

Cinema As A Tool For Health And Risk Communication : Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Film or cinema has always been a powerful medium that can be adapted to various situations of the human societies anywhere in the world whenever necessary. It also possesses a huge potential in making a point felt meaningfully by the human beings if properly disseminated. Presently, with the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic situation, thinkers and activists from the field of communication and media need to seriously brainstorm about the most effective means of communicating messages of health and risk communication. Specially the medium of cinema as it has not been utilized to the optimum for achieving the desired goal. Cinema that includes feature films and documentaries have been used on experimental basis by a very few film makers for this purpose. However, films on different kinds of diseases and health risks have been usually produced more for commercial gains not necessarily orienting them from the perspective of our discussion. It is high time a serious, coordinated effort needs to be pushed forward for taking advantage of the medium for facilitating health and risk communication in a far convenient and effective manner than it has been till date. There is more than enough scope for presenting issues in these two fields as a fully-prepared package for the public which would go deep down their mindset and convert them to empowered active citizens. This shall help them in adopting the suggestions and hints and thereby improving their standard of living. This paper makes an attempt at examining the issues and challenges on the path towards achieving the same.

Keywords : Global Health, Health for all, Informal University, Literacy, Public Health, Risk,

Introduction

Film plays a unique role in today's society. It is an art form, a language, an educational tool, a method of information delivery, and a vehicle for social marketing. Film has the power to communicate stories, to stir emotions, to inspire, to encourage action and to redress inequities in health (Fitchet, Bhagavatheeswaran *et al.* 2014).

The medium of cinema or films has developed over about a century's time now till its present avatar. It has been the result of efforts of a 'league of extra ordinary people' from both technical and theoretical fields. This bevy of inventors and innovators could not have imagined in their wildest of dreams that the medium has been improvised to such an extent today. Also, it is the relentless quest of mankind for furthering all existing situations that the medium has been adapted to suit the requirements of so many diverse fields. And the good thing is that it is still set to grow in the future.

Coming to the medium's foray into the health communication sector, it was in was in 1946, even before the Independence by the country, a film *Dr. Kotnis ki Amar Kahani* was released. It had the distinction of being directed by the grand old man of Indian films - V Shantaram. It was based on the life of Dwarkanath Kotnis, an Indian doctor offering yeoman's services in China for plague during the Japanese invasion of the former. While the noble soul did a splendid job there he himself had to succumb to the plague. Despite this tragic turn of events, the film continues to be a source of high inspiration even after about eight long decades of its release.

In 1971, the film *Anand* directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee narrated the story of a terminally-ill patient and how he tried to live life full-time till the very end of his life. It was inspiring even for the medical professionals along with other patients in the hospital to forget the pains even for the time being.

This was followed by the film *Mili* (1975) again by Hrishikesh Mukerjee which told the story of a girl affected by a rare disease. The treatment of this disease was not easily available in the country and the girl had to be flown

outside for the purpose. But a line added to the screen at the end of the film said that this disease was curable and not to panic.

In 2004, the film *Munnabhai MBBS* earned a rare accolade which probably no other Indian popular film has ever achieved. A short review of the film was published in the *British Medical Journal*, one of the most prominent medical and health journals of the world. Presenting a highly-unusual treatment of the medical profession for the mass audience in very effective manner, the film managed to acquire a huge impact on the peoples' mind. According to the reviewer Anand Pai, use of correct medical terminology, real locations as against a normally-unrealistic portrayal of the profession the film scored high brownie points and be different from other such ventures. It can be said that any attempt at health communication should endeavor to achieve similar kind of effects on the people. That too, in such a way that the messages intended to be disseminated percolate down to the people in a seemingly-effortless manner.

In our country, there is a trend of films or popular cinema focusing on various health and medical issues at different points of time. It goes on to win the minds of the target audience and bringing into fore the need for precaution, prevention whichever may be the case as and when it became necessary.

These few films can be said to be pioneers in the field of 'health communication' through films or cinema in the real sense of the term.

This is a form of edutainment by which this particular medium can address the issues in this field to an audience that may not be burdened by the aspect of literacy. as a person need not necessarily be a literate to enjoy and understand a film and finally become empowered to follow and do whatever is being professed in it.

The situation is further complicated by the emergence of innumerable sources of messages or information with the advent of social media on the internet platform. It has acquired such a panic situation that the World Health Organization (WHO) even termed the development of an 'information overload' as an 'infodemic' that the world needed to tackle before the disease itself (Thomas, 2020).

The inter-dependence of media of all kinds ranging from conventional mass media to new media is to be taken for granted for information dissemination in the domain of health. Yet, cinema as a major component of this package has been taken up with renewed interest and importance over the years because of its advantages compared to several other media.

Further, to admit that the COVID19 situation has brought in far-reaching and sweeping changes in each and every walk of life would not be disputed by any person. Among other things, it has compelled us to re-examine and review all aspects of our lifestyle in general. Belonging to the communication domain, this author would like to look at how these changing times, generally and also specially triggered by the pandemic situation have thrown in newer challenges of disseminating health and thereby risk-related information for the humanity as a whole. Today, health and risk communication are not bound by any barrier. Rather it has to be universally-acceptable and applicable domain of solutions which would be on offer in the coming days.

