

 **The Indian EXPRESS**

December 2025 Issue

PLUS +



DIL CHAHTA HAI



LAGAAN
Once upon a time in India



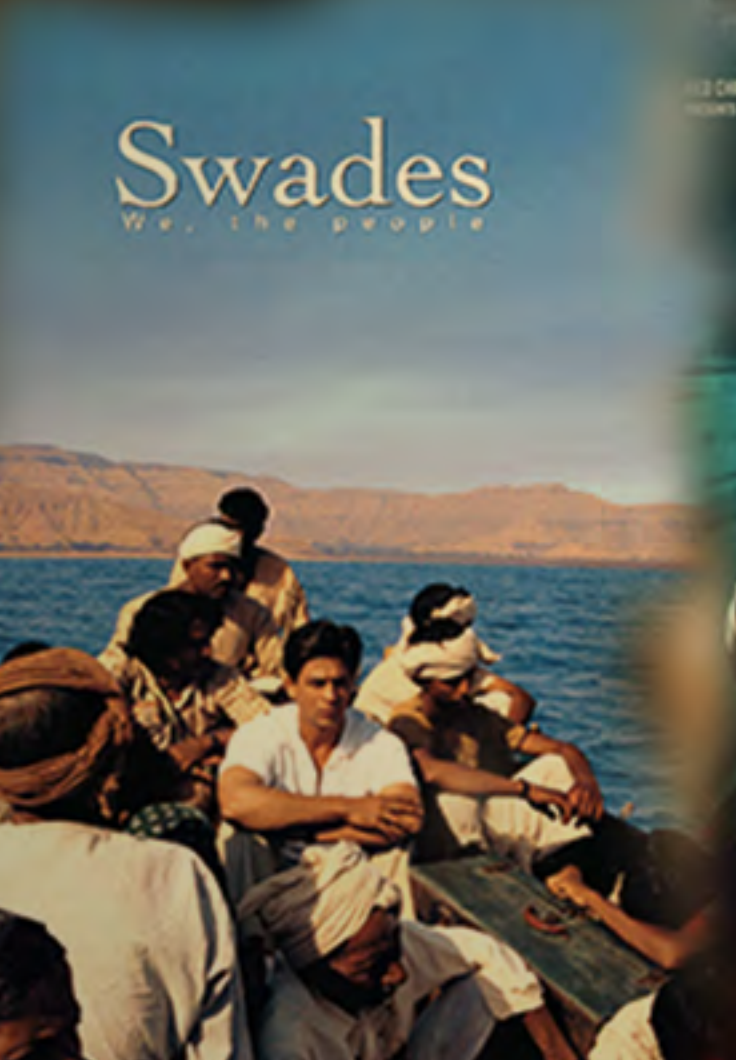
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25 Years of Indian Cinema

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Dear Reader,

It is that time of the year again — a moment to pause, look back, and take stock, even as we set our eyes on the year ahead.

If one were to define 2025, it would be remembered as a year of a shifting global order. From Operation Sindoor and the Gen Z uprising in Nepal to the tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump, geopolitics remained in constant flux. Closer home, India witnessed moments that captured both faith and inspiration: the Maha Kumbh Mela drawing millions of devotees, Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla's odyssey to outer space as part of the Axiom Mission, and the Indian women's cricket team lifting the World Cup.

There was, clearly, no shortage of headline-making events to choose from for our year-end cover.

And yet, as we sat down to decide what would define the edition, we chose to turn our gaze elsewhere — to the movies. Cinema, after all, is more than just an art form; it is also a refuge. Films offer escapism, comfort, and occasionally, clarity.

Our cover story looks at 25 years of Indian cinema — a quarter century that has mirrored the country's own transformations. From *Lagaan* and *Dil Chahta Hai* to *Haasil*, and from *Dangal* and *Udta Punjab* to the explosion of storytelling on OTT platforms, this period has reshaped how stories are told and consumed.

We hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as we enjoyed bringing them to you.

Thank you for your trust and continued readership. We look forward to seeing you in 2026!

The Indian Express Team

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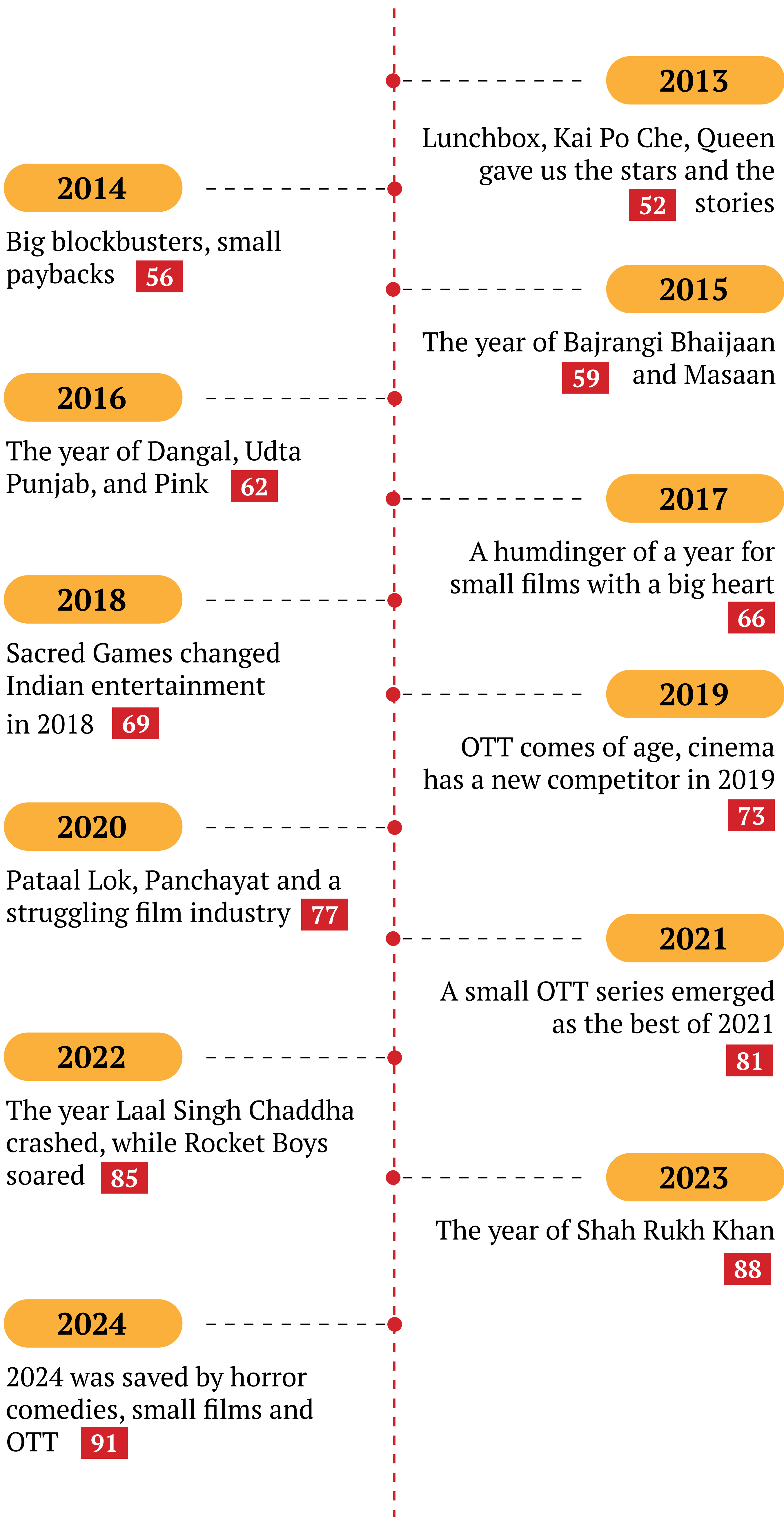
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2000

Hrithik Roshan challenged Khans, Bachchan came to small screen

– *Shubhra Gupta*

2000-2025. That's a quarter century, right there. Twenty-five years, in which Bollywood has changed in monumental leaps and small incremental doses, both going hand-in-hand, as these things always do. We have been right here, marking those changes, of how those years stacked up, pointing out the films – and shows – that became the marker for each year of this millennium, starting with 2000, even though, technically, it started in 2001.

The top-grossing Hindi films that came out in 2000 were a mix of everything that had gone before: stars and stories that had been in play for years.



And then came *Kaho Na Pyar Hai* (KNPH), and blew everything off the table. The year 2000 will always be known for this film, which created a new star of the kind that Bollywood used to be able to whistle up on demand, but never could after this youthful love story, in which Rakesh Roshan introduced his son.

Hrithik is the first, and last, ‘star son’ who created a sensation at the box office with his debut feature as a singing-dancing-romancing hero. How he moved — none of the jerky, break-dance-y steps favoured by Mithun and Govinda— but a modern iteration which combined a black net singlet, dark glasses, and electric moves. Very sexy, very cool.

With the success of KNPH, Hrithik became the biggest challenger for the three Khans who had shaped the 90s: it is another matter that nothing that he did after, including *Koi Mil Gaya* and the *Krrish* series, was as big.

Here we are in 2025, and the Khans are as big as they ever were. And Hrithik, while still a big star, is no longer counted in the same breath as the trio. Last seen, Roshan Jr was exhorting us to watch *War 2*, which tanked at the box office, on Netflix, and that’s an irony no one saw coming: a big movie star who was created for the large screen asking us to watch his film on a streaming platform!



If you're looking for the one thing that tells you that this is a permanent change in the theatre vs streaming wars, here it is.

The other big dhamaka that happened in 2000 was on television. Star TV created a double whammy in the shape of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* and *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. The first gave the weathering-over-a-tough-slope Amitabh Bachchan a new lease of life: he had been struggling to find his place post his attempted comeback — after his failed stint as a politician — and his films had all nose-dived. Hosting KBC, with that sonorous 'deviyon and sajjanon' baritone and the black-and-white beard, ensured that he was back, this time playing his age as the benevolent senior citizen who would help participants become crorepatitis.

Bachchan is still at it, and KBC is still locked and loaded, give or take kids who think they know more than the venerable host, and everyone else.

Saas Bahu may have won the TRP game, but it led to endless copies and spelt the death of creativity on television. With Ekta Kapoor throwing everything and the kitchen sink at the saga, which became an instant hit, everything else bowed out of TV.

Gone were the days of *Swabhimaan* and *Shanti*,



Banegi Apni Baat and *Jassi Jaisa Koi Nahin*: K serials (Ekta was ahead of the curve, figuring out the importance of the word K, way before Korean dramas became all the rage) took over. Saas, bahu, snakes, spaghetti blouses, sneering sisters-in-law, and slo-mo took over TV fiction, to the point that those who wanted to do something different were forced to look for different media altogether: YouTube became a first mover, and now it's all about streaming platforms.

KBC and KSBKBT were the defining TV moments of 2000, destined to become iconic popular culture markers. As we inch close to the end of 2025, two moments from recent episodes of these still-running programmes have gone viral, a term which was only used in context of a fever in those days — a smart-mouthed kid up against Bachchan telling us that it was all about parenting or the lack of it, and Smriti Irani, now the Ba of the household, chatting with Bill Gates on nutrition and motherhood.



**2001**

The year of *Lagaan*, *Gadar*, *Dil Chahta Hai*

– *Shubhra Gupta*

2001 was a blockbuster year for Bollywood, with *Lagaan*, *Gadar*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* all jostling for top grosser status. Looking back, it seems almost unbelievable that so many films that were released in 2001 became so speedily iconic.

The first two films, released on the same Friday, took on the theme of patriotism, but the execution was wildly dissimilar: the Ashutosh Gowariker-directed *Lagaan* had Aamir Khan and his rag-tag village gang beating the British at their own game; *Gadar* had Sunny Deol, who took his dulhaniya away from the same snarling Amrish Puri as had SRK a few years back, ensuring that we never looked at a handpump in the same way.



The making of *Lagaan*, which runs nearly four hours, is a fascinating story. Amongst other things, it became known as the first Bollywood film to use sync sound (the standard being lip-synching dialogue in dubbing rooms after the shoot was over). This meant a set where silence reigned, as the lines that the characters spoke had to be recorded: this, for its time, was revolutionary.

In Anil Sharma's *Gadar*, Sunny Deol plays a brawny salt-of-the-earth Sardar intent upon getting his beloved wife back from her tyrannical father in neighbouring Pakistan. It gave Sunny his biggest hit, which only the sequel, *Gadar 2*, with a near-similar theme, has surpassed.

Karan Johar's *K3G* was a film whose USP was its dizzying ensemble, gathering the biggest stars of the time — Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Hrithik Roshan, Kajol, Rani and Kareena Kapoor — in the same frame. It was also single-handedly responsible for spreading amongst the believers the undying craze of zardozi, karvachauth rituals, and young girls who wanted to be Poo.

But the biggest game-changer that year was Farhan Akhtar's directorial debut, *Dil Chahta Hai*. It changed the relationship Bollywood had with wealth, both generational and aspirational. In the matter of fact way it depicted rich dads, layabout sons, easily accessible Mercedes coupes,



spur-of-the-moment Goa breaks, and those stunning houses with equally stunning interiors — Akhtar’s tasteful aesthetic told us that money in and of itself wasn’t a bad thing, nor were the people who possessed it—the laxman rekha dividing bad ameers and the good gareeb was finally breached.

Dil Chahta Hai was also an urban-cool bromance of the kind Bollywood hadn’t attempted before, in which a younger man falls for an older woman despite his mother being unhappy about the relationship. It had uber-rich kids hanging out in each other’s dens filled with recliners and 40-inch TV sets, with boys-and-toys getting prime space. Aamir’s soul patch on the chin became a rage, and Saif got himself an immortal line about going everywhere for cake.

