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REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY IN INDIAN CINEMA BETWEEN 1970-2020

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of disability in Indian cinema from 1970 to 2020, tracing its evolution from stereotypical tropes to nuanced portrayals amid socio-cultural shifts. It analyzes how Hindi cinema has negotiated disability as a narrative device, social metaphor, and site of resistance. The study employs a chronological framework, dividing the period into three phases: the 1970s-1980s "tragic victim" era, where disability symbolized moral or karmic affliction; the 1990s-2000s commercial exploitation phase marked by sentimental melodrama and inspirational arcs; and the post-2000 diversifying representations reflecting neoliberal influences, activism, and intersectionality with gender, caste, and class. Through textual analysis of some key films, the paper reveals persistent ableism—disability as "otherness" for able-bodied redemption. Ultimately, the research contributes to global disability film scholarship by foregrounding non-Western contexts.

KEYWORDS: disability, representation, Indian cinema, ableism, disability studies, adaptation studies, bollywood

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema is regarded as one of the most effective mediums of reflecting the society. It not only serves as a source of entertainment but also touches lives of people in various ways, for instance, it has the potential to act as a means of educating the audience and also possesses the power to bring about change in society. Films captivate the audience's intellect not through the portrayal of reality, but by presenting fiction. The potency of imagination renders film a formidable medium. The unique strength of film resides in its imbedded narrative and the manner in which it is conveyed to the viewer. The allure lies not only in the narrative structure but also in the cinematic experience of the text. Mc Ginn reflects on the power of cinema and states that "movies offer us, by means of their cinematic devices, an unusually clear and intelligible medium" (McGinn 3). As cinema reaches out to a larger number of audiences, unlike literary texts and theater, it has proved much efficacious in uprooting stereotypes and altering the behavior and attitude of people over time. As W. Dissanayake points out that "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."

Since the emancipation of Indian cinema, a number of issues have been taken up and mirrored on screen and if one traces the journey from then till now, the variety and diversity of subjects cannot go unnoticed. The role of Indian cinema in bringing forth many sensitive and never talked of topics, has been noteworthy. Disability falls amongst one of the important subjects which are widely misunderstood in India even today. It has been repeatedly discovered via research that people with disabilities are subjected to significant social marginalization, as well as a lack of sensitization and understanding among the general public. Additionally, Indian cinema, particularly since the 1970s, has been instrumental in dismantling some of the conventional beliefs that have been constructed around the topic. Madhava Prasad makes the observation in his 'Preface' to *The Ideology of Hindi Cinema* that the year 1980 marked the beginning of Film Studies in India, which led to the official recognition of cinema as a distinct academic field in the country and it has:

Marked the beginning of a focus on Cinema, not merely as a site for occasional forays by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and ideologists, but as a field with an institutional

specificity that could only be ignored at the risk of a serious misreading of its cultural significance. (Prasad vii)

Currently, cinema has developed into an essential component of the culture of India, and it has amassed a significant amount of power and influence over the way Indian society functions. In her speech at the sixth International Film Festival, which took place in 1976, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, emphasized the need of producing films that have the intention of bringing about a constructive change in society. She highlighted:

As a medium of mass communication, creativity and entertainment it (cinema) has a pervasive power, so far unattained by any other medium. In India, as elsewhere, it wields considerable influence over its enormous audiences ... The tremendous potential of cinema as a means of artistic creation, spread of education and healthy entertainment has not been fully or properly realized in our country. The need to do so assumes particular urgency now when our people are engaged in the gigantic task of transformation and social progress. (Gandhi)

Over the course of fifty years, there have been a number of shifts in the manner in which people with disabilities are portrayed in Indian cinema. While the approach of some of the moviemakers was extremely sensitive and in the direction of establishing a new perspective to the subject; many failed to do justice to their jobs as they could not detach themselves from the established stereotypes. As observed by Dr. Atanu Mohapatra, "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 124).

