

Aditya Breaks his Silence

Filmfare – April 1996 (on winning the filmfare award for 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge')

Movies have been his school, his playground. As far back as you can remember, Aditya Chopra, has been a watcher, scurrying to the cinema halls to see every new release, preferably on the first day itself. Any image that moves on the screen tickles his appetite for more. When he was a kid, like Oliver Twist, Aditya Chopra, has been a watcher, he would ask for more.

The first-born son of Yash and Pam Chopra is also a stickler when it comes to following the principles he believes in. He refuses to compromise his convictions. Perhaps that accounts for the honesty of thought in his debut feature, Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, which evidently sprung from his steady regard for unsullied family values.

Although you have known Aditya aka Adi even since he was a sprightly teenager, the 24-year-old has avoided sitting himself down for a formal interview. Even if you've threatened him, periodically, that you'll quote his everyday statements anyway, he's been as elusive as the neighbourhood kid who rings the doorbell and bolts from the spot. On the Filmfare Awards night - following his triple triumph with trophies for the Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Dialogue - he senses that you'd feel disappointed if he doesn't show up for the post-function photo shoot. Just for that, he turns up, whizzes before the eye of the still camera. And a few days later, agrees to a conversation conducted in a mattress-lined ante-room of the Chopras' Juhu bungalow.

Here then is a replay of the Q and A with the director who, without doubt, is the hottest property in show town:

First of all, let me ask you why have you shied away from interviews?

I don't know. I probably just want to stay away from the media as far as possible. A film should speak for itself. And now that my film has spoken so well for me, I can't better that. Basically, I'm shy. I'm media-shy definitely.

What is your first distinct memory of the movies?

That's very difficult for me to pin-point today. I'm told that I would hang out on the sets of Kabhi Kabhie... I must have been four then... with a viewfinder. Usually, shootings are considered to be quite boring but I would love every minute of the experience... subconsciously maybe those days have stayed with me.

This may sound weird but till I was 10-years-old, I thought that everyone... the entire world... did nothing but make films. I was sure that film-making was the only profession in the world. I was quite startled that some of my friend's fathers were into business... into making iron and steel etc. etc. I must have been quite heavily into films to think that way. My brother, Uday, who is one-and-a-half-years younger than me was brought up in the same environment... but he wasn't as obsessive about the movies as I was.

I don't remember seeing the camera for the first time or anything like that. I just remember the movies. It didn't matter who was acting in a movie or who had directed it. The Hindi feature film per se was the biggest high for me.

At times, haven't you felt that some of the films are senseless... that they're foolish?

No, no, not at all. Frankly till a certain age, I liked every film. I couldn't tell the good from the bad. It was only when I was 14 or 15 that I could pass any sort of judgement. I actually hated one film I saw. And the first time I realised that a film could be good was when I saw Deewar. After that I became somewhat more discerning, I started noticing films more closely.

Influences on me

- My Parents

...and on my work

- Raj Kapoor
- Sooraj Barjatiya
- Mani Ratnam

What were you like as a school kid?

I was a sports fanatic. I'd play football and every game I could handle. I wasn't a bad student though, I always ranked among the top 10. I think I was a balanced kid - when I had to study, I would concentrate on my text books with all my heart. And during the vacant hours I'd read books... fiction books which narrated stories with some craft and style... like the books of Jeffrey Archer,

Sidney Sheldon and Ayn Rand. Earlier, of course, I was crazy about Enid Blyton's Famous Five and the Hardy Boys series.

I believe you wrote a script revolving around a bank robbery when you were in the fourth standard in school?

Oh that! I wasn't in the fourth standard... I think I was in the seventh standard. I must have been 11 or 12 then. It wasn't a full-blooded script as such, it was an attempt at a thriller about a man who kills someone and loses his memory. And then he becomes a police officer and is assigned to investigate the murder he has committed himself (Laughs). It was just an attempt to form some sort of a storyline. And who knows? Perhaps, I could still make it into a film someday...

Have you ever written any short stories?

