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Families in Bollywood cinema: Changes and context

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Abstract

With increasing and rapid urbanization and population changes in India, a growing number of people are migrating from rural areas to urban areas, which brings about major changes in support systems. As a result, the portrayal of families has also changed in Hindi cinema over the last 50 years. Recent family melodramas have focused on an idealized version of joint and extended families. In this paper we use some key Hindi films of the 1960s and of the last two decades to compare how films have changed and how, in view of changing audiences, they have created a version of the family which is far from real. Clinicians need to be aware of these changes while dealing with patients and their families (the latter may have unrealistic expectations of their own family members).

Introduction

Film is one of the most potent media in understanding how a culture responds to various issues, from mental illness to social attitudes and behaviour. Films reflect the society within which they are made but also influence society as a result. The relationship between film and society is incredibly complex. Films are made to entertain but they contain coded messages which can be deciphered and these may well appeal to audiences generally or only to sectors of society. The entertainment meted out in films is aimed to appeal to the common denominator or the target audience in order for the film to succeed at the box office.

Mental illness and the creation of the despised, feared or alienated 'other' (mentally ill) are often used in films to portray villainy, comedy, epistemological considerations, and also as a turning point in the story. Films dealing with mental illness in any culture are often made for entertainment and not necessarily for education, even though they may be used for this purpose. Mental illness and its impact on the family may form a small part of the story, or the whole film may focus on mental illness. In this paper we do not focus on mental illness but on simple concepts of families and changes brought about by social and economic factors.

There is little doubt that the Hindi films engage large audiences in India but are also extremely popular among the Indian diaspora worldwide, bringing

with them an idealized image for migrants as well. The portrayals of characters and families in that context are heavily embedded in the social, cultural, political and economic contexts of the cultures.

Background

The conventional cinema industry in India produces 600 films per year, ranking above Hollywood in terms of number of total films produced and the size of audiences it attracts. In spite of the fact that India has 12 screens per million population compared with 117 in the USA, 3.7 billion cinema tickets were sold in India compared with 1.4 billion in the USA in 2006 (Bamzai, 2007). Although the portrayal of mental illness has been studied extensively in Hollywood films (Metz, 1982, Cohan & Hark, 1993, Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999), and cinema has become of interest to medical historians (Boon, 1999), conventional Hindi cinema has been ignored by Indian historians and sociologists until relatively recently. Kazmi (1999) argues that this relative neglect of conventional Hindi cinema in academic circles is due to its perceived lowbrow nature. With increased economic growth and an increase in the middle class (now estimated to be over 350 million), the status of Hindi films has become more respectable. More multiplex cinemas are opening in India to show a range of films, thereby changing the types of films being produced. Between 2001 and 2006 the growth

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of multiplexes increased ten-fold and the number of audience increased from 2.8 billion to 3.95 billion per year (Bamzai, 2008) and this continues apace. During the same period, annual box-office returns trebled to reach \$1.4 billion. Over 97% of urban youths prefer to watch movies at multiplexes. As a result, in the past decade an increasing number of films are being specially made to target multiplexes and for urban audiences, and are also targeting non-resident Indians (Indian diaspora around the world). Bose (2006) notes some inconsistencies in the way some Hindi film stars are revered in India but have no fan base outside, and yet others are extremely successful in both diaspora and Indian bases, indicating a large fan base. However, Hindi films have a large market among the diaspora; the UK is the second largest market for Hindi films after India and Hindi films are often in the top 10 films in the UK box office charts (Bamzai, 2007).

In spite of or perhaps because of urbanization, Hindi cinema remains a major cultural and ideological force that creates and reinforces perceptions and attitudes towards a number of topics in its viewers. Hindi cinema as a popular culture is best understood in the context of social divisions, social, political and economic conditions prevalent at that particular time (Nandy, 1998). There is no doubt that cinema in general holds a mirror up to the society and culture within which it is made and is a reflection of those times. Nandy (1998), as well as Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998), recommends an approach which looks at the social, economic and political climate of the country and associates it with the portrayal of mental illness. Vitali (2008, pp. xiv–xv) points out that considering films as the primary source to ascertain what their stories say about events or periods already defined and seen as quasi-documentaries, and as historical accounts are both valid ways of studying films. Similar approaches have been used by Chakravorty (1993) while studying films in the context of national identity and by Kazmi (1999) in the context of political developments. Increasingly, similar strategies have been used in the context of action cinema (Vitali, 2008), feminism and portrayal of women (Prabhu, 2001, Jain & Rai, 2002), war (Bharat & Kumar, 2008) and religion (Dwyer, 2006). Interestingly, Virdi (2003) uses popular films as a social history of the nation and nationhood, raising the question of whether films portray what is going on in the society or whether it is the other way around. However, there is not much on mental illness or distress. Rajadhyaksha (2009) defines the era of celluloid as two key themes in Hindi cinema: as targeting a particular kind of public (audience), and excess in portrayal. This approach indicates that the study of Hindi cinema needs to be placed in the context both of the audience and of the story. Audience

responses can be seen in the box office returns and, to a much lesser extent, in the critical reviews of the films. However, not many non-urban audiences are likely to be influenced by the reviews of films.