Although Indian cinema dealt with disability and the issues related to it as early as the 1950s, it failed to impact or influence the audience to a large extent. One of the major drawbacks was the absence of disabled friendly environment and infrastructure. However, the decade of 1970s proved to be a transitional period in the history of Indian cinema, especially pertaining to the subject of disability. So far, the characters with disability had been portrayed in the light of exclusivity, but *Koshish*, a 1972 movie by Gulzar became a stepping stone in making an inclusive environment for characters with disability on screen. The film has received a lot of attention for providing the first honest insight into the complicated world of hearing challenged people and their involvement in society as any other human being. Gulzar, in a film festival in 2011 mentioned,

“including people with disabilities in the mainstream of public life is what the media must reflect in full measure...” Though Gulzar made serious attempts in dismantling many of the rigid notions against persons with speech and hearing disability and also provided a mirror to the attitude of people for them, he could not let go of certain inherently established stereotypes. One of the most commonly observed notions is relating disability to punishment. In this film as well, the result of the evil deeds of Arti’s brother (Asrani) leads to physical disability and he ends up using crutches to walk.

Credits are presented at the beginning of *Koshish*. In addition to the textual credits, they are also explained through sign language for individuals who have difficulties with hearing or speech. However, disabilities such as blindness were not included in this explanation. The movie opens in the modest household of Arti who lives with an old widowed mother and a wasted brother, who takes advantage of her condition twice-while stealing her savings in the beginning, but caught by his mother and in the middle which turns the events of the plot. Arti is seen to be the second responsible person after her mother as she contributes to the proper functioning of the household, not only by doing the daily chores, but she also steps outside to buy groceries and vegetables for the house. The shopkeepers too are shown not perturbed by the fact that she and Hari Charan, who is another protagonist of the film with hearing and speech impairment, cannot hear or speak. But right from the beginning, the tone of the dialogues is not left untouched either by pity and sympathy or disgust for these two disabled characters. When Arti’s mother realizes that Hari Charan can also not speak and hear like her daughter, her pity is quite apparent when she says, “*Hey bhagwan! Kaise bebas mila diye tune, bezubaan bechare*”¹ (*Koshish* 16:50-17:00). Although he couldn’t hear, her facial expressions make him uncomfortable. Even Arti gets into a state of shock after her mother tells her about this and she keeps staring him till the end of the scene, which is yet again a disturbing response.

Hari Charan’s efforts in taking Arti to school for people with speech and hearing disabilities offer an educational approach from the part of the filmmaker. The positive attitude of her mother also break certain typecasts related to both disability and gender biasness. The monologue of the teacher of school also gives an insight to the audiences that people with disabilities are not aloof from others and can easily interact with everyone. During the major portion of

the film after marriage, the couple faces innumerable difficulties because of their disability. They are constantly mocked by the people around them and are also bullied, which gives a glimpse of the stigma attached to disability and the attitude of society towards people with disabilities. At the nadir of their lives, the couple loses their child and Hari Charan is rendered jobless which further aggravates their emotional and economic instability. In spite of the fact that the movie does an excellent job of demonstrating the deaf-mute couple’s unwavering will and their independence, it also demonstrates that not everything is perfect. Within the context of the film, their capacity to live a life of autonomy is persistently jeopardized by the society and the people in their immediate environment. They are typically represented as being hard-up and generally depicted as being kind-hearted unfortunates. An exploitative brother-in-law betrays and takes from them, and their own young child dies because they do not hear him cry. It is possible that some people may say that this is yet another instance of stereotyping; yet, the fact that the remainder of the movie is so sensitive makes one question whether or not this is actually the case. It appears to be a more discouraging reality. It is for this reason that the film provides an accurate portrayal of the life of those who are hard of hearing. Also, the character of Narayan, who is blind, and his close bond of friendship with Arti and Hari Charan negates the idea that disability is a hindrance in forming close bond with people. It is not much the physical hindrance, rather the attitudinal barrier which pushes persons with disabilities in a space of exclusion.

