

## **Enabling/Disabling on Screen: Portrayal of Disability in Hindi Cinema**

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### **Abstract**

This essay analyses a section of films from Hindi cinema and its various approaches to portray disability. It also looks at how the Hindi cinema shapes the perception of non-disabled people towards disability and disabled people in the society. It follows the methodology of textual analysis of selected Hindi films that deal with disability as the central character of the plot. This study only looks at the physical disability and does not deal with mental disability. I will analyse the text of films that portray disability in various stereotypical and non-stereotypical manners. I shall engage in critical analysis of the text of Hindi films under 3 broader themes: (a) disability as punishment; (b) disability as over-heroism; and (c) non-stereotypical portrayal of disability.

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**Keywords:** disability in cinema, Bollywood and disability, portrayal of disability, Hindi cinema and disability.

### **Introduction**

Disability has always been marginalised in society. Disability has been looked down upon or seen differently from normality that's defined by the society. Disabled people face discrimination in society in terms of access to education, employment, and public spaces. Disability is widely misunderstood even today. Research has consistently indicated that disabled people are marginalised in society, as there is a lack of awareness and sensitivity about disability in society. Disability is often perceived as the punishment for the previous life or misdeeds by the parents in the past. This perception is prevalent not only among less educated people but also among the educated. Various groups and NGOs have tried to eradicate these stereotypes but due to their limitations, they could not spread awareness among a large number of people.

Cinema is a powerful medium to reach a large number of audiences. Cinema mirrors society in several ways. 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 behavioural change in their practices and attitudes. Cinema shapes the perception of an individual of society and, hence, it has been particularly effective in changing people's perception and uprooting societal stereotypes. Therefore, cinema as the powerful medium of mass communication should carry some responsibility. As it is the depiction of society, it should be careful with its representation of certain groups. Over the years, cinema has been criticised for its representations. It has continuously promoted stereotypes about love, emotion, and violence in the society. Disability is always used to elicit responses like sympathy and emotional drama or as a tool to generate comical moments. Stereotypes have also been developed through cinema related to disability, such as: disabled people are dependent on others for their basic needs; they have a sixth sense; or are sometimes likened to angels. As Mohipatra (2012) 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."

According to the United Nations (UN) (n.d.), disabled people are the largest minority of the world. Therefore, non-disabled people, or so called "normal" people, do not usually come in direct contact with disabled people. It is possible that they learn about disabled people or disability through media (mostly through cinema in the Indian context). Hindi cinema has astonishing reach across the countries. It is important that films should be ethically and politically correct in terms of their representation of disability so as to bring awareness among people, but unfortunately Hindi films have failed to do so. After living for 10 years in a residential special school for the blind, when I moved to college to pursue my further studies, I realised that sighted people have several misconceptions and stereotypes about people with visual impairment. When I became friends with them, I came to know that those stereotypes have been developed through cinema. For example, the idea of sixth sense was depicted in the Hindi film *Aankhen* released in 2002, in which three visually impaired people successfully rob a bank using their so-called sixth sense.

This essay analyses a section of Hindi cinema and its various approaches to disability portrayal. It also looks at how the Hindi cinema shapes the perception of non-disabled people towards disability and disabled people in the society. It follows the methodology of textual analysis of selected Hindi

films that deal with disability as the central character of the plot. It also aims to study the reading of disabled people and their portrayal in Hindi cinema. This study only looks at physical disability and does not deal with mental disability. I will analyse the text of films that portray disability in various stereotypical and non-stereotypical manner. I shall engage in critically analyse text of the Hindi films under 3 broader themes: 1- disability as punishment, 2- disability as over heroism and 3-beyond the stereotype.

Now, let us look at the various ways Hindi cinema portrays disability and disabled people.

### **Disability as Punishment**

The representation of disability as punishment can be found in Hindu religious practices and beliefs. Disabled people are often considered to be sent by God. Their disability is also sometimes seen as the outcome of karma—the misdeeds of the past. Even the ancient Hindu text like Manusmriti states that the disability is the suffering for punishment of the crime which the person has committed in the previous life (Kaur 2019).

