

Popular Culture and AIDS: The Role of Entertainment Industry in Impeding or Accelerating the Spread of AIDS

Shradha Kabra

Rajdhani College, University of Delhi, Bali Nagar, New Delhi – 110015, India

Abstract

The entertainment industry is imbued with the power of moulding young minds who harbour fixations for its enchanting show. Its impact is vast and engenders ideologies. As the mass media of popular culture has such an overwhelming effect on all spheres of life therefore it is not difficult to infer that the fatal disease of AIDS does not breed in isolation. It has different implications for AIDS which is not just a physical but also a social disease. The icons of popular cultural with their huge fan following also play an important role in this regard. Their lifestyles are closely monitored by the entertainment industry which may lead to formation of subcultures. My research paper will delve into this notion that how they, together, accelerate or impede the spread of AIDS.

KEYWORDS: AIDS, Media, Popular Culture, entertainment industry, subcultures

Introduction

With the globalization of consumer markets, popular culture has become an important engine of the Western consumption machinery. Today popular exists as a culture, as an industry and a way of thinking. Together with the film, music, television and myriad other forms of mass media it constitutes the entertainment industry, and as part of this entertainment industry it has become a major component of a permanent process of experimentation, adoption and adaptation. In different historical periods popular culture was always connected with alternative ways of experiencing the world. Popular can be a subcultural movement but also part of a mass culture, artistic avant-garde or insignificant leisure-time activity. Popular culture has penetrated all structures of society and greatly influenced people from all walks of life. This is particularly true for one of the most dangerous global epidemics of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Human ordeals mostly thrive on ignorance or misinformation and therefore popular culture has had varied implications for AIDS since it was first discovered in the 1980s till date. In the 1980s the disease was known as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) as it was believed that it was a disease that happened to “other” people, people who somehow deserved to be punished for their lifestyle and therefore the straight community preferred living in denial. Homosexuality as represented in popular media parallels political, legal and social attitudes. Thus, for much of the twentieth century homosexuality was “in the closet” and did not appear in the mainstream. Much later when the disease spread in the Hollywood and many of the heterosexual celebrities died of AIDS did the purveyors of popular culture come to terms with the situation and began sending powerful messages through media. In this paper I will show the ramifications of AIDS which is not limited to Europe, America or Africa but, in fact, has infested the whole world including India, which is still struggling to purge itself of this pandemic, and the role entertainment industry play in accelerating or impeding the spread of AIDS. On the one hand, this crisis has spurred the writers and producers to debunk the earlier insensitive stereotypes and

make films on the issue portraying homosexual or straight AIDS patients with balance and understanding. But on the other hand musicians sing about guzzling liquor and movie stars puff cigarettes and take drugs on the big screen and promote the use of drugs through this electronic “subculture” thereby inducing people to ape them.

(i)

Millions of people worldwide are infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) which subsequently leads to AIDS. While the government of India remained committed to many years to insisting that there was no serious threat of AIDS in India, the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) National Intelligence Council in the USA saw India as the largest conquest of AIDS in the world. In 2002, the CIA convinced itself that there was going to be twenty to twenty-five million AIDS cases in India by 2010. Amartya Sen threw light on the crisis of AIDS in the foreword of *Journeys in the Night: Untold Stories from India’s Best-Known Writers* which is an anthology of stories written by award-winning authors for the Bill Gates foundation AVAHAN about the epidemic in India and how the country is grappling with it. Sen writes that AIDS is primarily a crisis of human lives which in turn effects the economic growth of the country by putting in peril the lives of millions of Indians. He elucidates, “people suffer and are disabled, lose their freedom to do things, become dependent on others, and a large number of the victims die prematurely. It is not principally an economic crisis though there are important economic components in the human disaster, which add to the adversities involved” (p. 7). Such crisis arises from half-knowledge and half-understanding which plays havoc with people’s reasoning. As Martin Luther King, Junior expressed in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, “shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute understanding of people of ill will.” And even after considerable endeavours, rampant shallowness still pervades the popular media, which requires scrutiny and significant emendation.

