

Impact of Disability Related Policies on Hindi Movies

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Abstract

Cinema and society are interdependent on each other. While cinema presents societal realities, or in other words, serves what is liked by the people. Society, on its part, learns lessons and consolidates its knowledge about various issues through cinema. Thus, it, apart from being the source of entertainment, is also the source of knowledge and information. The state with immense power and authority completes the triangle. Cinema cannot, but at its own cost, afford to neglect presentation of its philosophies, principles and policies. Disability has been one of the most sought-after topics for Indian cinema. After independence, a number of movies have been produced on persons with disabilities in various vernacular languages including Hindi. Almost all except a few, portrayed disability from the perspective of charity and medical model. In recent years, The Bollywood is presenting altogether a different concept of disability. In this paper, I argue that changing the conception of disability is nothing but direct or indirect representation of the state's disability policy. Since, the scope of Bollywood is very vast, I will restrict my analysis to Hindi Movies.

Keywords: Disability, Persons, Portrayal, Movie, Hindi.

Introduction

Society and cinema are closely interlinked. Social practices, outlooks and values provide basic matter for film production. On the other hand, cinema showcases the popular themes prevalent in the society. Being the most popular and accessible means of entertainment, it has a far-reaching impact on the minds of the people, can influence thought processes, help build an inclusive or exclusive society through the portrayal of negative or positive images of hitherto marginalized sections of society, particularly, persons with disabilities. Diana Barrett and Sheila Leddy write that a well-made film with a compelling narrative and well-crafted outreach plan would logically work as a catalyst on the audiences and alter their minds, encouraging them to vary their entrenched behaviour about the social issues being depicted in it, and thus re-energize social movements. As the State is the most powerful autonomous apparatus capable of conflict management,

engineering social reforms, it enjoys immense authority of resource allocation and coercion, hence, the silver screen implicitly or explicitly presents the state's philosophy, ideology, ideals, principles and prevalent state practices.

Traditionally, disability is considered as retribution for past karma. People with disabilities are turned into objects of charity rather than being permitted to make merit actively by themselves and so escape from their karma of being disabled. Further, persons with disabilities are considered incapable, foolish, and a burden on the family, society and the nation. The corollary of this notion runs parallel with the practice of rejection, humiliation, marginalization, fun and stigma associated with persons with disabilities. Probably that's why, Anita Cameron says,

“many people with impairments tend to distance themselves from being identified by others or identifying their own selves as disabled.”
“This view of people with disabilities as pitiable, as objects of charity, as existing on the margins of...society, is reinforced by their representation in novels, television dramas and films.” (Riewpaiboo and Blume 20)

In little more than 100 years of journey, Indian film industry has produced movies on a variety of issues—patriotism, child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry, corruption, terrorism and last but not least disability. Beginning with *Jeevan Naiya*, Indian movies, particularly, Hindi movies have portrayed various dimensions of disabilities—punishment, pity, dependence, comedy, heroism, to mention a few (Sawhney 23). After the enactment of Persons with Disabilities Act, a sudden shift can be visualized in the portrayal of the character of persons with disabilities in Hindi movies.

This paper seeks to examine the impact of state's disability policies in the projection of disabilities in Bollywood movies. The paper is divided into four parts. In part one, I argue that in the first three decades, the Indian state, barring a few exceptions, largely practiced charity and the medical model of disability which had direct bearing on Bollywood movies. Part two of the paper argues that the government's decision to establish four premier institutions with the objectives to prepare manpower for rehabilitation of persons with disabilities and subsequent decision to provide 3% reservation in government jobs, inspired Bollywood to portray positive aspects of disability. Perhaps *Koshish*, *Sparsh* and *Naach Mayuri* were the outcome of such decisions. Part three of the paper argues that the PWD Act, 1995 and every major decision after that brought a

perceptible change in the outlook of Indian cinema. In comparison to previous decades, more movies have been produced portraying the empowerment of persons with disabilities. Part four, concludes the paper with the suggestion that cinema should refrain from unrealistic representation of disability.

The Indian film industry produces films in several languages—Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, Bhojpuri etc. However, this study will be based on the analyses of Hindi movies as Hindi is spoken and understood in most parts of the country, Naturally, attracts larger audiences than other linguistic movies.