Despite bringing the subject close to reality as well as offering an educational approach, the movie’s climax raised more than one question on the portrayal of disability on screen. The scene opens with Hari Charan being called by his boss to his home and he brings his son along. He brings up the fact that there is a significant social divide between the two families in response to his boss’s proposal of a marriage between his daughter and Hari Charan’s son. After that, the boss breaks down in tears and admits that his daughter is deaf-mute and that he is looking for a patient man to take care of her daughter. As he says this, his face contorts in embarrassment, his body language shifts, and the camera focuses on the girl’s ears and mouth, which appear to be deformed. At this point, Kumar puts aside the matter of social class and agrees to the marriage. However,

¹ Translation- Oh God! How did you make such pitiful persons

meet, unfortunate voiceless persons.

the son, who is considered to be "normal," vehemently rejects the marriage plan since he does not wish to be in a relationship with a deaf individual. Once again, the conclusion of the movie offers some unsettling observations, such as the argument that the girl's disability makes it appropriate for her to transition to a higher social class.

One of the path breaking movies from the next decade was *Sadma* (1983), which was directed by Balu Mahendra and two of the ablest Indian actors, Sridevi (Snehalata/Reshmi) and Kamal Hassan (Somprakash) performed the roles of protagonists. The movie opens with Snehalata enjoying at the beach with her friends and the party ends with an accident that culminates into her memory loss. The doctors inform her parents that she is suffering from Amnesia and remembers only initial six or seven years of her life. In the next scene, we meet her in a prostitute house where her name has been changed to 'Reshmi' and she Somprakash who goes there as a client. She hits him on his forehead in self-defense and later confesses that she has been sexually assaulted and mistreated there. This reflects on the vulnerability of people with disabilities, more for a person suffering with mental disorder as a worker in the hospital manipulates her easily and sells her to a prostitute house where she is exploited.

Snehalata reveals her real name but Somprakash calls her Reshmi throughout the film. The film, thereafter, explores much about the affectionate and trustworthy relationship shared between the two protagonists. While Balu Mahendra clearly projects Snehalata's dependency on Somprakash for various things, he, at the same time makes Somprakash's need for a companion quite apparent; he is as much dependent on her as she is. At several places we observe that Somprakash starts expecting 'normal' behavior from Snehalata as he would want in his partner and even gets irritated in many scenes. At one point in the film he says, "*Gadhi ki tarah badh gayi hai, lekin sar me bhoosa bhara pada hai*" (*Sadma* 44:35—44:42) and at another scene he scolds her saying, "*Taad ki tarah lambi ladki hai par sara kaam mujhe hi karna padta hai*"³ (46:22—46:30). Somprakash's expectations come to the forefront when, in a dream sequence he imagines Snehalata feeling shy in the saree he brought for her. The character of Balva, played by Gulshan Grover, tries to take advantage of Snehalata's condition by manipulating her and takes her to an isolated and shady place where he tries to

force himself upon her but she escapes and is finally rescued by Somprakash, which yet again reflects on her vulnerability and gullibility which people easily take advantage of.

Towards the end of the film, we find an ironic role reversal when Snehalata finally recovers and is found by her parents. She is ready to leave the place while Somprakash somehow reaches the station and tries to call out to her but she fails to recognize him and because of his actions, consider him a 'madman'. She says to her mother, "*Koi pagal lagta hai*"⁴ and throws a packet of food towards him and finally the train leaves with Somprakash left alone at the station in a deplorable state. Throughout the film, we observe that there are very limited people in contact with the two protagonists, while those around appear to be completely understanding. However, Somprakash does not allow her to come in proximity of the school he teaches in, which raises certain questions if he is embarrassed of her or if he is trying to protect from the outside world.

