

Exploring Issues of Caregiving of an Elderly Parent by an Adult Working Daughter through a Discussion of a Contemporary Hindi Film *Piku* (2015)

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Abstract

Probing into the challenges and pleasures of caregiving of elderly parents by adult children in the Indian context, this paper analyzes the contemporary Hindi commercial film *Piku* with a focus on the discussion of the difficult and compassionate father-daughter relationship of the main characters within a wider context that includes different stakeholders. This paper also examines the variations that the film offers in terms of characterization and plot compared to its predecessors and contemporaries. For these differences, analysis shows that 1) the film explores the interactions and relationships among characters: focusing on life as a journey rather than a destination; 2) the female character navigates through everyday domestic problems and limiting circumstances by balancing her multiple roles and adapting to unfolding moments, instead of grappling with constant patriarchal opposition or facing drastic obstacles; and 3) the film locates the protagonists within the wider familial relations and social structures, therefore reviving the forgotten pre-1990s cinematic characters such as the extended family and paid helpers. This paper also argues that *Piku* presents its characters in a uniquely complex manner where they are situated in the liminal space between vulnerability and strength, local and global, and traditional and modern sensibilities.

Keywords: contemporary Hindi cinema, caregiving, aging, illness, death, adult working daughter, hypochondria in the elderly

Caregiving is a universal activity among all types of mammals; however, what sets human beings apart is their capacity to provide care not only for their family members, but also for other living beings, including animals, for the longest time (Stone, 1986). *Homo sapiens* also have the unique ability to reverse caring roles across generations and social groups. From a wide range of pathways involved in caregiving, this paper specifically focuses on elderly caregiving by adult children.

Advancements in healthcare and improvements in standard of living have resulted in raised life expectancy and unprecedented growth in elderly population around the world. Most elderly require varying degrees of caregiving as their ability to be self-sufficient is compromised through chronic illness, senility, or disability. This care is provided primarily by immediate family (informal caregiver) and by professionals (institutionalized caregiver) (Stone, 1986). Aging process has wide-reaching implications, but this paper will only focus on the Indian context where unparalleled changes are impacting eldercare in significant ways.

Until recently, joint family system prevailed: elderly parents were mostly looked after by their adult married son and his family, while most married daughters or sisters acted as secondary caregivers. Hands-on caregiving has been mostly shouldered by women family members (wife and daughter-in-law) or paid helpers (Stone, 1986), while male family members have contributed to the cost of healthcare and so on (In the arranged

marriage system, the wife is usually younger than her husband and has to care for him until his death). However, this pattern is changing as family structure is being reshaped. In the last two decades, many families are becoming smaller and nuclear. In mobile societies, more people are migrating from their native places to greener pastures, meaning eldercare is being shouldered by fewer people. With access to education, resources, freedom to choose their partner, and greater influence in the decision-making in their families, many women are becoming primary caregivers. Increasingly, many elderly parents live by themselves, and take turns in caregiving for each other (Stone, 1986). When widowed, they sometimes fend for themselves in absence of strong support. Few of them move to old age homes or nursing homes due to limited quality and availability of formal services, financial burden, and social customs.

Much of social science research is leading the field into different aspects of eldercare and revealing, interesting insights that inform various disciplines and professions. Several studies have described the composition of caregivers, escalating costs of healthcare for aged, and caregiver burden (Stone, 1986). This paper has adopted an interdisciplinary approach in the sense that it combines a discussion on the emerging patterns of caregiving in post-1990s Indian society using primary and secondary research methods in social science with analysis of contemporary cinematic representation of different aspects of caregiving for elderly through textual/film analysis.

In relation to elderly caregiving, much basic and applied research has been conducted in the Anglo-Saxon world compared to India. Eldercare is a marginal subject in mainstream Hindi and English language cinema with some recent exceptions, such as the English language films *Still Alice* (Westmoreland and Glatzer, 2016), *Happy Tears* (Lichtenstein, 2009), and *The Savages* (Jenkins, 2007) and the Hindi language films *Piku*—from motion to emotion (Sircar, 2015), and *Baghban* (Gardener, Chopra, 2003). These films sensitively draw attention to the challenges of being an elderly person and nuances of eldercare offered by adult children.

