



## Epidemics in Indian Cinema: Before and during Covid-19

Amrapali Sharma

Associate Editor, Primus Books

### ABSTRACT

The paper identifies trends in Indian filmmaking on the Covid-19 outbreak between 2020-22 by examining selected short films and short film anthologies, documentaries/docudramas and feature films. The Introduction looks at appraisals of popular films on epidemics, which appeared in popular and academic media (print and electronic) between those two years. In passing, it notes that Indian films on epidemic outbreaks—though not too many—found almost no space in these publications. They also tended to overlook films produced internationally, leaving aside one or two exceptions from south Korea. The remaining study of the three genres identified above show that: (a) there is a vast difference in approach and tone between the first and the second waves of Covid-19 in India; (b) that some representations highlight official/ruling party views and are generally optimistic and laudatory, while others point to policy failures; (c) that while some short films focus on middle/upper middle class experience of the lockdowns, others foreground the enforced reverse migration of labour and destitution; (d) that Indian feature films, especially from Bollywood, have not yet ventured with any seriousness into this far-reaching public health disaster.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Indian cinema, epidemic, documentary, lockdown.

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### METHODOLOGY

The sources used here are available in the public domain. Beginning with recent appraisals of popular cinema on epidemics to see what they consider salient, we find a loose “canon” of epidemic films, including Indian, that pre-dates Covid-19. In the light of this, the remaining analysis of three genres of films produced over 2021-22 shows some remarkable variation.

### INTRODUCTION

From February 2020 onwards, some trends appeared in popular and academic media appraisals of primarily English-language films on epidemic disease outbreaks. Several “listicles” appeared in major online periodicals suggesting films worth viewing during lockdown, either to stave off boredom or to better understand the contemporary outbreak [1,2,3,4,5,6]. These “Listicles” vary widely. If *Vulture* [1] came up with seventy-nine films in the epidemic genre, *Parade* listed twenty and *Esquire* listed ten. Generally, the lists start from the 1970s and include mainly English-language films from the 1970s, primarily Hollywood productions, though the Indian edition of *Vogue* includes the Malayalam film, *Virus* [1].

There were also numerous articles and editorials that looked at the state of the industry following Covid-19—dwindling viewership, delayed releases and shrinking box-office returns—that effected commercial production hubs like Hollywood and Bollywood [7,8,9]. These were accompanied by academic studies. Some were interview-based qualitative studies of viewer response to pandemic/epidemic films “to understand the possible psychological function cinema can have during intense and generalized crisis”, and how such film might help to “manage the anxiety and the anguish caused by the epidemic and the consequent restrictive measures” [10]. Others used the same methodology to study how “viewers process the abstract uncertainty of the time through concrete sound and imagery”, and how they use “critical distance to separate the real-life horrors of the moment and the mediated ‘horrors’ of the films” [11]. Still others, based on samplings from over several decades, have made sophisticated distinctions between, for instance, films that show science and institutions prevailing, or failing, in the face of epidemics/pandemics [12].

### I: Short films

Indian films based around Covid-19 and produced during 2021-22 either reference the outbreak and the lockdown/quarantine conditions as merely backdrop, or substantively interweave the plot with the context. For obvious reasons, homemade short and anthology films, often filmed using mobile phones and minimal cast and crew, stepped up to the occasion, producing fine studies of individuals and relationships reframed by the pandemic experience. *PuthamPudhuKaalai* (“A brand-new dawn”) is a Tamil anthology film with five segments, shot over the 21-day

lockdown in 2020 and released on Amazon Prime[13]. It was followed by a five-episode sequel, *PuthamPudhuKaalaiVidiyaadhaa* (“Will the new dawn rise?”) shot during the second wave of Covid in 2021 and also released on the same platform[14]. Both are about the lives of married couples, police officers, lovers, work-from-home professionals, families and filmmakers, poignantly depicting the persistence of love, hope and humanity amidst disease, death and loneliness. *Karthik Dial SeythaYenn*, a 12-minute Tamil-language film [15], with music by AR Rehman, released in May 2020 on *You Tube*. It was shot indoors with an iPhone because of lockdown restrictions and revolves around a phone conversation between two ex-lovers trapped in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. A filmmaker facing a creative block and the closure of theatres calls his now-married former girlfriend during the lockdown seeking reassurance. Widely-reviewed for its elegant minimalism and realism, the film moreover touches upon a widely-felt crisis in film industries worldwide.

