

TalkPoint: Will Salman Khan's guilty verdict make Indians take wildlife protection seriously?

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Illustration by Siddhant Gupta

The Jodhpur trial court Thursday found Salman Khan guilty under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, for the killing of two blackbucks in 1998. His 'Hum Saath Saath Hain' co-stars Saif Ali Khan, Tabu, Sonali Bendre and Neelam, who had accompanied him, were acquitted. The chief judicial magistrate, while pronouncing the verdict, called Salman Khan a 'habitual offender'.

ThePrint asks: Will Salman Khan's guilty verdict make Indians take wildlife protection seriously?

Salman Khan's conviction will send out a powerful message to youth who indulge in illegal hunting



Praveen Bhargav

Trustee of Wildlife First and has served on the National Board for Wildlife

Salman Khan's conviction, albeit after 20 long years, is extremely important and a great fillip to wildlife conservation.

Some may call it symbolic, but this conviction will still act as a strong deterrent to the rich and famous who hunt wildlife for sport or whatever other reason.

The court's ruling will certainly contribute in boosting the morale of the frontline forest staff, who wage a dangerous battle not just against the high and mighty but also the ruthless mafia that operate hunting rackets.

Such convictions send out a powerful message to the self-proclaimed members of rifle associations who engage in illegal hunts. Lastly, even as the battle to prosecute such offences continues in

various courtrooms across the country, the most important challenge is to prevent hunting to the best extent possible. For this, the only mantra is eternal vigilance.

Salman Khan's conviction will send a strong signal to others who indulge in ego-driven poaching



K. Ullas Karanth

Director for Science-Asia Wildlife Conservation Society

Indira Gandhi, in 1972, introduced a strong wildlife protection law. This law made hunting largely illegal and created protected areas (PAs), within which additional staff and resources were provided to stop hunting. Backed by this law, forest department staff did a tremendous job of stopping poaching (illegal hunting), and the wildlife recovered. At 69 years of age now, I am an eyewitness to both its decline as well as miraculous recovery.

However, in many parts of India, like the vast tribal belts of central, eastern and northeastern India, because of social and cultural factors, rampant hunting has continued and has decimated most of the larger wild animal species.

Unfortunately, even among social elites, a segment of rogue elements remains who view poaching, and subsequently escaping punishment, as a sign of their social muscle power. They think they are above the law. I think, more than the pleasure of needlessly killing wild animals, it is the defiance of national laws that is the central purpose of poaching by such people, despite being fully aware about the threats to wildlife.

In the case of Salman Khan, poaching a traditionally protected antelope is a classic example of such an attitude. It is the unwavering persistence of the locals that brought him to justice. They are the ones that stood for the rights of the endangered animals.

All wildlife conservationists will welcome his arrest, trial and conviction. This will send a strong signal to many others who indulge in similar ego-driven poaching, that the strong arm of the law will get them too.

I am sure this will have a positive impact on wildlife conservation across the country, given the culprit's high profile, his fan following, and the wide coverage of the case in the media.

Salman Khan's conviction is a huge step forward for animals, environment, and humanity



Ambika Hiranandani

Animal rights activist and lawyer

A man, high on power and his celebrity status, brazenly killed an animal on the verge of extinction as a group of people stood by and watched. Even though hunting has been illegal in India since the passing of The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, he had the temerity to shoot the blackbucks. He committed multiple offences, entering a wildlife area with a weapon, and of course hunting the animal.

Salman Khan being found guilty is a huge step forward for animals, the environment, and for humanity. It also restores confidence in citizens, as individuals often think that systems can be easily manipulated and one can get away with committing a crime.

This sends a strong message to the world at large — India will not take wildlife crime lightly anymore.

It was a tribal community that took a stand and, despite all odds, held Salman Khan accountable. They pursued the case till he was finally prosecuted. This shows how important tribal cultures are for the protection of our forests. It highlights the importance of local people, and environmentalists should realise that they are their greatest allies.

Today, everything we have is because of our forests, the most important being water. We need to ensure the survival of our forests if we want to ensure our own survival. People who hunt are ensuring the doom of our forests and green spaces. They need to understand that each one of us relies on this planet, and rather than killing animals and being aggressors, each one of us needs to protect it with all we have.

Despite Salman Khan's conviction, the conversation has to be about how lightly animal-related crimes are taken in India



Apurva Vishwanath
Special correspondent, ThePrint

A blackbuck or a human — no matter who dies, it still doesn't seem like a worthy enough reason to send Salman Khan to jail.

Being awarded a five-year sentence, that too 20 years after committing the crime, seems like a bit of a joke. But 'Being Salman Khan', you can pretty much get away with anything. The maximum sentence under the law is six years.

Remember how he made bail the same day he was convicted in the 2002 hit-and-run case? Even with the 5 year sentence, if Salman Khan doesn't serve his time in jail, it would show the our justice system in very poor light.

Even as Salman Khan is pronounced guilty, the conversation will still be about how the man is a "loyal friend", charitable human being, and a much loved super star.

But the conversation really has to be about how lightly animal-related crimes are taken in India. The abysmal conviction rate for offences under the Wildlife (Protection) Act is proof that we don't take these offences seriously. In 2016, as many as 96 per cent of crimes related to the environment were, in fact, either reported under the Indian Forest Act and the Wildlife (Protection) Act.

Hopefully, Salman Khan's conviction will serve as an example and prompt us to take animal-related crimes seriously.

Compiled by Deeksha Bhardwaj and Talha Ashraf, Journalists at ThePrint.