Mass media campaign plays an important role in generating publicity and wider public awareness. The youth today are motivated and influenced by the mass media icons of our society. The youth (sub)culture consists of shared choices of styles, tastes, fashions, behaviours and rituals, and so forth. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl explain in *The Post-Subcultures Reader* “that cultures, specifically youth cultures, could be understood as particular articulation of contacts and influences drawn from a variety of places scattered, according to power relations, fashion and habit, across many different parts of the globe” (p.37). These scattered places from where the habits are inculcated are usually the zones of electronic subculture which comprises of films, music and the Internet.

(ii)

The disease acquired a face in the 1980s and compelled artists to campaign against it when Rock Hudson, a Hollywood actor, died. Due to the mass appeal Hollywood celebrities become cultural icons and are widely imitated by people all over the world. Their actions, lifestyles, preferences become hugely popular and are religiously followed even by the people belonging to the lowest rung of the society. AIDS spread, most commonly, through unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected person. In India, a huge population of sex workers have AIDS due to unprotected sex. They have suffered

generations of struggle and turn to sex work for their basic sustenance. Often ostracized or sold by their families and living amidst illegality, fragmentation and betrayal, they seek lives beyond ordinariness and catch glimpses of it in the entertainment industry. Bollywood, India's answer to Hollywood, captivates many by its fantastical world of glitz and glamour. So writes Kiran Desai in one of the stories "Night Claims the Godavari" of the anthology *Journeys in the Night* that how sex workers in a small village of Andhra Pradesh try to relate themselves to the film stars by naming themselves after the actors and mimicking their gestures. She writes that if some of the sex workers have glamour and "colour" then they "name themselves Kareena Kapoor and Sonali Bendre after film stars, without it seeming absurd" (p.42). She further writes that soliciting was termed as "shot" by them. "Shot was always said in English, with movie swagger" (p. 42). The movies have a huge impact on the masses and hold the key to streamline them into adopting the depicted fashions, styles and beliefs therefore many of the film makers started making films focusing on the issue of AIDS to mitigate the stigma attached to it. Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi in another story, "Hello, Darling", of the anthology writes about a suave gay film maker, Murad, interested in making documentaries about homosexual relationships who himself gets infected by the fatal virus. Documentaries became a defiant medium for him to express his sexual preferences and seek social acceptance. Pat Browne in *The Guide to United States Popular Culture* writes "filmmakers often wrote between the lines to include homosexuality, and it became something of a parlor game for gays and lesbians to find such gems as unmistakably gay scenes in Laurel and Hardy skits, *Calamity Jane*..." (p.403). Although Murad fought with the world to secure the right to voice his sexual identity he could not escape from the disgrace and humiliation the disease brought him. The entertainment industry works according to its own fixed codes and commercial motives and nothing, not even human emotions and lives, stands a chance in countering its ethos.

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The HIV infection rate does not only rise drastically through unprotected sex but also through injectable drugs. The tendency of addicts to share needles has led to the highest HIV concentration in India. Siddhartha Deb studies the gruesome condition of drug addicts suffering from AIDS in Manipur in his story "The Lost Generation of Manipur" in the anthology. The easy availability of drugs, the lack of opportunities for the young, and the constant atmosphere of violence and uncertainty are responsible for creating a significant population of drug addicts in Manipur. Although Manipur's infection rate among addicts has come down in the last decade, almost one fifth are still HIV positive¹. This amounts to an epidemic, but ironically the conditions in Manipur make no impression in India or the West. Whether it is violence, addiction, poverty, or AIDS, these miseries seem to take place offstage, in an invisible corner of India that seems to have received nothing from modernity except drugs, guns and draconian laws. The youth have resorted to the usage of drugs due to the unavailability and complete absence of any form of entertainment. They have no cinema halls, no book shops and no restaurants. They in fact seek entertainment from church which has turned into a small entertainment industry sending out glorifying messages of abstinence and purity. Deb delineates:

¹ Technical Report on HIV Estimates in India, National AIDS Control Organisation, 2006.

