

*Tribute: Raj Kapoor Birth Centenary: Chapter-IV*

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## **Hits and Misses: The Unknown World of Raj Kapoor**



*Awara*

Indian cinema has produced many legends, but only a handful occupy the position of being cultural institutions in themselves. Among them, Raj Kapoor remains unmatched. Actor, director, producer, editor and above all, a dreamer who knew how to weave emotions into celluloid, Raj Kapoor continues to be celebrated as the “Greatest Showman of Indian Cinema.” His films carried not only entertainment but also a vision of life, society, and the struggles of the common man.

As the world marks his birth centenary, it is a fitting moment to look back at his journey—a journey filled with brilliance and extravagance, but also marked by risks,

financial strains, and occasional failures. To understand Raj Kapoor is to understand a man who refused to compromise on art, even if it meant burning a hole in his pocket. His life and career remain an extraordinary mix of hits and misses, and that is precisely what makes his story so enduring. In this last and fourth article of the tribute series to Raj Kapoor.

Raj Kapoor’s career was born out of ambition. From his debut, he was clear that he was not content being just a performer. He wanted to command the film, shape its vision, and leave an indelible imprint on every frame. His loyalty to his audience was unwavering. He was never dismissive of their tastes, but he also believed in challenging them. He crafted

films that entertained yet carried meaning, often blending romance, music, and social critique in a uniquely cinematic way.

Even when Raj Kapoor was not sitting on the director's chair, his influence was unmistakable. He had the rare ability to sense when something was missing from a film, and his instinct for music and imagery often changed the course of a project. One of the earliest examples of this was *Boot Polish* (1954).

*Boot Polish* was conceived as a small project under RK Films and was directed by his assistant Prakash Arora. The story revolved around two orphans trying to survive on the harsh streets by shining shoes—a deeply human story about poverty, resilience, and dignity. The film was planned as a quick production with a limited budget and, unusually for Hindi cinema, without songs. The cast had no big stars either, relying on child actors Baby Naaz and Rattan Kumar to carry the story and the big and only support was in the casting of David. The film also saw a guest appearance of Raj Kapoor himself and the kids make fun of him in the train saying, "Nowadays everyone thinks of being Raj Kapoor!"

When Raj Kapoor saw the completed film, he was dissatisfied. To him, it felt more like a simple documentary than a film that could connect with the audience. He believed that music was not an ornament in cinema but its very heartbeat. Without songs, the emotions felt incomplete.

Kapoor immediately stepped in. He studied the script, revisited the film multiple times, and carefully selected places where songs would heighten the drama without disrupting its realism. He turned once again to

his trusted collaborators, the composer duo Shankar–Jaikishan.

The results were spectacular. *Nanhe Munne Bachche Teri Muththi Mein Kya Hai* became the voice of a new India, full of promise and hope despite hardships. *Chali Kaunse Desh* was another memorable number, even featuring lyricist Shailendra himself on screen, playing the bulbul tarang.

Though these additions delayed the release and stretched the budget, they transformed the film. What began as a grim story about child labor and survival was infused with emotion and optimism, making it resonate deeply with audiences.

Recognition followed not just at home but also abroad. Baby Naaz received a Special Mention at the 1955 Cannes International Film Festival, and the film itself won the Grand Prix for Music at the Phnom Penh Film Festival in Cambodia. Ironically, a film that originally had no songs became internationally recognized for its music. Even today the film is known for its diverse album with different flavours of music.



*Boot Polish*

Two years later came *Jagte Raho* (1956), another RK Films project where Raj Kapoor was not the director but deeply involved as

producer and lead actor. Directed by Amit Maitra and Sombhu Mitra, the film explored the urban nightmare of a poor villager who wanders into a city building at night in search of water, only to encounter greed, corruption, and hypocrisy behind every door.

The building in the film was almost like a character itself, representing society's collective conscience. Through its many apartments, the protagonist discovers the hollowness behind middle-class respectability.

The film's songs added depth, the introductory *Jindagi Khwab Hai*, shot on Motilal and particularly *Jago Mohan Pyare*. This song holds special importance for cinema lovers as it featured Nargis in a luminous guest appearance—her last collaboration with Raj Kapoor on screen. Their partnership had defined an era, and even in this brief role, her presence elevated the film.

Here, mention of yet another dream by RK is a must. There were a few films that Raj Kapoor had planned but they could not be made. Important among those could have been the first film planned in colour for RK Films, the title was *Ajanta!* With Nargis this period costume drama would have been a great treat to film lovers.

