

The Purposeful Bollywood Storytellers
By Rauf Ahmed

Baldev Raj Chopra
BR Films
&
Yash Raj Chopra
Yash Raj Films
&
Aditya Chopra
YRF Studio
Mumbai, India

"I'm the sentimental kind; I cry easily while watching a film. Poignant moments move me to tears irrespective of what film I am watching and who has made it."

—Yash Chopra

The statement might sound a bit mushy coming from a filmmaker of the stature and reputation of Yash Raj Chopra, who has made such outstanding films as *Deewar*, *Waqt*, *Ittefaq*, *Kabhi Kabhie*, *Darr* and *Dil To Pagal Hai* and dominated Bollywood for the last five decades like a colossus. But then, it lays bare the cinematic predilection of a director whose feel for the pulse of the audiences has been remarkable. In India, he has often said, a cerebral approach to cinema would be counter productive. "We are an emotional people, we respond from the heart."

Love and emotions, says Chopra, were the key ingredients around which he built his cinema. "You have got to have the sensitivity to *feel* and the ability to *communicate* that feeling to the audiences," he says. His uncanny ability to strike a chord with a pan-Indian audience has been his greatest strength.

In the milieu that Yash Chopra stepped into, there were but a handful of cinema literate filmmakers in the real sense of the term, who understood the nuances of the cinematic idiom, like *Bimal Roy* and *Guru Dutt*, to name just two. Their kind of films, however, couldn't command as big an audience as the so called "popular" cinema of the mainstream Bollywood could with its myriad "items" of entertainment. The mainstream cinema was big business, which involved selling dreams. The principle was to wean the common man away from the harsh realities of life and give him a three-hour "dream ride," most often through a clever play of the familiar emotional symbols. In the initial phase, these symbols were mythology-related. Later, with the "socialisation" of Hindi cinema in the '50s the emphasis shifted to human values. Cinema being the only easy-to-reach means of entertainment for the multitude in those early days, the success rate was pretty high.

Making "Purposeful" Bollywood Cinema

What set apart the “good” commercial film from the mundane one was the “purposefulness” of the content, meaning, the depth and relevance of the “message” the film conveyed and the intensity of its delineation. Yash Chopra’s elder brother Baldev Raj Chopra, known popularly as B.R. Chopra, who took a bow in 1951, was among the earliest to evolve a formula that consistently worked wonders at the box office. His ability to blend popular elements of entertainment into socially relevant themes with great dexterity, made him the most successful director of “purposeful entertainers.” His films such as *Ek Hi Raasta* (The Only Way, 1956), which advocated widow remarriage, *Naya Daur* (The New Wave, 1957), which was about the raging Man versus Machine conflict, and *Sadhna* (1958) which dwelt on the travails of a prostitute, dug gold at the box office. His production company BR Films, launched in 1955, had made it to the top rung with just three films.

The son of an accountant in the Public Works Department of the British administration in Punjab, Baldev Raj Chopra had no background in cinema. But he was a die-hard film buff from his college days in Lahore. After graduation, he took to film journalism essentially “to keep in touch with films.” He rose to be editor of Lahore’s popular cinema periodical *Cine Herald*. Chopra had managed to migrate to India just weeks ahead of the partition of India in 1947. As he was looking for a vocation to start life afresh in Mumbai, a friend who had known him as a film critic from Lahore, suggested that “with his knowledge of cinema” he make a film and offered to finance it.

Baldev Chopra knew nothing about filmmaking, but he was confident that he could tell a story convincingly. He put together a technical team and directed his first film from a story he had penned, which was curiously titled *Afsana* (A Story). He wanted to make the film with his favourite actor, Dilip Kumar, but the actor declined the offer on the plea that he was too young to play the protagonist. Chopra eventually managed to make the film with one of the biggest stars of the time, Ashok Kumar. The film was a hit, and there was no looking back for Chopra thereafter.

Baldev Chopra’s younger brother Yash Raj Chopra (younger to him by 18 years), who had been assisting his brother, got his break to direct a film independently in 1959. The film *Dhool Ka Phool* (Blossom from the Dust), dwelt on the travails of an illegitimate child. A huge hit, the film overnight established Yash as a director to watch out for. In his next, he tried to take a serious look at the complex theme of communal divide which was plaguing the nation at the time. The film, *Dharamputra* (1961), won him critical acclaim and the coveted National Award, but it failed miserably at the box-office. It shook Yash badly. “I still haven’t been able to figure out why the film failed,” says Yash. The film launched the late Raj Kapoor’s youngest brother, Shashi Kapoor, as an actor.

To salvage his pride, Yash went big with his next, *Waqt* (Time, 1965), which had an ensemble cast comprising the biggest names of the time like Balraj Sahni, Raaj Kumar, Sunil Dutt, Sharmila Tagore and Sadhana. It was Bollywood’s first multi-star film and it was a huge success. Yash went on to direct two more films for his brother’s company before making an abrupt unexplained exit. His parting of ways with his mentor-brother

was as dramatic as his marriage to Pamela Singh a few months earlier. He had met Pamela casually at his niece's wedding in Delhi.

