

RAJ KAPOOR

The Politics of Love

1924–1988

In a scene I like from the film *Boot Polish*, a 1954 Raj Kapoor production about growing up in the Bombay slums, a brother and sister are begging on a train, pretending to be disabled, when a shock sighting makes the boy forget his job of being blind. Isn't that shabby man dozing in a corner, like any other spent commuter, the legendary Raj Kapoor? His younger sister scoffs. "Everyone looks like Raj Kapoor these days," she says as they scoot on.

In life, Raj Kapoor was a compulsive seducer, a habit that made him a scene-stealer as an actor and effective as a director, persuading cast and crew to do his bidding. Yet as the wink of a cameo in *Boot Polish* hints, he was keenly aware of the distance between his celebrated Everyman persona and his actual, everyday self. "Raj Kapoor was just an image," he would say in his seventies, "a carcass of flesh and bones." He'd been acting since early childhood, and the duty of rising to screen-hero dimensions must, by then, have felt like something of a chore.

But the brass tacks of making movies never did. Chasing the next, better idea for a film was a singular obsession in a directorial career that extended from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s. One of his sons, the actor Rishi Kapoor, recalls that growing up, "from morning to night, his only conversation, whatever you spoke to him about, was cinema. You talked to him about food—he had great passion for good food—it goes down to cinema when he starts to talk. Any topic led to cinema. And only his own cinema." Kapoor's command

over the art that enthralled him produced some of the most watched films, anywhere, in the history of the medium.

Hindi cinema is so popular these days that we forget it once wasn't. Raj Kapoor didn't just make films: he made the mainstream Indian film audience, before the term "Bollywood" was even a glint in a marketer's eye. Which is not to say he didn't also make flops; two of his favorite films tanked—though he loved them a little more, he knew, because audiences loved them less. Yet when he hit, he hit big, by bringing romance, sexuality, song, and soul to Indian socialism in its heyday.

The world of Hindi film, **Satyajit Ray (47)** once wrote, was "a synthetic, non-existent society [where] one can speak of credibility only within the norms of this make-believe world." Yet as both left- and right-leaning artists understood, Hindi film was also a means of education and exposure in a country where the literacy rate at Independence was 18 percent. Many village schools were bad, if they existed at all; unread pamphlets became paper airplanes. So an important vehicle of education (religious, cultural, and political) was an actual vehicle: a truck juddering from village to village with a projector and a rolled-up film screen, to be erected on a maidan, or field.

Kapoor's own family were landowners in Punjab, from a merchant caste, the Khatri. Not least because of him, Khatri came to dominate Bombay's film industry and made Punjabi song and dance a stand-in for all-India entertainment. But the vision Kapoor staged and sang was not provincial; it was recognizably Nehru's India, featuring an urbanizing, modernizing milieu. Behind his yearning, moist-eyed heroines and sometimes slapstick comedy was often a cheerful nagging that promises made to the poor in advance of Independence should be recouped.

Kapoor had a keen eye for tiny deprivations that dashed the spirits of the unprivileged. In another moment from *Boot Polish*, the camera pans down a long line of people waiting for rations. It's a glimpse of a country's have-nots, united in need. Suddenly, though, the rain starts, and the class of need divides again: there are those who pull out umbrellas, and those who get thoroughly drenched. The humiliation of the poorest makes you cringe. Yet this being a Raj Kapoor film, it also makes you laugh, and soon enough there's a really good song.

Kapoor's was an ideology, if one can call it that, of emotionalism and entertainment. He sugared his social concerns with sauciness and music and melodrama; the solutions he posited to a collective, post-Independence let-down had little to do with politics and a lot to do with love. As much as that

tendency frustrated his more political collaborators, it would introduce Indian cinema to the world and lay the groundwork for Bollywood, India's greatest cultural ambassador after Gandhi—a considerable achievement, if an ambivalent one. How did he pull it off? Raj Kapoor didn't just have uncanny comic timing; he had historic timing, too, which would bring him, in socialist and Communist countries, followings bigger than those of his fan Jawaharlal Nehru.

