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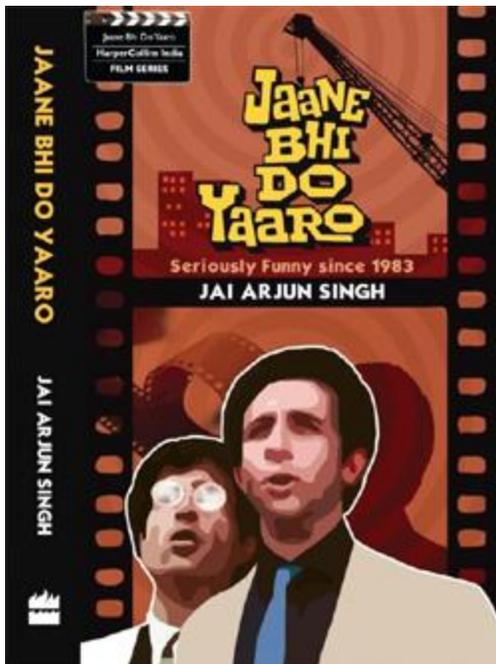
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BOOK REVIEW JAANE BHI DO YAARO: SERIOUSLY FUNNY SINCE 1983

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Author: Jai Arjun Singh
Publisher: Harper Collins India Film Series
Pages: 272 Price: \$23.50 (on Amazon)/ Rs. 295

Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro (1983, directed by Kundan Shah) has enjoyed cult status across generations for over two decades, an unprecedented success for what was essentially a small budget, government-funded production that did not fall under the rubric of most recognised genres of popular Bombay Cinema. Known for its unconventional screenplay and non-formulaic humour, the film poses a challenge to anyone trying to unpack what is essentially a very individual film. It is therefore rather surprising, given its unique success story, to find that apart from very brief mentions on various online sources and general books on cinema there is a notable absence of any detailed engagement with the film in both academic and popular discourse.

Jai Arjun Singh's *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro: Seriously Funny Since 1983* (2010) is perhaps the first book-length publication that attempts to fill this gap. It takes a detailed behind-the-scenes look at the making of *JBDY* and chronicles the many twists and turns that in the end seem to be an

indelible part of what made the film unique. Adopting an intimate and conversational writing style, Singh gives the reader a very subjective take on the making of the film that serves to enhance our appreciation of the film and its complicated and multilayered production process.

The book traces the journey of *JBDY* which Singh researched over a period of four months in Bombay. It begins with a brief context of the period in which *JBDY* was first publicly circulated through Doordarshan – India’s premier television channel those days and the principal vehicle for all productions of the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC). Singh begins the journey of *JBDY* through a mini biography of Kundan Shah as he struggled to become a film director, going against his family’s wishes to study film direction at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune. It also looks at his early cinematic influences including a growing fascination with comedy, the making of his thesis film which helped him develop the comic form, to finally, the writing of a screenplay for the NFDC that became *JBDY*. The production section is remarkable in its attention to detail and in working through the many problems encountered during the process of shooting without losing sight of the final result on celluloid. It also highlights how off-screen problems and chaos in production found their way into the performances and the overall look of the film with mixed results. The section on post-production is perhaps the least developed of all, failing to provide the kind of personal details that mark the texture and tone of the rest of the book. It does, however, pay significant tribute to the film’s editor whose skill authored the way the final film was able to overcome the many oversights of the shooting process. Singh acknowledges all the imperfections that, despite best efforts, remain part of the final film. For people who know the film well this is a frank assessment of some of the film’s shortcomings. The last section, predictably, looks at the legacy of *JBDY*. Kundan Shah regrettably never managed to replicate the promise of his first venture; but the biggest disappointment perhaps rests in the fact that, despite *JBDY*’s obvious success, Bombay Cinema as a whole did not adopt satire as a viable popular form for several years. The section summarises how the less stringent cultural and political climate when *JBDY* was initially released probably helped the film to get away with its many irreverent references to religious / communal texts which, in contemporary times, would almost definitely be regarded as offensive and most likely censored out of the final print. The book then ends the story of *JBDY* almost as it began – by reaffirming its unique place in the history of Bombay Cinema with an influence that, though widely acknowledged and well-known, could never be replicated.

