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**“Stardust has always told facts, not gossip!” An interview with Nari Hira, founding editor of Stardust Magazine**

Piyush Roy

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## **“*Stardust* has always told facts, not gossip!”**

### **An interview with Nari Hira, founding editor of *Stardust* Magazine**

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University of Edinburgh, [piyusroy@gmail.com](mailto:piyusroy@gmail.com)

For 100 years, Indian cinema and its galaxy of stars have defined the drama on screen for generations of viewers and fans across the globe. For nearly half that time span, India’s leading film magazine in English (and Hindi), *Stardust*, has been a much ‘trusted’ source for some equally engaging real life drama ‘revolving’ around the lives of Bollywood’s bold and beautiful off screen. The rise of *Stardust* is a unique single-magazine driven 20<sup>th</sup> century media success story, that made Magna Publishing Co. Ltd. one of the largest magazine groups in India long before other publishing houses joined the trend of diversifying risk with myriad theme publications. Loved and loathed by its star subjects, consumed to addiction by its readers, and aspired for by journalists as a valuable and influential access to the film industry, *Stardust* remains for its founder-editor, Nari Hira – a legacy, an alter ego, and an attitude to reporting that continues to make headlines in a far more competitive and crowded space since its near monopolistic success for over two decades with a circulation of peak 300,000 plus copies and annual issues sold in ‘black’. Breaking film industry scoops may no longer be exclusive to *Stardust*, but a presence on its cover page still remains a dearly desired honour for many film stars. In a free and frank interview Piyush Roy, former Editor of *StarWeek* and *Stardust*, talks to Nari Hira, the uncrowned pioneer of ‘tabloid journalism in India’ and Chairman & Managing Director of the Magna Publishing Co. Ltd. on four decades of the *Stardust* impact story and how and why could it shape and set the agenda for film journalism in India, apart from making writing in ‘Hinglish’ acceptable and fashionable. Fresh insights are also provided on what went behind the making of some of Bollywood’s biggest scoops of the last 50 years

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**Piyush Roy: How was the Indian film magazine scene in the 1970s around the launch of *Stardust*<sup>1</sup>?**

Nari Hira: There used to be a lot of competition in the film magazine space in those days. There were magazines like *Filmfare*, *Star & Style*, *Picture Post*, *Film World* and few other smaller publications themed around cinema. But I found that all of them, especially the leading ones like *Filmfare*, were basically PR (Public Relations) magazines. You would have elaborate photo features showing Waheeda Rehman, Nanda and Sadhna<sup>2</sup> sitting and making sand castles in Mumbai's Juhu beach. It was pathetic reading with hardly any content of genuine interest. My background was advertising. I was born, bred and brought up in South Bombay. I was not an avid Hindi movie watcher like to the extent of an average Indian fan, but we did know a Feroze Khan<sup>3</sup> at the Derby, and the likes. We had a snobbish attitude towards Indian movie stars. But I had always wondered why no one was writing anything about their private lives, which the general public is interested about the most.

**PR: How did the first cover story come about and what did it reveal about the focus, attitude and USP (Unique Selling Proposition) of the magazine at its 'birth'?**

<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted at Mr. Nari Hira's Mumbai-based office, Magna House on 22 May, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Leading Hindi cinema heroines of the 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> A leading Bollywood film hero of late 1960s and 1970s known for his flamboyant lifestyle.



**Figure 1.** Veteran Bollywood star Dharmendra with Nari Hira at the MAX *Stardust* Awards 2008 held on January 27, 2008

NH: In the 1970s, Shobhaa<sup>4</sup> (De) used to work with me, in the copy department of my advertising agency, Creative Unit. One fine day, I told her, 'Do you want to get out of here since you are not getting along with the executives you are working with?' She hated them and they hated her, it was kind of a mutual dislike. So to find a noble way out for her, we decided on this magazine, designed the *Stardust* logo. Until today we are using the same logo that we had started 40 plus years ago and I worked on the headlines of our first 'breaking' story on Rajesh Khanna. He was 'the reigning star' in those days, and the biggest curiosity around him was whether he was married or not? We published a story declaring that he was 'secretly married'. At that time we knew Anju Mahendroo<sup>5</sup> and her mother, who happily fed us the story because she wanted Rajesh to marry Anju.

