

## Blinded by misdemeanours of movie men in a glitzy world

October 17 2017 09:15 PM



**BROUGHT TO BOOK:** Tamil comedy star Jai was penalised for driving while being drunk. **(RIGHT) BRAWLER:** Tamil actor Santhanam obtained bail from the Madras High Court for having a brawl with a builder.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Today, we in India are blinded by the glitz and glamour of movie stars. So blinded are we that we not only place a halo over their heads, but also worship them. Yes, literally, by building temples for actors, by celebrating their film releases by garlanding the huge wooden cutouts of them and anointing them with milk and honey. Such adulation, nay worship, goes into the heads of many stars, and they begin to feel that they are above the law, above everything else – and they can do no wrong!. But they do, and thanks to saner thinking, they also get caught and punished.

I was saddened to hear that Tamil actor Santhanam – who is all set to cross the line between comedy (read buffoonery) and meaningful portrayals with his upcoming *Server Sundaram*, where he plays the hero (after years of being the heroes sidekick, silly and stupid) – had to get an anticipatory bail from the Madras High Court after he got into a fight with a builder over a land deal gone wrong.

I really do not want to go into the merits and demerits of the case, but will confine myself to saying that this was real bad publicity for Santhanam, particularly on the eve of what I feel can be a landmark in his career. *Server Sundaram* can be seen as a tribute to one of Tamil cinema's most original comedians, Nagesh, whose role as a restaurant waiter (who later fulfils his dream of being a film star, a dream for which he has to pay a heavy price) was critically acclaimed. Nagesh's *Server Sundaram*, which hit the theatrical circle in 1964, proved to be a breaking point for the comedian and also its director, K. Balachander, who went on to make socially punchy cinema. It is quite possible that history will repeat itself with Santhanam.

Unfortunately, the brawl between the realtor and Santhanam could not have come at a more inappropriate time. But Santhanam is not alone. There are other actors who have also been getting into a scrap.

Some days ago, Tamil actor Jai (with films like *Idhu Namma Aalu* and *Enakku Vaaitha Adimaigal*) was caught by the Chennai Traffic Police driving in an inebriated state and crashing into a road divider. He was asked to appear before a magistrate. When he failed to do so, he was issued a non-bailable warrant. Jai then came to court, but was let off with a light fine of Rs5,000 and a six-month suspension of his driving licence.

Going by media reports, the police were seemingly unhappy with this light penalty, because they had informed the court that this was the second time Jai was caught driving in a drunken state!

Well, a court order is a court order, and one must respect it. But I am afraid that in a country where rash and drunk driving has become the norm with many, it is time stricter punishment is meted out. This can be suspension of a driving licence for a longer period if the person concerned has been a habitual offender – or even complete cancellation. Certainly, fines should be steeper. Imagine driving a vehicle that costs lakhs of rupees but getting away by paying something paltry and for a crime like drunken driving that can kill or maim innocent people.

Here one is tempted to believe that Jai's star power helped him escape a stiffer punishment, and this only vindicates my stand that actors in India carry such a dazzling halo around them that the society at large is driven to assume that these men can do nothing wrong. And when they do, they seem to get away – sometimes scot free, sometimes with a penalty that is not commensurate with their crime.

We saw this in the case of Bollywood actor Salman Khan, who avoided prosecution for years after he had reportedly run his vehicle over sleeping pavement dwellers in Mumbai and even got out, if I am right, without being convicted. We have also seen this in the case of Admiral Nanda's grandson, Sanjeev, who was also under the influence of drink when he ran his BMW car over six people, including three policemen. He also got a light punishment.

There have been other such unsavoury incidents. Bollywood star Shahrukh Khan roughed up a security guard at the Wankhade Stadium,

and the actor was debarred from entering it for a long time. He did not face any criminal charges, which you and I could have been subjected to.

Saif Ali Khan, whose fantastic performance in Omkara (Vishal Bharadwaj's novel adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello, which the helmer set in the badlands of India's Uttar Pradesh) had me floored, was accused of not only killing a blackbuck, a dear held sacred by Rajasthan's Bishnoi community and protected under India's Wildlife Act, but also bashing up an elderly man and his son in a Mumbai restaurant. The two had asked Khan and his friends to tone down their boisterous behaviour, and this led to an altercation and physical violence.

It is regrettable that the real and the reel world have become blurred for some of India's most popular stars. They appear to forget that a movie location is very different from the space outside they have to step into once they have packed up for the day.

But what is really alarming is that in nation like India where the young and impressionable have really no great men or women to look up to, film stars end up being role models. I have heard young children – barely into their teens – describe actors or actresses as their heroes or heroines, nay their role models. And the kids want to emulate these stars.

Now, imagine this! We have an Amitabh Chalisa! An Arrah-based advocate, Sharad Kumar Singh, has scripted the Amitabh Chalisa – a 40 verse compilation glorifying Bachchan. I have nothing more to add!

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