Another negative sentiment towards disability can be found in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. In one story of the Mahabharata, King Dhritarashtra is made blind by the gods because in a previous life, he had brutally blinded a swan. In the Ramayana, there is Manthara, who is portrayed as the sinful manipulative servant with a hunched back. These kinds of portrayals in Hindu mythology constitute the perception of disability being treated as punishment. Unfortunately, even in the twenty-first century, disability is often perceived as a result of personal or parental sin. Even my own parents still believe that I became visually impaired because they committed some crime in the past, which obviously is due to the Hindu orthodox mindset.

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 based on an idea of social justice. Pal 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: she came 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 then, is revealed to be the same devoted wife he abandoned due to social taboo. *Koshish* (1972), directed by Gulzar, is considered as the first

attempt to discuss people with speech and hearing impairment using sign language. While the attempt can be appreciated, the film does not get away with internalising the social stigma of disability as punishment. *Koshibish* is yet another example, where the evil brother Asrani, who torments his deaf sister and brother-in-law is himself crippled, which he perceives as punishment for his acts. In *Dhammaan* (1981), the rich and arrogant atheist Rajesh Khanna is blinded and unable to buy a new pair of eyes for himself. He eventually finds a benevolent donor only when he feels remorse and turns to God. According to Prasad, Kashyap, and Rabindranath (2018), “In Bollywood, the idea of disability had been used as the severe punishment for a range of sins. For example, the wicked father-in-law is blinded in *Aadmi* (1968), in *Kasam* (1988), the chieftain of a village of criminals gets disabled in a police attack in *Jalte Badan* (1973), Kiran Kumar, a drug addict, gets blinded.”

In the film *Sholay* (1975), Thakur (Sanjeev Kumar), the police officer, has his arms amputated by the robber Gabbar (Amjad Khan). Unable to avenge himself, Thakur employs two mercenaries to destroy the Gabbar’s gang, but sets up a climactic duel between himself and Gabbar. He begins the duel by saying 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. Indeed, as Sawhney (n.d.) states, “The punishment for the evil is not a swift bullet, but an enduring disability similar to the one imposed on him.” Similarly, in *Andhadhun* (2018), Tabu damages Ayushman Khurana’s eyes because she realises that he is pretending to be a visually impaired person, but he is not, and he may have seen the murder that took place at Tabu’s place when he visited her house as visually impaired musician to play the piano.

### **Disability as Over-Heroism**

While a certain section of society associates disability with karma, some people think that the person with disability comes with special powers or special abilities. This is the reason why people think that disabled people have sixth sense, and this stereotype is even prevalent among educated sections of the society. According to Mohipatra (2012), “The terminology of ‘differently-abled’ is a recent one which got its recognition after three stages of debate and discussion from handicapped to disabled to physically challenged.” But the society is also addressing those with disability as “special people” or “Divyang”. “Divyang” is a Hindi word that means divine body. This terminology is irrational. What is so divine about a disabled person’s body? In India, it is widely believed that God loves those who help weak people because weaker people are considered to be closer to God. So, they help disabled people

to please the God and not out of concern or humanity. This is the root cause of why this new terminology of “Divyang” or “special people” came to existence. This is problematic because the views about disability as sins of the past and closeness to God are very regressive approaches to the issue at hand.

Some film-makers have tried to show the disability in a so-called positive way by giving it a heroic persona, but I would argue that they have failed to do the same. Unfortunately, film-makers are unable to detach themselves from the societal stereotypes. In fact, I would argue that it is the result of a lack of research or insight into the lives of those with disability. To portray disability in a positive light, film-makers are known to enhance other senses and skills of a disabled person to superhuman levels because he/she lacks a particular physical ability. As Mohipatra (2012) says, “In Indian Cinema, the relationship between sympathy and heroism is parallel. The golden rule is if the main protagonist is with special abilities, then first he earns the sympathy of the audience, then struggle for survival and finally ends up as a hero.” For instance, in the 2017 Hindi film, *Kaabil*, Hrithik Roshan and Yami Gautam play a visually impaired couple whose situations, circumstances, and struggles are placed in the film to create sympathy in the minds of audience. In the end, with his extraordinary planning, Hrithik Roshan takes the revenge of his wife’s murder by killing the villains. At the film’s climax, he is proven to be a great hero.

In yet another film, *Iqbal* (2005), a poor villager who is deaf and mute wants to become a cricketer. The factor of sympathy is also added in the film through disability to capture the emotions of the audience. The film is inspirational, and the protagonist Iqbal has the element of heroism.