The other film which defined 2001 was Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding*, a decisive, delightful counterpoint to the splashy, over-produced movies of the Karan Johar and Sooraj Barjatya universe, in the way it unapologetically revealed dark family secrets. It remains, for me, one of Nair’s two best films, the other being *The Namesake*.

The bride, Vasundhara Das, is struggling with the whole idea of her arranged marriage and reluctant groom, Pravin Dabas. The parents,



Naseeruddin Shah and Lillete Dubey, are busy putting up a show while navigating cash flow issues. And the climactic stroke, which has cousin-of-the-bride Shefali Shah pulling out the rug from underneath a predatory uncle, played by a terrific Rajat Kapoor, upending the ever-smiling, ever-happy Bollywood shaadis we had witnessed till then: with Sukhwinder Singh’s ‘*Rabba Rabba*’ ditty flowing over it all, *Monsoon Wedding* is one of my all-time favourites, which I can watch over and over again, and it is as rewarding each time.





2002

The year of Devdas and Company

– *Shubhra Gupta*

It was the year of *Devdas*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's shiny reworking of the Devdas saga, with Shah Rukh Khan playing the titular role, accompanied by Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit. At the opposite end of the spectrum, layered with grime and grit, was Ram Gopal Varma's *Company*, a spiritual successor of RGV's *Satya*, which upturned the way Bollywood told the gangster story.

Devdas isn't my favourite SRK film, not by a mile, but I have to admit that he looked good in that clean-cut good-boy Bengali bhadralok attire of kurta and dhoti, accessorised with that booze bottle, mooning over his Paro and Chandramukhi, while making everyone, not just himself, thoroughly miserable.



The buzz around Bhansali's iteration of *Devdas*, funded by one of Bollywood's then fave jeweller-financier Bharat Shah, told us to expect everything the filmmaker was known for, and more: big stars, opulent sets, even more opulent costumes — the weight of Aishwarya and Madhuri's lehengas in their *Dola Re* dance-off became a talking point — and, of course, SRK in full-male-lover-victimhood mode.

The film had a premiere at that year's edition of the Cannes Film Festival, with SLB, SRK and Aishwarya walking its famed red carpet. But none of the flash and glitter could hide the fact that the film itself was overlong, overwrought, and nothing the ethereal Aishwarya did would make us forget that faux-eesh: it was not just Bengalis who cringed.

Bhansali has carried right on since, with his insistence on mega sets, and songs that carry swing: his latest web show *Heeramandi* is a testament to the fact that Bhansali baroque is still very much alive and kicking.

Saathiya gave us Shaad Ali's only other film (apart from *Bunty aur Babli*), that has worked. An adaptation of Mani Rathnam's *Alai Payuthey*, it has Vivek Oberoi and Rani Mukerji playing a couple struggling to find their romantic compass post marriage: with lovely songs and performances, this film is almost as good as the original starring R Madhavan and Shalini.



But the stand-out of the year, also starring Vivek Oberoi along with Mohanlal, Ajay Devgn, and Manisha Koirala, was Ram Gopal Varma's *Company*. A spiritual sequel to *Satya*, this follow-up is a far more polished film, loosely based on the relationship of real-life mobsters Dawood Ibrahim and Chhota Rajan, and it gave Oberoi a role he has rarely bettered.

Company, getting us up close and personal with the mobsters-in-chief just the way we had got to know *Satya* and its foot-soldiers, was a top-grosser of 2002, and it cemented RGV's reputation of making movies with grit, picking up characters from the real underworld's famed dons. Currently, RGV is better known for his provocative posts on X, but knowing his propensity to bounce back, it is never wise to write him off: last heard, his *Shiva* is poised for a comeback.

It was also the year which finally got Vishal Bharadwaj into Bollywood with *Makdee*: that film would have been rightfully dubbed Y/A today, with Shabana Azmi as a gnarly-fingered witch and Shweta Basu Prasad in a double role as the twin sisters who bravely confront the scary 'chudail'. The film, an atmospheric Grimms fairy tale — the special effects were super effective for its time — was a precursor to *Maqbool*, the film that cemented Bhardwaj's reputation as one of the most exciting filmmakers of the time.





2003

The year Irrfan Khan broke out with *Haasil*

– *Shubhra Gupta*

From coms, three-hanky weepies, and relationship dramas dotted 2003.

But the film that catapulted real difference into our midst was Tigmanshu Dhulia's debut feature *Haasil*, in which he presented NSD mate and good friend Irrfan Khan as an *Illahabad-ka-sakht-launda*: the film had been long in the making, and when it finally came out, both Irrfan and Dhulia — finally and jubilantly — found their footing in Hindi cinema. *Unka time aa gaya*.

Nikhil Advani helmed *Kal Ho Na Ho*, with Shah Rukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan, and Preity Zinta circling each other in NY, singing soulful songs, giving SRK a guaranteed three-hanky deathbed scene, and that infamous Kanta Ben gag in which the character's homophobia is played as a joke,



something producer Karan Johar went on to try and fix in the 2008 *Dostana*.

After KNPH, Rakesh Roshan lucked out again with *Koi Mil Gaya*, in which glam maa'm Rekha is mom to Hrithik's developmentally challenged young boy/man, Preity Zinta is the simpatico girlfriend, and there's a jealous fellow played by Rajat Bedi, yes, the very one who has resurfaced in *The Ba***ds Of Bollywood*. In all of this, the cute alien Jadoo, our own ET, steals the show.

Aziz Mirza's *Chalte Chalte* has commonplace truck-company-owner SRK and poor little rich girl Rani romancing in sun-dappled Greece. And then, in an unusual stroke for a mainstream Hindi movie, their screen marriage is severely tested, generating heat and tension: a major turnaround from most Hindi films, which end at the *mandap* and *mangalsutra*, because after that, as most marrieds know, lies danger.

Ravi Chopra's *Baghbaan* had Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini playing parents to a bunch of ungrateful adult children, dispossessed from their own home, forced to find love with others. The melodrama was high, but the veteran lead pair carried the film, with Salman in a surprisingly heartfelt cameo, proving once again that when the latter enters a film late, just like he did in KKHH, he often leaves more of an impact than when he is doing full-fledged hero-giri.

Rajkumar Hirani's debut *Munna Bhai MBBS*,



with Sanjay Dutt as Munna and Arshad Warsi as Circuit, gave us one of the most feel-good films of the year. The good-hearted goon, propped by his faithful sidekick, confronting the cold and cruel representative of the medical community, played by Boman Irani, made us laugh and cry, and proved that Hirani was the rightful legatee of the middle-of-the-road cinema which had vanished from our screens.

But 2003 belonged to *Haasil*, Tigmanshu Dhulia's long-in-the-works debut, in which the once-prestigious Allahabad University's faded charms become the prime location for the action, bringing back Hindi cinema's engagement with youthful unrest sparked by local political *chutbhaiyyas* and goons, which was more successful than the parallel love story between Jimmy Shergill and Hrishita Bhatt.

This was the film which gave Dhulia a foothold in Bollywood, and Irfan Khan (at the time, he still spelt his name with a single R) the role of a lifetime. The latter's Rannvijay Singh is a 'negative' character, but his positive traits are the ones that make us fall in love with him — Irrfan had almost given up on Hindi cinema, and if it hadn't been for his being able to finally break out with *Haasil*, we would have been deprived of watching one of the most dazzling actors that Hindi cinema has ever produced. His untimely passing is still a wrench.





2004

The year of *Swades*, *Maqbool* and *Main Hoon Na*

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Another striking year for Bollywood, with so many films which caught our eye then, and are still in conversation now. Farah Khan arrived with a bang, coasting on her love for the rollicking masala of the 70s. Ashutosh Gowariker and Vishal Bharadwaj gave their leading men films that would stay on top of their filmographies: SRK with *Swades* and Irrfan with *Maqbool*.

With *Main Hoon Na*, a film that channelled the madcap movie of Manmohan Desai, sprinkled with a little Prakash Mehra, debutant director Farah Khan proved she was as adept at assembling a big-budget movie as she was at creating crackling



choreography. Shah Rukh Khan plays an action star in it, years before he did *Pathaan* and *Jawaan*, but it is his goofy romantic bits with the chiffon-clad Sushmita Sen which still bring a smile to the face.

Rajkumar Santoshi's cop-and-crime saga *Khakhee* is, for my money, his best film, with the sharply feminist *Lajja* coming a close second. It should also be high on the CV of Akshay Kumar, in which the star proved he could do grey even better than vanilla. Bachchan has a great role in it (ah, that opening scene in which he is caught, literally, napping), as does, surprise, Tusshar Kapoor.

2004 can also be called the Year of Yashraj. I've termed *Dhoom* India's first item film: the whole thing is constructed with itemized sequences and songs, perfecting the mix in its second, *Dhoom 2*, which took the enterprise to a whole new level. Bikes, babes and flashy fun on the side is what the film promises, and that's exactly what you get, nothing less, nothing more.

Then there was *Veer Zaara*, a film that revolved around a star-crossed romance between an Indian *naujawaan* (SRK as Veer) and a Pakistani *haseena* (Preity as Zaara) with Amitabh and Hema continuing their senior-citizen successful jodi as Veer's supportive parents, a theme that



no one can dream of in today's polarised India, what with Pakistan reigning supreme in the enemy stakes.

Another Yashraj film, Kunal Kohli's *Hum Tum*, was India's first proper rom com (no lisping *bachchas*, no *kabootars*, no *dadaji* and *dadiji*, no *buas* and *masis*) featuring Saif Ali Khan and Rani Mukerji as the lovers who meet and part, meet and part, in true *Harry Met Sally* style. Nice songs, nice perfs, foot-tapping music, make this a film that has lasted.

I will split the best of 2004 between two films. *Maqbool*, Vishal Bharadwaj's magnificent Macbeth rendition, starred Irrfan as the lead paired opposite Tabu, with Pankaj Kapur, Naseeruddin Shah, and Om Puri and a terrific supporting cast. After *Haasil* and *Maqbool*, Irrfan firmly placed himself on the audience's radar, and every discerning filmmaker who wanted to work with a real actor started writing scripts with Irrfan in mind.

Ashutosh Gowariker's *Swades* was patriotic in the way it felt natural before 2014. Its patriotism didn't have to beat the drums and wave the flag: it was a part of the hero's DNA. SRK's Mohan Bhargava leaves a lucrative job at NASA and returns to India because he wants to give back.



I still don't like the long-drawn climax– where SRK's Everyman hero, in a checked shirt and regular trousers, becomes too heroic for his own good, and many of the conversations between the reluctant villagers and Mohan feel rehearsed and simplistic, but SRK is solid in his devotion to his quasi-mother and motherland.

And that fabulous scene, with Mohan in a boat, surrounded by ordinary Indian faces, says so much without a single dialogue. As does the theme song: '*yun hi chala chal*,' an evergreen song of the road and the rahi.





2005

Small towns returned to screen

– *Shubhra Gupta*

The ‘small town’ made a comeback. Swish rom coms set in foreign parts came out from the same studio just to keep the balance: choose your pick, Abhishek and Rani, or Saif and Preity? Loud comedies ruled the roost: 2005 had all this and more. It also had *Black*, which brought the conversation around disability into the mainstream.

Bunty aur Babli gave the small town a YRF-led designer upgrade.

You wonder if real-life Kanpur boy Shaad Ali would recognise his own city in his movie, which is about these two small-town youngsters *jo jhola utha ke chale* to big towns, heading towards



bigger things and living their dreams.

It is also the film that got back the ‘small town’ in Bollywood’s imagination, replacing the grunge and grime of the real thing with cutesiness and underlined quirk. The colorful outfits that Abhishek and Rani’s *Bunty and Babli* sport, could only have sprung up in Yashraj’s design department, which were of course adopted speedily by the tailors-and-their-patrons of the self-same UP small towns that the film wanders through, completing the circle— stars wear clothes— their characters hit the spot— cheap knock-offs flood the market— the wearers also become stars.

This is one of Abhishek’s better films, and Rani, when she is not wailing, is being perky and smart. But the one who steals every scene is Bachchan Sr, who comes on in a near walk-on part and runs away with the film.

Bunty aur Babli is also adorned with the item number to end all item numbers, a song that is still top of the pops as far as dance floors are concerned. Aishwarya Rai (she still wasn’t Bachchan then) swings her waist, and both father and son follow suit. *Kajrare kajrare, mere kaare kaare naina*, goes Gulzar’s ditty: I dare you not to get up and swing with it.

Loud comedies like *No Entry* and *Garam Masala*



marked attendance. So did the dud period film *Mangal Pandey*, a rare early misfire from Aamir Khan.

One of my guilty pleasures that year was another YRF production, Siddharth Anand's frothy rom-com *Salaam Namaste*, which gave us one of the first live-in couples in Bollywood, in which a very pregnant Preity Zinta gives in to her cravings for Ben and Jerry ice cream in the dead of the Melbourne night, with reluctant-to-be-dad Saif Ali Khan following suit.

But the film that marked the year was Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Black*, featuring Rani Mukerji as a girl with a profound disability and her relationship with her teacher, played by Amitabh Bachchan, whose character is struggling with advanced Alzheimer's.

Several parts of the film felt groaningly maximal — Shimla mansions as more art deco constructions done up in European accents — but then that's trademark SLB. A couple of sequences in which I'd felt uncomfortable back then are still as problematic: a teacher dragging a screaming 'problem child' by the arm is one.

