

Tracing the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema

Introduction

Cinema is considered to be a powerful medium that reflects the happenings in a society. While it is caught up between the real and reel life, it still serves as an important medium of entertaining people, educating them and bringing a behavioral change in their practices and attitudes. Given the reach of the Bollywood industry in India and across the world, it has been particularly effective in changing people's perception and uprooting societal stereotypes. This is perhaps the reason that The Nehru government funded Hindi films as early as in 1948 with the objective of disseminating the ideas of a free Indian nation that possessed its own identity free from Western influences (Dissanayake, Jaikumar).

Disability is an important issue that is widely misunderstood even today in India. Research has consistently found substantial social marginalization of people with disabilities and a lack of sensitization and awareness in the general public. Unfortunately, the traditional concept of "disability and karma" where disability is often perceived as a punishment for misdeeds in the past lives or crimes committed by the parents, continues to be a common belief amongst not only the less educated, but also well-educated urban dwellers. Several other similar stereotypes and taboos abound in our society. While several disability NGOs and activist groups have employed different strategies to break these stereotypes and bring about awareness, it is evident that their reach has been limited.

Given the lack of awareness and direct experience with disability, media representations such as film representations can provide powerful and memorable definitions for the public. In films that depict a character with a disability, the character rises to the occasion in order to exemplify people with that particular disability – showing to the audience how individuals with that disability

behave, feel, communicate, exhibit symptoms and experience life. It, thus, becomes important that disability is presented responsibly. This paper analyzes the representation of disability, while also analyzing the role of Bollywood in the disability movement in the country. To do so, the paper traces the portrayal of disability in Hindi movies from the 1930s to the present using some select movies. The paper also discusses the recent trend of portrayal of invisible disabilities, besides analyzing the impact of these movies on the disability movement in the country through three case studies. Finally, the paper explores the impact of other social barriers such as socioeconomic and gender disparities on the representation of disability.

[Representation of disability in the Indian cinema](#)

There have been two trends in film-making insofar as Bollywood films are concerned. While several film-makers have used disability as a comic interlude or to give a dramatic twist to their script with scant regard for the rights of a large group of people with disabilities, there have been some film-makers who have been able to build a tale around the insensitivity of society towards the disabled. As Dr. Atanu Mohapatra notes, "portrayal of disability in films swings primarily between two extremes – pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, and awesome heroism are at one end of the spectrum while discrimination, coping-up, emotional swings and aspirations of the human soul are at the other end." (Mohapatra) This section discusses these different representations of disability in Bollywood.

[Disability as punishment](#)

Disability has been widely regarded as a punishment in India for quite sometime, and this has been the most popular representation of disability in our films as well (Pal). One of the earliest films to portray disability as punishment was the 1936 Bombay Talkies film, *Jeevan Naiya*. The film, written by Niranjan Pal was driven by an idea of social justice in film, and used his screenwriting as a means of highlighting problems with traditional beliefs, specifically those

related to Hindu orthodoxy. In the movie, the lead character abandons his wife because of her background from a family of dancers. Subsequently, the husband is blinded in an accident and nursed back to health and happiness by the woman, who unknown to him is revealed to be the same devoted wife he abandoned due to social taboo. Similarly, in *Netrikkan* (1979), the philandering Rajnikanth ends up on a wheelchair at the end of the film as an appropriate outcome for his lascivious ways throughout the film (also highlighting the desexualization of the disabled). *Kashish* (1972) is yet another example where the evil brother Asrani who torments his Deaf sister and brother-in-law is himself crippled, which he takes as punishment for his acts. In *Dhanwaan* (1981) the rich and arrogant atheist Rajesh Khanna is blinded and unable to buy a new pair of eyes for himself and eventually finds a benevolent donor only when he repents and turns to god.

There have been much more powerful representations as well, where disability has been represented as equivalent, if not worse, than death. For instance, in *Mehboob Ki Mehendi* (1971), when the protagonist Pradeep Kumar comes to kill his nemesis Iftikar, he finds him on a wheelchair, and decides then that he is not worth stabbing since he is already disabled and allowing him to live would be a worse punishment than death. *Haider* (2014) echoes this sentiment, with Shahid Kapoor deciding against killing his uncle despite his strong resolve to avenge his father's murder, partly because of his mother's words "revenge only results in revenge" and partly because he finds his uncle gravely injured with his legs amputated.