Raj Kapoor, as always, could not compromise with realism. Unhappy with the way the original climax looked, he ordered a massive life-size wall set to be constructed for reshooting the final sequence. The protagonist's escape—throwing money to distract pursuers while scaling the wall—gained a raw intensity that the earlier version lacked. The decision inflated the budget of what had started as a modest film, but Kapoor

considered authenticity more important than economy.

The gamble was rewarded. *Jagte Raho* went on to win the Grand Prix at the 1957 Karlovy Vary Film Festival in Czechoslovakia. It also received recognition from the Government of Burma. Interestingly, the Bengali version of the film, *Ek Din Raatre*, produced by RK Films, won the National Award for Best Bengali Film that same year.



*Jagte Raho*

If one were to choose a single film that symbolized Raj Kapoor's passion for extravagance and vision, it would be *Awara* (1951). The film's dream sequence is still studied today for its ambition and execution.

Stretching nearly ten minutes, the sequence was one of the longest dream sequences in Indian cinema. It required three different sets, elaborate special effects, and a combination of music, poetry, and imagery that carried immense symbolic weight. It wasn't a mere spectacle; it was the turning point of the story, illuminating the inner conflicts of the character played by Raj Kapoor.

The making of its iconic song *Ghar Aaya Mera Pardesi* reveals the perfectionism

that defined Raj Kapoor. During the recording, he was dissatisfied with the dholak rhythm. A suggestion led him to bring in a folk dholki player, Lala Bhau, unfamiliar with studio work. Recording was delayed until late at night, and Lata Mangeshkar had to return at 2:30 a.m. to record the final version with the new rhythm. The result was pure magic. This instance has been beautifully elaborated in a documentary *Masti Bhara Hai Sama* by Ashok Rane featuring Master Dattaram, the music director of Raj Kapoor's *Ab Dilli Door Nah* (1957).



*Shree 420*

For the dream-like visuals, Kapoor arranged for gas cylinders from Coca-Cola's factory to create fog, halting its operations for days. For another scene, truckloads of sand were brought into the studio to mimic a seashore. Each decision spiraled the budget upwards, but Kapoor's vision triumphed.

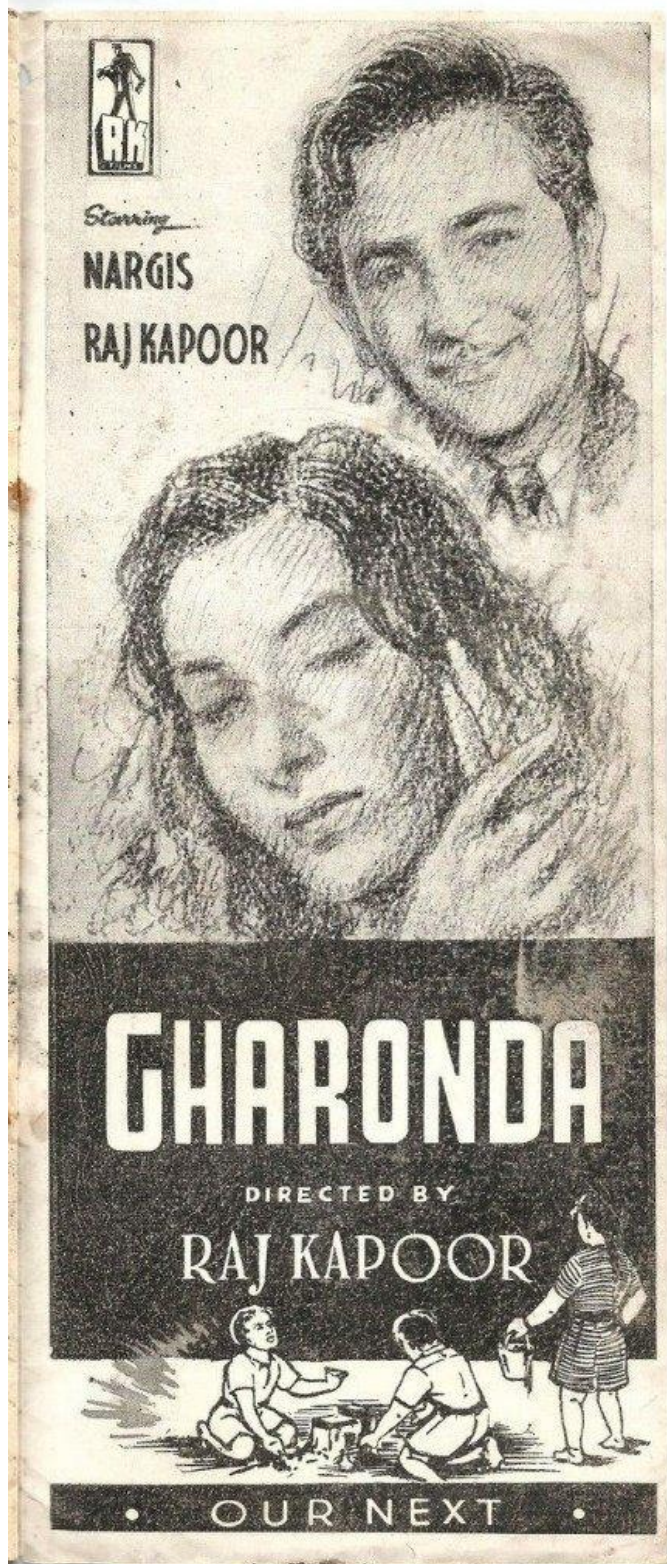
In *Shree 420* (1955), Kapoor once again let the director in him override the producer. For the iconic rain song *Pyar Hua Ikrar Hua*, he insisted on creating a three-dimensional indoor set that replicated a Mumbai street.