Khamoshi: The Musical (1996) is yet another masterpiece which brings cinema and disability together. It is interesting to notice that the movie was released one year after the Persons with Disability Act was passed. The movie portrays Seema Biswas (Flavy) and Nana Patekar (Joseph) as a deaf and mute couple whose life completely revolves around their daughter Annie, played by Manisha Koirala. The narrative opens with a tone of happiness where Annie is coming to her parents with her husband Raj (Salman Khan) and their child, but they end up in an accident which gets her in the state of coma and the flashback begins which narrates Annie's story since birth in her voice.

Annie's world from the beginning seems to be divided into two—silence of her parents and music of her grandmother, Maria Ma (Helen), who introduces her to music from an early age. The economic status of her family is quite low and Joseph's disability is hinted to be the cause for their condition. Due to his hearing and speech impairment, he neither gets a good job, nor performs well in the present one which requires him to sell soaps going door to door. He loses his job and is humiliated by his employer who states that he gave him the job out of pity but the only option left for him is begging, "*goonga behra samajh kar ehsaan kia tha*"⁵ (22:00—22:56). Persons with disabilities living in poverty are doubly stigmatized and marginalized and are often stereotyped as beggars, but Sanjay

² Translation-Grown up like a donkey but mind filled with shit.

³ Translation-Grown long like bamboo but still I have to do all the work.

⁴ Translation-looks like a mad person.

⁵ Translation-I did charity assuming you were deaf and dumb.

Leela Bhansali vehemently rejects such notions in this film and it is shown in the form of the fighting scene between the shopkeeper and Joseph. Also, Joseph's never losing hope attitude speaks volumes about Bhansali's intentions. In another scene, when Joseph accidentally burns his hands while working in the factory, the doctor says, "*Aap jaise apahij logon ko kaam par rakhte hi kyun hain*"⁶ but this again does not budge him from doing hard work.

While Bhansali tries to reject certain established opinions against persons with disabilities, he too fails to detach himself completely from the societal lens. It becomes quite evident in the scene when in a fit of anger, Joseph's mother reveals that his father is not with them because he could not accept that his son was deaf and mute and thus, he left to join the army where he died. This reveals the stigma attached to disability and even families fail to accept it and holds the disabled person responsible for every bad that comes to them.

The personal tone of Annie's narrative opens up several dimensions to disability in the film from an insider's perspective who is yet an outsider. Annie's attachment to her parents and their dependency on her, especially after the death of their second child, appears more of a responsibility on her. In one of the scenes, she confesses to the Father of the church, "*Mai jab bhi lehren ki awaz sunti hun, patton ki sarsarahat sunti hun, gana sunti hun; mujhe aisa lagta hai mai gunah kar rahi hun*"⁷ (55:05—55:16). At many places, Annie seems to be in a dilemma; while on one hand, she wants to put her step out and enjoy the life as she wants, on the other hand, she feels scared about leaving her parents behind. Her love for her parents, with age, becomes responsibility and later, the mere thought of leaving her house comes back to her as guilt. All these feelings start overpowering her to the extent that starts feeling suffocated and frustrated. The scene where her mother suffers a stroke vividly explains her buried emotions when she shouts on her father, "*Kya aapko sunai nahin deta, mumma ko madad ki zaroorat hai*"⁸ (1:14:45—1:15:27). Annie's final outburst when her father throws her out of their house, on finding about her pregnancy reveals her anguish and suppressed frustration from her childhood.

Annie's family is not surrounded by people from the outer world, except for the person who owns a musical instrument shop and few co-workers. Their

first encounter with others is observed when Raj's parents come to their house for lunch and Joseph makes chewing sound which creates an awkward situation for Raj's parents and even Flavy who senses it through their expressions. She feels as if they are mocking them and gets angry. Raj's parents too judge Annie's family and say, "*Ye kaise log hain, kaisa shor macha rahe hain*"⁹, to which Raj replies, "*Jo aapke liye shor hai, wo inke liye khamoshi hai*"¹⁰ (1:51:50—1:52:10). The scene on the dining table is well portrayed by the director as rather than succumbing to the stereotypes of judging persons with disabilities, he portrays it as a clear case of miscommunication, which is cleared by both Annie and Raj. Raj too learns sign language and explains Joseph's speech in the church in the end which hints at filmmaker's foreseeing of an inclusive world for persons with disabilities.