Perhaps the most enduring portrayal of disability as a punishment is that of 'Thakur', the protagonist from possibly the most-watched film in India, *Sholay* (1975). In this film, Thakur, the police officer (Sanjeev Kumar) has his arms amputated by the bandit Gabbar (Amjad Khan). Unable to avenge himself, Thakur employs two mercenaries to destroy the bandit's gang, but sets up a climactic duel between himself and Gabbar. He begins the duel by noting that even without

his arms, Gabbar is no match for him, and concludes it not by killing Gabbar, but by crushing his arms with spikes. The punishment for the evil is not a swift bullet, but an enduring disability similar to the one imposed on him.

Disability as a comic interlude

Disability has often been used as comic relief in action movies or light entertainment films. In movies such as Tom, Dick and Harry (2006) and Pyare Mohan (2006), the lead characters have been people with different disabilities, and their interaction with each other and their limitations has been used as a source of entertainment for the audience. Golmaal (Tushar Kapoor with speech disability and Paresh Rawal and his wife as blind), Mujhse Shadi Karogi (Kader Khan as a person with different disability everyday) and Judaai (Upasna Singh with speech disorder) are some other movies where limitations have been exploited for comic effect. Since disability is not the primary theme for these movies, these, unfortunately, have often reinforce the existing stereotypes in an attempt to connect better with the audience.

People with intellectual disabilities, in particular, have been represented as comic supporting characters that add an amusing sideshow to the central story for a long time. While Hindi cinema has evolved on various aspects in recent years, for some strange reason, it continues to be irresponsible in its projection of mental illness. According to Andrade et al., considering the potential for harm in the dissemination of misinformation, film-makers should exhibit a greater sense of ethics when creating impressions that might adversely influence health. Similarly, as per Prof. Dinesh Bhugra, compared with Hollywood's portrayal of psychological ailments, Indian cinema is perhaps less enlightened. "The power of the mass media can never be overestimated. Film as a medium should be used to advantage to dispel the stigma associated with psychiatric disorders, and unfortunately, the contrary happens right now." (Bhugra)

Disability as heroism

There are some films that have projected persons with disabilities as heroes and super-heroes. For instance, in the 1998 Bollywood thriller *Dushman*, Sanjay Dutt, a blind veteran, fights Ashutosh Rana when he tries to rape Kajol, using his "sixth sense" to determine Rana's position and movement. Similarly, Akshay Kumar, Paresh Rawal and Arjun Rampal successfully rob a bank despite being blind using their "sixth sense" in *Aankhen* (2002). While these movies present people with disabilities in a positive light, they also distort the true identity of these people, helping little to improve understanding of and appreciation for the disabled. According to Rustom Irani, an independent film-maker, guest columnist and more than 60% disabled wheelchair user, "There are a couple of disability tropes that need to disappear from Bollywood.....Please don't enhance the other senses and skills of disabled characters to superhuman levels because they lack a particular physical ability." (Nair)

Disability as an object of pity and dependence

Arguably, the persistent portrayal of people with disabilities as unable to live independently has been a very important setback to the independent living movement for people with disabilities worldwide. In Indian films, the idea of dependence on charity is quite typical. For instance, the 1964 Rajshri classic *Dosti* features two disabled protagonists, Mohan, who is blind and Ramu, who uses crutches to walk. At the start of the film, Ramu is seen distraught. Everything about the state works against him-cars cause him danger on the street, water tanks on the street have no water, and people don't respond when he speaks with them, and the only person who does speak to him insults him when Ramu asks him for work by saying "What work can be done by someone like you?" referring to his disability. Mohan, the blind youth likewise enters the film asking people to help him cross the street to no response. For most of the remainder of the film, the two

youths are shown as being in situations where their disability makes them deeply dependent for their basic existence.

