



After a long journey, Saif gets his due in Bollywood

It has been a long journey for Saif Ali Khan! From the pampered scion of a Nawab family to one of Bollywood's most versatile actors and a serious contender for the No. 1 spot, Saif has truly emerged triumphant at the turnstiles.

Saif's debut in Umesh Mehra's 'Aashiq Awara' in 1993 didn't earn him accolades, rather some negative comments were aired about his looks and appearance. No wonder he remained in the zone of the probable for so many years. Looking gawky, ill at ease and out of sorts in a series of post-debut films, Saif all but finished off his career.

He was and remains to a large extent a Khan from the outside. Aamir Khan and Salman Khan belong to film families. And despite being a Delhi dude Shah Rukh Khan is more of an insider in the industry today than any other actor. Yes, Saif has his mother Sharmila Tagore. But moms don't count much in Bollywood.

There're many stories about how insecure he would get on the sets of Karan Johar's 'Kal Ho Naa Ho'. But Saif denies them.

He said: "You know I get paranoid about every movie. I knew from the start that Shah Rukh would be the pivot of the film. But I knew I had great lines and a great role. I was never made to feel Shah Rukh was more important to the project. I went with very clear expectations. It was a civilised unit. Everyone was young and fun. I didn't feel like an outsider at all. I never did, though I was from outside Mumbai."

He says he never felt any need to be a part of any particular camp. "I was always warned

about camps and groups. And I always felt there was some strength to be gained from standing alone, and not being part of any camp. But at the same time if you look at it I'm quite a Yash Raj boy, in many ways.

"I started my career with Yashji in 'Parampara'. He saw my first screen test. My first hit 'Yeh Dillagi' was also connected with Yash Raj Films. The way they work suits me. I'm not expected to socialise with them. So the whole 'camp' thing is quite a myth for me. Really, Karan Johar and Yash Raj Films have spoilt me."

'Omkaara' was definitely a new beginning. When Vishal Bharadwaj zeroed in on him to play the Indian Iago, Saif was, as usual, unsure. He never says an outright yes to any role, not even when it comes to a film like Farhan Akhtar's 'Dil Chahta Hai'. That film clearly was the turning point in his career.

Farhan was sure he wanted only Saif to play



the confused, naïve and confounded Sameer. As usual Saif wasn't convinced. Four years later, Saif was the same indecisive entity, when Bharadwaj offered him Langda Tyagi.

"I was in Jaipur. And I began to think about how Vishal came down here to narrate 'Omkaara' to me. One morning I was sitting on a beautiful lawn in Jaipur's Rambagh Palace with no work to do. Vishal was sitting in front of me. At that point of time I was wondering why I was being offered a negative role. Vishal really pushed me. He told me he was worried because it was an important part. From getting me to cut my hair to delivering my lines properly... he was quite paranoid.

"Initially, I read my character's lines with a bit of an English accent. Looking back, I could've taken it even further. But it was correct timing. Everything fell into place."

Siddharth Anand, who's a close buddy, gave Saif's career as a leading man a further boost with 'Salaam Namaste'. Siddharth thinks Saif is constantly doing roles that challenge him to make his presence felt. Saif admits he's incapable of enjoying the gift of the present. "Perhaps. But at least I'm conscious of it. I'm always anxious about the future."

"On the sets of 'Omkaara' people would say there were four National Award winners. My first impulse would be to wonder who was the fourth after Vishal, Ajay Devgan and Konkona Sen. Then I'd realise, 'Oh shit, the fourth National Award winner is actually me!'"

Saif has the final word. "I may seem like a bundle of contradictions most of the time. But there's a method to my madness which is apparent only to me a lot of times." ■