

## PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY IN HINDI CINEMA: A STUDY OF EMERGING TRENDS OF DIFFERENTLY- ABLED

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### ABSTRACT

*Cinema is considered to be a powerful medium that reflects the happenings in a society. While it is caught up between the real and reel life, it still performs as an important medium of entertaining people, educating them and bringing a behavior change in their practice and attitudes. While there are people who believe in the power of cinema to change the world, there are others who say that its chief purpose is to entertain people. In case of 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. However, there has been a third trend which emerged in the beginning of the new millennium is a major contribution of films in India. The present study is an attempt to identify the variation of portrayal of disability in earlier days and the present trend which perhaps justify the contribution of Bollywood to the society. And the recent trend is an effort of filmmakers to make the disabled people differently-abled and uncover many hidden disorders related to disability for creating awareness among the audience in India. While formulating the research design for this paper, one pertinent question raised – whether the recent trend is a self- initiated or a response to continuous critics of Bollywood's stereotype portrayal of disability. Through a historical analysis method few questions of similar nature has been analyzed in this article.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Differently-abled, Hindi Film, Bollywood, Disability, New Trend, Portrayal.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Cinema is perhaps the mainstream of all art forms, most popular and most accessible, especially in India, a country which produces most number of films in a year compared to any other country and a country where we have a large base of cinema-going public. Cinema, more than any other art, has the power to influence people. Therefore, it is very important to understand how the country, its people and its aspirations are represented in the cinema produced in the country. Cinema as a medium of mass communication can be seen at different levels, serving different purposes. It can be an art form, an entertainment, a social document or a social critique. Cinema

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can be all of these and at the same time be a means to something else – a mirror unto our lives, showing us exactly how we function as society. In any social theme, often we see many diseases are portrayed where the lead character either has overcome it or die with a strong emotional feeling. However, disability with its various form has been shown in different characters over the period of time.

One way of examining films dealing with disabilities as mirrors which indicate a society's attitude toward the subject is to examine the history of the interaction between disabilities and film (Norden, 1994). While analyzing disability and cinema, Morris (1991) explain, "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 humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience. Unfortunately, the more disability is used as a metaphor for evil or just to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed."

Indian cinema often criticized for its stereotype theme of love, emotion and violence. Nevertheless, its focus on social theme is remarkable especially when one analyses the attempts made to highlight the most uncommon diseases. History suggests a lot many films have been made on different diseases at different times but the recent trend on the rare disease is new innovation. It is certain that there are lots of themes based on disabled have been produced at different times and most of them have got tremendous popularity with good business. But the portrayal of rare diseases associated with disability and making them differently-abled<sup>1</sup> theme in recent time has been a remarkable contribution of Indian cinema.

Since the beginning of Hindi film era, many film makers have attempted to portray the various diseases in a different thematic way. However, disability remained the central theme of all disease. An introspection of the same would guide us to get a comparative view of past and present trend of Hindi films based on disease related theme. A close look of the beginning of the disease related themes will uncover many realities.

## **PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY AS THE MAIN DISEASE**

Mass media has a strong impact on peoples' imagination of any disease related theme (Cumberland and Negrine, 1992; Norden, 1994), and this in turn makes our study of disability a complex examination in which the lines between what is derived from traditional social imaginations of disability are easily blurred by what is a contemporary social belief influenced by screen portrayals. Portrayal of disability in Hindi cinema has always been the central theme of all disease. The nature of disability in Hindi Cinema has always been primarily either punishment or dependence. (Pal, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

One of the earliest films to portray the disability as punishment was the 1936 Bombay Talkies film, *Jeevan Naiya*. The film, written by Niranjan Pal was driven by an idea of social justice in film, and used his screenwriting as a means of highlighting problems with traditional beliefs, specifically those related to Hindu orthodoxy. In *Jeevan Naiya*, the lead character who abandons his wife because of her background from a family of dancers. Subsequently the husband got blinded in an accident and nursed back to health and happiness by the woman who unknown to him revealed to be the same devoted wife he abandoned due to social taboo.

This idea of disability as the ultimate punishment for a range of sins is seen across Indian cinema. In *Netrikkan* (1979), the philandering Rajnikanth ends up on a wheelchair at the end of the film in an importance that offers a fitting outcome for his lascivious ways through the film (and therein also highlights the de-sexualization of the disabled). The wicked father-in-law Pran is blinded in *Aadmi* (1968), in *Kasam* (1988), again Pran as the chieftain of a village of criminals is disabled in a police attack, in *Jalte Badan* (1973), the drug addict Kiran Kumar is blinded, in *Kashish* (1972) the evil brother Asrani who torments his Deaf sister and brother-in-law is himself crippled, which he takes as punishment for his acts, in *Dhanwaan* (1981) the rich, arrogant atheist Rajesh Khanna is blinded and unable to buy a new pair of eyes for himself and eventually finds a benevolent donor only when he repents and turns to god. In *Mehboob ki Mehendi*, when the protagonist Pradeep Kumar comes to kill his nemesis Iftikhar, he finds him on a wheelchair, and decides then that he's not worth stabbing since he is already disabled and allowing him to live would be worse punishment than death, echoing the theme of *Sholay* that the disability trumps death. However, during seventies, which was dominated by the young angry man era, Gulzar made the first attempt that combined a narrative interspersed with some basic discussion of sign language and independent living for the deaf in "*Koshish*" released in 1971.