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Although Kapoor typically played poor, often in Chaplinesque style, he was born to spanking artistic advantage. His father, Prithviraj, was a renowned stage actor who starred in India's first talkie, *Alam Ara*, in 1931. Today, we're often dismissive of the sixteen years of Indian cinema stretching from that groundbreaking film to Independence, as if it consisted only of village romances, "mythologicals" about gods, or swashbuckling Douglas Fairbanks-style fare. As if the cinema of a new India needed itself to be bracingly new. In fact, many Indian filmmakers and actors of the 1930s, Prithviraj included, were devoted to social concerns, among them the criticism of untouchability. There was even a woman director, now forgotten, Jaddanbai, the mother of the legendary Nargis, who would become Raj Kapoor's most famous costar.

Prithviraj and his wife were living in Peshawar when Raj was born, but his childhood was spent between Calcutta and Bombay, where Prithviraj acted and, in the 1940s, helped found the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The collective sought to use theater for progressive political aims, from addressing famine to supporting the nationalist Quit India movement. It took inspiration from a wide range of sources, including Soviet silent cinema, Italian neorealism, and Charlie Chaplin. Prithviraj's eldest son drank it all in, often in greasepaint, treading the boards.

His father permitted him his first stage role when he was five. "It was then that the whole thing just entered me," he recalled, "and I could not think of anything except belonging to the world of show business." His first film role came five years later. His looks were Pathan (pale skin and striking blue eyes), but cuddly rather than chiseled. The screen effect, a slightly unplaceable comeliness, later underwrote his international appeal. A precocious teacher's pet and self-described "pampered brat," he was also widely admired for his singing and dancing. Yet in adolescence, cherubic plumpness turned to fat. Bullied despite (or because of) his prettiness, he was initiated into the hard childhood truth that more tearful protests only bring on

more brutal beatings. "So instead I put on the mask of a joker by reacting as though I thoroughly enjoyed being made the butt of practical jokes," he later said. "Indeed, I even took this a step further by inventing jokes on myself, which would make my colleagues laugh." This defense mechanism would serve him well.

He had a feel for the moods of his audience, even in high school. Seeing people grow bored in the front row, he'd try something unscripted to rouse them. Getting and giving love was an addiction from early on. After failing high school—Latin and math were his undoing—he persuaded his father to help him enter the film line, first as a production assistant and then, effortfully slimmed down, as a star. He was handsome enough now to have become the Indian Errol Flynn. Instead, in 1948, at the age of twenty-three, he became the youngest film director of his time anywhere in the world, with a "studio" in an old car: R.K. Films.



Kapoor's 1948 directorial debut, *Aag* ("Fire"), was about a young man who wanted to be a stage actor, disappointing parents who had hoped for a lawyer. Young Indians' desire for self-realization in modern India, and the resulting conflict with their parents' expectations and traditions, would become a theme in his work (and then in much of Hindi cinema), but it was only one of several ways in which *Aag* announced its modern idiom. In addition to employing a more naturalistic acting style than was typical in Hindi film, and more humor, he was taking risks with a new means of waking up the dozers in the front row: eroticism.

Kapoor considered eroticism central to the Indian tradition, from the sculptures of Konarak and Khajuraho to temple dance. (He dated his own interest in eroticism to bathing as a child with his beautiful mother.) This put him at odds with industry mores, which held that showing men slapping women was fine, but showing them caressing them was outrageous. Shortly after Kapoor started making films, Nehru—himself a bit of a *pas devant les enfants* liberal—created a national board of film censors, to centralize existing regional ones. Keeping a thousand lips closed during kisses was a function of the market as well. Going to the pictures was a family affair, and too much hotness hurt sales. The risk of offending religious groups and social conservatives was high even in the city: in the mid-1950s, Nehru received a petition about cinema corrupting the young that had been signed by thirteen thousand women residents of Delhi.

In his first film, Kapoor managed a fine balance between realism and propriety, redefining the cinematic portrayal of love. In one scene, the hero he plays tries to rebuff a beautiful actress whom his best friend wants to marry. What is it that I have that my friend doesn't? he asks her. As she makes an ardent list, beginning with his eyes and hair, her lust is unabashed, and a cinema convention of the woman as passive love object is toppled.

