The Poor Want Purpose
Why Marketing Needs to Be Social in India

Seeking Respect

*Dabangg* (Audacious) is a highly successful Bollywood movie with an equally successful sequel *Dabangg 2*. The two movies together have amassed close to Rs. 500 crores ($80 million). The movies feed on Bollywood star Salman Khan’s appeal and his demeanor – wearing his shades on his back collar and his effortless Bollywood style dance, swinging his waist while adjusting his belt. The movies have a mainstream appeal with item songs that add to their rustic and raunchy quotient. But there’s more to *Dabangg*’s appeal. *Dabangg* is also a story of the quintessentially poor and downtrodden, who rise above their circumstances and ensure justice for everyone. The protagonist, police officer Chulbul Pandey, played by Salman Khan behaves less like a law abiding, government officer, more like Robinhood Pandey. He believes in instant justice and shoots his opponents at will. *Dabangg*’s appeal is in reinstating the rights and the respect of the masses. It makes the powerless feel powerful, even if it’s only for two and half hours. The raunchy dance sequences and the well-choreographed fight scenes are a bonus.

The masses’ fight for respect has been a long running motif in Indian cinema. Most of Amitabh Bachchan’s movies through the 70s dealt with the
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conflict between self-respect and money, eventually putting their weight behind self-respect. The ever popular Bollywood dialogue “Main aaj bhi feke hue paise nahin uthata” (I don’t pick up money thrown at me) from his movie Deewar, summed up this conflict for India’s underprivileged. Earning respect was well within one’s abilities; earning wealth wasn’t. Placing respect over wealth and material wellbeing put power back into the hands of the poor.

Lagaan (Land Tax) was a blockbuster movie of 2001. Its story captured the tension between peasants of a fictitious Indian village Champaner and their British colonists. The point of contention was the exorbitant taxes levied by the colonizers. The climax of the movie was a bet between the British and the poor peasants – a cricket match. If the village team beat the British at their own game, they would get reprieve from the taxes. If they lost, they would pay double. Though it began as a tax negotiation tactic, the cricket match turned into a battle of self-respect for the entire village. In a nail-biting climax, the protagonist, Bhuvan played by Aamir Khan led the village cricket team to victory. As the movie played across cinema screens in India, moviegoers cheered the cricket team of Champaner. The support wasn’t merely for the game of cricket; it was against the excesses of the British colonial rule. This was also the time (early 2000) when India was riding the buoyancy of economic liberalization. Lagaan brought to the fore the narrative of India’s rise over the West, overcoming its deprivation of many decades. Winning the game of cricket was like winning self-respect. It symbolized India’s fight for self-respect in the new world order.

The backdrop of cricket in the movie Lagaan is symbolic. Cricket represents India’s dominance in a game invented by its colonizers and contested fiercely by one of its arch political rivals – Pakistan. Cricket matches in general and those against Pakistan specifically lead to a mass frenzy in India. Every time the Indian team takes to the cricket ground, it plays to uphold India’s nationalist sentiments. Both Lagaan and cricket are carriers of mainstream India’s desire for self-respect. These are small tickets of redemption for the larger India that otherwise may never escape its economic and social reality. Also at play here is mainstream India’s need for a greater purpose, the need to rise above its humdrum existence.