



## **Nepotism: An Exploration of the Cliques and the Politics of Access in the Hindi Film Industry**

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Actor Ananya Panday appeared a few years ago at the newcomers' roundtable hosted by film critic Rajeev Masand. The daughter of actor Chunky Panday, who made her silver screen debut with *Student of the Year 2*, shared her take on her personal struggle, and said, "Mine has been a lot of personal experience, I have seen my dad go through so many things that I don't take anything too seriously. So it's not as easy as people say. Everyone has their own journey and their own struggle."

Seeming to reflect the 'extra pressure' that the so-called star-kids claim to face, Ananya said, "I overcompensate sometimes. I am so scared that people may say that 'oh you are taking things too lightly' so I will come extra early to places. I am so happy that I have this chance."

Her *Gehraiyaan* co-actor Siddhant Chaturvedi, an actor with no family links in the film industry appearing at the same roundtable agreed that everyone has their own struggle. He further added, "The difference is, *their* struggle begins (at the point) where *our* dreams are fulfilled."<sup>1</sup>

This us-versus-them exchange is symbolic of the uneasy peace that upcoming actors without family connections forge with descendants of lineage in the film industry, to work together on projects. Accusations of nepotism have been bitter and personal; talentless family scions continue to bag one leading role after another despite their films failing while charismatic actors with no connection struggle through auditions for walk-on parts, waiting for years for a breakthrough role.

**This is how society works!**

Zoya Akhtar, one the most respected directors in the film industry can hardly be accused of having received her position on a platter. A trained filmmaker who studied film-making at New York University and assisted renowned directors including Mira Nair, Zoya faced years of rejection before she could make her first film despite being the daughter of Javed Akhtar, India's most successful scriptwriter and lyricist. She has a pragmatic take on the debate: "Bollywood is not a kingdom, it is an infrastructure and that's how it works. If someone has the resources and they want to make a film or launch their sons or daughters they can and they will, this is how our society works. It is not my mistake that I was born and brought up in a family which has been working on films, I am not going to say sorry".<sup>2</sup>

Gulshan Devaiah, a trained fashion designer who later became an actor and gained critical acclaim over the years, thinks it is wrong to expect a perfect meritocracy. "It is not a government job, it is a private enterprise. Everybody is going to have their own subjective opinion about who is the best suited for a particular role and they are going to make their choice. This is not a selection for IAS or IPS that your rank matters," Devaiah reasons. "It is just human nature to blame everything for your misfortune. Of course there are power structures, they have power and they do whatever they want but it's really not some battle or it's not like all darkness."<sup>3</sup>

Zoya Akhtar seems to echo this thought. "It is not about inside-outsider, it is basically that people are angry about the haves and the have-nots in the country. This is playing out in the industry because this is a soft target. It's not about making movies or getting a break. You want to be a star, you want to be invited to that party, and nobody can help you with that."<sup>4</sup> Commentators concur that several strident 'outsiders'



complaining about nepotism sound like high school kids who are not invited to a party or are envious for not being part of some cool group.

Sunny Deol, an enormously popular and beloved actor who has been around for four decades, belongs to one of the most respected families in the business. He has a simple take, something that reflects the wider society's propensity to make largely family-based professional choices. "What is wrong if a father wants to do something for his son or daughter? If not his family, then who is the father working for?"<sup>5</sup> Naseeruddin Shah, himself a rank outsider when he started decades ago, seems to agree with Sunny. "I don't understand why only the film industry has been accused of this. People in other industries do it as well. You don't see people creating a major debate when businessmen put their kids in charge of their business. Or you don't say anything to politicians who help their kids get into politics?"<sup>6</sup> he asks. -

#### **Access: Nothing more than a foot in the door?**

Javed Akhtar, the legendary scriptwriter and lyricist articulates this line of thinking more succinctly. "Inheritance cannot be called nepotism. I think people are confusing inheritance with nepotism. In the film industry, nepotism is not possible because ultimately, the person who is buying the ticket at the box office is the voter and that cannot be rigged. Maybe somebody born in a film family has a foot in the door, but that's about all,"<sup>7</sup> Akhtar says.