The actress was Nargis, and she and Kapoor would go on to become one of the legendary pairings of Indian cinema, in large part because of their sexual chemistry. (In a later film, she would be, again, unconventionally, the innocent hero's ardent pursuer.) Nargis was already a star when she signed up with the first-time director, and became more than his muse and mistress. She was an intellectual and practical partner in the films. Nargis was Muslim, and the actress she plays in *Aag* is a Partition refugee—one of the first mentions of the tragedy in Indian cinema. As the Bollywood expert Nasreen Munni Kabir points out, even a glancing mention of the communal bloodshed, only months after the fact, took courage; it was a time when many elites feared that discussing the subject would incite new violence. *Aag's* attempts to evoke both sex and politics signaled what an R.K. Films picture would come to stand for: work that, for all its escapism, inhabited the same world as its audience.



In *Awara* (1951), Kapoor's third film and one of the most successful of all time, Nargis plays not just the love object but a practicing lawyer. Kapoor plays a thief and vagabond (an *awara*) who adores her. As in many of Kapoor's films, the faults of the poor spring from the wrongs of the rich. In one exchange, Kapoor's character describes the miracle of modern society: "Capitalists, black marketers, profiteers and money lenders: Who are they? All thieves like me."

By now, Kapoor had assembled a trusted team of collaborators, among them the Marxist novelist, political columnist, and neorealist scriptwriter Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, who, like Kapoor's father, had belonged to the IPTA group. Abbas had modeled himself on the muckraking American novelist Upton Sinclair. Shailendra, a poet and author of many of Kapoor's most famous songs, was only slightly less left-wing. *Awara* spoke to the mass unemployment following Independence, and the corruption in the criminal justice system. Kapoor's next film, the enduringly popular *Shree 420* (1955), was an even sharper critique of upper-class corruption, and conveyed deep appreciation of the difficulty of

behaving ethically in a world intricately rigged against the poor—even for honest souls with college degrees, like its protagonist. The title comes from Section 420 of the Indian Penal Code, on fraudsters. The rich in the film seem to be born dishonest; the dishonesty of the poor is Indian-made. It was a theme that packed in the filmgoers.

But even in such populist films, Kapoor's primary interest was fun. He knew how to honor Shailendra's work by the clever integration of lyrics and dance into the scripts. By the time Kapoor made *Bobby*, in the 1970s, Abbas was complaining about his pointed dialogue getting cut in order to cram in songs—though he also joked that if he'd made the films according to his own vision, they'd have flopped.

As Kapoor's career continued, a crucial aspect of the lives of the poor, discrimination based on caste, remained largely implicit. Paradoxically, he had strong feelings on the subject, dating back to a childhood visit to his grandfather's home in Punjab. Having joined some other children to pick cotton, he fell asleep in the field and woke up alone. An untouchable worker on the estate discovered him and carried him home. Upon delivery, the worker apologized to the family for having soiled the child with his touch, and Raj wasn't allowed inside until he had bathed. "I didn't know the implications of all this then," he later recalled, "but I knew that what was being done was wrong."

However, like Nehru, and a whole post-Independence generation, Kapoor seems to have internalized the constitutional fiat that caste no longer existed. The dream of the 1950s—soon fading—was that if one didn't speak of the old social divisions still oppressing hundreds of millions of people, they might go away. In fact, nation-building actively required it to disappear. So the gradations of inequality captured gracefully when the umbrellas come out in *Boot Polish*, among countless other moments, would not be explored through the biggest source of inequality in Indian life.

The acuity of Kapoor's class analysis reached an apex with his production of the relatively unsung *Jagte Raho* (1956), in which a rumor of a thief loose in a middle-class community prompts the people to organize their impoverished neighbors into armed goon squads: poor men eager to beat off the "thief," who is actually a destitute peasant, recently migrated, in search only of a drink of water. This absurdist comedy of middle-class snobbery and petty perfidy demonstrates a canny handle on how the lower classes are used as tools to undermine those with whom they might find common cause. Yet as is typical in Kapoor's films, the conflict is ultimately mollified by kindness.

