

Real victims of the VIP syndrome



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Many of our countrymen were outraged, at least according to electronic media and its unending SMS surveys, by the ill-treatment meted out to Bollywood super star Shahrukh Khan. Some ignorant and possibly arrogant security officials detained him at the Newark airport in the US for two hours in the name of a security verification that could have been easily avoided by a mere ten second Google search with his name.

Like all of us the US government seem to have felt bad about this unpleasant incident. Their ambassador to India has uttered some nice words about Shahrukh Khan describing him as a welcome guest to his country. But about the actual incident they have only said that the matter is being looked into and details are being collected. But have you seen any action, corrective or punitive, against anyone on ground till now? The answer is a 'no' for now and if Khan fans are expecting an Indian style 'Mafi mang nahi to vardi utrawa dunga' type action, they are grossly mistaken and sure to get disappointed in the coming days.

In fact, the American security officers who were involved in this over-hyped incident can rest assured that they will not be punished as long as they have followed the prescribed procedure. After 9/11 the US has put rigorous systems and procedures in place especially at their airports and with a specific focus on the non-white people. We do not have details of these procedures. But if they have gone by the procedure, then the officers can sleep peacefully without bothering about any comments from our all-knowing TV anchors or Indian community in the US and even the Indian government. If the rules actually demanded such long verification of anyone having a particular name, surname or any other detail, no harm is likely to come to the enforcers. The system they were trying to protect, will protect them for sure.

Now visualise a similar scenario in our country. Had there been such shabby treatment to a celebrity with much less clout than Shahrukh Khan at some Indian airport, the officers involved would have been suspended the same night. Not many would have bothered about their intentions or the prescribed procedure. In our country celebrities of various weights and sizes and many legal, illegal

or traditional VIPs keep bulldozing their way into the security rings every day. This birthright of theirs is taken for granted by them, by common people and worse by the security apparatus as well. India has also a better security set-up but these systems are mostly meant for common people. The insulation of VIPs from security drills continues unabated. They can beat any security system or at least the person who tries to enforce it on them.

Within our system we have interesting counter mechanisms to neutralise the regular security set-up. The VIPs can always have bodyguards who make sure that their protectee can flout the rules at airports or other secure areas. They can have big passes pasted on their car windows or dangling around their necks. They can have shining nameplates and big (mostly illegal) red beacons on their vehicles that can intimidate any security mechanism. Remember the then Haryana Chief Minister Bhajan Lal's car entering into a secured route in Delhi and coming face to face with the car of none less than visiting Russian prime minister. As a result of the security goof-up the then commissioner of Delhi police Ved Marwah was transferred. Many more were punished in the administrative action, which was actually a face saving diplomatic exercise. What happened to Bhajan Lal? Nothing of course.

Such is the VIP mania in our country that not only mobile companies but our transport departments also sell 'VIP numbers' at a premium. Thus you can the number '0001' for your car and obtain a temporary VIP status that can save you from obeying traffic rules. A sticker with words like 'Press', 'Advocate', 'Police' or even 'Army' can always be handy with various degrees of effectiveness. Our semi-literate constables can be easily frightened by these tags.

In fact, police and other security personnel are real victims of the VIP syndrome. You cannot have a better prey than a policeman to prove your rating on the 'VIP Richter scale'. What can be better than taming the tamer? Thus if one can jump a traffic light and still intimidate some poor policeman with a hoarse 'don't you know who I am', he can claim to be a real VIP.

Recently in the US, President Barrack Obama criticised a police sergeant James Crowley of Cambridge area for arresting one of his friends and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates. On this the police chief of the area called the media and openly defended the officer and his action. How many senior officers can stand up and do this in our country even if they are convinced of the legality of an action taken by their own men? How many can survive such a misadventure? In fact, such was the outrage in the US that Obama had to almost apologise to the officer. To rectify his mistake he personally called up Crowley and invited him to the White House for a beer. Can we ever think of such scenario in our country? A sub-inspector of police versus the executive head of the country. In India, in a similar situation, the officer would have lost his job. He would have been declared guilty much before any inquiry.

You might not have noticed but such scenarios do not crop up much in our country. Reason is not far to fathom. Many of our police officers are smart enough to understand the situation. They know well that there is a rule of law in the country. But they are clever enough to read the situation — when one has to look at the rulebook and when to look at the person. They also understand that laws are there to be enforced economically and most importantly with due diligence and discretion. The laws are to be enforced on whom it is not only possible but also perfectly convenient to enforce. The mighty ones can always be offered a smart and spineless salute and shameless grin.

(The author is an IPS officer in the Orissa cadre. Views expressed are his own)