The language of abstinence might have influence on American youth who have had the opportunity to become jaded by consumerism, but it is likely to have limited appeal here. They feel their isolation keenly, especially because they are too far removed from the rural background of their forefathers to be content with the simple life. And because they feel themselves stranded in the backwaters, the modern world glimpsed through television, music, and even foreign missionaries, seems particularly attractive. (p.208)

The youth in Manipur turned into drug addicts because of the lack of any media of entertainment. Abstained from the privileges of modern entertainment they took recourse to drugs. But what happens when these forms of popular media encourage drug usage? Glen R. Hanson, Peter J. Venturelli and Annette E. Fleckenstein reiterate the conviction of a sixteen year old boy, daily marijuana user, in *Drugs and Society* when he says “all I know is that almost every song you listen to says something about [drug use]. It puts it into your mind constantly... When you see the celebrities doing it, it makes it seem okay” (p.515). Almost all the musicians and film celebrities have been accused of taking drugs and some have even died due to overdoses of drugs. They further write:

Approximately five years ago [i.e. 1990], rock and rap industries experienced a heroin epidemic. Although many other rockstars before Kurt Cobain used and abused drugs, Cobain’s struggle with heroin and his 1994 suicide appear to have glamorized the use of this drug. The number of top alternative bands that have been linked to heroin through a member’s overdose, arrest, admitted use, or recovery is staggering: Nirvana, Hole, Smashing Pumpkins, Everclear, Blind Melon, Skinny Puppy, 7 Year Bitch, Red Hot Chilly Peppers... (p.516)

People are influenced in their behaviour not only by well-reasoned advocacy but also by what may look like “thrilling behaviour”. Amartya Sen mentions this in his foreword of the anthology when he writes that such behaviour applies to “drug taking, which has played a very important part in the spread of HIV infection in parts of the country” (*Journeys in the Night*, p.13). Such a seeker of “thrilling behaviour” forms a subculture with like-minded people and willingly endangers his life. Shanghvi writes about such an eccentric behaviour:

A widely criticized article, published in *Rolling Stone* in 2003, exposed a small subculture of men who actively sought HIV. At ‘bug parties’ in America, positive men called ‘gift givers’ would bareback – have unprotected anal sex – with ‘bug chasers’, men who desired to be HIV positive only so they could finally overcome the constant threat, and terrible doom, of possible infection. (*Journeys in the Night*, p.70)

The use of drugs is commonly associated with parties. Marijuana and alcohol are known as so-called “gateway drugs”, meaning that their use is believed by some experts to lead to the use of more dangerous drugs, such as cocaine and heroin. The rave subculture grew out of the acid house movement and branded as drug-centric culture which was related to activities like all-night partying. Marshall Cavendish writes in *Sex and Society* about methamphetamine (commonly known as “meth”), a dangerous party drug:

While under the influence of meth, users experience euphoria, increased sexual libido, and may engage in unsafe sexual behaviours. For example, meth users do not usually achieve orgasm but may engage in vaginal or anal intercourse for long periods of time because of their increased sexual energy. This is dangerous

because having prolonged intercourse increases the chances of tissue tearing in the vagina or anus, which in turn increases the chances of exchanging body fluids and contracting HIV/AIDS.... (p.606)

The splendour of rockers and other musicians became emblematic of a guerilla warfare, who took objects from the dominant culture and transformed their everyday naturalized meaning into something spectacular and alien. Style became a form of resistance. It is pertinent to note Dick Hebdige's view of subculture:

Subcultures represent noise (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media. We should not therefore underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation. (*Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 1987)

The subversive allure of subcultures often loses its sheen when they are adopted by mass culture for commercial purposes. This process of cultural appropriation leads to the death or evolution of the subculture.

The entertainment industry is imbued with the power of moulding young minds who harbour fixations for its spellbinding show. Its impact is vast and engenders ideologies. The glitz and glamour of the entertainment industry entrances the masses and influences their views and actions. As the mass media of popular culture has such an overwhelming effect on all spheres of life therefore it is not difficult to infer that the fatal disease of AIDS does not breed in isolation. It has different implications for AIDS which is not just a physical but also a social disease. The icons of popular cultural with their huge fan following also play an important role in this regard. Their lifestyles are closely monitored by the entertainment industry which may lead to formation of subcultures. Together, they accelerate or impede the spread of AIDS.

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