Objectives :

The objectives of this paper are to ---

- Explore the contribution of cinema in facilitating 'health communication' along with 'risk communication' primarily in India,
- Endeavours towards this field at the level of the government and health agencies supported by it,
- Examine the synergy of commercial feature films and public health documentaries in expanding the horizon of public literacy in this direction,
- Look for a few potential remedies for improvement in the situation for future purposes,

Methodology :

This paper is primarily an empirical one exploring facts and newer developments from a variety of sources and experiences of agencies and individuals in this domain across the world. Already existing literature in details from research studies and experiences of earlier situations have been closely studied for deriving assumptions and arriving at recommendations and conclusion. Prepared as an empirical commentary paper it draws upon secondary sources of information basically along with those available during the COVI19 period because of the huge worldwide expanse of the issue at hand - Health and Risk communication alike.

What is Health Communication :

Though there are scores of different definitions of health communication, in very simple words it is the communication or dissemination of any information related to health and medical issues to the target audience. While many of the diseases or health issues pertain to some individuals, yet it assumes a far higher importance during situations of epidemic and pandemic that has swept through the world causing a major scare on the entire human kind.

Along with this, let us look at the definition of health according to the National Health Portal of Government of India. It says that health is the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. It is recognized, however, that health has many dimensions (anatomical, physiological, and mental) and is largely culturally defined.

Health communication is a way of promoting health behaviours and attitudes, and sustaining them over a period of time aimed at positive health outcomes packaged in ways that the target population can relate to and comply with. It is a vast area with a lot of scope and indeed one of the most effective and proactive types of public health interventions (Sumedh, 2016). According to the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health. The European Union also gives due importance to the field declaring that it was integral to an effective public health response to the continuing threat posed by communicable diseases in the European Union (EU) and EEA countries. It also says that emergence of newer kinds of diseases has further strongly established the importance of the role of this specialization of communication as a core competency for public health practices (ECDC Website, Article 12 of its Founding Regulations).

It has two major sides to it. That is, at an individual or micro level it deals with individual patients or people coming up with some kind of health problems. On the other hand, there is also the broader level at the community or even national or international community of human beings (Macro level). The latter can be very aptly compared with that of epidemics and pandemics. However, in both the cases, cinema definitely possesses huge potential for being handy or effective to inform, educate and thereby empower the people by its strong treatment or presentation of the specific angle of the problem as desired.

Why films for this purpose :

The Vice President of the country M. Venkaiah Naidu in 2016 opined that films should expose people to ideas, problems and developments happening in society. Inaugurating the 47th International Film Festival of India (IFFI), he further said that this medium should reflect larger social concerns besides focusing on entertainment. "Films should illuminate the mind and heart, engaging audience both intellectually and emotionally. They should expose people to ideas, problems and developments happening in society and make them think critically and look for alternative solutions and actions. In a country like India, with its several social problems, a case could be made for social realism in our films."

And communication of various aspects of health-related issues do qualify to be considered very much a social concern in our country at least.

On the other hand two experts in the field of medical research say that the power of cinema not only influences our knowledge but also the beliefs of different quarters of the society. This essential power of cinema, lies in making one think and absorb instances at a personal level. This goes in the favour of better health communication through films. It will be no exaggeration to state, no research publication has been able to achieve the impact, 'Taare Zameen Par' has had on understanding dyslexia and holistically empowering patients, care givers, parents, teachers and the society at large. To deal with situations where children need special attention. The sensitivity to address and approach this health condition at the mass level, has been a special achievement of the film (Pati, Sharma, 2018).

Commenting on the three long decades of existence of the much-acclaimed film *Rain Man* (1988), a prominent psychiatrist wrote in *The Guardian* (2018) that the film was the best thing that ever happened to autism. "No gigantic public education or PR effort could have produced the sensational awareness that the film brought to the national and international radar screen." Dr Darold Treffert, the commentator, an expert on autism and savant syndrome, worked on it as a script consultant.

A good background research also adds high value to the films so made. And does leave an impactful benefit for the society on various grounds - awareness, empowerment, relief etc.

And it is also highly-intriguing how some films or work of fiction that we tend to term as mere science fiction turn out to be a larger-than-life situation at a later point of time. Yes, everything the film *Contagion* (2011) has presented to the masses in its celluloid frames has turned out to be happening in such a near-perfect situation. It also talks about the 'pandemic' situation that we all are so familiar with now. If probably the society would have tried to take some of the hints of that movie seriously, maybe humankind might not have faced the pandemic disaster' that it had to go through because of the outbreak of the COVID19 of 2020.

At this point, let us look at an important aspect related to the whole theme of discussion here. On the front of cinema in general, the Japanese government of the 1930s had a rare enough foresight to realize the power of this medium for a high-impact dissemination of messages of any kind to the targeted audience. Hence, the government became involved in production of propaganda and promotional films called as 'bunka eiga' on the lines of the 'kulturefilms' of Germany of those days. This speaks of the faith of the power-that-be in the medium and efforts to utilize the same for various purposes. The situation was to the advantage of the government as the Japanese Home Ministry kept all the major portfolios under its strict control which included most of all cinema and education among others. The glory and powers of the empire obviously had to be the focal themes of these cinemas in which even Akira Kurosawa had a contribution in terms of more than one movies.