Khamoshi (1996) is yet another striking example where nana Patekar and Seema Biswas, a deaf and mute couple have been shown as completely dependent, both personally as well as economically, on their daughter Manisha Koirala. In fact, when Koirala falls in love with Salman Khan and decides to marry him, the couple is distraught. "I won't let her marry Raj. We will die without her," says Patekar to his wife.

Gulzar's Koshish (1972) is often seen as a landmark in the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema. The movie opens with sign language alphabet in its credits, and at several points, the film takes what may be called an educational stance to its audience by incorporating how a deaf person may communicate and participate economically, among others. Despite this, both pity and indifference can be seen in the movie. At the film's climax, Sanjeev Kumar's boss at work invites him home for dinner and asks him to bring along his son. The scene unravels in the boss then offering his daughter's hand in marriage to Sanjeev Kumar's son. Kumar (who is deaf and mute) is shocked at first, and signs that there is a huge class schism between the two, at which the boss confesses with tears that his daughter is deaf-mute and he is looking for a patient man for her. As he says this, his face reclines in shame, his body language changes, and the camera focuses on the girl's ears and mouth-ostensibly defective. At this point, Kumar puts aside the class issue and agrees to the marriage, but the son (who is "normal") refuses emphatically, because he does not want to be with a deaf person. The ending is particularly disturbing for its combination of class with disability, implying that for a disabled girl, a small class adjustment is reasonable. The boss' search for a patient man reinforces the idea of dependence on a hearing person for a successful life.

Disability as social maladjustment

The stories of Shakuni and Manthara from the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana are important markers of the idea of disability as a form of social maladjustment and a pathway to evil. In particular, the Shakuni stereotype has been employed often for wicked supporting characters, such as the scheming crippled brother-in-law Prem Chopra in *Ram Tera Desh* (1984). Yet another example is *Gora Aur Kala* (1972) in which the lead actor plays twin sons of a royal family. The two brothers are separated at birth. While one grows up to be a good prince (Gora), the other becomes a bandit (Kala). The two terms are indicative of the contrasts—the fair skinned prince is suave, kind, desirable, whereas the bandit is dark skinned, cruel, and most importantly, has a paralyzed left arm. (Pal)

Similarly, in the film *Vaali* (1999), Ajith Kumar plays twin brothers, one of who is deaf. The deaf brother Deva is an evil genius of sorts, modeled on a supercrip personality and has extraordinary lip reading powers. He is however perennially jealous of his speaking twin, Shiva, and constantly schemes against him. Eventually, when the evil twin dies, his soul expresses the sadness of never being able to speak of his feelings towards his brother.

The true disabled

While some movies have portrayed disability in a bad light and others have overdone it, there are some that have played an important role in furthering the efforts of the disability community in generating awareness about the true abilities and limitations of the disabled. Sai Paranjpe's *Sparsh* (1980) is one such movie. The film is about the life of Anirudh (Nasseruddin Shah), a blind school principal. His expectations, strengths and limitations all are well-represented in the movie. The movie portrays Shah as a very independent man, capable of not only managing a school and the staff, but also managing his own personal life—cooking, cleaning etc. By conveying the message that the disabled do not want pity and unnecessary help, the movie conveys the

frustration that many people with disability often have to go through when the society constantly questions their abilities. It also explores the tricky aspect of disability and relationship, driving home the point that people with disabilities too expect love and genuine concern in a relationship, and not charity. At the same time, the movie also highlights several bitter realities, the most important being the lack of access to accessible textbooks in Braille, and the focus on vocational education for the blind (thereby suggesting that blind cannot pursue mainstream academics). Thus, the movie presents an authentic picture of the blind in that time.

Yet another pertinent example is Gulzar's *Koshish*. While the film does a great job in presenting the never-say-die attitude of the deaf-mute couple and their independence, it also shows that not everything is ideal. In the movie, their ability to lead an independent life is constantly threatened by society and the people around them. An exploitative brother-in-law cheats and steals from them, their own infant child dies because they do not hear him cry; they are frequently hard-up and generally depicted as kind hearted unfortunates. While some may argue that this is yet another stereotyping, the sensitivity throughout the rest of the movie makes one wonder if that is really the case. It seems more of a bitter reality. The movie, thus, presents a true depiction of the life of the hard of hearing.