Up until the early 2000s, the majority of the portrayal of people with disabilities on TV was done so from an offensive perspective, and there were very few people who took a compassionate approach to the subject. A new wave of cinema, on the other hand, began to emerge gradually, and it began to depict people with disabilities in a manner that was both quite serious and sensitive on screen. This shift in perspective became more noticeable, particularly after the year 2005, when the Ability Foundation, a non-governmental organization located in Chennai, coordinated the country's first international film festival for people with disabilities. The festival was a one-of-a-kind and motivational exhibition of amazing films from all over the world, with the purpose of bringing attention to issues pertaining to persons with disabilities and dismantling misconceptions about those who have disabilities (India Gritz). Since that time, this festival has been held annually, and it has attracted a number of renowned filmmakers and producers.

Aamir Khan made his debut as a director with the film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), which is widely considered to be one of the most prominent films when it comes to depicting disability with extraordinary empathy. Ishaan, a dyslexic youngster who is ten years old and is portrayed by Darsheel Safary, is the central character of the story. Not only did the film garner the attention of the audience, but it also received a great deal of appreciation from a variety of handicap organizations all around the world. This was a significant effort on the part of the

⁶ Translation-Why do they even employ handicap persons like you?

⁷ Translation-When I listen to the sound the sound of waves, the sound of leaves flowing due to wind, a song..I feel I am committing a sin.

⁸ Translation-Can't you hear that my mother needs help.

⁹ Translation-What kind of people are these, creating so much noise!

¹⁰ Translation-What is noise for you is silence for them.

filmmaker to teach and educate people about intellectual disability, as well as to pave the way for inclusive education for children who are afflicted with illnesses such as dyslexia. A number of educational institutions and authorities across the country took action as a direct result of the film in order to incorporate these pupils into the mainstream educational system. According to Sayli, the Central Board of Education issued a circular on December 31, ten days after the movie was aired, providing students with impairments additional compensatory time to finish their examinations. This was done in order to better accommodate the needs of these students. Beginning in 2008, the local authority of Mumbai, which maintains 1188 schools, established twelve classrooms specifically for pupils with autism. The film provides a vivid reflection on the attitude that society has toward those who have intellectual disabilities, and it also targets against the inflexible mindset that society has.

The narrative begins with Ishaan fishing in a gutter near school from where the school bus conductor pulls him while scolding. He comes across as a messy boy who does not keep his uniform clean. He is seen isolated from everyone in school, bus and also on playground as he prefers playing with dogs in his society rather than with other children who bully him. The narrative established from the beginning that he is not good in studies and has failed in third standard, and in contrast is his brother who is a topper in school. Nobody, except his brother understands his creative mind and his parents, especially father keep coercing him to study harder and try to match his brother. The principal of his school even mentions that he should join a special school, "*Kuch bacche badnaseeb hote hain*"¹¹ (Taare Zameen Par 43:45—43:58). While the principal shows a streak of sympathy and pity in her tone while classifying him into a broad category, his father takes an offense and does not pay a single thought if his son requires to be taught in a different way. When Ishaan fails to come up to the expectations of his teachers and father, he is forcefully sent to a boarding school where the approach of teaching is to get uniform results out of students as the warden says, "*Yahaan bade bade bigde ghodon ko naal pehnai hai humne*"¹² (Taare 49:00—49:07). The very fact that students at this school are compared to horses is quite disturbing.

The introduction of Ishaan's new Arts teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh, played by Aamir Khan brings in the ray of hope. Through his character, the

issue of dyslexia is brought forth and also it gave an insight to the stigma linked with such conditions. Aamir Khan's efforts to break away with such stigma and stereotyping are clearly visible in the film. The songs in this movie also voice out the inner frustration of a child suffering from intellectual disability. The first song "*Duniya ka naara, jame raho*"¹³ puts forward a picture where two opposite worlds are talked of and when Ishaan bunks the school, the song in the background states, "All I need, is to be free", which is yet again a hint towards the cobwebs spun by society around the issue of disability. Another song, "Why can't you?" quite evidently speak of Ishaan's feelings to the audience.