But what *Black* did was to place characters with profound disability front and centre, as drivers of the narrative, not characters to be pitied or sidelined and forgotten. And the impact of that

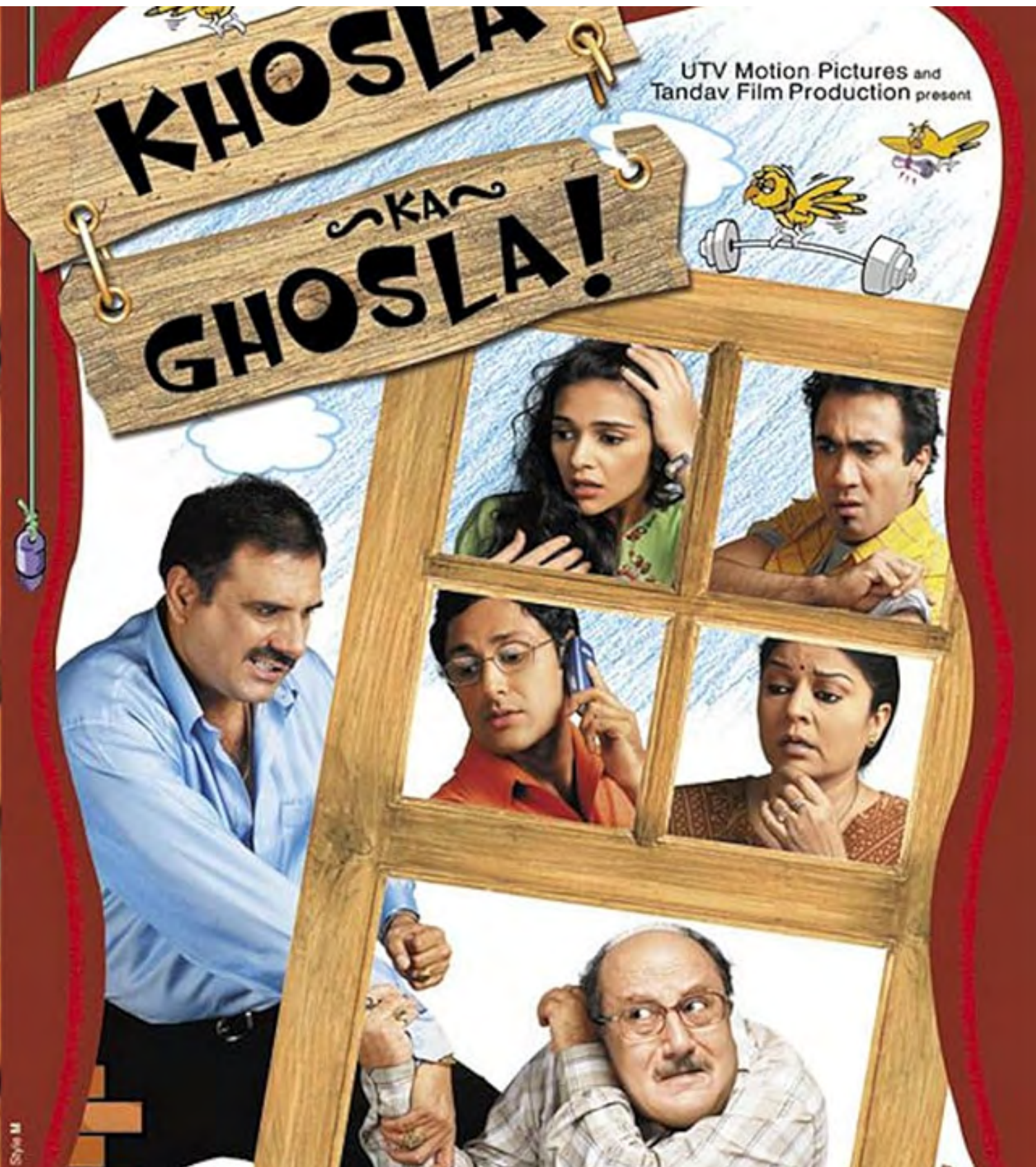


choice was huge: conversations around the importance of acceptance and inclusion were kick-started.

Just for that, you want to applaud Applause Films, which produced the film, giving Rani one of her most challenging roles, and which she managed to pull off with conviction, barring the odd exaggerated gesture or look.

The year also marked Imtiaz Ali's underrated debut *Socha Na Tha*, featuring another debutant, Abhay Deol, whose striking pairing with the ebullient Ayesha Takia heralded a fresh sensibility in the Bollywood rom-com.





2006

When Omkara, Rang De Basanti and Khosla ka Ghosla went beyond urban-cool

– *Shubhra Gupta*

It was Hrithik's year once again with *Dhoom 2*, in which he plays a dishy thief, zipping around global hot-spots conducting heists and swinging with Aishwarya Rai in that banger of a song – *Dhoom Macha Le Dhoom* – that is so back with Zohran Mamdani, new mayor of NYC, making it a loud and proud statement at his oath-taking ceremony.

With his streaked hair, bronzed face and athletic moves, Hrithik never looked better. And he followed that up with *Krissh*, in which he plays a caped superhero, a sequel to *Koi Mil Gaya*, both directed by Rakesh Roshan. The ladies in the



film included Rekha and Priyanka Chopra, and the VFX, for which Hollywood technicians were hired, was startlingly good for a Hindi movie.

It was Shah Rukh Khan's year too, with two very different films. In *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*, both he and his director, Karan Johar, went down a path they would never tread again, the former playing a man who two-times his wife, and the latter stamping betrayal all over the plot. If the film had done better than it did — though it appears to have scraped into the top ten highest-grossing films for 2006 — it would have rewritten the rules of romance. But SRK as a cad, getting into bed with another man's wife, was not something the audience was ready for then. And I doubt whether it would fly even today.

In Farhan Akhtar's *Don*, a remake of Amitabh Bachchan's rollicking film of the same name, SRK plays the titular character with style and swag, but there are no surprises in the film. Kareena comes on for a cameo, stepping in for Helen in the original, and Priyanka Chopra takes Zeenat Aman's place as Roma, the 'jungle billi' who embarks on a love-hate relationship with this cool criminal, which rolls over into the sequel *Don 2*.



It was also the year when Saif broke out of his urban-cool image with a radical 360 degree swivel: his foul-mouthed, paan-stained, black-hearted character in *Omkaara*, Vishal Bharadwaj's star-heavy re-telling of Othello, gave the star-actor his best role to date. The film's language was consistently salty, causing much uproar amongst the faint-hearted, but to hear Saif throw the 'ch' word around as if he had always done it, sitting alongside the brilliant Deepak Dobriyal, was a thing.

The film, whose success was a surprise, was, for its time, a brave experiment. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Rang De Basanti* had a group of college-goers finding purpose and clarity after a pilot friend's death in a MIG crash. The script picked on real-life crashes of these fighter jets, and the climax, which I still find the weakest part of the film, focussed on calling out the corruption among politicians and arms dealers.

The film's ensemble — Sharman Joshi, Siddharth, Kunal Kapoor, Soha Ali Khan, R Madhavan, Atul Kulkarni — danced around in their *masti ki pathshala*, drawing parallels with real-life *krantikaris* of the freedom struggle, headed by an in-form Aamir Khan. And ARR's music became a catchy anthem, which never gets old.



RDB was that rare film whose impact was felt outside the theatres; justice for Jessica — the girl shot dead at a swish Delhi bar by a drunk-on-power politician's son — can be linked directly to the candle-lit vigils of citizens, all fired up, the patriotic bunch in the film.

It was also the year Dibakar Banerjee arrived in Bollywood with *Khosla Ka Ghosla*, which tapped into the anxieties of middle class India — a home of their own — via the specificity of West Delhi manners and mores. Its unlikely hero was a middle-aged man played by Anupam Kher, who is up against Boman Irani's shifty-eyed land shark who goes by the name of Asthana. The latter was a total hoot, with that immortal line — *aap party ho ya broker?*





The year of SRK, and small big films Bheja Fry and Black Friday

– *Shubhra Gupta*

A cracker of a year, in which the starry blockbusters were trumped by a series of indie sparklers, most directed by debutants. Of the top-grossing list– Akshay Kumar with four films, Shah Rukh Khan with two, Salman Khan and Aamir Khan with one each, and Abhishek Bachchan with two, only a couple stand out creatively.

Om Shanti Om was Farah Khan again paying tribute to the most beloved tropes of Bollywood potboilers — the star-struck mother who is convinced her son will make it big one day, the shenanigans of the movie moguls, and the games they play — was the year's biggest guilty



pleasure, with SRK-Shreyas-Kirron-Arjun and Deepika Padukone in her debut, looking every inch the Hema Malini stand-in she was meant to be. All cool boys and girls of Bollywood showed up to celebrate themselves in that iconic song, whose spirit SRK's beta Aryan celebrated to the max in his crowd pleaser of a series, *The Ba***ds of Bollywood*.

The other is Shimit Amin's *Chak De India!*, in which SRK's failed hockey player-cum-reluctant-coach sets out to reclaim his personhood, snatched away by bigots, by knocking into shape a rag-team of no-hopers and making them into a match-winning team. The fact that it was an all-women team was a plus point, cementing SRK's reputation as a champion and respecter of women, and flashing forward presciently to a whole decade later, when his religion would become a flash point for trolls. Being Kabir Khan is one of SRK's most affecting performances, and it is still India's best sports film. And the best of 2007.

Why did Aamir Khan take over the direction of *Taare Zameen Par*, midway into the film's making? That was a burning question which took up a lot of tabloid space that year, but the result was a film which did a great deal for children who learnt differently. The young boy, played by Darsheel Safary, is not badly behaved; he has dyslexia, and his mind works differently. Aamir,



playing an empathetic teacher, also takes a back seat and lets the kids do their thing. The film brought dyslexia into public discourse and built on spaces which opened after *Black*, to have conversations around special needs.

It was also the year that Anurag Kashyap finally broke censorship shackles and managed to get his *Black Friday* out in theatres. Based on the till-then untold story behind the Bombay blasts, it had to be fought long and hard in courts, but once it was out, no one could deny the power of the film and its performances — with Nawazuddin in a blink-and-miss role — and it remains India's best docu-feature. It also broke the jinx Kashyap had been facing, and launched his career as a director; censorship and its evils, though, have continued to dog the filmmaker, and he has continued to speak against it.

The Namesake, Mira Nair's lovely adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel of the same name, gave Irrfan and Tabu, once again together after *Maqbool*, roles of a lifetime. It is one of those films you can keep watching in a loop, but with Irrfan not in this world any more, we are left with a lasting ache at the untimely passing of this incomparable artist.

Rajat Kapoor's *Bheja Fry*, produced by Sunil Doshi, became a marker of the small film, which did so well that it earned more than the most



successful film in that year. The Rajat brand of quirk was the USP of this film, with his familiars, Vinay Pathak and Ranvir Shorey, riffing off of each other, creating laughter which also made you think.

Reema Kagti's *Honeymoon Travels Pvt Ltd*, also fun and quirky, marked her arrival into Bollywood, giving us a zany romance with a unique superhero angle, and Kay Kay — yes, him — dancing like a dervish: *sajna main vari vari jaaon re* is still such a hoot.

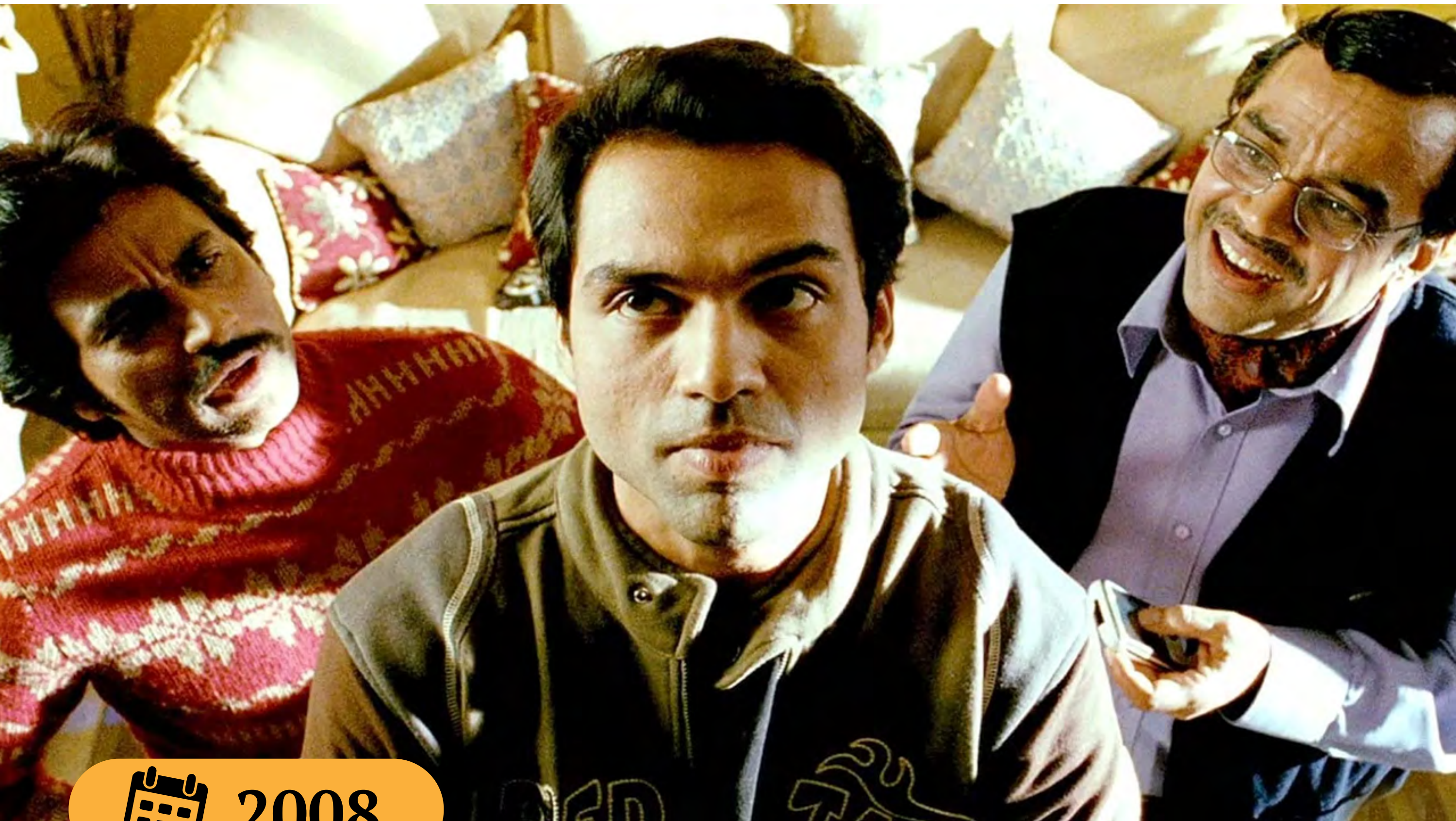
Abhay Deol had three films that year. With *Honeymoon*, *Ek Chalisi Ki Last Local* and *Manorama Six Feet Under*, he became the certified big star of the small film. It's one of those inexplicable things that you wonder about – if these films had had a good run, rather than staying niche, would it have made a serious dent in the mainstream? That last is a bit of a stretch, but it's a question that has continued to niggle – whatever happened to this Deol, who was from a legacy film family, yet wanted to break free from the formula, tried with a bunch of brilliant films, and then.