Cinema - an unusually-attractive medium has been mostly classified as an escape for the audiences for a few hours from the harsh realities of life and acquire some entertainment at an affordable price. So, while a good dose of entertainment has to be there in any film to be popular, the film team led by the director must also be tactful enough to infuse adequate hints and suggestions for achieving the goal of creating awareness about a certain health issue, in a subtle manner or otherwise. It must also go beyond the normal scope of entertainment to inject the overall message of how to achieve a healthy life overcoming any illness and a potentially-risky situation for the future.

It must also be understood that like any media, cinema also possess two sides of its life - negative and positive. Many a times, one must have come across quite a few sayings that media has been responsible for a lot of ills in the society. In fact, in the film *Gol Maal* (1979), again by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, veteran actor of yesteryears Utpal Dutta has a chance meeting with Raj Babbar who was shooting for a film as part of the film plot. When Dutta was criticizing films for the deteriorating quality of youths' characters of those times. Raj Babbar makes it a point to counter with adequate justification whatever was spoken by Dutta who in turn had to accept it.

This issue has to be corroborated by an understanding. That is, no media or for that matter any development in science and technology including nuclear power systems are either good or bad in themselves. And as human beings of simple mind, we usually take it for granted that all these developments are good by nature.

Only cliché is that whether it is good or bad depends solely upon the people behind conducting or driving those media. It is fully dependent on the interests of those people only, not the media itself which is just an instrument in the hands of the people. Same is the case with nuclear power systems. There is more than enough scope for putting them into good usage by any count.

At the same time many of the films which qualify to be called as those facilitating health communication since very early days of this medium may not have been made with that perspective at all. Going by theoretical concerns in film or cinema, there are many directors or film makers who would make a film the way it is made because they wanted it that way. They are not concerned about whether audiences would like it or not. Then there is this breed of film makers who make a film from audience's perspective - whether it would have a mass appeal or not. So, all the films in health communication may belong to either of these two or even some other category of film makers with a different philosophy.

But, even though many of these films may not have been made with that ideal in mind yet they have attained high success in attracting the attention of the audiences and tell their stories in an effective way. In short, they have been able to drive home the message with maximum or optimum success.

An interesting experiment in this direction can be cited here. The Worldview International Foundation, an organization focusing on practical participation in the information process set up a media centre in Dhaka,

Bangladesh in an effort to use the film media to disseminate development messages. Initially, the foundation made a film on 'literacy' which was highly successful in attracting audiences. They went on to make another one on the theme of 'family planning' which also became a reasonably successful one. A detailed report of the initiative was published in the PubMed bulletin of the National Centre for Biotechnology Information and, U.S. National Library of Medicine (Riber, Smith, 1985). It attributes the success of these two films to the fact that both the themes were adapted to the traditional feature film format which needs to be considered in a serious way. The report further lamented that till that time commercial cinema format was 'underutilized' for development messages. The same can also be said about health communication. However, since the publication of the report in 1985, it is assumed that the situation has improved at least to some extent, if not considerably at least.

Under the present circumstances, would it be considered a far-fetched idea for utilizing such a unique capacity of this medium for developing 'social message' communication activities. Specially in the domain of 'communication for health' and its allied issues.

Public health documentaries :

Continuing the discussions, there is need to talk about the documentary genre also which over the decades have presented quite a few excellent films dealing with various health and related issues of high relevance. According to *MPH Online*, an independent online resource for public health students, documentary films in this domain have been around from almost the same time as that of advent of films in general - a century of existence. This was pioneered by the very first long-form documentary feature *Nanok of the North* (1922). Over the decades which have followed, many brilliantly-produced documentaries have enriched the repository of such films oriented towards the health and related issues of the people.

Notable among these have dealt with themes like AIDS (*And the Band played on*, 1993), Ebola epidemic (*Hero with a thousand faces*, 2016), health workers of the front engaged in the fight to eradicate polio in India and Pakistan (*The final inch*, 2009), the unholy nexus between western drug multinationals and governments in blocking access to drugs for HIV positive patients (*Fire in the blood*, 2012), the leprosy menace in India (*Ancient enemy*, 2014), brutal murder and gang rape of girl in Delhi in 2012 (*India's daughter*, 2015) among others. The list compiled by MPH can't be said to be a fully-exhaustive and exclusive one. Yet it almost covers a good range of public health documentaries made over the years. Being based on facts and true stories, unlike commercial cinema, these documentaries or the other form of the cinematic medium sustain its own significance against all odds. And it is in itself a powerful medium of communicating its themes conveniently and effectively for the intended public. Discussions on cinema and health communication can't be completed without giving this genre its due space.

Few of the films in this genre :

A discussion about a few of the films in this direction shall be of convenience for understanding the point that is being endeavoured to be made here.

