Screening Difference: Charting the Evolving Representation of Disability in Bollywood Cinema

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The sociocultural construction of disability through visual representation is compelling, and the present study is based on the Bollywood representation of disability on screen. Disability studies have emerged as an essential area of research in the twenty-first century. It has evolved beyond the narrow definition of a medical problem to one of social and cultural concern. As a critical discourse, it has borrowed extensively from gender and cultural studies and psychology. Films are part of visual culture and have an essential role in shaping the sensibilities of society on various issues. Many critics have observed that disability is used as a critical component in storytelling. The Bollywood industry has picturised disability since the 1970s and has come a long way in depicting disability in newer lights. However, despite this progress, a key research problem arises: how and why do these representational shifts occur, and what ideological work do they perform in shaping public consciousness? This change in the trend is briefly studied in this paper using representational and popular movies like *Taare Zameen Par, Black, My Name Is Khan, Barfi, Hichki* and *Paa.*

Keywords: Disability, Hindi Film, Bollywood, Critical Discourse, Film Studies, Representation, Cultural Studies

Introduction

India has gradually enhanced its legal and policy framework to safeguard the rights and enhance the welfare of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). This journey commenced with the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, which represented the first comprehensive legislation ensuring equal chances for all. Subsequently, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, broadened the range of disabilities recognised, underscored the importance of accessibility, non-discrimination, and inclusion, and aligned Indian laws with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

To back these Acts, the Government has rolled out a variety of initiatives, including the establishment of the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (2014), the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) aimed at achieving barrier-free access, reservation in education and employment, skill development programs, financial assistance schemes, and partnerships with NGOs for rehabilitation and empowerment. Collectively, these actions illustrate India's dedication to ensuring dignity, equality, and full participation of PwDs in society.

Although legislation and government initiatives have established a foundation for protecting rights and promoting inclusion for Persons with Disabilities, societal attitudes and cultural views are also vital in influencing lived experiences. Policies may require accessibility and equal opportunities, but these principles are ingrained in society through media, education, and daily interactions. With its broad reach and emotional impact, cinema serves as a significant platform where concepts of disability are negotiated, contested, or reinforced. Therefore, analysing Bollywood's changing depictions of disability alongside India's legal and policy frameworks offers a comprehensive perspective on how both the state and popular culture contribute to the broader vision of empowerment and inclusion.

Disability studies have experienced rapid growth in the twenty-first century, shifting from purely medical definitions to an examination of how society and culture shape notions of ability and difference.

Cinema, particularly Bollywood, has historically been a potent medium in this context. For many years, it relied on conventional tropes that portrayed disability as tragedy, eliciting pity, or even as a source of comedic relief. However, in recent years, a transformation has emerged. Filmmakers have started to create more complex narratives that acknowledge resilience, individuality, and the potential for inclusion.

The selection of films—*Taare Zameen Par*, *Black*, *My Name Is Khan*, *Barfi*, *Hichki*, and *Paa*—is based on their landmark status in Bollywood as works that not only achieved critical acclaim and commercial visibility but also influenced public discourse on disability. Each film depicts a different condition, ranging from dyslexia, deaf-blindness, and autism spectrum disorder to hearing and speech impairment, Tourette syndrome, and progeria, thereby offering a broad spectrum of representations. Collectively, they highlight the transition in Bollywood from earlier stereotypical portrayals of disability as a source of pity, tragedy, or comic relief to more nuanced narratives that foreground individuality, agency, and inclusion. Their sociocultural impact is particularly significant, as these films reached mass audiences and initiated conversations on education, accessibility, and empathy, making them valuable cultural texts for analysis within disability studies, cultural studies, and film studies.

Disability can be seen as part of a person's identity, similar to gender, nationality, sexual orientation, race, and class. It limits a person in performing their daily routines and leading an independent life. "The word 'disability' hints at something missing either fiscally, physically, mentally, or legally" (as cited in Goodley, 2011, p. 1). According to Goodley (2011), "…to be disabled evokes a marginalised place in society, culture, economics, and politics" (p. 2).