Aditya Chopra, one of the most successful filmmakers whose company Yashraj Films (YRF) has launched many non-film-family talents that went on to become wildly successful, recently addressed the nepotism debate. He said, "My brother (Uday Chopra) is an actor, and he is not a very successful actor. Imagine a company like YRF that has launched newcomers, we could not make him a star. The bottom line is, only an audience can decide 'I like this person, I want to see this person'. No one else. If you are born into a film family, there is no doubt that there could be an easier in, into getting an audition or a break. But it stops there."<sup>8</sup>

The comment about privilege being nothing more than a foot in the door is repeated by many from established film families, but it is perhaps not the whole truth. 'Access', which the film families downplay as 'just a foot in the door', is a distant dream for many who live in the hope of being noticed by a filmmaker.

The lack of sensitivity and denial of privilege is almost as big a problem, as the privilege itself. Take for instance this comment made by Varun Dhawan in an interview: "They (the outsiders) are acting as if their father hasn't even bought a pencilbox for them. After a point, it just becomes an excuse." Sonam Kapoor, for example, has rarely acknowledged how easy it has been for her or her brother to get big breaks. She was considered for her first film, *Saawariya*, because she could be an Assistant Director to Sanjay Leela Bhansali largely on account of her family background. Her brother Harshvardhan Kapoor was launched by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra in *Mirzya* after Mehra spotted him when Kapoor was chilling on the sets of *Delhi 6*, a film which Mehra directed and Sonam acted in.<sup>9</sup> No outsider-struggler can imagine 'just chilling' on a set so they may be 'spotted' by an ace director; they are more familiar with being asked to email their portfolio and being shooed away by security.

The struggle of making it in the film industry is more fundamental, as recognized by Vivan Shah, actor and son of Naseeruddin Shah. In a sensitive and gracious response to the accusation of nepotism, he says, "A second-generation person like myself must never forget that he is a second-generation person. He must never be defensive when someone reminds him of it. He must be conscious of it, and be grateful and aware of the privilege and benefits that he has enjoyed. He must learn to put himself in the shoes of one



who is not as fortunate, and learn to look at the world through those eyes. I am not a person who has come from a small town, who has no contacts in this town and in this business, who has to fend for himself, who has to strive to acquire three square meals a day, who has to battle to find a roof over his head, who has to face the slings and arrows of a hostile world. I must never forget that. If I do, then I am an idiot and a brat, and a person who lacks consciousness. Of course, the term nepotism has been politicized, exploited and manipulated by the right-wing lunatics and Bollywood bashers to fulfill their own sinister agenda, but does that mean that it is not a significant subject that must be addressed?"<sup>10</sup>

“Only a foot in the door” is a claim belied also by the repeated opportunity that star-kids get despite failure. In an industry driven by private enterprise, producers will continue to bet on the audiences’ curiosity about say, Aamir Khan’s son or Shah Rukh Khan’s daughter. The media and the audience as well as social media consumers all contribute to perpetuating the name-recognition and bankability of a star kid in comparison to an unknown face.

### **Bullying and Groupism**

Karan Johar, the influential producer-director and anchor of the chat show Koffee with Karan has been famously accused of being ‘the flagbearer of nepotism’ on the same show by actress Kangana Ranaut, mainly for working largely with friends and their children, but also, significantly, for using his show to publicly mock and humiliate actors not part of his inner circle. Groupism and cliquish behaviour on the part of the sons and daughters of movie stars that have grown up knowing each other is a big factor in creating a strong feeling of exclusion.

Kangana Ranaut seems to have updated her stand recently, recognizing the bullying and social exclusion by the ‘insiders’ as the real problem. "Nepotism was never my problem. The problem was ganging up on outsiders because of nepotism. There is a difference. If you are doing your job quietly, no problem. But to say that these are outsiders and shouldn't be here because this is our forefathers' place, isn't it wrong?"<sup>11</sup> She asks.

Dorothy Suskind, an assistant professor at Longwood University in Virginia, writes in Psychology Today, “Bullies often create an inner circle of compliant colleagues who will not threaten their reign, while purposefully excluding talented and curious employees who could question them. Exclusion is effective in reaching this goal, for humans’ innate need to belong makes some willing to abandon their values and beliefs in order to gain access to the inner circle.” Social exclusion is enacted in many ways: by disclosing any sensitive, marginalizing information bullies may have about their target, by spreading lies about the target, by shaming their target in public or by purposefully leaving people out with the deliberate intention of hurting them through exclusion.<sup>12</sup>