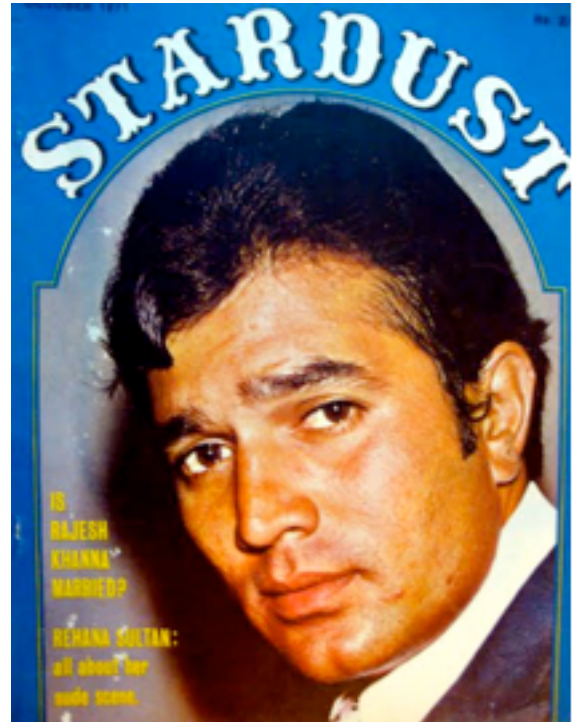
<sup>4</sup> Former Editor of *Stardust*, columnist and author of popular fiction.

<sup>5</sup> Hindi film model and actress from the 1970s, who went on to become a popular television star.

So we started the first issue sitting in the offices of Creative Unit with a team of rookie journalists, who incidentally ended up being some of the best journalists we ever had. It was pure luck. Ingrid Albuquerque, Uma Rao, Binoy Thomas... the names that everyone remembers, and Vanita Ghosh, who joined little later – they all took to the job like a duck takes to water. They used to go out and find the stories, while Shobhaa and I, sat in the office, adding and subtracting to their inputs quite happily and thus *Stardust* was born. The cover story – *Was Rajesh Khanna Secretly Married?* – was a shocker! While other magazines were priced at Rs. 1, we priced ourselves at Rs. 2 and went on the stands. I took hoardings all over India and we sold 25,000 copies in three days. Such figures in so short a time were absolutely unheard of at that time! Since then, there has been no looking back and the rest as they say is history. We looked at our product and said that now we could do whatever we want.

**PR: Had you anticipated such a phenomenal take-off?**

NH: Yes, I was very sure that it was going to happen. I was basically a marketing person. Copy was my forte, as I used to write advertising copies. So I knew what the hunger must be for the people to know what's happening behind the screen in the lives of their idols. There was no doubt in my mind on whether the magazine would take off. Its success didn't take me by surprise at all. What



**Figure 2:** 1970s' superstar Rajesh Khanna adorns the cover of the first *Stardust* issue (October 1971)

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surprised me were the leaps and bounds with which it grew. I had to change my first press because it could never handle the massive demand; soon we opted for a bigger second press. Eventually we had to start our own printing unit in order to print the huge number of copies that were required.

**PR: Given a chance would you like to make any changes in the script of the *Stardust* 'birth' story?**

NH: None exactly, though in retrospect, I do regret that we were a bit unfair on the stars sometimes, especially in the early days as we were so disconnected from them. Neither did we attend their film parties, nor did we have the need to be in their goods books or aspired to get invited to drinks

or dinner with them. Hence we could afford to write whatever we felt. So far they had been interacting with poor journalists, many of who hung out on their doles, but I had done very well for myself, had a terrace apartment in South Bombay and the works. So when we threw parties and invited the stars over instead, they were all astonished with their mouths wide open to see that in status and comforts we were actually equal to them, or at least not less than them.

**PR: Was *Stardust* based on - or inspired by - any earlier Indian or foreign film magazine? Its caustic quips on the personal lives of stars (e.g. the *Neeta's Natter*<sup>6</sup>) do remind one of Baburao Patel's unsparing criticisms in *Film India* from a previous generation.**

NH: I used to read *Photoplay* and *Movie Mirror*, which had a section called 'Hopper's Hat' or something like that. I wouldn't deny that *Neeta's Natter* was inspired by Hopper's Hat, but the rest of the regular sections of the magazine were original. The stories were all original then and continue to remain so, even today. The magazine's regular columns like *Rumours & Rejoinders* and *Court Martial* are some of my favourite reads that have successfully carried on for all these years with the readers yet to tire of them.

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<sup>6</sup> The signature opening section of the *Stardust* that abounds with a series of saucy and often sarcastic no-holds-barred comments on stars and their public and private acts stated as short editorial observations.

As regards, Baburao Patel, he indeed was a pioneering editor in the English film magazine space in India, but he also eventually ended up getting into politics, which we never did. He was very good, there's no doubt about that, but I think his publication lost its edge when its focus ended up being political.