Similarly the way mental illness is used in the narrative of the film is determined by the state of the society and the reflection of political and economic factors which are prevalent at a specific time in the history of the culture and society. Cinema in general and Indian cinema in particular has a fantastic disconnectedness from reality. In a country like India, where people idolize film stars and are markedly influenced by cinema, it is very important that issues like human emotions and mental illnesses are portrayed accurately and responsibly. For long, the Hindi film industry namely "Bollywood"<sup>2</sup> represented the mentally challenged as comic supporting characters that add an amusing sideshow to the central story. While Hindi cinema has evolved on various aspects in recent years, for some strange reason, it continues to be irresponsible in its projection of mental illness.

Andrade (2010) examined the extent to which the identified inaccuracies are practically important and offer reasons for the inaccuracies. Considering the potential for harm in the dissemination of misinformation, filmmakers should exhibit a greater sense of ethics when creating impressions that might adversely influence health. There have been some eye-opening

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<sup>2</sup> According to Wikipedia, Bollywood is the informal term popularly used for the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, Maharashtra. The term is often incorrectly used to refer to the whole of Indian cinema; it is only a part of the total Indian film industry, which includes other production centers producing films in regional languages. It is one of the largest centers of film production in the world.

works on films and psychiatry. Most recently, Prof. Dinesh Bhugra's Mad Tales of Bollywood has exhaustively studied the mental disorder in Hindi cinema. As per Bhugra, compared with Hollywood's portrayal of psychological ailments, Indian cinema is perhaps less enlightened.. The power of the mass media can never be overestimated. Film as a medium should be used to advantage to dispel the stigma associated with psychiatric disorders. (Bhugra, 2006)

Disability as dependence in Hindi film is a typical in nature. While few films are centrally thematic on dependence nature many films' associated characters were shown as dependent due to disability. Rajashri Production's Dosti in 1964, Gulzar's Koshish in 1972 and recently in 2010 Atmakatha are the best illustration of lead characters dependence due to disability. Besides, there were many films based on associated characters as disabled parents depending on their children. More than a dozens of films have been produced in such category with a recent one Khamoshi.

Gender differences in perceptions of disabled people in Bollywood movies are also evident in many forms. First, men with disabilities feature far more often than women with disabilities. Second, men with disabilities are often loved by a devoted woman without disabilities (as in Saajan), whereas women with disabilities are rarely loved by men without disabilities (and in cases where they are such as Mann, the men loved them before the onset of disability). Third, women with disabilities almost never attain economic self-sufficiency. While male stars with disabilities may not be very wealthy, they can attain such independence. Finally, the disabilities that women are portrayed with are very rarely ones that impact their physical appearance, so that they largely remain beautiful (Ventakesh, 2008). Overall, women with disabilities in India cinema are doubly weak – women and women with disabilities. This contrasts to more frequent portrayals in Hollywood cinema of women with disabilities who have strength and discover independence. On the contrary, women with disability are more often the object of a man's sympathy and dependence. In many films women with disability has been portrayed as risk to sexual exploitation and hence, justify the need of male protection. Imman Dharam (1977), Insaaf (187), Bhrastachar (1989), Khuddar (1994) and recently Humko Tumse Pyar Hai (2006) are few examples of disable women's dependence on their counterparts. (Pal, 2000)

Hence, Kanan and Batra (2012) argues that “the imagery surrounding disability in films swings between these two extremes – pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, lampooning 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. And the world over, cinema has either been charitable towards people with disabilities, pitying or laughing at them or portraying their concerns with real sensitivity”.

One rarely finds the splash of realism, as the Hollywood is used to churning out at regular intervals in films like 'Rain Man', 'My Left Foot', 'Scent of a Woman', 'Born on the Fourth of July' and 'A Beautiful Mind'. Here once in a while, a sensitive director like Gulzar wakes up to make a touching 'Koshish' (1972), Sai Paranjpe to make a poignant 'Sprash' (1984) or a Sanjay Leela Bhansali to make the ironically loud 'Khamoshi – The Musical' (1996).

