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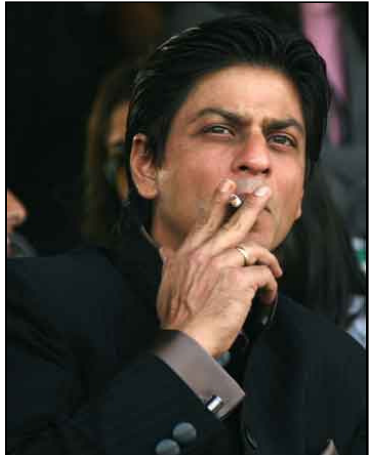- Region
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Films

# Smoking Screen

**Despite widespread awareness campaigns, cinema continues to showcase the cigarette**



Cinema's power to move and mould men – and women – is awesome. Actors play facilitators and propagators of this power, and when India's Federal Health Minister, Anbumani Ramadoss, recently carried out a long campaign to ban smoking on the screen and even succeeded in doing so, he certainly had a point.

Film heroes and heroines who essayed smokers often set hard-to-resist examples, especially for their younger fans. The act was what mattered, not its consequences. Neither the money spent on cigarettes nor the terribly ruinous effect they had on health appeared on the radar of all those who idolised the men and women puffing away on the screen.

Humphrey Bogart, one of Hollywood's endearing icons who by his sheer presence turned ordinary films into riveting classics ("The Maltese Falcon", "Casablanca", and others), drove his fans to delirious heights with the smoke rings that he blew into the air.

The nicotine stick shadowed Bogart *(picture above right)* on the screen, and off it, something that he could not live without. He carried off some of his best scenes with a cigarette dangling between his lips. Never had the roll of poison looked so cool. But in the end, it brought him a painful and premature death. He was only 57 when cancer killed him.

It was the same sad story with the two Marlboro men, Wayne McLaren and David McLean, whose tough persona on billboards and other forms of advertisements had encouraged hundreds of teens to start smoking in an attempt to attain macho-dom.

In India, it's very common to see actors such as Shahrukh Khan *picture above left)*, Amitabh Bachchan and Rajnikanth (Tamil superstar) light a cigarette often not really to take a puff as it's to make a statement. Such scenes, of course, have only contributed to popularise smoking in a nation that deifies its film heroes.

Among actresses, a smoking Penelope Cruz ("Vicky Cristina Barcelona") or a Pamela Anderson ("Barb Wire") or a Sandra Bullock ("In Love and War", "The Net", "A Time to Kill") or a Demi Moore ("The Juror", "Now and Then") or a Sharon Stone ("Casino", "Diabolique") mesmerised girls worldwide. Stone's crossing and uncrossing of legs in "Basic Instinct" could have looked a lot less saucy had she not reached out for a cigarette. The smoky aura that engulfed her made her all the more tantalising for women.

Research has concluded that many teens take up smoking after they see their favourite stars looking rugged or sexy with a cigarette. America woke up after the American Journal of Public Health, considered the Bible of community well-being, established that smoking in movies was undeniably linked to boys and girls taking up the habit early in life. Usually it began as an image building, confidence boosting exercise: boys wanted to smoke to look smart in order to impress girls, and girls believed that the smoke they blew was a sign of empowerment, a freedom of expression, even an affirmation of sexual liberation.

So the Indian health minister was not being exactly paranoid when he piloted a law to prevent actors from lighting up on the screen. Rajnikanth's famous antics with the cigarette had to stop. Shah Rukh Khan had to build his body and strip to his waist to make up for what he or his directors may have considered a loss of "manliness". However, the law was recently turned down by the Supreme Court. It was in force only for a few months.

In India, with a predominantly large young population which looks at cinema stars as demi-gods (Rajnikanth's wooden cut-outs are anointed with milk and honey every time his film opens), the tobacco majors see a lucrative market. And they find that they can easily expand it through the screen. With the West increasingly hostile to the cigarette, Big Tobacco has turned its attention to developing nations, where a growing middle class can be easily tempted into nicotine addiction.

It is this glamourisation that needs to be checked. Time was when mostly villains smoked in Indian films. Now with heroes and heroines puffing away stylishly and seductively, the line between the good and the bad appears blurred. It is imperative that actors show greater restraint before lighting up and fuelling the fire of desire.

By Gautaman Bhaskaran
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