

We Can Do Anything, We Are Bombay Film Stars

■ **Dr. M.N. Buch**

Two well known film stars have been in the news, but for the wrong reasons. Sanjay Dutt was convicted of illegal possession of arms, trying to destroy evidence and of being in touch with terrorists, but without attracting the draconian laws relating to organised crime or acts of terrorism. On conviction he was duly sentenced and committed to prison. The world of cinema as represented by Bollywood was outraged that a person of the eminence of Sanjay Dutt could be made thus answerable by law and even today a person who could have been booked for even more serious offences has, in my opinion, been let off cheaply. Why is it that there was no moral outrage at Sanjay Dutt's criminal behaviour?

It is a fact that many film stars, because of the high exposure that they have and the adulation that they receive for their play acting, tend to become more ego centric than people who lead normal lives. A certain amount of swollen headedness is understandable, especially because one does develop an inflated ego at being constantly recognised, deferred to and generally treated as a demi god or goddess. However, when this turns to an attitude in which the actor or actress feels that he or she now stands above the law and can indulge in every whim, even if it is illegal, then the matter becomes of public interest. When the thespians' make believe is converted into reality and acts of criminality are done, then the matter is really serious. Salman Khan, feeling himself above the law, first poached wildlife in Rajasthan, for which he is facing trial in a Jodhpur court. He then, as held by the Additional District and Sessions Judge of Bombay, consumed alcohol and drove a high powered car at high speed in which state he lost control, ran over five people on a footpath in Bandra, killing one and seriously injuring four persons. The car was damaged severely in the impact and, as held by the judge, Salman Khan headed away from the scene of the crime. He was brought to trial which, through one legal step or the other, he was able to delay for thirteen years, but eventually the court completed the trial, convicted him of culpable homicide not amounting to murder and rash and negligent act causing death. He has been given a sentence of five years rigorous imprisonment. He now seeks mercy because of the delayed trial, for which delay he himself was responsible.

It is shocking that actors and actresses, producers and directors in the Bombay film industry have come out strongly in favour of Salman Khan, with some of them stating that it is the fault of government and the people that they were sleeping on a footpath and, therefore, could expect such a death. Most persons of the film industry has sympathised with Salman, called him a good man and virtually suggested that there is perversion in the judicial order convicting him. There are so many hit and run drivers in India, many of whom are brought to justice and given suitable sentences. Why has the film industry been silent about the fate of such persons? What is so great about Salman Khan that he should be allowed to behave like a spoilt brat and when this costs lives, then to be supported as being blameless, with somehow the victims being at fault? This is so disgusting, so much beneath contempt, that one can only be shocked by the reaction of the film industry to the conviction of Sanjay Dutt and Salman Khan.

Assuming that Salman Khan is a very good man who has promoted charities and because of this he should have been let off for the killing of one person and injuring of four others, does it mean that the victims are scoundrels who deserved to die or be injured? Is that how our film stars really feel about the ordinary citizen, the common man? It is a fact that these are the very people who keep the film industry alive because they pay for visits to a cinema to view films and be entertained. Can the industry afford to hold the poor, on whose backs they have climbed the ladder of success, in such utter contempt?

It is alleged that the victims are to blame because they were sleeping on the footpath. Supposing they had been walking on it, then would it still be legitimate for Salman to mow them down by driving a car at high speed under the influence of alcohol? Incidentally, cars are meant to be driven on the road and not the footpath, at the prescribed speed limit, but certainly not under the influence of alcohol. The fact that the car mounted the footpath is itself a traffic offence. It is irrelevant whether the victims were sitting, or sleeping or walking on the footpath. I am surprised that the media has given so much space and time to a Bombay film star who obviously has contempt for law. In some ways it has converted itself into an apologist for Salman Khan and by giving him so much space and time it has virtually blocked the path of justice and tried to build a cocoon around Salman Khan behind which the man continues to be unrepentant. Is it that in the eyes of the media the victims were trash compared to Salman and can be treated as such? Is this what social, political and economic justice to which every Indian is entitled means to our actors and actresses and the media which reports on their inane comings and goings?