The Bengali-language anthology film, *Lockdown* [16], has three stories based around the first night of the lockdown on 24 March 2020. The first is about a single girl and the man who comes to sanitize her flat. The second about an unhappily married couple. The third about a blogger who interviews a sex worker. The sudden announcement of the lockdown and the prospect of uncertainty brings to the fore personal crises. Likewise, *Unpaused* [17] on Amazon Prime is an anthology with five segments. Another Bengali short film of 30 minutes, *Lockdown Love* [18] is about a man and his wife at home during lockdown (announced by PM Modi on tv news) when a common female friend who was the husband’s ex-lover comes to stay. An intense 13-minute Hindi film, again titled *Lockdown* [19], is about a screenwriter who wakes up in his flat to find his wife has left him the day the lockdown is announced. TV news with dire reports about events outside and text messages that confirm the breakup from the backdrop to a minimalist take on confinement and loneliness. Shefali Shah [20] essayed into direction with the autobiographical *Someday*, a 10-minute short film about a mother-daughter duo in quarantine. Shot indoors with a crew of 5, it was screened at the 51<sup>st</sup> USA Film Festival (April 2021) and the 18<sup>th</sup> Indian Film Festival in Stuttgart (June 2021).

Other short films are about poverty, lockdown-induced destitution and the plight of migrant labour. *Lockdown Train* [21], a 15-minute Hindi film by Mandeep Mani is a simple yet powerful slice-of-life of a migrant labourer desperate to reach his village home. Faced with empty bus stands and railway stations the man decides to walk home along railway tracks, as did millions in India during that summer. Assaulted by police, feeding on leaves and wild berries, stealing morsels from stray dogs and sleeping in the open, the lonely migrant labourer ends as a hit-and-run victim on a highway. *Lockdown kegodmein* [22], a 34-minute Bhojpuri film (27 August 2021) with a cast from Jharkhand, is about an impoverished agricultural labourer’s suffering at the hands of the landlord and the police. *Parvaasi: The Story of Migrant Labour* [23] is about a man, his pregnant wife and a child who abruptly leave Ludhiana with the lockdown announcement and begin walking to Sitapur in UP. It is a familiar story of hunger, fatigue and police harassment that ends when the wife dies on the highway during childbirth.

## II: Documentaries and docudramas

There is a clear difference of approach and tone between documentaries produced during the first wave and its aftermath in 2020, and those produced during the second wave of 2021. One of the earliest was *Lockdown: India Fights Coronavirus*[24], directed by a former show/promo director for MTV, Sajeed A. Using archival footage, self-shot sequences and infographics, and a cast that included slum dwellers, health and sanitation workers, police and government officers, it certainly provided real-time accounts of an unfolding situation over four weeks. By contrast, *Covid 19: India’s War against the Virus*[25], narrated in dramatically hushed tones by actor Manoj Vajpayee, relied heavily on official data and over-emphasized Modi’s speeches on tv. The language of “war”, “warrior”, “victory”, “heroes”, “frontline soldiers”, etc., India’s vaccine production capacity and a high recovery rate, presented an optimistic view of the situation. With some precautions like hand washing and mask usage, India would be rid of Covid forever. At least, that’s the impression the documentary created, though frankly critical documentaries had already appeared. *India: Under Lockdown*[26] and *1232 KM*[26] are among those, focussing entirely on construction workers, rickshaw pullers, casual labourers and daily wagers in Delhi, rendered destitute overnight by the abrupt March 2020 lockdown. Similarly, *Lockdown 2020*[27], a docudrama produced by the Surat Fellowship Pentecostal Church contrasts the effect of the lockdown announcement on a well-to-do middle-class family and the family of their house maid, with a Christian message of reconciliation with the calamity of the outbreak.

*Lords of Lockdown*[28], with Anurag Kashyap as producer, tracks four individuals in Mumbai between March-August 2020. Ruben Mascarenhas who started an NGO to feed the hungry migrant workers; a journalist and her team doing the same; a gynaecologist who offers free treatment to pregnant women; and a railway police officer whose efforts led to the railways restarting in the city [29]. Hunger, basic healthcare and transport, the most urgent crisis that any lockdown imposes are intertwined in this documentary. The second wave of April-June 2021 was documented by two hard-hitting English-language documentaries: *Inside India’s Catastrophic Second Wave*[30] and *How India united against its deadly Covid-19 Wave* (Channel News Asia: 25 July 2021). Among other things, they record the work of NGOs such as Hemkunt Foundation, Mission Oxygen, United Sikhs (an UN affiliate) and the Uncut Team that stepped in

to manage a national oxygen emergency, importing ventilators and medicines in chartered flights, and arranging funerals for the dead. They rely on interviews with volunteers, doctors and virologists explaining virus mutation, transmission and immunity. Both highlight the failures of the state as the oxygen shortage was followed by vaccine shortage and as the mounting crisis was sought to be manipulated by under-reporting infection and mortality figures and by grand gestures of vaccine diplomacy.

