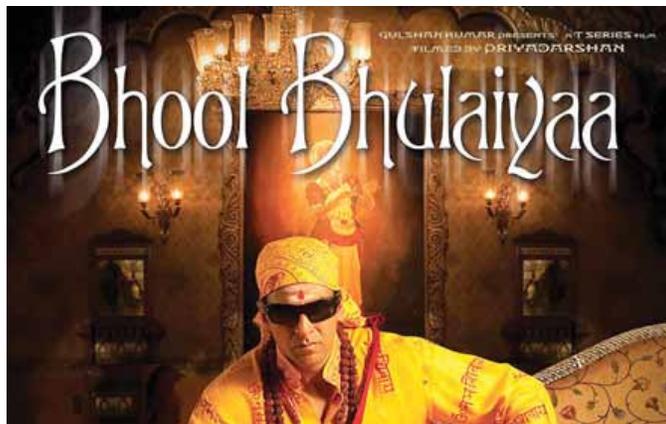


# cinema



\* Akshay Kumar in *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* ... a sorcerer or psychiatrist?



\* Suriya in *Ghajini* ... mentally imbalanced.



\* Dhanush flies into a rage in a scene from 3. He is supposed to portray a bipolar disorder sufferer in the film, but ends up showing grossly inaccurate symptoms.

## Maladies that movies make

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**M**ovies were always mad about maladies of the mind as they were about the affairs of the heart. In a country like India where superstition and stupidity often blockaded medical science on its path to tackle psychiatrist problems, very few films actually addressed the issue with scientific rationality or a modicum of logic.

If the movies erred on medical facts, they were equally erroneous when it came to scripting relationships between those normal and those not so. Stories about schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (even hysteria and others) were far from accurate depiction of the mental illnesses.

A leading Chennai psychiatrist tells me that whenever a film writer or director comes to him seeking information about the mind, he gives it, but on condition that his name should not appear on the credits. "I never know how they would ultimately portray a mental disease, and I do not want

to be sounding like a fool," he quips. He is absolutely right.

Despite the information age we live in — and with a flood of literature available on just about every topic under the sun — filmmakers never do their homework well enough to present an authentic script.

Admittedly, most of the ticket-paying masses are ignorant about psychiatric problems or do not have adequate knowledge (or could not care less) to pick holes in the celluloid creations. Producers, writers and directors go scot free.

However, before I talk about the howlers I have had to see on the screen, I would mention two very interesting films in this area I liked. They touched me.

The 1988 *Rain Man* is beautiful drama penned by Barry Morrow and Ronald Bass and helmed by Barry Levinson. It is the story of a haughty, spoilt young man, Charlie Babbitt, who finds to his horror that his estranged father had bequeathed his entire multimillion-dollar estate to his other son, Raymond, an autistic savant.

Starring Dustin Hoffman as Raymond

and Tom Cruise as Charlie, the movie was conceptualised after a thorough research based on real patients of autism. It was not surprising that the film went on to win the Golden Bear at Berlin, and four Academy Awards — Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Actor (Hoffman). *Rain Man* was brilliantly moving, and factually correct.

The other movie is *Khamoshi* (1969) in Hindi. Based on a novel, *Nurse Mitra*, by the noted Bengali writer, Ashutosh Mukherjee, the black-and-white film was directed by Asit Sen and had Rajesh Khanna (yet to attain super stardom) and Waheeda Rehman. Helped by Gulzar's haunting lyrics set to music by Hemant Kumar, *Khamoshi* was visually arresting and was probably Rehman's best ever performance I have seen.

Carrying the entire film on her shoulders, she plays a nurse in a mental asylum who finds it difficult to separate her professional duty from her emotions. She falls in love with two of her patients, one who does not remember her the moment he is cured, and the other promises to wait for her, when she herself goes insane.

When I compare and contrast these two movies with the current crop of works on psychiatric problems, I am sorely disappointed. After heart conditions and tuberculosis, it is now the turn of mental disorders.

Priyadarshan's *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* in 2007 in Hindi was remade from the original Malayalam version, *Manichitrathazhu* (which was followed in Tamil by *Chandramukhi*). About split personality disorder, I saw to my disgust (the films were also touted

as thrillers) psychiatrists behaving like sorcerers. Even the normally restrained Mohanlal (*Manichitrathazhu*) seemed to have had no clue how to enact this part. The worst was Akshay Kumar in the Hindi edition who was literally jumping around as the doctor trying to cure Manjulika, played by Vidya Balan. Rajnikanth in Tamil fitted somewhere between Mohanlal and Kumar! Psychiatrists and psychologists must have been horrified at this callous portrayal and treatment.

The latest blot has been 3 with Dhanush and Shruti Hassan. Made by Rajnikanth's daughter, Aishwarya, the movie tackles bipolar disorder — characterised by extreme mood swings. Ram (Dhanush) hallucinates (which does not happen in such cases) and is given electric shocks (again not accurate) when he begins to exhibit uncontrolled anger, bordering on violence.

But his family, including his wife, Janani (Shruti), is kept in the dark. Pray why? Maybe, so that the film can end the way it does. Psychiatrist Vinayak Vijayakumar (who was consulted by Aishwarya and who also essayed the doctor in 3) said that the disorder did not lead to suicide. "I suppose the film had to be sold," he said.

But the medical fraternity is peeved, because such movies create anxiety in patients. It could have made better sense if Aishwarya had not specified Ram's sickness. She could have left it vague.

There have been any number of other works in recent years (*Ghajini*, *Anniyan* and so on) that have revolved around mental sickness, but much to the chagrin of patients and their physicians, these movies have not been careful enough to present a balanced or correct view. As much as the man who keys in his stories, those who wield the megaphone must never forget that they have an enormous responsibility to the society.



\* A scene from *Vazhaku Enn 18/9*.

## Simply appealing

I have written even earlier that Tamil cinema had been bold enough to film very unusual stories, though it slips up in finesse and scripting. Its humour can be downright juvenile, even bawdy, but its characters are often very ordinary people. They are not good looking in the classic cinematic sense. They are not painted up, and are willing to be seen in clothes picked up from the streets. No designer wear for them. No exotic locales for their romances. Quite a contrast from the artificial and pretentious Bollywood.

The other day, I saw *Vazhaku Enn 18/9* (Case Number 18/9) about a young housemaid and a young man working for a roadside eatery. Velu (Sri) is smitten by Jyothi (Urmila Mahanta), and before he gathers his guts to tell her about

his feelings, her face is disfigured after a spoilt brat of a boy throws acid on her, mistaking her for the girl who rebukes him.

The performances are not up there, nor are the production values. But I admire writer and director Balaji Sakhthivel for having thought up of something as novel as this. Although, there have been movies in Hindi (and Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*) about pavement and slum-dwellers, one could invariably notice the effort, though subtle, to add a touch of glamour to the characters and their parts. Even Shyam Benegal had indulged in this with two of his heroines — Shabana Azmi and Smita Patil. Sakhthivel scores here, and endears, presenting a disarmingly simple work which tugs at your heart.

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