Akshay Kumar, Paresh Rawal, and Arjun Rampal successfully rob a bank despite being blind using their “sixth sense” in *Aankhen* (2002). In this film, heroism of disability has been glorified extensively. The film portrays the biggest stereotype of disabled people—that of the sixth sense. In one of the sequences, visually impaired persons from all over India are asked to apply for a workshop where they would be awarded a scholarship. Akshay Kumar (one of the three selected applicants) says in his application, “God is the biggest dealer of this world. He took away my eyes but gave me a special thing and that is the sixth sense. After knowing about your advertisement about the workshop, my sixth sense alerted me.” Such statement by a visually impaired person presents more convincing power for audience to believe in things like so-called sixth sense. This dialogue is very misleading for the audience.

Another stereotype the film portrays is that of the disabled person as beggar. Paresh Rawal's character is shown as a blind beggar in the beginning. In another sequence, the film takes the glorification of sixth sense to the next level, where Akshay Kumar is portrayed as having a great sixth sense, through which he realises that his friend Paresh Rawal's life is in danger when he and Arjun Rampal are out to call the doctor. After his sixth sense alerted him, Kumar and Rampal move back to the training centre where their friend has been trapped by Amitabh Bachchan. This false representation of the disabled having a sixth sense is very common in Indian films and television, and disconnected from reality and real experiences of those living with disability. While training before the bank robbery, Sushmita Sen teaches all the visually impaired protagonists to count the steps to reach a particular section of the bank. This is yet another stereotype—that visually impaired people count steps to move from one place to other.

While these movies present people with disabilities in a positive light, they also distort the true identity of these people and does not contribute to spreading awareness about disabled people. The factor of heroism is an effective tool to make audience feel inspired by Hindi films and, in some ways, a reason why disabled people are perceived as inspirational. The film enhances other skills and senses of disabled characters and propagate it as the sixth sense of disabled people.

### **Beyond the Stereotypes**

While various directors have portrayed disability in an inappropriate manner, some directors have taken an effort to spread awareness about disability by making films from disabled people's perspective, where their films truly depict the limitation and abilities of disabled people.

*Sparsh* (1980) is one such film directed by Sai Paranjpe, which deals with the life of a blind principal. The protagonist of the film portrays an independent visually impaired school principal, who not only manages the school and staff but also manages his household works like cooking and cleaning. A visually impaired person's strength and limitations have been very well represented by the director. The film realistically portrays the complex conflicts between abled and disabled bodies. It conveys the message that disabled people do not want unnecessary sympathy, pity, and help. It also raises important issues about disability of what disabled people have to go through when society constantly questions their abilities. In one of the initial sequences, the protagonist of the film, Anirudh

(Naseeruddin Shah), reaches the house of the female protagonist of the film, Kavita (Shabana Azmi), instead of a doctor while listening to her sing. There, Shabana Azmi informs him that he has reached the wrong place and subsequently guides him to the right address. While climbing down the stairs, noticing his visual impairment, Kavita shows interest in helping him descend. In response to that concern, Anirudh immediately says, “No thanks, as I have reached here without anyone, I can also go without anyone.” Through this sequence itself, the director successfully establishes that visually impaired or disabled people do not want unnecessary help. One of the important aspects of the film is that it shows a disabled person attending parties and involving himself with different aspects of society and, most importantly, becoming a part of the mainstream society. In the party, Kavita meets Anirudh and there arises a very basic conversation that is interesting from society’s perspective. Anirudh recognises Kavita by her voice. Shocked, Kavita asks him how he recognised her, referring to his visual impairment. Anirudh clears that he recognised her through her voice, but she says that she hardly spoke three–four words to him, referring to their previous accidental meeting. Here, Anirudh gives a very basic and logical answer. He asks, “Would you have to see a person again and again to recognise that person?”

