

# ENTER THE CAUSERATI

Engaged in fending off the world's ills from AIDS to communalism is a new breed of activists—rich, famous and ready to lend their names to a worthy cause

by Shefalee VASUDEV

IN HELEN FIELDING'S NOVEL *Cause Celeb*, one of the characters makes a prediction: "Celebrities have been promoting causes since the First World War but in five years' time no cause will be complete without an accompanying star to promote it."

As celebrities scoop out causes with saintly fervour and fame courts the calamity-hit zones before disaster management teams, Fielding's prophecy is fast being propelled into reality. The desi stars have realised that renting fame to nobler deeds does wonders to their social resumes. So you have socially empathetic beauty queens, activist popstars and charity-spewing filmstars who party at night and espouse a cause by day. They scrub their faces for a peace run and paint them for photoshoots. They are a cross-breed of the literati, chatterati,

glitterati, powerati, with a cause to boot. Move over jholawallas, the causerati is here.

Be it AIDS, communalism, eye donations, organ transplants, animal rights or orphaned children, there is a renowned, glamorous or rich person not far behind, enunciating you-see-how-important-it-is speeches. Till some years ago, the stars "graced" the occasions—they lit a lamp or cut a ribbon, smiled into the blinking cameras and disappeared from the scene. They came to enjoy the perks of what was rightfully theirs—fame—and didn't profess to serve the country. They still smile for the cameras but not without

Arundhati Roy's pen often beheads whatever she thinks is socially unjust

an impassioned speech or two. Some willingly share their personal crises with a sympathetic public. Even those who read out discourses framed by ghost-writers do it with the right facial expressions. For authenticity, there is the sym-

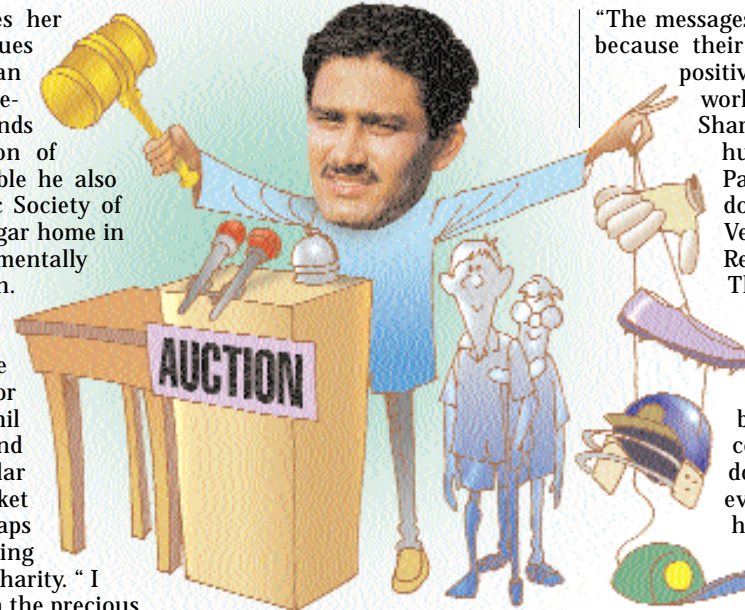
Sharmila Tagore & Tiger Pataudi have set their sights on eye donations



tions but also professes her mission is working on issues related to AIDS. The Indian cricket team's affable vice-captain Rahul Dravid lends a hand to conservation of tigers. Whenever possible he also drops by at the Spastic Society of India near his Indiranagar home in Bangalore to cheer up mentally challenged children. Dravid and fast bowler Javagal Srinath are also associated with the National Association for the Blind. Bowler Anil Kumble on the other hand is known for the popular auctioning off of cricket collectibles like bats, caps and T-shirts and donating the money collected to charity. "I don't mind parting with the precious items for a good cause," says the spinner. "I wish I had more time to personally get involved in social service," he adds.

As rhetoric for social causes floats like confetti, celebrities, small and big, past and present, have-beens and wannabes all crowd in, eager to autograph some social cause or the other. As a result there is a surplus of both—the celebrities and the causes.

