



BOXING TO GLORY: Priyanka Chopra as Mary Kom in a publicity still for the identically-named flick.

Why Priyanka packs a punch as Mary Kom

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

A while ago, when the Frieda Pinto-starrer *Miral* was screened at the Abu Dhabi International Film Festival, some Palestinian journalists were unhappy. They felt that Pinto did not look or sound like a Palestinian girl that she plays in *Miral*. Of course, I was not competent to form an opinion on this. How would I know how Palestinians looked or sounded, but, yes, I felt then that Pinto as *Miral* was superb. Her career best, if I may say so. She has not bettered that yet.

During a subsequent interview with *Miral*'s director, Julian Schnabel, I drew his attention about this criticism. He was not unduly perturbed, and threw up examples of how other helmers too have chosen actors because they were good and could do justice to the roles.

It mattered little whether they belonged to the race of the characters they portrayed, he quipped. Acting is all about make-believe, and a good artist can convince just about anyone that he or she is THE person on the screen.

In Pinto's case, she might not have sounded Palestinian enough, but could have passed off for one as far as her appearance went. This is what I felt then.

In India, such mismatch — if I may call it so — happens ever so frequently. Imagine an Amy Jackson, that beautiful British model, acting in Tamil cinema! And, so many actresses from

Mumbai or northern India have been essaying Tamil girls!

I have winced at the idea, the difference being particularly obvious to me, a Tamil. But then, some of these actresses have disappeared so wonderfully into whomsoever they were in the films that one ceased to even notice that a northerner was essaying a southerner. Or vice-versa.

Rekha, (daughter of Gemini Ganesh, yesteryear romantic star of Tamil cinema), for instance, has been extremely ideal playing

north Indian parts. Was not Konkana Sen (born to a Bengali mother and actor-director Aparna Sen) brilliant as Mrs Iyer in the movie titled *Mr & Mrs Iyer*?

It is in a scenario such as this that we are now coming across loud murmurs about Priyanka Chopra transforming herself into Mary Kom, the Indian boxer from Manipur.

In an op-ed piece in *The Hindu*, A Bimol Akoijam wrote: "Why was Malaysian-born actress Michelle Yeoh chosen to play Aung San Suu Kyi in the latter's biopic *The Lady*, Morgan

Freeman chosen to play Nelson Mandela in *Invictus*, but Priyanka Chopra chosen to play Mary Kom in the biopic on the Manipuri boxer in a country which is ostensibly proud of its diversity?"

Let's not pretend to be politically correct here. The answer is simple: an oriental face is not acceptable to the general public of this multicultural India. Even the female form depicted in Konarak or Khajuraho temples does not represent the Indian idea of beauty; it is the hourglass figure seen on fashion ramps in the country or its dream site, Bollywood, that does. Curvaceous actresses are also not the usual favourite of Mumbai's filmmakers; they only appeal to cine-goers who are south of the Vindhyas."

While I agree with Akoijam that Indian citizens from the north-eastern States of the country have been facing discrimination — call it racial or anything else — the director of the biopic *Mary Kom*, Omung Kumar, would, in all probability, not have been prejudiced when he chose Chopra to be the screen boxer. It is quite likely that he did not find a suitable Manipuri actress or was driven by boxoffice consideration or both when he signed on Chopra.

Mind you, producers are investing crores of rupees in a movie, and they have to keep the returns in view. Which means while a Priyanka Chopra may appeal to the masses and draw them into buying tickets for the film, an unknown actress may not be able to do this. Audiences have to identify with the protagonist, and only a known face — a popular star, in fact — can help here.

Helmets and writers also have the right to take certain other liberties. Shahrukh Khan, a Muslim, played Kabir Khan, the hockey coach in *Chak De India*. But was Kabir seduced by a woman player as was shown in the movie? No. Yet, the script took this little licence to add this incident in *Chak De India*, only because the writer, the producer and the director wanted a bit of drama to enliven the story.

Again, why was not a Sikh asked to essay Milkha Singh in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*? Veteran Shyam Benegal, one of the pioneers of the new Indian cinema of the 1970s, says in the same opinion piece in *The Hindu*: "If the broad brushstrokes are okay and you're true to the spirit of the person, you can tweak the detailing. Because the audience will always recognise a film's honesty..."

You could make an entirely accurate movie, but if it's not acceptable to the audience, what use is it? You have to find that golden mean, which is artistically satisfying and has honesty and transparency...When people pay money to see a film, you have to hold them for those few hours and the director is entitled to a few cinematic liberties in dramatising the story and making the viewer identify with the protagonist at some level?"

So, one could have made an entirely accurate movie by choosing, in this case, a Manipuri actress to portray Mary Kom. But this might not have gone well with viewers, and the film could have bombed. What a wasted effort that would have been. I clearly remember another sports movie, Irrfan Khan's *Pan Singh Tomar* — which premiered at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, but rotted away in the cans for two years before it opened theatrically in India. Why was this inordinate delay?

Irrfan, despite being an excellent performer, was no Shahrukh Khan or Salman Khan or Aamir Khan. Irrfan was not a star like the others, but of course, his talent has since then been acknowledged and accepted. I think he is the best of the Khans.

And, Chopra was good as Mary Kom — much like Shahrukh in *Chak De India* and Farhan Akhtar in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*.

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TWO TO TANGO: Priyanka, right with the real Mary Kom.