On one of the episodes of Koffee with Karan, Sonam Kapoor was asked to name an actor who needed to improve their English-speaking skills. Sonam named Kangana. In another episode, Kangana was asked if she had ‘worked on herself’, in a suggestive way that could have made her uncomfortable.<sup>13</sup> In a similar instance, Kareena Kapoor, another Karan Johar insider made fun of Priyanka Chopra and asked, “Where did PC get that accent from?” Sushant Singh Rajput, a talented actor who had worked his way up in the industry without any connections reportedly took his own life. One of the reasons that led to his sense of despair was, allegedly, the bullying and exclusion that he faced at the hands of a powerful ‘insider’ lobby.<sup>14</sup>

Priyanka Chopra, a top star in India who left for Hollywood ten years ago at the peak of her stardom in



India, said recently, “I was being pushed into a corner in the industry(in India). I had people not casting me, I had beef with people. I am not good at playing that game so I was tired of the politics and I said I needed a break. ...I would be required to schmooze certain clubs and cliques of people. It would require groveling and I had worked a long time by then that I didn’t feel like I wanted to do it.”<sup>15</sup>

Filmmaker Vivek Agnihotri, a vocal critic of the dominant cliques praised Priyanka Chopra for not giving in to the “gang of bullies” in the Hindi film industry. Agnihotri wrote that when “big bullies” harass, some people “kneel down, some surrender, some take drugs”. The filmmaker also claimed that some people have also lost their lives to the bullying. Against the “impossible to defeat gang of bullies,” Agnihotri claimed, very few have stood firm on their ground and mounted a success story. “Those are the real-life stars,” he added.<sup>16</sup>

### **Interpersonal Skills and Networking**

There are always two sides to a story. Zoya Akhtar is heard saying, in another discussion on the topic, “I am of the firm belief that if you are very talented and you still haven’t been able to make it, it is because you are doing something wrong with your behaviour or attitude. It is the only reason why people won’t work with you. It is a very tedious job. A regular shooting day is 14 work hours and you don’t want to go to the set and work with someone who is going to harass you.”<sup>17</sup>

Sure enough, there have been reports that Sushant was temperamental, depressive and given to substance abuse.<sup>18</sup> Priyanka was said to have overclaimed proximity to Shah Rukh Khan through planted media stories, a grave transgression that would have sullied the superstar’s rock-solid family man image. This perceived threat led his friends and family to close ranks against Priyanka in a bid to protect Shah Rukh.<sup>19</sup> Kangana Ranaut has not exactly been known for winning friends in the industry. The slogan of ‘nepotism’ has become a large carpet under which many interpersonal issues are possibly being brushed.

Spokespersons for the ‘outsiders’ camp cite the continuing careers of several star-kids, despite multiple flops and a perceived lack of acting talent. Critics are alleged to give them favourable reviews on the back of old relationships with their parents. Industry insiders on the other hand are quick to point out that some of the industry’s biggest stars are first-generation performers, naming Shah Rukh Khan, Katrina Kaif and Siddharth Malhotra as prominent examples.

It is notable that each of these ‘outsiders’ named above forged strong personal relationships with at least one powerful film producer or actor in the early part of their careers: Shah Rukh with Yash Chopra, Katrina Kaif with Salman Khan and his family and Siddharth Malhotra with Karan Johar. This seeming ‘adoption’ of the outsiders as one of their own by the film families may have played a strong role in the growth of their respective careers. Aditya Chopra, of the famous Chopra lineage, and Anurag Kashyap, a first-generation producer-director, have *both* emerged as major promoters of new talent. The importance of mentoring is well understood and established in the corporate world, but perhaps not as well understood by the larger society. Networking, socializing in parties, or forging personal relationships may be looked down upon by some newcomers as ‘schmoozing’, making it out to be a compromise with personal pride. It is likely that newcomers who harnessed the power of mentorship early in their careers ended up getting a steady stream of work that helped them create a firm foothold in the industry. Those perceived to be standoffish, on the other hand, possibly found it harder to assimilate, and continue to feel like ‘outsiders.’

