India as 1947: Earth, this was Aamir Khan’s official entry into parallel cinema. This Canadian-Indian drama film directed by Deepa Mehta was based on Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, Cracking India. Playing the role of Dil Navaz, the Ice Candy Man who falls in love with Shanta, a Hindu girl (played by Nandita Das), Aamir Khan brings out the cruel realities of the India-Pakistan partition of 1947.

7. Sarfarosh

This was a pathbreaking role, even for Aamir Khan. In his role of ACP Ajay Singh Rathod, he was shown to have been battling an entire system of corruption and red tapism. An issue which was highlighted apart from the battle of an honest actor against the entire system, something which is a problem with every common man. Another theme which the movie very subtly portrays is the clash between the personal responsibilities of a common man and his call of duty.
8. Lagaan

One of the landmark movies in the history of Hindi film industry, Lagaan was India’s major step on the global cinema scene. On 12th February 2002, Lagaan was nominated for the best foreign language film at the Academy Awards ceremony (popularly known as Oscars). This period drama, set in the 19th century, highlighted the struggles of Indians in the pre-independence era against the colonial oppression. Through the national passion of cricket, this movie also highlighted several other issues like teamwork, social evils, transcendence of love over geographic and linguistic boundaries and eventually, the victory of good over evil.

9. Rang De Basanti

The 2006 movie about the fiery gang of rebels of Delhi University first created furore with its music and then with the content. The gang, led by its leader “DJ” Daljit Singh, took matters related to corruption into their own hands. This film, also known as RDB, very thematically highlighted the applicability of the ideals of Independence revolutionaries
even in the current setting; how the times have changed, but
the questions and their answers remain the same.

10. TaareZameen Par

Released in the Christmas week of the year 2007, this movie
featured the first mention of dyslexia in such a commercial
and widespread sense. The turbulence in the life of Ishaan
Awasthi (played by Darsheel Safary) due to him not fitting in
the “educational” system, his hitting the rock bottom and then
rising up due to his relationship with his teacher, mentor and
guide, Ram Shankar Nikumbh was portrayed beautifully in
the movie. The underlying issues like the educational policy of
one-size-fits-all and the rat race in the name of educating
children were also dealt with.

11. 3 Idiots

The 202-crore movie, loosely adapted from
Chetan Bhagat’s “Five Point Someone”, is one of the highest
rewatch value movies. This comedy-drama movie was actually
one of the best movies of the decade. Through the endearing
characters of Raju, Farhan, Rancho and Virus, an entirety of
issues like how a person should ideally pursue excellence instead of blindly going after success, what is the kind of recognition that follows etc.

4.2 Evolution as an Actor and a Social Activist

Aamir Khan, as an actor, started his film career quite early on in his life. During his career, Aamir Khan has shown tremendous evolution as an actor. In the beginning of his career, Aamir Khan was busy with a flurry of roles. There are two seemingly contradictory aspects to Aamir Khan’s first decade of acting career: while he was primarily involved in romantic roles and love stories, contrary to his contemporaries, he did not rely on his looks and charms to act on his behalf; instead Aamir Khan’s performances were serious. He even got commendations and awards for some of his earlier performances (Special Jury Award – Actor for Raakh and QSQT).  

Later on, Aamir Khan’s movies became more mixed and varied, with him doing roles of different genres. As a result, his acting preferences also varied and his prowess
increased. With the growth of his stature, Aamir Khan became more and more selective with his choice of his movies. As can be seen in the following graph, majority of his work was done in the earlier part of his career.

With the passage of time, Aamir Khan’s performances became much more mature. His method of extensively preparing for his roles became extremely popular, earning him the title of “Perfectionist”. All this time, Aamir Khan has maintained a stand of shunning popular film awards. This sent an important signal that he didn’t believe in the transparency of these film awards and was not bothered about this form of appreciation.
There is an additional angle to Aamir Khan’s evolution in the film industry – behind the camera. Aamir Khan produced his first movie Lagaan in 2001; since then he has produced a total of 8 movies. The movies that Aamir Khan has produced revolve around various themes as discussed earlier. With the possible exception of Dhobi Ghat, all of his movies have been commercial successes and have been appreciated in different capacities.