These three movies releasing in an approximate gap of one decade have portrayed life of the disabled realistically with varying degree of success. While 'Koshish' focused on a deaf-mute couple played by Sanjeev Kumar and Jaya Bachchan, leading a secluded life and tackling so as to say the outside world. 'Sprash' on the other hand depicts the conflict between the worlds of able-bodied and the disabled. It brings out the complexes embedded in the minds of disabled as well as able-bodied with an unsentimental equilibrium. A nuanced performance from the ever dependable Naseerudin Shah playing a blind man gives an added exuberance to the film. 'Khamoshi' tries to give honest account of deaf-mute parents coming to terms with the musical aspirations of their grownup daughter. But somewhere you feel that the reality is eroded at the expense of aesthetic considerations. The beautiful music, an enviable star cast of Nana Patekar, Seema Biswas, Manisha Koirala and Salman Khan and the breathtaking locales of Goa somehow don't rescue it from falling apart. (Palicha, 2003)

### NEW TREND OF PORTRAYAL OF DISEASE RELATED THEME

Recent trends show that the commercial movies off late started focusing on rare disease themes though primarily on disability. Bollywood these days is setting up a new trend in exploring rare diseases with directors casting big superstars in roles which raises awareness about such hardly known ailments. These movies not only entertain their audiences but also enlighten them. And it will be appropriate to term this period as the paradigm shift in how a director looks at disability – from the point of view of the disabled person. Rather than making us just sympathizes with his predicament, the director asked us to treat him with love and care and to stop getting upset with his inability to cope with the normal world.

Bollywood's attitude can be traced back to the 2005 when the first international disability film festival in India was organized by the Chennai-based NGO, the Ability Foundation. The festival was a unique and inspiring showcase of extraordinary films from around the world with an objective of raising awareness about disability issues and tearing down stereotypes about people with disabilities (India Glitz, 2005).

In the same year a historic film- Black, the first by a major director to focus on a girl with disabilities got released. More box office success followed with the 2007 film Taare Zameen Par, directed by Aamir Khan revealed the story of an eight-year-old boy who suffers from dyslexia. Besides, there have been films featuring the rare genetic condition progeria (Paa), Asperger's syndrome (My Name is Khan), amnesia (Ghanjini) and speech problems (Kaminey). The new era is a paradigm shift in how a director looks at disability. Rather than making the audience just sympathises with his predicament, the director sent message to treat disability with love and care and to stop getting upset with his inability to cope with the normal world.

"Black" released in 2005 was also about a blind & deaf girl and his teacher who succumbs to Alzheimer. Sanjy Leela Bhansali began with Khamoshi which got the same disabled theme, although got fluffed, reached a new height with 'Black', every frame of which shows his passion and intensity. Bhansali's strife 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 (Swaminath and Bhide, 2009).

Black is her world as she lives without sight, sound and words to speak. Young Michelle suffocates in the vacuum of her inner world. She is like an animal living in the dark, until an eccentric teacher decides to make her 'a fine young lady'. Michelle McNally is an unfortunate child, an illness in her infancy has rendered her blind, mute and deaf. She is living in a dark world when Debraj Sahay comes into her life as her teacher and teaches her the meaning of words and how to express them. As she grows up, the challenge of becoming a graduate and living her life with pride arising from a sense of accomplishment looms in front of her. There are many obstacles - like the world which has no patience for disabled persons, and the deteriorating mental condition of her teacher, but Michelle pursues her goal and narrates her story of victory achieved in spite of all hindrances.

One of the most important films of last decade was "Taare Zameen Par" released in 2007 which revolves around an eight-year-old boy suffering from mental disorder called 'dyslexia'. The disease is mainly characterized by difficulties with learning, decoding the word, spelling, reading accurately and fluently. And the movie was a super hit with a strong message to the parents to understand their children's hidden disorder and give a proper direction as and when required (TELLYONE, 2010). This movie forced parents who pursue to make their child shine academically to speculate that their child might be talented in other ways that requires nourishment and right direction. This perhaps the best illustration of redefining the term "Disability" to "Differently able".

In 2008, "U Me Aur Hum" starring Ajay Devgan got released with the less known disease Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's is a brain disorder named after German physician Alois Alzheimer as a progressive and fatal brain disease and has no current cure. This is an irreversible, progressive brain disease that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills, and eventually even the ability to carry out the simplest tasks.

