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Virus, Producers: Rima Kallingal, Aashiq Abu, Director Aashiq Abu; Malayalam, 152 minutes, 2019.

Aashiq Abu’s Virus is a medical thriller which chronicles the 2018 Nipah Virus outbreak in Kerala. It is a tribute to the ordinary people who came together to contain the contagion. The plot of the film revolves around the epidemiological investigation undertaken by the medical community in Kerala with the support of the state administration in successfully tracing the link between different patients of the Nipah virus outbreak so as to contain the disease. Named after the village in Malaysia, Sungai Nipah where it was first identified in 1999, Nipah virus (NiV) is transmitted from animals to humans, specifically from its natural wildlife host fruit bats (Pteropus a.k.a flying fox). In the past, cases have been reported in Malaysia and Singapore where the virus was transmitted from bats to pigs and then from the sick pigs to humans. In the outbreaks that have been reported in Bangladesh and India however, the virus was reported to have been directly spread from fruit bats to humans. NiV has a very high mortality rate and does not have a vaccination. In the 2018 outbreak in Kerala, out of the 19 infected by it 17 died.

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). The outbreak chiefly affected Calicut district and a big part of the film takes place around Kozhikode Medical College where subsequent patients were admitted and isolated. This medical college is a very important hub in the city, 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 for the people in the city. Many of the patients affected by NiV were bystanders or companions to patients visiting the hospital. Previously in Malaysia and Bangladesh, the NiV outbreak was reported in rural areas, compared to which the situation in the crowded city of Calicut was substantially different. The disruption caused by the outbreak to the city’s social dynamics is something that the film elegantly captures.

There is a sequence in the film (which actually and historically happened), where the family of the index patient, coming from a Muslim family, requests a proper religious burial for all the four members in the family who succumbed to NiV. Bodies of the deceased patients were being cremated until then following the Ebola protocol so as to assure safety, but the ministers and the medical professionals have a discussion in the film on this issue--this being a matter of the religious sentiments of a family which had already suffered a lot. Dr Suresh Rajan (played by Kunjakko Boban) explains that NiV is spread through droplet transmission and that there have been cases in Malaysia and Bangladesh where bodies were buried safely in the traditional way after which the World Health Organisation issued guidelines for a scientifically authenticated deep burial. Hearing this the ministers and the district collector decide to allow the family to bury the deceased using the deep burial method. The scene where the burial takes place is a powerful one, where family members and friends of family are shown reciting prayers wearing masks while the medical professionals in full protective gear are shown in front of them lowering the bodies into the pits.

Another 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 IAS officers but also through the eyes of underpaid mortuary workers, nurses, ambulance drivers and most importantly the victims and their families—to all these, the story is admirably compassionate. The personal struggles of each of these characters even amidst the peak of the contagion is never swept aside.

The main plot of the film follows the medical community and the state authorities in their quest to find and establish the epidemiological link connecting the index patient with the rest of the confirmed cases. This is where the film introduces the character Dr Annu (Parvathy Thiruvothu) who is a PG student in community medicine. Annu is called into the Nipah cell to collect information for preparing an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) but her interactions with the family members and the neighbors of the affected people provide crucial insights into finding the link between different patients. The second half of the film takes on the quality of an investigative thriller where Annu does extensive work in the community investigating the family and social background of different patients. It is important to reiterate that such diseases have an intrinsic social and cultural component, not just a medical or biological one.

The ‘thriller-quality’ of the plot is amplified when in the second half of the film, 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 weaponized 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 has a 40% Muslim population and has a very high migration rate to the 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 Defense Ministry in a week. Thus, Dr Annu and Dr Suresh Rajan, however, succeed in not just finding the epidemiological link between every single patient, but also in tracing the source of exposure of the index patient to fruit bats and not to malign human agency.

There are some moving performances in the film; Rima Kallingal as Nurse Akhila (based on Nurse Lini Puthussery who died after being exposed to NiV while treating the index patient), and Soubin Shahir who gives a riveting performance as Unnikrishnan, one of the final patients diagnosed of NiV.

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 forth to help contain the outbreak, and of the people who were affected the most by it. 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. And this is not to mention the extensive quarantine measures and the monitoring of more than a thousand people who came in contact with the infected, leading to 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.