The definition and understanding of disability can vary across different contexts, legal frameworks, and cultural perspectives. Disability is a crucial component of critical imagination since it often concentrates on the human condition in the world. Disabilities and impairments are not the same thing. According to James Staples, "Disability Studies (DS) in Britain and the United States (US) developed, from the 1970s onwards, both as a counter to the hegemonic

biomedical models that continue to frame international discussions of disability and in relation to particular histories of industrialization and civil rights movements" (p. 25).

The disability rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the discipline's emergence. Scholars started to explore topics such as the cultural representation of disability, the intersectionality of disability with other social categories, and the historical experiences of people with disabilities. Disability studies is one of the most challenging theories at present. "Critical Disability Studies" distinguishes "impairment" and "disability" and sees the latter as "…a socially generated system of discrimination" (Davis, 2014, p.177). According to Charlton, disabled people experience alienation from their own bodies, from their sexuality, and from others in society" (p.74).

The sociocultural construction of disability through visual representation is mighty, and the present study is based on the Bollywood representation of disability on screen. Pinney in his work *Camera Indica* observes that there is a "…complex relationship between photography and cinema in India. He argues that both media have played a significant role in shaping Indian notions of identity and selfhood" (p. 1). Pinney has also observed that Indian cinema has played a crucial role in creating a sense of national identity.

Art and Literature can change the way we perceive the world. Sometimes, disabled characters are depicted in literature and films in a negative light. The Indian epic *Mahabharata* depicts Shakuni as a detested character. The discourses of epics have a strong influence on shaping the attitudes of people towards disability. Indians may find it difficult to view the presence of dwarfs, hunchbacks, or disabled individuals as fortunate because of the *Ramayana's* skewed portrayal of the character Manthara. Her physical deformity, a hunchback, may be used symbolically to represent her inner turmoil and distorted perspective.

From the perspective of disability studies, Indian films present a visual reinforcement of the biases of society towards disabled individuals. Gokulsing and Dissanayake observe: "From the very

earliest times, the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, have profoundly influenced the thought, imagination, and outlook of the vast mass of Indian people" (p. 17). They further observe that "they have consequently had a profound impact on the development of Indian cinema and given it a unique Indian identity. Their influence can be usefully analysed at four levels: themes, narrative, ideology and communication" (p. 17).

Bollywood has a long history of using disability as a plot device, and characters with disability were often depicted in dark shades as pitiable or villainous, thus perpetuating negative stereotyping. The individual experience of a disabled individual is overlooked, and the intersectionality of race, culture and gender is not well represented. However, over the years, there has been a visible change in the visual media in India regarding the representation of disability.

In Bollywood cinema, disability was also represented through the marginalised lenses of poverty. As Hindi cinema has evolved to be a glamorous expression of the cultural diversity of India, the heroes and heroines are subjected to the audience's gaze. The masses consume them as part of popular culture. Joyjeet Pal observes that "Disability on Indian screen is not nuanced with mixed messages. From the occasional supercrip portrayal (Hartnett) of Deaf lip-readers and blind people with near sonar ability to sense objects to discourses of dependency around the pathos of disabled life, Indian cinema seemingly encompasses the range of canonical globally prevalent disability stereotypes" (p. 109).

A society's social and cultural aspects highly influence its portrayal of people with disability. Indian society is highly biased when it comes to the perception of disability on screen. In Hindu mythology, disability is often portrayed as a curse or punishment from the gods, and disabled characters are often depicted as vile and cruel. "The relationship of disability and punishment in Indian cinema is complex, as disability can either be seen as punitive or therapeutic, where the tolerance of a disability is a form of self-abnegation that emerges as an act of redemptive righteousness. These ideas have strong mythological roots" (Pal, 2013, p.111). Hindu mythology has portrayed

disability in a negative light and has shaped the attitude of Indian society. This trope continues in the films. "This idea of disability as the ultimate punishment for a range of sins appears across Indian cinema" (Pal, 2013, p.111). Films are cultural products. They influence and reinforce many social prejudices. Swagata Chatterjee observes that "disability in film has become a metaphor for the message that the non-disabled writer wishes to get across in the same way that beauty is used. In doing this, movie makers draw on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people, knowing that to portray a character with a humped back, a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings in the audience. Unfortunately, the more disability is used as a metaphor for evil or to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed" (p.14).

