

Dressing and looks of Hindi film industry actors were defined by the roles they played, which in turn reflected the concerns of society from time to time

by **Derek Bose**
The Statesman/ANN

Late last year, when the promos of Aditya Chopra's *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* started storming the television screens, many fans of Indian superstar Shah Rukh Khan did a double take. How could their hero look so down-market? EKV even a corporation clerk would not wear those ill-fitting shirts and loose trousers with double pleats in the front and side pockets. And what were those silly spectacles doing? On top of all that, a wig!

Of course, the character had an alter-ego in the film—a dashing and debonair Raj who (literally) sweeps the heroine off her feet.

It can always be argued that Shah Rukh can never go wrong because he enjoys such a large and loyal fan following that no matter what he does or wears on screen, it would always work at the box office. In 2004, he came in as a non-resident Indian wearing a simple checked shirt (when he was not in a vest) and jeans in *Swades*. He then tied a turban and became a ghost in *Paheli*. Thereafter, he limped his way through *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* as the bitter footballer retired-hurt. Soon after, he became a disgraced coach of a women's hockey team in *Chak De India*. And then he turned into a struggling actor of the '70s (who becomes a superstar in after-life) in *Om Shanti Om*.

Barring a fast and furious crime thriller, *Don* in 2006, all his screen appearances during these last five years have been a far cry from the slick and suave Shah Rukh Khan we have seen from his younger days of *Baazigar*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Dil Se*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Josh* and so on.

Now, Shah Rukh is not the only top star to have mellowed down on his

looks. Take Aamir Khan, before he became a vengeful beast with that bizarre tennis ball haircut in *Ghajini* last December. In *Taare Zameen Par*, he was as cool and casual as any young school teacher can be in jeans and a non-descript T-shirt. Before that, there were films like *Fanaa*, *Rang De Basanti* and *Dil Chahta Hai* in which he could easily have been another face in the crowd. The reasons for his understated dressing were of course, dictated by the roles Aamir had to play in those films. But then, this is one Bollywood star known to be extremely fastidious

about his screen image—whether it was with his fierce twirled-up moustache in *Mangal Pandey*, or that famous bare-torso look in *Lagaan* or the spiky hair and beard-let he sports in *Dil Chahta Hai*. Now, all too suddenly, he seems to have lost interest in making a style statement.

The same can be said of the four other Bollywood biggies: Akshay Kumar (*Namastey London*, *Heyy Baby*, *Welcome*, *Singh Is Kingg*), Salman Khan (*Partner*, *Hello*, *God Tussi Great Ho*, *Yuvvraaj*), Saif Ali Khan (*Tara Rum Pum*, *Race*, *Tashan*, *Thoda Pyar Thoda Magic*) and Hrithik Roshan (*Dhoom 2*). There is nothing distinctive about their

clothes have not always been the true barometers of contemporary fashion. There were some defining moments in Bollywood styling during in the early '90s when Urmila Matondkar pranced about in those skimpy designer outfits in *Rangeela* or say, when Madhuri Dixit flaunted her backless choli in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. But today, barring some item numbers and party scenes (where those very outfits are still being recycled with minor variations), the style statement of heroines is being spoken of in terms of size zero figure, attitude and get-up. At the most, a reference to 'casual chic' could raise a buzz, as in the recent case of Kareena Kapoor pulling off a loose, oversized T-shirt and a mismatched Patiala salwar with conviction in *Jab We Met*. Likewise, Shilpa Shetty's deglamourised look in *Life*.

In a metro with long skirts and muffler around her neck had become a talking point in fashion circles last year.

Ordinariness is fashionable

dressing styles, let alone sartorial eloquence, to leave a lasting impression. From all appearances, they would much rather copy the common man in everyday clothes than look larger-than-life or become trendsetters in fashion like some of their predecessors had.