### **Changing Times: Plenty of Opportunity**

In reality, this polarising debate may already be past its sell-by date, at least in the Mumbai film industry. The explosion of OTT platforms in the last five years has demanded enormous content output, leading to



the opening up of acting, directing, editing, music scoring, cinematography and other opportunities in numbers unimaginable a few years ago. With so much work to go around, there are plenty of good, starring roles that are available purely through audition. Wamiqa Gabbi and Sidhant Gupta gained overnight stardom following the success of their Amazon Primeshow Jubilee. Vijay Varma and Gulshan Devaiah broke through with *Dahaad*, another show on Prime. Jaydeep Ahlawat earned a fan-following with *Pataal Lok*. Radhika Apte, Shreya Dhanwantary and Shobhita Dhulipala are stars in their own right, all on the back of several successful web series. The list goes on. Freed from the pressure of a strong ‘opening’ – big box office numbers over the first weekend of theatrical release that only a major star can pull – OTT shows are throwing up a slew of talent in all shapes and shades.

Professional, structural support systems are another welcome change. With the rise of professionally managed casting and talent agencies, multinational studios such as Fox, Viacom and Disney, and commissioning platforms such as Hotstar, Netflix and Amazon Prime, casting choices are driven less by personal relationships and more by the demand of the script and the creative vision of the makers. Earlier, casting agents were not seen in the best light. Casting director Mukesh Chhabra who has introduced several newcomers through his long list of projects including *Dangal* and *The Gangs of Wasseypur*, seems to have added authenticity back to the profession. “I want to give respect to their job.... Establishing an authentic casting company helped to eradicate casting couch fears. If an outsider like me can become an insider here, then anybody can become an insider. Rajkumar, Kartik Aaryan (his discoveries), everyone is an outsider. In fact, outsiders have taken over Bollywood since time immemorial,”<sup>20</sup> he says.

A fundamental difference between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ years ago would be the difference in professional training. Most supporting and cameo parts in the Hindi film industry have usually gone to actors trained for years on the stage, at the prestigious National School of Drama in Delhi, or at the Pune-based Film and Television Institute of India. The leading man roles, however, would go to star sons who were thought to be conventionally better looking, wore better clothes, attended dance classes, learnt to ride and maintained gym-toned bodies. An Old Rep (Birmingham) Theatre-trained Sunny Deol was the exception, rather than the norm.

This is changing too. The emergence of Manoj Bajpayee, Irrfan Khan, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Rajkumar Rao, Radhika Apte, Shobhita Dhulipala, Vidya Balan and Shefaly Shah has broken the ‘conventional’ mould of what a leading man or leading lady needs to look like. On the other side, scions of film families are also investing time and energy in training to become actors rather than relying purely on starry demeanour. There is greater mindfulness too. Shah Rukh Khan’s son, Aryan, a filmmaker by education, has for now chosen to stay away from acting to focus on filmmaking, in an apparent bid to deflect allegations of favouritism and to avoid comparisons with his supernova father.

### **They are all related!**

An Internet-based research carried out in the course of writing this piece throws up an interesting discovery. A vast majority of the famous names in the Hindi film industry are all somehow related to each other through a *single, unbroken* network of relationships – offspring, siblings, cousins, spouses. So it turns out that the Kapoors, the Sippy’s, Manmohan Desai, Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Guru Dutt, Mehmood, Meena Kumari, Amitabh Bachchan, Feroze and Sanjay Khan, Dharmendra and Hema Malini, Kajol and Ajay Devgan, Javed Akhtar and Shabana Azmi, Rajesh Khanna and Dimple Kapadia, Mahesh Bhatt, Rekha, Akshay Kumar, Anupam Kher, Siddharth Malhotra, Varun Dhawan, Zeenat Aman, Sanjay Dutt, Anil Kapoor and Satyajit Ray

- yes, the great man himself – are *all* distantly related to each other. One way of looking at this is to



agree with the notion that the Hindi film industry is largely a ‘family’ enterprise, with high entry barriers for those without connections. There is another perspective too: This single family tree is a great testimony to the tremendous inclusivity of the Hindi film industry, into which first-generation performers such as Siddharth Malhotra, Tilottama Shome, Akshay Kumar and Kunal Kapoor are able to assimilate both professionally as well as personally. The fact that religious, regional or community-based divisions have not mattered in the industry has always been well-known. All faiths reflected on a single large family tree is a strong reason to believe that the Hindi film industry continues, despite some contrary voices in recent years, to remain a torchbearer for progressive and inclusive values.

There are no easy answers to the nepotism debate. The last word must go to Gulshan Devaiah, who, despite claiming to have lost roles because of those with ‘veto power’ confesses he never felt like an outsider. Simply, but ultimately, most profoundly, he just wishes that ‘people were a little nicer to each other.’<sup>3</sup>

### Endnotes

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