Not really. Occasionally, I've just jotted down some points. Often, ideas just float around in my head. Physically, the first time I actually got down to writing was with Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. I never thought I could actually sit down and write but I did.

Earlier, I'd merely suggest a story idea to dad. The germ of Darr came from Dead Calm, an Australian film about an obsessed lover. I thought such an idea would lend itself to an interesting film... the kind of film which hadn't been made by dad before. Only the climax which was set on the sea in Dead Calm was similar in Darr... apart from that, everything else was different.

Your father has seen extreme highs and lows with success and failure. Were you affected when the Yash Chopra banner was going through a low phase?

I was too much of a kid when Silsila, Mashaal and Faasle didn't do well. As a child, I was cushioned against the hard blows. Our lifestyle didn't change - we'd still go out on vacations, we'd eat the same kind of food and wear the same kind of clothes. I knew that dad was in a depressed frame of mind but he didn't let Uday and me get affected by what he was going through. Mum handled the situation beautifully.

However, I was directly affected when Lamhe didn't do well commercially. It was the first film I'd worked on... assisted on from scratch. Before that, I'd come into Chandni only halfway through. Those days, Lamhe was the film closest to my heart. When it bombed, it shook us up a lot. Perhaps that's why the success of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge did not send me on a great big high... I did not get swayed because I know that even today a Lamhe is possible.

Have you become aware of the negative aspects of the film industry... of the fakeness and the put-on attitudes?

A while ago, I didn't believe this was true of the film industry at all. I thought film people were essentially good. But when I came in contact with the film industry, I did sense its negative aspects... which is true of every field. Fortunately, I've worked only with good, positive people. I've consciously tried to keep away from the negative side. I don't socialise much. If I don't come to know the industry too closely, it's just as well. Most of my close friends are from outside the industry... and I think it works better that way.

Directors often get emotionally involved with their artistes. Have you found this a problem?

It helps if you don't get emotionally involved. If you get too close to your artistes... to anyone as a matter of fact in your day-to-day work... you may realise that you don't like them. And I can't work with people I don't like. That's why I've chosen not to get too close.

Aren't you pretty close to Shah Rukh Khan?

I can't claim to be his best friend. But I can sense that there is a mutual respect for each other's work... which is a good thing.

Tell me, did you or your parents have any other career options for you?

No, my decision to be associated with the movies was taken very, very early. I didn't have even half-a-doubt that I would become a film-maker. Mum was keen that I should go abroad for further studies... in business management or whatever. But since I was sure that it was Hindi films for me, I felt the years abroad would have made me somewhat

westernised. That stint would have removed me from the Indian way of thinking which I wanted to hold on to at any cost.

What some words mean to me...

- Love... *Forever*
- Sex... *Passion*
- Possessive... *A part of Love*
- Lust... *A Basic Instinct*
- Success... *Hardwork*
- Failure... *Fear*
- Purity... *Mother's Love*
- Evil... *Jealously*
- Life... *Love*
- Death... *Inevitable*

But aren't you a bit westernised?

Not at all... well maybe I'm a blend. Like my film... or the character of Raj... my exterior may seem westernised, but my inner thoughts and beliefs are absolutely Indian.

Would you say that you cut your teeth by assisting on Lamhe and Darr?

As I said, I came in half-way through Chandni. Gradually, I became well-versed with what goes on. I was also involved in one major schedule of Aaina. I didn't concentrate on the technical side of things though. Direction can't be taught, you have to acquire whatever you can by observing the entire process of film-making on the sets.

So far, I've paid more attention on character development and performances. I have to become more proficient in camera angles and the lenses which must be used for particular shots.

After the apprenticeship, were you ready or did you have to be goaded to direct a film independently?

I had to be goaded. Because I'm lazy, I don't like working. I have to be pushed. I guess the fact that I'd nurtured the idea of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge for two to three years, set me off on the road.

The original intention was to do a love story as an English language film. I wanted to show the international audience that India isn't a country of snake-charmers. Rather I wanted to acquaint them with how we Indians live, love, think and react today. Maybe I could still do this kind of international project someday.