However, there is another side of the filmstar Aamir Khan. He has taken up various humanitarian and social causes from time-to-time. With his different lifestyle and approach to films, Aamir Khan had already made a statement about the kind of person he was. There were four major issues which highlighted Aamir Khan’s evolution from a socially known actor to an activist:

1. Narmada Bachao Andolan

The first Prime Minister of independent India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said, “Dams are the temples of modern India.” He advocated the development of dams to promote
the development of India. However, the construction of dams led to a lot many problems and wide-scaled issues, which led him to publicly retract his statement and call them “a disease of gigantism that India must abandon.” The “Narmada Project” began in 1961 and ever since then it has been marred with different controversies. Since the early 1980s, different groups and associations have been opposing this project. The principal opposition movement was the Narmada BachaoAndolan, under the leadership of renowned social activist MedhaPatkar. By way of different protests and non-cooperation movements, Narmada BachaoAndolan made it a point to ensure that injustice to different aggrieved parties was mollified or atleast brought into the public eye.

In April 2006, Aamir Khan participated in a hunger strike in Delhi to demand that the height of the dam not be raised. He offered to discuss his concerns about the lack of rehabilitation of those displaced directly with the Prime Minister. Consequently, he faced a lot of political unrest because of his comments against the Gujarat state government. His movie
Fanaa was about to release at that point of time; due to his anti-establishment stand, his movie wasn’t allowed to be released in the entire state. The thing about Aamir Khan’s behaviour during the entire incident was that he didn’t compromise on his value system and the stand that he took simply because his movie was facing commercial problems. Generally, filmstars are not very vocal about their activism, especially when the issue is controversial. On the contrary, Aamir Khan was very public in is support for the Narmada BachaoAndolan. When the controversy regarding the release of Fanaa was in its prime, Aamir Khan called a press conference at his home and refused to apologise for his stand. He said, "I will not retract my steps nor will I apologise to anyone simply because I've not done any wrong." Interestingly, when he was being quoted as an anti-Gujarat person, he pointed out that he was stationed in Gujarat while shooting for Lagaan. Furthermore, he had helped out in rehabilitating the victims of Bhuj earthquake.
2. Kuposhan Bharat Chhodo

Malnutrition has been known to be one of the gravest obstacles in a nation’s overall development. Many global and transnational institutions use nutrition under Human Development Index as a yardstick for measuring nation’s progress. Apart from costing lives, malnutrition limits development and the capacity to learn. Malnutrition is more common in India than in Sub-Saharan Africa. One in every three malnourished children in the world lives in India. India’s 2013 Global Hunger Index is 21.3, which is the 16th highest in terms of global malnutrition.

Aamir Khan was involved in fighting against this social evil as well. On 30th November 2011, Aamir Khan was appointed the ambassador promoting nutrition for children in India by UNICEF. Upon receiving this appointment, Aamir Khan said that he was honoured to be a part of the UNICEF family. "I am humbled to be here today...I don't take this as a burden but as a responsibility... For me the journey began a year and half ago when a group of young MP's came up to me from
citizen alliance against malnutrition saying that they wanted me to be a part of the cause for fighting these issues.” In 2012, Aamir Khan also participated in a pro-bono, information, education and communication campaign by the Ministry of Women and Child Development to spread awareness about the problem of malnutrition. This campaign titled “Kuposhan Bharat Chhodo”¹³ aimed at educating masses about how malnutrition is a silent destroyer and how it negatively impacts the future of this country. Through this campaign, Aamir Khan showed his commitment towards actively participating in creating a better life for the multitude of India.

3. JanLokpal Movement

On the morning of 5th April 2011, the whole world came to know about the power of Indian masses, when renowned civil activist and revolutionary Anna Hazare began Anshan or hunger strike at JantarMantar in New Delhi. The 2011 Anti-Corruption movement in India was the driving force behind implementation of the Citizen’s Ombudsman Bill or the “Jan
Lokpal Bill.” This movement was named among the “Top 10 News Stories of 2011” by TIME magazine.\textsuperscript{14} This bill was intended to deter corruption and protect whistleblowers.