Sooner in 2008 we witnessed "Ghajini" in which the character of Aamir Khan suffers from Amnesia. Amnesia makes the diseased forgetful with a short term memory span that lasts for few minutes. The 2009 film Lafangey Parinday was central on a dancer played by Deepika Padukone who loses her sight before a major competition, briefly loses her faith in her abilities, and then is mentored back to excellence on the dance floor by a prizefighter, Nelli Nitin Mukesh, who specialized in blindfolded freestyle fighting and happens to cause her to lose her sight in an accident. The film has an interesting mixed message. On the surface, the film emphasizes the point that people with disabilities can achieve, and overachieve in what may be considered a mainstream activity for the able-bodied, and at the time of its release was lauded by the popular press for the lead actress attempts at method acting by the actress who spent several months and had to "observe a lot of blind people" to prepare for the role. (Pal, 2000)

In December 2009, Bollywood witnessed the great performance by Mr Amitabh Bachchan suffering from rarest disease in movie "Paa". Progeria is an accelerated aging disease, while leaving intelligence intact, progeria ages the body many times faster than normal leaving teens with frail bodies of people nearing 100 years old. The average life expectancy for a child with progeria ranges from 10 years to 23 years. The film unfolds with Auro (Amitabh Bachchan), an intelligent and witty 12-year-old boy with an extremely rare genetic disorder called progeria. Mentally he is twelve and very normal, but physically he looks five times older.

In spite of his condition, Auro is a very happy boy. He lives with his mother Vidya who is a gynecologist. Amol Arte is a young, cold blooded politician. He is out to prove to the world that 'politics' is not a bad word. He is a man with a mission. Auro is Amol's son; however, Vidya conceals this from him. Amol meets Auro when he visits the boy's school. Though he does not know that Auro is his son, he takes him to Delhi to see the president's house. Auro, who knows the truth, tries to get his mother and father back together, but Vidya resists, still hurt by the fact that Amol wanted her to have an abortion when they first found out she was pregnant. Amol realizes his mistake though, and proposes to Vidya, as he is still in love with her. He stays by Auro's side when he finds out that Auro is his son. Auro's health begins to deteriorate as he reaches his 13th birthday, his physical defects catching up. However, he is finally able to reunite his mother and father once again as Vidya gives in to her feelings for Amol and her motherly love for Auro. Auro, succumbing to his disease, says his last words "Maa" and "Paa" before dying with a satisfying smile. (TELLYONE, 2010)

In February, 2010 "My name is Khan" released with starring Shah Rukh Khan who suffers from the disease Asperger's Syndrome (asperger) is a kind of autism illness and is a neurobiological disorder. This disorder is characterized by difficulty in social interaction. The person suffering from this has normal intelligence and language development, but exhibits autistic-like behaviors and marked deficiencies in social and communication skills.

Anurag Basu's latest film Barfi released in September 2012, starring Ranbir Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra in lead roles, is being touted as one that can change Bollywood's perception about the abilities of the disabled. Mainstream Bollywood cinema has always found it tough to seamlessly integrate the differently-abled into its plotline. Barfi is deaf and mute but that doesn't take away from experiencing the joys of life. Barfi lives his life to the full; lives his life as it comes and works around his imperfections with a smile on his face. It doesn't take too long for him to fall head over heels on Shruti (Illeana D'Cruz). She too falls for his mischievous and happy go lucky self however, giving in to societal pressures ends up marrying somebody else. The unrequited love makes Barfi start his life afresh and soon enters Jhilmil Chatterjee (Priyanka Chopra) an autistic girl, in Barfi's life. While the others fail to understand Jhilmil, Barfi instantly strikes a bond with the girl (Pal, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Unlike the post-independence era for many decades till the new millennium era and the emergence of communication revolution, movies were, though based on disease theme, entertainment touch was always the major focus. The recent trend has changed the notion of entertainment on various angles and explored an opportunity in making a serious film with a theme based on the disability related disease which can create more social awareness and bring a behavior and attitude change of the different segment of audience. NGOs and social workers are encouraging this new move of Bollywood, which they say would result in an increase in the awareness and sensitivity among those who were ignorant of such diseases. Most importantly all the experiments in overall film making were successful with a good business also.

Although often Bollywood is criticized for its stereo-type theme and portrayal of disability, there are film makers who have taken risk against the market forces of the present

consumerism era. Sanjay Leela Bansali despite his first attempt in *Khamoshi* which got a very cold response in Box Office could achieve many awards and revenue from *Black* nearly after a decade. Subsequently the trend started and the latest release of *Barfi* is the manifestation of Bollywood's concern for such social awareness.

The portrayal of disability, though in early days was social but punishment and dependence was a major theme. The new trend has started educating the audience and also it persuades the people. The attempt of recent film makers in disseminating knowledge for attitude and behavior change among the audience towards the disabled perhaps the best contribution of Bollywood that justifies the positive role of Cinema as an important medium of mass communication. On the other hand, Bollywood's attempt in bringing various diseases related to disability to the limelight against the common notion of physical and mental deformity is the only cause of disability is remarkable. Besides, the initiative of portraying the disabled as independent and equally abled at par with their counterpart is a major contribution of Bollywood in rationalizing the new terminology of differently-abled. This move further strengthened the claim of Bollywood as an instrument in creating the social awareness against various social evils and taboos.

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