From these films, the paper will focus on *Piku* for multiple reasons that will be discussed later. The film reflects the nuances of caregiving by sketching a difficult but compassionate relationship between the male protagonist, a 70-year-old father named Bhashkor (enacted by Amitabh Bachchan, a top veteran Bollywood actor), obsessed with his bowel movements, and his 30-year-old daughter, female protagonist named Piku (enacted by Deepika Padukone, a top young Bollywood actress), who looks after him with dedication. *Piku* achieved both box-office success and critical acclaim—drawing large number of elderly people and women to the cinema halls. The film balances the perspectives of a responsible caregiver with those of a widowed and intelligent care-recipient unlike *The Savages* (2007), which emphasizes the perspective of the caregivers, and *Still Alice* (2016), which centers on the needs and deteriorating condition of a care-recipient. On the other hand, the Hindi film *Baghban* (2003) focuses on an elderly retired couple who are mistreated by their sons and their families and eventually are looked after by an adopted son and his wife.

Shoojit Sircar, the director of *Piku*, is known for exploring taboo subjects in cinema such as the neglected theme of sperm donation in the film *Vicky Donor* (2012). Similarly, in the film *Piku*, the director interweaves the under-represented themes of aging and bowel movements. The narrative makes an obvious but neglected connection between the aging father's mental state and his motions, thus the second part of the title of the film: *from motion to emotion*. The film explores the everyday lived experience of bowel problems through humor without depending on exaggerated melodrama or cheap vulgarity.



Figure 1. While taking a short halt during a long car journey, Rana, the owner and driver of a taxi business, is baffled to observe Bhashkor's, Piku's father, excretory habits and their impact on him.



Figure 2. Bhashkor is uncomfortable using public toilets, so for the car journey, Piku, the female protagonist, packs a portable commode for him. They are accompanied in the trip by their long-standing, full-time help, Budhan, who makes the right sounds for Bhashkor to pass his urine.

While most contemporary Hindi films leave parents missing in the narrative, *Piku* not only foregrounds problems of the digestion and mental health but also underlines it with a sophisticated father-daughter relationship. This contrasts with *Baghban*, which shows a simplistic relationship between parents and their adult children. Although both films sketch the parents as protagonists, *Piku* departs from the convention by creating a second protagonist in the form of the daughter, while *Baghban* paints the sons as secondary characters in the narrative.

Most pre-liberalization, mainstream, Hindi cinema narratives portray a stereotypical relationship between the parents and the adult children where it remains cordial as long as the adult children accept the parental choice of partners (e.g., *Hum Apke Hai Kaun* or *What is My Relationship with You*, Barjatya, 1994) but becomes antagonistic when the adult children aspire to marry a romantic partner different from the economic and cultural background of the parents (e.g., *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*, *From Doom till Doom*, Khan, 1988). The adult children have had one sympathetic parent (usually the mother) and one unrelenting parent (usually a conservative father), although in different variations (e.g., *Mughal-e-Azam*, *The Great Mughal*, Asif, 1960 and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* or *the Big Hearted Will Take the Bride*, Chopra, 1995 & *Bobby Jasoos*, Shaikh, 2014). In contrast, *Piku* and her father have a layered relationship that is very different from its cinematic predecessors. Their relationship can be appreciated by understanding these “strong characters” (Chopra, 2015) autonomously and relationally, as the following pages attempt to do.

Unlike her predecessors, *Piku* is a flesh and blood character—she is an urban, educated, upper-middle class, career-oriented woman who balances her professional life as an architect while looking after their home, caregiving for her father, and tending to her personal needs. The theme song and official trailer of the film *Piku* represent this juggling act quite well. Although *Piku* is no different from others in terms of balancing competing demands as many urban middle-aged caregivers tend to balance work, home, families with teenage children, and caregiving responsibilities, she remains a unique example in contemporary Hindi cinema. *Piku* has advantages as



Figure 3. The visual design of the official poster of the film, *Piku* reflects the situational dynamics among the three lead characters, *Piku* (adult, working, daughter), *Bhashkor* (elderly father), and *Rana* (owner of a taxi business), wherein *Bhashkor*'s phobias affect him and those around him.

a caregiver who is single and healthy compared to aged caregivers who face the challenges of empty nest, nearing retirement, coping with health challenges of their own (Stone, 1986). Piku does not have the problem of balancing her caregiving for her father with an additional family and a second home since she has no sibling, partner, or a second parent.