On 20\textsuperscript{th} July 2011, Aamir Khan very publicly threw his weight behind the movement by saying that the ombudsman should not be under government’s control but accountable to the people of this country.\textsuperscript{15} The key fact to be noted is that Aamir Khan was not just a face in the movement; he actually had a lot of different viewpoints on various aspects of the Lokpal Bill in comparison with the Anna Hazare drafted bill.

\textbf{4. SatyamevJayate}

There have been many shows on the television platform falling under different strata – reality shows, quiz shows, game shows, soap operas etc. Some of the biggest filmstars of India have been associated with them – right from KaunBanegaCrorepati to DusKa Dum. Seldom, in fact rarely, have filmstars come up on television as a platform to start a full-fledged show dedicated to bringing up social issues into public eye.
Aamir Khan’s show Satyamev Jayate first premiered on 6th May 2012 on Star Network and Doordarshan. This is quite against the general trend, as the telecast of any show is driven by totally commercial motives; this move was so because of the maximum outreach and viewership of Doordarshan. Aamir Khan was not just the host of this show; the conceptualisation and creation of the show was Aamir Khan’s responsibility. The show highlights sensitive social issues prevalent in India such as female foeticides, child sexual abuse, dowry, medical malpractice, honour killings, untouchability, plight of senior citizens and water crisis. The show, despite primarily being in Hindi, is dubbed into many regional languages along with English subtitles. Aamir Khan initially received the suggestion of venturing into TV from the CEO of Star India, Uday Shankar; he worked for two years on the concept of this show before signing on to it. In his own words, the agenda of this show was not something as lofty as making a change. This show was simply intended to enhance the understanding of a problem. After the promotional song of the show was released, Aamir Khan said, “Through this show we understand the
problem of the people, we are not here to make a change. I am no one to change anything. I don’t think I am in the position to change anything else. I feel understanding a problem and feeling it or holding one’s hand or hugging is also important. I may not have the solution, but at least I can hear and understand.”

4.3 Different Cinema: Some Observations

“Two roads diverged in the woods and I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference”

-Robert Frost

Aamir Khan has never portrayed himself as the conventional cinema superstar. The slightly apathetic, aloof and disinterested persona that he has created is representative of his intention of coming into films. The Aamir Khan in front of the general public has always been “The Perfectionist”, making films after films which made sense, not just because of his acting, but also because of the sensibilities of his scripts. Excluding Dhoom 3, which was his latest venture and possibly, Talaash, Aamir Khan’s movies have garnered
commercial success by way of making the viewers want to watch them instead of simply forcing them to do so through marketing gimmicks. In short, Aamir Khan has been doing things differently and has succeeded immensely. Following are some observations about the differentiation of Aamir Khan’s cinema career and filmography in comparison with the usual cinema stars.

Content

Indian cinema audience is a very peculiar one: they prefer their heroes in a certain way or image. This is not a new trend; in fact, this preference has existed even before there were technicolour films. Manoj Kumar was always “Bharat” Kumar, Dilip Kumar was always the “Tragedy King” and Shahrukh Khan was always “Romance ka Baadshah.” Whenever a top-notch actor tries to deviate from his set image, the audience automatically becomes less receptive of the film; in worst cases, the audience has rejected the film simply because the actor has broken out of his mould and done an unconventional role.
The beauty of Aamir Khan’s work is that he has not let himself fall into a single mould. Aamir Khan has invented and reinvented his persona in such a way that no one character, no one genre, no one category can be attributed to him. Especially since the turn of this millennium, Aamir Khan has been known to prepare himself for the roles. For example, for Mangal Pandey: The Rising, Aamir Khan took a hiatus of 4 years to put in extensive thought and preparation in portraying the character of Mangal Pandey, a character which was highly appreciated.
In the recent 5-6 years, Aamir Khan has become more experimental.

**Frequency**

Aamir Khan has been known to be “The Perfectionist” in both the Hindi film industry circles and among his fans. His reputation of extensive preparation for his roles has been in newspaper headlines innumerable times.

Following is a comparison of the no. of movies Aamir Khan has done (with a chart) with the film frequency of other prominent Hindi film actors:
Quantitatively speaking, Aamir Khan has done a total of around 40 films, which is just 48.78% of the average no. of films (82) that the other top filmstars have done.

Aamir Khan does an average of 1.53 films annually; compared to the average no. of films that the other stars do (3.399 films per year), this is a meagre 45.25%.