Vitali (2008) has highlighted a strategy in reading films in the social, economic and cultural context. In an earlier study, Bhugra (2006) studied mental illness in Hindi cinema but focused on major mental disorders using a similar strategy, putting the cultural and critical contexts together.

Analysis of films

Saari (2009) notes that one reason why the basic framework of the Hindi film has not changed over the decades is that the vast majority of the audience has not changed dramatically. This makes it easier to carry out a longitudinal study, even though with the ten-fold growth in multiplexes (Bamzai, 2008) the target audiences are beginning to change. It is important to note that Hindi cinema is not homogenous. Thus one accepted method of categorizing films is to study community values and attitudes prevalent at the time. Such an approach allows the viewer to place films into personal context too by understanding the social context. For example, when Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency in the 1970s, films which portrayed certain political agendas were censored heavily or were refused censor certificates, and in one case even destroyed. One of the key hit films of that time was *Sholay* [The Embers] (Directed by Ramesh Sippy, India, 1975), which has been described as a 'curry Western', where a dacoit kills the family of the police inspector who had arrested him. The portrayal of love and sex in Hindi cinema has changed with the changed roles of women and economic liberalization (also see Orsini, 2007). Inter-religion and inter-caste love also plays a role in the way sex and sexuality are portrayed (Panjwani, 2006).

Families and changing structures

In the 1960s, post-Independence euphoria was still prevalent. The films were gentle, romantic, with a lot of songs; the period has often been called the golden era of Hindi cinema. The characters had specific constructive roles to play – the heroes were generally doctors or engineers and the heroines were teachers, doctors and nurses. Family conflict occurred in the context of family expectations and due to differential status between the hero and the heroine. Often external factors, especially those representing western values tried to break the family apart. The classical example of this was a Hindi film made in Madras (now called Chennai) titled *Khandaan* [The Family] (Directed by A. Bhimsingh, India, 1965) where the patriarch has to divide the family and the estate

under the influence of a foreign returned 'villain' who manages to drive a wedge in the family. Hindi films were very strongly influenced by two Hindu scriptures – *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In both these scriptures families play a major role, where divisions within the family result from the greed of power. It can be argued that 'lolly', lady and land are three main causes of family conflict, divisions and war. Family conflicts, central in South Asian cinema, also tend to explore the nation's politico-historical experiences that are cast in common cultural and antinomies of East versus West and tradition versus modern, all undergirding one central conflict between the community and the individual. Viridi (2003, p. 151) goes on to note that within the family, narratives privilege women in wife-lover and mother-figure roles, paying special attention to mother-son dyads and relationships. The oedipal complex in the Indian context has been alluded to elsewhere (Bhugra & Gupta, 2009). Mothers-in-law pitting against daughters-in-law, especially if the latter were westernized and independent thinking, leading to conflict of values, and often the sons and fathers-in-law got caught in the middle. The roles of mother-in-law and sometimes sister-in-law led to conflict and destruction of the ideal family, and occasionally the conflict reflected the 'partition' of the country as well. Similar context has been repeated widely in Hindi movies, especially in what was often used as social film. For a period, films produced in Chennai were described as social, as these largely focused on family melodrama generally caused by one or more naughty individuals and/or by natural causes.

A big hit in 1969 was *Do Raaste* [Two Paths] (Directed by Raj Khosla, India) where again a foreign-returned daughter-in-law creates chaos in the family with in-laws being forced to move out of their house. The relationship between tradition and modernism following similar story lines was also seen in other films such as *Upkaar* [Good Deed] (Directed by Manoj Kumar, India, 1967) in the late 1960s.

Sholay [The Embers] was a big hit in 1974–1975 and based on the relationship between a police officer whose entire family (except daughter-in-law who was out of the house) had been killed by a dacoit, for whose arrest the officer was responsible, and two minor crooks. Here the two crooks are almost surrogate sons to the extent that there is a strong indication that the police officer would like her widowed daughter-in-law to marry one of them. The film reflected the zeitgeist where the population had lost faith in their leaders and individuals had to take on the role of defending themselves and their values.

