

When the joke is on the vulnerable, it is not funny



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A RECENT advertisement by a cement company features actor Ranbir Kapoor locked in a bare room, speaking incoherently and behaving irrationally. It ends with Kapoor, now dressed as a doctor, reassuring the audience that the person inside cannot escape because the room is built with strong cement. The commercial may have been intended as harmless humour. But it reflects a disturbing insensitivity towards mental illness. It turns mental illness into a spectacle for entertainment. Behaviour associated with psychological distress is caricatured and presented as comedy. This reinforces the deeply damaging stereotype that people with mental-health conditions are objects of ridicule rather than individuals deserving empathy, treatment and dignity.

Even more troubling is the underlying message that such individuals should be confined. The imagery is impossible to separate from a darker history of mental-health treatment, when people with psychiatric conditions were deprived of basic human dignity. The emphasis today is on treatment, inclusion, community support, rehabilitation — not segregation.

India's enormous burden of depression, anxiety and suicide is made worse by the social and psychological stresses that have intensified in recent years. Yet, access to mental-health services remains inadequate, with severe shortages of psychiatrists, psychologists and community-support systems. Social stigma remains a big barrier preventing people from seeking help. Families hide mental illness and young people hesitate to speak openly about depression or anxiety. An advertisement that uses mental illness as comic relief, therefore, only deepens prejudice.

Companies today speak frequently about inclusion, diversity, ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) commitments and social responsibility. Many invest in campaigns related to gender equality, disability rights and social inclusion. Mental health deserves the same sensitivity. A corporation cannot claim commitment to social responsibility while its advertisements mock vulnerable individuals. Celebrities, too, cannot escape responsibility. Public figures wield enormous influence, particularly among younger audiences. When they endorse content that demeans mental illness, it normalises prejudice and undermines years of work by professionals and civil-society organisations.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that several public figures have played a constructive role in changing attitudes. Celebrities such as Deepika Padukone have spoken openly about their struggles with depression. Others from cinema, sports and media have encouraged people to seek support without shame or fear. These efforts have contributed significantly to reducing stigma, especially among younger Indians. Precisely because celebrities possess such influence, they must recognise that the messages they endorse carry wider social consequences.

Humour has a place in advertising. But humour that humiliates is neither clever nor harmless. Creative freedom cannot become an excuse for demeaning vulnerable groups. This episode should prompt serious introspection within India's advertising industry about ethical boundaries and social responsibility.

A compassionate society is judged not by how it treats the powerful but by how it treats the vulnerable. Mental illness is a human condition deserving understanding, care and dignity.

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