(Exceptions are costume dramas like *Jodhaa Akbar* and *Chandni Chowk To China* in parts, as well as superhero films like *Krishh*, *Drona* and *Love 2050*.) Second and third rung heroes, from Sanjay Dutt and Ajay Devgan to Abhishek Bachchan and Shahid Kapoor are similarly swimming with the tide, more out of compulsion than choice. Quite clearly, the days of our heroes wanting to be seen as role models of dressing are over.

It is however, a misconception that yesterday's heroes were, in any manner, at the cutting edge of contemporary fashion. That distinction rested with the villains, right from the days of KN Singh, Ajit, Jeevan, Pran and Prem Chopra. In their well-cut Western suits and fancy cars, they were the most stylish of screen characters. Their look always spoke of wealth and (consequently) power, whereas the hero appeared as an idealistic and vulnerable sort, typically in dhoti-kurta or as a country bumpkin. Some like Dev Anand and Shammi Kapoor who specialised in playing romantic city slickers, managed to come up with a distinctive trend-setting style once in a while but their dressing and looks were defined by the roles they played in films, which in turn reflected the concerns of society from time to time. And it is that tradition that has been carried forward by Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan to Shah Rukh Khan and Akshay Kumar today.

The only ones to buck this trend are our leading ladies. They are the ones expected to infuse all the glamour and glitz to a film, though style-wise, their

popularity of ordinariness can be attributed to three crucial factors. One, films are hardly made on extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances these days. Ever since the multiplex revolution began a decade ago, the approach to story-telling and the nature of key characters in a narrative have changed. The hero is no longer the idealistic, self-righteous, handsome hunk he used to be. Instead, he is a regular guy with normal habits, strengths and weaknesses.

Similarly, the heroine has ceased to play the archetypal virgin-in-white, self-sacrificing and beautiful. She is today like any other girl next door; intelligent and approachable, and with as many shades of grey as the male lead. Nobody is holier-than-thou, exceptionally gifted or extra-special. And they all dress the part. This has contributed immensely to Hindi cinema coming across as closer to reality. Audiences have no difficulty identifying with the characters they see on screen.

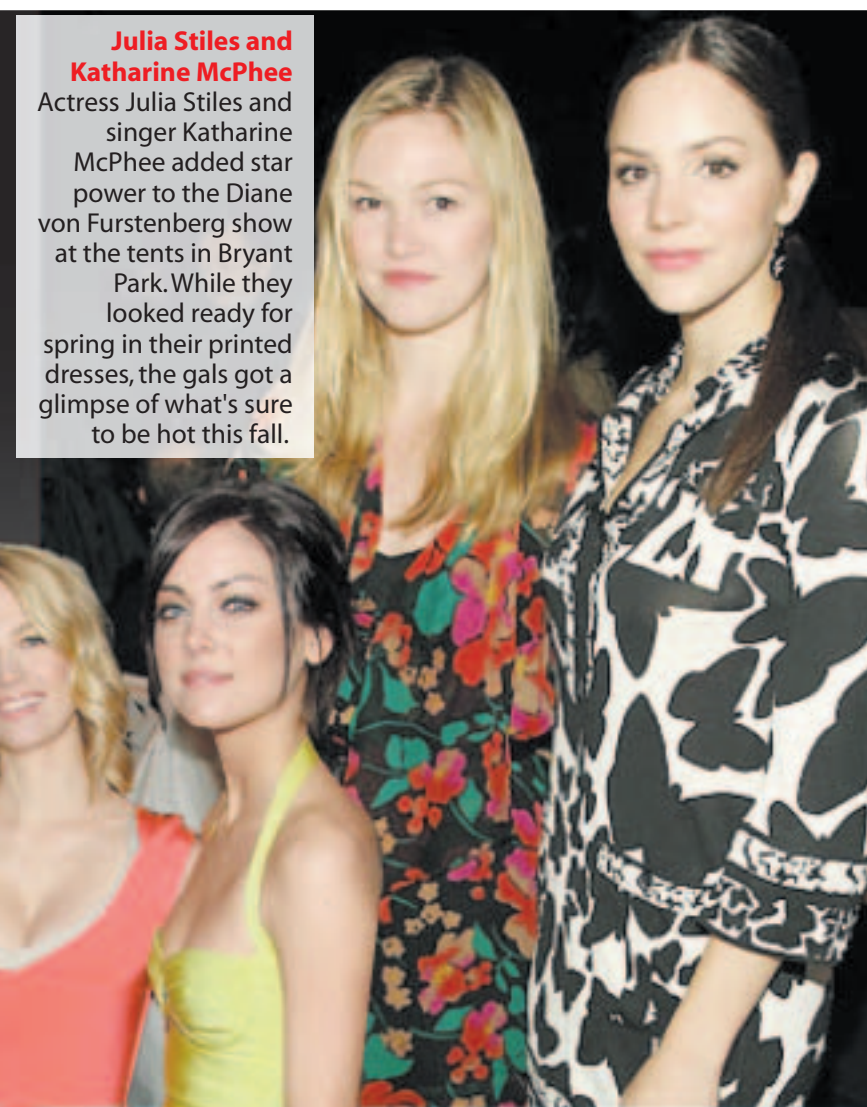
The second reason for Indian actors to be dressing down is the advent of several high profile couriers like Manish Malhotra, Ritu Beri, Neeta Lulla and Aki Narula in films. Over the past decade or so, these trained professionals have not only replaced the dress makers of yore, they are increasingly calling the shots in every department of filmmaking. They understand cinema and with their background in fashion design (most of them have their own designer labels) are able to decide on the look of an actor in keeping with the spirit of a film.