Figure 4. In the road trip from Delhi to Kolkata, they take many stops to make Bhashkor comfortable. Piku provides constant care to her father's needs by assuming different roles such as helping him to move and exercise during the long journey.



Figure 5. Piku performs all kinds of household tasks such as unclogging the drainage, a chore usually reserved for male family members or male helpers. However, the helper, Budhan watches while Piku takes charge of yet another domestic problem.



Figure 6. This image represents the dirty and messy aspects of daily living and the hands-on-approach of the attractive but unglamorous female protagonist.

These dimensions have been neglected in the depiction of daily lives of the glamorous predecessors and even the unglamorous contemporaries of the mainstream narrative.

As a widower and retired person, Piku's father, like most elderly, struggles with loneliness, which distorts his sense of well-being and reality. His interactions with his physician meet his social needs. Interactions with surviving members of extended family surface negativity and differences but also play an important role in eldercare. *Piku* acknowledges and humanizes these forgotten secondary characters compared to other contemporary films and to the pre-1990s mainstream Hindi narratives which tend to stereotype them. For instance, as a pun, Piku's maternal aunt is not widowed or a desperate spinster but has actively separated and married three times unlike similar characters in other mainstream narratives (e.g., *Dulhania Le Jayenge*, Chopra, 1995). Their role might be shrinking in the nuclear family, but they have been an integral part of Indian domestic spaces, social structures, and Hindi cinema.



Figure 7. The traditional yet formal, but not too formal, dinner reflects the specific culture of the family and the community they belong to. On the occasion of his deceased wife's birthday, Bhashkor enjoys the company of his daughter, deceased wife's siblings, and their family. He unapologetically judges the married women in his family. Despite his open dislike for his wife's sister, she religiously visits them, uninformed.

Piku performs most of the caregiving roles by herself but still delegates some responsibilities to her loyal helper. Piku's economic background limits her to hire the services of a full-time professional caregiver as private eldercare service is too expensive and not necessarily well-trained, and public health service for eldercare is inadequate. Moreover, long-term care has financial costs for the caregivers and care-recipients to incur (Stone, 1986). Like most middle-class families, Piku and Bhashkor depend heavily on their unskilled helpers (rural migrants) for completing household tasks. Piku is well versed in the domestic chores, but she hires working class helpers (one full-time and a few part-time) to free herself for balancing her multiple roles. The film aptly depicts the love-hate relationship that most domestic employers have with their helpers. With the increasing number of urban working women who drive to work and despite knowing how to drive and having a vehicle, Piku still prefers to hire the services of a taxi company as her father is afraid of her having an accident. Piku and Bhashkor can be unreasonable when dealing with the staff and can drive them away. While Bhashkor is suspicious of the part-time maid, Piku's anger towards the taxi drivers reflects her difficult temperament and daily stress of caregiving for her hypochondriac father.



Figure 8. In their Delhi home, Bhashkor is unable to retain part-time maids, but Piku tries to convince the latest one to be fired by him to resume work. The maid refuses to deal with Bhashkor's tantrums.

In the absence of professional and institutionalized caregiving, informal family caregivers become very essential to the healthcare system and are considered a "vulnerable group" (Stone, 1986, p. 12), despite being usually neglected in public discourse. Research studies show that long-term caregivers are at a high risk of experiencing fatigue, anger, anxiety, frustration, and stubbornness. In a spectrum, the psychological impact of caregiving makes Piku stressed, but neither depressed nor neglectful nor overwhelmingly burdened. Piku does not live in self-pity or constant frustration, even with occasional tendencies of aggressiveness. It can affect not only the caregiver's health but also their work performance and professional growth. Therefore, they tend to make conscious decisions about the nature of their work, financial matters, and working environments (Stone, 1986). Piku co-owns an architectural firm with her supportive business partner, who understands that her work will be constantly disrupted by her personal matters. In one scene, Piku's father calls her during a business meeting, and her secretary gives a message from her father about his disturbed bowel movements. It really upset her, so she cancels her afternoon date to give her father a piece of her mind and tend to his real and imagined needs.

