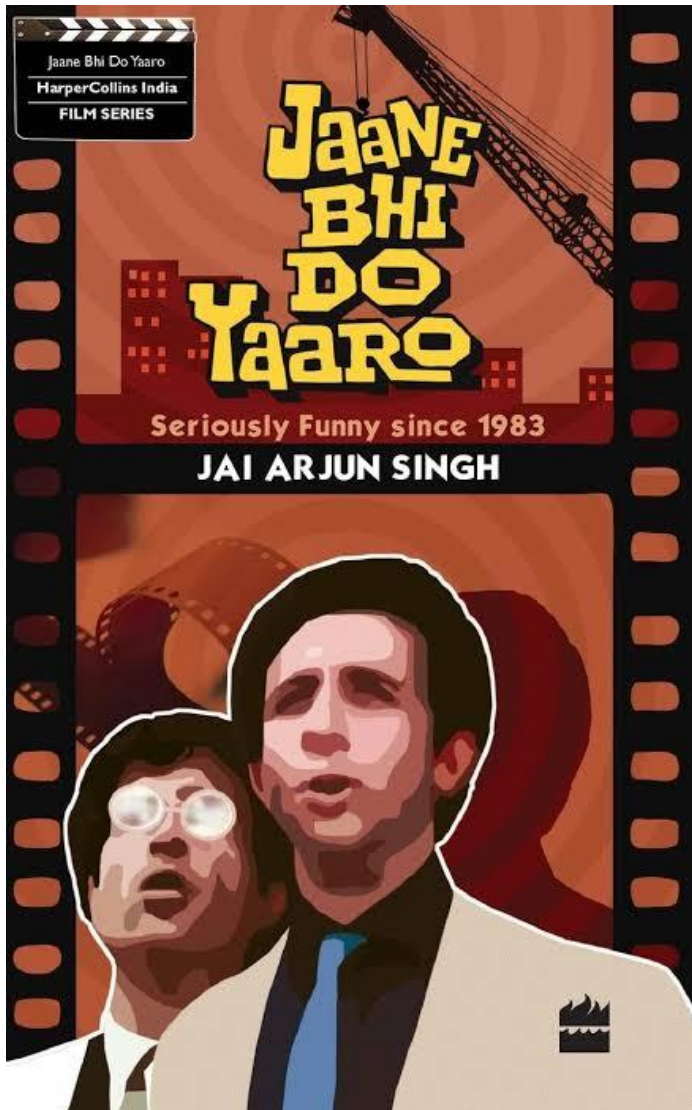


Article

Apoorva Dua

Kundan Shah's *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*: Re (Defining) Comedy Since 1983



(Front cover of the book "*Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro Seriously Funny Since 1983*" by Jai Arjun Singh)

"Comedy and cruelty go hand in hand ... When a person slips and falls, he might - speaking realistically - have broken his hip, or worse, but people laugh. "You create humour out of something painful.", said Kundan Shah in a casual conversation with author Jai Arjun Singh. Coming from the genius of the man whose directorial debut became a cult

classic years later, these words give us something to think about.

1983 was a rather phenomenal year for India. We made history by winning our first-ever Cricket World Cup. But for the Hindi film industry, the year brought out some of the best films, both commercial and non-commercial, as well as a plethora of actors and filmmakers who are worth noticing to date. One such filmmaker is Kundan Shah, an FTII alumnus, who debuted with a hilarious satire that spoke to the audience of the 20th century and the 21st century. If you search the top black comedy films made in India, you'll eventually find *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* at the top of the list on IMDb, and it's very well justified. I remember rewatching *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* right after FTII (where I studied) had reopened for students after the pandemic. It was screened in the first week of January 2022 at the National Film Archives of India, which also reopened its gates to the common masses and the film institute students for the first time after the pandemic. I cannot think of a better film to open with than the hilarious satire that shook the nation with its rawness and audacity. My first experience of watching it with my peers, all of whom spend days watching world cinema, who somehow decided to take a load off and gather a few cheers at the screening of a jolly good 1980s film starring the Hindi film industry's "who's who" brought my liking of this film to a whole new level. The pandemic had left us all as helpless as Vinod (played by Naseeruddin Shah) and Sudhir (played by late Ravi Baswani) of *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* are throughout the film. But just as Vinod and Sudhir don't have a happy ending, we realise that neither do we, in most circumstances.