Though four of the five films he directed for his brother's banner were hits, his last, *Ittefaq* (Coincidence, 1969), was arguably the best cinematically. A slick thriller, it was about two strangers, a man and a woman, who were thrown together one night in mysterious circumstances. It was among the rarest Hindi films to do away with songs completely.

Creating an Independent Identity

The now famous Yash Raj Films, or YRF, was born in 1973 with a film about marital mess titled *Daag* (A Poem of Love). It had three of the biggest stars of the time, Rajesh Khanna, Sharmila Tagore, and Raakhee, as co-leads. The film was a huge success at the box office. Having established the credentials of his newly formed banner with his very first production, Yash shocked the film industry by announcing a guts-and-gore film, *Deewar*, as his next. Written by Salim-Javed, *Deewar* had an emerging star Amitabh Bachchan in the lead instead of Yash's favorite actor, Rajesh Khanna. Yash, who was known for glossy, relationship-oriented films, had taken on a flick inspired by the life of a famous don. It led to the unfair perception that *Deewar* was an out-and-out Salim-Javed film. Even though the film had one of the finest screenplays ever seen on the Hindi screen, the fact that Yash's eye for detail and flair for grandiose projection had given it an imposing look and texture cannot be undermined.

Deewar, which has acquired cult status as a film, stands out as Yash Chopra's magnum opus. Among other things, it sky-rocketed Bachchan to superstardom overnight, just as YRF's *Darr* and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* were to raise Shah Rukh Khan's career to a new high two decades later. Soon after, Yash came up with another shocker. He went against the tide to cast Bollywood's "Angry Young Man," Amitabh Bachchan, in the role as an aging brooding poet whose romantic past catches up with him. In his next film project, *Kabhi Kabhie* (1976) told a "mature love story," again with Bachchan in the lead role. It was a "dangerous" casting decision, since Bachchan had begun making waves as an action hero. But Yash stuck to his guns and won the battle with the film public by skilfully showcasing the versatile Bachchan. The phenomenal success of two thematically contradictory films, *Deewar* and *Kabhi Kabhie*, in quick succession proved Yash's belief that the so-called "trends" don't matter. "There is nothing like a trend," says Yash. "A well told story seldom goes wrong, but it should have the power to strike a chord with the audiences."

Yash's impressive record at the box office lends credence to his assumption. A majority of the 21 films directed by him have been blockbusters. However, he strikes a note of caution when he says, "The audience can be very unpredictable at times; it may just reject a concept which might seem infallible to you." Just such a thing happened in the case of his favourite film, *Lamhe*. "I still can't figure out why *Lamhe* failed. I consider it one of my best films. It's very popular in the DVD circuit even today.... People still talk about that film," he says. Box office failure had happened to him before,

too, with *Dharamputra* and *Silsila*.

Silsila (1981), a romantic triangle, had Amitabh Bachchan in the lead opposite his wife, Jaya, who came out of retirement to make the film, and his favourite co-star, Rekha. The combination was hyped as a “casting coup”—yet the film had a poor run at the box office. In fact, it marked the beginning of a rough patch in Yash’s professional career which had been on a high for most part of the ‘60s and the ‘70s. Three more of his films sank at the box office in the ‘80s. Apparently, with a young, irreverent, new breed of directors looking to revitalise a stagnant Bollywood, the popular formulae had begun to look jaded and irrelevant—and so were the old guard.

Luckily for Yash Chopra, the paradigm shift which followed Bachchan’s screen exit, helped him fight back. The roaring success of Aamir Khan’s debut film, *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (QSQT), a musical romance with new sounds of music, became the game changer. Directed by young Mansoor Khan, a computer wizard trained in the US, brought back musical-romance as a genre. This changing cinema milieu offered Yash the opportunity to lean back on the genre he loved most—the musical romance set against exotic locales. With *Chandni* (Moonlight, 1989) hitting the jackpot at the box office, YRF was back in the Bollywood reckoning once again.

Welcoming a New Generation

Yash owes a fair share of the credit for his second coming to a creative genius in his backyard—his 17-year-old son, Aditya Chopra. Adi, as he is popularly known, had stepped into the making of *Chandni* midway into the project and made a positive impact with his out-of-the-box touches. To Yash’s credit, he always had an ear for Adi and his friends who hung around the place. It helped him keep abreast of the changing times. Yash’s next project, *Darr*, saw the entry of a new-generation actor, Shah Rukh Khan, into the Chopra fold. Shah Rukh Khan had readily slipped into a role in *Darr* when the original choice, Aamir Khan, expressed some doubts about characterisation and demanded a few changes about which Yash was reluctant to comply. “Being a part of the Yash Raj banner automatically boosts your career prospects,” an elated Shah Rukh Khan had remarked after signing on. He was dead right. It also made him a part of Aditya Chopra’s “gang,” as they called his think-tank, which also included young Karan Johar, who was to be a major mainstream filmmaker later. Shah Rukh has remained a part of the YRF set up ever since, playing the lead in six YRF blockbusters in 15 years.