The role of the mother and her relationship with her son, the role of the dutiful obedient wife and that of the helpless sister have all changed over the decades, as have family expectations. In a few films, illegitimate children have been brought back into the

family from *Masoom* [Innocent] (Directed by Shekhar Kapur, India, 1983) to *Kabhi-Kabhie* [Occasionally] (Directed by Yash Chopra, India, 1976) and more recently *Kal Ho Na Ho* [There May Not Be a Tomorrow] (Directed by Nikhil Advani, India, 2003). In some films it is the married woman who had a child out of wedlock, but in *Kal Ho Na Ho*, the mother of the husband discovers that her daughter-in-law has been bringing up her son's illegitimate child as her own. Singh (2002) argues that the old orthodox way of looking at illegitimacy underwent strong changes after the rise of feminism in the 1970s. These films question and deal with the issue in alternate ways.

After the economic liberalization, the shift was visible with the rise of the Hindu (fundamentalist) party becoming part of the government. Two hit films illustrate its impact. The first one was *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* [Who Am I to You?] (Directed by Suraj Barjatya, India, 1994). The film is the story of a rich family where the uncle is bringing up two of his nephews, one of whom is running the business and the younger one returns from finishing his studies abroad. The idealized family has the older son's marriage arranged, and when his wife dies in an accident leaving a young child behind, the pressure falls on his sister-in-law to marry him even though she is in love with his younger brother. Both the young lovers are willing to sacrifice their love for the family. Only divine intervention saves them. In this idealized family, everyone knows his/her place and it is an organic whole: casteless, classless, seamless, conflict free; everyone lives in perfect harmony (Kazmi, 1999). Kazmi goes on to note that at a time when mutual distrust and animosities were at their peak, this film showcased strong bonding between a Hindu and a Muslim. The relationships are not between individuals but between discrete social units.

Portrayal of a non-resident Indian family in London is highlighted in another big hit – *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* [Bravehearts Will Carry the Bride Away] (Directed by Aditya Chopra, India, 1995). The story revolves around a young Indian girl who falls in love with an Indian boy who, in spite of numerous urgings from others, refuses to elope with her. As her father has arranged her wedding to a distant relative in Punjab, the hero follows her to India and tries to woo her father to gain his approval. Chopra (2004) points out that this film offers both to men and women especially in the face of uncertainties of new freedoms and an unpredictable future, a vision of the present combining both the stability of the old order and the enticing choices of the new. Chopra (2004) suggests that this film offered uncomplicated solutions in response to vertiginous (political, economic and social) changes in India. The competition and conversations between modernity and tradition in this film remain intriguing. Several films subsequently have

tried to do this, e.g. *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* [Dear I Have Given My Heart] (Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, India, 1999).

These changes have also led to altered family context within which sexuality is observed. Furthermore, the role of alcohol and the relationship with suicide and depression in the context of the family all deserve study.

Families and changing sexual mores

Sexual behaviour

Sexual behaviour, whether heterosexual or homosexual on screen, had generally been covert, but this too has changed in the last 10 years and recently there have been a few films where same-sex relationships have been shown to be more open. Until a decade or so ago, the portrayal of sexual behaviours was very subtle and often symbolic. In more recent films the portrayal has become much more blatant. In the 1950s and 1960s songs were used to portray and declare love, but recent films have contained less concealed, perhaps obscene songs. The changes in the role and portrayal of heroines has shifted from showing them as pure demure symbols of Indian womanhood to much more westernized and outgoing with pre-marital sex and coupling becoming more common. Portrayals of homosexuality and 'third sex' are also becoming more sympathetic even though until 2010 homosexual acts remained illegal. Portrayal both of male and female homosexuality has changed and even the songs depict these in a more open manner. In earlier films pre-marital sex was often actively criticized and the heroine was supposed to be virginal and demure. However, vamps could traditionally be identified by their 'loose character', and westernized clothes and values; they could indulge in drinking and roles linked with sexual favours.

Using courtesans as models, several films portrayed the role of such individuals as teachers and poets but also as potential threats to families and their well-being. Female sexuality was frowned upon but recently this too has changed dramatically. Several recent films have shown young men and women living together and with clear pre-marital sex without any guilt or consequences, showing that urban India has changed. Films such as *Fire* (Directed by Deepa Mehta, Canada/India, 1996) and *Girlfriend* (Directed by Karan Razdan, India, 2004) have openly shown lesbian scenes, in the former within the context of the family where two sisters-in-law have sex with each other as the husband of one of them is aggressive and the other one has taken *sanyas* with thus withdrawn from the material world.

