

Will playing screen Samaritan help Salman Khan?

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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Cinema is such a powerful medium that it arrests the eye and the mind – and keep them captive for a long time. No wonder, then, that people in power, all kinds of power, have used pictures to promote themselves. Politicians, media men, industrialists and even morons have reached out to movies to brag about themselves. The latest is Salman Khan.

Once unflatteringly labelled the Bad Boy of Bollywood – known to have taken on actors like Vivek Oberoi and suspected to have brutalised Aishwarya Rai – Khan has been accused of other serious misdemeanours. He went blackbuck hunting in Bishnoi land, where the deer is held in sacred reverence. In any case, the animal cannot be hunted in India. It is a protected species. And, Khan was also charged with running over sleeping men on a Mumbai pavement, killing one, and this in his sozzled state. That he has kept himself out of jail speaks of a corrupt system and the actor's own money and muscle power.

Now, past 50, Khan would like to be remembered as a good man, and the best way to achieve this is to play a Samaritan in movies. In the 2015 Bajrangi Bhaijaan, he turns into Pawan Kumar Chaturvedi, a devoutly religious young man, living in the holy town of Kurukshetra – where one day he comes across a mute, six-year-old girl. She is lost, having been separated from her Pakistani mother, who had come to Delhi to visit a shrine. The little girl gets off the train just before the Indo-Pakistani border, unnoticed by her sleeping mother, and lands in Pawan's territory. When he finally finds out that she is from Pakistan, he takes her there without a passport or visa, in order to reunite the little girl with her family.

Bajrangi Bhaijaan was clearly an effort by Khan to project himself as an ardent Indian desirous of building a bridge between India and Pakistan – two neighbours who had been warring for seven decades. There are many number of scenes in the film that tries telling us that the people in Pakistan are a good lot, and these come out most effectively in the final frames – when a local cop allows Pawan out of the prison to return home. He becomes a hero on either side of the fence: for the Pakistanis, he is the guy who went to great lengths to take the little girl back home. What is more, she even begins to speak. For Indians, he was sacrifice personified – who put his life at great risk to undertake a journey as perilous as that.

Now, two years later, Mr Khan is back with another bridge – which he places between another set of not-too-friendly neighbours, divided by a mountain range. In a remote Kumaon village during the 1962 border clash between India and China, Lakshman Singh Bisht is a man who has not quite developed into an adult. He is slow and childlike. So, he is teased and taunted by his schoolmates, and later his villagers – who have nicknamed him Tubelight.

Directed by Kabir Khan, Tubelight also has Sohail Khan essaying Lakshman's smart younger brother, Bharath, who gets pulled into the army when tension on the border begins worrying New Delhi. Later, he is taken prisoner, declared dead because of a mistaken identity. But eventually the grave error is rectified, much to the joy of Lakshman and the rest of the rural community.

But all this is not quite the story – though this part also screams out loud and clear the patriotic message. What is much more apparent is the humanitarian, we-are-brothers card that Salman Khan plays, trying to tell us that Chinese are people like us. They are nice and lovely.

By a strange coincidence, a woman, Liling (Zhu Zhu), and her son, Guo (Matin Rey Tangu), of Chinese origin land inside Lakshman's Rekha, and with the war having made the race an enemy – almost overnight (this was most apparent in the Calcutta of the 1960s where a huge Chinese community in a variety of professions like medicine, leather, food, etc was seen as a foe) – the two find themselves unwelcome. But Lakshman with all his warmth and innocence befriends them, especially the little lad.

Having been taught by a distant uncle (late Om Puri) to follow Gandhian principles, Lakshman begins his role as a preacher, urging the village folk to embrace the young mother and son – and the message is not lost. Rather, it comes off as too heavy, often boringly so. I found Lakshman as the do-gooder not in tune with his somewhat limited mental ability.

But so what? Mr Khan's agenda is clear. He wants to don the role of a noble guy – using the screen for a makeover of his none-too-clean image. The hostile ties between India and Pakistan, and the blow-hot blow-cold atmosphere on the Indo-Chinese border have come in handy for our Salman. But I really wonder whether in this day and age with a people whose intelligence cannot be doubted will buy what Khan is trying to sell.

Apart from all this, Tubelight does not even work as a movie. Aptly, the Hindi daily Prabhat Kiran, from the central Indian city of Indore, said Tubelight does not even have a starter. And for me, the film played out like a theatre of the absurd.

Worse, the movie does not seem to have enamoured even the die-hard fans of Salman. Its box-office collections during the opening weekend were unimpressive – as unimpressive as Khan's performance has been. Walking with a slight stoop and with a contorted face (which is passed off as some kind of comedy), he appears downright silly. Not that he was ever a good actor, but Tubelight seems to have pulled him to the rock bottom.

And, come on Khan, do you really think that people are so gullible to be taken in by your carefully cultivated screen image – something you probably hope will erase the bad memories they have of you?

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