People with disabilities are mainly featured in popular culture through stereotypical images, but as years pass, culture becomes more inclusive and progresses, and realistic depictions are put forward. This change is visible in the cultural milieu of Bollywood films and Indian regional films. The cultural change and assimilation of the media of disabled individuals is part of the inclusiveness of society and is very relevant when viewed through the cultural lens. Disability portrayed in a new light is part of an "emergent culture," and it helps us to understand the cultural change in society. As Ramond Williams states: "Emergent forms are forms which are really in the process of formation, within the limits of existing formation. They are in a sense half-formed, seeking fuller formation. They are to be understood in terms of process and becoming, not in terms of finished state or substantial being" (p.130).

Disability in Hindi films often has mixed messages to offer the audience. The portrayal of disability was a plot technique to evoke a sense of ugliness and evil in the early decades of Hindi cinema. The film *Jeevan Naiyan* (1936), one of the earliest portrayals of disability in Hindi cinema, shows blindness as a punishment for the evil done by the protagonist. In the wake of colonisation, Indian films capture the experience of handicaps and the exclusion of disabled individuals as a stigma in the pattern of the West. People with disabilities

were shown as beggars in post-independence films such as *Koshis*, *Satte pe Satta*, and *Aakhen*.

   The portrayal of disability has changed over the years. The film *Koshish*, directed by Gulzar, which came out in 1972, has very sensitively portrayed the struggles of a deaf and mute couple. *Black* (2005) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali portrays the life of a deaf-blind girl, played by Rani Mukerji and her empowerment through her teacher, portrayed by Amitabh Bachchan. This visible shift in the portrayal of disability over the decades is a positive message of inclusion. It indicates the acceptance of disability, one of the marginalising factors in society. The aesthetic appeal of the movie is also impressive, as suggested by Swaminath and Bhide: "…every frame of which shows his passion and intensity. Bhansali's striving for perfection in his craft comes out in the meticulousness with which he tells his story without making you feel pity for the leading character of the blind-mute-deaf girl" (p. 244).

   In recent years, Indian cinema has shown significant progress in exploring the theme of disability. Filmmakers have started sensitively exploring the theme of disability, and more research has gone into the portrayal because of the use of science and technology. Films like *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Paa* (2009) and *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) have portrayed disabled characters with deep sensitivity and depth. The diversity of experience within the disabled community (ed., visual, hearing, mobility) is also explored in these recent films.

   The film *Barfi* (2012), directed by Anurag Basu, treats the theme of love in a very unconventional way. The love relationship between Barfi, portrayed by Ranbir Kapoor, and autistic woman Jhilmil Chatterjee, played by Priyanka Chopra, challenges the conventional narratives of love, thus underpinning the successful love themes in Bollywood cinema.

   Taare Zameen Par is a remarkably successful movie that significantly impacted society because of its sensitive portrayal of a boy named Ishan Avasti, a child with dyslexia. Though his parents fail to recognise his hidden talents, his sensitive school teacher shows him his inner potential. The prejudices of society are also sensitively

portrayed in the film.   Jyojeet Pal observes that "while some of these films indeed move closer to an inclusive view of disability as part and parcel of society, and several are significant on multiple levels because they discuss concepts that have never been featured before, there are still far too many films at the other end of the spectrum that continue the strong foundations of othering that years of Indian cinema have facilitated. 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, things like the public discourse of disability in popular culture are of critical importance" (p.129). Prasad observes that "Bollywood films can play a significant role in promoting social inclusion and challenging discrimination against people with disabilities. Films such as *My Name Is Khan* (2010) and *Hichki* (2018) have helped to raise awareness of different types of disabilities and to show that people with disabilities can achieve great things" (p.171). Mishra observes that **"**these films focus on the individual's abilities and aspirations rather than solely on their disabilities. They also highlight the societal barriers that differently-abled individuals face, aligning with the social and rights-based models of disability" (p. 1). The reasons for the changes can be identified in the following factors.