Sriram Raghavan's rollicking caper *Johnny Gaddaar*, with a bunch of crooks zooming around trying to best each other in true James Hadley Chase fashion, mixed grunge, grime and glitter: if you want a thriller with brains, this one is it.



And then of course, there was Imtiaz Ali's *Jab We Met*, which became the film that set the refresh button for the Bollywood love story's leap into the new millennium: Kareena Kapoor's *main apni favourite hoon* Geet and Shahid Kapoor's quiet, intense lover was a vibe, and the music was foot-tapping. You can still watch it, and smile.





2008

When Oye Lucky Lucky Oye was the sweet spot in the year of average movies

– *Shubhra Gupta*

An extremely average year, with the top spots divided amongst the usual suspects: Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan, Akshay Kumar, Hrithik Roshan, Saif Ali Khan, Abhishek Bachchan, and also, John Abraham.

One of the better offerings of 2008 was Yashraj's *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* (SRK playing a *seedha saadha* Amritsari office-goer who turns into a dancing dude to woo his wife, Anushka Sharma), with the film's broad brush strokes being offset by a sweetness rare in Hindi cinema.

The two wheeler, the tiffin-box packed for office lunch, the pushy colleagues showing up to check



out their new *bhabhiji*, and the hero's bashful decency becoming characteristics to celebrate, rather than berate: *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* is a film that allowed SRK yet another stab at playing the middle-class hero, a regular guy who went to work, and returned home, breaking the habits of a life-time strictly to please the woman in his life.

Dharma's *Dostana* gave homosexuality a Bollywood boost by having its male leads pretend to be gay, just to get into an apartment owned by the very straight Priyanka Chopra. The film had Boman Irani as a screamingly gay character, limp-wrist very much to the fore, Abhishek Bachchan as a male nurse who actually works for a living, and John Abraham who flashes a shapely butt in his bright yellow swimming trunks. It was castigated for making fun of queer people, but what it did was get homosexuality out in the open, making the phrase part of everyday chatter from Lucknow to Ludhiana.

With *Sarkar Raj*, Amitabh Bachchan showed he was still very much in the reckoning in starry senior stakes, and it remains one of RGV's better films.

With Ashutosh Gowariker's *Jodha Akbar*, Hrithik and Aishwarya cemented their reputation as being Bollywood's hottest jodi, with a scene between the Mughal emperor and his Rajput



paramour creating serious steam. It was also the director's last critically-acclaimed hit.

But 2008 was clearly the year of *Ghajini*. The blockbuster, directed by A R Murugadoss and starring Aamir, a remake of the director's own Tamil film, was a first for a couple of reasons. For one, it brought the phrase South masala back into popular parlance. Hindi potboilers had been there-done that back in the 70s and 80s, but in the hands of Southern filmmakers, the masala was pounded for more violence, more decibel, and zero nuance.

It was also the first Indian film to smash the 'Rs 100 crore' boundary. After *Ghajini*, it all boiled down to whether a film had cracked the 100 crore ceiling and entered it. Aamir also showed how marketing can be sharpened in a canny star's hands, by going across barber shops in the country, giving surprised patrons the *Ghajini* cut!

And in the sweet spot, Dibakar Banerjee's *Oye Lucky Lucky Oye*, had Mumbai boy Abhay Deol play the street-smart Delhi chor Lovinder aka Lucky, its sharpness and its very Dilli vibe, along with its love for pesky Pomeranians, pehelwaans and papajis, making it a delightful watch, then and now.





2009

The year of South remakes and ‘emosional atyachaar’

– *Shubhra Gupta*

If one South remake works, let’s make another. Actually, let’s make many more. Out came Salman Khan’s *Wanted*, which also roared into the Rs 100 crore club.

Warner Bros. tried their hand at producing in India, and got severely burnt, because *Chandni Chowk To China*, starring Akshay Kumar, was dead on arrival.

Zoya Akhtar makes her debut in *Luck By Chance*, an insider look at Bollywood’s machinations, giving brother Farhan a chance to play the lead, deftly navigating the outsider-insider nexus while being aware of its meta-ness. I remember



thinking when I first watched it that it needed to have been a bit sharper, but in hindsight, to have two legacy kids lending this hard-to-get-off-the-ground project even this much edge, and with Konkona Sen Sharma playing the true outsider, given her own legacy, feels radical.

Ranbir Kapoor plays, really well, the first of his many man-child roles in *Wake Up Sid*, with Konkona appearing in this one as the older, wiser woman, just as she has had to turn older and wiser in *Luck By Chance*.

He also plays the titular role in *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year*, one of the best films to have come out of the Yash Raj stable. A sharp slice of life, cut from uncomfortable cloth, from acquiring ‘marketing’ skills to catching a much-required break in a hard-edged work-place, with Ranbir giving it all he’s got, it was startling in its lived-in authenticity. Tragically, it crashed and burned at the box office.

Anurag Kashyap makes *Dev D*, the best post-modern version of that classic sorry-for-himself-desi-lover boy who believes that the world owes him a living, and that all women should roll over just because he deigns to look at them. It is Abhay Deol’s finest, co-stars Mahi Gill and Kalki Koechlin lend the film its feel and texture, and the music is outstanding. Kashyap calls this film a musical, and it very much is, with 18



songs interspersed through its run-time. *Kaisa tera jalwa, kaisa tera pyaar*, Dev D's 'emosional atyachaar' is a film for the ages.

Kashyap's *Gulaal*, with the interesting ensemble of Kay Kay Menon, Abhimanyu Singh, Raj Singh Chaudhary, Deepak Dobriyal, Ayesha Mohan, Jesse Randhawa, Piyush Mishra, Aditya Srivastava, is also out this year, and while there's a lot in there to like, the film – an anthem to misguided youth, and a call to arms – ultimately misses its mark.

The film that surprised me most in that year was the Nandita Das fine directorial *Firaaq*, which was based on the Gujarat riots. It had ongoing producer trouble, managed to release finally and then vanished, but remains one of the few cinematic on-record accounts of those terrible days when Gujarat was in flames, and thousands died in the communal riots.





The year Bollywood went independent with LSD, Ishqiya, Udaan

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Another great year for the small film; the big films did what they are meant to do — capture as many shows in widespread releases across multiplexes in order to make money; it was the smaller-budget indie-spirited films which gave us real joy.

Salman Khan's *Dabangg*, which gave the star one of his most popular roles as the Robin Hood-esque cop, was the biggest hit of the year. And much of its repeat-worthiness went to item song *Munni badnaam hui*, in which Malaika Arora swung her waist with as much gusto as in *Dil Se*'s 'Chaiyyan Chaiyyan'.

Shah Rukh Khan played a man with Asperger's



Syndrome in *My Name Is Khan*. The film came riding on many controversies, but the star gave way to the actor, doing a superb job with his enactment of that very specific disability. The fact of his Muslim-ness and connecting it with terrorism — My Name Is Khan and I'm Not a Terrorist — is a placard SRK's character holds aloft in the film.

It was a sharp rebuttal to the heavy anti-Muslim sentiments sweeping the world, and in a way, it turned out to be prophetic, for what SRK was subjected to in post-2014 India. It does go off track in the second half, but that, to me, was not a deal-breaker. I admire the film and its message: it was hard to pull off this character, and SRK does it with grace and conviction.

What's even more interesting is that it is a Dharma film that went on to become a top grosser internationally, even if it didn't do as well within the country: was it to do with SRK's star power, or the film's universal theme, or both?

And here are smaller films, all full of flavour and verve, giving us hope for mainstream Bollywood.

Abhishek Chaubey's debut *Ishqiya*, in which a couple of crooks, Naseeruddin Shah and Arshad Warsi, vie for the attention of attractive widow Vidya Balan, gives us several shades of black-blacker-blackest comedy in Gorakhpur, a small dusty UP town. *Dil to sach mein bachcha hai ji*.



Dibakar Banerjee makes *LSD*, which conclusively deep-sixed Bollywood's creaky way of showing physical intimacy. It was the first Bollywood film made in the most un-Bollywood-like way, meta-referencing earlier hits which have seeped into popular culture. Adi Sir, aka Aditya Chopra, is an unseen-but-felt character in the movie.

Banerjee also used handheld cameras to show us, up close and personal, our hypocrisies, hatred for the other, disgusting casteism, and using violence as an end to solve all problems. Watch it today, and you will still feel each of its blows as sharply.

Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* is Bollywood's first real coming-of-age film, which turned the beloved father figure on its head. Ronit Roy plays an uber-violent dad to two boys – one a teenager thrown out of a prestigious boarding school, the other much younger – giving us a searing portrayal of a man who is never at home when home. It interrogates our notions of masculinity while giving us so much to think about: why can't boys cry, and why, indeed, do they have to stay and face a man incapable of love? Lovely, lovely film.

2010 was also the year of Maneesh Sharma's *Band Baja Baraat*, which gave us Ranveer Singh's electric energy, whose chemistry with leading lady Anushka Sharma made this YRF rom-com instantly fresh and fun, *bread pakode ki kasam*. *Jab We Met ke baad kya aata hai? Haanji, BBB*.





2011

Delhi Belly and Pyaar Ka Punchnama defined

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Salman Khan had *Bodyguard* and *Ready*, continuing his spell of South masala. Ajay Devgn had *Singham* with heavy lashings of slo-mo walks and scowls. Shah Rukh Khan had *Ra One* and *Don 2*, the first a no-hoper, the second a routine actioner. Top grossers all.

But a handful of non-starry films defined 2011. The top of the pops were *Delhi Belly*, directed by Abhinay Deo and written by Akshat Varma, and Luv Ranjan's *Pyaar Ka Punchnama*. Same same yet different in specific ways, essentially three best friends navigating the crooked ways of Delhi-NCR, with its distinctive people, pathways and not to forget, lingo.



Delhi Belly, literally, had Delhi and belly, and the smelly fruits thereof, driving the narrative. Or let's say, three Dilli boys living in the grungiest flat that Bollywood designers could dream of, whose life gets sucked up in a belly ache which leads to a pile of excrement, stolen diamonds, and a bunch of crooks. Imran Khan (now not to be seen), Kunaal Roy Kapoor (still around) and Vir Das (Emmy-winning stand-up comic and newly-minted author) whoop it up, in dialogue which is almost all English with a little bit of Hindi slipping in, the two lasses played by Shenaz Treasurywala and Poorna Jagannathan, now well known for her strict desi mom in *Never Have I Ever*. So much so that it can safely be called the first Hindi film in English.

There's also a jaw-dropping love-making scene of the kind I haven't seen before or after in a Hindi flick, unless you count *Jhankaar Beats*, with its below-the-seat action. And that theme song *Bhaag D K Bose* would never pass the censors' eye now: it's unbelievable that it did so back then, even if the film's producer Aamir Khan was smart enough to ask for an A certificate from the get-go.

Then there were the three boys of *Punchnama*, dreaming of girls, girls, girls, with a rawness of delivery that made the boys relatable. Of the trio, Kartik Aryan — the one with that monologue — has become a big star, around whom the insider-



outsider debate has raged, and is now reportedly working with Karan. Blurred lines much in New Bollywood? Does Karan need Kartik more than the other way round?

Vidya Balan, hitting the high notes in Milan Luthria's *The Dirty Picture*, was a rare Indian female star who won the box office in a woman-centric role. Based on the life of Silk Smitha, there was enough sex and smut in the film to get in the crowds, but it was also a film in which Balan's performance was itself a draw. Emraan Hashmi and Naseeruddin Shah are in support, but this film is through and through Vidya's vehicle.

Also, not to forget Zoya Akhtar's *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (ZNMD), which felt like a *Dil Chahta Hai* redux: those boys had grown into these men, still very much in search of self. Almost like a coming-of-age point two oh. But the bromance, starring Hrithik, Farhan, Abhay, lifted by Katrina and Kalki, has weathered well enough, what with its castinet-clicking-Senorita, the rumbustious tomato-throwing in Tomatina, and the presence of Bagwati, the bag that was hilariously more expensive than the very expensive people sitting in the car.

Lots of that ultra-cool BFF vibe. And lots of on-and-off chatter around a sequel: will it ever happen?





2012

With Vicky Donor, Kahaani, Gangs of Wasseypur, Hindi cinema changed

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Forget about the biggies of the year, which included the first edition of superspy Salman's *Ek Tha Tiger*, and south masala *Rowdy Rathore*. With the exception of Reema Kagti's *Talaash*, a spiky crime thriller starring Aamir, Kareena and Rani, which had a certain degree of depth, none of the big starry takes are memorable.

Focus, instead, on the terrific array of crackling fresh films that came from Tigmanshu Dhulia (*Paan Singh Tomar*), Shoojit Sircar (*Vicky Donor*), Anurag Kashyap (*Gangs of Wasseypur 1 and 2*), Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish*, and Sujoy Ghosh (*Kahaani*).



