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# Representation of ‘Disability’ on Screen; through the Lens of Bollywood

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*“If disabled people and their knowledge were fully integrated into society, everyone's relation to her/his real body would be liberated.”*

*- Susan Wendell*

The common worldview believes that the able-bodied are the norm in society, and the people who have disabilities must either strive to become that norm or should keep their distance from able-bodied people. The ‘able-ist’ worldview holds that disability is an error, a mistake, or a failing, rather than a simple consequence of human diversity. So, the term ‘disability’ doesn’t only stand for physical or psychological impairment. This rightfully can be used to refer to the disabling barriers of prejudice, discrimination and social exclusion of the impaired person. It is actually a socially constructed form based upon physiological reality, which acts as the attribute of the socio-cultural and other forms of oppressions leading the way toward discrimination and absolute elimination from the ‘pathologized’ course of the society. The process of pathological normalization of body gives assurance to decrease the attributes of non-compliance and hence affirms the possibilities of social conformity. So, being no more a medical construct, disability is rather treated as the conditioning of the people created by the society and ruling ideology in which they are unable to conform to the major needs and the desires propagated by the media and the other ruling institutions. Factually in our society, prejudice is associated with the recognition

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of difference and an integral part of it is the concept of normality. And this idea of normality is inherently tied up with ideas about what is right, what is desirable and what belongs to it.

In Indian socio-cultural context, the traditional concept of ‘Disability and Karma’ enunciates disability as a perception of punishment for misdeeds in the past lives or crimes committed by the parents, which to some extent still continues to be a common belief amongst not only the less educated, but amongst well-educated urban dwellers also. The construction and also modification of such common belief have been performed by the media with the dramatic proliferation in societal sub-systems, coupled with its symbolic power to shape reality. Depiction of disability in media embodying human roles and values has also undergone a paradigmatic change. In a bid to reflect the reality and evoke enough sympathy, mass-mediated texts, especially popular cinema somehow reinforce the traditional and polarized views of ‘normalcy’ and ‘thriving non-normalcy’ within the heterogeneous condition of physiological and psychological impairment, but almost in a homogenous manner.

## **PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY IN BOLLYWOOD POPULAR MOVIES**

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.” The depiction of disability through the Bollywood movies mainly encompasses this very view. 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 impairment, there have been some film-

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makers who have been able to build a tale around the insensitivity of society towards the disabled. Observation can reveal multifaceted portrayal styles of disability within the filmic narrative of Bollywood.

### **Disability as punishment**

This concept is actually based upon the previously mentioned traditional ideation of 'Disability and Karma'. While disability has been widely regarded as a punishment in India for quite some time, this has been the most popular representation of disability in our films as well. One of the earliest films to portray disability as punishment was the 1936 Bombay Talkies film, *Jeevan Naiya*. The film, written by Niranjana Pal was driven by an idea of social justice in film, and used his screen writing as a means of highlighting problems with traditional orthodox beliefs. 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. Gulzar's *Koshish* (1972) is yet another example where the evil brother (played by Asrani), who torments his deaf sister and brother-in-law, becomes crippled himself, which he takes as punishment for his acts. In *Dhanwaan* (1981) the rich and arrogant atheist (played by 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 dominant 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 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

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punishment than death. Being a crucial adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the more recent film *Haider* (2014) also echoes similar sentiment, with the protagonist (played by Shahid Kapoor) deciding against killing his uncle despite his strong resolve to avenge his father's murder, partly because of his mother's words 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 cult film in India, *Sholay* (1975). In this film, Thakur, the police officer (played by Sanjeev Kumar) has his arms amputated by the bandit Gabbar (played by Amjad Khan). Being unable to avenge himself, Thakur employs two mercenaries to destroy the bandit's gang, but sets up a climactic duel between himself and Gabbar. With sheer melodrama he takes over Gabbar finally even without his arms, and concludes it not by killing Gabbar, but by crushing his arms with spikes. The enduring physical and psychological struggle of impairment, imposed as a curse in these cases, was promulgated by the mainstream Bollywood narratives as the most 'fruitful' punishment even worse than death.

### **Disability as a comic interlude**

Disability has often been used as comic relief in action movies or light entertainment films through acts of almost offensive caricature. In movies such as *Tom, Dick and Harry* (2006), *Pyare Mohan* (2006) etc, the lead characters or one of them have been people with different physical impairment (generally problems with speech, vision or hearing). Their limitations and interaction with each other 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) and its sequels (There's also an controversy with *Golmaal 3* regarding the stammer scenes), *Mujhse Shaadi Karogi* (Kader Khan as a person with different disability everyday), *Judaai* (Upasna Singh

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with speech disorder), *Chup Chup Ke* (Where both the hero and heroine were with speech impairment; while the heroine was really mute, the hero pretended to be for avoiding some problems, which was used as comic attraction throughout the movie) are some of other typical mainstream Bollywood movies where limitations have been exploited for comic effect. Since disability is not the primary theme for these movies, these, unfortunately, have often reinforced the existing social stereotypes.