[The current trend](#)

While a lot of the portrayal of disability in films in the period leading up to the early 2000s was offensive caricature, a new wave of cinema has started portraying disability more sensibly and sensitively on the screen. The intent is to use the platform as a means to generate awareness and sensitivity among the general public. Also, there seems to be a paradigm shift in how a director looks at disability-from the perspective of the disabled person rather than something to exploit. This attitude can be traced back to the 2005 when the first international disability film festival

was organized in the country by the Chennai-based NGO Ability Foundation. The festival was a unique and inspiring showcase of extraordinary films from around the world with an objective of raising awareness about disability issues and tearing down stereotypes about people with disabilities (India Glitz). Since then, this festival has been organized every year, drawing several eminent producers and directors.

Besides more sensitization, there have been a number of mainstream films in recent years about a range of conditions, many of which rarely get serious discussion in the public sphere including Progeria (Paa), Alzheimer's (Thanmatra, U Me aur Hum), Dyslexia (Tare Zameen Par), Asperger syndrome (My Name is Khan), Cerebral Palsy (Angel 2011, Vinmeegal). It is gratifying to see that many of these films are indeed moving closer to an inclusive view of disability as part and parcel of society. While some of these movies have been accused of stereotyping, the fact that the concepts they discuss have never even made it to the screen make them worth appreciating. In a country where studies show that even a vast number of the disabled themselves consider the role of a past birth as playing a part in one's disability, public discourse of disability is of critical importance, and these movies seem to be playing an important role in facilitating it (as will be discussed in the next section).

Not only is there an increased awareness amongst the directors and producers, but many actors are also championing the cause, particularly those that have had some exposure to disability. In an interview with the Independent, Hrithik Roshan, condemning the use of disability for comic effect, said, "In the greed of entertainment, we use people's disabilities to garner a cheap laugh, which is completely wrong. My stammer was always a cross [to bear] in my life. I remember the first time somebody asked me what I wanted to do in life and I tried to say I wanted to be an actor, but I couldn't get the words out. I got stuck on the word 'actor'. I could feel a loss of breath

as my stammer came and my facial expression stuck. The more anxious I felt, the worse it got." (Buncombe) Roshan has been widely applauded by disability people's organizations throughout the country for his constant support. Abhishek Bachan (who suffered from dyslexia as a child), Salman Khan and Aamir Khan are a few other actors that have been increasingly involved in disability advocacy and awareness.

[Bollywood and the disability movement](#)

While there seems to be an increasing understanding of people with disabilities in the industry, it is important to analyze if the medium is playing any role in furthering the disability movement in the country. This section attempts to do so by using three case studies-Tare Zameen Par (2007), Main Aisa Hi Hoon (2005) and Sparsh (1980).

[Tare Zameen Par](#)

Tare Zameen Par (2007), directed by Aamir Khan, revolves around the life of a 10-year-old dyslexic boy, played by Darsheel Safary. The movie not only was a superhit, but was widely appreciated by disability groups across the world. The movie led to a greater appreciation for the limitations faced by people with intellectual disabilities, and resulted in several educational institutions and authorities across the country taking action to include these students in the mainstream. On December 31, ten days after the movie was released, the Central Board of Secondary Education issued a circular granting students with disabilities extra compensatory time to complete their exam. Mumbai's civic body, which runs 1188 schools, started 12 classrooms for autistic students w.e.f. 2008 (Sayli). The movie also had a spillover effect on Chandigarh. The education administration started a course for teachers to deal with children with learning disabilities in early 2008, and screened the movie as the first sensitization lesson. (Naithani)

Besides new provisions in favor of people with disabilities, the movie also helped the existing disability advocacy across the country. According to a social activist working for the empowerment of people with intellectual challenges in Delhi, "Funding increased substantially. And, more than that, we had so many more organizations wanting to support us in empowering these children...The Government officials were also far more cooperative and understanding than before". The movie also had some very specific effects. Since the release of the movie, fashion shows have become one of the primary sources of raising funds for disability organizations across the country, especially those working for people with intellectual challenges (Chona).