In some contemporary Hindi films like *Bobby Jasoos* (Shaikh, 2014), *Queen* (Bahl, 2013), and *Dangal* (Tiwari, 2016), the female protagonist negotiates with patriarchal prejudices in her personal or professional life; however, this is not the case with Piku. For example, she was saved from constant probing about her impending marriage despite being in her 30s, which is supposed to be a wrong side of the marriageable age. The narrative breaks the plot driven, which is high on drama rule by emphasizing on "characters, relationships, interactions" (Joshi, 2015). The narrative conflict emanates from domestic and everyday problems, which Piku embraces instead of escaping or fighting them. Unlike her cinematic counterparts, she does not have to prove her strength of character by

overcoming drastic obstacles or sudden turn of events. Instead, she employs patience and problem-solving abilities. She is capable of being very assertive, but she allows her father to dominate because of his vulnerable health condition that is not uncommon among the elderly. Piku's tenderness for her father cannot be interpreted as submission to patriarchal ideology, as film critic Saltz (2015) argues, or naive surrender to the stereotype of 'parents as Godly creatures.' She has a strong sense of inner self, which is reflected most impressively in the sequence after her father's death.

Intense caregiving leaves some caregivers with a limited outlook where many of them cannot see beyond the caregiving role. Piku channelizes her energies towards her father and work instead of pursuing a personal interest that empowers her. Elderly caregiving can affect the caregiver's personal needs in drastic ways. Piku does not socialize with friends and is not in a committed romantic relationship. When Piku's aunt introduces her to an eligible bachelor, her father intervenes, for he drives away a man who might be incompatible with his daughter because of being either conservative in attitude or submissive in nature. Bhashkor is very weary of Piku becoming close to anyone, but he respects Piku's decision to have casual relations and invite her casual sexual partner at their shared residence, which is an uncommon feature in most middle-class households. The film represents a sophisticated and refreshingly liberal father-daughter relationship. Bhashkor emphasizes on educating his daughter, respects her choice of career, invites discussion and dialogue, but disapproves of her getting married due to fear of becoming an orphan. Despite his articulations about her private life, he refrains from expressing his dislike for her male friend/lover/business partner who visits them often. Like Piku, most caregivers live with their parents, but many caregivers tend to relocate home to live together or closer to their elderly parent(s) (Stone, 1986). In the Indian context, many adult children co-share the domestic space with their elderly parents irrespective of their marital status, economic and professional situation, or caregiving responsibilities.

A major part of the film is located in such domestic spaces predominated by interior shots, which indicate the limited world of the main characters. The choice of interiority is simultaneously a welcome break from the "palatial outposts" (McCahill, 2015) of big-budget and larger-than-life narratives of Hindi cinema. This domesticity is punctured, in part, by a road trip from Delhi to Bhashkor's hometown Kolkata, which the father convinced his daughter to take. Bhashkor's fear of flying and train journey results in hiring the services of a taxi company owned by the second male protagonist, Rana Chaudhary (enacted by Irfan Khan, a top Bollywood actor with international standing). Since the drivers would not work with Piku, Rana decides to drive them. These two men, unlike their macho predecessors, are both vulnerable and strong, in the same vein as the female protagonist, Piku. This trip gives a fresh lease of life to Piku, Bhashkor, and Rana, who are confined by their social environment and their own minds. The film works within the road movie sub-genre where the main characters leave home on a road journey, and the protagonists change, grow, or alter their perspective. With this, Piku and Bhashkor's interface with Rana during the road trip results in small but significant changes in their attitude and behavior.