### **Disability as an object of pity and dependence**

Arguably, the persistent representation of people with impairment as unable to live independently has been a very important setback to the independent living movement for the ‘differently able community’ worldwide. In Bollywood films also, the idea of dependence on charity is quite typical. For instance, the 1964 classic *Dosti* features two disabled protagonists, Mohan, who is blind and Ramu, who uses crutches to walk. In the film, Ramu is seen very distressed and eventually also been insulted while asking for a job, by getting the answer, “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 a deaf and mute couple (played by Nana Patekar and Seema Biswas) have been shown as completely dependent, both personally as well as economically, on their daughter (played by Manisha Koirala), who is ‘normal’. In fact, they become distraught with their daughter’s affair and her decision of marriage and even think to impede it in a fear of being utterly helpless on their own.

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The National Film Award hailed movie *Koshish* (1972), directed by Gulzar, is often seen as a landmark in the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema. The movie opens with sign language alphabets in its credits, and at several points, it takes almost an educational stance to its audience by incorporating how a deaf person may communicate and participate economically, among others. Though the film sensitively depicts very authentic mundane struggle of a deaf and mute couple and their ever-lasting high spirit, this too couldn't overcome the cliché representation of impairment through the lens of both social pity and dependency. At the film's climax, protagonist Hari Charan's (played by Sanjeev Kumar) boss at work invites him home for dinner and asks him to bring along his son. The scene unravels in the boss's eventual offering of his daughter's hand in marriage to Hari's son. Hari (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 too and so 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, Hari immediately puts aside the class issue and agrees to the marriage, but the son (who is 'normal') refuses emphatically. 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 apparent portrayal of boss's gestural change while confessing his daughter's physical impairment and also the refusal of marriage proposal by Hari's son can be considered almost insulting. Furthermore, while the boss's search for a 'patient man' for his daughter's successful conjugal life reinforces the idea of dependence (for a deaf-mute) on a 'normal' person, Hari's immediate consent to the marriage after knowing about the girl's impairment reflects the usual sense of pity on a disabled person (even being himself a deaf-mute too!).

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## **Disability as extraordinary heroism**

There are some films that have projected persons with disabilities as heroes and even almost super-heroes! For instance, in the 1998 Bollywood thriller *Dushman*, the protagonist (played by Sanjay Dutt), a blind veteran, fights the villain (played by Ashutosh Rana), when he tries to rape the heroine (played by Kajol), using his ‘sixth sense’ to determine villain’s position and movement. Similarly, the three lead characters (played by Akshay Kumar, Paresh Rawal and Arjun Rampal) successfully rob a bank despite being blind again using their ‘sixth sense’ in *Aankhen* (2002). In attempts to represent physical impairment in a positive light, these kinds of movies actually 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.”

## **Disability as social maladjustment**

The characters of ‘*Shakuni*’ and ‘*Manthara*’ from the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana respectively 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 in many movies, like the scheming crippled brother-in-law (played by Prem Chopra) in *Ram Tera Desh* (1984), the crippled evil brother among twins in *Gora Aur Kala* (1972) etc. In *Gora Aur Kala*, the lead actor plays twin brothers; one of them with some amount of physical impairment, who eventually goes evil, carries jealousy for another one, and finally got conquered by that ‘suave’, ‘kind’, ‘desirable’, ‘ideal’ brother of the contrasting pair. Morris truly utters, “...*Unfortunately, the more*

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*disability is used as a metaphor for evil or just to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed.”*

### **The sensible representation: ‘Sparsh’**

Apart from the stereotyped stigmatic depiction, there are some more authentic and thoughtful representation of disabled individuals in Bollywood generating awareness about their true abilities and also limitations. Sai Paranjpe’s *Sparsh* (1980) is probably the most prominent one of these kinds. The film is about the life of Anirudh (played by Nasseruddin Shah), a blind school principal. His expectations, strengths and limitations all are well-represented in the movie, which portrays Anirudh as a very independent man, capable of not only managing an entire school, but also his own personal life-cooking, cleaning etc. The movie conveys that it is not the submission of the impaired person by seeking pity or charity, but an imposition over them by the societal system which constantly questions and compares their abilities. It also explores the tricky aspect of disability and relationship, with the ‘normal’ factors like ‘love’, ‘concern’ etc. At the same time, the movie also highlights several bitter realities, most importantly the lack of accessible textbooks in Braille, and the focus on vocational education for the blinds as alternative of mainstream academics.

### **THE RECENT SCENARIO**

A new wave of Hindi films has started portraying disability much more sensibly and sensitively on the screen. The intent is to use the platform as a mean to generate awareness and sensitivity among the common people. Also, there seems to be a paradigm shift in how a director looks at disability, by depicting individual and interpersonal acceptance and adherence instead of cliché melodramatic social negation and rejection. It is noticeable that, the earlier films of



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Bollywood while representing disability, mainly preferred to portray characters of deaf and mute, blind, accidentally impaired and impaired by action of revenge. On contrary, 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; such as Progeria, Dyslexia, Asperger Syndrome, Tetraplegia, Autism, Cerebral Palsy etc. It is gratifying to see that these kinds of films are indeed moving closer to an inclusive view of disability as integrated part of society. Though 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, especially for taking effort to facilitate critical importance of public discourse of disability.

