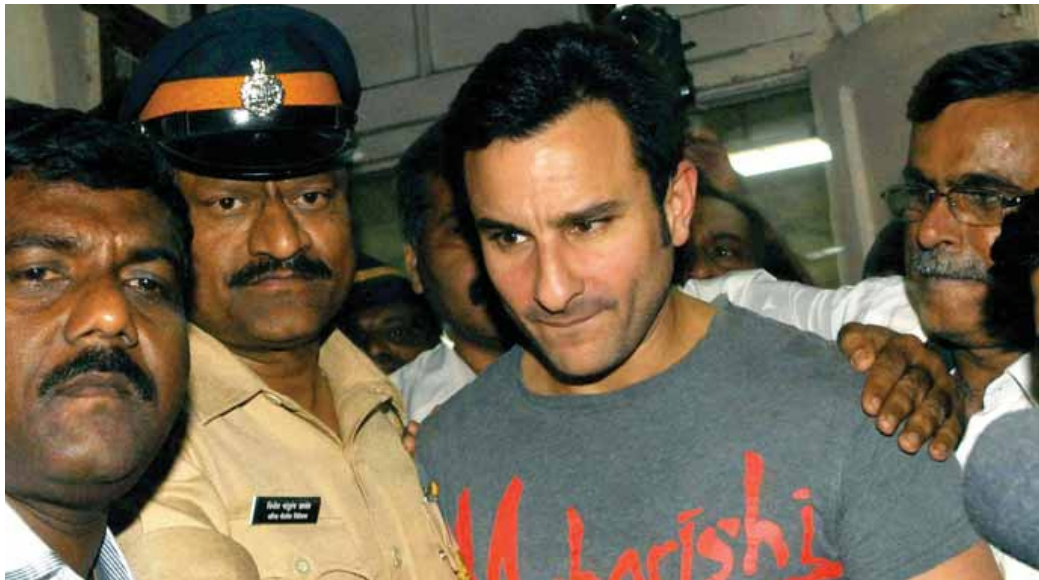


cinema



* Bollywood star Saif Ali Khan, surrounded by police officials, leaves a police station in Mumbai on February 22. The leading actor surrendered to police after being accused of breaking a man's nose in a brawl at a luxury hotel's restaurant in Mumbai. Khan was released on bail after being questioned about the incident at Colaba police station.

Flying off the handle

Saif Ali Khan's alleged brawl at a Mumbai restaurant is one in a series of episodes where Bollywood stars tend to take the action off the screen and into real life with drastic consequences, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

India's rich are a mighty lot. They believe they are 'rightly' as well. Not just sometimes, but always, even when they bash not necessarily baddies, even when they brawl around, even when they drink and drive, crushing sleeping men on sidewalks.

We remember Bollywood hunk Salman Khan allegedly driving his fancy vehicle over half a dozen people on a Mumbai pavement some years ago. (He is said to have been inebriated.) In classic cinematic style, Khan's driver "pleaded guilty" (probably was forced to do that). Maybe he is still in jail. Nobody has bothered to find that out.

The media could not care about such

lesser mortals. Perhaps, the driver's family is being taken care of. Truly film-style again, for I remember seeing movies where the villain's/hero's Man Friday declares in court that he has committed the crime — which he has not actually, but his master has — in return for a hefty sum of money. Man Friday goes to jail happily. The villain/hero dashes off to his next bloody adventure.

When it is not men who are mowed down on streets, it is the turn of animals. Salman Khan and his group of friends drove into a Rajasthan reserve forest and shot a couple of endangered blackbuck. Even though hunting these animals is illegal in India and the deer is highly revered by the Bishnoi

community in Rajasthan, Khan was later acquitted.

One among the group was Saif Ali Khan, son of India's ace cricketer, Nawab of Pataudi, and Bollywood star Sharmila Tagore. Now described as 'Chhote Nawab', Saif was dining at an upscale restaurant in Mumbai the other evening, when something provoked him to turn into a typical Bollywood hero. He boxed a South African businessman, Iqbal Sharma, and his elderly father-in-law (!), who were also dining at a table adjoining to Khan's. The actor's entourage included his longtime girlfriend, actress Kareena Kapoor, and some other friends.

Although the star-obsessed Indian media was quick on its takes — attributing all kinds of motives to Khan's violence, including that it was part of a publicity stunt for the promotion of *Agent Vinod*, opening mid-March — I would dismiss all of these.

Given Khan's hot-headed past, it is more likely that he flew off the handle at dinner that evening. And this is not the first time he has got into a mess. He hunted a blackbuck and slit its throat. He drove down to Ashok Row Kavi's (a journalist and well-known gay rights activist) house and slapped him, because he had criticised Sharmila Tagore's accent. Even earlier, Saif had roughed up a magazine journalist with the actor's former wife, Amrita Singh, watching the show.

Nobody is going to forget the ugly dinner episode in a hurry, because the fight was not between two stars. Two common men were also involved here. And, the Indian masses and the media are in an angry mood, given the kind of brash unlawfulness that exists among the country's rich and the powerful. Sympathy and support are now for the man on the street, not the one on the pedestal.

However, it must not be forgotten that men like Khan are the creations of the media, which has over the years given them undue importance, making demi-gods out of them. The lay public has followed the media adulation with its own brand of idolisation.

Watch this Khan

There is, though, another Khan, also a star in his own right (and also a brilliant actor), who is modest, humble and pleasing to be with. He is Irrfan Khan, the quietest of all the Bollywood Khans — as I wrote in 2010 after watching his *Paan Singh Tomar* and talking to him at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival.

Paradoxically, Irrfan sometimes plays rebels, as in his latest work, *Paan Singh Tomar*, helmed by Tigmanshu Dhulia. He was admirable in the movie as Tomar, fast on the sporting track (Tomar was a champion steeplechase runner before he was pushed into the badlands by the unfair system) and on the trigger. He was firm, but compassionate, and explored avenues other than violence before he let bullets fly.

Now working on Ang Lee's *The Life of Pi*, Khan said recently during an interview that "Hollywood isn't ready for an Indian leading man... It will take time before Hollywood is free to write a story about an Indian guy, unless it's about the dark side of India, like *Shumdog Millionaire*, where he (Irrfan) played a detective who interrogates a poor boy suspected of cheating in a game show... Hollywood does not want to see a normal India. That's not the shock value it has to have."

Khan said he no longer aspired for fame or fortune, but maybe for roles, each very different from the other, and, yes, for a career the looks beyond race, religion and the geographical boundaries of a country. What is more, he said, with some finality, he was "after God".

Paan Singh Tomar opens soon, but unfortunately after having remained in cans for over two years. In the film, Khan's Tomar is pushed into a life of crime, and takes up the gun to preserve his self-respect and dignity. But will he ever pick up a revolver to resolve issues in real life? Nobody has ever asked him this. But knowing him, he is probably too much of a gentleman to punch people or shoot them into silence.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been watching "filmy action" on the streets as he has on the screen for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanb@hotmail.com)



* Irrfan Khan... "Hollywood isn't ready for an Indian leading man."