Based on a true story about a Nobel laureate, *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) for example is a film on how the protagonist overcomes an attack of paranoid schizophrenia with the support of his family and friends. And he finally regains his composure and goes on to win the prize. This is highly-encouraging film about any person diagnosed with such a health issue and hopes for recovery brightens up.

Then there is the 'activist' genre of films of which *Erin Brockovich* (2000) is a good example. It is based on a real life story of the same name, an assistant to a lawyer who accidentally stumbles upon medical records of a client on some other works which pointed out to chemical poisoning of the water supply system of a certain township in the USA. Then she makes it a point to go full steam into it and finally manages to acquire adequate compensation to the victims of the tragedy. And thereby exposing an enormous health risk involved.

This film is not dealing with any particular disease. But more important than that, it is showing the path towards the battle against any such move or development anywhere in the world.

Nearer home, *Munnabhai MBBS* is a film in this genre that we have already mentioned at the beginning. This is a simple film spoofing the medical profession situation in the country that has touched the heart of the millions as the subject is so close to our day-to-day life. It has given a fresh way of looking at the profession as well as life in themselves. Thus, the uniqueness of the film lies in its being able to factor in the desired change in the thought process of the people who have seen the film.

Vicky Donor (2012) on the other hand also treats a subject that is rather an open secret or taboo also at times in the society and presents it such a manner that it is accepted by the people. It is tackling two different aspects. First of all it is preparing the people to accept the inevitable in case of families facing trouble for having children under normal circumstances and showing the options at hand. Secondly, that sperm donating can also be a respectable means of earning money.

Black (2005) by Sanjay Leela Bansali deals with two issues. At one end of the story, the director is taking the audience along with him towards a ray of hope by improving the condition of the affected girl to a considerable extent. At the other end, he is also introducing the people to Alzheimer's disease.

On both the counts the director has been successful in depicting the seriousness of the issues and also making us aware of them.

It is interesting to bring into the discussion another Bhansali film - *Khamoshi* (1996). It is a story of a deaf and dumb couple whose two children do not have that problem. Termed as a musical, it went on to win several awards and has set a new standard in the way of communicating by people with sign languages. It is said that Nana Patekar has done such a good job in sign languages in the film that his version was later adopted by several foreign countries for training of their own citizens with it. It can be termed as a bold move by the director in dealing with an unusual story that might not have been having a great prospect in terms of box office collection which actually happened. Yet, from the point of view of overall health-related issues, it is a landmark film in that category.

Then comes the film *October* (2018) by Shoojit Sarcar. It is about a girl who goes into a major health after a disastrous fall. As the girl asked about her colleague he made it a point to be with her nurturing to the maximum extent possible. And also eventually driving her towards a good sign of recovery more out of his constant encouragement backed by medical care. However, though she succumbed to the injuries soon after, it was not before she was released from hospital for which credit was due to Dhawan to a big extent. Even taking the tragic end to its stride, it must be commented that the film managed to successfully demonstrate the willpower and compassionate help and support a person can give to another person at times of such health and medical emergency situations. The focus was on the human aspect of health care and nursing.

The film *My Name Is Khan* (2016) is also relevant in this regard. This film's protagonist is suffering from Asperger's Syndrome - a neurodevelopmental disability affecting the ability to effectively interact and communicate with people. Though it may have been made only as a popular cinema, yet it has made people aware of this disease and is an encouraging story of facing and also overcoming such challenges of life.

Taarey Zameen Par (2007) is a movie that can be considered as one much before its time as it tackles the 'unwanted' subject of dyslexia, a not-so-uncommon issue with children of a lower age category. The issue was treated in such an effortless manner that everything about it was conveniently understandable to anyone concerned. It also wielded enough 'encouragement' for any parent having such a child for coming forward for a positive intervention. We can also consider this film as that of being driven by the saying 'catch them young'.

Another film that was a runaway success is the *Three Idiots* (2009). The film examines the problem of the youth from a different standpoint. Yet it also fully qualifies to be an equally-successful film about communication of health in the broader sense of the term - both mental and physical. It has been quite effective in driving home the very fact about the component of stress playing havoc in the life of most of the youngsters.

This is so important if we bring in the fact that by now India has earned the accolade of being the 'Youngest Country' of the world. According to the report of IRIS Knowledge Foundation in collaboration with UN-HABITAT titled 'State of the Urban Youth, India 2012: Employment, Livelihoods, Skills', by 2021 our population in the bracket of 15 - 34 years would peak at 464 million. This distinction comes with its tremendous accompanying potential of turning the fortunes for the country's favour by being the world's manpower source for all kinds of professional avenues.

However, the report also highlights its concerns related to this as one fifth of the urban population lived on less than a dollar a day. Also, it says that while income levels in cities may appear to be higher, yet the cost of living is also constantly increasing causing 'inadequate access to healthcare and more than half of urban woman being anemic along with maternal mortality being one of the top causes of death of woman.

It is important to add here that by 2020, India is set to become the world's youngest country with 64 per cent of its population in the working age group. With the West, Japan and even China aging, this demographic potential offers India and its growing economy an unprecedented edge that economists believe could add a significant 2 % to the GDP growth rate. Thus, keeping the health of all, but specially this huge segment of the 'young population' is all the more important under present circumstances.

