

# cinema



\* Veteran actor Rajesh Khanna gestures as he talks to the media at the Venetian Hotel after receiving his lifetime achievement award at the 10th International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) awards in Macau on June 13, 2009.



## The first Indian superstar

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**R**ajesh Khanna was not an actor. He was a star, a superstar at that, the first ever that India knew. While Raj Kapoor was Chaplinesque, an adorable tramp who won hearts through his comic gestures, Khanna was dashing, debonair and a darling whom women were willing to die for.

He was a lover boy, who breathed romance into the way he looked, smiled and spoke. I really wonder whether men like Dev Anand and Shammi Kapoor were ever rivals to Khanna.

In any case, Khanna emerged when Dev and Shammi were past their prime, and their best movies were behind them.

Khanna, whom his family and friends endearingly called Kaka, ruled Bollywood in the early 1970s, helping producers get one hit after another.

Fifteen consecutive films of his boosted the box-office. And then came seven flops, one after another, which virtually stripped Kaka of his celebrated 'guru kurta' (an ethnic shirt), and that boyish smile.

Admittedly, Rajesh Khanna was never as popular as Amitabh Bachchan was later, and we have seen this. When Bachchan was critically ill, even not so critically ill, the whole country seemed to pray for his recovery. Now recently, when Khanna was in hospital and sick, there was hardly that kind of mass sorrow which one saw during Bachchan's bouts of illness.

But then, I wonder whether Bachchan ever got that kind of female attention which Khanna did. Women swooned over Khanna, inked passionate letters in blood and married themselves to his photographs.

Those were crazy times, when cinema stars evoked delirious response in their admirers. There was mass hysteria, his distinct hair-style and kurta adding to his allure. (Of course, this sort of mass adulation has been common in southern India, particularly Tamil Nadu.)

His co-star, Mumtaz, remembers one night in Madras (then), when hundreds of women gathered outside a hotel lobby to catch a glimpse of the star. In Calcutta (then), the police refused permission for a shoot of *Amar Prem* on the Howrah Bridge (one of the most famous landmarks in the city) as they feared that the structure could collapse under the weight of the thousands of fans who would throng the place. It could then have been a case of the Howrah (not London) Bridge falling down.

Born in Amritsar in 1942, Rajesh Khanna was named Jatin, and he grew up in a Mumbai suburb, adopted by a couple who were relatives of his biological parents. He went to school and college with Ravi Kapoor, who was to later become Bollywood actor Jeetendra. Khanna dabbled in theatre at college, and debuted in Chetan Anand's *Aakhri Khat* in the mid-1960s. Under contract with United Producers, he acted in several movies till *Aradhana* came in 1969, which pushed him to superstardom.

*Aradhana*, where Khanna was paired with Sharmila Tagore, actually endeared him to

audiences in no small way. In a dual role — both as Air Force officers — Khanna played the romantic hero as he did the more serious tragic guy. If this film was the beginning of a very lucrative on-screen relationship with Sharmila Tagore and playback singer Kishore Kumar, it also signalled the start of his meteoric rise. One remembers songs such as *Mere Sapnon Ki Rani* (remember the scene where he is in a Jeep travelling next to a toy train carrying Tagore) and the lustful *Roop Tera Mastana*.

Though he essayed a range of characters — a terminally ill man in *Anand* (where perhaps one noticed Bachchan for the first time as a concerned friend and doctor helplessly watching his best pal die of cancer), a comic, canny chef in *Bawarchi*, an unhappy husband in *Amar Prem* (in love with a courtesan) and a psychiatric patient in *Khamoshi* — it is very difficult to label him a great performer. He may have donned many avatars, but he firmly remained Mr Khanna on the screen. There was no way anybody could take away that image from him. He would not let them do that.

Khanna was also hero to heroines like Mumtaz, who was perhaps secretly in love with him, even sharing his neighbourhood space till she understood that he would never be hers. I still remember their *Dushman* for its novel plot, where the judge sentences Khanna's Surjit Singh, a truck driver, to serve the family of the man he kills. The lead pair's on-screen chemistry was electric and did convey a certain attraction between them away from the sets.

He also sparkled with Asha Parekh (in *Kati*

*Patang* with its haunting story and songs) and Hema Malini (*Andaz*, whose success was attributed to Rajesh's brief appearance coming as the film did during the actor's boom time).

Sadly, Khanna's fall came as quickly as his rise. Just months after he had been playing to packed houses came terrible B grade movies like *Wafaa* and *Gora*. Rishi Kapoor eclipsed him as the new lover boy.

Kapoor must have felt a sense of revengeful fulfilment. Kapoor and Dimple Kapadia had fallen in love on the set of *Bobby*, and had even got engaged, when one night, Mr Khanna came along, took the girl to a seashore and wooed her to such an unimaginable high that she even allowed him to take off the ring and throw it into waves!

Khanna's life was bohemian all right. Early in his career, he scandalised the film fraternity by living with Anju Mahendru, for seven years. And then came Dimple, who was just 16 and whose bikini-clad appearance in *Bobby* created a storm fiercer than Sharmila's in *An Evening in Paris*. Rajesh was 11 years older to Dimple. They married, had two daughters, and divorced in 1984, though not formally. Dimple spends a lot of time with him today.

Khanna dabbled in politics in the early 1990s, but like Bachchan, he hardly made a mark. However, unlike Bachchan, Khanna was not prudent or lucky enough to keep his role in cinema glowing even into his later years.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran may be contacted at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com))