If a person unfamiliar with Bollywood films before were to encounter these films, they wouldn't have believed those who claimed that the only films that the industry churned out were assembly-line, formulaic offerings.

Paan Singh Tomar is one of the best films that came out of the Dhulia-Irrfan combine, and ranks high on my all-time faves. It struggled to be released, but when it did come out — I remember watching the first day first show completely alone in my South Delhi swish multiplex — it blew us away with its rawness, authenticity and the power of its performances and storytelling. Irrfan, flying on the track, a national-level athlete forced into becoming a dacoit, was sublime.

Ayushmann Khurrana's first film still remains his best. Directed by Sircar with a story from Juhi Chaturvedi, it was about a sperm-donor who has to keep his 'job' secret, and how it impacts his relationship with his lady love, Yami Gautam, also in her most natural act. For conservative Bollywood, to even speak of sperm, let alone mention the sexual act, was a major leap, and the way in which Khurrana embraces his role made this film a joy.

Anurag Kashyap's coal-mafia-mein-rival-gangstergiri double bill GOW 1 and 2 is high in his filmography, and one of my most favourite films of his. It is a formidable achievement to



carry the plot, its myriad characters and the many decades it spans, for five hours and some, but the film never lags, buoyed by its vibrant songs, dialogues and performances: Manoj Bajpayee is brilliant, with terrific support from Pankaj Tripathi, Jaideep Ahlawat, Piyush Mishra, and of course Tigmanshu Dhulia, with that line — *tumse na ho payega* — becoming iconic even as it came out of Ramadhir's mouth.

Ironically, Kashyap now claims he 'hates' the film, because everyone expects him to keep making the same thing; his latest *Nishanchi*, which can feel like a return to the GOW territory, is actually different, but to get where he's going with it, you need to see both its parts, back to back.

Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* got Sridevi back into our midst. This story of a middle-aged housewife finding her metier, and a near-romance with a man not her husband, touched a deep chord amongst the audience. We've all known women like Shashi Godbole, played beautifully by Sridevi, who is so good at prioritising their spouse and kids that anything they do for themselves comes as a shock and surprise. Adil Hussain, as the husband, is excellent too, and Sridevi wins our hearts.

After *The Dirty Picture* came Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani*, and Vidya Balan also aced this one, playing a very pregnant woman arriving in



Kolkata in search of her missing husband. There may still be people who haven't seen the film, so I won't spoil what happens next for you. Suffice it to say that *Kahaani*'s thrills and spills are well done. Balan carries the film, with support from Nawaaz and Parambrata Bhattacharya, and its climax still has the power to surprise.

Hansal Mehta's *Shahid*, based on the life of the real-life lawyer of the same name, brought the director back from the dumps, with a career-best performance from his regular protege, Rajkummar Rao. It was also a rare Bollywood film with a Muslim protagonist, something which would be impossible to conceive these days.

The most unusual film of the year was Anand Gandhi's *Ship Of Theseus*, produced by Sohum Shah, who plays a role in it: it was fiercely indie-spirited, but it came from a director who has written for Ekta Kapoor's serials, and was championed by Kiran Rao with support from her then husband Aamir Khan. This mix of independent and mainstream cinema has occasionally brought some hidden gems to the forefront; Rao is still a vocal supporter of films that are truly different.





2013

Lunchbox, Kai Po Che, Queen gave us the stars and the stories

– *Shubhra Gupta*

It was the year of *Dhoom 3*, the weakest edition of the franchise, starring Aamir Khan and Katrina Kaif. The latter danced like a charm; the former was heavy and charmless, and the film was a dud. It is one of Aamir's worst; the only one worse than this is yet another dead-on-arrival YRF production *Thugs of Hindostan*, and his own production *Laal Singh Chaddha*.

Shah Rukh Khan-Deepika Padukone romped nicely in *Chennai Express*, a Rohit Shetty film, perhaps the only one of the director's that I've enjoyed, because it had these two fronting the fun and games, submitting to the silliness that



this kind of film demanded.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Ramleela* had to be changed to *Goliyon Ki Rasleela*: this desi version of Romeo-Juliet, starring Ranveer-Deepika, was forced to go in for a name-change, a precursor to the Padmavati-Padmavat imbroglio — there have always been extra-judicial factors at play around cinema in India, but this was the beginning of an era of interference that shows no signs of slowing down.

Ayan Mukerji's *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* is yet another Deepika film (2013 was quite the Deepika year), in which she switches from a '*padhakoo-glasses-wali-doctor*' to a svelte creature while showing Ranbir Kapoor's commitment-phobic fellow the error of his ways. This rom-com, which swung from '*Balam Pichkari*' to '*Badtameez Dil*', continues to nestle in a surprising number of millennial hearts. Sometimes tropes are trumped by good-looking leads and foot-tapping music.

After his 2012 success with the remake of *Agneepath*, Hrithik returned with the third part of the *Krrish* franchise, and it was more of the same, with the bad guys — Vivek Oberoi and Kangana Ranaut — having all the fun: it was a big hit, but a fourth iteration never materialised.



In all these big-budget blockbusters, this bunch stood out — *Queen*, *Kai Po Che*, *Madras Cafe*, and *Shudh Desi Romance*.

Kangana Ranaut owned Vikas Bahl's *Queen*, in which she plays a heartbroken West Delhi girl in search of self as she journeys across picturesque European spots. Its runaway success turned Ranaut into a bankable star, and she hasn't bettered that virtuoso performance.

Abhishek Kapoor's *Kai Po Che*, based on a Chetan Bhagat novel, was about three cricket-mad friends in Ahmedabad navigating the fissures caused by communal riots and natural disasters: it was Sushant Singh Rajput's debut feature, with wonderful support from Rajkummar Rao and Amit Sadh, and great music: this *rishton ka maanjha* is still as watchable.

How good writing can be the best part of a film which never quite delivers on its promise of giving us a new-agey, modern romance is evident in the YRF-produced, Maneesh Sharma-directed *Shudh Desi Romance*. The delightfully life-like lines from Jaideep Sahni keep everything going, even when Sushant Singh Rajput, yes, him again, Parineeti Chopra and debutant Vaani Kapoor sag and lag here and there.



But if I were to pick one film which changed the game in terms of a wider overseas release, it was Ritesh Batra's *Lunchbox*, an unlikely romance between two lonely souls arising out of a rare mistake made by Mumbai's famed dabba-walas. It gave Irrfan one of his most flavourful parts, with Nimrat Kaur layering her tasty treats with love and care, and Nawazuddin digging in for his bite as well.

It was one of the first Indian films which did very well in foreign markets, not primarily NRI-driven, and it broke the outdated notion that Indian films were all song-and-dance wonders.





2014

Big blockbusters, small paybacks

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Of the top grossers, which included same-old starry turns with same-old treatment — *Kick*, *Bang Bang*, *Singham Returns*, *Holiday*, *Happy New Year*, *Ek Villain* — only *PK* stood tall for its freshness. Rajkumar Hirani directed Aamir Khan as the big-eared, saucer-eyed alien landing on earth and fixing its troubles, while learning a few lessons along the way.

Ali Abbas Zafar's *Gunday* gave Irrfan Khan yet another of his cop roles, and yet another supporting role in a YRF film, this time working alongside Ranveer Singh, Arjun Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra, being yet again the best part of a masala movie. It was the year when several female-centric films broke out of the formulaic mould.



There was Priyanka Chopra as the titular character in Omung Kumar's *Mary Kom*, and Rani Mukherji in and as *Mardaani*, directed by Pradeep Sarkar and produced by Aditya Chopra.

Conducting herself credibly, Priyanka faced down the murmurs that someone from the North East, if not Mary Kom herself, should have played her character in the biopic; Mukherji as a tough cop doing the right thing was impactful.

Imtiaz Ali's *Highway* gave Alia Bhatt, with terrific co-star Randeep Hooda, one of her breakout performances, in which she plays a young girl on the run. It set the 19-year-old Bhatt on the path of films which would challenge her, and she has made good on that early promise by becoming one of the most successful stars in Bollywood.

Hasee Toh Phasee, directed by Vinil Mathew and produced by Dharma, was a rom-com with a difference. It welcomed Sidharth Malhotra back to Dharma, and got Parineeti Chopra in its fold, and the two — a wannabe entrepreneur and an eccentric scientist — made one of the most unusual pairs in Hindi cinema.

Vishal Bhardwaj's third of his Shakespeare tragedies, the Hamlet-inspired *Haider*, isn't as striking as the earlier *Maqbool* and *Omkaara*, but it gave Shahid Kapoor, working with Kay Kay and Tabu, one of his best roles: being set in Kashmir,

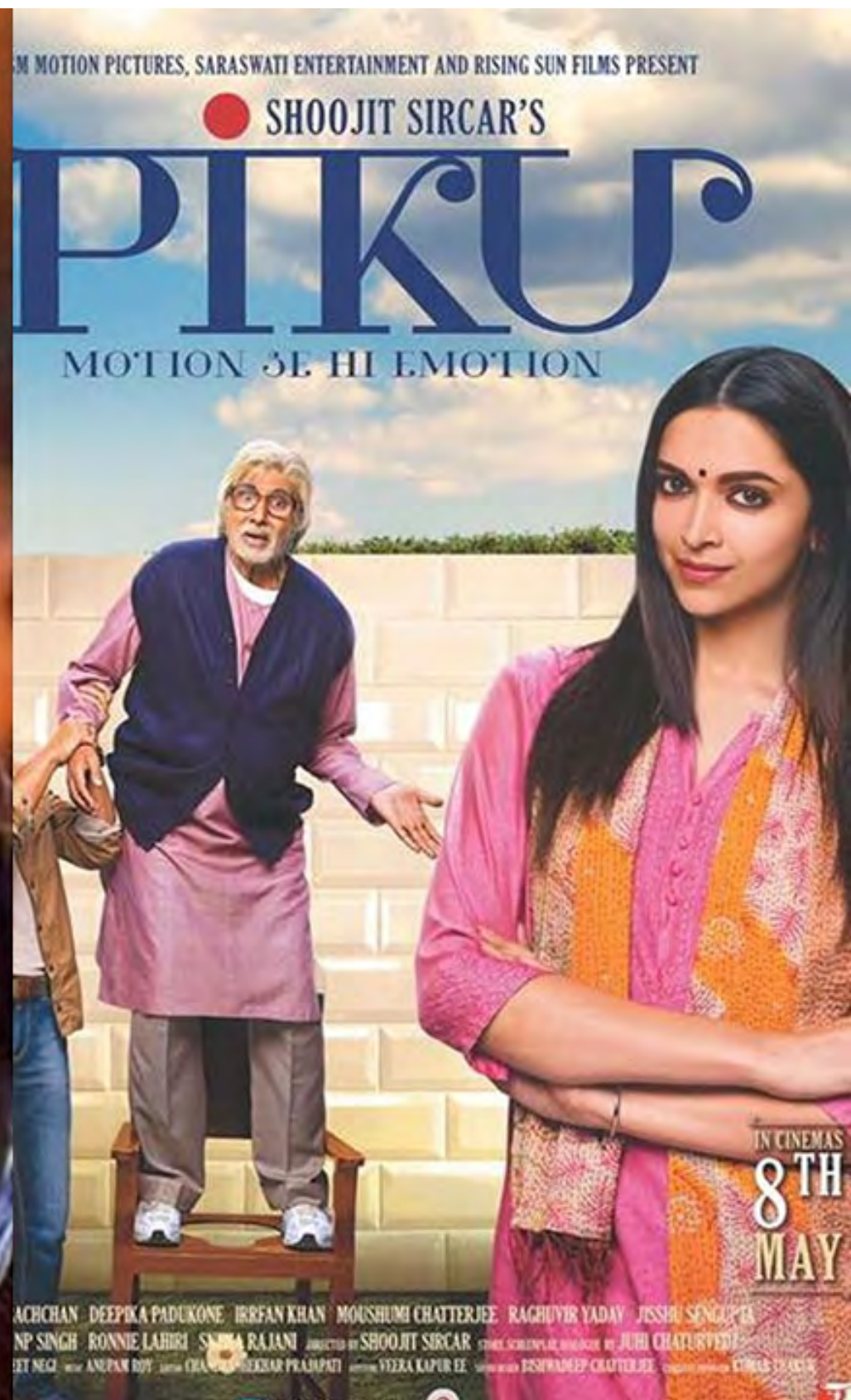
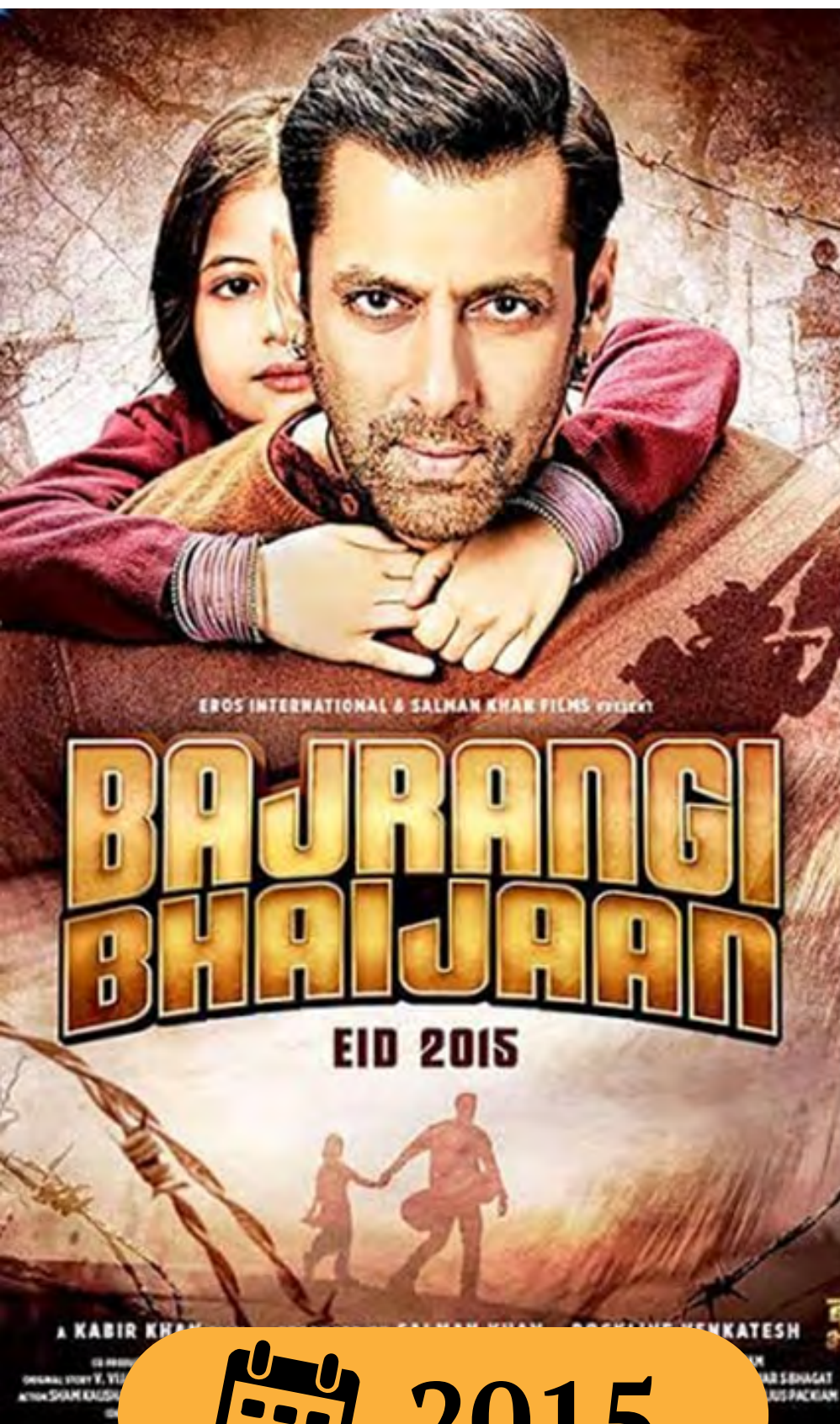