In yet another sequence, society’s attitude towards a person with disability— “Bechara” attitude (helplessness)—can be seen when Kavita visits Anirudh’s office, agreeing to his request for volunteering at the school. Anirudh asks her what she can teach blind students. To this, she replies that she can teach singing, storytelling, and handicraft, as well as everything she knows partly. She then adds, “*Main yehi chahungi ki becharon ko zyada se zyada de saku*” (I would want to teach those helpless people as much as I can). Anirudh makes a small request of her. He says, “It would be great if you could forget the word ‘helpless’ as soon as possible. We need help but not sympathy. Students over here definitely lack something, but there is no point of keep making them remind their disability. In fact, it is important to realise them that there is still hope in life. Will you think in this manner? It is going to be a big challenge for you. Don’t forget: If you will give them something then they will also give you many things. No one is doing any favour to anyone, and no one is helpless.” In the same sequence, Anirudh is pouring coffee for Kavita. Seeing that, Kavita gets up out of concern and says that she will help. Anirudh gets angry and says, “Sit down, please, sit down. You are my guest and let me host you. If I need any help, I will tell you.”

Another conflict between abled and disabled bodies can be traced when Anirudh and Kavita go to a restaurant for the dinner. Kavita's thinking of Anirudh being unable to dance due to his visual impairment reflects the constant struggle of disabled person. Subsequently, the staff gives the bill to Kavita instead of Anirudh because of his stereotypical thinking attached with visually impaired people. Such incidents shatter Anirudh's confidence and self-esteem. This reflects in his behaviour when Kavita brings cake for him, and he is reluctant to cut it. In another sequence, Anirudh explains Kavita about how he is reluctant to receive any favours because of his disability. He raises this concern when he realises that Kavita is doing many things for him. In the same sequence, he also refers to the blind students and him as "Bechara". This clearly indicates how his disability and abilities are constantly threatened by the society through these various incidents.

The film also challenges the socially constructed idea of beauty. In a sequence, Kavita describes her beauty to Anirudh by talking about her fair complexion, hazel eyes, and long, dense hair, whereas Anirudh describes her beauty in terms of her beautiful voice and the attractive fragrance of her body. One may argue that he is a blind, so complexion may not matter to him, and he is using other senses to describe her beauty. But I would argue that even non-disabled persons have those other senses. Despite this realistic representation, it is problematic to note that Shabana Azmi's character is a widow. This can be read as being there for no substantial reason other than attaching some element of "lack" or social marginalisation to her character, so that she can be in a relation with a disabled person.

*Margarita with a Straw* (2014) is a film that deals with disability without pity and sympathy. It is probably the first film that deals with disability and sexuality together. We never talk about disability and sexuality on the same page. If you take disability out of the equation, it still an interesting film about a young, horny, awkward teenager and is a coming-of-age story. Sexuality is still treated as a taboo in India; it is one of the biggest issues even today. But when sexuality of a disabled person has been never discussed. Disabled persons have always been desexualised by the media and the society. Laila, the protagonist of *Margarita with a Straw*, has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair to move around. She is interested in exploration of her sexuality for which she is completely unapologetic and has no shame in accepting it. The film explains that just like any human being, even disabled persons have sexual feelings and there is no harm in exploring that. In one of the initial sequences of the film, the protagonist Laila is shown watching porn and having pleasure. In the subsequent sequence to that, she asks for a vibrator in a shop and laughs about it. In the next sequence, the protagonist is shown as



making out with a boy. Thus, the director establishes Laila's exploration of her sexuality in the beginning of the story itself. The film also deals with the conflict between abled and disabled bodies. Laila breaks down when she feels rejected by the lead singer of the band group for whom she develops feelings. This is what a disabled person faces on a daily basis when he or she feels rejected or don't receive love from the so-called abled bodies.

When Laila moves to New York to study, the film depicts how that city is accessible for disabled people. There, Laila meets Khanum, a young, visually impaired activist, and Jared, who has been assigned to help Laila. Here, her sexual exploration takes a different route. She develops great friendship with both. In a club with Khanum, Laila opens about her experience with dating. She says, "Why would anybody date me?" referring to her disability and adds that this is what she has experienced in the past. After this conversation, both start dancing. They have great time together. Then, Laila reaches Khanum's place at night and both enjoy some intimate moments. Both fall in love with each other and then Laila moves in with Khanum. Soon after, she also has sex with Jared, for which she feels guilty because she was in a relationship with Khanum.