Family and sexuality

In addition to the family's attitudes to sexuality, sexual behaviour and alternative sexuality, in recent decades the portrayal of female sexuality itself has changed dramatically. From demure oppressed female characters to more assertive, outgoing and demanding characters, female sexuality has come of age. Pre-marital sex and living together outside the marital bond is often shown. In films of the 1980s and 1990s, the wife remained smart, attractive but conformed to her husband's needs (Chatterji, 1998). With economic liberalization the female became a chattel in a different way – she needed to be controlled and stalked. Several films, including *Darr* [Fear] (Directed by Yash Chopra, India, 1993), *Abbass-Mustan*, India, 1996. *Daraar* [The Chasm] (Directed by Abbas-Mustan, India, 1996), Ghosh, India, 1996. *Agnisakshi* [With Fire as Witness]. *Dastak* [The Knock] (Directed by Mahesh Bhatt, India, 1996) among others, showed deranged and possessive boyfriends or husbands who stalked their girlfriends/wives. Some of these films were heavily influenced by the Hollywood success of *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Directed by Joseph Rubin, USA, 1991). The code of dress shifting from traditional sari to mini- and microskirts indicates that the younger generation sees itself as modern though some of their values remain traditional. Films related to divorce do appear from time to time, but often do not succeed at the box office. A stunning film on the role of the courtesan in the life of a young landlord, *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* [King, Queen and Knave] (Directed by Abrar Alvi, India, 1962) was based on a Bengali book of the same name written by Bimal Mitra. The landlord spends his time visiting courtesans and his young wife who has no child (being the youngest in the joint family) is taunted by her sisters-in-law. In one of the most exciting scenes in Hindi cinema, she urges him to stay at home and he challenges her to see if she could do what a courtesan does, i.e. sing, drink and dance. She takes up the challenge and ends up being addicted to alcohol. Many earlier films deal with the theme of adultery, directly or indirectly indicating the role of female as temptress as well as victim.

Depression

Depression is likely to become the second most serious burden on healthcare by 2020, according to the World Bank. Depression is both a symptom and a psychiatric diagnosis. Across cultures it presents in different ways although similar diagnostic patterns emerge. In cultures which are socio-centric and kinship based, the notions of depression deal with shame rather than the Judeo-Christian concept of

guilt. This presentation of clinical depression in healthcare settings is already beginning to change in India as well as among migrants (Bhugra, 2002; Bhugra et al., 1997). It is therefore likely that the symptoms and their portrayal in Hindi films will also change. Social causation of depression will also reflect changing social and economic factors. As depression is one of the common mental disorders, it is inevitable that its portrayal and its impact on the family will be of major interest to the viewer.

Family and alcohol

Rates of alcohol consumption and abuse are going up in India as a result of the increasing middle class and as a result of the impact of industrialization and globalization. Alcohol consumption is also used as a proxy marker for westernization in many Hindi films, indicating the creation and the role of the 'other' which is crucial in Hindi films. Furthermore, women abusing alcohol is often a sign of their weakness, their westernized tendencies, and those who engage in drinking are often portrayed as having loose moral values and character or as seductresses, sirens and vamps. No contextual analyses of these films exist at present, but good political and cultural studies are available for this period.

Looking at the portrayal of alcohol abuse it appears that the drinker is often shown as a buffoon, as a tragic character or as a villain. The portrayal of alcohol abuse is sometimes romantic, but consumption of local liquor such as toddy is shown to be related to low socio-economic status or when the individual falls from grace and cannot afford Scotch or Indian whisky. This portrayal needs to be explored in relation to per capita consumption and other relevant social factors.

One of the classic novels in Bangla by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, *Devdas*, has been filmed several times in Hindi and in other Indian languages too Chatterjee (2002). Son of a rich landlord, Devdas is in love with his poor neighbour, but his family – which has a strong patriarchal structure – does not approve of the match. The young woman is married off to a much older man and Devdas ends up seeking solace in alcohol, and ends up dying because of liver failure. Each version of the film is targeted at a different generation and the audience of that generation prefer their version. In *Sahib Bivi aur Ghulam* (1962), mentioned earlier the young wife gets addicted to alcohol. Alcohol intoxication is often used to considerable comic as well as destructive effect in the family. In the films of the 1960s, a character actor named Keshto Mukherjee always ended up playing a drunkard and a buffoon. In several films, women who drink alcohol and smoke are seen as outsiders and a potential threat to family