a place beset with so much contestation even today, lends it continual resonance.

But of the films that year that were truly different, Rajat Kapoor's *Aankhon Dekhi* would be right at the top. Through a character, played flawlessly by Sanjay Mishra, who decides to believe only what he can see with his own eyes, Kapoor weaves a magnificent tale of belief and perception, his unique injection of whimsy making it one of my all-time favourite Hindi films.

And then there was Ashim Ahluwalia's terrific *Miss Lovely*, which revolved around the sleazy C-grade sex-and-horror films so popular in the 80s, focussing on the ecosystem which produced these films. The creation of that parallel Bollywood era, which doesn't exist anymore, made in a most un-Bollywood-like manner, is unparalleled.





2015

The year of Bajrangi Bhaijaan and Masaan

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Among the year's major hits, which included *Bajirao Mastani*, *Prem Ratan Dhan Paayo*, *Welcome Back*, *Baby*, *Drishyam*, and *Dilwale*, two have the easiest recall.

Salman Khan's *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, in which the star plays a devout Hanuman bhakt whose mission in life is to restore a lost little girl from Pakistan to her family, was destined to have long legs. At the time it was released, tensions between India and Pakistan were running high; today, post-Operation Sindoor, they are as high as they have ever been: even then, this Kabir Khan directorial felt like a peacenik dream, but at least it got made. An impossibility now.



Zoya Akhtar's *Dil Dhadakne Do* was yet another poor-little-rich-people drama that the director excelled at before she rolled over into more egalitarian ground with *Gully Boy*. It had an arresting ensemble, including Anil Kapoor, Farhan Akhtar, Ranveer Singh, Priyanka Chopra, Anushka Sharma, with a memorable turn by Shefali Shah, and the most innovative one-take *solid-masti-chaayi* song. Watch it and smile.

It was also the year when stars tried their hand at working in offbeat — for them, at least — films. Anushka Sharma as an urbanista in the gritty lost-in-Jatland adventure in *NH 10*, directed by Navdeep Singh and written by Sudip Sharma, and Varun Dhawan's vengeful young man in Sriram Raghavan's *Badlapur*, held out hope for mainstream cinema.

The presence of Deepika Padukone and Amitabh Bachchan lent a starry sheen to *Piku*, a Shoojit Sircar film that was a gift for Irrfan. With this constipated-Bengali-father-exasperated-daughter drama in which Irrfan gets a sideways role, the latter finally made the leap into a coveted bracket that had been thus-far elusive: it also became one of Irrfan's most loved films.

But not every star tasted offbeat success. Ranbir Kapoor went hard in *Bombay Velvet*, Anurag Kashyap's once-upon-a-time-in-Bombay period saga, but the film was a bust.



Yashraj tried going the small-town way again, but this time with a story that felt real. Sharat Katariya's *Dum Lagaa Ke Haisha* gave us Haridwar, and a fresh pair in the shape of an unlikeable Ayushmann Khurrana and his plus-sized wife, played by Bhumi Pednekar. The way the rocky relationship develops, becoming a lifetime's *moh-moh-ke-dhaage*, written by Varun Grover, makes this special.

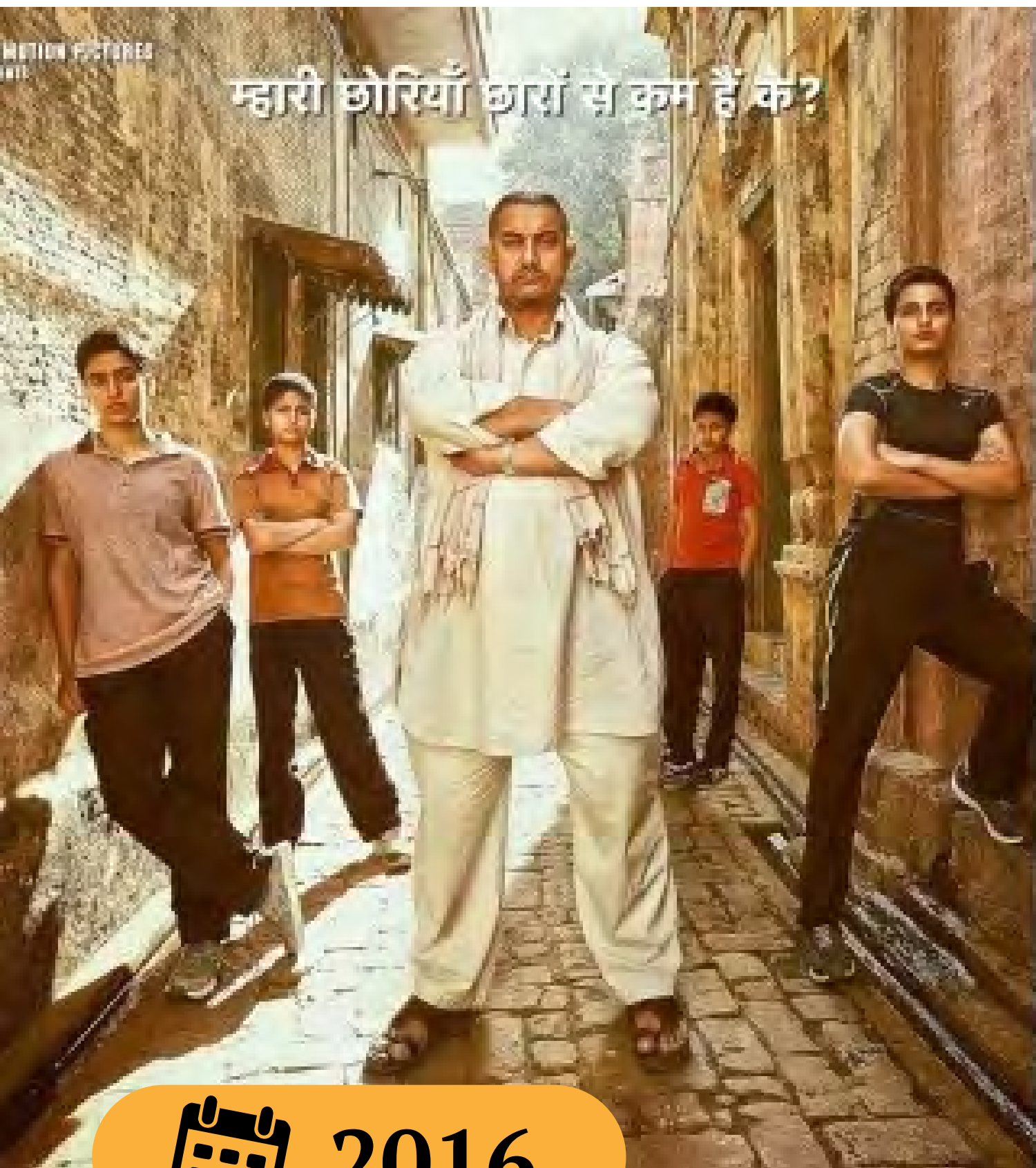
And four, yes four, totally offbeat films went straight into my to fave list: these fiercely independent films were distributed and exhibited in the same circuit as the mainstream films, and even if they didn't get half as many theatres as did the big starry exhibits, they have cemented their position in Best Film lists.

Anup Singh's terrific pre-partition drama *Qissa* is by far and away one of Irrfan's best performances, as haunting today as it was when I first watched it.

Neeraj Ghaywan's debut feature *Masaan*, working at the intersection of old-and-new India, gave his star Vicky Kaushal and himself a jump-start; both are working at their peak today.

Kanu Behl's *Titli* was another first-time director's singular vision — bleak, pitiless, true — from which you couldn't lift your eyes.





2016

The year of Dangal, Udda Punjab, and Pink

– Shubhra Gupta

Two sports or sports-related films, both featuring wrestling, both set in Haryana, both top-lined by superstars admitting to their age, became the top grossers in 2016.

Dangal, directed by Nitesh Tiwari, and starring Aamir Khan, along with Fatima Sana Shaikh, Zaira Wasim, Sanya Malhotra, Sakshi Tanwar, among others, pushed the envelope of gender empowerment, with the famous rallying line: *mhari choriya choro se kam hai ke?*

Aamir is the strict-but-loving father going the mile for his daughters, as they train hard to become champions, and even though he gets a



crucial climactic scene when the girls are doing the winning — for which the film was slammed — there is no doubt that a star fronting a film became a strong statement.

Sultan, directed by Ali Abbas Zafar, is that rare Salman Khan outing which actually submits to a plot. This is not just bhaigiri, but being a character, in which he fails, falls, and gets up again, showing us the sweat and blood that goes into winning. One of Salman's better films, not just in terms of the box office, but in performance.

Ae Dil Hai Mushkil, another of Ranbir Kapoor's rom coms in which his man-boy character learns the error of his ways, is remembered primarily for the way producer Karan Johar was forced to rename Lahore to Lucknow, while cutting Pakistan heart-throb Fawad Khan's part drastically — lesson number one to zero: in New India, the neighbouring country is not to be dislodged from its position of enemy number one. The film also has Bollywood's first 'break-up' song: trust KJo to turn heartbreak into a party swinger.

Fawad has a deeper role in the second film from the Dharma stable, *Kapoor & Sons*, with the other cool swinger of the year: *ladki beautiful kar gayi chull*, starring the good-looking duo of Sidharth Malhotra and Alia Bhatt. It also has Rishi Kapoor buried under layers of latex, and Rajat Kapoor doing a distinctly grey character: with its



elements of homosexuality and infidelity, it was a very different ‘family film’, and the audience rewarded it by making it one of the year’s hits.

But one set of fans deserted the much-awaited *Fan* in which SRK plays a double role, as an ardent fan and a not-so-nice superstar. I love the film as it has one of SRK’s sharpest performances, but it was much reviled: how it scraped into the Top 10 of the year is a surprise, as it was considered a flop.

SRK managed to win back fan favour with Gauri Shinde’s *Dear Zindagi*, in which he plays an attractive Goa-based shrink to Alia Bhatt’s conflicted young woman: I do think he looks dishy, as does Goa, which has more main character energy than either of the leads, but the film is unconvincing. A psychiatrist going cycling, etc, with his patient looks cool; in real life, it would be considered as crossing a line.

Alia’s 360-degree turn as a bedraggled village girl in Abhishek Chaubey’s *Udta Punjab* carries much more conviction because of the way the film took on the subject of the rampant drug menace in Punjab. Shahid Kapoor and Kareena Kapoor Khan — in that brief, deglam doctor role — and Diljit Dosanjh were all so good.

Hansal Mehta’s *Aligarh* gave Manoj Bajpayee another of his memorable roles, in which he



plays a middle-aged man who refuses to call himself homosexual; he belongs to a generation which is not comfortable talking about sexual orientation; he just claims he is different, and in that reluctance to be classified, achieves a delicacy.

Ashwini Iyer Tiwary's *Nil Battey Sannata*, starring Swara Bhaskar and Ratna Pathak Shah, took up the issue of education and empowerment, showing how inextricably connected the two are at any age and stage: a socially conscious film which, thankfully, did not preach.

And then there was *Pink*, the Anirudh Rai Chowdhury-Shoojit Sircar film, about a Delhi crime and rightful punishment. No means no, thundered Amitabh Bachchan, speaking on behalf of Taapsee Pannu, Kirti Kulhari and Andria Tariang, three Delhi girls who stand up against a bunch of powerful molesters. The film was a powerful call to arms, which still resonates.





