

Medicine and Society

Changing portrayal of doctors in Bollywood films, 1940–2020: Is it time for introspection?

SATYENDRA TYAGI

INTRODUCTION

The Indian film industry is the largest cinema hub in the world. Indian Hindi cinema, popularly referred to as Bollywood, is renowned not just for its glitz and drama but also for being socially relevant. This has been reflected over time in its thematic selection of screenplays and depiction of characters; be it the caste system (*Achhut Kanya*, 1936), widow remarriage (*Phool Aur Patthar*, 1966; *Prem Rog*, 1982), rape (*Damini*, 1993), premarital pregnancy (*Kya Kehna*, 2000), or homosexuality and HIV (*My Brother Nikhil*, 2005).

Traditionally, the medical profession has been considered 'noble' in India. With doctors now included in the Consumer Protection Act, they are subject to greater social scrutiny.¹ The profession has moved from being paternalistic to being subservient to its patients. With this, the social perception of the medical profession too has changed over time. Bollywood, ever so sensitive to social changes, has portrayed this over the past eight decades through its characterization and portrayal of doctors in films. This article analyses the changing portrayal of doctors in Bollywood films over the past 80 years to examine how it has been influenced by changes in public perception.

METHODS

A little over 9600 Bollywood films were released between 1940 and 2019;² of these, plots of 68 films with medical themes of some importance to the story were reviewed (Tables I and II) and 35 of these were also viewed. Twenty-three releases where the doctor's portrayal had important social relevance or the character was important to the script were noted, chronologically listed, and analysed for the way the medical profession or professionals were projected in the screenplay (Table II).

RESULTS

One of the earliest portrayal of a doctor was in *Dushman* (1939), a social romantic drama, which was termed as a propaganda film by the then Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, patron of King George's Tuberculosis Fund. K.L. Saigal, the hero, is cured of his tuberculosis in a sanatorium with the help of his doctor friend and Prithviraj Kapoor, the sanatorium in-charge. In *Doctor* (1941), the hero is played by the famous singer Pankaj Mullick (who had composed the musical score for *Dushman*) who

believes in the ideals of humanism and equality and spends his entire life in the service of the downtrodden in a village during an epidemic of cholera. Several years later, *Dr Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (1947) showcased the young doctor experiment on himself to find a treatment for the plague while in China. In both films, the doctor is portrayed as being of flawless character, with high morals and ethics. Even though the medical profession was a mere subplot, the portrayal of the doctor as rich and

TABLE I. Thirty of the 68 films reviewed but not included in analysis

<i>Koshish</i>	1972	<i>Naina</i>	2005
<i>Anuraag</i>	1972	<i>Aparichit</i>	2005
<i>Khushboo</i>	1975	<i>Maine Pyaar Kyun Kiya</i>	2005
<i>Ankhiyon Ke Jharokhon Se</i>	1978	<i>Salaam Namaste</i>	2005
<i>Meri Biwi Ki Shaadi</i>	1979	<i>Chehrra</i>	2005
<i>Kaala Patthar</i>	1979	<i>Chup Chup Ke</i>	2006
<i>Clerk</i>	1989	<i>Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota</i>	2006
<i>Suhaag</i>	1994	<i>Red: The Dark Side</i>	2007
<i>Diya Aur Toofan</i>	1995	<i>Apna Asmaan</i>	2007
<i>Koyla</i>	1997	<i>U Me Aur Hum</i>	2008
<i>Deewana Mastana</i>	1997	<i>Kambakht Ishq</i>	2009
<i>Hello Brother</i>	1999	<i>Jab Tak Hai Jaan</i>	2012
<i>Dr T and the Women</i>	2000	<i>Humshakal</i>	2014
<i>Aankhen</i>	2002	<i>Placebo</i>	2014
<i>Armaan</i>	2003	<i>Dear Zindagi</i>	2016

TABLE II. Thirty-eight* of 68 films that were both viewed and their plots reviewed

<i>Dushman</i> ‡	1939	<i>Ek Doctor Ki Maut</i> †	1990
<i>Doctor</i> ‡	1941	<i>Darr</i> *	1993
<i>Dr Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani</i> ‡	1947	<i>Dil Chahta Hai</i> *	2001
<i>Anuradha</i> †	1960	<i>Kal Ho Naa Ho</i> *	2003
<i>Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai</i> †	1960	<i>Munna Bhai MBBS</i> †	2003
<i>Aarti</i> †	1962	<i>Phir Milenge</i> *	2004
<i>Bandini</i> *	1963	<i>Kyon Ki</i> †	2005
<i>Dil Ek Mandir</i> *	1963	<i>Black</i> *	2005
<i>Upkar</i> *	1967	<i>3 Idiots</i> *	2009
<i>Khamoshi</i> *	1970	<i>My Name is Khan</i> *	2010
<i>Pagla Kahin Ka</i> *	1970	<i>Vicky Donor</i> †	2012
<i>Anand</i> †	1971	<i>Ankur Gupta Murder Case</i> †	2013
<i>Tere Mere Sapne</i> †	1971	<i>Gabbar is Back</i> †	2015
<i>Mausam</i> *	1975	<i>Waiting</i> †	2015
<i>Mili</i> *	1975	<i>Uda Punjab</i> †	2016
<i>Silsila</i> †	1981	<i>Traffic</i> †	2016
<i>Bemisal</i> †	1982	<i>Andhadhun</i> †	2018
<i>Dard Ka Rishta</i> *	1982	<i>One Day Justice Delivered</i> †	2019
<i>Meri Jung</i> †	1985	<i>Kabir Singh</i> †	2019