In 2005, the film *My brother... Nikhil* depicted the trauma and related aspects of a upcoming young promising sportsperson who was put into segregation following discovery of his status as HIV positive. The plot was set in the period between 1987-94 at a time of a very low awareness about AIDS in the country. It has done a good job of disseminating adequate awareness about the disease in a far more effective manner than it would have been possible through print or other media at all. It has also brought into focus the relationship between two male persons which at that point of time was definitely a taboo of sorts by all counts. Thus, the film had scored two important points through this venture.

Our discussions would not be complete without taking into consideration two films of rather recent origin.

First of all, *Padman* (2018) which is based on a true story of a person who dedicates his life for facilitating easy availability of cheap but standard sanitary napkins. He had taken the 'social enterprise' way for the job as opposed to those sold by big companies at a price not easily affordable by the people with not a good economic status. More so in the rural and semi-urban areas of the country. The story that depicts the unspeakable hardships, humiliation that he faced in his journey to liberate upcoming young girls from those vulnerable areas is really a refreshingly encouraging film. It had won the audience towards its side and has been a strong source of inspiration for many like-minded people who would like to do something for the society.

Secondly, *Toilet - Ek Prem Katha* (2017) is about families not having a proper toilet at their homes forcing the people to visit the nearby fields or forests. The endeavour has taken out the truth of a considerable portion of our families to the public domain nicely spoken in the form of a feature film. Going by the success of the film in box office, it seems to be an encouraging and inspiring one for the populace.

In the domain of communication, it is an established saying that 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. Here in case of cinema, if not a picture, it is a film or movie which has the potential to transform the behavior or habits of a huge population towards a certain aspect of life which can prevent a potential disease or help properly in healing of an existing one. This is why cinema as a means of communicating health and risk-related information and messages to the masses needs to be given even more significance than it is so at present under any circumstance.

Regional Films' perspective :

Assamese films :

The films in the regional languages of this country of continental proportions also contribute a major share of the overall film scenario. So it is necessary to look at such films in this context. However, it needs mention here that availability of literature on this particular theme from the regional films' perspective is not up to the mark.

A case in point are the Assamese films which has entered the 85th year of its existence in 2020. The first Assamese film was released in 1935 with more than two hundred films produced so far. One film was even the country's official nomination to the Oscar awards in 2019.

But, out of the few hundred odd films produced over these nine decades there is hardly any film that can be termed as a health and risk communication film in the proper sense of the term. Yet, mention may be of a few films indirectly connected to the theme of discussion here.

The *Ahir Bhairav* (Songs of the Dawn) is one that deals with the universal issue of 'schizophrenia from a social perspective. It deals mainly with the impact of this deep-rooted mental disorder on those in close contact with the sufferer.' It is interesting to note that the producer himself is a doctor of Assamese origin and a General Practitioner based in the United Kingdom. It was out of his concern for the people suffering from this problem that he made the film. It is to facilitate helping families with such family members to cope up with the situation at least to some extent. Though produced in Assamese language as a feature film it was entirely shot in England with English subtitles. Released in 2007 It has made its mark by winning the Best International Director of a Feature Film Award 2008 at the New York International Film and Video Festival.

Then comes the film *Ishu* produced by the Children's Film Society, India (CFSI) in 2017. It is directed by prominent film critic and national film award winner in this field Utpal Borpujari and set in a rural background with an ethnic population in the state. The film focusses upon the social evil of 'witch hunting' because of superstition of the society as experienced through the eyes of a child - *Ishu*. It is important to note that the director has chosen a child's psychology to narrate the whole incident as it would create more interest among the people about the problem. Further, the director seems to be guided by the saying "catch them young" so that it would facilitate the film to connect with the younger generation much better. This would help in creating an orientation for not accepting superstition in the young minds which would go a long way in improving the society's situation.

"However, despite its sensitive and serious backdrop, my film treats the subject in a way that it is suitable for viewing for children. In fact, the Central Board of film Certification (CBFC) has given it 'U' Certification without any cuts," Borpujari said. "Children are the future of our country and should always be motivated. Movies like '*Ishu*' bring awakening in the society about the ill-effects of social evils and educate people about their harmful aspects on the society." he added.

On the burning issue of 'witch hunting' there is another notable movie - *Ai Matite* (At this land) produced and directed by the eminent Assamese playwright Dr. Sitanath Lahkar in 2017. It should be mentioned here that this film was made by the director producer based on his own successful drama *Tamasha* with his personal funds following his retirement as a professor of Mathematics from Cotton University, Guwahati (Assam). Devoid of any established actor of the film world it scores good with its message delivered in a hard manner to the audience. It has been able to make its presence felt in the select audience of the state. The district administration of Nalbari in the state has adopted it for creating awareness about witch hunting in the area which reflects its effectiveness. (Times, 2017).

Another film that was made on the struggles of a rural community for getting treated piped water to its locality is *Pani*. While the film tries to underline the importance of having pure drinking water, it narrates the behind the scene politics of everyone trying to take advantage of the situation. It finally results in the project becoming a failure as not a drop of water trickles through the laid pipeline. This leaves the people have to depend upon the traditional and natural source - rain water.

