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OPINION

Just Because...You're Watching

A celebrity and a social cause: the perfect tango for free publicity

JOHN Abraham looks smashing when he endorses Pepsi or when he struts the ramp, when he models for Yamaha bikes, Wrangler jeans, Samsung mobiles, or plays football at IIT with the *'Goal'* of promoting his film. But when he spouts homilies on human trafficking 'to appeal to the youth', he's clearly out of his depth. Pepsi posturing and commitment to social causes is not a convincing combo, even for those who love John in his white ganjis.

Recently, news reports gushed that Amisha Patel and John Abraham "led a pack of Bollywood celebrities" at the UNODC's press conference in Delhi as part of an initiative against human trafficking. In reality, these two not only came late, distracting everyone present, but also displayed how little they knew about the cause. Nevertheless, it was they who were gheraoed for city supplement interviews and TV cameras, rather than Meeta Vashist, Onir and Talat Aziz, among others, whose pledge seemed straightforward, sans faaltu hype.

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Does the world know more about human trafficking because of Amisha and John Abraham? Maybe. In that doubtful 'maybe' lives the global debate on celebrity activism. Do celebrities actually bring more attention to the causes? Are they committed to moving beyond these public and well-publicised appearances, to mobilise opinion among the political leadership, or do they endorse worthy causes merely to enhance their image?

Cut back to the days of Sunil Dutt and his company Ajanta Arts, when he travelled to far-flung border areas to entertain our jawans. True, he built up his political career alongside, but selfish motives were never his primary agenda. And nobody could raise a finger against his politics, which was clean, secular and well-meaning. But today, when a celebrity endorses a luxury watch and in the next breath talks about HIV-AIDS, the impact is rather different. Just as it is when we confuse Sanjay Dutt with real-life Gandhigiri.

Never mind the old argument that even celebrities have brains and hearts and are capable of embracing a cause passionately. The little devil on our shoulder hiccups with skepticism over the effectiveness of those in the limelight as ambassadors of social change when the other 99 per cent of their passion is splashed across luxury magazines.

There is the blazing other side too. In an age when Bono's DATA (Debt, Aids, Trade, Africa) made him the person of the year along with the Gateses; when Angelina Jolie as the symbol of geopolitical glamour continues to reassert her commitment; when rockstar Bob Geldof as the Pied Piper of celebrity activism is actually able to 'feed the world'; when our own Big B's pulse polio drive made more than a 100 per cent difference to polio awareness, the impact of celebrity on a cause is no longer a question. It's the answer. The celebrity culture we all swoon under will have it no other way. As George Clooney said, "If you're going to take all these cameras and follow me, follow me to Darfur. Let's all find out something for ourselves that might be worthwhile for the whole human condition."

The worry is, when the hierarchy of merit—as important in civil society as anywhere else—fades away, it gives celebrities the privilege to be less responsible than grassroots workers. As when Rakhi Sawant screeches at OB vans while she takes computers for jailed convicts. It is infinitely worse, even critically damaging, when celebrity involvement in a cause is primarily a matter of self-promotion or just a passing fancy. As when stars keep reminding interviewers ad nauseam about their five-minute appearances as part of a cleanliness drive. Or as when all of us on all sides—editors, media managers, publicists and NGOs—learn 'how to work the system', blurring the line between the real hero vs the momentarily influenced one. Then we must question the causerati culture. Or what *Vanity Fair* columnist Maureen Orth called the celebrity-industrial complex.

Celebrities and civil society have become overlapping industries. Cause-driven organisations want star endorsements for the same reasons that Nike and Coca-Cola do. Brands pay cash whereas humanitarian organisations extend stature and respectability to a star. There is a cause and there are its clear effects.

What does the janata get? Social awareness or free entertainment? This is the Hindustani public. *Yeh sab jaanti hai*. They did not buy AB's *jurm yahan kam hai* line on UP, but they did take to polio drops.

So who is taking whom for a ride? ◘