The films like *Iqbal* (2005) and *Black* (2005) mainly jive with the rhetoric of heroic triumph of the impaired protagonists against all misfortunes and social obstacles. Nagesh Kukoonoor's *Iqbal* is about the hard of hearing and mute son of a farmer (played by Shreyas Talpade), who has a passion for the game of cricket and eventually goes on to make it to the Indian Cricket team overcoming all barriers. Inspired by the film 'The Miracle Worker', which was based on Helen Keller's life and struggle, the cathartic tale of a visually challenged and hearing impaired girl (played by Rani Mukhrjee) in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Black*, overcomes the adversity of being disabled to become one of the 20th century's leading humanitarians.

*Black* also portrays the lack of social touch and numerous formal rules, which bind up the disability in elite family where the struggle is mostly inward and confined to the person with disability. But 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

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competition in the industrial world. Here, *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* (inspired by critically acclaimed Hollywood film 'I am Sam') can be considered as more truthful portrayal of disability, where an autistic single father (played by Ajay Devgan) challenges existing social and legal system in order to claim the custody of his only daughter. Compared to this, *Koi Mil Gaya* deals with an imaginary friendship of a mentally challenged young boy (played by Hrithik Roshan) and an alien, though portraying some amount of social struggle of the protagonist. The film *Guzaarish* (2010) also portrays the societal and legal struggle of the protagonist Ethan (again played by Hrithik Roshan), a tetraplegic or quadriplegic patient, who petitions the court for 'Euthanasia' and decides to gather public support when the law fails him. This film actually deals more with the existing debate regarding Euthanasia than social struggle of an impaired individual. *My Name is Khan* (2010) is also another film of this kind, where the sensitive issue of Islamist and Terrorism is given the prime focus through the journey of protagonist Rizvan Khan (played by Shah Rukh Khan) with asperger syndrome, rather than portraying the mundane struggle of acceptance for such individual.

The highly acclaimed film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) authentically portrays the mundane problems and struggle for social adherence of a 10 years old dyslexic boy (played by Darsheel Safary). This particular film leads to a greater appreciation for the limitations faced by people with intellectual disabilities, and resulted in several educational institution and authorities across the country taking action to include the students with slow learning abilities in the mainstream. Another movie, which has successfully created a mass awareness about a rare genetic disorder, is *Paa* (2009), which gives a very authentic depiction of progeria suffered 12 year old Auro and his physical and psychological struggle against existing societal forms of acceptance. The character of Auro is played by then 66 years old

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Amitabh Bachchan, being masked by an extraordinary makeup portraying disordered physical appearance of a progeria patient.

Anurag Basu's *Barfi!* (2012) narrates the sweet and simple romantic tale of a deaf-mute boy Barfi (played by Ranbir Kapoor), an autistic girl Jhilmil (played by Priyanka Chopra) and a 'normal' girl Shruti (played by Ileana D'Cruz). Notably, the film tries to depict the construct of love and sexuality within an autistic individual through some short but crucial behavioral gestures of the character Jhilmil. The discovery and triumph of this individual choice of sexuality within the framing of disability, has probably never been portrayed so prominently like the film *Margarita, With a Straw* (2014), directed by Shonali Bose. The film depicts the journey of an independent, rebellious teen Laila (played by Kalki Koechlin), suffering from cerebral palsy. The story unfolds Laila's self-discovery of being bisexual, her struggle against all societal inadequacy of adherence and acceptance and finally embarking a journey on her own taking control of her own life without any need or dependency of being loved by anyone else.

## IN CONCLUSION

In this journey from archetypical portrayal of disability to creating authentic representation of impairment and its struggle, though a very positive shift of building mass awareness can be noticed, some problems remain as well. Though creating special inclusive measures, the abled-dominated society still declines to recognize the impaired people as fully integrated and contributing members. This is like the both face of the same patriarchal society, which first ostracizes then glorifies an impaired individual in construct of 'normalcy' (Wendell, 1989). Aren't the popularized mediated codes of representing disability congregating them within a particular

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socio-cultural box of ‘entities thriving for normalcy’? While representing a disabled character in film, imitating the metonymical and gestural pattern of a disabled person and hailing it by judging the quotient of similarity can surely help to garner enough social sympathy or may be apathy for some comprehensive measures. But, in a paralletic view, such filmic practice of distinguishing ‘abled’ as ‘conforming entity’ and the ‘disabled’ as ‘finally triumphant as a conforming entity’, is further differentiating the disabled as ‘others’ by the carried codes and signs under the canopy of liberty and progressiveness propagated by modern media and society.

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