2017

A humdinger of a year for small films with a big heart

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Konkona Sen Sharma's terrific debut feature *A Death In The Gunj* gave us a specific time, place, atmosphere, and a young man's steady erosion of self because of the bullying he faces. Vikrant Massey plays Shutu, a sort of hanger-on, poor relative, to an entitled bunch of holidayers – Ranvir Shorey, Tillotama Shome, Jim Sarbh, Gulshan Devaiah, Kalki Koechlin – who come visiting a friend's home in McCluskieganj in Bihar (now Jharkhand) in 1979; the parents are played by the wonderful pair of Om Puri and Tanuja.

I really can't single out a performance because each one is just so good; if I close my eyes, I



flash back to Massey, still a relative newcomer in 2016, and his flawless turn.

Alankrita Srivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* was also a film filled with the texture of the place it is set in. Four women in Bhopal, different circumstances, struggling with difficult circumstances. Ratna Pathak Shah, Konkona Sen Sharma, Ahana Kumar, Plabita Borthakur work well together to break the patriarchy.

Two actors-well-on-their-way-to-stardom, Rajkummar Rao and Ayushmann Khurrana, teamed up with Kriti Sanon, also now a star in her own right, to create a small-town romantic triangle laced with humour. *Bareilly Ki Barfi* has both the feel of the town, and the sweetness of the *mithai* in the title.

And Ayushmann Khurrana goes it alone in *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan*, also 'small-town' but this one a truly different sort of love story: what happens when erectile dysfunction – *hawww*, did we hear that right – threatens to ruin a *nai-nai shaadi*? Will it turn into *barbaadi*? Khurrana and his dulhan Bhumi Pednekar go round and round the mulberry bush, and finally find an answer.

Gurgaon and *G Kutta Se*, both different-but-similar, both powerful features about life in a satellite town of the NCR (National Capital Region), both revolving around *zar, zoru, zameen*,



male entitlement, patriarchy, misogyny. Shanker Raman and Rahul Dahiya direct with fierce authenticity; the first got Pankaj Tripathi one of his first lead roles in the movies.

Pankaj Tripathi has another striking part in Amit V Masurkar's *Newton*, one of the most biting political satires in recent Hindi cinema, starring Rajkummar Rao as a low-level babu who holds on to his essential decency in the face of experiences which could have flipped him over. Another film I love, for what it says, and how it says it.

And Irrfan Khan plays the romantic fool in Tanuja Chandra's *Qarib Qarib Singlle*, paired with Parvathy, a love story whose endearing leads have found a permanent place in my heart. Irrfan also got his first solo super-hit with *Hindi Medium* (breaking into the Rs 100 crore club), in which he plays an old Dilliwalla trying to find his feet in South Delhi, while trying to get his daughter admitted in an English medium school.

Of the other big hits – *Tiger Zinda Hai*, *Golmaal*, *Raees*, *Toilet Ek Prem Katha*, *Secret Superstar*, *Kaabil*, *Badrinath Ki Dulhaniya*, *Judwa 2* – only *Toilet* claimed difference in its plot point – the importance of toilets in rural homes – but the treatment was same superstar heavy, with Akshay Kumar as lead, along with Bhumi Pednekar.





2018

Sacred Games changed Indian entertainment

– *Shubhra Gupta*

I have two words to tell you how significant this year was, in the landscape of Indian entertainment, and no, it isn't the name of a film: *Sacred Games*. Netflix's first original show, based on Vikram Chandra's book of the same name, *Sacred Games* turned out to be an absolute gamechanger.

Starring Saif Ali Khan and Nawazuddin Siddiqui as the cop-and-mobster, and a bunch of other notables (Pankaj Tripathi, Ranvir Shorey, Aamir Bashir, Kalki Koechlin, Radhike Apte amongst others), this two part show, directed by Vikramaditya Motwane and Anurag Kashyap, changed the way we would consume 'content' going forward.



Not that *Sacred Games* could be accused of being generic content. This very Bombay story had the zing that Kashyap's *Bombay Velvet* lacked, and though the second part was nowhere as good as the first, the two-hander ensured that web series were here to stay, kickstarted the popularity of streaming platforms in India: after Netflix came Amazon, followed by SonyLIV, and Disney Plus (now Jio Hotstar) and several others.

A few months after *Sacred Games*, Amazon Prime Video came out with its own original, *Mirzapur*, a show with a potent mix of small-town mobsters, crime families, and memorable characters. Directed by Karan Anshumann, Gurmmeet Singh and Mihir Desai, the series showcased an ensemble toplined by Pankaj Tripathi, Ali Fazal, Vikrant Massey, Divyenndu Sharma, Shweta Tripathi, Shriya Pilgaonkar and others.

With Covid-related theatrical shutdowns, which were just around the corner, and consequent production slowdown of the movies, viewers were given a taste of shows, films, shorts from around the world, both in subtitled and dubbed versions. The audience had never been so spoilt for choice, and nothing would ever be the same again. Now, instead of being 'how is the film', the question I get all the time is: *OTT par kab aayegi?*

Going back to the movies that came out that



year, a handful of well-told hits rose above the general dross, which was topped by the so bad it's terrible *Thugs Of Hindostan* (Aamir Khan), with Anand L Rai's *Zero* (Shah Rukh Khan) coming a close second.

Amit Ravindernath Sharma's *Badhai Ho* has Neena Gupta and Gajraj Rao as a middle-aged couple catching pregnant, having to deal with a horrified grown up son and his girl-friend, played by Ayushmann Khurrana and Sanya Malhotra .

Sriram Raghavan and Ayushmann Khurrana, along with Tabu and Radh teamed up in *Andhadhun* for a smart thriller in which a bunch of characters are blind-sided by a canny musician.

In Sidharth P Malhotra's *Hichki*, Rani Mukerji plays a character who rises above their disability (Tourette's syndrome) with conviction, in yet another attempt at a disabled character after *Black*.

Here are some of my other favourites of 2018.

Amar Kaushik's *Stree*, with Rajkummar Rao and Shraddha Kapoor was the beginning of the small-town horror coms tinged with a strong dose of feminism, leading to several copies, but nothing that compares to the smarts of this one.

Shoojit Sircar's *October* gave Varun Dhawan yet



another role to show that he could do something else other than Govinda-style song-and-dance comedies. A coming of age with a difference.

Shashanka Ghosh's *Veere Di Wedding*, a female buddy comedy starring Kareena Kapoor Khan, Sonam Kapoor, Swara Bhaskar and Shikha Talsania, very quickly became of my favourite of the genre – the girls were frank, fearless and fun, facing down all kinds of obstacles.

Anurag Kashyap's *Mukkabaaz* gave Hindi cinema one of its finest actors in the shape of Vineet Kumar Singh, playing the titular small-town boxer and his journey.

Anubhav Sinha's *Mulk* brought him out of the sludge he had been in, and the film, starring Rishi Kapoor and Taapsee Pannu can be seen as a course correction for not just the director, but of a nation spiralling on the path of majoritarianism.

Also who can forget *Tumbaad*, co-directed by Anand Gandhi and Rahi Anil Barve, a beautifully shot, atmospheric period film, starring Sohum Shah, melding myths and secrets and greed?





2019

OTT comes of age, cinema has a new competitor

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Yes, there were a few good films this year too, but 2019 will be known as the year when desi web series came of age, with a clutch of terrific shows whose instant popularity ensured new seasons: shows on OTT began as an experiment, and when *Sacred Games* in 2018 became the phenomenon it did, the flood gates opened.

Sacred Games part 2 wasn't half as smart or entertaining as the first one, but it cemented the success of Netflix as the originator of 'desi originals' — shows that were funded and created with Netflix backing, as opposed to the ones that were 'bought' or 'acquired'. Richie Mehta's dark, disturbing *Delhi Crime*, based on a bunch



of committed cops in the Capital solving the Nirbhaya case, made up for the *Sacred Games* dip.

Other terrific shows — Raj & DK's spy saga *The Family Man* and Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti's wedding-planner splash-out *Made In Heaven* on Amazon Prime Video, TVF's middle-class-Mishras-ki-katha *Gullak* on Sony Liv and coaching-life-special *Kota Factory* on Netflix, legal drama *Criminal Justice* — kept us busy.

I'd go so far as to say that between Kaleen bhaiyaa from *Mirzapur* and Jeetu bhaiyya from *Kota Factory*, the case for the desi web series was won. From this year on, there would always be a fight for eyeballs between theatres and streaming platforms.

The most important thing that happened with this OTT wave was not just that we, the viewers, were now always going to be spoiled for choice, but also that there was now going to be a space for new stars to be born.

These could well be established actors who never really got their due in the movies, which are driven by big stars and plots created to assuage their egos and massage their image, but also new faces that became the ones we lived with along with the popularity of their shows.



One of the blockbusters in 2019 was Aditya Dhar's *Uri*, starring Vicky Kaushal and Yami Gautam, which kickstarted the muscular nationalist movies that have defined this era, with its *ghar mein ghus ke maarna* turning into a flag-waving mantra.

So was Hrithik Roshan's *War*, which dialled down the jingoism comparatively, but stayed determinedly on top of the India vs its enemies narrative.

Shahid Kapoor's *Kabir Singh*, a remake of the Telugu blockbuster *Arjun Reddy* starring Vijay Deverakonda, got everyone stirred up, and rightly so, with Sandeep Reddy Vanga's all-out depiction of the domineering bad boy hero and submissive heroine: the conversation is still swirling around us, and rightly so.

Zoya Akhtar's rap-ready *Gully Boy* was a swing for the director from her usual eat-the-rich problems to characters who live in Mumbai's slums, and with credible acts from Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt, gave us a film that nestles high on her CV.

Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*, starring Ayushmann Khurrana as the naive outsider who learns hard life lessons with his posting in a UP small town — the fissures of caste and class — was slammed for turning its hero into a saavarna saviour. But



it is a film whose truths cannot be denied, and for a mainstream film to go down this path was brave.

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha, directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar, starring Sonam Kapoor as a girl who likes girls doesn't proceed half as bravely as its title suggests, but it remains one of the few films that took on the subject of same-sex love. Because LGBTQi hai na. *Boy girl bahut ho gaya, thoda girl girl ho jaaye?*





2020

Pataal Lok, Panchayat and a struggling film industry

– *Shubhra Gupta*

Three months into 2020, the pandemic struck, and theatres were closed down, not just in India, but worldwide.

Funny how something as catastrophic — millions dead of an unknown virus, humans in lockdown, emerging, post-vaccine back to some kind of normalcy — already feels like history.

What it did, apart from the lingering medical problems and virus mutations that doctors are still unpacking, is to cause profound changes in our viewing habits.

Before that fateful day in March 2020, oblivious to the terrible days that were coming, Hindi



cinema's first quarter did not exactly cover itself in glory.

The year began with Om Raut's *Tanhaji*, another of the films which had Bollywood glorifying our past, and vilifying Mughal invaders. Ajay Devgn plays the valiant Maratha leader who saves his people from the evil emperor Aurangzeb's man on the ground, played by Saif Ali Khan, chewing the scenery as a slit-eyed villain, as well as, wait for it, crocodile meat.

Hitesh Kewaliya gave us a proper gay pair in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan*, played by Ayushmann Khurrana and Jitendra Kumar — their characters even share a proper kiss, gasp — trying to convince the former's conservative family about his sexual orientation. Mostly good fun, it was received well and was a box office hit.

Meghna Gulzar's *Chapaak* and Anubhav Sinha's *Thappad* were films which are 'women-oriented', and they also made money. In the first, Deepika Padukone plays an acid-attack survivor pushing back at her aggressor, and in the second, Taapsee Pannu refuses to normalise being slapped by her husband. Important films, unapologetically feminist, unapologetically message-y, yet totally watchable.

The last film before Covid shut everything shut down was Homi Adjanian's *Angrezi Medium*, starring Irrfan as the supportive father of a young woman who wants to study in one of the world's



best colleges. Tragically, it also became the film that would be the cancer-ridden actor's last: he died a month later, leaving Hindi cinema impoverished, and us bereft.

With movie halls shuttered for an unforeseen period, some films were forced to come out on OTT, but except for Anvita Dutt's *Bubbul*, Honey Trehan's *Raat Akeli Hai*, both debutant directors, and Alankrita Srivastava's *Dolly, Kitty Aur Woh Chamakten Sitare* which privileges female desire, nothing leapt off the screen.

Here are my picks of the two of the best non-mainstream films of the year: Rohena Gera's *Sir*, about an unusual relationship between a domestic worker and her employer (Tillotama Shome and Vivek Gomber), and Prateek Vats' *Eeb Alley Ooo*, an even more unusual account of a money-catcher in Delhi, played by Shardul Bharadwaj.

2020 was a terrific year for new shows.

Directed by Avinash Arun and Prosit Roy, and written by Sudip Sharma and team, *Pataal Lok* blew us away with its gritty story-telling which connects the dots between a cop and a criminal: the face-off between Jaideep Ahlawat and Abhishek Banerjee is a keeper.

TVF's *Panchayat* made its fictional village Phulera a landmark, causing urbanistas to flaunt their newly acquired rural-com vocabulary revolving



around Sachiv Ji and co, featuring Jitendra Kumar, Raghubir Yadav, Neena Gupta and a bunch of others.

Hansal Mehta's *Scam 92* gave us the Harshad Mehta story, with a stellar cast taking us back to a time when an ambitious young broker broke the Bombay stock market with his bull runs. Lead actor Pratik Gandhi has never looked back since.

Helmed by Ram Madhwani, Sushmita Sen's comeback in and as *Aarya*, homemaker-turned-steely drug runner, never losing sight of her motherly duties even in the most dangerous situations, was thoroughly enjoyable.

Anand Tiwari's *Bandish Bandits* gave us a clash between tradition and modernity, classical music ustaads and warring rockstars, and all-round superb music: a show — featuring Naseeruddin Shah, Sheeba Chadda, Ritwik Bhowmik, Shreya Chaudhary, Rajesh Tailang, Atul Kulkarni among others — about 'gharanas' and its many stakeholders, up against the age old question of what 'moving with the times' could mean, it kept us engaged.