I

The trajectory of Indian cinema coincides with the journey of the Indian state. Its stories, characters and hidden messages broadly, in one or the other way, replicates the perspectives and policies of the state. The constitution of India, initially, did not pay much attention to persons with disabilities. Article 41 calls upon the state to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement... Likewise state list's entry 9 lays responsibility on the state government to provide Relief to the disabled and unemployable (Constitution of India 1950). Eventually, both the provisions treated the persons with disabilities as dependent.

Again, like other marginalized sections—SC and ST—no mandatory responsibility was entrusted upon the state for most marginalized and scattered minorities, i.e., disabled persons. Though the state did initiate some efforts for the education and employment of persons with disabilities with welfare approach. Besides this, charitable organizations were also actively promoting educational and employment opportunities for the disabled persons. Hence, Jagdish Chander argues that the charity model coincided with the welfare approach in the immediate post-independent period, but largely they remained isolated and dependent on family and society for their existence (82). Moreover, during the first 30 years of its life, the Indian state generally saw disability through the lens of “medical model,” viewing disability as a disease to be cured through proper treatment.

Echoing the similar ideologies and principles, Hindi movies portrayed persons with disabilities as dependent. Disabled characters in *Deedar* (1951) and *Dosti* (1964) are fully dependent on society for their survival. Shamu in *Deedar* and Ramu and Mohan in *Dosti* earn their livelihood through begging on the streets

and roads. Out of three disabled characters, two (Shamu and Ramu) were orphans, while Mohan had a sister, who refused to recognize him as she did not want to associate her with a blind beggar (*Mahaan*). Thus, it means that persons with disabilities are not only excluded by society but by family as well.

The medical model considers disability as an illness or problem of an individual. It represents disability as lack, tragic loss, dependency and abnormality (Ghai 10). Further, it believes that scientific diagnosis and treatment is the only way to a normal life. Going by the same logic, persons with incurable disabilities cannot hope for a good life like their non-disabled or temporarily-abled counterparts.

Prevention of disabilities emerged as a basic concern of all, except a few, movies produced between 1951-1989. Disabled characters in movies like *Dosti*, *Shor*, *Anurag*, *Jheel Ke Us Paar* and *Sunayna* could not get social acceptance without being cured of their disabilities. Strangely, to add sensation and drama, Hindi movies show miracles or unreal incidents in the life of disabled characters. In *Dhanwan*, Rajesh Khanna gets his eyes back with the help of a donor. Author herself being visually impaired, knows thousands of people with visual disabilities, and has never heard such miracles. This claim is valid because data collected through sample surveys, generally keep sample size in triple digits. Indian movies have failed to present realistic representations of disabilities.

II

Cinema, across the globe, mirrors the values, customs, ideals and evil practices of the society, Indian cinema particularly Hindi movies are no exception. Bollywood has enjoyed the portrayal of stereotypical characters with disabilities. Portrayal of dependency, love, punishment, fun and humiliation are the major characteristics of Hindi cinema. Through the portrayal of disability through a character on the silver screen help people unfamiliar with persons with disabilities to form general notions about the behaviour, way of living, thinking, and communication of the entire community of that specific disability (Boray 1-11). Thus, the individuality of a person is completely overlooked. Morris is of the opinion 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, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience. Sadly, portrayal of stereotypes undermines the abilities, ambitions,

dreams and zeal of persons with disabilities to overcome challenges for a dignified life.

However, the 1970s and 1980s became witness to a couple of movies that marked the beginning of an era of incremental but steady change in the perspective of disability. *Koshish* (1972) directed by Gulzar made a debut in breaking the stereotype portrayal of disability. It, for the first time, underscored the significance of sign language. Speech and hearing-impaired Haricharan (Sanjeev) asks equally speech and hearing disabled Aarti (Jaya Bhaduri) who later became his wife to go to school to learn sign language for better communications. The movie not only projects their struggle, pain and conflicts but also highlights those two disabled persons can lead an independent life and earn their livelihood through the means of self-employment.

Sparsh (1980) directed by Sai Paranjpe presents a realistic and contemplative view of persons with disabilities. The movie had been picturized on a school for students with visual disability, namely, Blind Relief Association (BRA). It revolves around the story of the principal of the school. *Sparsh* conveyed a very positive message to society that, given an opportunity, a visually disabled person can be a successful administrator as well as manage his household responsibilities. It also raised, writes Arnab Banerjee, “the problems faced by students with visual disabilities in getting accessible material for education, such Hindi films changed the way we look at people with disabilities.” Likewise, *Naache Mayuri* (1986), based on the life of the classical dancer Sudha Chandran, became sin-qua-none of the phrase “where is the will, there is the way.” The movie showcased how a physically disabled person, who lost her one leg in an accident, accomplished her dream of becoming a great dancer.

