

A rare optimistic medical thriller

YADUKRISHNAN P T

Film: *Virus*, Producer: Rima Kallingal, Aashiq Abu, Director: Aashiq Abu; Malayalam, 152 minutes, 2019.

Aashiq Abu's *Virus* is a film that chronicles the 2018 Nipah Virus outbreak in Kerala. It is a tribute to the ordinary people who came together to contain the contagion. Nipah virus (NiV) is transmitted from animals to humans, specifically from its natural wildlife host fruit bats. Previously, large outbreaks have been reported in Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh and in West Bengal in India. NiV has a very high mortality rate and does not have a vaccine. In the 2018 outbreak in Kerala, out of the 19 persons infected by it, 17 died.

The plot of the film follows the medical community and the state authorities in their quest to find the epidemiological link connecting the index patient with the rest of the confirmed cases, so as to contain the disease. Here the film introduces Annu (Parvathy Thiruvothu) a second year Community Medicine Student. Annu is called into the Nipah cell to collect information for preparing an FAQ, but her interactions with the family members and the neighbours of the affected people provide crucial insights into finding the epidemiological link. The second half of the film takes on the quality of an investigative thriller where Annu with the help of Dr Suresh Rajan (Kunchakko Boban) and other members of the Nipah cell trace the spread of NiV from its index patient.

One of the areas where *Virus* the film succeeds is in establishing the cultural specificity of the region where the outbreak occurs. The index patient came from Perambra, a town in the north Kerala district of Calicut (Kozhikode). Kozhikode Medical College, where most of the patients got admitted, is a very important hub in Calicut, and is always crowded with relatives and friends of the patients admitted, to the extent that the act of visiting friends and family in that space is sometimes a socialising activity. Many of the patients affected by NiV were bystanders or companions to patients visiting the hospital. The disruption caused by the outbreak to the city's social dynamics is something that the film eloquently captures.

In the second half of the film, the "thriller-quality" of the plot is amplified when the representatives of the Central Ministry of Health and Family Welfare accuse the state authorities and the doctors in the Nipah cell of being reckless in not considering the possibility of this outbreak being a weaponised Nipah attack by terrorists. They base this on the fact that the epidemiological linkage between a particular new patient and the index patient had not yet been established, and that the index patient is a very religious Muslim who had a stint in the middle east. This does not qualify as being alarming for the state authorities because Kozhikode district has a 40% Muslim population and has a very high migration rate to gulf countries. The xenophobic nature of this particular suspicion of terrorism by the representatives of the Centre is palpable for the state representatives, but the Secretary of the Central Ministry of Health and Family Welfare states that unless they can prove otherwise the mission of containment will be taken over by the Office of the Defense Ministry in a week. How this stressful situation then plays out makes for engaging fare.

A significant factor which makes the narrative of *Virus* compelling is the way writers Mushin Parari, Shamsu and Suhas have approached the event from the perspectives of multiple working class men and women. We see the effects of the outbreak play out, not just through the eyes of doctors, medical students, ministers, and other bureaucrats; but also through the eyes of underpaid mortuary workers, nurses, ambulance drivers and most importantly, the victims and their families—to all of whom the story is admirably compassionate.

Virus is a tale of compassion and perseverance, of a crisis which brought together different branches of the state healthcare machinery, of those who came forward to help contain the outbreak, and of the people who were affected the most by it. It points out how diseases have an intrinsic social and cultural component, not just a medical or biological one. India does not have a good record of outbreak investigations—here, thousands of people die every year of different outbreaks before the cause is even diagnosed. Therefore, the discovery of a rare deadly virus by the second case itself is an outstanding feat; not to mention the containment of the outbreak within weeks. Cinema is often cynical of medical institutions, many times rightfully so, shining a light on sub-par facilities, infrastructure, rampant corruption and the plight of the average citizen amidst all of this. *Virus* is therefore a refreshing addition to the rare and optimistic medical narrative in Indian cinema.

Author: **Yadukrishnan PT** (yadu19@gmail.com), Manipal Centre for Humanities (MCH), Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, 576 104, INDIA.

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