All of this is not for the lack of offers, but in accordance to his self-made policy of doing one film at a time. Notorious for being very selective in deciding which scripts to work on,
Aamir Khan works in detail on each and every aspect of the movie he is a part of.

4.4 New dimension of his cinema

Aamir Khan’s cinema has known to be different from the other conventional, commercial cinema. Aamir Khan has been known to be a trendsetter in so many ways. With TaareZameen Par, Rang De Basanti, Mangal Pandey: The Rising, Lagaan and many more, Aamir Khan has brought novel dimensions to the thinking of the Hindi film industry. In a time when his contemporaries are busy building self-images or “brands” of themselves, Aamir Khan has differentiated himself by concentrating on building the films and their characters. By way of four movies – Mangal Pandey: The Rising, Rang De Basanti, Dhobi Ghat and Delhi Belly – as case examples, the differential angle of his cinema will be established.

Mangal Pandey: The Rising

“Ye azaadikiladaihai... guzre hue kal se, aanewaalekalkeliye”

-Mangal Pandey: The Rising
Also known as The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey, this movie was released in 2005 after a 4-year long gap in Aamir Khan’s movies. Buzzing with anticipation, this biography/drama was supposed to have taken intensity that Aamir Khan has never shown before. Directed by Ketan Mehta and supported by an ensemble cast of Rani Mukherji and Hollywood actor Toby Stephens, Aamir Khan portrayed the role of Mangal Pandey, a sepoy in the British Army who sowed the seeds of unrest and discontent in the hearts of the Indian people, leading the first freedom struggle of 1857.

The film is set in British India of the 19th century. Mangal Pandey, is a sepoy in the East India Company army. During the First Anglo-Afghan War, Mangal Pandey saved the life of an English officer by the name of William Gordon, who feels that he owes his life to Mangal and this feeling develops into an uncommon yet strong friendship. Their friendship, both accused and praised on both the sides, took an irreversible turn when the East India Company decided to introduce a new variety of rifles called the Enfield Rifled Musket into the
arsenal. This change in preferred weaponry was not called into unnecessary question until rumours started flying about the use of animal – beef and/or pork – fat in the bullets of these rifles. According to the then social conventions, while beef being the meat of cow, was abhorrent for Hindus, the same could be said for Muslims in the case of pork or the meat of pig. Unwilling to risk their religious beliefs for the sake of this new “technology”, the sepoys refused to use these bullets.

Under intense pressure from the East India Company to use the new rifles, the task of establishing the truth fell on William Gordon, Mangal’s friend. Upon his investigation, William was informed that the bullets do not use any such materials and the claim made was baseless. This, he conveyed to the sepoys. Trusting upon his friendship, Mangal decides to “use” the bullet as a show of faith towards William. Later, Mangal Pandey and his fellow sepoys, upon their own investigation, found that their colonial masters had deceived them regarding the use of animal fat. In consequence to this breach of trust,
there is a seed of discontent against the establishment which is sown and the rest is history.

Renowned Hindi film critic TaranAdarsh, upon seeing the movie, was of the opinion:

“Attempting a period film in an era when the focus is on candyfloss, escapist cinema is nothing short of a challenge. It's a risk, as the storyteller just cannot deviate from history, indulge in cinematic liberties, throw songs whether or not the situations warrant them or try to balance serious with light moments. If you talk of national heroes, you ought to remain faithful to the subject-material.”
Just to cover the commercial angle, this movie did not simply flop because of being a biopic. Although the movie was only critically acclaimed in India, it received a lot of commendations in different countries across the globe. In fact, mostly due to Aamir Khan’s star power, Mangal Pandey: The Rising was the third highest grossing movie of that year.

If one looks at the kind of Hindi movies that were made in the year 2005, although movies were made across all genres, most of them were made with an out-and-out commercial outlook. The problem with such movies was not that they were bad or non-entertaining; in fact the main objective behind most of these movies was to entertain the audience. The problem lied behind the content of most of the movies; with an exception of a handful of movies, most of the movies were very mediocre on content. This movie was the exact opposite; it was very high on content which was not very popular or prevalent.