Does it help? Even real activists do not deny the mass appeal of celebrities who adopt causes. "Policymakers like Kapil Sibal and well-connected



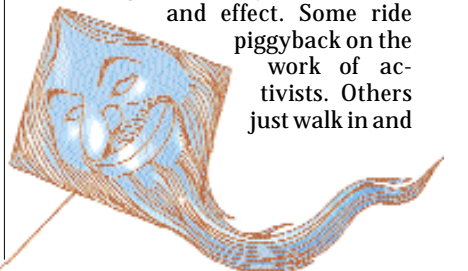
Anil Kumble has bowled over Bangaloreans with his auctions of cricket collectibles

celebrities like Nafisa Ali help further the cause by getting things done that otherwise may take years," says Dr Chinkholal Thangsing, director of the AIDS project at Action-India, an NGO. Even those who smirk at the slogan-shouting Ali's frequent appearances at every solidarity meet, admit that it helps draw the deserved attention. "The urge to involve myself in social causes was sparked years ago, when, as a newly married woman, I helped out army jawan's families," says Ali, apparently unperturbed by

"The messages of icons are stronger because their achievements lend a positive energy to social work," says former filmstar Sharmila Tagore, who with husband M.A.K. "Tiger" Pataudi, supports eye donations through the Venu Eye Institute and Research Centre in Delhi. The Pataudis were instrumental in setting up an eye-care centre in Pataudi town many years ago but their current cause celebre is advocating eye donations. Tagore, however, doesn't think of herself as an activist.

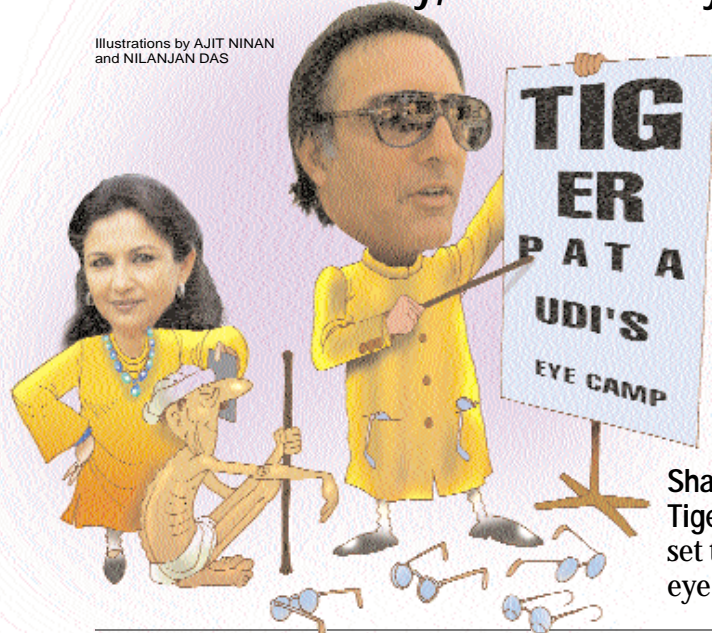
"None of us has the unselfish dedication of a Mother Teresa," she says, adding, "I choose to support a real worker or organisation than do the grassroots work myself." Also, as Tanuja Joshi, director of the Venu Eye Institute, points out, the Pataudis don't try to overshadow the cause.

But then, not everybody endorses Tagore's clarity about cause and effect. Some ride piggyback on the work of activists. Others just walk in and



For authenticity, there's the symbolic holding of a child or concerned visits to earthquake zones with shock writ large on their faces.

Illustrations by AJIT NINAN and NILANJAN DAS



bolistic holding of a child, patting of an AIDS patient, nursing of a battered woman or concerned visits to hospitals, refugee camps and earthquake zones with shock writ large on their faces. All dutifully documented by a voyeuristic media.