The emergence of Aditya Chopra, though invisible in the initial stages, has had a game-changing effect on Yash Raj Films. From the film *Darr* onwards, he has had a definite role in guiding the thematic thrust of the films coming out of the YRF studio, which has evolved into a highly influential film production corporate entity, driven by a group of hard-core professionals drawn from mainstream Bollywood. That’s where YRF has a distinct advantage over other corporate bodies funding films.

At YRF, filmmaking is no longer confined to Yash Chopra and Aditya Chopra. In the last few years the studio has backed several young directors to make films on a

moderate budget. Many of them, for example, Sanjay Gadhvi (*Dhoom*, *Dhoom 2*), Shimit Amin (*Chak De! India*), Kunal Kohli (*Hum Tum*, *Fanaa*) and Shaad Ali (*Bunty aur Babli*), had been left in the cold after the debacles of their debut films. YRF chose to pick them up and give them a second chance, in most cases with great success. Aditya Chopra's creative acumen has been a decisive factor in turning these young aspirants into bankable directors. One of the earliest and the most significant talent to emerge from the portals of the Yash Chopra School was Karan Johar, a shy young lad, who had admittedly lacked self-belief. Today he is a major power center in Bollywood. With *Kabul Express* (2006), YRF produced its first film for an international, beyond the Asian diaspora, audience. Directed by a youngster, Kabir Khan, the film was screened at several international film festivals.

With the proliferation of production activity, the Chopras focussed on the consolidation of their distribution activity, deploying innovative promotional and marketing strategies along the way. It enabled them to ensure the viability of the films they made with younger directors with a penchant for experimentation. Made on a moderate budget, these films with off-beat themes needed smart marketing to be commercially viable. For years, hard-core businessmen had been calling the shots in Bollywood film distribution, at times even forcing a producer to alter the theme or add a "popular item" after the film was complete. By gradually getting into the critical business of distribution, YRF not only freed itself from outside interference in the creative domain, but also ensured ready exposure for "smaller" films made on moderate budgets.

Establishing a Global Film, Television, and Music Presence

In keeping with Yash Raj Chopra's vision of turning YRF into a film production giant with a global edge backed by a state of the art studio, India's biggest entertainment conglomerate is diversifying rapidly under 38-year-old Aditya Chopra. Over the last few years, YRF's distribution network has managed to establish its clout both in the Indian and the overseas markets. Besides its own home productions, YRF has been distributing films made by other well-known Indian filmmakers with remarkable success—ranking number one among distribution companies in India. In a global survey conducted by the magazine *Hollywood Reporter*, it ranked YRF among the biggest film distribution houses in the world.

As a logical next step YRF Studio has forayed aggressively into home entertainment segment by marketing and distributing DVDs and VCDs of classic Indian films through its offices in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates as well as India. It has also teamed up with Walt Disney to make a computer-animated movie. YRF Studio also produces television programs, software animation, advertising films, music videos, and documentaries. Early this year, YRF Television made its debut in entertainment channels with a star show anchored by Karan Johar on Sony Entertainment Television.

Another significant move was to foray into the music market. A mainstay feature of Yash Chopra's films has been their chart-busting music. The music of films like *Kabhi*

Kabhie has transcended barriers of time. To cash in on their unique longevity and to exploit to the maximum the potential of the music of the large number of films coming out of YRF Studio, the company decided to launch its own music label called Yash Raj Music. Besides promoting and marketing the music of their own films and producing exclusive albums, YRF Music has been picking up music from outside banners and marketing them. Though they had started reasonably well with the music from films like *Mangal Pandey*, *Black*, and *Jurm*, their progress in this area hasn't really been very successful. Predictably, apprehensive filmmakers see YRF as an imposing rival. But the Chopras remain optimistic. The company's long-term agenda is to spot and groom fresh singers of quality and launch them through multi-pronged promotion.

What gave the Chopras the impetus and the drive to reinvent themselves and reach for the next level was the mind-boggling success of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Braveheart Will Take the Bride, 1995), Aditya's debut film as a director. DDLJ, the acronym by which the film is popularly known, went on to obliterate every possible record for a single film in Bollywood's 98-year history. It is still running in a Mumbai cinema hall--in its 15th year!

As a filmmaker, Adi is essentially cast in the same mould as his father in his cinematic predilections, but his sensibilities are different. He likes to go beyond grandeur; he works on the physiognomy of his characters and he adds nuances to their behaviour patterns. His characters are not the uni-dimensional ones familiar to mainstream Establishing a Global Film, Television, and Music Presence

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