Despite a few hundred films produced in Assam till date, there has been only these few ventures in the field of health and risk communication. Other forms of genres primarily led by entertainment and artistic pursuits have led to such a situation. Further, the Assamese film industry is not so vibrant like that of Malayalam, Marathi or Bengali etc. This is both from the aspects of quantity as well as variation in genres.

Malayalam Films:

Speaking about Malayalam films on this genre, an interesting development has taken place in the recent times. The Kerala chapter of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) has requested the CBFC for taking steps on the "issue of unscientific representation of facts related to medical field and treatment of diseases in Malayalam films in recent times". More specifically with reference to the films *Joseph* and *Trance*. The chapter has urged CBFC for instituting a medical advisory committee and to take the opinion of the committee before certifying films depicting medical issues (Praveen, 2020). The chapter informs that it has been necessitated by the fact that a large number of people are often misled by such messages in these films, which often have no scientific basis. The first one deals with the issue of organ donation and the second one with psychiatric problems.

"Since cinema is a very powerful medium, what is being said through it reaches a lot of people, creating the kind of impact we cannot imagine of. For instance, in the case of '*Joseph*', the number of organ donations came almost to a standstill in 2019, after the movie was released. This was at a time when there were more than 3,000 patients waiting for various organs. Till then, we were making immense progress in organ donation. After this dip, we had to organise a lot of awareness campaigns to dispel fears regarding organ donation, which the government is overseeing using stringent norms," said the State Secretary of IMA, Kerala (Praveen, 2020).

The chapter has raised a pertinent issue as many a times presentation of medical issues may not be exactly what it should have been in reality. As a film, there has to be sufficient amount of entertainment, emotional aspect etc, in them. However, as health and risk are highly sensitive areas with a potential to harm our life, proper scientific precautions while depicting any health issue need to be strictly maintained.

Within the Malayalam film world which is a highly-thriving one among the regional films, a popular website www.nettv4u.com has listed ten films on mental health issues as the most prominent ones. The list includes *Thanmathra*, *Vadakkumnathan*, *Thaniavartanam* among others noted for a fair and logical treatment of the subject that is expected to go a long way in orienting the audience towards tackling such issues for near and dear ones in real life.

Marathi films :

In case of the Marathi film world in this direction, a detailed news article in DNA (Kharade, 2011) summarizes the scene in an apt manner. It informs that in the few years prior to 2011, quite a few Marathi movies were made with an entirely changed treatment to medical storylines. Important to note that those films have dealt with subjects like surrogacy (*Mala Aai Vhaychaay*), a mother's fight to obtain stem cells for treatment to save her daughter from leukemia (*Janma*) hard-hitting drama around the medical profession (*Aaghaat*), HIV-AIDS (*Zindagi Zindabad*) etc. Even the film *Pratisaad* is about the influence and power of homeopathy. Amarsinha Nikam, a homeopathy doctor who produced *Pratisaad* said, "Since there are many misconceptions about homeopathy, I decided to make a film to clear the air and create awareness about it. *Pratisaad* was a first-of-its-kind film on homeopathy. Since visual medium is very powerful, one can educate the layman through such films," he said.

Kharade (2011) further informs that all these films have been made for creating awareness about the particular issues taken up. Further, they 'highlighted how such people needed compassion and that one shouldn't judge them'. These films were also about 'advantages and disadvantages of being a surrogate mother and how it has become a big business in our country'. The directors and producers have gone to considerable length in their efforts for not allowing the films to look like mere documentaries. They tried their best to present them like feature films so that there can be a better impact upon the audience.

The author quotes a prominent Marathi film director saying that the trend during those days was in making socially-relevant films was very distinct in this film industry. "Now there is a new and sensible audience which is interested in such films. That could be the reason why more and more Marathi filmmakers are showing courage to handle such strong, serious and issue-based subjects." (Kharade, 2011).

Punjabi films :

In Punjabi language also, a comic satire named '*Phullu*' was released by two prominent established filmmakers of the state which deals with issues of woman's health, specially about menstrual aspects. The film tells the story of the need for using sanitary napkins through the curiosity of a married man who happens to learn about it from his wife, the subject being almost a taboo in the society to be discussed openly. Quoting a detailed report from UNI, Webdunia news portal informs that the film was given a U/A certificate without any cut.

Thus it is seen that though few in quantity, films on health issues are not negligible yet. This despite the fact that films on pure entertainment and other popular genres far outnumber those in this particular segment. This is true for both the cases of Bollywood or popular Hindi films world and also for the regional language film fraternity alike. However, this small initiative needs to be encouraged for future purposes. That way, the masses can get more education and orientation about different health and risk issues through this medium of 'open educational resource (OER)'. This is so because many a times it seems that this kind of OERs seem to be far more effective in

Advantages of the medium :

Cinema is a very strong medium that has the following advantages to its credit ---

First of all it is an audio-visual medium that can catch the attention of the target audience much better than any other media. The combined effect of the audio-visual presentation compares with no other media in its strength.

Secondly, one does not need to be a literate to enjoy a film as we have already mentioned earlier.

