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Perception of Mental Health through Entertainment Media

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ABSTRACT:
Assessing one's health status without including mental health in the ambit renders such assessment not only incomplete but also invalid. Relevance and importance of acknowledging mental health issues is increasing day by day, especially with the increasing stressors in life. In such scenario, creating right awareness about mental health is very crucial in order to ensure timely recognition, combat stigma, improve prevention and stimulate practical intervention for dealing with mental health concerns. There are various psychological and social factors that still act as obstacle in addressing mental well-being of individuals in society. These factors need to be recognised and effectively dealt with. Along with that, need of the hour is to facilitate true understanding of mental health, its related disorders and importance of seeking professional help among all the strata of society till grass root level. Reviewing the role of entertainment media in influencing common discourse about mental health can be a potential factor in enhancing one's understanding about challenges faced by society in addressing mental health. Therefore, this chapter would look at mental health from the lens of movies which have veered understanding of mental health by common public in both negative and positive direction.
Key Words: Entertainment, Films, Media, Mental Health.

Mental health awareness has been gradually increasing globally, and India is no exception. Historically, mental health issues were often stigmatized in Indian society. However, there has been a shift towards more sensitive portrayals that aim to reduce stigma and increase understanding. Bollywood celebrities and public figures in India have become more open about their mental health struggles. This has contributed to reducing the stigma and encouraging others to seek help. The Indian cinema has also started addressing mental health issues more prominently. Efforts are being made to depict mental health struggles in a nuanced and realistic manner, avoiding sensationalization. Some recent movies have portrayed characters dealing with mental health challenges. A few television shows have also incorporated storylines that touch upon mental health issues to raise awareness. With the rise of web series and digital platforms, there has been more room for in-depth exploration of mental health themes. Documentaries focusing on mental health, like "Breaking Free," have also contributed to the public awareness and understanding of mental health challenges.

Some critics argue that the portrayal of mental health issues in Indian media can be oversimplified or dramatized for entertainment purposes. There is ongoing discourse on the responsibility of media in portraying mental health, as inaccurate or insensitive depictions can reinforce stereotypes. But before putting the onscreen portrayal of mental health to scrutiny, it is far more imperative to understand the accurate picture of mental health concerns in real life. Mental health issues in Indian society are complex and multifaceted. While progress has been made in recent years in terms of awareness and advocacy, several challenges persist. Accepting and addressing the issue of mental health is the biggest problem. The disparity and discrimination in physical and mental health issues is so grave, that when a person suffers from even a mild headache, he or she does not shy in taking medication for this physical discomfort. Whenever people face physical health related illness, they are not confused as to whom to consult, where to go and with utmost respect, show faith in competence of doctor whom they refer to in case of physiological ailment. But on the other hand, when it comes to mental health, the very acceptance of any issue related with it gets stuck on the word "mental" itself and the case is laid unopened due to fear of stigma and lack of awareness.

Views on mental health in Indian society can vary widely due to the diversity of cultural, social, and economic contexts. However, there are some common themes and perspectives that often shape how mental health is perceived in India. These become the barriers in acknowledging the mental health issues. Some of these major issues are -

Stigma

Stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant barrier. People with mental health conditions often face discrimination, social exclusion, and negative stereotypes, making it difficult for them to seek help. There is often a tendency to associate mental health problems with personal weakness or moral failings, leading to social stigma. As a result, individuals and families may be reluctant to openly discuss or seek help for mental health concerns. There is not only a sense of judgement but also contempt and mockery which adds more pressure on the person who is already struggling with mental health challenge. This pressure is of stigma, it is the pressure of being alienated from one's loved ones and people in society in general who fail to understand and acknowledge mental health issues. Individuals become hesitant to share personal struggles, even with close family members.

Traditional Beliefs and Superstitions

Traditional cultural beliefs and superstitions sometimes influence how mental health is understood. Mental health conditions might be attributed to supernatural causes, leading to reliance on religious or traditional healing practices rather than seeking professional help.

Inadequate Mental Health Resources

If a person overcomes the fear of stigma and wishes to seek out help to deal with one's problems at mental level, one faces the other major challenge in the field of mental health and that is - the treatment gap. There is a problem of inadequate resources. When people fall physically ill, they can easily find a hospital and doctor to consult to, whereas in case of mental health, as per WHO report in 2011, for every 100,00 patients suffering from a mental health disorder in India, there were only 0.301 psychiatrists and 0.047 psychologists. Ram Nath Kovind, the former President of India, asserted that India is facing a mental health pandemic and despite of that, there is a huge gap in availability of proper treatment for mental disorders.

Lack of Awareness

Lastly, the factor that is one of biggest obstacle in seeking out help for mental health and well-being is lack of awareness about it. People are ill-informed in general about what is mental health, its importance and how to address issues related to it. Due to stigma attached to it, mental health has not been able to become a part of mainstream narrative and is usually brushed under the carpet. Limited awareness and understanding of mental health also contribute to misconceptions and myths. Since people often do not talk about it openly, awareness about mental health is lacking and it is only in past few years since the celebrities started coming out about their personal battles with mental health issues that people have gradually started acknowledging the issue but even till today, we as a society lack basic knowledge about how to deal with a person who is suffering from mental health problem. This lack of education contributes to delayed or inadequate treatment for those in need.