**PR: So was there any other scare for the film industry before Patel, and *Stardust* and its *Neeta's Natter*?**

NH: If you are asking about a film columnist of reckon and concern, then according to me, it was not Patel, but rather Devyani Chaubal. She was the one, who I would call was the first major 'gossip' columnist of the Indian film world. She wasn't owned by any publication though many pretended to know who she was. She definitely was someone who the stars feared besides us, and she functioned at the same time as the launch and growth of *Stardust*.

**PR: It was generally perceived that irrespective of who the editor was, the cocky irreverence in the 'natters' of *Neeta* were courtesy you. When did you actually stop writing *Neeta's Natter*?**

NH: Don't ask, because I am not answering that. That's the only question I won't answer.

**PR: Fact is that *Stardust* did share a fragile relationship with Bollywood's greatest superstar**



**Amitabh Bachchan, just years after its launch.  
Didn't a mutual ban exist at the peak of his  
career?**

NH: He didn't ban *Stardust*; it was we who had banned him. He admits it himself, and has gone on record to say that 'he needed *Stardust*', which I don't think is true. This is Amitabh in all his humility, diplomacy and all that... During the Emergency<sup>7</sup> we were always kept on hold by then I&B minister V.C. Shukla<sup>8</sup>, who used to have regular meetings with editors at the Nataraj (hotel in Mumbai), which is now called the Intercontinental. Film magazine editors like myself, Rita Karanjia of *Cineblitz*, then editor of *Filmfare* and others would be in attendance and every time he would bring a stack of magazines marked with comments censoring write-ups featuring Amitabh Bachchan<sup>9</sup>. All the publications were on our side advocating the freedom of press. They assured me that they would stick for me and that we should not back out or give in, but I didn't

want them to go through this every time or get embarrassed because of us. So I told V.C. Shukla that 'if you don't want us to write about Amitabh the way we want, then we are not going to write about him at all!' The ban came like that. Amitabh denies having to do anything with the censorship. I also think it was more to do with over-zealous officers, who just overstepped their boundaries to please their bosses.

**PR: How did the eventual patch-up with Mr.  
Bachchan happen?**

NH: Well, when Amitabh landed up in the hospital post the fatal accident on the sets of *Coolie* (The Railway Porter, 1983), we wrote an item saying that 'He should get well and blah blah...' which was wrongly construed as being unsympathetic and that 'we wanted him dead'. After he got well, he came to meet me at my house, and said, 'Let's make up and blah blah...' I told him, 'Look I didn't want you to drop dead; I just wanted you to flop!' And he keeps quoting me on this all the time. He said that he admired my honesty and we became pals. I don't think he really needed us because he was right on the top at that time, but neither did we need him either for our survival. However, his humility and honesty touched me tremendously.

**PR: Did any of your controversial interviewees  
ever disown a story or an interview?**

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<sup>7</sup> One of the controversial periods in the history of independent India, when a state of emergency under Article 352 of the Indian Constitution was declared from 26 June 1975 – 21 March 1977 by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed on the request of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It bestowed on her government the power to 'rule by decree', suspending elections and civil liberties.

<sup>8</sup> An Indian statesman, he was as Minister of State with Independent Charge of Information and Broadcasting in the cabinet of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from 1967 to 1977. During the Emergency (1975-77), his ministry had been criticised for turning into a propaganda vehicle of the ruling party (Congress I) courtesy its restrictive policies of media censorship that had put 'freedom of speech' under attack.

<sup>9</sup> The biggest superstar of Indian cinema in the 1970s-80s, Amitabh Bachchan and his parents Harivansh Rai and Teji Bachchan used to share a close personal friendship with the Nehru-Indira Gandhi family from the days of Jawaharlal Nehru's premiership.

NH: There have been interviews, where the subjects had often told us in advance that they would deny it. It's a common understanding between us that if they want to run someone down they do it. But no, we had never done interviews like that.

**PR: Do you have a list of your favourite or most impacting 'Stardust Scoops' down the decades?**

NH: Here are the headlines of some of our best scoops – *Mithun-Yogita Marriage! Divorce Remarriage?* (June 1979), *The Terrible Truths About The Thespian – How Dilip Kumar Hid Them Behind His 'Legend' For Thirty Years* (August, 1982), *Embittered Saira Exposes Dilip!* (April, 1982), *Naseeruddin Shah decodes His Own Career* (December, 1983), *How Rajesh Khanna Tried to Molest A Newcomer?* (May, 1986), *How Sridevi Stole Rekha's Most Precious Possession! – Can She Have 'It' for Keeps?* (June, 1986), *The Dark Secrets Behind Sridevi's Success* (March, 1989), *Gauri Khan's Candid Confessions* (July, 1994), *2 Year old Jaan! The Child Aamir Khan Abandoned!* (September, 2005)...

