

Film stars stand up for good causes

HIV/AIDS, cancer, immunization, animal cruelty and climate change ... Examine an issue, and there's likely a star connected with it. It is the most in thing to do around the world and of late many Indian celebrities like Sanjay Dutt and Salman Khan are getting seriously involved.

Most superstars have their reasons. Some have been personally affected by their causes - think about Sanjay, whose mother died of cancer, or Neil Young, who has two children with cerebral palsy, or Michael J. Fox with Parkinson's disease.

Others want to get involved and give something back to society, as with Shabana Azmi, Paul Newman and many more. But others may be contributing for less altruistic reasons.

Whatever the reason, stars who do not fully understand the issues they are advocating for, are passe. Media sees right through them and denounces any celebrity who is ill informed. Gone are the days when giving lip service to social causes was equivalent to flaunting the latest fashion accessory.

Already, a barrage of international celebrities including Angelina Jolie, Ashley Judd and Ralph Fiennes have visited India to familiarise themselves with ground reality.

Within our country, young politicians and Bollywood stars recently went on a field visit to witness the extent of malnutrition among children in Madhya Pradesh.

'Many Bollywood stars would do good away from the spotlight, going by the Hindu philosophy of performing duty without expectations. But they are now realising they can benefit more people by being visible. Similarly, many are entering politics,' says an industry old-timer.

Bollywood's bad boy Salman, who has done some good deeds as well, is the latest to overcome shyness. News reports say he will be seen launching Salman Khan Foundation in an upcoming episode of 'Kaun Banega Crorepati-III'.

Bollywood stars are even endorsing international causes. Superstar Amitabh Bachchan has joined forces with British actress Sienna Miller to launch a campaign for recruiting supporters to help fight climate change.

Amitabh, who was honoured by the UN for his contribution to the polio eradication programme in India, and Miller signed the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) Bond for Global Cool in London. The campaign targets the 500 million fans of Indian cinema worldwide with an appeal to reduce carbon emissions.

The IIFA weekend is a four-day presentation of Indian entertainment, business and culture, taking place from June 7-10 in Yorkshire and London.

On the other hand, a good cause for Amitabh and the whole of Bollywood to oppose could be global retail giant Wal-Mart's attempts to dovetail with the New York Bollywood Awards in an attempt to invade Indian markets - a move fervently opposed by activists across the country.

News that Wal-Mart Stores Inc. will be the main sponsor of the 9th annual Bollywood Movie Awards to be held at the Nassau Coliseum in New York City May 26 has many in India up in arms who fear Wal-Mart will clobber small and medium-size local businesses.

Any takers for this cause?

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Globally, superstars have been putting their might against unfair trade practices. The World Economic Forum in Davos witnessed a plethora of celebrities. Similarly, Hollywood award functions are turning into platforms for calling global attention to burning social issues, including controversial ones like the Iraq war.

However, questions regarding celebrity-inspired action still crop up from time to time. Xavier Sala-i-Martin, economics professor at Columbia University, agrees that celebrities can do some good. But he is still worried because some aid flows are not based on rational decisions, but the whims of a superstar.

Media attention is guaranteed, but donors' wallets don't always open. A year ago, Hollywood megastar Sharon Stone attended the World Economic Forum and heard the Tanzanian president explain that every year a million people were dying of malaria because they lacked basic precautions like bed netting to keep mosquitoes away.

Stone stood up, pledged \$10,000 and challenged business people to match her donation. Within 10 minutes more than \$1m was pledged but at the end most of them were not honoured. A UN body had to make up the shortfall.

But 'should we rely on Stone's instincts to determine a worthy cause' in the first place, asks Sala-i-Martin. 'Every year diarrhoea is killing more people than Malaria,' he says 'so, could the UN organisation have used the money for an even more urgent cause?'

A star, he says, is not accountable to anybody.

Rachel Weingarten, a New York-based publicist and event organiser who heads GTK Marketing Group, says she is discouraged by what she calls 'the Hollywoodization of doing good', in which a name is required to get attention for the cause.

'I have real issues with the fact that people with great ideas, who do good things - if they don't have a celebrity name attached, they get lost,' she said.

What's worse, she added, is when the celebrity factor overwhelms the cause. She mentions one event she worked on in which the charity had hoped to benefit several hundred children. In the end, because of overhead for celebrity demands, the money raised only supported one-tenth that many.

Such risks of 'celebrity inspired action' notwithstanding, lucky are the charities that have superstar backing.

'If I get the subject onto the entertainment pages, it allows me to share a subject matter with an

audience that may not be aware of it,' says Hollywood actor Michael Douglas.

Priyanka Khanna (© IANS / India eNews)