

Shah Rukh Khan: The Return of the King

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December 22, 2023

The three blockbuster films delivered by the Bollywood heartthrob show a definite turn in his oeuvre



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5 min read Last Updated : Dec 22 2023 | 3:53 PM IST

On 2 October 2021, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) arrested then-24-year-old Aryan Khan, an Indian entrepreneur and son of Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan, from a cruise ship off the coast of Mumbai for alleged possession of contraband substances. He would spend over 20 days behind bars before being granted bail by the Bombay High Court, and finally given a clean chit by the NCB next year. During this period, both Aryan and his more famous father would be subjected to a visceral media trial conducted both in the mainstream media and social media that has been described by legal scholars as a sort of “moral panic”.

Journalist Barkha Dutt wrote in The Washington Post that Shah Rukh Khan, who had spoken out against rising Islamophobia in India following the lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in 2015, had been silenced by online trolls targeting him and his films. “Khan’s middle-class roots, interfaith love marriage to a Hindu woman, full-throated embrace of multiculturalism and sardonic humour are among the many factors that made him a symbol of all that is bright,

brilliant and possible about India and its pluralism,” claimed Dutt. “Now, his heart-breaking transition to a sad, apologetic and, above all, silent public figure captures all that is being corroded, debased and devalued in India today.”

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The moral panic around Aryan Khan’s alleged drug use should be understood in the context of the media frenzy that erupted the previous year after the death of the actor Sushant Singh Rajput. [An empirical study](#) by several media studies scholars, analysing content from YouTube, Twitter and debunked disinformation, showed that politicians and political entrepreneurs benefitted from changing the discourse around Rajput’s death by referring to it as “murder” instead of “suicide”. The swirling campaigns purportedly aimed at delivering justice to Rajput and his family villainized certain sections of Bollywood for their alleged hedonistic lifestyles and nepotistic industry practices.

Poet, journalist and film producer Pritish Nandy, in an [article](#) for the New York Times, wrote that the vilification of Bollywood was a well-orchestrated distraction to take the public attention away from the failure of the government to deal effectively with the Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on the economy. At the time of Aryan Khan’s arrest, Shah Rukh Khan (SRK) seemed particularly vulnerable. One of the most successful actor-producers of Bollywood, with a global fandom, SRK had failed to deliver a box office hit for many years. His last film, Zero (Aanand L. Rai, 2018) had been panned by critics and audiences for its outlandish story of a short-statured man from Meerut becoming a NASA astronaut.

SRK has, however, this year crafted one of the most remarkable comeback stories, releasing three back-to-back blockbusters that have not only resuscitated his career but also breathed life into a moribund Hindi film industry, reeling from the effects of the pandemic. First came Pathan, directed by Siddharth Anand and also starring Deepika Padukone, John Abraham and Salman Khan in an extended cameo, in January. A high-octane spy drama, it also seriously undermined the effect of the Boycott Bollywood brigade that became active around its release.

SRK followed it up with Jawan, another action thriller directed by Atlee, which, [according to some critics](#), the very essence of a “massy, pan-Indian cinema”, which did not shy away from referring to issues such as farmer suicides, failing health care, and corporate-political nexus. A popular dialogue from the film, “Bete ko hath lagane se pehle, baap se baat kar” (Before touching the son, deal with the father)”, was instantly picked up by the fans as his [response](#) to Aryan Khan’s arrest. And now comes, Dunki, directed by Rajkumar Hirani, which has already [earned Rs 30 crore](#) after releasing on Thursday – short of the first-day earnings of Pathaan and Jawan, but still very much on its way to becoming a box office success.

The chart below demonstrates just how successful SRK has been this year, even without including Dunki:

Highest-grossing Indian films of 2023

(All figures are in Rs crore)

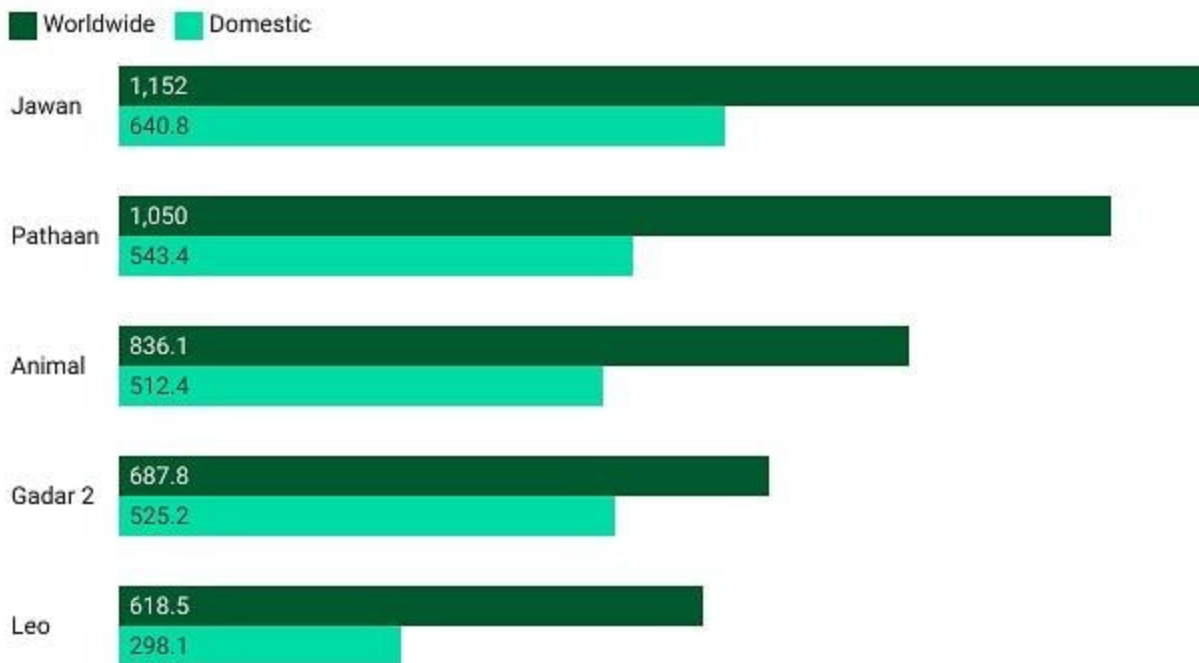


Chart: Uttaran Das Gupta • Source: IMDB • Created with Datawrapper

The cumulative worldwide earning of *Jawan* and *Pathaan* is Rs 2,202 crore – higher than the cumulative earning of the next three films, at Rs 2,142.4 crore. While *Animal* is still running in cinemas and might alter this hierarchy, it is unlikely that any lead it achieves will significantly overtake SRK’s films. Domestically, the cumulative earnings of *Animal*, *Gadar 2*, and *Leo* at Rs 1,335.7 crore is higher than the two SRK-starters at Rs 1,184.2. But *Dunki* still has the potential to buck this trend.

Literary scholar Ananya Jahanara Kabir, in an [essay](#) published earlier, compares *Pathaan* with Salman Rushdie’s novel *Victory City*, and claims that these texts mark the “ecstatic return” of the Indian Muslim on the 75th anniversary of the country’s independence from colonial rule. “Instead of relinquishing that category or behaving as deemed appropriate for it by majoritarian forces, both deliver a congruent manifesto of what I am calling ‘ecstatic return,’ marked by charisma, braggadocio, and swag,” writes Kabir. In some ways, it is a celebration of the cosmopolitan, syncretic, urbane and secular Muslim man in the cultural sphere. How sustainable is it? Only time can tell.

The writer is a New Delhi-based writer and journalist. He teaches journalism at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat