

## "THEPROBLEM LIES WITH NAME OF THE PROBLEM AND ADDRESS OF THE PROBLEM AND AD

Aamir Khan says he wouldn't mind if his daughter Ira decides to enter Bollywood some day, though he admits that the way the industry portrays women is far from ideal. This Women's Day, one of the rare true feminists among Indian men—and certainly the only one in the ₹100-crore club—tells **Rajashree Balaram** why most 'women's issues' are actually problems with men. Photographs by **Tarun Vishwa** 

e are in Mandawa, a charming village in Rajasthan, where Aamir Khan is shooting

for Rajkumar Hirani's *Peekay*, in which he plays an alcoholic who has lost his memory. The blazing sun and the wintry breeze conspire to make it a delicious afternoon. As it's a day off from shooting, Aamir is relaxed as he changes one outfit after another for the *Femina* photo shoot. The ripped muscles and washboard abs speak much about the endurance and punishing discipline that drive this 47-year-old body.

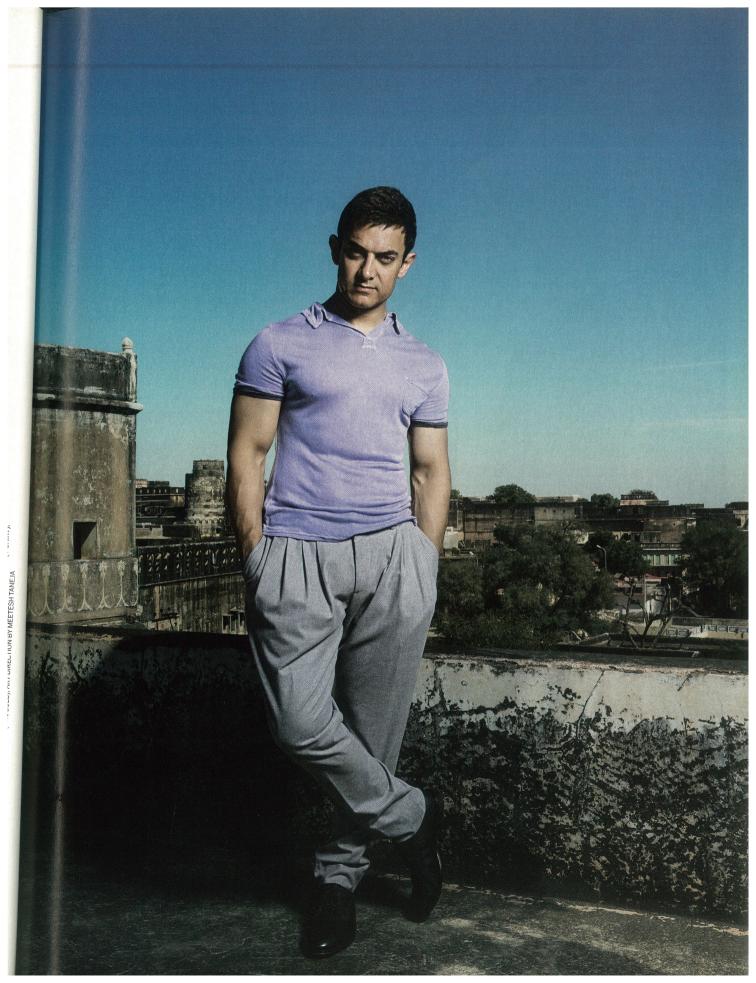
However, Aamir's greatest sex appeal lies in his eyes—warm brown that turns steely when he tells you that, just like his mother, he is as stubborn as he is sensitive. There's a great force of purpose in his steady gaze. Hardly surprising, then, that he made India sit up and take

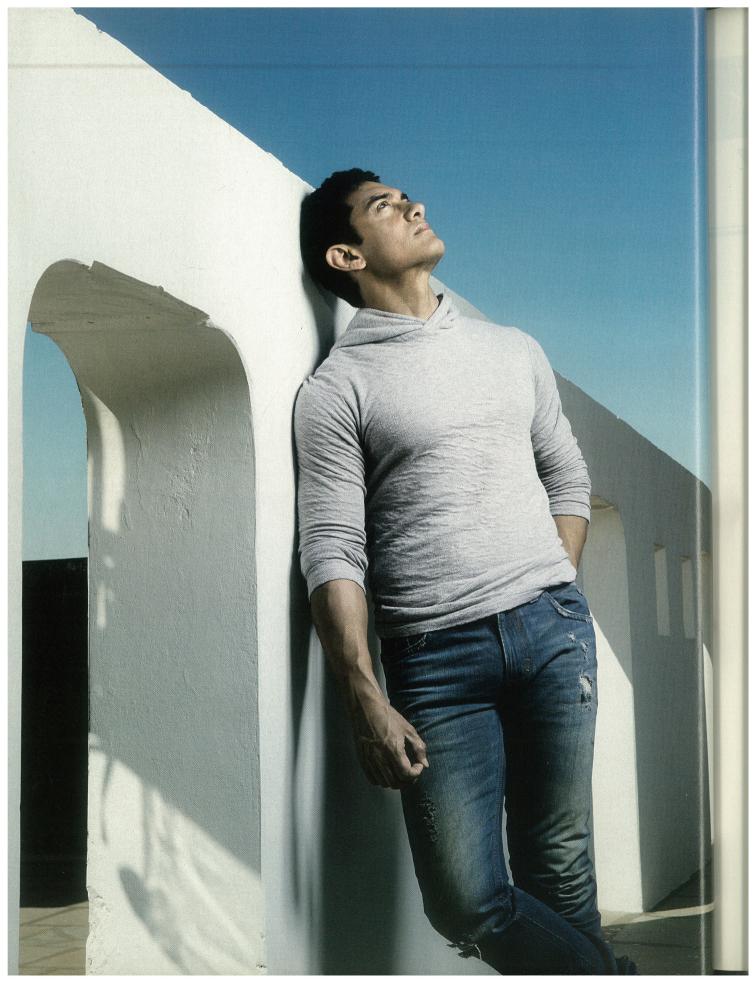
notice when he spoke on Satyamev Jayate, the 13-episode talk show that rocked our collective lethargy every weekend, as it revealed the decay that plagues many areas of Indian society. "A number of the topics on Satyamev Jayate were related to women—domestic violence, female foeticide, dowry, honour killings. Though we may want to tag these as women's issues, let's face it, the problem lies with men. Women suffer because men take away their right to choose: the right to choose the way they want to live, love and dream. This patriarchal mindset is hindering nationbuilding. The problem is that we don't just not empower woman, we wilfully dis-empower them. We do not want the girl child to be born. And if she survives, we make sure that she knows she is not important enough. At every level-nutrition, health, educationwe give her a raw deal. The sad part is that a lot of women also buy into this patriarchal thinking. They endorse it, and the cycle continues." ▶

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Aamir admits that one of life's most profound lessons was taught to him by a woman. "I used to play competitive tennis at the state level when I was in my teens. One day, I won a significant match, and, as always, when I came home I saw my mother eagerly waiting at the door to find out the result. When I told her that I had won, she hugged me joyously. Later in the day, while I was still basking quietly in my success, she came up to me and said, 'Beta, you know the boy who lost against you today... I wonder what his mother feels like right now.' I was stunned into silence. for I had not seen my victory from that perspective. My mother was not trying to teach me anything that day, but, as usual, she taught me much with the way she led her life. I like to think that my sensitivity, my ability to feel what the other person is feeling is something that I have imbibed from her."

There is passion in his voice, but also a great force of personality and a doggedness that insists on bringing you around to his point of view. After Satyamev Jayate aired the episode on female foeticide, the Rajasthan Government cancelled the licences of six sonography centres in Jaipur and issued notices to 24 others for their suspected involvement in the female foeticide and violation of Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal and Diagnostic Test Act, 1994.

or Aamir, the show was also an eye-opener.
"I have met CEOs, doctors and engineers who are louts, just as
I have seen examples of liberal thought in rural uneducated men."
He quotes the example of Dr Kaushal Pawar, a lecturer at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, who he met during the making of the show. She spoke about her life as a dalit and the way her father

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encouraged her to dream big. "She comes from a community of manual scavengers, but her father, an illiterate man, went against his whole family when Kaushal decided to pursue her studies. He warned the male members in his family that he would not let anyone come in the way of his daughter's dream. Now, that is a man I respect and salute." He also tells us why he will never forget the mother-daughter duo Chandrapati and Seema from Haryana. "Chandrapati's son Manoj was brutally murdered when he married a girl belonging to another caste. The village boycotted the mother and daughter, and some powerful local men even threatend to rape and kill them. But the two women defied all odds and pressed charges; the perpetrators have been convicted in the Session's Court and the High Court, and the case is now in the Supreme Court. I think those two women are a lot stronger than many urban men and women."

Aamir admits that the inspiring women in his life never allowed him to harbour any chauvinism.

"My cousin Nuzhat (actor Imran Khan's mother), especially, has had a profound influence on me. She made me read Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex when I was just 14. She was the one I confided in when I first fell in love. And it was she who first introduced me to fresh concepts in

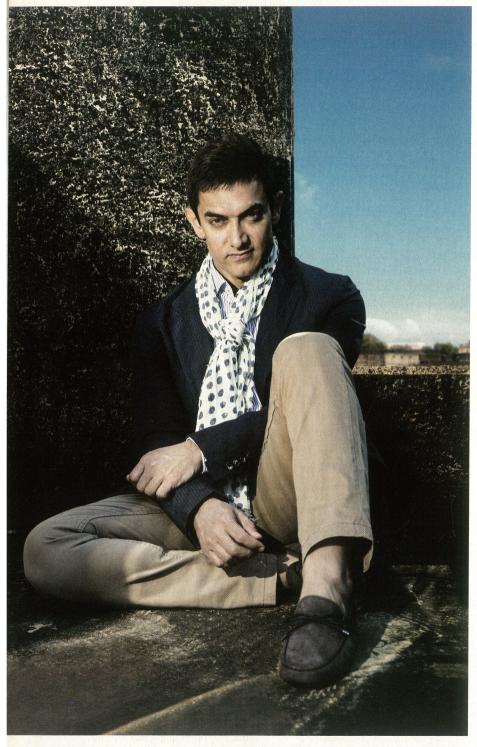
art, music, politics, and explained to me the finer nuances of human relationships." Aamir also believes he owes much to his first wife Reena. "She has immense strength of character, and patience." Though the two have parted ways, he speaks of her with great fondness and respect. "I was 21 and she was just 19 when we got married. It was as if we grew up together and learnt everything about marriage, child-rearing and relationships along the way. She is a valuable part of my life. Our relationship may have altered, but nothing and no one can take away what we have shared." Their sustained friendship and her warm relationship with his new family is something he is proud of.

alk of new family leads to Kiran Rao. His eyes light up as he talks about the curly-haired beauty who is now his wife. "She has this great joyous energy that has infected me. Ever since she has been part of my life I have felt lighter and more joyous inside." Their oneyear-old son Azad is on the sets with him, and a little earlier we saw Aamir having a hard time disengaging the little one from his arms as he greeted us and got ready for the interview. As Azad clung tightly to his T-shirt and protested strongly with baby talk, he lit up a wide smile on Aamir's face, the smile we all love, the one that crinkles the corners of his eyes. "He is a fantastic kid, very quick, very communicative."

It's obvious that Aamir thrives on the joys of fatherhood. "I am always anxious about my children's wellbeing, and often helplessly torn by worry. But now, from my daughter, I am learning the art of easing off. 'Chill dad' she keeps saying, but I still have a hard time putting that into practice!"

We ask him if he would be okay with his daughter Ira entering the film ▶





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industry. "Why shouldn't I be? If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for her," he shoots back. He agrees that women in Indian cinema have got a long way to go before they come into their own, and that the alpha male still dominates our screen. "Filmmakers keep giving audiences what they want. And the audience is still happy with the patriarchal behaviour and dynamics on screen. The few strong women characters that we see are almost always flawed, but that's okay-all of us are flawed in some way or the other."

e test the waters

to see if Aamir is open enough to admitting to his own flaws. Is he really the painful perfectionist that he is painted out to be, in his personal life as well? "I don't expect my wife to do things my way, or cook for me, or organise my clothes. That's not her job, and I am quite capable of taking care of myself," he tells us. When we push further and ask if he would bow down to Kiran's vision while she is directing a film, he relents: "I would express my point in no uncertain terms, but if she is not convinced and asks me to shut up, I will. She is the boss after all, when she is directing the film." He has a wide smile on his face as he says this, and you wonder how you would brave that charm if he ever tries to coax you towards his point of view. There's no doubt about his charm, either. You can understand why a woman with wild eyes and wilder hair once camped outside his apartment for three months to hand him a rose every time his car passed by. "She was scary to look at, but there was something in her eyes that was true and pure. I grew fond of her and one day she disappeared and I still wonder where she is and if she is okay." •