### III: Feature films, before and after Covid-19

India had more than a fair share of epidemic outbreaks from the nineteenth century and after. India was also a centre of epidemiological research in the late-nineteenth century when the cholera and plague bacilli were identified in Calcutta and Bombay. The earliest film based on an epidemic is possibly *The Catechist of Kil-Arni*[31], a 41-minute silent-era film on a cholera outbreak, with a proselytizing Catholic message of sin, punishment and redemption. Cholera appears again in *Neecha Nagar*[32], written by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas. The plot weaves together issues of class conflict, social justice, urban development and sanitary concerns, which come to a head in a cholera outbreak caused by contaminated water. *Shikast*[33] has Dilip Kumar the doctor-hero who returns to his ancestral village, the plague and superstition-ridden Kundan Garh. Plague and superstition reappear in *Samskara*[34], based on UR Anantha Murthy's eponymous novel of 1965. But unlike in the earlier films, plague is more a metaphor for an ossified community. A Marathi historical film, *22 June 1897*[35], with dialogue by Vijay Tendulkar, is based on the Chapplekar brothers, who assassinated the British plague commissioner in Pune on that date. The film's strength lies in the close focus on a particular conflict in 1896-98 between quarantine laws under colonial medical policy and Hindu-Muslim sensibilities [36].

Recent films on epidemics before Covid-19 have followed other directions. The Tamil-language *Dasavatharam*[37], with Kamal Haasan playing ten roles, is an ambitious cocktail of epidemiology, espionage and geopolitics over the Ebola virus. *7aum Arivu*, a Tamil production[38], also combines science, espionage and Chinese bioweapons directed at India, with a heavy dose of medieval Buddhist history. The Hindi action thriller *Aazaan*[39] has all the above elements, only the enemy state there is Pakistan. Also in Hindi, *Rise of the Zombie*[40] has zoonotic transmission as cause. A wildlife photographer camping in the Uttarakhand hills gets bitten by an insect, though the rest is body horror. The epidemic-zombie phenomenon continues in the Tamil *Mirutan*[41] which is about a fictional epidemic in Tamil Nadu. An accidentally leaked lab virus infects a dog that bites a human leading to the spread until even the traffic policeman-hero turns into a zombie. The most promising recent film on epidemic outbreaks is the Malayalam medical thriller, *Virus*[42]. It is about the zoonotic transmission of the Nipah virus, which actually occurred in Kerala in 2018 and killed seventeen patients. The film revolves around patients, nurses, doctors in a government medical college in Kozhikode. A slice-of-life representation of a medical emergency, the film shows a smooth working relationship between patients, healthcare professionals and government functionaries[43].

Of the very few feature films on the subject that appeared during 2021-22, there is *Sreekaram*, a Telegu family drama [44] on the vicissitudes of an agricultural community that fails to market its produce when the lockdown shuts down transport. Other films are comedies like Telegu-language *VivahaBhojanambu*[45], about a miser who gets married during lockdown and *Zombie Reddy*[46], publicized as the first zombie film in the language. Meanwhile, *The VirusLockdown*[47], is an unconvincing thriller about a doctor who kidnaps and abuses a girl he desires during lockdown, apparently to save her from contagion. From all available evidence, it is likely that viewers will have to wait longer before Indian cinema returns to the subject of epidemic outbreaks with the seriousness that early Indian cinema had showed, or the Malayalam *Virus* recently. Meanwhile, with the re-opening of theatres, big-budget mythological and fantasy action cinema seem to have taken the forefront.

### CONCLUSION

Representations of epidemic diseases in Indian cinema go back to the silent era. Between 1946-1979, three full-length feature films (two in Hindi, one in Kannada) engaged with cholera and plague outbreaks with great sensitivity and sociological relevance. From 2000 until 2022, three trends are evident in Indian films: (a) linking disease outbreak with geopolitics and espionage, (b) "zombification" and body horror, (c) comedy. From available evidence, viewers may have to wait longer before Indian cinema returns to epidemic outbreaks with the seriousness that early Indian cinema had showed and the Malayalam *Virus* recently. Meanwhile, with the re-opening of theatres, big-budget mythological and fantasy action cinema seem to have taken the forefront.

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