The causerati list is long. Writer Arundhati Roy uses her pen like a sword to behead whatever she thinks is socially immoral or politically unjust. MP Kapil Sibal spearheads anti-AIDS campaigns. Ex-Miss World Yukta Mookhey talks of charity for orphaned children, actor Rahul Dev and model-veejay Nafisa Joseph plead the cause of stray animals. There's the glamorous model Rhea Pillai who teaches troubled souls the Art of Living and, of course, the former beauty queen Nafisa Ali who nurses political ambi-



the criticism she has drawn. "This is my calling. I want to work for AIDS patients," she says, pointing out that her persistence yielded in Cipla, the pharmaceutical company, donating 1,000 doses of Neverapine, a drug that can reduce the risk of HIV transmission from mother to child.

Not many disagree with the convincing power of fame.

RHEA PILLAI is a prominent and pretty ambassador of the Art of Living

out of charitable causes without consistent empathy. Still others do it as a social obligation that they cannot escape. Social organisations say they prefer conveying their messages through a popular face to spending astronomical sums on advertising. Mookhey vehemently argues against involvement in social work for an image. "Charity can't be faked. As a beauty queen one is expected to say and do certain things, but people soon understand whether you are a fake or a real," says the tall beauty who is now the ambassador of the National Liver Donation Foundation and the National Orphan Adoption Foundation. On the other hand, Joseph, who is associated with People for Animals (PFA) and People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), finds the scepticism

about celebrities espousing causes shallow. "I get enough attention through my work. Why would I stoop so low and resort to espousing causes for publicity?" she asks insisting that she is an animal lover not an activist.

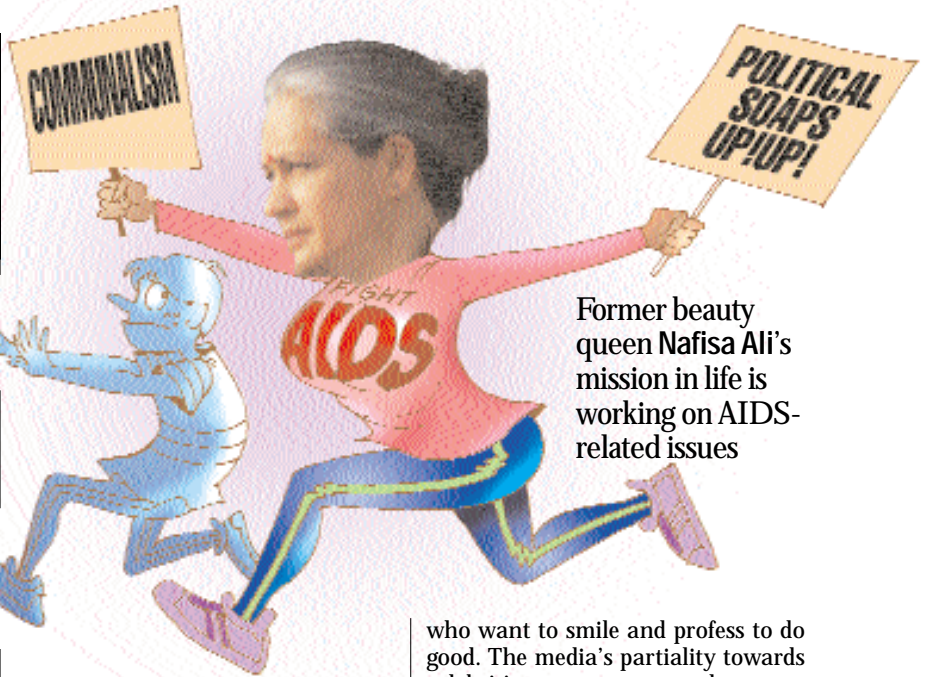
Celebrities giving a face to causes has been a longstanding trend even in the West. Hollywood actors like Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Gere or singer Elton John, among others, have been serious anti-AIDS campaigners. The late Princess Diana often lent her pretty face and famous smile to raise funds for those afflicted by cancer or AIDS. Former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell was hired to raise funds for breast cancer, while *Baywatch* babe Pamela Anderson willingly promotes awareness about hepatitis.

"But unlike in the West, here the celebrities become larger than life, looming over the causes they campaign for," says cultural analyst Sudheesh Pachauri who thinks the media savvy celebrities are exploited because the real activists are neither photogenic nor articulate. He cites the example of Roy where he feels the Narmada dam cause has been relegated to the background while Roy basks in the limelight.