Thirdly, it is a different way of story telling that people usually identify with far better convenience and acceptance than any other media.

Accepting the unique advantageous characteristics of this medium, the World Health Organization (WHO) has taken up the highly-motivating initiative of organizing the 'Health For All' film festival for the first time in 2020.

Further, it may be mentioned here that WHO has also dedicated this year as the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife.

The response to the initiative is quite encouraging with about 1300 submissions from 119 countries with themes ranging from challenges of providing health-care in remote areas and countries in conflict, the realities of living and battling cancer, and the courage and resilience of nurses and midwives in the face of the most challenging of circumstances. All these in the three categories of video reports, animation or nurses and midwives. The primary goal of the festival is to provide a platform to equip film makers with storytelling powers for presenting champions for the cause of health and well-being around the world with role models from amongst individuals and communities.

This health body for the entire world adequately recognizes the power of cinema for driving us to feel, laugh, cry and think which would ultimately definitely impact our behaviours and decisions we would make in actual life. In the same way, the medium also has the potential to influence our health and be a catalyst of change for the society.

Global Health Films :

Here there is another genre of films being made, either with support from any organization or absolutely on personal initiatives all over the world. The films produced under this unusual category has the overall health perspective of the Planet Earth from all walks of life, not dealing with any particular disease or health issue of an individual or society. Nevertheless, this is also a highly-important aspect of film-making as the future of the humankind is also dependent on the well-being of the earth.

In this regard, it is highly worth mentioning that the Planetary Health Alliance supports the Global Health Film festival which looks at presentation of challenges before the globe. It is about its well-being from environmental aspects impacting an 'urgent public health crisis' in all walks of life as well as potential solutions to them. The organization says that it recognized the threats to the planet Earth and has been looking for various ways for mitigation of the same for the sake of saving the global ecology at length.

"The Planetary Health Film Prize celebrates a film that awakens us to this moment and inspires us toward a new path forward," PHA Website.

The winner for 2019 is the film '2040', an innovative documentary that looks at the future of the earth with all its accompanying problems through a structured visual letter to a child.

The point being attempted to be made is that cinema is nowadays is accepted as an effective and feasible medium for disseminating risk as well as health-related communication messages to the masses. That too, in a far more wider manner than it would have been otherwise sometime earlier. This is an encouragingly-emerging trend that is set to grow in quantity and quality in the near future.

Media as an Open informal University :

It is a commonly-accepted fact that the media should ideally be the 'mirror image' of any society or nation in which it exists in the true sense of the term. Hence, cinema being a very popular medium also needs to live up to this expectation. And take up issues prevailing in that society for making the broader population aware of it and the developments attached to these issues.

At this point, this needs to be noted that media (all varieties included) is an 'Open Informal University' for all. Why so ?

First of all, in an ideal situation, it should be accessible to anyone who would like to benefit from it. There can't be an exception barring reserving right of access to some materials which might be considered not very suitable for people under a certain age group. Thus, it must be 'open' for anyone in the society.

Secondly, it is 'informal' because there is hardly any formal requirement for accessing or utilizing the services of any medium rather than paying a price at times like buying a newspaper or entering a movie hall. Nowadays, even these are coming for free most of the times.

Again, a 'university' because media in the broad meaning has to deal with each and every issue which may arise at any given moment of time in the society without any exception.

The electronic media - specially cinema is of particularly higher significance than the others in our country as our literacy rate is still hovering at 74 % (2011 census). This is an improvement from 64.80 % in 2001 census. So, the print media may not have a lot of scope to drive home the issues on health. Of course, though the importance of the

print media can't be undermined, yet the focus must also be on cinema as an equally-effective tool for achieving the same target.

Government patronage in India for films on health communication :

It is an established fact that the government authorities have become much more media-savvy over the years and decades by now, utilizing various kinds of media available for getting across its points of view and also about schemes, awareness-creation on so many issues. Starting with the National Health Mission (NHM) and any other body set up for a specific purpose would have an adequate media mechanism. This is for a smooth and convenient dissemination of the policies, developments etc. But, production of cinema as a means of health communication has not been one of the priorities despite such a potential that the medium possesses. It is hoped that in future, the government would take up a policy about it, either directly supporting persons or firms with such a proposal or encouraging people to make films on relevant health issues emerging from time-to-time as the case maybe. This would help the population to get the desired benefits of the health problems as well as about the risk perceptions for the future in this direction in a far better manner than any other media.

Besides, a small point that needs to be discussed here is about the advertisement of 'bidis' in the films produced in country. During his childhood, this author vividly remembers full advertisements of various brands of this smoking product attached with the trailers of films while going for film shows in cinema halls. It was the 1970s and 80s. However, this author was surprised to see such advertisements sometime ago in the same manner. Now the question is - is bidi not harmful like cigarettes or liquor that its advertisement need not be banned at all. Also, as already mentioned, there are two sides to everything in life. In that light, isn't it questionable how far justified at all is the showing of bidi advertisements tagging them along with commercial films which draw huge crowds along with children always.