Role of Media and Entertainment in Shaping Common Narrative about Mental Health

Entertainment Media is a very powerful medium to spread awareness and make something become a part of common discourse among masses. Its impact is huge due to sheer fact that it is consumed by people from the wealthiest strata to the poorest section of the society. It touches the chord of connect with the lowest common denominator and is enthusiastically consumed by masses. It holds the power of shaping attitudes of people through subliminal conditioning in the garb of entertainment and there is no other better way to educate than through such impactful medium.

Mental health problems are largely misunderstood by Indian Society because of persistent silence and effort to hide the issues due to fear of ostracization and stigmatization. There is a general lack of sensitization among masses when it comes to mental health challenges. It is not that people have not made effort in this direction but it is because of the fact that whatever efforts have been made, their reach has been rather limited. Given the situation, entertainment media, which has such wide consumer base, can be influential source of creating awareness in general public and fostering right perception of mental health and disorders related to it.

Media portrayals of mental health issues can influence public perceptions. While there is a growing trend of films and TV shows addressing mental health, these portrayals may not always be accurate or may sensationalize certain aspects. Unfortunately, over the years, representation of mental health issues in entertainment media has been negative and rather than doing good, it has instead promoted stereotypes and made public phobic and prejudiced towards individuals suffering from mental disorders. Characters in movies, series and serials which are shown mentally ill are often used as tools to evoke comedy or instill fear. Of course, it is entertainment media and its core purpose is to entertain audience but should there be no conscientious effort to use such powerful medium to deal with sensitive and relevant issue like mental health in a way that can uproot stereotypes, mitigate prejudice and promote true understanding of the complexities faced by people struggling with mental disorders so that the majority of people around such individuals who are fighting with mental challenges everyday are not looked down upon or doubted about genuineness of their struggle and are rather lent the helping hand.

In the early decades of cinema, Hindi movies rarely touched upon the stories of mental disorders directly and far and few between had the caricature like representation of mentally ill or retarded people. Even the decade of 2000 – 2010 had movies like *"Kyon Ki"* with Salman Khan and Kareena Kapoor in which completely bizarre and stereotypical set up of psychiatric hospital was showed to masses, seeing which, anybody could fall prey to considering mental disorders as something crazy cured only by electric shocks and punishment, leading to isolation of individual who suffers from such illness. And this kind of message in as recent as 2005 could be considered one of the reasons why Hindi commercial films failed to disseminate actual representation of significant section of society which combats mental health challenges and which is growing larger and larger due to unaddressed mental health issues. Worsening the situation are the cinematic products like *"Golmaal"* series and *"Houseful 3"* which have used mental and physical disability just to create comedy and eventually desensitize public about such sensitive concerns of real people suffering in real world with such problems. Even a good story of dissociative identity with strong performances in *"Bhool Bhulaiyaa"* released in 2007 lost its track by the end and just to build up the drama for climax, the issue of mental disorder was overshadowed and use of tantric knowledge to cure Vidya Balan's character led to spreading of misinformation about mental health and its cure. *"Ghazini"* in 2008 presented a very faulty portrayal of short-term memory loss.

Psychological disorders have been used in movies to tell horror thriller stories like *"Darr"* in 1993 and *"Sangharsh"* in 1999 in which the fanatic behaviour of protagonists is met with killing of such characters at the end of the movie. These films represented psychosis well but they failed to send appropriate message either through story or through disclaimer that such behaviours develop due to some potent causes and can be treated scientifically, leaving audience more horrified of individuals suffering from any of such mental illness.

It highlights the fact that there is surely something amiss not just at the level of individual but also at the level of society in not being informed practically about the emotional first-aid that should be made available to persons suffering from mental health challenges.

The significance of right depiction of mental health and disorders related to it in cinema can be acknowledged from the fact that movies which dealt sensitively and realistically with this aspect of health contributed positively in shaping right attitude towards mental health and spreading awareness about its importance, its issues and its cure.

Cinematic Products that influenced Mental Health Awareness Positively

Some distinct films, although far and few between, but impactful in spreading awareness realistically about different mental health disorders have become reference point for making lay persons understand these conditions.

"Black" (2005) is a movie in which Rani Mukherjee's character develops violent, uncontrollable behaviour due to frustration of physical disability of loss of hearing and eyesight at a very early stage of her life. Although her teacher, role played by Amitabh Bachchan, uses harsh methods in the film to teach her appropriate behaviour for expressing and communicating herself, but this story makes audience aware about the link between physical disability and mental health problems that can arise as a result of it and how sensitive the situation can be. Later in the film, character of Amitabh Bachchan

is shown succumbing to Alzheimer's disease, making audience aware of this illness realistically, without stereotyping it.

