

After playing the role of a young lover in several romantic films, he got tagged as the best entertainer in the country. But Shah Rukh Khan has surprised everyone with his latest 'Chak De! India' where his performance as a hockey coach establishes him as a mature actor in Bollywood.

If writer Jaideep Sahni and director Shimit Amin are getting accolades for making such an unconventional film, Shah Rukh too is winning praise for his natural performance as Kabir Khan, the disgraced hockey player who tries to redeem his prestige by coaching the women's hockey team and making them winners.

Those who thought 'Swades' was Shah Rukh's best performance, as an Indian American NASA scientist who comes home on a visit only to get involved in development projects in a village, will be surprised with his emoting in 'Chak De! India'.

While fans say they are proud of him for choosing an unusual film like this, critics are raving about how effortlessly he plays a coach who travels to glory from gloom.

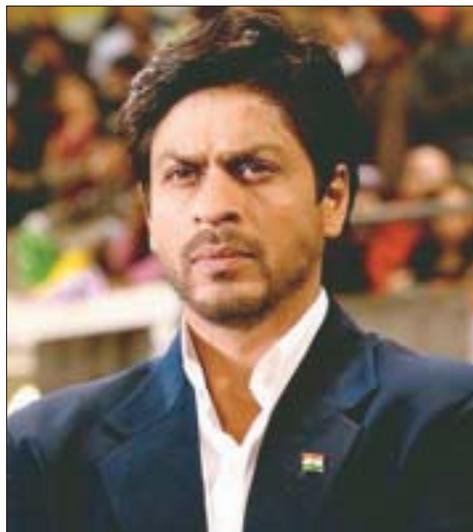
Critic Andy Webster in his review in *New York Times* writes: "For his part, Mr. Khan, to his credit, lets his co-stars' youthful charisma carry the movie. He also laudably portrays a man who vigorously and unabashedly advocates the advancement of women."

The film is based on former India goalkeeper Mir Ranjan Negi who lost his glory after conceding several goals in a match against Pakistan in the 1982 Asian Games

final. He was dropped from the team. Negi returned to the hockey field, most grudgingly, 16 years later as a goalkeeping coach and helped India in winning the 1998 Asian Games men's gold at Bangkok and the women's gold at the Manchester Commonwealth Games in 2002.

Shah Rukh convincingly portrays the shame, disillusionment of the disgraced hockey player and determination to win back his prestige. Negi, who was roped in as a technical director of the film, said he was impressed by Shah Rukh's performance. He is a fine actor and evoked the right emotions in the movie. He has done justice to the role, Negi said.

Aditya Chopra's mega hit 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge' gave the actor the yuppie romantic hero image, and other hits like



'Dil To Paagal Hai', 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai' and 'Kal Ho Naa Ho' built on that persona. Soon Shah Rukh became a superhero and directors began to concentrate on his image, mannerisms and style. As a result, he never got enough chance to prove his versatility as one who could ably play non-conventional roles.

Film critic Anumpama Chopra's recently released book *King of Bollywood: Shah Rukh Khan and the Seductive World of Indian Cinema* reveals that diverse roles give Shah Rukh creative satisfaction.

The actor, who is often accused of playing safe and not working with untried directors, played negative roles in 'Baazigar' and 'Darr'. He has tried to play unconventional roles — in 'Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani', as a journalist, in 'Asoka', a historical, and 'Devdas', as an alcoholic lover. But the films, though appreciated, didn't benefit him much.

But it was Ashotosh Gowariker's 'Swades' which was the turning point in his career, which critics described as his coming of age. His performance as NASA scientist Mohan Bhargava didn't show a single trace of his iconic attitude. He immersed himself in his character and wowed both critics and fans.

People can go on arguing whether Aamir Khan or Irrfan Khan or Amitabh Bachchan is a better actor than Shah Rukh, but the fact remains that the superstar is being accepted as the best and one shouldn't underestimate his potential.

Such is the performance of Shah Rukh as Kabir Khan that it will live with the audience for a long time. ■