Whatever be the movie’s fate, Aamir Khan’s performance in the movei was appreciated by one and all. In his review of the movie, TaranAdarsh said,
“Mangal Pandey would look incomplete without Aamir's awe-inspiring portrayal of the great hero. Not once do you realize that the role is being 'enacted'. It's Aamir's splendid performance that makes the film a memorable affair.”

**Rang De Basanti**

*Zindagijeeneke do hi tarikehotehain ... ekjohorahahai hone do, bardaashtkartejao ... yaphirzimmedariuthaoussebadalneki*

-Rang De Basanti

After Mangal Pandey: The Rising, the next movie that Aamir Khan did was Rang De Basanti (translation in English is Colour It Saffron). This movie was directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, who had only directed one movie prior to this called Aks, which was a critically acclaimed movie, but not a very popular one. It would be unfair to say supported but in equally important roles with Aamir Khan were Siddharth, Kunal Kapoor, Sharman Joshi, Atul Kulkarni, Soha Ali Khan, Madhavan and Alice Patten.
The film begins when an aspiring English filmmaker turns up to India to make a movie on the forgotten heroes of Indian freedom, and encounters Daljeet Singh “DJ” and his band of rebels. Carefree and full of life, these people reluctantly and jovially accept to play the roles of the legendary revolutionaries in her docu-drama. During the course of filming this documentary, all of these youngsters go through a process of introspection, assessing where they are in their real lives. In a sudden turn of events, one of their friends who is a fighter pilot dies in a plane crash. Upon investigation, it becomes clear that this accident could have been prevented and was caused only because of widespread corruption in the defence equipment and that a consortium of ministers and industrialists were responsible for the death of their friends. Seeking inspiration from the revolutionaries, they decide to take matters into their own hands and take the radical step of killing all those who are responsible, the intent being to send across a strong message to the youth of this nation and to the corrupt officials who indulge in twisting and turning the law and exploiting the loopholes. In the end, they become martyrs
for the cause and the English filmmaker records their stories so that they can be shared with the world.

The interesting thing about this movie is its narrative; the story progresses in a fashion where the past and the present run parallel to each other. This not only improves the flavour of the plot, but gives the movie interesting moments. RakeyshOmprakashMehra was working on this movie for seven years, including three years writing the script. In the first sitting, Aamir Khan was on board the movie and decided to put in his traditional effort into the movie. The movie is a mirror of the times it was made in.
2006 was commercially a very good year for Hindi film industry, which is why despite having a domestic collection of around INR 72 crores, this was not in 5 highest grossing movies of the year. Subhash K. Jha of the Indo-Asian News Service said,

“RANG DE BASANTI dares to point fingers, and tells us where we've gone wrong. It isn't only a film about the education of a moor less generation; it's also an outstandingly accomplished piece of cinema... RANG DE BASANTI is an extremely ambitions film. It tries to educate the generations in Independent India who have brought the country to its current crisis of moral and political corruption.”

Dhobi Ghat

“Yatohdostigehrihai ... yayeh photo 3D hai”

-Dhobi Ghat: Mumbai Diaries

Also known as Mumbai Diaries, this movie was released in January 2011. The first thing which strikes any viewer is the runtime – the movie had a duration of 95 minutes, which is
around half of the conventional movie duration. Contrary to most commercial films, this movie was first released in the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2010 and then was released in India. While this is the trend with most of documentaries, this was not very prevalent in movies of filmstars of Aamir Khan’s stature. Directed by Aamir Khan’s wife Kiran Rao, this movie was a typical parallel cinema, both in its approach and its content.

Dhobi Ghat is a story about the city of Mumbai and its unexplored faces. The story revolves around four characters – a dhobi, an artist, a photographer and an aggrieved sister – and how unwillingly they become involved in each other’s lives.

Mayank Shekhar, a famous Hindi film critic, in his review of the movie commented,

“Bombay, you figure, is the centre of this film’s attention. It’s probably the only city in the world where so many classes so closely merge into a common river of sorrows, beauty or hope: unaware of how each affects the other every day.”

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Since the movie is an artistic attempt at cinema, the commercial angle of the movie was not very much a concern, both for the producers and the actors. As far as Aamir Khan’s portrayal of Arun, the artist in pursuit of his musings is concerned, Shobhaa De, the renowned columnist said,

“Arun does not hijack the story, nor does Aamir the superstar hog the script. In fact, most viewers agreed that just about any unknown could have played Aamir’s part and there isn’t a single memorable scene that stays from his segment of the inter-linked narrative.”