Another movie released in 2005. It was *"15 Park Avenue"* and it made significant impact in creating awareness about mental health disorder of schizophrenia. In this movie the lead character of Konkona Sen created an alternate reality for herself in her imagination in which she marries her ex-fiancé and has five children with him. Konkona's character is shown suffering from delusion of persecution in which she considers her sister and her mother holding her from meeting her imaginary husband and children. This movie successfully tells the story of challenges of schizophrenic patient and those who care for them. Such stories in which there is no exaggeration for dramatic effect and thereby no misinformation disseminated can be considered as effective source of creating awareness about mental health and associated disorders.

"Koi Mil Gaya", a 2003 science fiction film generated elements of empathy and understanding toward a mentally challenged young man who forms a bond with an extra-terrestrial being. While, *"Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara"* (2005) explored the deteriorating mental health of an elderly man who believes he was responsible for Mahatma Gandhi's death.

"Taare Zameen Par" (2007), a film about a child suffering from dyslexia who does not perform well academically but has creative imaginative ability and possesses talent for art and painting which is often overlooked by family and society alike until the entry of new art teacher in his boarding school who is able to identify his developmental disability appropriately and encourage his talent through his unique teaching style. This directorial debut by Aamir Khan was a masterpiece in highlighting the challenges faced by children suffering from dyslexia and making society not just aware about this condition but also sensitize people towards needs and concerns of such children. There was no such scene in this film which did not serve the purpose of telling the story with earnest honesty which made this product of cinema exquisite. There is need for more such films which can sensitize and create awareness among wide audience of entertainment media.

A film named *"My Name is Khan"* (2010) which made its audience aware that how a child with Asperger's syndrome brought up with love and no discrimination can show better development of communicative ability, relative ease of expression and finer development of personality; Another movie in 2010, *"Anjaana Anjaani"* addressed the alarming concern of suicide, where the lead characters decide to embark on a journey together, addressing themes of despair and hope.

"Barfi" (2012), a story about an autistic girl and deaf and mute boy who find true companionship in each other and showcase same emotions of love and vulnerability as experienced by those who do not suffer from such challenges; *"Tamasha"* (2015) in which young boy in his thirties on the verge of borderline personality disorder is healed from his erratic feelings, moods and thoughts about himself through the love and non-judgmental attitude of his love interest.

In 2015, a film directed by Shonali Bose brought forth the mental health related issues of a patient of cerebral palsy. This movie was *"Margarita With A Straw"*. It is a poignant narrative of a girl suffering from physical disability of cerebral palsy, who after being rejected by a guy falls for a girl and simultaneously harbours romantic feelings for another guy. Her dilemma about her sexual orientation is beautifully shown on celluloid through layered depiction of her character and how she handles her relationship with her lover and her mother. This movie is raw, real and facilitates genuine understanding of people facing psychological and physical issues. Such real depictions through cinema can add valuable contribution in enhancing mental health literacy among common masses.

This year's release of commercial film *"Dear Zindagi"* starring Alia Bhatt as young cinematographer who is discontented with her life due to cumulative effect of break up with her boyfriend, uncertainty on the front of her career and some unresolved issues with her parents. She consults a psychologist, the role played by Shah Rukh Khan, and is able to see life in different perspective. This movie will help in making significant contribution to positively influence people's perception towards mental health and seeking out help for resolving emotional problems. The film made it clear that normal stressors of life could sometimes be hampering an individual's day to day functioning and there is no shame in consulting a psychologist for it. One does not need to wait for some catastrophic experience to acknowledge need for seeking help for mental well-being. At the end in this film, Alia'scharacter develops feelings for the psychologist which is also resolved very normally when therapist makes her client aware that transference is quite normal to develop in a therapy but actual success of therapy

lies in her being self-dependent. The normal treatment given to mental health issue of the protagonist of the film makes the film successful in rightly portraying the essence of mental well-being, which is needed for making impact in shaping right attitude towards mental health.

These films cover a variety of genres and themes related to mental health, showcasing the diverse storytelling approaches in Hindi cinema. These are the products of entertainment media which entertained not through misrepresentation of mental health by making it butt of ridicule and evoking prejudice but rather using this powerful medium to send across right information and message about mental health and related disorders. The Indian government has also taken steps to address mental health at the policy level, and this awareness is likely to influence media portrayals. It's important to note that the landscape of media representation is dynamic, and changes may have occurred. Additionally, public perception, societal attitudes, and media trends can vary widely within India due to its diverse cultural landscape.

CONCLUSION

Being mentally healthy is imperative in achieving true essence of healthy existence. The need of the hour is to educate and sensitize people about mental health and disorders related to it. For that, along with government policies in this direction, sections of media that can spread awareness at grass root level have to be utilized efficiently. Entertainment Industry is one such medium which can have wide reach and influential impact on shaping informed attitude towards mental well-being.

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