After Darr, I was trying to find a story idea for dad. When I told him the basic premise of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, he didn't react immediately. But while I was narrating it to him, the visuals started evolving in my mind... so I thought, okay I'll give the story a shot myself. Something about it excited me. I felt it could be an absorbing love story through which I could say a few things that I wanted to.

What are the few things that you wanted to say?

The primary aim was to make a very honest love story... a love story that would make it at the box office. I wanted to make a film which I would enjoy seeing. In that way I was being selfish - I was making a film for myself. A wholesome film which I wouldn't mind seeing again and again.

On a broader level, I was also trying to get something out of my system. I'd be quite troubled while watching those love stories in which the boy and the girl elope. I'd wonder how they can just cut themselves off from their parents who've done so much for them. How can they be so callous? They have no right to break the hearts of their parents. I wanted to say that if your love is strong enough, then you will come together... your parents will be convinced about your love ultimately.

I also wanted to comment on the position of the girl in Indian households. In fact, I'm especially proud of the scene between the girl and her mother. I think it describes the situation that Indian women are caught in very clearly. We may be in the 1990s but there are certain things about the Indian family structure that haven't changed at all.

I believe to start with, your dad felt that the mother-and-daughter scene slackened the pace of the film.

It was like this. When I wrote the complete scene and narrated it to my parents and some of the unit members, it was felt that it was a little long and that it would drag. But I shot it the way it was conceived... if it had slowed down the pace, maybe I would have cut out a few lines of dialogue. In fact, quite a few of the scenes were long... I was scared that they might bore the audience. They could have become restless... they could have hooted.

Yes...go on.

Like it was touch-and-go in the case of Shah Rukh's monologue towards the end which I felt was the base of the film. In the last reel, there's just this one man talking. If anyone in the audience had made a noise, the entire scene would have crumbled. But at the first show in the theatre, it was watched in pin-drop silence. And I knew we were through, I knew we had a winner.

But there were some abruptly brief scenes in the film. For instance, Shah Rukh's night out in the Punjab village with Parmeet Sethi and the other boys.

I was aware that the film was quite long. So I didn't want to deviate too much from the main plot. As a result, there were some brief, almost abrupt scenes. I also didn't want to create the character of a typical villain. I just wanted him to be a typical MCP... and not a pitch-black, nostril-flaring villain.

Memorable books...

- Ayn Rand's
- *The Fountainhead*
- Jeffery Archer's
- *Kane & Abel*
- John Grisham's
- *The Firm*

How much difference was there in the film's conceptualisation and final execution?

It turned out to be exactly the way it had been conceptualised... be it the scenes set in London's Trafalgar Square or in Punjab's *sarson ke khet*. Normally, things can change when you get down to the nitty gritty of shooting. Yet, everything seemed to fall into place at the locations and at the studio. Somebody up there was

making it go all-right for me.

What do you have to say about the controversy over the script of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge... following Honey Irani's statements that she was denied credit?

I can answer that question only by saying that ever since I can remember the only thing I ever wanted out of life was to make films... the dream was to make films which were commercially successful and critically acclaimed. But the most important part of the dream was the sense of belonging, the feeling of being part of a group of wonderfully talented people.

Today after the success and appreciation of my film, I should feel that the dream has come true. But I don't. Because there is a doubt about my honesty, integrity and capabilities. As I told you, I've always believed that one's work should speak for oneself. So, I think I'll have to start all over again from the beginning - try and work harder, try and write a better

script, make a better film and hope that it will meet with this kind of success and appreciation again. Hopefully then, there won't be any doubts left. Hopefully then, I'll feel that I belong here. Believe me, that's my honest response to your question... and that's all I will ever say on the subject.

Okay... were Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol your first choices for the roles of Raj and Simran?