**S**CEPTICISM abounds in many others like Pachauri about the dynamics surrounding the word "celebrity".

Former Samata Party president Jaya Jaitly says she too finds the false aura around celebrityhood difficult to accept. "Inviting celebrities to endorse causes shows the lack of conviction of the organisations. Why can't they rely on their merit?" she asks. Jaitly who has worked with handloom and handicraft artisans for over 35 years and has been behind the success story of the popular handicraft bazaar Dilli Haat in Delhi, says India's glamour-struck society is largely to be blamed.

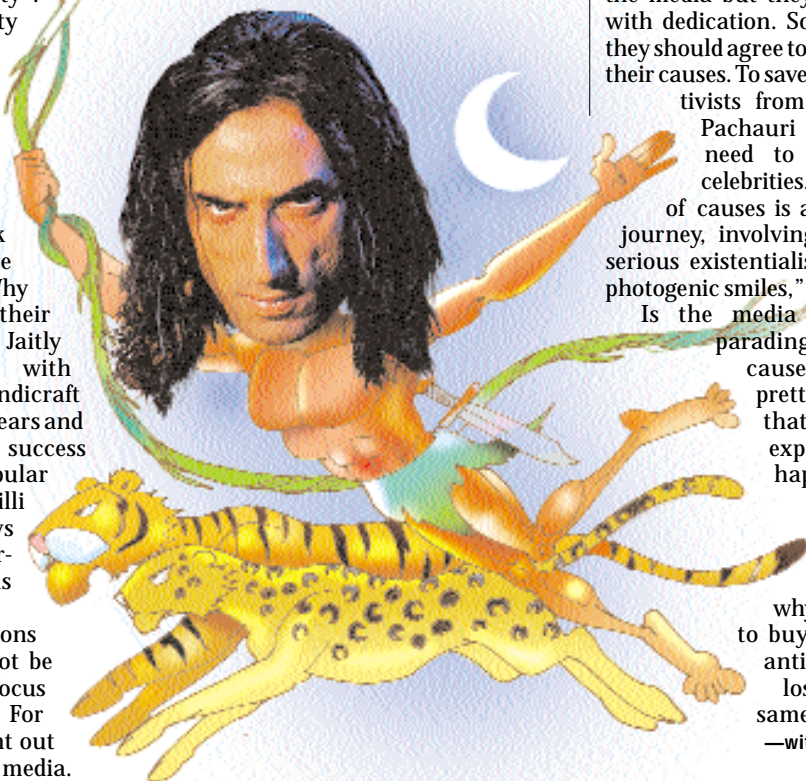
While the intentions of the famous cannot be doubted, a lopsided focus certainly creeps in. For which the buck, point out many, stops at the media.



Former beauty queen Nafisa Ali's mission in life is working on AIDS-related issues

Suma Varughese, former editor of *Society* and now a spiritual writer, agrees that the media is culpable. "The social causes get eclipsed, making the millions of non-celebrities mere spectators," she says, adding that this culture also creates too many wannabes

**RAHUL DEV** speaks with rare ferocity when it comes to animal rights



who want to smile and profess to do good. The media's partiality towards celebrities seems to rattle many others. "Journalists rarely question the credentials of celebrities while interviewing them when they endorse causes," says Mumbai-based columnist Simi Chandoke. "And worse, they seldom bother with following up a cause that a celebrity waxed eloquent about," she adds.

What weakens the cause of the activists is their willingness to play second fiddle to the rich and the famous. They may not know how to play the media but they work hard and with dedication. So it is ironic that they should agree to celebrities selling their causes. To save the authentic activists from a total eclipse, Pachauri feels the causes need to be saved from celebrities. "The real pursuit of causes is a life-threatening journey, involving litigations and serious existentialist dilemmas, not photogenic smiles," he quips.

Is the media responsible for parading celebrities because the pages look pretty or is it because that is what people expect it to do? Perhaps a bit of both, because few people have any answers when asked why they are willing to buy soap as well as anti-communal philosophy from the same celebrities.

—with Stephen David and Natasha Israni