Shift in Social Attitudes: Society has shifted from viewing disability only as a medical issue or something negative to understanding it as a social problem influenced by prejudice, exclusion, and a lack of accessibility.

Influence of Rights-Based Movements: The global disability rights movement, along with India's legislative changes like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, has made inclusion an urgent social issue.

Cultural Responsibility of Cinema: Cinema, as a cultural product, influences public opinion. Filmmakers have started to acknowledge their role in challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusion.

Audience Expectations: As awareness grows, audiences prefer authentic and compassionate portrayals instead of exaggerated or pity-filled roles.

OTT Platforms and Global Exposure: Global exposure has created a demand for more realistic and sensitive stories that fit with worldwide trends in inclusive storytelling.

How the movies have achieved their goals is listed below

Sensitive Character Development: Films like *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) and *Paa* (2009) show disabled characters with individuality, inner life, and talents. They do not reduce them to just their conditions.

Diversity of Representation: Disabilities across different areas—dyslexia (*Taare Zameen Par*), progeria (*Paa*), cerebral palsy (*Margarita with a Straw*), autism (*Barfi*)—are explored in detail.

Challenging Conventional Narratives: *Barfi* (2012) redefines love by presenting a relationship with a neurodivergent character. It breaks away from the stereotype that disabled people cannot have romance.

Social Critique through Cinema: Films highlight not just disability but also the societal barriers, including prejudice, exclusion, and stigma, that people with disabilities encounter (Mishra, 2024). Promoting Inclusion: Movies like *Hichki* (2018) and *My Name is Khan* (2010) depict disability as compatible with achievement, resilience, and dignity. They support the social and rights-based model (Prasad, 2019).

The shift in portrayal comes from changing social awareness, rights-based frameworks, and the cultural responsibility of cinema. Filmmakers now emphasise ability, aspiration, and inclusion. They are moving away from the older stereotypes of pity or mockery. Indian cinema, as a widely consumed cultural product, can change public attitudes and create a more inclusive society.

Conclusion

Since the middle of the 20th century, Bollywood's representation of handicaps has changed significantly. Earlier representations included pathetic, defenceless people who served as comic relief. Social stigma was attached to the individuals and the family, and disability was used for dramatic effect. By the end of the 20th century, there was a noticeable change in how people were portrayed; movies started to break taboos and prejudices by presenting more complex characters with disabilities as engaged members of

society. Bollywood is becoming more and more involved with the social model of disability in the twenty-first century, which prioritises societal barriers over personal limitations. Movies like *Margarita with a Straw*, *Barfi!*, and *Taare Zameen Par* celebrate the abilities and uniqueness of disabled individuals by showing them with richness and empathy.

Bollywood cinema is playing a positive role in changing the way disability is represented in Indian society. By portraying people with disabilities in a positive light and by challenging negative stereotypes, Bollywood films are helping to promote a more inclusive society where people with disabilities are treated with respect and perception. Positive and realistic portrayals in Indian cinema have the potential to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity. Visual media can shape an empathetic society that can view disability as a social issue and handle it with care and caution. In recent years, Indian cinema has shown signs of change. Filmmakers have begun to explore disability more sensitively and authentically, challenging conventional narratives. The deconstruction of cinematic stereotypes can result in many alternate narratives on disability, contributing to the humanitarian aspect of a cultural product like cinema. It will grow as a tool that can influence and shape societal attitudes and would result in social change.

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