Initially, I was keen to do the film with newcomers. But I sensed that the key scenes called for a high level of performance. Being new myself, perhaps I couldn't have extracted the kind of performances I needed. Kajol was the natural choice - she's the best... her potential hadn't been sufficiently tapped... I feel it still hasn't been tapped enough.

As for Shah Rukh, he hadn't done a pukka love story before. His negative image even helped me. To start with, the audience feels unsure about the boy - is he a haraami sort of fellow, a mischievous guy? The audience's trust in him was won slowly but surely as the story unfolded.

How did you handle your two lead players?

Their scenes and their characterisations were clearly defined. I just tried to create the right ambience for them... and let them be. I just held the reins in my hand, controlling them, pulling and pushing them according to the requirements of the scenes.

Often, both of them went beyond the script and the direction. I thought Kajol was brilliant in the scenes with Faridaji and Amrishji and also in that close-up when she meets Anupam. And Shah Rukh was outstanding in the climax... the bridge scene where he has to convey a sense of pain and anguish. Actually, I can't really be objective... I feel close to all the scenes.

My memorable foreign films

- It's a wonderful Life
- Odd Couple
- The Godfather - I and II
- Die Hard
- When Harry met Sally
- A Fish called Wanda
- Cinema Paradiso
- Goodfellas
- E.T.
- Schindler's List

A romance was suggested between Anupam Kher and Himani Shivpuri. But why was that nipped in the bud?

It was just a cute flirtation. If I had carried it forward, it would have distracted the audience's attention again from the main plot. It wouldn't have been correct to intrude in the romance between Raj and Simran. I did want Himaniji to be part of the group in the last shot, when the train is pulling out of the station. But her husband had passed away and she couldn't be there. If she was present at the schedule, I would have thought about this angle a bit more. It could have been a light touch at the end.

After Hum Aapke... and Dilwale Dulhania... won't elaborate wedding and engagement scenes become a staple of the Hindi movies?

I did not imitate Hum Aapke... Whatever I've shown was dictated by the script. The shaadi backgrounds in both the films were integral to the storylines. It was to catch the feeling of festivity, of celebration. After Hum Aapke... and Dilwale Dulhania, it has been understood that you don't always need to have plenty of action and a frantic pace. If I believe in what I'm saying then so will the audience.

You have stressed the sanctity of the family unit. But is that feasible in this day and age when the joint family structure is splintering?

I think family oneness is the essence of being Indian. To preserve the family unit isn't something rigid, regressive or backward at all. In fact, the west should learn a lesson from our family system. If there has been a splintering of the structure, I would say that these are exceptions to the rule. By and large, a solid family background is the base of every individual in our society. Also, you don't have to live together to feel close to one another. I would say that emotional togetherness and the respect for one's elders in India make us special.

You've touched upon the issue of the Indian settled abroad. Was this deliberate?

No, it wasn't deliberate. I wanted to create the character of a rather rigid father - to enhance his rigidity, I felt that the character of Amrishji could be shown to be far away from his roots. In a sense, he is a displaced person and yet his outlook is very stubborn. Without intending to, I touched upon the issue of the major generation gap that exists between Indian immigrants and their children.

Have you used any moments from your own life in the film?

There's nothing from my life in Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. But given the situations in the story, I would have reacted just the way Raj did. I put myself completely into the character.

Have you known a Simran?

(Laughs) No! Simran is like a collection of different girls. I've been very lucky to have close friends who are girls. Through them I've learnt how a girl reacts, behaves and thinks. Simran is also a little bit like what I'd want in a girl... how I think she should be. What am I saying? Forget this... please.

Don't get coy now. You tell the entire nation to "Come... fall in love." But have you ever fallen in love?

(Blushes cherry-red) Of course, I have... when I was in the third standard! I fell in love with a classmate because I saw her crying. She wasn't very lovely or anything like that... but I wanted to rush out to her and be nice to her. I felt this is what love is all about. Today, I'm still waiting to define love... to understand it fully.