Pick up the worst – they are all yours!

**PR: Is it true that Shah Rukh Khan, Hindi cinema's next reigning star after Mr. Bachchan, had apparently got so incensed by one of your write-ups that he had come in person to break the windowpanes of your Mumbai office?**



**Figure 3:** A memorable *Stardust* magazine cover.

NH: Forget the windowpanes; Shah Rukh Khan had come to the Magna House<sup>10</sup> to break down the whole building. Yes, the incident had actually happened, but its trigger was a truly ridiculous story. Shah Rukh was a real fool in those days. There was an innocent Catholic girl working with us, who had done a story about Shah Rukh Khan 'holding this girl with his hands on her eyes'<sup>11</sup> with a report on some innocuous thing going on between him and Juhi Chawla<sup>12</sup>. That's all. But obviously, his wife, Gauri Khan got upset. We had

<sup>10</sup> The head office of Magna Publications Pvt. Ltd. in south Mumbai's Worli suburb.

<sup>11</sup> The said image featured in the promotion stills of Ketan Mehta's *Maya Memsaab*, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Former Miss India (1984), and leading Bollywood actress of late 1980 and '90s, she entered into partnership with three

initially thought of her to be some *burqa* clad, conservative woman, but I was quite surprised to see this smart girl in a mini-skirt not at all conservative, but that's another story. I think Shah Rukh's reaction was immature and impulsive; he just seemed to have lost the plot completely. He even ranted at our journalist saying something like, 'How can you do this? Aren't you married? What would your husband say about you writing such stuff? My wife is so upset...' and this and that. It was just the beginning of his career. God knows how many link ups have been written about him after that, but these things happen.

**PR: In a way *Stardust* did mess up with three of the most influential stars and 'power centres' from different eras of Hindi cinema – the original thespian Dilip Kumar (whose 'secret marriage' it had exposed), Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan – and yet it survived to tell more tales. Does it in a way endorse the showbiz *mantra* that there are 'no permanent friends or enemies' in the film industry?**

NH: Our experience and changing equations with the industry have indeed proven over a period of time that 'there are no permanent enemies or friends in the film industry'. Today we and Amitabh (Bachchan) are on the best of the same page. He was at the Magna Lounge few months

ago to launch the special issue of one of our magazines. We patched up with Dilip Kumar too and gave him the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Stardust Millennium Honours (2000). You will also notice that all the celebrities featured in the above mentioned scoops are now friends with *Stardust* because the industry needs us and we need the industry. We have our fights and then we make up again. These animosities last only for a certain amount of time. You are prepared for this backlash for a few months but we make sure that we have got our facts right. That's why I resist our reportage being called gossip because it's not something that we have published without checking or rechecking our facts. We tell facts, not gossip!

**PR: So you insist that *Stardust* has always told the truth?**

NH: Always! And the rare moment when we did err, we had no hesitation in correcting it. I think it was a British lady journalist and Bollywood researcher, who had come and told us that Aamir Khan<sup>13</sup> was having an affair with so and so make-up person around the time of the making of *Ghulam* (The Slave, 1998), and that the latter was traumatised. We carried the story, and in the very next issue she issued denials stating that 'Aamir never had any such affairs'. Actually, she

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of Shah Rukh Khan's biggest commercial ventures a production house called *Dreamz Unlimited*, a company Red Chilles Entertainment and along with her husband Jay Mehta co-owns Shah Rukh's Indian Premier League cricket team, the Kolkata Knight Riders.

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<sup>13</sup> An Indian star, director and producer, who made his debut as a lead actor in the 1980s. In the early 2000s, *Stardust* had carried a story alleging he fathered a love child with Jessica Hines, British journalist and author of the book *Looking For The Big B: Bollywood, Bachchan & Me* (2007).



had planted the first story because it was she who was having the affair, but she never told us about that.

**PR: Your publication also has the perception of having the maximum defamation cases against any magazine in India.**

NH: No, correction there, actually we hardly have any. I think there was one from Rekha<sup>14</sup> that had nothing to do with us. She was trying to stop all publications from printing anything about her and Mukesh Agarwal<sup>15</sup>. But now Rekha and we are on friendly terms. At that time she had put a blanket ban on everybody, not just us. I cannot think of any other case other than the one involving Shilpa Shetty<sup>16</sup> (in 2001).



**Figure 4:** *Stardust*'s last major shocker featuring superstar Aamir Khan; **Figure 5:** Aamir Khan congratulates Nari Hira at the 40th launch anniversary bash of *Stardust* in 2011 reiterating the fact that 'there are no permanent enemies or friends in the film industry'

**PR: Did you at all have any policy of self-censorship?**

NH: That's my job. My red pencil is always out contrary to popular perception. Stories come to me to make sure that we don't go overboard.

**PR: Your most important concern...**

NH: No hurting of children. That's most important!

<sup>14</sup> Popular Hindi film actress of the 1970s-80s also known as the 'Greta Garbo' of Bollywood.

<sup>15</sup> A Delhi-based industrialist, who Rekha married in 1990. A year later, when she was in US, he committed suicide, after several previous attempts, hanging himself from a fan with a *dupatta* (scarf) that allegedly belonged to the actress.

<sup>16</sup> 1990s' Bollywood actress and Celebrity Big Brother winner, Shilpa Shetty, had filed a defamation case against *Stardust* in the Mumbai High Court in 2001 claiming Rs. 20 crore as damages over three articles published by the magazine in its November 2000, December 2000 and January 2001 issues. The articles had alleged that the actress was having an affair with a married man after her break up with action hero Akshay Kumar.

**PR: Shobhaa De, former editor of *Stardust* had once stated that the film industry scandals revealed in the *Stardust* were only the tip of the iceberg, and that ‘entire revelations would leave the fans with no icons’. Your take.**

NH: Art of exaggeration!

**PR: Can a star and a journalist ever be friends as unofficially claimed by many film magazine editors?**

NH: They are. In fact the stars truly do open up to them. Let’s face it, the stars have to talk about themselves, and who will they talk to other than the journalists. They open up, they become close.

There are times when a star realises that a journalist has got to do his/her job. Those that realise this, develop deep friendships like our ex-editor Sonali Zaffar is friendly even today with Raveena Tandon<sup>17</sup>, or as Nishi Prem is with Shah Rukh Khan. Nishi Prem may not be the editor of *Cine Blitz* anymore but she is still in touch with Shah Rukh. Both the stars and the journalists realise that they need each other. A lot of editors have transcended that barrier. So it happens, very close friendships do happen, but it becomes a bit unfortunate when they end up as their secretaries.

**PR: How do you reflect on your ‘media tag’ as the pioneer of the ‘tabloid’ style of journalism in India?**

NH: Well I wish I could have maintained that title, but now the daily papers have all taken over. I don’t mind it, I actually quite relish it – it makes no difference to me one way or the other.

**PR: A part of that style also meant a different and allegorical style of writing copies with long commentaries and short quotes often penned as ecstatic essays by rookie journalists. What made you encourage, believe in and let *Stardust* be a perennial take-off board for so many young and wannabe film journalists?**

NH: Because young journalists bring freshness with them; the older journalists just get burnt out. They have been there, seen it all, and done everything. These people come with stars in their eyes. I always tell them to take the reader along with them. When you walk into a room, or the presence of a star, just express whatever you felt at that moment. They bring in that freshness, which with a little bit of subbing and editorial control gives you a fresh perspective. Also, with the passage of certain number of years, journalists tend to get cynical and I don’t want that to happen with my magazine.

**PR: Perhaps this deliberate resistance to mature has had the magazine frequently challenge prescribed writing conventions, like bringing in a ‘Hinglish’ style of writing into vogue with unique star acronyms like ‘idli’ Malini, ‘garam’**

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<sup>17</sup> A popular Bollywood actress who debuted in the 1990s.

**Dharam, etc. that many today don't realise to have actually originated at *Stardust*.**

NH: ...And which the mainstream media that frowned upon us then by calling us lowbrow are happily using now. Don't forget that our magazine came from an English background. Even today my Hindi is not very good. I learnt my Hindi by going to the Hindi movies, which is also true for a great part of India outside the Hindi belt. That (Hindi-English)<sup>18</sup> approach you inculcated into your thinking when you wrote. Also when you want to lend a certain character, a signature 'Indianness' to what you are writing, a '*garam*' Dharam works much better than a 'hot' Dharmendra. It also sits well within Bollywood's 'fusion' mindset and 'mix' lingo, and then you stretch it a bit, get other references and coin for instance something like '*La Tagore*' (for Sharmila Tagore). It was just a method of expressing yourself. There were a dozen such epithets coined by us like '*idli*' Malini (for Hema Malini), '*asli ghee*' was Yogita Bali, Shatrughan Sinha was '*Shotgun*' when we liked him, and '*double bore*' when we didn't like him.<sup>19</sup> Amitabh of course was always the 'angry old man'...

**PR: You mean, even when he was young!**

<sup>18</sup> Writing in English for films made in the Hindi language.

<sup>19</sup> Dharmendra, Sharmila Tagore, Hema Malini, Yogita Bali and Shatrughan Sinha were all leading Hindi film stars of the 1970s and 80s, most of who (exception Bali), still continue to act in Indian films as popular character actors.



**Figure 6:** Indian socialite & philanthropist Parmeshwar Godrej, Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan and Nari Hira at one of his famous rooftop house parties in South Mumbai

NH: Yes!

**PR: No such epithets however seem to have been coined since, especially in recent decades for the generation of stars, who came after the '70s' debutants?**

NH: Well, after some time it lost its charm and then everybody started doing it, so we said okay let them now carry on...

**PR: The change in style and approach to celebrity reporting post the launch of *Stardust* does seem to have been influenced by it, especially in the increased coverage of film stars and other cultural celebrities in the media.**

NH: I think eventually what a magazine or a paper has to do is give to the readers what they want. I think more than what we have done, what's important is the realisation of mainstream dailies that their entertainment supplements are very important for their publications. So you have

Hindustan Times launching a *HT Café*, the Times of India has *Bombay Times*, and DNA *After Hours*. The Indian Express, which had fought this trend all along too has started a Friday edition focussing on film stars and I am sure that they will have a daily version of it soon. They are doing it because that's what the masses want. Once in a while, headline news on IPL matches and the likes may be interesting; otherwise most of the main news revolves around politicians and their usual nonsense, which is boring and repetitive. The readers would rather hear about Shah Rukh Khan, what movies he is doing, with whom he is working and his views on various issues. Film stars lead colourful lives and let's just admit that there are voyeuristic tendencies in all of us.

**PR: The flip side is that dubious epithets like 'yellow', 'gossip', 'tabloid', 'sensationalism' and the likes have come to be associated with the *Stardust* brand of journalism.**

NH: They don't bother me because I don't think anybody right now is 'yellow', the way you describe it for the simple reason that you scratch my back and I scratch yours. Today the stars are insulated by a galaxy of PR people, who you need for their interviews, photo shoots and to even just talk to them. It's no longer like you are the only one there. *Stardust* has seen a period when it was the only publication of reckon. So we could do what we wanted. Today there are so many TV channels and a host of entertainment supplements

to pick and chose from. Today Shah Rukh Khan can have a fight with 'xyz publication' and still be heard. Aamir Khan is not talking to *Bombay Times*, but he is talking to us. Today, the stars switch their friends like we all do. And then we have our film award functions, where they come and we need them.

**PR: Has coming into the organisation of film award ceremonies somewhere dented *Stardust*'s 'no holds barred' edge and irreverence of the past?**

NH: To some extent it certainly has, though I won't say all the way.

**PR: The annual *Stardust* awards (started in 2003) have been known for their skew towards recognising popular '*masala*' movie fare, which those who know you vouch you to be an absolute fan of. What are your views on the 'critical' dumb down of signature Indian styles of storytelling by the reviewing 'intelligentsia' of most mainstream Indian English media?**

NH: Personally, I do like serious movies too, but if you want me to stick to an image then I will go with it. I don't think the mainstream media is that disparaging about popular cinema anymore, though there definitely was such a time earlier. Today scribes have realised that they have been making asses of themselves by running down films that have consistently ended up being blockbusters. So

senior critics like Anupama Chopra<sup>20</sup> and others are now changing their points of review. They do take into account what the mass wants, and in their reviews tend to categorise whether a film will work with a multiplex audience, or in the single screen mass frequented theatres only. Even when they do not like a typical *masala* film entirely, they still tend to highlight parts of it that they enjoyed. I think they learnt a lot with *Sholay* (Ambers, 1975), which the industry keeps rubbing down their nose at every chance it gets. The film was panned by the critics at the time of its release, and yet subsequent generations of critics have been celebrating it as the greatest Bollywood film ever. So whenever filmmakers get a bad review, they just say that's what even a '*Sholay*' got and look what happened!

