

cinema



* Shah Rukh Khan ... in the eye of a media storm.

Stardom under the scanner

Did India overreact to Shah Rukh Khan's interrogation by airport authorities in New York last week? Perhaps the Bollywood star needed a reality check, suggests

Gautaman Bhaskaran

"My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist," Rizwan repeats what seems like a million times in a Bollywood film. Playing a Muslim man with Asperger's Syndrome in the 2010 *My Name is Khan*, Indian actor Shah Rukh Khan has, despite his impassioned utterances on the screen, been finding himself in tight corners at American airports.

The US Immigration seems as nonchalant to Khan's pleas as Rhett Butler was to Scarlett O' Hara's passionate love for him in Hollywood's *Gone With The Wind*. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" he tells her at the end of the story. Airport officers in America must be saying this as well, though under their breath.

Curiously, Khan's first brush with the US authorities was during his 2009 trip to promote/shoot *My Name is Khan*. On his way to Chicago, he was detained and questioned at Newark Airport for two hours. "Nothing seemed to convince

the immigration officer", Khan lamented later, and he was really angry after the "traumatic incident". He said he felt humiliated, more so because he was not even allowed to make a telephone call.

Last week, Khan was invited by Yale University as a Chubb Fellow to give a lecture, and he found himself being stopped and asked to step aside at a New York airport. He was grilled for two hours. He had flown in from India in a private plane with Neeta Ambani (wife of industrialist Mukesh Ambani). While Ambani and others were quickly cleared by the authorities, Khan had to stay back.

The Bollywood actor's aides said he was furious, and Yale had to intervene before Khan could walk out of the airport.

Later, Khan joked about it to Yale students. "Yes, it always happens. It is nice. Whenever I start feeling arrogant about myself, I take a trip to America. The immigration guy kicks the stars out of stardom", he quipped.

While I realise that the US authorities suffer from

anxiety neurosis, and appear suspicious of names like Khan, I often wonder why Indians as a race have become so conceited. Humility has just disappeared from just about every corner of this country. Movie stars wear insolence on their sleeves. In India, where cinema is such a compulsive obsession, haughtiness easily rolls down from the screen to the street.

Today, haughtiness appears to be the hallmark of the Indian cinema fraternity, and Khan was bang on when he said he needed a dose of the American "kick" every time his head began swelling. Somehow, Indian stars have begun to think that they are demi-gods. Look at the way, Salman Khan drove over sleeping men on a Mumbai pavement and felt no remorse. See how Saif Ali Khan punched two diners at a Mumbai restaurant, and one was an old man. Did Saif feel sorry? I do not think so.

Stardom and the vulgar amounts of money that is there for the asking have pushed actors and actresses to the precipice of bizarre behaviour. And they are encouraged, idolised and forgiven by their fans.

I cannot understand why Yale must invite Shah Rukh Khan to deliver the Chubb lecture. Could the university not have found another Indian? If at all, it wanted someone from cinema, why not Soumitra Chatterjee? Why not Girish Kasaravalli? Why not Adoor Gopalakrishnan? Buddhadeb Dasgupta? Shabana Azmi? Could Yale only think of Khan, who is not even a great actor?

Yale probably got carried away by the response Khan attracts abroad, particularly in Germany. But what Yale does not realise is that these adulations mostly come from expatriate Indians, who are hung up on popular cinema. Read *Bollywood*.

Worse, the media at home and those abroad run by Indians are obsessed with the stars and their stardom. Mainline dailies in India frontpaged the Khan episode, while those lesser mortals similarly harassed in US airports hardly ever get airtime or space in newspapers. Not just this, but the Indian government and the bureaucracy were so perturbed that the Khan incident was made to look like a diplomatic catastrophe.

Indians have become sickeningly slavish to stars. No wonder these men and women with painted faces behave the way they do.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanb@hotmail.com)