We find that the social model started to take control of the screen in the 2000s, and it contributes to the portrayal of the notion that problems are not caused by disability but rather by the environment and society in which it is put. It is the amount of involvement within the society that, in point of fact, determines the position of the individual. The depiction of this kind in movies is typically considered to be progressive and contemporary. When it comes to analyzing the various depictions that have been displayed in films over the course of history, the social model is an extremely useful tool. In addition to this, it offers assistance in demonstrating a shift in social constructions, social concerns, and social attitudes.

In *In My Name is Khan* (2010), disability representation centers on the protagonist Rizwan Khan's Asperger's syndrome, portrayed through repetitive behaviour, literal thinking, and social challenges that humanize rather than pathologize him. Khan's performance emphasizes Rizwan's intense routines, such as his discomfort with touch—"Don't touch the yellow! Don't touch the yellow!" he repeatedly warns during a meltdown, highlighting sensory sensitivities and anxiety triggers. This portrayal transitions from tragedy to resilience, employing neurodivergence as a framework for ethical discernment in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia, yet it potentially perpetuates savant stereotypes through the character's mechanical aptitude and exceptional recall.

The film's narrative evolves disability sensitivity into a tool for heroism and empathy, as Rizwan's blunt honesty—"My name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist"—challenges prejudices, merging his disability with racial profiling to give a dramatic edge to storyline. Interactions with his wife Mandira reveal relational depth; she adapts patiently, noting,

¹¹ Translation- Some kids are simply ill-fated.

¹² Translation- We have disciplined the worst of children here!

¹³ Translation- Slogan of the world- Keep at it!

"You're not like others, but you're perfect for me," which highlights her acceptance of him as he is. Ultimately, *My Name is Khan* advances Indian cinema's portrayal of intellectual disabilities, promoting public dialogue on inclusiveness while complicating it with motivational themes. Nevertheless, the film indirectly attacks ableism by associating his characteristics with social misconceptions, thereby facilitating more nuanced narratives on neurodiversity.

In 2018, *Hichki*, directed by Siddhartha Malhotra talks about one of the least discussed but not so rare disabilities, Tourette syndrome. The plot opens up with a woman named Naina Mathur, played by Rani Mukherjee, suffering from Tourette syndrome, who has been rejected by several schools for teaching, despite holding proper degree, because of speech impairment. Her family, especially her father, also seems to be not supporting her daughter as he keeps taunting her over her condition. At several points in the film, she is mocked, bullied by her students and made fun of, even by her colleagues who are apparently well-educated. She is finally given a chance to teach slum students in a convent school and faces a lot of difficulties during the course of her tenure. She, however, emerges triumphant in the end and makes it a point to reject and change the

stereotypical notions set against such disabilities. She establishes the fact that people with disability are not 'non-normal' and they equally deserve the right to opportunity and a facilitating environment to exercise their skills.

Despite the fact that the films and scripts that have been mentioned above have demonstrated the shifting tendencies of attitude, approach, and sensitivity in the discourse of disability studies in Indian cinema, there is still a great deal of work that needs to be done in order to completely eradicate the rigid stereotypes and barriers of attitude that continue to exist to this day. When it comes to portraying people with disabilities, Bollywood has come a long way from portraying them as pitiful to portraying them as powerful and self-sufficient individuals. Although disability has frequently been portrayed as a kind of dependence and punishment, a number of films that have been released in recent years have dealt with the problem in a sympathetic manner and have had a big impact on the movement for people with disabilities in the country. Taking into consideration the present trends, one can have faith that the powerful medium of cinema will be utilized in a manner that is both suitable and effective.

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