[Main Aisa Hi Hoon](#)

[Main Aisa Hi Hoon](#) (2005) is based on the life of a mentally challenged father (Ajay Devgan) who raises his daughter (Rucha Vaidya) as a single parent. Everything is ideal in their life, until Vaidya's maternal grandfather returns to India to take her back with him to the UK, thinking Devgan to be irresponsible. A legal battle ensues where Sushmita Sen not only defends his case, but also raises important questions about society's perception of the disabled. One such instance is about the use of appropriate terminology, particularly the issues with using such words as "retard", "paagal", "handicapped" and "bichare". It is indeed noteworthy for a Bollywood movie to take cognizance of something as subtle as this. The mention of international legislation goes to show the team's sincerity and research. Interestingly, many of the points (including terminology) raised in the movie have been incorporated in the draft of India's new disability law, which is slated to be introduced in the Parliament later this year.

[Sparsh](#)

While there has undoubtedly been a greater recognition of the rights of people with disabilities in this decade, and the movies have played an important role in bringing about this awareness, older movies such as those from the 1980's have also helped the disability movement in the country.

Sparsh is one such example that had a crucial impact on the disability sector in the 1980's. By portraying the potential of blind people and the challenges that hindered success (such as lack of adequate textual material in accessible formats), the movie led to important policy changes. Not only did the Government double the funding for the Blind Relief Association, Delhi (a public school for the blind), but also improved the infrastructure at the Central Braille Press in Dehradun within a few days of the movie's release. Diwali Mela at BRA also registered a drastic increase in attendants that year, and since then, the mela has been one of the most popular events around Diwali.

[Disability and other social barriers](#)

So far, the paper has explored various representations of disability. This section discusses how these representations change with other social factors such as economic status and gender.

[Disability and socioeconomic status](#)

There seems to be a disparity in the portrayal of disabilities in different economic contexts. Lack of social touch and numerous formal rules bind up the disability in elite family where the struggle is mostly inward and confined to the person with disability. The film Black (2005) portrays so. In films such as Koi Mil Gaya (2003) and Main Aisa Hi Hoon (2005), while portraying the disability in the context of middle class family, the victim or the person with disability faces the hindrance and fate of social prejudices and the legalities of inclusiveness in the bargain of competition in the industrial world. Finally, disability in poor family is portrayed in films such as Khamoshi (1996), where the problems are tied up more with occupational difficulty, food and basic needs than the concern for facing social stigma unlike disability in middle-class family.

[Disability and gender: outcomes of the World Bank study](#)

According to a World Bank study commissioned by the Govt. of India, characterizations of disabled women in Bollywood are not strong enough, though Indian films as a whole have tried to

enhance society's sensitivity. "Overall, women with disabilities in Indian cinema are doubly weak-women and women with disabilities. This contrasts with more frequent portrayals in Hollywood cinema of women with disabilities who have strength and discover independence," said the report titled *People with Disabilities in India: From Commitments to Outcomes*. The report concluded that Bollywood films played on gender differences. Men with disabilities, for instance, "are often loved by a devoted woman without disabilities" (an example being *Saajan*). "But women with disabilities are rarely loved by men without disabilities. In rare cases, as in the film *Mann*, the man loved the woman even after the onset of the disability. Also, women with disabilities almost never attain economic self-sufficiency in these movies," the report underlined. This is unlike Hollywood films such as *The Miracle Worker*, which was based on Helen Keller's life, or *Children of a Lesser God*, where the deaf-mute heroine learns to convey her thoughts."

Conclusion

From a pitiable to an independent and self-reliant person with disability, Bollywood has come a long way in depicting disabilities. While disability has often been represented as dependence and punishment, several recent films have dealt with the issue very sensitively, and have had significant impact on the disability movement in the country. Observing the current trends, one can be hopeful of the appropriate and effective utilization of the powerful medium of films. However, there have still been some movies that have presented disability in the stereotypical conventional light or for comical effect (the controversy regarding *Golmaal 3* poking fun at people who stammer is one such example). Thus, festivals such as the international disability film festival must be continued and promoted to ensure that the Bollywood fraternity is even more sensitized and the disability sector is able to make full use of Bollywood for getting its message across to the public.

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