

The perils of being a celebrity

By Richa Mishra

Being a celebrity or to work in an entertainment industry is hard because you don't have a personal life. Some people have work life and private life, but you don't have that. You are accountable even for the things you do on your private personal time" — De Philosopher DJ Kyos (Kyos Magupe)

No surprises then when a speech made by veteran actor Amitabh Bachchan at the recent Kolkata International Film Festival generated a debate.

The debate on certain points made by Bachchan also raises some questions — when it comes to voicing their opinions, how much is too much for such personalities? Should they not have a voice? And what kind of regulations they should be governed by? Should they adopt self-censorship?

According to Rajya Sabha member and former bureaucrat Jawhar Sircar, that the role of films and personalities influence the socio-economic position is a serious question. "It is a tension between established norms and the present," he said.

This tension is more prevalent in culture or media as there is a challenge of creativity and restraints, he added. Citing an example, he said pick any episode of Mahabharata or Ramayana, they are subject to so many interpretations and are subject of so many debates. "When anything, any idea or concept challenges the existing established norm then only an alternative is created," he said, adding that a person in this field needs to define how much he or she can portray.

Self-boundaries

"Yes, boundaries have to be drawn, but it is self boundary," he said, adding "regulations can just give broad structure." According to him, "An established-determined boundary would negate the very purpose of creativity to raise questions and suggest alternatives."

Clearly, films have an impact on society and also reflect socio-economic changes in society. Some of Bachchan's films too like Aarakshan ('Reservation') in 2011, Kaala Patthar and many more have dealt with politics and socio-economic conditions.

"Since those early times, there have been many changes in cinema content. Production, star system, the way films are viewed by audiences... Subjects have also been vastly varied from mythological films, socialist cinema, like the films of Bimal Roy, Chetan Anand and Raj Kapoor, with his Chaplin-inspired Tramp as the protagonist," Bachchan had said.

He had pointed to "Art House Cinema, the Advent of the Angry Young Man of the 70s and 80s, viewed against the frustration of countless unemployed youth to the current brand of historicals couched in fictionalised jingoism, along with moral policing, the range has kept audiences reflecting on the politics and social concerns of our times through single screens, videos, multiplexes, and now the burgeoning OTT."

In fact, films have been used to study various trends and aspects of economy. As Jaideep Prabhu, Professor of Marketing, Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, puts it, "Films of all kinds are a wonderful source of insight into and data on how societies and economies are at a point in time as well as how they evolve over time."

"Documentaries provide a more factual insight into, and record of, how economies and societies are and

evolve. But even feature films that explore fictional stories can be studied by researchers to make inferences about how individuals and groups behave and make choices that have social and economic implications. For instance, my co-authors and I have used a database of Indian feature films set in the chawls of Mumbai from the 1960s onwards to understand how the use of energy and appliances in lower to middle income homes has changed over time,” he added.

There are censor boards to maintain checks and balances on what is being projected and how, and there are also rules for celebrities doing brand endorsements.

Mirror to society

In his speech, Bachchan spoke about how over the years filmmakers have reflected society and economy’s changing mores. He also pointed out that “We cannot take our audiences for granted. Today viewers are not only exposed to a range of international content but also have the option to watch this content in a variety of formats, ranging from the traditional big screen to their personal tabs and mobile phones. Big decisions have to be made that will determine the future of entertainment. I suspect they will have to be artistic rethinking and bold and imaginative ideas will bring new joy and faith to humanity.

“With these never-ending confrontations in the 1940s, the policing of Indian cinema grew exasperatingly stringent. To put it mildly, over the rigmarole of five different censor boards setting up their own rules, things were chaotic. Finally, the 1952 Cinematograph Act, set out the structure of censorship as it stands today upheld by the film certification board. But even now.. questions are being raised on civil liberties and freedom of expression,” he said.

It is Bachchan’s reference to freedom of expression and civil liberties that sparked the debate.

While his speech was more academic in nature, it had an otherwise fidgety audience glued — just because it was Bachchan speaking.

Actor Akshay Kumar, in his foreword of FICCI-EY Media and Entertainment report 2022, wrote: “...today India’s media and entertainment sector is flourishing worldwide. The industry’s value is likely to touch ₹2.3 trillion by 2024.”

Thanks to digital outreach, today smartphones exist in every corner of the country, which makes it easy to access OTT, TV, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter through which all kinds of content, including films, sports, news, music and more can be seen, making voices of these personalities important.

“Films do reflect socio-economic reality. Films to that extent feed on reality and act as mirrors in what they reflect back into society. A black mirror even!,” said Harish Bijoor, Founder, Harish Bijoor Consults Inc.

So should boundaries be drawn on what is said by film personalities and what is shown in films? While one section of experts feel there should be a thumb rule for it, there is another section which feels self-regulation works best.

Policymakers, too, have discussed and debated on it. The jury on this debate is still out, but there is little doubt over the growing appetite for consuming content, making celebrities like Bachchan influencers.