I think this movie moves beyond stereotypes because of the absence of pity, sympathy, punishment, and heroism attached with disability. Laila losing her mother, her expectations of true love, having sexual desire, daily struggles, and Khanum's feeling of betrayal make the audience aware that these struggles and human desire are universal and disabled people are also a part of this universe. However, a critique of these films that try to portray disabled people in non-stereotypical manner is that non-disabled actors play the character of disabled people. Though both films try to draw a thorough picture of disability, they fail to give right intention and are trapped in the societal stereotype that disabled people cannot act in films.

## **Conclusion**

In Hindi commercial or mainstream cinema, the protagonist has a great importance. The protagonist is considered as the ideal person who is perfect, who is always right, who cannot be defeated, and is truly influential. The protagonist has the perfect heroic persona. Hindi films have always been criticised for promoting stereotypes. Stereotyping disability as punishment, sixth sense/over-heroism, pity, and dependence has been used excessively in them. Prasad, Kashyap, and

Rabindranath (2018) say, “The disabled bodies thus have conventionally fulfilled either supporting character roles, or else if they are the central characters or protagonists, they must become an object of tragedy or their senses and skills would be stretched beyond reality, in an exaggerated fashion.”

Considering the fact that the many in society lack direct experience with disabled people, the film-makers draw on their prejudice and incorporate the stereotypes related to disability in the film that are already prevalent in society. This is why we can clearly see the absence of authentic research in films about disability.

As discussed earlier, films generalise and stereotype disability and disabled people by incorporating heroism as a character of disability. They enhance other skills and senses of disabled characters and promote it as the sixth sense of disabled people. This is misleading for a non-disabled audience and disturbing for disabled people. Stereotypes like sixth sense and extraordinariness of disabled people in films distort the true identity of the disabled people. Extraordinariness of disabled people takes away their right to be ordinary. The right to be an ordinary person is one of the most basic rights of someone with disability needs, but terms like “Divyang”, “special person” and “sixth sense” act as exclusionary tools of disabled people from the mainstream society. Everybody is an ordinary person besides his or her achievements or talent. Disabled people who achieve something in their lives is not because they got extra supernatural power or they have divine bodies, but because of their determination and human efforts.

There are not many films that deal with the real-life disabled personalities. The current film-making trend is inclined towards making biopics where the film-makers seek real-life stories and personalities. But when it comes to stories of real-life disabled people, film-makers are reluctant. The reason for this attitude by the film-makers may be the non-disabled majority of the audience. The success stories of the disabled people are largely untold and, even if they are told, they are focussed on glorification of their condition rather than their achievement. The film-makers depict disability in films according to their own convenience, which obviously lacks authentic research and stereotypes are thus glorified. The depiction of real-life stories of disabled personalities becomes important to educate audiences and a way for these stereotypes to be eradicated.

The other problem of our film industry is that non-disabled actors play the characters of disabled

people. Film-makers don't work with a disabled person to play disabled characters because of the stereotype that disabled person won't be able to act or work in the industry. Robert Mrcruer contextualises disability in the root sense of the word, he argues that the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability in an authentic way replicates the theory of the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness. "Compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa" (Mrcruer 2013). This criticism also applies to those film-makers who depict disability in non-stereotypical manner. I understand that there will be some limitation, but physically disabled people can be assigned to play the role of a disabled character. Due to lack of opportunity, disabled people are also reluctant to make a career in the film industry, and even if they do, they are denied opportunities by the industry. Making disabled people a part of film production will create a positive inclusive environment in society. The authenticity of the representation of disability can be improved by making disabled people part of the film-making process.

One of the most significant points I would like to raise is the issue of accessibility. Due to prejudice and ignorant nature of our society, the accessibility issue faced by disabled people to consume media content or cinema has been never discussed. The film-makers never consider disabled people as their audience. Audio description of the film for visually impaired persons and sign language in the film for hearing/speech impaired people can solve the issue of accessibility for disabled people. There are mobile applications like Excel Cinema, which make available audio description for visually impaired people if requested by the makers of the film. There are some films like *Andhadun* and *Kaabil* that were screened separately for visually impaired people with the help of audio description by Excel Cinema, but again, this is an exclusionary approach of the society. Why can't visually impaired people or disabled people experience the pleasure of watching cinema with non-disabled people in the theatre? Digital accessibility rights are extremely important for India and one of the ways that can make the society inclusive for all.

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