**PR: Is *Sholay* your 'greatest' Hindi film from the last 100 years as well?**

NH: I do believe that Hindi cinema is one story before *Sholay* and another after it, but my most memorable Bollywood movie experience still remains my viewing of K. Asif's magnum opus, *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). It's the first film I saw after I came back from London and I couldn't understand it because it was more Urdu than Hindi. But I was completely mesmerised by the film. I had seen it at Maratha Mandir (one of the biggest and still existing single-screen theatres in Mumbai), and I had told my friends that I couldn't understand a thing – but its scenes just stayed on,

like the one where Dilip Kumar was caressing Madhubala with a feather! They suggested that I see it again. So I saw it twice, but only after a third time did I understand it completely and it left a lasting impression. Maybe I was too young at that time for the film to make that kind of an impact. Maybe it won't do the same now. But that's how I felt – I was retuning to India after spending two straight years in London. When you spend that long a gap outside your country everything hits you as strange on comeback mode. After seeing the dogs on the streets, the poverty etc., when you are revealed such grandeur from the past, you just exclaim 'Gosh... this also was an India that existed at some point in time!'

**PR: *Mughal-e-Azam*, indeed is a lasting testimony of Indian '*masala*' movie making at its signature best. What does the term '*masala*' mean to you?**

NH: Songs, dances, fights, love, romance, emotions... that's *masala* for me! Don't waste your time wondering why the hero's hair-style has changed, whether the heroine is wearing the same sari or why they are at the pyramids in Egypt in one scene and in India in the next? Just sit back and enjoy the fare on its own terms – which is about appealing to the heart because we are a very different people emotionally. I so want to make an English film with Indian emotions. Moreover, all western movies are not about realism, you also

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<sup>20</sup> Indian author, journalist and film critic.



have the Rambos and *Rockys* – so let's not kid ourselves.

**PR:** Contrary to many current film magazines, writers and stars, you seem to be comfortable with the 'Bollywood' nomenclature for the Hindi film industry.

NH: I know Amitabh and a lot of industry people want it to be called the Hindi film industry, but Bollywood it is and so it will be. Let's just accept it. I don't think it is a disparaging term. People the world over are calling it Bollywood, how many people are you going to go on correcting and saying 'No, no... call it the Hindi film industry'?

**PR:** What do you think could be the next major game changer in tabloid journalism in India? Is the Indian media ready to bring in the paparazzi culture?

NH: The paparazzi in the West can afford cars to chase the stars all over, how many can do that here? Yet, it is coming up here as well. Look at the way Sanjay Dutt's<sup>21</sup> return to the jail (May 16, 2013) was covered. They tried to avoid them, but these people were following him along. We will

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<sup>21</sup> An Indian film actor, who debuted in the 1980s, Sanjay Dutt was arrested under India's Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) in April 1993, for interactions with terrorists and illegal possession of a 9mm pistol and an AK-56 assault rifle. After spending 18 months in jail, he was granted bail in April 1995, but in March 2013, the Supreme Court of India upheld his five years of imprisonment sentence and sent him back to the jail to complete the rest of his prison term.

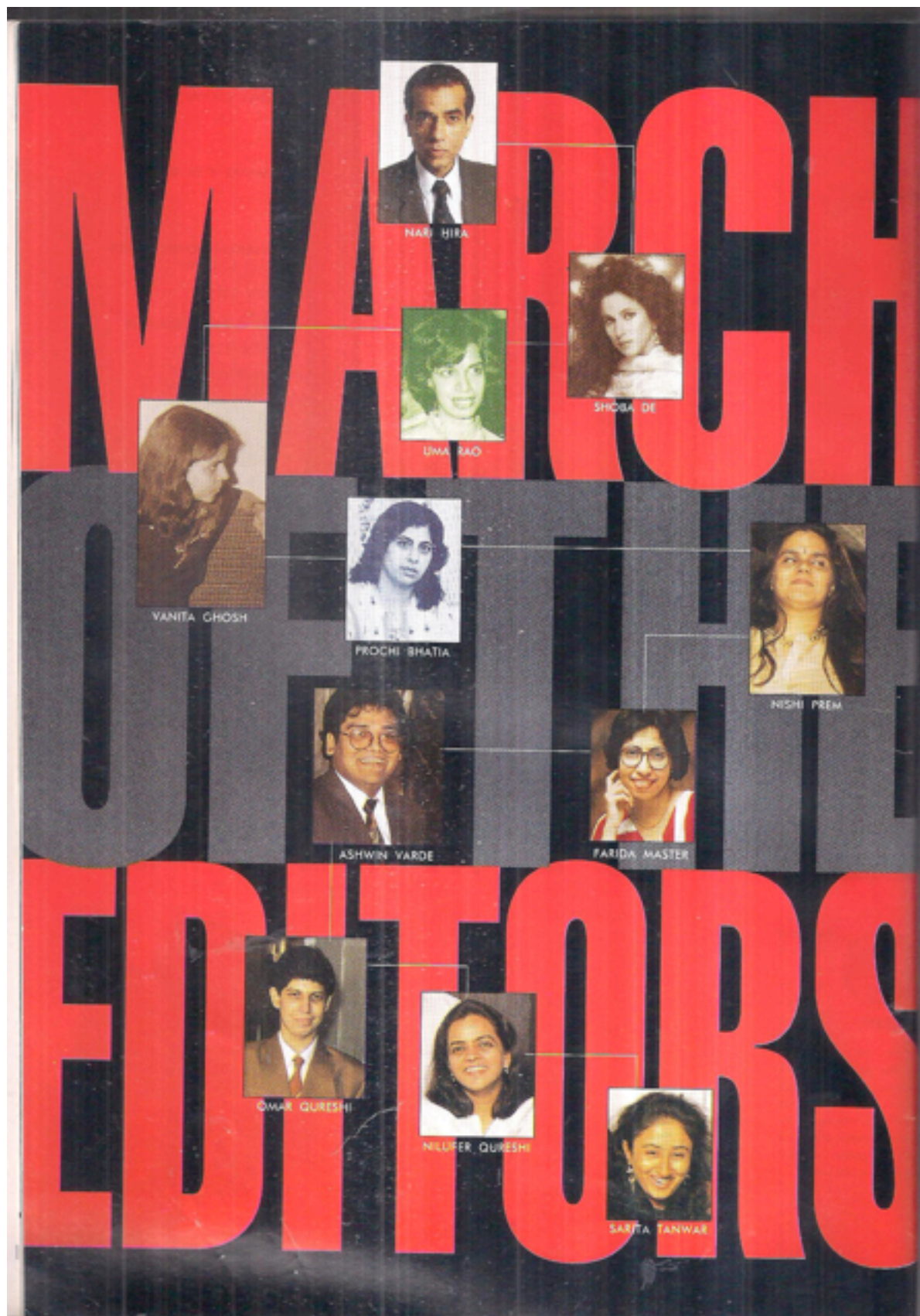


**Figure 7:** The themes of the *Stardust* annual issues may have kept getting bolder down the decades, but they have always remained a favourite launch pad for upcoming actors with new stars frequently adorning the covers of even its special issues.

definitely be coming to that stage sooner than later. The trend has already started in India but our stars are more insulated than their counterparts abroad.

**PR:** Were the stars more bohemian in the earlier days or have they just become smarter today?

NH: I don't think that the stars of any earlier generation were more bohemian, but the standards of living were very different in those days.



**Figure 8:** A photo roll of *Stardust* editors, who influenced and impacted its first 25 years

Parveen Babi<sup>22</sup> staying with Kabir Bedi<sup>23</sup> without marriage was a big thing – it was like they were living in sin! Today you have stars like Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor staying together before marriage. Of course they are sleeping together; there is no longer a question on that. Instead the question today is whether they are going to get married or not? Nobody is bothered anymore about whether the people in the film industry are sleeping with each other or not. It's taken for granted. So the times have changed, our morals have changed... History has changed! We don't look at affairs anymore with the goggle eyes with which we had started the magazine. At that time having an affair was a great thing. Today, if actors like Kunal Khemu and Soha Ali Khan are going around together, (the world knows about it and Soha proudly talks about doing up his house, etc.) the question now is that whether they are going to marry, or whether she is going to dump or not dump him. So the curiosity revolves around totally different equations and parameters now. There are no bedroom secrets now, which there were in the olden days. So the bohemianism is not any more or any less, except that it is more open now.

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<sup>22</sup> First Indian actress to adorn the cover of *Time* magazine, Parveen Babi debuted in the 1970s. Famed for her glamour quotient, she made more news outside her films for her 'western' looks and 'modern' lifestyle.

<sup>23</sup> Kabir Bedi is an Indian television and film actor, who has worked in India, USA and many European countries in film, television and theatre. He was best known internationally for playing the pirate *Sandokan* in a popular Italian-German-French TV mini series by Sergio Sollima in the 1970s.

**PR: *Stardust* has given to the Indian media some of its best-known film writers, critics and editors. How do you look back on having mentored so many celebrity journalists?**

NH: I am very proud of each of them. Obviously I like Shobhaa, but besides her, Ashwin (Varde), Nilufer (Qureshi), Rohini (Iyer), all the people who have been with us have reached a certain level. Of course, Shobhaa overshadows a lot of them. But that doesn't discount the fact that a lot of them have been achievers in different spheres, including your self.

**PR: Finally, if you had to describe the *Stardust* journey in just one word...**

NH: Unbeatable! 🥳

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