A special mention for Neeraj Pandey's spy-saga *Special Ops*, top-lined by Kay Kay Menon, and of course, the second season of *Mirzapur*, which continues to track its characters, whose home-grown names Guddu, Golu, Munna, Sweety, Bablu deserve a separate fan base.





A small OTT series emerged as the best of 2021

– *Shubhra Gupta*

The Covid-induced lockdown resulted in shuttered theatres, production slowdown and delayed releases which were further affected by reduced footfalls because viewers were slow to return to public spaces. It impacted both 2021 and 2022, with just a handful of films which stood out over 24 months.

Inevitably, 2021 was one of the weakest years for films all over the globe, and Bollywood was no exception.

Two of the biggest films of 2021, meant to release



in March 2020, finally came out at the end of 2021. *Sooryavanshi* was the fourth edition of Rohit Shetty's cop universe starring Akshay Kumar-Ranveer Singh-Ajay Devgan, with the former leading from the front, the second following through, and the latter showing up as a taali-seeti endnote. Same old Shetty, bad Muslims, the token good Muslim, and the brave Mumbai cops going bang-bang.

Ranveer Singh's '83, directed by Kabir Khan, is a fictional account of the 1983 World Cup win at Lords. Ranveer plays Kapil Dev with conviction, managing to look and sound remarkably like him, as do the other actors playing his teammates. It's Bollywood, so can song and dance be far behind?

The film that was truly different, at least in its premise, was Abhishek Kapoor's *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, in which Ayushmann Khurrana played a muscle-bound gym bro falling for Vaani Kapoor's trans person. Gasp, was this really Bollywood? The idea is great, and both Ayushmann and Vaani do their jobs well: if only it hadn't chickened out as it goes along, stuffing itself with tropey situations and characters, it would have been quite something.



Umesh Bist's *Pagglait* (which came out on Netflix) deals with the different ways humans deal with grief: Is the young widow, played by Sanya Malhotra, as sad as she should be after her husband's untimely demise? It's sort of tonally similar to Seema Pahwa's directorial debut *Ramprasad Ki Teravi*, starring Naseeruddin Shah, Supriya Pathak, Konkona Sen Sharma, Manoj Pahwa, and Vikrant Massey, in which a large 'kunba' is shown responding to the death of the patriarch. Chamber dramas rife with family politics and secrets can make for watchable, and both these pass the test.

In the web series domain, it was Ajitpal Singh's *Tabbar* (Punjabi), on SonyLIV, which was by far the best of the year. It revolves around a family in Punjab, melding elements of the crime thriller and family drama in its gripping eight episodes, toplined by the wonderful Pavan Malhotra, ably supported by Supriya Pathak, Ranvir Shorey, Kanwaljeet Singh and others.

Anirban Bhattacharya's *Mandaar* (Bengali), an atmospheric remake of Macbeth, was an underrated gem, which deserves to be watched widely. Featuring Debashish Mondal as Macbeth, Sohini Sarkar as Lady Macbeth, Debesh Roy Chowdhury as King Duncan, and the director



as a crooked cop, it can easily claim its place as one of the best adaptations of Shakespeare's play, not just in India, but globally.

Subhash Kapoor's *Maharani* gave Huma Qureshi one of her longest-playing parts. Season one in 2021 presents her as a naive housewife pitchforked into a situation where she has to learn the rough-and-tumble of state politics in Bihar. Her chief minister husband has resigned and who does he appoint as a successor? Those familiar with the Lalu Yadav-Rabri Devi saga will know the answer, and Qureshi's Rani Bharti is still ruling, even as we speak.





Laal Singh Chaddha crashed, while Rocket Boys soared

– *Shubhra Gupta*

2022 was nearly as dismal as 2021, films-in-theatres wise.

Aamir Khan's *Laal Singh Chaddha*, his touted *Forrest Gump* remake, was inarguably one of his worst outings, in which his simple-but-wise Laal comes off as a cipher, all widened eyes and jerky dialogue. It crashed and burnt at the box office.

Just what was *Brahmastra*, produced by Karan Johar and directed by Ayan Mukherji? It went hard at all the elements of a mythological-actioner-romance-superhero saga, but ended up being nothing but a bewildering mess, with Ranbir Kapoor, Alia Bhatt, Amitabh Bachchan, with a blink-and-miss act by SRK. Heavy on



special effects, low on impact: it was meant to be a trilogy, and I'm not holding my breath.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, a fictionalised re-telling of the infamous queen of Kamathipura, with Alia Bhatt playing the lead, was one of the better films of the year, once you got past the SLB excesses of glitter-in-the-grime, and the very young Alia playing a woman coarsened by her years of experience in the brothel. Despite everything, Alia makes you believe.

Alia Bhatt's second film of the year was *Darlings*, a straight-to-streaming film on Netflix, in which she plays a young wife who pushes back against a violent husband, played by Vijay Varma. Directed by Jasmeet K Reen, and with Shefali Shah as Alia's supportive mother, and Roshan Mathews in a bit part, the film was a striking anti-patriarchy attempt, with solid performances all around.

Harshvardhan Kulkarni's *Badhaai Do* places, daringly, a lavender marriage at the centre of its narrative, and both Rajkummar Rao and Bhumi Pedekar— he is gay, she is lesbian— are very good. The rest of the film falters, but it is still a film that stands out for its subject, and the way the characters embrace their parts.

Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files*, which places the Kashmir pandit exodus from the valley after being targetted by terrorists, helped sharpen the anti-Muslim rhetoric in



Bollywood in the way it dealt both with the aggressors and their victims, freshening old wounds and opening new ones.

Of the web series that year, *Rocket Boys* and *Suzhal The Vortex* were the clear winners; *Family Man 2* returned with a bigger season than the first.

Based on the lives of Homi J Bhabha and Vikram Sarabhai, who pioneered India's space programme, which at one point was the cynosure of all eyes, including the scientists in the US and USSR, the aptly named *Rocket Boys* is a well-produced, well-told show. Created by Nikhil Advani, directed by Abhay Pannu and produced by Siddharth Roy Kapur, it features Jim Sarbh and Ishwak Singh as Bhabha and Sarabhai respectively, and both were terrific, as was the show.

Suzhal The Vortex (Tamil), created and written by Pushkar and Gayathri, suffused its eight episodes with stinging small town secrets, local myths, religious fervour, missing girls and childhood trauma, turning it into a potent thriller.

Family Man Season 2 was sharper than the first by giving ace agent Manoj Bajpayee's Srikanth Varma a worthy adversary in the shape of Samantha Ruth Prabhu's fierce Sri Lankan rebel Rajji. Between the two of them and Srikanth's faithful number two, Sharib Hashmi, this season made sure we stayed glued all through its nine episodes.





2023

The year of Shah Rukh Khan

– *Shubhra Gupta*

To say that 2023 was the year of SRK is a no-brainer. It was also the year that Bollywood proved that it wasn't going to go under the South juggernaut which had nearly steamrolled over it in the past two years, with *Kantara*, *RRR* and *KGF*, coasting on their larger-than-life computer-graphics-heavy tales.

January began with *Pathaan*, in which we were asked to tighten our seat belts: '*kursi ki peti*' has never been as sexy. The YRF-produced, Sidharth Anand-directed spy actioner which touched down on global hotspots before whizzing off to the next destination delivered mad spoofy silly fun.



Atlee's *Jawan* was SRK basically showing us everything he'd got, in a father-and-son double role. It was a massy masala movie in the Atlee mould, which meant that at every turn you have scenes-and-dialogues meant for taalis-and-seetis. And of course, there was that line: bete ko haath lagaane se pehle, which brought the house down.

It felt almost anti-climactic that SRK's third film of 2023, Rajkumar Hirani's *Dunki* turned out to be such a clunker. Given the star's ascendancy, and the director's penchant for giving us films that make us laugh and cry, this tracking-the-dunkey-route-to-the-promised-land should have been much better than it turned out to be.

Sunny Deol returned to *Gadar* territory, and the sequel, also by director Anil Sharma, gives us a middle-aged Tara Singh, living happily with his beloved wife Sakeena, with a strapping son who goes missing. So it's back to bashing bad Pakistani generals, with young 'un losing his heart to a pretty Pakistani girl : and of course it's back to Sunny and his dhai kilo ka haath winning the battle.

Karan Johar's *Rocky and Rani Ki Prem Kahani* got him back to his comfort zone of the rom com, with Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt playing the-Punjabi munda-and-the-Bengali-girl who fall for each other, who then have to win their



respective families over. What jhumka, went Alia, and everyone swooned.

The film that had moviegoers deeply divided was Sandeep Reddy Vanga's *Animal*, starring Ranbir Kapoor with a violent guy with serious daddy issues, said daddy being Anil Kapoor. That Vanga has the ability to carry a scene is no dispute. That Ranbir has the ability to get into the skin of the character is in no dispute either. Zero surprises then that the film which gave its leading man the sort of animalistic tendencies which would put real animals to shame turned out to be one of the biggest hits of the year.

The two best series of the year were Vikramaditya Motwane's sparkling *Jubilee*, which takes us back to the beginnings of the Bombay film industry, starring Prosenjit Chatterjee, Aparshakti Khurrana, Aditi Rao Hydari, Ram Kapoor among others; and Sudip Sharma-Randeep Jha's *Kohrra*, a Punjab-set murder mystery which gave us actors — Suvinder Vicky, Barun Sobti, Manish Chaudhuri, Varun Badola and others — who looked as if they had sprung from the soil, and a story that kept us in its grip right till the very end.





2024 was saved by horror comedies, small films and OTT

– *Shubhra Gupta*

2024 was mostly meh for mainstream Bollywood.

If it hadn't been for Allu Arjun and his second go-round in *Pushpa 2*, bigger and louder than the first part, roaring in Telugu, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Bengali, the biggies wouldn't have been able to save any face.

Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3, directed by Anees Bazmi, forgot that part one had given us a proper little horror-com-verse, much before *Stree* swam up on the horizon. The combined star power of Kartik Aryan and the ladies, Tripti Dimri, Madhuri Dixit and Tabu could do nothing to save the film, nor



could our fave bhootni Monjulika.

Singham Again was every-edition-of-Singham-till-then, a signal that the Rohit Shetty cop universe was getting tired and tiresome. An array of stars, Ajay Devgn as the eponymous hero, new addition to baddie-land Arjun Kapoor, joker-of-the-pack Ranveer Singh, Kareena Kapoor Khan, and Deepika Padukone as the long-legged lethal Lady Singham, turn up, to not much avail.

The two films which worked at the box office stuck to their horror-comedy tropes, with Amar Kaushik's *Stree 2*, toplining Shraddha Kapoor and her magical choti, with a still-struck-by-her charms Rajkummar Rao, accompanied by his old pals from the first film, Aparshakti Khurrana, Abhishek Banerjee and Pankaj Tripathi.

Maddock Films, the producers of *Stree 2*, struck gold with Aditya Sarpotdar's *Munjya*, another supernatural tale featuring Abhay Verma and Suhas Joshi as a grandson-grandmother combine who fight the might of an evil spirit. It wasn't perfect, but the fresh ensemble and the lovely Konkan locations created welcome freshness.

Kiran Rao's *Laapata Ladies* conjured up a grounded fairy-tale, giving us a tale of swapped brides and confused spouses, mildly-corrupt-but-good-hearted-cops, and middle-aged-women who came to the rescue. It did well enough for the



kind of film it was, in theatres, and got a second wind when it dropped on Netflix.

Two film festival winners won our hearts fair and square. Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light* won the grand pix in Cannes, the first Indian film to have done so in thirty years, with all-round wonderful performances from Kani Kusruti, Divya Prabah, Chhaya Kadam (also in *Laapata Ladies*) and Hridu Haroon.

Shuchi Talalti's *Girls Will Be Girls* was a terrific coming-of-age film. Each character has a growth arc, not just the teenaged Mira, played by Preeti Panigrahi, but also her mother, played by Kani Kusruti. There really is no right or wrong age to learn who you really are; the young boy, played by Kesav Binoy Kiron, who becomes the point of conflict between the mother and daughter, also learns some life lessons.

Diljit Dosanjh shone in *Amar Singh Chamkila*, a biopic directed by a returning-to-form Imtiaz Ali, on the life of the real-life Dalit folk singer from Punjab whose bawdy lyrics made him both popular and looked-down-up, depending upon who you listened to. Dosanjh and Parineeti Chopra, so good as his singer-companion-wife, sparkle in their scenes, making this one of the best films of 2024.

Nikhil Nagesh Bhat's *Kill*, with Lakshya facing



off against Raghav Juyal and his co, was nothing but a South Korean slash-burn-kill kinda flick, in which Lakshya's patriotic soldier is up against an army of thugs, with the girl he loves, played by Tanya Maniktala, in between. Lots of hacked limbs, lots of blood, lots of dead people.

The best shows of 2024 were Richie Mehta's *Poacher*, with Nimisha Sajayan, Roshan Mathew, Dibyendu Bhattacharya, Kani Kusruti tracking a poaching ring whose tentacles reached far-away markets and collectors willing to pay good money for ivory wrenched from mighty tuskers.

Jai Mehta's *Lootere*, bristling with Somalian pirates and Ukrainian containers, is a high-octane hijack drama on the high-seas, featuring Rajat Kapoor as the valiant captain of the ship and Vivek Gomber as a slippery businessman, made it an enjoyable actioner.

Anubhav Sinha's *IC 814*, based on the Kandahar hijack, with Vijay Varma in a stellar role as the resilient captain of the plane, along with Naseruddin Shah, Pankaj Kapur, Arvind Swamy—seen after a long gap in a Hindi project—Kumud Mishra, Manoj Pahwa, was a gripping drama all the way through.





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