The third important reason for understated chic in Hindi cinema is the rising popularity of the so-called 'non-heroic heroes like Vinay Pathak (*Bheja Fry*, *Dasvidaniya*, *Oh My God*), Rajat Kapoor (*Monsoon Wedding*, *Krazzy 4*, *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*) and Ranvir Shorey (*Khosla Ka Ghosla*, *Traffic Signal*, *Ugly Aur Pagli*). It is in their ordinariness that they have found an appreciative audience, something established stars like Shah Rukh, Akshay and Aamir are now waking up to.



Julia Stiles and Katharine McPhee
Actress Julia Stiles and singer Katharine McPhee added star power to the Diane von Furstenberg show at the tents in Bryant Park. While they looked ready for spring in their printed dresses, the gals got a glimpse of what's sure to be hot this fall.

Daisy Fuentes (in a red chiffon Pamela Roland gown) was one of the many stars, including Hilary Duff, Jennie Garth and Amanda Bynes, who helped kick off New York Fashion Week at the Heart Truth's Red Dress Collection Fashion Show. The annual show helps raise awareness for heart disease and also raises money by auctioning off many of the dresses with



January Jones and Jessica Stroup "This is my first show of my first New York Fashion Week!" said an excited Jessica Stroup, who showed off her flawless figure in a boldly-hued Herve Leger by Max Azria bandage dress at the Fall 2009 runway show. "If you'd told me a year ago that I'd be here, I would have called you crazy." After greeting Azria backstage, the 90210 star joined *Mad Men's* January Jones in the front row.



Whitney Port
The City's Whitney Port celebrated her team's hard work at the Diane von Furstenberg after-party in the Meatpacking District. The MTV reality star currently works for the designer and instead of taking her usual front-row seat, Port was busy working backstage during the show with co-worker, and co-star, Olivia Palermo.



Mischa Barton, Minka Kelly and Kristen Bell After attending the Matthew Williamson store opening, Mischa Barton joined Friday Night Lights star Minka Kelly and Kristen Bell in the front row at the Miss Sixty show. The fashionable trio got in a few laughs before marveling at the '80s-inspired acid-washed jeans, punk biker jackets and graphic-print dresses that came down the catwalk.