The visual landscape of the film including the long road journey is interlaced with the soundscape consisting of silence, dialogues, sound effects, and an unassuming background score, *Journey Song*, that includes poetic lyrics and music—both vocal and instrumental. The song constructs a complex emotional landscape that not only captures the challenges and spiritedness of Piku's life but also her unfolding relationship with Rana. In keeping with Hindi cinema's story-telling tradition, the film's narrative is juxtaposed with a few songs. Like most of its contemporaries, the songs in *Piku* are not dancing numbers (ETC Bollywood, 2010). They are composed by a young music composer but are sung by different singers, including the music composer in his calming voice. The "simple and lilting" music balances the "frenzied frames, the hyper people, the constant motion in the sequences" (Joshi, 2015). Similar to the growing number of contemporary Hindi films, the songs push the narrative forward. This is unlike their cinematic predecessors where songs were accompanied by dancing in exotic locations and not necessarily connected to the narrative logic. On the other hand, the visual landscape of the film is shot on location, and the *mise-en-scene* is also based in scenic realism, like most mainstream narratives. The road trip and the

excursion trips in Kolkata are filmed outdoor ranging from extreme long shots to mid-shots. Otherwise, most of the shots are filmed in confined spaces including the car journey; these are filmed mostly in daylight and range from mostly mid-shots but with few long shots. The negligible presence of close-ups in the visual imagery of the film, except a few medium close-ups, and close-ups that emphasize the facial expressions, points towards the level of intimacy in the personal relationships and visual conventions in Hindi cinema. The cinematic elements effectively portray the “chaos of relationships,” yet they manage to stress on the “unruffled continuities” (Joshi, 2015). The visual landscape, soundscape, and editing pattern of the film is realistic and well-paced as these cinematic elements mirror the unfolding nature of film’s perspective of life as a journey rather than a destination.

Caregiving can yield unexpected results for the caregivers in terms of their personal relationships. It can break weak partnerships, deepen exiting bonds, or introduce caregivers to supportive partners, as is the case in the film *Piku*. As the story unfolds, Rana is drawn to Piku, and Piku is attracted to Rana. Unlike Piku’s male friend and business partner Syed Afroz (enacted by Jissu Sengupta), Rana treats Piku with respect but without being submissive towards her. Rana impresses her with the way he successfully handles Bhashkor’s eccentricities and her rudeness rather than running away or becoming a passive spectator.



Figure 9. During the car journey, Rana and Piku build a rapport with each other, which is expressed in gestures more than in words. Rana takes an interesting journey with them (literally and emotionally), without informing about the trip to his difficult mother and sister, as his taxi company’s drivers refuse to drive Piku, who is a regular customer.

He asserts himself through his “facial expressions, body language” (Kaushal, 2015), and polite but grounded articulations. Rana and Piku share comfortable silences, charming banter, warm eye contact, and “unaffected conversations” which are uncommon between the lead pair in mainstream narrative (Kumar, 2015), leading to a romance that remains unpredictable and understated. Their unfolding relationship is captured in two songs in the film, *Teri Meri Baatein* and *Lamhe Guzar Gaye*. Until recently, romance has been the central driver of most Hindi films although many post-1990s films are reworking the rules of the formula narrative. *Piku* has none of the obsessions on romantic relationships and clichéd Bollywood romantic moments (Kaushal, 2015). Traditionally, in most films, the female character is pursued by a suitable suitor, and eventually the two of them are united in matrimony. Presently, in a few female-driven narratives, there is a shift from romance and marriage to other pressing matters that drive the story and the characters. For instance, there is absence of romance in *Jai Gangaajal* (Jha, 2016) or presence of an unpredictable romantic relationship placed at the margins of the plot in *Bobby Jasoos* (Shaikh, 2014). Until the end of the narrative, Rana and Piku’s relationship is open-ended—with no commitments expressed in silence or words.

In post-1990s commercial Hindi films, the female protagonist’s role is being redefined in growing number of films (Jain, 2016; Sircar, 2015). These narrative developments are being accompanied by wider changes taking place in Hindi film industry and Indian society. The contemporary female character is either ambitious and