* Fifteen were not included † Twenty that were included and analysed

‡ Three films, only the story and critical reviews were read and included

Kailashi Multi Speciality Hospital, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India
SATYENDRA TYAGI Department of Gastroenterology

Correspondence to SATYENDRA TYAGI; drtyagi@gmail.com; 44A Saket, Meerut 250001, Uttar Pradesh, India

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aristocratic reflected the prevalent trend of the times. The profession's high standards and dedication to society are clearly and truly reflected in these early films.

Two films from the early 1960s, *Anuradha* (1960) and *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai* (1960) show the profession as a form of social service. In *Anuradha*, Balraj Sahni is idealistic and devoted to his patients while ignoring his family. *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai* bucked this trend but only slightly. Woven into the story is an extramarital affair between the doctor and a nurse. Such was the reputation of the medical profession in Bollywood that even when the doctor was morally wrong, he got the sympathy, while his wife, though wronged, was despised by the audience. *Aarti* (1962) almost brings the doctor, Ashok Kumar, to the brink of blackmailing Meena Kumari, the heroine, in exchange for her love as a fee for operating on her husband who is suffering from brain haemorrhage. Yet again, the reputation of the profession adds a twist to the tale, and the doctor simply wishes the couple well.

By the 1970s, Bollywood had progressed to bolder and more outspoken scripts while portraying the medical profession. *Anand* (1971) and *Tere Mere Sapne* (1971), which was loosely based on A.J. Cronin's novel *The Citadel*, were two path-breaking films conveying a different public perception of doctors. The awareness of unethical practices within the healthcare system was boldly projected in *Tere Mere Sapne*. Dev Anand as the suave, ambitious surgeon is as comfortable in Bombay's 'Page 3' life as he is in its unethical referral system. The greed to mint money blinds him to such an extent that he fails to recognize that Mumtaz, his wife, is pregnant with their first child. *Anand* reinforces the stereotype image of the medical professional: strict, over-indulgent and ever-grumpy. The doctor (Amitabh Bachchan) treats life with utmost seriousness even as he hides his extremely compassionate nature. The kind doctor is initially repelled and even angered by his patient's (Rajesh Khanna) carefree outlook to his fatal illness. The famous dialogue by the terminally ill patient, '*Babu moshai, zindagi badi honi chahiye, lambi nahin*' (Sir, life should be big not long), became iconic as a telling statement of how doctors were perceived as being more concerned with the length of life rather than its quality.

Till the 1980s, Bollywood continued to project the medical professional as mild-mannered, gentle and self-sacrificing. *Silsila* (1981) was a bold attempt that showed Amitabh Bachchan two timing with his doctor friend's (Sanjeev Kumar) wife (Rekha). Sanjeev Kumar's character, though aware of the relationship, chooses the path of least resistance and ignores the illicit relationship. The films stood testimony to doctors being non-confrontationist even when provoked to the extreme.

Bollywood would not be true to its role as a social mirror had it turned a blind eye to the emerging unethical practices or negligence in the healthcare system. In *Bemisal* (1982), Vinod Mehra plays the rich unethical doctor performing illegal abortions. It is the benevolent portrayal of Amitabh Bachchan's character that balances the derogatory depiction of the profession. *Meri Jung* (1985) is a powerful courtroom drama that has a doctor's case at the centre-stage. While the film had technical flaws in terms of medicine, what is important is that for the first time, well before the implementation of the Consumer Protection Act, a Bollywood film had malpractice and negligence at the core of its plot.

The most telling commentary on the medical profession came with *Ek Doctor Ki Maut* (1990) with Pankaj Kapoor as Dr Roy.

Even as his research is acknowledged by a famous foreign university, the bureaucracy transfers him at the behest of his more influential colleagues. The film shows Dr Roy as a brilliant yet timid doctor in government service, subservient to the bureaucracy. Professional jealousies and inherent insecurities are evident when the medical fraternity unites to discredit the phase 1 results of Dr Roy's work. *Ek Doctor Ki Maut* might mean the death of one doctor, but it referred to discredit the entire medical community.