As hard as the world gets, there's usually a loving Nargis on the way, ready to slake thirst with a small gift of water.

It was, as Nasreen Kabir puts it, a Marxist analysis of problems that proposed no Marxist solution. A "professional emotionalist," Kapoor seemed to be suggesting that you could love your way toward equality and dignity, or at least love your way around the structural problems of your society. In *Shree 420*, Raj and Nargis walk in the middle of an empty road during a monsoon shower, singing "Pyar Hua Ikrar Hua," the most famous love song in the Kapoor repertoire. The couple is in a bubble of romance, apart from the world, and they know the road ahead is hard, despite a future in central government "people's housing." Yet as Nargis makes clear with a gesture and a flash of her eyes, babies will figure in the couple's noncentralized five-year plan. If the promise of Indian Independence were not to be realized imminently, Kapoor seems to hint, perhaps the second generation of young, spirited Indians would have better luck.



Kapoor's last film, *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), is known today mainly for a scene in which the heroine's thin white sari is drenched under a waterfall: a moment of such transparent eroticism that nobody but Kapoor could have got away with it. By 1985, says Rachel Dwyer, a professor at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, he "was such an establishment figure that he could set the norm."

There's political commentary as well as titillation, of course: for instance, a secret plot between an industrialist and a politician to build a factory whose effluent will contaminate Calcutta's Hooghly River, a channel of the holy Ganga. While the corrupt are duly vanquished in the end, to watch that final film is to be reminded that, as associated as Kapoor came to be, retrospectively, with Nehru's project, none of his work demonstrated faith in politicians.

Perhaps the best expression of Kapoor's political skepticism comes in *Shree 420*, when the tramp hero comes to a Bombay maidan to hawk sand he hopes to pass off as toothpaste. Crowds have gathered to hear a politician promise his listeners the world. Kapoor's seller convinces the crowd that the politician is also a salesman, but with a product of lesser value. Toothpaste, he argues charmingly, will change your life more than hot air. As ever, Kapoor's sentimental hope lies in individuals, not institutions. That his heroes were not bureaucrats deciding how many tractors to make helped give the filmmaker a worldwide reach he'd never imagined.

Awara opened in the USSR in 1954, the year after Stalin's death. Under the so-called Khrushchev thaw, there was suddenly new freedom in media and the arts. In that year alone, a stunning sixty-four million people, mainly young people, are estimated to have bought tickets to *Awara*. "Kapoor-mania," as it was called in the USSR, became even more frantic with *Shree 420* the next year. Soviets didn't require Marxist solutions in their films; there was plenty of that on the state-run radio. They celebrated the songs, which became ubiquitous on the airwaves, and bought postcards with Raj's image (cult collector's items to this day). They made the young hero who pursued his desires against social traditions their own.

On Nehru's first prime ministerial visit to Russia, in 1955, the crowds who turned out to see him shouted out to the Indian leader: "*Awara hoon!*"—"I am a vagabond!" There would soon be many more enthusiastic young vagabonds, in East Africa, Romania, Egypt, Afghanistan, Iran, the Middle East, and China—even Chairman Mao was a Raj Kapoor fan. In Turkey, where *Awara* was made into a popular television show, the song "*Awara Hoon*" still matters enough that there's a hip-hop version.

Still, the legacy of Kapoor is strongest in India, and literal: he created a dynasty. Both his brothers became actors, as did all three of his sons, two successfully. His granddaughters Karishma and Kareena became major screen heroines, and his grandson Ranbir Kapoor, a celebrity, acted in *Yeh Jawani Hai Dewani* ("This Youth Is Crazy") (2013), one of the highest-grossing Bollywood films of all time. It's a silly film, but it stands out from the action pics and science fiction dominating the top-ten list because what doesn't feel silly is the love story. Politics may have leached out of the Kapoor bloodline—at least as seen on the screen—but the deft command of romance endures.