determined to have an independent life such as in *Bobby Jassos* (Shaikh, 2014), *Jai Gangaajaal* (Jha, 2016), *Wake Up Sid* (Mukerji, 2009), *No One Killed Jessica* (Gupta, 2011), *Chak De India* (Amin and Miller, 2007), or unfavorable circumstances push her to find her uniqueness and identity such as in *Queen* (Bahl, 2013), *Highway* (Imtiaz, 2014), *English Vinglish* (Shinde, 2012). Piku mostly falls in the first category. Within the context of Piku's life, the film empowers the female protagonist in unprecedented ways. Far from being an image of resigned sacrifice or silenced by her circumstances, the character's engagement throughout the narrative depicts her fervor for life. Piku is not judged for expressing and fulfilling her personal needs and desires within her family. Unlike her pre-1990s counterparts, Piku is an unglamorized yet desiring woman who is not relegated to a secondary role of a vamp or a deviant woman. While she shares traits with "traditional," "Anglo-Indian," and "Westernized Indian" woman, Piku also departs from these cinematic categories (Anujan, Schaefer, & Karan, 2012, p.113). Piku does not think or act like her submissive predecessor, namely the "traditional" Indian woman even though she is fully clothed in traditional Indian attire and shares the values of caring for elderly. She is not romanticized as a mythical figure who is a "good woman," as she has her flaws. Piku is neither a non-resident "Anglo-Indian," nor is she skimpily dressed "Westernized Indian" woman. As a caregiver, she is not demonized as "bad person" because she occasionally loses her temper on her aging and "patience-testing" (Masand, 2015) father, or a "woman of poor morals" because she occasionally drinks alcohol and has a sexual partner. With the "Westernized Indian" woman, Piku shares an aspiration for professional expression and economic and personal freedom. Instead, Piku is a multi-layered character: her "frazzle silence" (McCahill, 2015), expressive eyes, and arrogance can intimidate people outside her family. A character who is liberal-minded and simultaneously rooted in a specific cultural milieu is a reflection of a type of characterization (glocalized) that is gaining currency in post-1990s Hindi cinema that has a local (Indian) essence but is globally acceptable. The characterization in the narrative signals a shift towards the liminal space between the imagined and real binaries of modern/global and local/traditional sensibilities.

Through the characters, and actions that build the plot, the narrative sketches a nuanced representation of the wide spectrum of challenges involved in eldercare. In the last-act crisis, Bhashkor indulges in the forbidden—he gorges on unhealthy street food and cycles around the city of Kolkata that leads to his best motion but creates panic in the family. Rana resolves clogged plumbing before leaving for Delhi. In the meantime, Bhashkor dies peacefully in his ancestral home in Kolkata. Influenced by Rana, Piku keeps Bhashkor's wish to retain the ancestral house. She returns to her Delhi home to organize a simple mourning for her father.

Figure 10. Towards the end of the film, Piku organizes a simple mourning on the occasion of her father's death – the gathering is small and informal reflecting their limited social circle. Unlike other narratives, the film represents the event with sensitivity instead of melodrama or denial. While most narratives, shy away from representing the co-existence of sad and humorous memories while remembering the deceased, this scene remains true to a complex rather than escapist worldview of life.



In the last scene of the film, the maid who was fired by her father returns to resume work while Piku plays badminton with Rana in her driveway. Such simple but not simplistic moments provide a "restorative [and an] oddly pleasurable form of release" (McCahill, 2015). The caregiving experience including her father's death leaves Piku resilient rather than bitter, lonely, and judgmental. The experience shapes her into a mature and confident person who can deal with life's ups and downs, without much fuss. Piku takes caregiving seriously and the act of caring gives her, like other caregivers, a sense of belonging and a strong sense of purpose to an ordinary life.

The film *Piku* is part of the growing yet still marginal repertoire of Hindi films that have an open-ended ending. The film has a unique way of emphasizing life as a slow passage of time. The film reflects on life as a mix of contradictions—constant chatter and arguments that are juxtaposed with moments of silence, play, laughter, compassion, and meaningful conversations. Through the father-daughter relationship, the film re-positions caregiving as part of the flow of life—part of the hues and colors that make life meaningful instead of representing it as a hopeless aspect of human life. Shoojit Sarkar’s charming father-daughter film is a light-hearted but mature mediation on coping with aging, caregiving, illness, and death amid more commonly found father-son and mother-daughter melodramatic tales.



Figure 11. The train and the car carrying the protagonists run in unison, lending a larger perspective to the specific story that unfolds. The slow-paced movement symbolizes the affirming idea of life as an evolving journey of varied moments that the protagonist lives through with effort and grace.

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