Kundan Shah's persistence in bringing this cast together eventually helped push the envelope.

Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron (1983)



(Neena Gupta, Ravi Baswani, Satish Shah, Bhakti Barve, Pankaj Kapoor and Naseeruddin Shah in a still from *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*)

Not only is it written well, the actors come together to leave behind the conundrum of reality to show the world through the lens of sheer humour, comic timing and teamwork. Imagine a serious actor like Naseeruddin Shah scratching his head while trying to make sense of the scene where he and Satish Kaushik are in the same room, talking to each other over the phone. He went bonkers thinking about how this could make any sense. But eventually, it all comes together as they both hit the right note, making us laugh wholeheartedly. Speaking of serious men, Om Puri starrer *Ardh Satya*, a classic cop drama, was released the same year and became a huge name in parallel cinema. Imagine the very same Om Puri as a drunken real estate tycoon who mistakes a coffin for a man driving a sports car as he tries to fix it with a stepney. The film comes to magic with the genius of actors like them and Satish Shah and Ravi Baswani, the only actors in the movie who had done comedy in the past. And who can forget the clever and corrupt Tarneja, played by Pankaj Kapoor, who later went on the opposite end of the spectrum as the very common man in the famous television show *Office Office* who's knee-deep in the quicksand of bureaucracy? Not to forget the bittersweet playfulness between actors Neena Gupta and Satish Kaushik, who play sidekicks to Tarneja.

Although we put pressure on it for being one of the finest black comedies produced in the Hindi film

industry, Kundan Shah always emphasised that one can't intellectualise comedy into a niche other than what it is -

'Comic instinct tells you something is correct—you can't intellectualise humour.'

This quote puts so much into context as we step forward and see comedy as a whole - a genre so overlooked when discussing cinema as a craft. We fail to take comedy at its face value or that it has the power to make sense on its own. Still, this film sets the precedent that good comedy can carry itself - courtesy of an ensemble cast that became the game changers in the Hindi film industry. Even after being a slapstick, fun story of two young men stuck in a scandalous situation; it brings a freshness in terms of comedic value, integrity, and cleverness that humour can bring to the table, enough for it to be taken seriously.



A motif that adds to the beauty of this film is the song *Hum Honge Kamiyaab*, which constantly evolves as we first hear from the beginning to the end. The first time we hear the song is when Vinod sings to Sudhir as a vote of confidence as they anticipate whether anyone will show up for the inauguration of their "Beauty Photo Studio". The song then becomes a beacon of hope for Vinod and Sudhir, as it also is in reality for the many children of this country who are taught to sing it in unison from a very young age. It goes on to say just how naive and optimistic the common man can become despite knowing that the only one hanging by a thread in this corrupt and unjust society is them. The last time we hear this song is when the actual version is played, as we see Vinod and Sudhir wandering about Mumbai in their prison clothes. The comic nuance of the music slowly turns

into a bitter truth in the end that no matter who does what, the only one that bears the brunt of it is the common man. Any discussion about *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* is incomplete without the talk about the Mahabharata scene. If it doesn't remind you of the endless laughter riots from the climaxes of Priyadarshan's hits like *Hera Pheri* and *Hungama*, I don't know what does. With this, the film wins over the great irony behind "good over evil", which is played out so well that you will fail to understand how it went from laugh out loud to deeply dark. And as

Kundan Shah mentioned, we derive laughter from someone's pain, and that's what the film represents about reality - it is always the rich and powerful who derive pleasure from the exploitation of the common man. But deep inside, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* is more than a message to society. It is a crazy emotional rollercoaster that navigates us through the ups and downs of our complicated society because 40 years later, there is still a Vinod and Sudhir among us, whose shriek in pain is someone's dose of laughter.

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