Delhi Belly

“Jo chaukaudte hue jaaye, use chakkakehtehain”

-Delhi Belly

There was a lot of buzz when the Imran Khan-starrer Delhi Belly was about to come out. Before the movie had hit the theatres at all, it had hit hard on the minds of its target audience – the urban youth of India. Finally, when the movie released in 2011 in the first week of July, there was a furore
and the audience was divided – some were of the opinion that this movie does more harm than good and does not deserve to be called a movie; some said that this movie is one of the most fun movies they had ever seen. Either way, through the content and the targeting, Delhi Belly had rewritten the rules of the Hindi cinema.

The movie is about three roommates who are all struggling in their respective lives with different issues. One of them gets a Delhi Belly – an acute case of diarrhoea contracted from eating spicy food – and hence, begin the goof-ups. These goof-ups lead to a confrontation with a gangster and eventually, the three of them emerge victorious.

The reason why this movie is so different is threefold – one, the genre in itself is black comedy, something which is neither widely pursued nor accepted in India; two, content is lewd, racy and in-your-face, again something not very common in the land of Chopras, Johars and Barjatyas; three, the movie was marketed in such a way that it attracted only the right kind of people and repelled the conventional movie goers.
In his review of Delhi Belly, Nikhat Kazmi of the Times of India said,

“All in all, Delhi Belly is a fine example of how the brightest and the boldest, when they pool in their talent, can create a film that is guaranteed to give you your money’s worth, even as it re-writes all the moth-balled rules of an ageing industry.”

The movie was so radically different that it was screened at Harvard Business School, one of the premier educational institutions in the world, and the director of this movie, Abhinay Deo, was invited as a guest to the Harvard India Conference 2012. Aamir Khan’s role in the movie was not of the actor that he is known to be, but that of a producer that he is supposed to be. Aamir Khan, in his metaphorical ceremonial garb, stepped out to market the movie in a manner which only Aamir Khan can and thus, became one of the most important reasons in the success of the movie.
Observations

These four movies help in understanding the differential nature of Aamir Khan’s cinema. Mangal Pandey: The Rising was a sincere attempt to portray the legend of a somewhat unsung hero, thereby involving a commitment of such a nature that Aamir Khan the superstar took a break of 4 years from his illustrious career to devote to the movie. Rang De Basanti, a youthful movie, which raised several questions in the minds of the youth, was a movie where a 40-year old actor played the character of a 20-something old directionless rebel. Dhobi Ghat, an art cinema, where one of three top Khans of Hindi Cinema played a role which was insignificant when compared to his co-actors and was comfortable enough to allow such a thing. Delhi Belly, where an actor with one of the cleanest images in the film industry, goes behind the scenes to produce a movie which is one of the raunchiest movies on celluloid. All of these and many more are testaments to the boldness and courage of Aamir Khan and the kind of vision
that he persistently sticks to while choosing to be associated with some movies.

4.5 Impact of his movies on youth

“Sometimes the people whom we’ve known for only a short amount of time have a bigger impact on us than those we’ve known forever.”

-Maya Angelou

India is a country of peculiarities; one of these peculiarities has given India an advantage at the global scale. The peculiarity is that India is demographically very rich, and its demographic dividend is about to pay off. Demographic dividend is defined as “the freeing up of resources for a country’s economic development and the future prosperity of its populace as it switches from an agrarian to an industrial economy.” The peculiarity is that even though India has made a transition directly from the agrarian economy to a service economy, it still has a significant demographic dividend. India’s demographic dividend lies in the age of its working population; India is one of the youngest countries in the
world. Contrary to developed nations like Japan or some major European nations, India has a significant young population and this generation is significantly different than the previous ones in a lot of ways.