The extremely popular *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2003) was a story of competence versus compassion. Its social impact was more by way of its '*Jadu Ki Jhappi*' or 'the magical embrace'. Bollywood was asking the stereotypical doctor to notice that the society today values compassion and a smile (Sanjay Dutt) more than rigid standard operating procedures (Boman Irani) where competence and success alone matter. The film was not about what the doctors were 'perceived' to be, but what the society 'expects' of them. *Kyon Ki* (2005) highlights the general attitude of our society towards the mentally ill. Worse still, it shows the doctor, Jackie Shroff, strangle the lobotomized hero in an act of empathy. It raises a pertinent question of whether the public actually believes that doctors practise assisted suicide or euthanasia.

The decade from 2011 to 2020 was one of the unbelievable, negative portrayal of the medical profession by Bollywood. However, two films served as the saving grace for the profession and both *Vicky Donor* (2012) and *Uda Punjab* (2016) had bold stories. *Vicky Donor* was a light romantic comedy based on sperm donation with Annu Kapoor as a wily, gold-hearted doctor with no malice, running a sperm donation centre. *Uda Punjab* had Kareena Kapoor playing the doctor with Florence Nightingale compassion who rehabilitates addicts as she fights for reforms.

The Aamir Khan-hosted television series *Satyamev Jayate* (2012) in its fourth episode on 27 May upset many in the medical profession with its message that the healthcare system in India is rampant with malpractice. Victims were brought on the television show to tell their stories. The dark underbelly was beginning to be exposed by films such as *Ankur Arora Murder Case* (2013) that openly took up an urgent and disturbing issue of death on the operation table due to medical negligence. The moral of these stories was that a good doctor is not necessarily a good person. *Gabbar is Back* (2015) is a vigilante film based on an extremely derogatory story of doctors keeping 'alive' a dead child on ventilator just to inflate the bills. *Waiting* (2015) focuses not just on the complexities of decision-making and consent by the families of critically ill but also on the unscrupulous means to inflate bills and recommend treatment alternatives that fetch more profit. The crime thriller *Andhadhun* (2018) characterized the only doctor in the film to be involved in the unethical practice of selling kidneys for huge profits. Another crime thriller the same year, *One Day Justice Delivered* (2019) has the doctor couple bribed to kill an eyewitness in a terror case in a way that would look natural. The portrayal of Shahid Kapoor as the doctor in *Kabir Singh* (2019) with severe anger management problems, pathologically aggressive, alcoholic and a drug addict is an extreme portrayal. Did these films reflect the truth about changing ethics or were they just playing to the gallery for an enhanced 'Box Office' collection?

DISCUSSION

This article aims to review the changing portrayal of doctors and

not to chronicle all the films where doctors may have a fleeting or small role. The article has deliberately excluded certain films such as *Dil Ek Mandir* (1963) and *Aman* (1967), among the few successful ones, as these continued with the portrayal of doctors as being self-sacrificing and compassionate, similar to what several films from that period had already done.

How does a film exist in culture and culture mirrors in the film? While the metaphor of film screen as a cultural mirror is good, the power of the camera to set the scene of culture is much stronger than that of mere reflection. The cinema literally contributes to a culture's self-image, inflecting, not just capturing, daily experience.³ The portrayal of doctors in Bollywood cinema has seen a marked change over the decades. It has been depicted from being self-sacrificing (*Anuradha*) to self-serving (*Tere Mere Sapne*) to being outright corrupt (*Gabbar is Back*). Even the individual characterization has been consistently morphed, from the social worker (*Dr Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani*) to the tolerant (*Silsila*) and ostracized (*Ek Doctor Ki Maut*) to the ill-tempered psychopath (*Kabir Singh*). There have been exceptions (*Uda Punjab*) to show that all is not lost yet. Do these exceptions prove the rule or are they too few to summarize that the public perception reflected through cinema has not changed?

The debate continues on the extent to which Bollywood mirrors society and influences it. Pandit Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, had stated that 'the impact of films was greater than the influence of newspapers and books all put together'.⁴ His statement was symbolic of independent India's recognition of the vital importance of cinema. On the flip side is what actor

Naseeruddin Shah told the Press Trust of India (PTI), 'I feel that cinema can't change society or bring a revolution. The only serious function films can serve is to act as a record of their times.'⁵ Do the 2000-odd films released every year in India and watched by almost a billion viewers in different languages accurately reflect the changing perception and standing of the profession? Does Bollywood exaggerate what are mere aberrations? Is cinema just for fictional tales and mindless entertainment, or is it a reality check both for the society and the medical profession? If what Amitabh Bachchan is quoted as saying 'Indian Cinema has virtually become a parallel culture'⁶ is correct, then should not the changing portrayal of doctors in Bollywood films be a time for introspection for the profession itself?

Conflicts of interest. None declared

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