A detailed joint report of WHO and Government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare declares that about 19% of tobacco consumption in the country is in the form of cigarettes followed by 53% as bidis, the rest mainly in smokeless form. And that it is highly popular among the people cutting across socio-economic status with a high projected figure of film-going habit. Though the report's finding may seem to be somewhat older as it was published in January, 2008, yet the situation may not have changed a lot from what is depicted in it.

But another deep-rooted problem with government is that there is no proper policy of Health or Risk communication in place at all till date. Whatever have been achieved in this direction so far are results of a piecemeal system of implementation whenever the crisis arises. Never an established and well-thought out policy with a futuristic and dynamic standard at all. This needs to change once and for all for dealing all future exigencies as the COVID19 situation has shown our vulnerability to a huge extent.

Why risk communication :

Let us also discuss a few aspects of - Risk Communication which can be termed as an equally-significant, if not more sub sector of Health Communication.

The WHO defines it as 'exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being'.

The primary objective is to facilitate people at risk situation for taking 'informed decisions' for safeguarding those dear to them - family members, neighbours and community as far as possible. It throws a lot of potential to be used properly at times of epidemic and pandemic situations like COVID19, disasters like floods, major earthquakes etc.

Like health communication, this one also utilizes all kinds of potential media for the purpose including films. In this regard, understanding of perceptions, mindset, beliefs etc. all the issues need to be considered properly before embarking on any endeavor in this direction.

After a close observation and deliberations, it may not seem to be odd at all to put the films like *Contagion*, *Taray Zameen Par*, *Three Idiots* etc. in the 'risk communication' bracket. It is because their objectives are to create awareness and thereby take proactive actions and precautions about such exigencies and happenings in the society and also nature. In a way, majority of the films in the health communication genre can also be considered under this sub category also.

Talking of the need to emphasize upon health risk communication, medical researchers have come up with highly-significant facts. That is, the 1990s tobacco smoking and exposure to second hand smoke (SHS) ranked among the top three risk factors contributing to the global burden of disease along with childhood underweight and household air pollution. And, even after a gap of two decades by 2013, these two problems still ranked among the top three risk factors despite the other risk factors being replaced by high blood pressure and alcohol use. (Arora, Nazar, 2013). Thus the proposed target of WHO for a 30 % reduction in tobacco use globally by 2025 may seem to be quite an uphill task.

Hence, we can say that risk communication is also an equally-important area to focus on while deliberating on health communication issues.

Recommendations :

Drawing from the detailed discussions on various aspects of the theme of study here, the following recommendation are put forward for the quarters concerned for future adoption and achieving better results in the fight against health issues for the society ---

- i) It has become obvious that the film or cinema fraternity including individuals and also established firms should be encouraged more for making films specifically aimed at facilitating awareness creation and empowerment of people in health-related issues and risks involved,
- ii) Academic institutions conducting programmes in mass media, communication and those exclusively having film-making and related courses should be encouraged and mandated for emphasizing upon this particular development for future advantage, The government either directly or through its relevant bodies including National Films Development Corporation should arrange adequate support in terms of finance and other aspects for quality film- making projects in the desired fields.
- iii) Contests for film making on health-related issues should be encouraged more and more and the International and national Film Festivals of India and those prominent ones by voluntary bodies should set aside a special wing or section of the programme for films made with this genre.
- iv) More relevant and stringent restrictions need to be taken up for prevention of undesirable issues, incidents, scenes from being shown in films from the health and risk points of view further beyond the purview of smoking and alcohol consumption like it is at present.
- v) Nowadays, with the advent of modern technological advances, film-making has become far more convenient than it was a decade or so back. Thus, more and more people should be encouraged for utilizing this medium for telling their own stories which would encourage and inspire thousands of others in the domain. It is helped to a big extent by the fact that at present distribution of films is also so much more convenient option.

All these recommendations are equally-effective for both feature films and documentaries for all purposes - individual health, community or social health and also global health alike.

Conclusion :

From the discussions above it has become clear that film or cinema as a tool for facilitating the important cause of health and risk communication, possesses immense potential scope. However, the ground reality is that it has not been effectively and consciously utilized for achieving major goals and objectives in the country so far. Whatever efforts are made over the decades seem to be one off endeavours or affairs many of which may not even have been produced with this sole idea in mind. Thus, there is a need for a proactive effort in this directions if this tool with so much of future is to be tapped properly to the optimum level. This shall go a long way in extending the benefits of health and risk communication to the people at all levels of the social hierarchy, right from the highly-privileged ones to those at the grassroots level. The COVID19 as well as other epidemics and also the man-made disasters caused by destruction of rain forests, the ecological balance of the earth etc. have amply shown us that when such a situation emerges, it brings forth danger to any and everyone irrespective of caste, creed, social status etc. Hence, it is extremely important that all members of the society become united to work towards this cause and achieve the end goal of 'well-being' of the humankind. Of course, it is not that only the medium of information dissemination can do everything on its own. It has to be a combined, collective and global effort so that each and every society can get involved in it. Further, the stakeholders concerned - the government, society

at large, experts in the fields of health and media, policy makers, everyone has to be onboard a common single platform for achieving the maximum possible advantage out of this campaign. We expect this write up to be the starting point for such a movement for the near and also distant future.

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