and married life. Interestingly, in the films of the 1960s and 1970s, villains and vamps drank VAT 69. There is rarely a gentle introduction to alcohol and more often than not it is about binge drinking and losing control, often with alcoholic hallucinosis. As a symbol of westernization and western values, alcohol plays havoc in story lines from incidental appearances to long fully fledged scenarios. Films such as *Kaajal* [Kohl] (Directed by Ram Maheshwari, India, 1965), *Phool aur Pathar* [Flower and Stone] (Directed by OP Ralhan, India, 1966), *Kati Patang* [Torn Kite] (Directed by Shakti Samanta, India, 1970), *Des Pardes* [Nation/Abroad] (Directed by Dev Anand, India, 1978), *Inteqam* [The Revenge] (Directed by RK Nayyar, India, 1969), *Namak Haraam* [Disloyal] (Directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, India, 1973) show the use of alcohol as causing problems in relationships or drowning their sorrows or pretending to be drunk to put others off. Further work need to be done to explore the relationship between alcohol and other drugs and their impact on family roles.

Family and depression and suicide

There has been an increase in suicide rates in the last decade, and there has also been an increase in interest in the study of suicidal behaviour – attempted and completed suicide. The portrayal of suicide on screen will affect public perceptions of what is seen as wrong and what needs to be done. There is considerable evidence to suggest that watching suicide on screen affects people's behaviour, although few studies exist from developing countries. Suicide as an act remains illegal in India. However, recent spates of suicides by farmers by consuming insecticides and pesticides – for which their families are given compensation by the government – have led to an increase in rates, which has been picked up by Hindi cinema. In earlier films, suicide was shown as both a way out of difficult situations such as pre-marital pregnancy and as a cry for help for financial and personal stresses. Thus comparison across decades as attention-seeking or as a reflection of borderline personality disorder as well as an act of desperation will be useful in the changing historical and social context. In the Hindu scriptures, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the portrayal of depression in individuals and families is often noted but not discussed at length. Similarly, both the scriptures describe individual and mass suicides. Hinduism as a religion and a philosophy does not proscribe suicide. Many Hindi films have shown attempted suicide and threat of suicide. Some of the films for the portrayal of depression include *Funtoosh* (Directed by Chetan Anand, India, 1956) (where following a fire in

which his family are lost the hero withdraws into himself), *Khilona* [The Toy] (Directed by Chander Vohra, India, 1970) here again the hero sees his girlfriend commit suicide and he becomes depressed and psychotic, *Anuradha* [The Wife] (Directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, India, 1961) who develops depression after her husband becomes too busy and ignores her, *Dastak* [The Knock] (Directed by Rajinder Singh Bedi, India, 1970) (earlier version) where a newly-wed wife becomes depressed as she cannot cope with the lack of privacy in a big town and is constantly misrecognized as a prostitute; *Abhimaan* [The Pride] (Directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, India, 1973), where the wife becomes depressed after losing her baby in pregnancy and *Sadma* [The Shock] (Directed by B Mahendra, India, 1983). In virtually all these films the depressive episode is precipitated by a life event and the family response varies from bewilderment and a lack of recognition in *Abhimaan* to changes in circumstances and removal from the situation. Several films have portrayed borderline personality related to suicidal attempts. These include *Aaina* [The Mirror] (Directed by Deepak Sarin, India, 1993), *Sangam* [The Confluence] (Directed by Raj Kapoor, India, 1964), *Bhumika* [The Role] (Directed by Shyam Benegal, India, 1977) and *Arth* [The Meaning] (Directed by Mahesh Bhatt, India, 1982). In films such as *Sangam*, suicide is presented as a sacrifice and an altruistic act for friendship. The impact of attempted suicide in the family is often glossed over so that it is difficult to ascertain how the family may cope with the act itself or its aftermath.

Conclusions

Families are the building blocks of society, and social, political and economic changes influence their structure and functioning. It is inevitable that these will in turn influence how they are portrayed in the arts including films. Psychiatry as a medical specialism more than any other has the ability to use films and arts, including poetry, literature, folk tales and painting to learn about and understand strengths of other cultures. Any paper dealing with films will rely on a personal choice and a very specific way of interpreting films and portrayal of subjects and its contexts. Families bring up children and thus influence their cognition and cognitive schema. It is therefore helpful in clinical settings to understand the role and the importance of family in understanding the patient. Films do not by themselves offer all the knowledge and the information but most certainly can provide pointers which can then be utilized for detailed understanding of these building blocks. Hindi

cinema offers a mirror to our understanding of changing social mores and personal values and we must find ways of using it more. Various psychiatric conditions have co-morbidities associated with them and their impact on families and the family's understanding of the illness can form an important part in developing interventional strategies.

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