

## Salman: Privileged and pampered

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STAR POWER: Salman Khan surrounded by a bevy of Bollywood beauties. Quite a few fellow artistes openly supported him despite the conviction.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Crime and criminality have become the middle names of some Indian actors. And these misdemeanours can, at times, be horrifying. They can be as horrendous as drunk driving, rape and sheer hooliganism.

Some months ago, one was appalled to hear that Malayalam superstar Dileep was charged with hiring a "supari" to rape a well-known actress from the state. She was sexually assaulted in a moving car on a highway, and what was even more beastly was the video-graphing of the whole sordid episode! It was an act of revenge or so is what is being stated, and Dileep is now out on bail after spending 80-odd days in jail.

But Bollywood actor Salman Khan was lucky. Last week, he had to cool his heels in a Jodhpur jail for just two nights, and if rumours are to be believed, he stayed in an air-conditioned room with television for company. But this is not the core issue: what is, is the haste with which he was granted bail in a 1998 blackbuck poaching case after being sentenced to five-year rigorous imprisonment.

To begin with, Khan managed to delay the case for 20 years, and I think it was the dogged perseverance of the Bishnoi community that got Khan a jail term for killing blackbucks — a highly endangered species under India's Wildlife Act and also considered as sacred in the region. The Bishnois literally worship the gentle animal, and are known to be fierce protectors of wild life in general in a country like India where poaching of tigers, elephants and rhinos is rampant and almost a well-oiled industry.

Although Khan was slapped with a longish prison term, he was out in a wink, much to the chagrin of many.

It seemed like a travesty of justice when the judge, who, had in the first place sentenced him, was transferred just before he could hear the bail application. The new judge allowed Khan to walk free. Everybody knows what would have happened.

One should have seen the way Khan emerged from the jail, clean shaven and well dressed — and he was whisked away in a car to a waiting private plane, which flew him to Mumbai. A convict, he hardly behaved like one.

It seemed such a shame that many actors, directors and others in Bollywood stood by Khan. Some said that 20 years had passed by, and the man would have matured and reformed. Others averred that Khan had done so much of charity that he must be pardoned.

Of course, nobody said that he had been playing the Good Samaritan on screen in films like Bajrangi Bhaijaan and Tubelight — in a cleverly orchestrated move to give himself an image makeover and win public sympathy. Which he has got, given the kind of overwhelming reception he received in Mumbai on his arrival from Jodhpur.

While Bajrangi Bhaijaan spoke about his devotion to Hanuman and his yeomen effort to reunite a mute little girl with her parents living across the border in Pakistan, Tubelight was all about his efforts to build a bridge between India and China. He has only furthered this image in films like Sultan and Dabangg — in, what one feels, is a desperate attempt to tell the world what a noble guy he is.

But off screen, Khan has had a brush with the law several times. In 2002, he drove his SUV over pavement dwellers in Mumbai — killing one and maiming others. But the case dragged on for over a decade — a period when key witnesses vanished or died. Eventually, the High Court acquitted Khan, who was also reportedly, inebriated when he was driving on that ill-fated day.

(Khan is also said to have abused Aishwarya Rai in those days when they were together. And one even remembers how she lost a role when Khan barged into the set she was shooting in and created a scene.)

A Hindi film, Jolly LLB, pulled all stops to make fun of our justice system, lambast lawyers who accepted huge sums of money to protect the guilty and, in short, to mock at our courts. But then there was one sessions judge, although known to be corrupt, who listened to his conscience and sent the rich man's son, guilty of running over pavement dwellers and killing or maiming them, to jail. It was a bold work.

The Jodhpur judge must have been under tremendous pressure to free Khan, but I think he stood up to save the day for the Indian judiciary. But then, the second judge buckled, and Khan walked out of jail.

There was a similar case in Chennai. A judge allowed Tamil actor Jai to escape drunk driving with a paltry fine of Rs5,000 and suspension of driving licence for a mere six months. The police were peeved and did bring it to the court's notice that Jai was committing the offence the second time and that he must not be shown any leniency. But the judge did not pay heed to this.

It is time that celebrity crime is firmly dealt with in India. When an actor drinks and drives or when a star like Saif Ali Khan beats up an elderly man and his son in a restaurant because they objected to his loud banter or when one goes butchering blackbucks supremely sure that he is above the law of the land or when one assaults a woman, he must be brought to book. No mercy here, please. No excuses either citing the crores of rupees riding on Khan. Big bucks and charity cannot be reasons for pardon, especially when it comes to crimes like drunk driving and poaching.

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