My memorable Indian films

- Aawara (1951)
- Mother India (1957)
- Mughal-e-Azam (1960)
- Ganga Jamuna (1961)
- Sangam (1964)
- Teesri Manzil (1966)
- Anand (1970)
- Johny Mera Naam (1970)
- Mera Gaon Mera Desh (1971)
- Bobby (1973)
- Chupke Chupke (1975)
- Deewar (1975)
- Kabhi Kabhie (1976)
- Amar Akbar Anthony (1977)
which I must have seen 25-30 times
- Hum Kisise Kum Nahin (1977)
- Karz (1980)
- Masoom (1983)
- Nayakan (1988)
- Maine Pyaar Kiya (1989)
- Parinda (1989)
- Hum Aapke Hain Koun...! (1994)

So when will you get married?

Not for a very long time. What is this? What are you asking me? See, I'll get married when I meet a girl I want to spend the rest of my life with.

Would you go through all that Raj did?

Absolutely... if I love the girl to the extent that Raj did.

You haven't fallen in love to that extent yet?

Not really.

So what does love mean to you today?

(After a long pause... a half-smile) Let me see if I can put it in words... Hmm... love is the emotion when you feel for and respect a person so much that you put that person above everyone else. According to me, respect is the most crucial part of love.

What do you feel about the sexual permissiveness of the '90s?

(Blushing violently again) Sex is there... it's on everyone's mind. You just have to know when to exercise self-control and not take advantage of the other person.

That people talk about sex, that it has come out into the open is a good thing. Mercifully, we aren't as repressed as we used to be. But when the talk becomes vulgar and excessive, I don't approve of it.

Colors I immediately associate with certain films

- Blue - Cape Fear and Jaws
- Purple - The Godfather
- Red - Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!
- Orange - Purab Aur Paschim
- Brown - Mother India and Lawrence of Arabia
- White - Chandni
- Black - Parinda
- Green - Lamhe
- Pink - My Fair Lady
- Yellow - Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge

After a mega-success, another director would have announced his next project quickly. Why are you resting on your laurels?

I'm still trying to recover from Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. I have to get it totally out of my system. If it still lingers in my mind, I'll end up merely making it all over again. I want to start afresh... and that moment could come next week, next month or next year.

Finally... what do the three Fimfare Awards mean to you?

I feel good, great. But also a bit scared, I don't know if I'll be able to live up to the higher expectations from me now on. The maximum satisfaction comes, of course,

with box office success. And after that if you win awards, then you can't possibly ask for more.

Aditya Speaks

Filmfare March 1998 (on winning the Filmfare award for the best dialogue for 'Dil To Pagal Hai')

Frankly, dialogue is the toughest department of film-making for me. It's a pain, I did the dialogue of Dil To Pagal Hai because I had no choice, because I couldn't find a writer who could express what we wanted to say in words. So in a way, I became a dialogue writer by default.

In both Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge and Dil To Pagal Hai, there was a conscious effort to be natural-by which I mean the attempt was to avoid theatricality, exaggeration and larger-than-life drama. The attempt was to use a modern, everybody lingo. Within those parameters, I tried to convey the various thoughts to the best of my ability. I made a determined effort to be grammatically correct and at the same time be colloquial. Probably, I could succeed in bringing a conversational feel because the characters of Dil To Pagal Hai were modern and contemporary. I certainly wouldn't be able to handle the dialogue of a period film or even achieve the lehza of characters based in Aligarh or Lucknow.

I cannot imagine ever writing dialogue like Javed Akhtar or Gulzar. I certainly can't reach their level. If I were to even try to write in Urdu, I'm sure I'd fail miserably. I can't weave a line.

I try to rely instead on the strength of a thought... a thought that will connect with the audience, touch them, make them laugh or react.

I feel I'm at home with characters who are somewhat like me or like characters I've known and met. Then I can be less awkward about the heaviness in the lines. The simplicity and that quiet flow should emerge from the scene.

I think what has been perhaps liked in Dil To Pagal Hai are the thoughts which have been conveyed simply. For instance, the thought about the difference between friendship and love.

This interview appeared in the March 1998 issue of Filmfare.