Jai Arjun Singh’s book takes a large step in bringing a full-length study of a popular film to the casual viewer of cinema and it is important to define the context of the publication in order to understand better what the book accomplishes within that framework. *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*:

Seriously Funny Since 1983 is one of three commissioned publications of the recently launched Film Series by Harper Collins India. The series attempts to enter into the market's burgeoning interest in popular films and to bridge the gap between two diverse types of writing that have so far dominated the publications on film: on the one hand, scholarly writing on cinema that is largely inaccessible to the public and on the other, glossy accounts of film stars and the industry that lack any in-depth discussion. According to the commissioning editor of the series the initiative was to publish book-length monographs each about a single film written by film enthusiasts who may not necessarily be film scholars. The books therefore reflect the authors' individual perspectives and intellectual positions regarding cinema and have so far produced varied results. An article published by one of Delhi's cultural events magazine describes the books in the series: *Deewaar: The Footpath, The City and The Angry Young Man* by Vinay Lal is an "academic deconstruction" of Yash Chopra's iconic family melodrama, comic writer Anuvab Pal's *Disco Dancer: A Comedy in Five Acts* is an entertaining and affectionate reading of the film while journalist and blogger Jai Arjun Singh's *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro: Seriously Funny Since 1983* is a behind-the-scenes chronicling of the making of Kundan Shah's cult comedy.¹ Clearly, the writers' different perspectives ranging from the academic to the journalistic inform not only the writing style but also the methodology adopted by the books of this series.

Prior to the Harper Collins series there were only a handful of book-length publications on popular Indian films, some of which are published by the British Film Institute (BFI). In fact, the BFI Film Classics series, which has published over a hundred titles under its banner, may well have been the inspiration behind the Harper Collins Film Series. However, the BFI's reputation as an institution that supports cinema as a serious art form is already well-established and its publications, although diverse in their approach, respond equally to academics as well as keen cineastes. On the other hand, Harper Collins still seems to be in the process of testing the waters for readership in a country where cinema is still largely considered 'only' entertainment.

It is these contexts that define the circulation and reception of Jai Arjun Singh's book. For a *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* fan, this book offers plenty to enjoy in terms of details which are engagingly written and greatly add to our appreciation of the film. What the book manages to achieve, and achieves well, is mapping the chaos of the film text with the chaos of its production. It accomplishes this through a combination of writing style that emphasises the conversational texture placing the reader in the midst of the narrative and also through its methodology that maps the sequence of events in a chronological manner foregrounding the randomness of the process rather than attempting to structure it into theoretical or intellectual categories. The choice of this methodological structure focuses on the empirical and Singh's own interpretive texture in

certain sections fills in the gaps that Kundan Shah and other team members were unable to. The book is written for those who know the film well and are looking to further enjoy the pleasures that the film provided.

There are however a few significant points that the book has overlooked or chosen not to address in detail which, in a book-length study of a single film, are noticeable slips. Locating the film within a larger political, social and even cinematic structure is the major lack that emerges which, had it been addressed, would have greatly added to appreciating the film in a larger context. While the book mentions political satire, black comedy, slapstick, surrealism, it does little to locate *JBDY* within any of these frames of reference. In retrospective view of the politically turbulent 1980s, there is a significant void in providing an intellectual or political reading to a film that has been heralded as one of the few political satires that the Bombay film industry has produced. Singh makes it clear that the film's director Kundan Shah himself was not overtly interested in the "deeper meaning" of his film. However, given that Singh makes several subjective interpretative forays into the narrative reading of *JBDY* this too is an area that he could have taken on in a similar manner. For the most part the book does not diverge very much from the chronological script that the director himself provides. At the end of the book the reader has most likely re-lived the film's best moments in a humorous way and knows how certain events unfolded but is most likely no closer to understanding its layered text and how it integrates with the social-political scenario of its time. One of the reasons why films like *JBDY* resonate with people across generations has to be, although the book does not say so, a broader contextual and perhaps metaphoric framework that is embedded within deeper political and cultural factors an understanding of which would have given greater density to a book that otherwise does so much in enhancing our appreciation for an already well received and popular film.

About the Reviewer: Radha Dayal holds a Master's degree in Film Studies from King's College London and an undergraduate degree in Architecture. Currently she is pursuing her PhD at the University of Westminster where she is working on the marginal elements in the narrative and form of Bombay Cinema.

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Notes

ⁱ From *First City* magazine, March 2011. Available at: <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-wpzB4tV76sA/TXizydbANZI/AAAAAAAAAC0I/iNiCd5wBaZM/s1600/firstcity.jpg>