Technically, an adolescent is defined as someone who has crossed the threshold of teenage but has not entered adulthood yet. The term youth however, has a much broader mandate. There is no specific consensus as to the age limit of a young person; convention dictates that a young person be considered between the age of 15-24 human years. In India, the size of the youth population is around 237 million, which
is a significant proportion of the population, especially in comparison to the other countries of the world. The youth of this country is idiosyncratic in two senses – one, the earlier half of this population has practically no purchasing power while the latter half of this population has developed a significant disposable income. This youth population, however, is very strong on one aspect – the ability to influence the future course of this nation. Be it the Jan Lokpal movement or the recent AamAadmi Party popularity, the youth has had a very impactful role to play. It is therefore, only logical to assume that whoever has a significant impact on the youth has a significant impact on the future course of this country. The influence may be cultural, political, technical or in any other form, but the significance of that influence cannot be undermined. This is where the term “youth icon” and its importance comes in.

Time and again, Aamir Khan has been voted as a youth icon on various fora and ceremonies. Apart from the social activities that Aamir Khan has undertaken, his movies have
been the primary drivers behind positioning him as a youth icon. Aamir Khan has always been a responsible actor and has ensured that after achieving stardom, he takes extra care in deciding which films to do and which not to. It is this quality-focus and avoiding unnecessary controversies that has made Aamir Khan’s image today.

Aamir Khan’s movies have always been youth-centric. If his career before the turn of the new millennium is glanced at, with the exception of a couple of movies, all him movies have had young central characters and have been very youth-oriented.

Till 1990, his movies were majorly romantic in genre; consequently, his movies and the central theme of rebellious, young love became very popular. For example, his movie Dil, which was not a very anticipated movie, was a huge hit because of the fiery college romance between him and Madhuri Dixit.

Between 1990 and 1995, his movies, which were a mixed bag of different genres. These movies attempted to touch the
youth chord in as many ways as possible. For example, while Dil Hai ki Manta Nahin was a story about a young girl and her runaway love, Jo JeetaWohiSikandar was a story about the dreams and aspirations of a young student intertwined in an infatuation-oriented love story. His 1994 film AndazApnaApna achieved cult status and is still very popular among the youngsters of this country, to an extent that it is passed down as folklore in different colleges and social groups.

In the late 90s, Aamir Khan deviated from this youthful norm and started making more adult-centric movies. There were certain very mature subtextual messages in those movies. While movies like Akele Hum Akele Tum were more about adulthood responsibilities, movies like Earth and Mann were about the transcendence of inner desires over social and physical barriers. Sarfarosh was the closest to what can be called a youth-inspiring movie in this half-decade time frame; the honest, ethical cop fighting against the system could have inspired a lot of youngsters to join the services at that time.
From 2000-2005, Aamir Khan’s movies took a turn for good: the primary focus was back on the youth. His movies, one at a time, focused on themes which were a primary part of any youngster’s life, systematically targeting preferences and aspirations. For example, Lagaan was a good way to communicate the notion of independence through the preferred game of cricket, something which ran through the veins of the youth of this nation. DilChahta Hai, which was described by critics as modern, suave and cosmopolitan, was a movie which described the youthful characters as who they actually are, rather than who they are supposed to be.

2005 onwards, Aamir Khan’s game really picked up. With the exception of two movies, all of his films were purely and directly targeted towards the burgeoning youth of this nation. This time frame really gave Aamir Khan the impetus towards becoming the quintessential youth icon. For example, 3 Idiots is one of the best examples there can be towards a youth-centric movie.
Apart from influencing and inducing the youth of this nation towards preferring a specific set of movies or films, Aamir Khan has had some societal impact as well. The social activities that Aamir Khan has undertaken (especially the four ones mentioned in the section on “Evolution as an Actor and a Social Activist) has garnered significant following, something which is again a very difficult thing in itself. His films in themselves have also instilled certain kinds of behaviours among the youth. For example, in Rang De Basanti, the rebels made a peaceful protest in front of India Gate by lighting candles. Upto that point, such protests were marginal. However, once the movie had released, there was a marked increase in both the occurrences of such protests and the media mileage given to them. In the case of 3 Idiots, once the movie had come out, there were a lot many instances where students of different educational institutions had come to the front to ask for a change in the current educational system. When the movie TaareZameen Par had come out, it made a huge impact on the societal perception and towards the dyslexic people, like the central character of the movie.
Chapter 4

The Period of Aamir Khan & his Status as a youth icon of Indian cinema in 21st century

Endnotes:


