



ROLE OF HINDI CINEMA IN GENERATING AWARENESS ABOUT HIV AND AIDS

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Abstract: HIV/AIDS is the worst epidemic humanity has ever faced. Despite tremendous efforts to create awareness of HIV/AIDS being made by governmental and non-governmental agencies, the misconceptions relating to HIV/AIDS continue to outpace the efforts to educate people about HIV/AIDS.

AIDS is not an issue for 'others'. Lack of information causes denial and rejection of people living with HIV (PLHIV) at personal and societal levels. It keeps them away from seeking information or help. The misconception that people who are deprived and socially aberrant are affected by HIV/AIDS makes some believe that they cannot be infected. It promotes denial and keeps them away from the realities of the disease. They are caged by the false sense of security. All of us fall under the high risk group as long as the restraints and precautions are accorded low priority as a matter of choice. It is evidenced from the fact that from one reported HIV case in 1986, the number of HIV positive people in India has already crossed the 2.21 million mark and ranks third in the world.

Hindi cinema has the promise to create extensive awareness on HIV/AIDS, and to create a positive attitudes towards persons living with HIV/AIDS, and impelling people to alteration high risk behavior that make them susceptible to the infection. It plays a crucial role in the fight against AIDS. Cinema has remarkable power and influence, chiefly with the youth, who represent the future and who are fundamental to any successful initiative against HIV/AIDS.

The present paper analyses two major feature films “My Brother Nikhil and Phir Milenge” made on HIV/AIDS their effectiveness in generating awareness through entertainment about the disease. It also outlines the need to engage audio-visual media as full partners in achieving three zeros by creating awareness and educating people through entertainment.

Key words: HIV, AIDS, Stigma, Isolation, Victimization

India is a country where 2.21 million people are afflicted with HIV and AIDS. Despite growing awareness, war scale strategies to combat stigma and outrage still accompany those affected by the disease. The burden is all the more when one is gay.

Hindi cinema is truly evolving, with newer themes being attempted from time to time. In that respect, PHIR MILENGE is an attempt to spread awareness about HIV/AIDS and how it affects

the lives of those who get infected. AIDS deaths are so widespread in the world particularly in South Africa a game called 'Funerals' is played by children (Singhal and Howard, 2003). The AIDS pandemic has created a new class of 'untouchables': throughout the world people with HIV face social rejection and victimization.

Sadly AIDS has created individual who do not feel complete (Taylor, 2001). Stigmatization of people is a profound issue, although its nature varies greatly with the context in which people live (Singhal, 2003). It induces fear, shame. social isolation, victimization and ostracization .This leads to outright human rights violations and government policies and laws turn coercive in many countries (Singhal, Rogers, 2003).

Entertainment-Education (E-E) is a contemporary term hat has come into use and entails the process of designing and implementing a media message to entertain and educate. The attempt of E-E is to increase audience knowledge about an social issue, create a positive attitudes and change social norms and behaviour of individuals in communities (Singhal and Rogers,1999). The (E-E) strategy furthers social change in two ways: (a) it increases awareness by removing pre-conceived notions, modifies attitudes, and changes behaviours towards a socially necessary end. The methods anticipated effects are present in the individual audience members; and (b) it can impact the audiences' social milieu to create the positive conditions for social change at the system and group level. The influences are located in the social-political and interpersonal arena of the audience. The E-E media assist as a social mobiliser, advocate, or target setter which then influences public and social policy initiatives in desirable manner.

Entertainment-Education represents a viable tool in the battle against HIV/AIDS. These programmes make use of popular appeal of entertainment such as melodrama to address educational issues (Singhal and Rogers, 1999). These interventions generate high audience ratings and initiate interpersonal conversations among people who watch them. The ability to stimulate conversations can bring taboo topics like HIV/AIDS into public discourse. Its narrative approach is not seen as didactic and sermonizing by the audience and therefore generates a greater appeal. Walter Fisher (1987) argument that human beings are basically storytellers (homo narrans) and they use a narrative rationality in processing discourse. Whether on television or film, E-E is able to present highly complex narratives with plots and subplots, conflicts and their resolutions. The programmes appeal because it is a pleasurable activity for them. They appreciate the conflict-laden, suspenseful and also educative drama. Watching a character repeatedly in impending danger often heightens the enjoyment of the drama. The resolution of the threat becomes a cathartic experience.

The Bollywood movies of the 60s and 70s advocated equality of caste, class, gender, and bridging of the rural-urban divide. Movies of Raj Kapoor, Basu Bhattacharya, Bimal Roy, were social exploration cinema. More contemporary movies with actors like Akshay Kumar, Ayushmann Khurrana, and Sonam Kapoor Ahuja are tackling subjects that are rarely spoken about. Filmmakers agree that these taboo themes are openings for exploring larger social issues. Humour, satire and filmy characters moderate the path for presenting taboo subjects, in so doing coaxing them out into the open. Bring these to large audiences and into the theatres.

Affect from a media character is communicated to the audience, often through the process of projected identification i.e. the propensity of audiences to perceive that they have a personal relationship with the characters (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Sood and Rogers, 2000). The viewers

start envisioning the media characters as close friends or enemies. Viewers often talk to their favourite characters, laugh and cry with them. The protagonists 'infect' the viewers with their feelings in an unaware manner. The power of entertainment-education in behaviour change communication is greatly significant because of this feature especially in inculcating desirable behavior modifications related to issues like HIV/AIDS.

The authors have tried to assess the effectiveness of Bollywood which has massive outreach. The Indian film industry has moved a step ahead by coming up with films based on the theme of AIDS. Though these movies have managed to create some inroads into bring out a difficult subject they have not necessarily been box office hits. There are five intensely moving films that have raised awareness about AIDS. 'AIDS Jaago' is an endeavor that has four short-films that address the myths and misconceptions about HIV/AIDS. The films are Blood Brothers, Migration, Positive and Prarambha. They each bring a different point about the disease and are from different parts of the country. Each film is made in its own unique genre. Dus Kahaniyaan is an compilation of ten short films directed by six directors. One of the films titled 'Zahir' revolves around 'AIDS'. The story is about Zahir a writer and Sia a bar dancer. They eventually fall in love. But Sia rejects Zahir and in rage he rapes her. The disclosure of her HIV status and rejecting him unfold. The narrative is by Zahir post Sia's death and his imminent death. Nidaan is a film based on a story where a teenager contracts HIV after a blood transfusion.

The authors have reviewed two feature films made on HIV and AIDS as their central theme in terms of their success in initiating discussions and behavior modification in relation to HIV and AIDS. These films are *My Brother... Nikhil* and *Phir Milenge*. The success story of *My Brother... Nikhil* provides much optimism and inspiration for those who wish the Indian film industry to engage itself in socially relevant subject matters. The film was directed by Onir. The genesis of the story of *My Brother... Nikhil* is drawn from the life of Dominic D'Souza, a worker at World Wildlife Fund and an AIDS activist. The film is centered on two important areas 'homosexuality' and 'AIDS'. The movie portrays the life of the protagonist Nikhil and how his life changes after being diagnosed with HIV. He is thrown out from his swimming team and even arrested just because he is HIV positive. In the early days of the epidemic in the '80s, laws allowed quarantining HIV-positive people in virtual isolation in residential institutions. D'Souza became one of the first openly self-disclosed HIV-positive activists.

My Brother... Nikhil is a commercial film about a gay man grappling with AIDS. The story begins with a flashback as the family and friends of the central character *Nikhil* document his story. The story is loosely connected to the life of one of the first victims of HIV and AIDS in 1980s from Goa. It recalls the social stigma and angst that were aroused due to lack of awareness about the disease. *Nikhil* is shown as a 'state championship swimmer' who is thrown out by his parents, arrested and put into solitary confinement in a dirty asylum as per the law of the country at the time, and treated as a social outcast. It is only with the help of his sister and gay partner that he fights the law, create awareness and gains social sympathy for his cause in the process.

It is a film about relationships, between brother and sister, father and son and also between two male lovers. Onir had an offer from some well-known international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on HIV/AIDS to release the film on 1st December which is

World AIDS Day which he turned down. The Indian censor board has issued a U-certificate, which allows the film to be screened for everyone from diverse age groups and backgrounds.

Onir's *My Brother Nikhil*, though is a fictionalized story of a gay champion swimmer's experience of HIV and AIDS stigma in Goa in India in the late 1980s, is based on 'true incidents' of atrocities against homosexual HIV and AIDS patients in Goa at the time. *My Brother Nikhil* is narrated to the viewers after Nikhil's death. The narrators are his mother, father, sister and friends. They exhibit grief at his suffering and subsequent death while reconstructing the events that preceded his death. The story explicitly shows the plot at the time of the genesis of the epidemic (the 1980s). It also focusses on the ethics of end-of-life decisions, the helplessness and hopelessness of medical science and medical intervention rather than the management and cure of an infection (HIV) with its ideas of the benefits of early diagnosis and the triumph of medical care/cure. Stigma faced by the homosexual patients portrayed by these texts often precedes either the medical diagnosis of HIV or AIDS infection or the patient's own knowledge of his condition. The community that Nikhil inhabits in *My Brother Nikhil*, has the news of his being diagnosed with HIV before he is informed of his own condition. Nikhil and his family's victimization from the community precede, even within the narrative unfolding of the text, their knowledge of the virus now developing its community in his body. More importantly, Nikhil's homosexuality is addressed explicitly in the film, only following the disclosure (to his family and to the viewers) that he has been infected with HIV. The movie is the cinematic response to HIV using 'entertainment-education' strategy within mass media enlisted in public health promotion.

The narration in *My Brother Nikhil* is done by an uninfected, heterosexual narrator who is deeply connected with the story she narrates and the subject of the narrative. *My Brother Nikhil* often attracts attention to Anu's bravery—she stands by Nikhil even after his parents leave Goa. While *My Brother Nikhil* is narrated mainly by Nikhil's sister Anu, the film connects Nikhil's story through the confessional monologues of his family members, his lover, Nigel, his advocate and friends. Anu, Nigel and Nikhil's parents testify to the social stigmatization, isolation and rejection they share with Nikhil on account of their relationships with him. His childhood confidante and close friend Lena, who, unaware of Nikhil's sexual orientation and infection, comes back to Goa to marry him, also vouch how people in the town began to look at her as though she was a 'socially unacceptable.' Though Nikhil turns down his parents' proposal that he and Lena should marry, she tells the audience that 'they were considered a couple' and this association alone was enough to make her feel not-at-home in Goa and forces her and her family to relocate themselves in Mumbai. Nikhil's parents are also asked to leave the club that they have been visiting for years on account of their son's now HIV positive status and it is at this moment that his HIV infection is first disclosed in the film. It is significant that the community of Nikhil's family knows of his illness before it is disclosed even to him and that this determines to a some extent, Nikhil's expulsion from his home. Nikhil is forced to go away and stay with Nigel. In an uncanny depiction of close social monitoring, the next morning, news of his deportation and HIV positive status is shown to reach the local police who arrest Nikhil immediately even before he communicates to Nigel, the news of his HIV infection.

The film also shows how Nikhil's lifestyle at home is at 'odds' with the life that his father dreamt for him and as one of the reasons of friction with his father even before his infection with AIDS comes in. Nikhil finds it difficult to face the pressures of his swimming career. The

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issue of his marriage to Lena, his so called 'good-for-nothing' friends and frequent 'partying' all lead to frequent domestic quarrels. When he loses first place at the State swimming competition, his father blames his 'lack of concentration' due to his outings and frequent partying and when Nikhil refuses marriage and gets into an argument with his father, he is asked if his use of drugs as the cause of his erratic behavior.

Nikhil constantly expresses his desire to return home and meet his parents after his stay at the hospital. His life with Nigel is thus shown as 'exile.' His two-year 'exile' ends with his return home, but Nikhil makes the journey home in order to die. Recalling a childhood memory, Nikhil, upon meeting his father after a period of almost two years, asks his father to reassure him that whatever is happening is just a bad dream. This is increasingly important in the context of Nikhil's return home. The implication is of this return to a childhood state a state when he was innocent and needed to be assured by his father after each bad dream,

My Brother Nikhil depicts Nikhil's productivity in the setting up of the support group 'People Positive' the viewers are informed is meant for 'people like Nikhil.' Another important incident is when Nikhil's sister Anu finds an advocate who is willing to fight for Nikhil's release from his forced isolation, Nikhil informs the lawyer that he would like her to take up his case not only just for him, but also for all those people who are 'like him' ie HIV positive and facing brunt of social stigma

While preparing for their campaigns to free Nikhil from his forced exile, his lawyer similarly advises Nikhil's sister, her fiancé and Nigel about the importance of explaining to people the events that transpired after his infection, rather than focusing on the causative factors of the infection. The lawyer also advises that in order to gain public sympathy, it is important for them to let people know about Nikhil's achievements that he was a 'champion' swimmer and not a criminal.

My Brother Nikhil foregrounds Jeffrey's Bar where Nigel and Nikhil meet for the first time. This was also the space where Nikhil was with several women, before Nigel. Nikhil's father, in one of his addresses to the audience, expresses his pain and grief at people's insistence on 'labelling' Nikhil's sexuality after his death. His father confirms that Nikhil was a polite, disciplined and very well-behaved boy. He also had many girlfriends. Nigel too recalls how Nikhil was always surrounded by women at Jeffrey's bar before they became couple. She also mentions that Nikhil showed no interest in them. This intentional ambiguity in Nikhil's sexuality still maintains focus on Jeffrey's bar as the town's sanctioned space for such 'high-risk' encounters to take place. In those scenes in the film the Jeffrey's bar is shown as notably populated by young people—it is also shown as a place where Nikhil's sister *Anu*, meets her future husband.

Phir Milenge another Bollywood movie starring famous actors and directed by an award-winning director is an example of E-E communication strategy.

The central theme rests on an HIV-positive employee facing discrimination at the workplace. It is a struggle against the victim's oppression. In order to address gender discrimination and

ill treatment the director of the film has incorporated relevant gendered characters such as the sex of the appellant. Romance has been added to increase audience appeal.

In *Phir Milenge* the protagonist Tamanna is depicted as a successful business woman who meets her male friend and musician Rohit, after a period of ten years, during a 'College Reunion Function'. They share some intimate moments. Tamanna has a younger sister, Tania who is a radio jockey by profession. One day, Tania meets with an accident and Tamanna is required to donate blood. Tamanna discovers she has HIV infection during this process of blood donation. The difference between being HIV-positive and having AIDS is explained to her the doctor. The news brings Tamanna's world crashing down. She tries to contact her Rohit who is abroad but does not succeed. She then shares her HIV-positive status with her younger sister, a close friends, and mentor at her workplace.

When Tamanna joins back her work after her initial shock, she finds that she has been expelled from the job on grounds of incompetence. The drama depicts the stigmatization she faces due to her HIV positive status. Tamanna tries to hire the services of a lawyer to fight her case, however most lawyers refuse when they learn she is HIV-positive. After some initial reluctance, a lawyer called Tarun takes on her case. He takes the help of his former law school professor and during the process discovers that there are no legal remedies to defend the rights of people living with HIV. Tarun fails to succeed in winning the case in the lower court but continues to appeal in higher courts. The plot of the story depicts that Rohit returns from the US and Tamanna meets with him. Rohit is afflicted with full-blown AIDS and is shown as terminally ill. He confesses to Tamanna that he was unaware that he had HIV when they met at reunion. He unfortunately dies in the film. The lawyer wins the discrimination case in the higher courts. This is shown not just as a victory for Tamanna but all HIV affected persons who are excluded, stigmatised, ill -treated, and rejected. The film ends with a photograph of Tamanna on the jacket of a business magazine.

Viewers, in general, felt that *Phir Milenge* was successful in balancing its entertainment, educational and informative content. People show their willingness to watch entertaining films with relevant and contemporary social themes. They not only recommend the film to their friends and near and dear ones but also motivate them to watch such films. Many NGOs and educational institutions also promote such films. Consequently, conversations about *Phir Milenge* kind of films with social message and behavior change strategies occur in social networks of individuals, spreading information and initiating both private and public discourses on the topic of HIV and AIDS. Most importantly, the film talks of HIV/AIDS, the stigma associated with it and the untimely death of the person infected with the virus, but it doesn't spread the word on the availability of the treatment that keeps the person healthy and alive for years. In fact, the film is more about despair /misery /death and less about hope/optimism/life.

There are millions of people who have been infected with the virus and are well aware of the latest development in the treatment regimens and are leading normal lives. In today's times, Anti-Retroviral drugs are being used throughout the world. But none of the two films discussed above mention it what to talk of promotion of availability of treatment.

After watching the pre-climax, one feels that there's no hope for a person who has been infected with HIV and AIDS. This is gravely far from reality. Even if there is no cure, there's still hope and availability of treatment, immunity boosting medicines and nutrition counselling all over the globe. With regular and timely intake of Anti-Retroviral therapy (if prescribed), good nutrition and exercise, hygiene, precautions and abstinence from involvement in risky behaviours one can carry on with his/her life like any other normal person. Had this been the conclusion of the film, the films would have done the wonderful work in generating awareness and developing desirable behavior change in people who needs more information about HIV and AIDS.

The problem with the script of Phir Milenge is that it borrows heavily from Director Jonathan Demme's acclaimed Hollywood film Philadelphia made in 1993. Since then medical Science has made much progress. But Phir Milenge, a film made in 2004, makes no references to the progress and the available treatment which majorly defies the educative purpose of the film. This shows that the writers have picked up the story from a film which was made 11 years ago and have not incorporated advances made by medical fraternity in managing the disease which was once considered as a death warrant. Had they updated themselves and done complete research about the disease and its management and depicted the same the film would have done wonders in the arena of HIV and AIDS and would have received greater applause. Multi- mega star studded films have the potential to bring out from the closet challenges faced by people suffering from HIV and AIDS place them upfront in public-policy circles. AIDS is not just a medical illness but also a malady of ignorance and exclusion. AIDS is projected by media as a disease of people with alternate sexualities, drug users, and commercial sex workers and hence it perpetuates greater victimization. The biological virus appears sometimes to be less potent than the consequences of it such as fear, prejudice, rejection, injustice, isolation and stigma. These further hinder testing, counselling, treatment, and care. Labelling and consequent outcome is a major hindrance to successful information and communication about HIV and AIDS. The stigma induced negative reactions like denial, shame, fear, anger, rejection, isolation, prejudiced relationships. Hence, communication strategies need to be clearly and effectively designed and at the centre of efforts to overcome the stigma of HIV and AIDS. Bollywood films can be of great help in breaking the silence about such tabooed topics like HIV and AIDS, and create an enabling environment where people can openly initiate the discussion of HIV/AIDS and lead it to the public policy spaces. Researches undertaken on the efficacy of Bollywood interventions in knowledge building, attitude alteration and practice modification are inadequate. The present paper in analyzing the content of the two films in relation to knowledge, attitudes and practices related to HIV and AIDS in society has attempted to fill some part of this lacuna.

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