The song, picturized on Raj Kapoor and Nargis sharing a single umbrella in the rain, remains an immortal moment of Indian cinema. M R Achrekar, the art director, was given full freedom, and the result was worth every rupee spent. It became a cultural image of love in urban India—one that continues to be recreated and remembered even today.

Raj Kapoor was never afraid of breaking convention. He remains perhaps the only filmmaker in India to have released not one but two films with two intervals. The first one came in the form of *Sangam* (1964), RK Films' first Technicolor production, *Sangam* was a sweeping romance about love, friendship, and sacrifice. It also introduced Indian audiences to the glamour of international locations, shot extensively in Europe. Its length justified two intervals, but audiences were captivated by its grandeur. *Sangam* is a film that Raj Kapoor wanted to make since the time he made his first film *Aag* (1948). The title that he had in his mind was *Gharonda*. On the publicity card of *Aag* he had put up the advertisement for *Gharonda*. In *Sangam* there is a scene where the kids discuss the houses in future and one scene also speaks of *Gharonda*.

Even more ambitious was *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), a semi-autobiographical saga about a clown whose life is filled with laughter for others but loneliness for himself. Divided into three chapters, it was released with two intervals. Kapoor poured his heart into the film, but the audience found it too long and too heavy. It bombed at the box office, pushing RK Films into a financial crisis. However, it was the highest foreign currency grosser that year. *Mera Naam Joker*

remained his own favourite after it was made. It had a special corner in his heart.



Despite all the difficulties Raj Kapoor faced post *Mera Naam Joker*'s sad run at box office he was not one to wallow in failure. Understanding the changing pulse of the audience, he quickly shifted gears. He made

*Bobby* (1973), a youthful love story with newcomers Rishi Kapoor and Dimple Kapadia. Made on a modest budget and completed in record time, it became a blockbuster and restored RK Films' fortunes. *Bobby* became a trend setter and proved to be much more than expected in each section of film production.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Raj Kapoor's career is the tension between the producer in him and the director in him. The producer was cautious, thinking of costs and deadlines. The director, however, was uncompromising, willing to spend whatever it took to bring a vision to life. Almost always, the director won. This is why Kapoor's films, even when commercially risky, carried an artistic integrity and visual richness that few others could match. His projects may have run over budget, but they created moments of cinema that became timeless.

Raj Kapoor proudly carried the title of "*The Greatest Showman of Indian Cinema*", embodying it both on screen and in life. His films brimmed with dreams, romance, social critique, and music that remains unforgettable. Few filmmakers have matched his gift for blending entertainment with reflection, humor with pathos, and stark realism with poetic fantasy.

Even his setbacks, like *Mera Naam Joker*, are today regarded with respect for their audacity and scale. His triumphs—from *Awara* to *Bobby*—defined the golden age of Hindi cinema and cemented his place as a cultural icon.

Marking his centenary, one can only imagine the kind of celebration he would have orchestrated: vibrant, musical, and larger-than-life, echoing the very spirit of his art.

But Raj Kapoor was more than a filmmaker—he was a dream merchant who believed deeply in the magic of cinema. His creations captured the joys and sorrows, the hopes and contradictions, of an entire nation. They gave us characters that are forever etched in memory, music that refuses to fade, and images that continue to move generations.

From the simple poignancy of *Boot Polish* to the grandeur of *Awara*, from the realism of *Jagte Raho* to the sweeping canvas

of *Sangam*, from the heartbreak of *Mera Naam Joker* to the youthful freshness of *Bobby*—his journey was a tapestry of hits and misses. Yet even the so-called misses revealed his uncompromising vision and relentless pursuit of artistry.

A century later, his cinema still inspires, reminding us that films are not mere narratives but dreams captured on celluloid.

Long live the legacy of Raj Kapoor—the eternal Showman.

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