Undoubtedly, these movies revealed such aspects of disabilities hitherto camouflaged. Nevertheless, it would be premature to say that they were able to break the stereotype of disabilities either in the mind of the directors of Hindi movies or the mind of people, for maximum movies and people still have stereotypical conception of disabilities. Besides this, projection of a positive image of disabilities, portrayal of firmness, determination and abilities of persons with disabilities to overcome all hurdles that barricades their independent life is preceded by certain decisions of the government. According to NIOH’s site in 1969, the then Ministry of Social Welfare, Government of India set up a high-level committee to establish National Institutes to serve as apex organizations for developing rehabilitation services countrywide with emphasis to human

resource development in disability specific sector viz. loco motor, visual, speech & hearing and mental retardation. Therefore, National Institute for the Visually impaired (NIVH 1979), National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped (NIHH 1983), National Institute for the Orthopedically Handicapped (NIOH 1978) and National Institute for the Mentally Handicapped (NIMH 1984) were established.

A watershed office memorandum was issued by the Government of India in 1977 (Mani 61-2; Pandey & Advani 100-102). It provided 3% reservation in the lower-level government jobs (which are categorized as “C” and “D” positions). The memorandum mandated that 3% of clerical and blue-collar jobs be reserved for the disabled in the Central Government Services and Public Undertakings (industrial or service units having a substantial share of government in the management). These decisions played a crucial role in empowering persons with disabilities in terms of education, employment and independent living. *Koshish*, *Sparsh* and *NaacheMayuri* reflected implicit or explicit impact of these decisions.

III

The decades of 1980 and 1990 proved to be very important from the vantage point of disability rights. At the domestic level, movement of organized blinds (*HandeCr* 2011). Powerful agitation seeking enactment of a comprehensive law to promote the rights of persons with visual disability. At the international level, the United Nations General Assembly declared 1981 as the ‘International Year of Disabled Persons’ (IYDP) and 1983-1992 as the ‘International Decade for Disabled Persons (IDDP).’ IYDP called for a plan of action at the national, regional and international levels, with an emphasis on equalization of opportunities, rehabilitation and prevention of disabilities (UN Enable-International Year of Disabled Persons 1981).

During the IDDP General Assembly requested the member state to formulate policies and programmes for the effective implementation of ‘World Programme of Action’ urged member states to make every effort to attain the objectives of the World Programme of Action in co-operation with non-governmental organizations concerned and to involve disabled persons in planning and decision-making related to the implementation of the programme; invited member states as a matter of priority to reinforce or establish national committees or similar bodies for the Decade at the highest level with participation of organizations of disabled persons to plan, co-ordinate and encourage the execution of activities in

support of the objectives of the decade at the national and local levels (United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons 1983-1992). In 1992, India signed a Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region. Further, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific adopted the resolution 48/3 on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002, as a catalyst for effective new policy initiatives and actions at national, sub-regional and regional levels aimed at systematically improving the conditions of people with disabilities, who constitute approximately one-tenth of our total population, and for harnessing their full development potential (Proclamation on the full participation and equality of people with disabilities in the Asian and pacific region 1992).

These developments led to the emergence of a new approach toward disability based on a disability rights perspective (Chander 82). To overcome the twin pressure of domestic and international forces, the Parliament of India unanimously enacted the persons with disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation Act, 1995) to give effect to the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of the People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region (PWD Act, 1995).

This is a landmark achievement for disability rights groups in India. This Act is a blend of the 'medical' and 'social' models. However, more emphasis has been laid on the 'social' model i.e., removal of disabling environments. On the one hand, governments are to identify causes of disabilities and promote various methods to prevent occurrence of disabilities provide facilities for training to staff at primary health centers; awareness campaign for dissemination of information regarding general hygiene, health and sanitation; prenatal, perinatal and postnatal care of mother and child; etc. On the other hand, it ensures full empowerment of persons with disabilities through the means of education and employment. Section 26 of the Act lays responsibility on "appropriate government" to provide free education to children with disabilities upto the age of 18. Section 33 of the Act reserves not less than 3% posts for persons or class of persons with disability. Section 66 of the Act makes provisions for the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities. Further, suitable provisions have been made for non-discrimination and removal of barriers.

The Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act, 1995 came into force on January 1, 1996. The governments, at various levels, made endeavours to ensure effective implementation of the various provisions of the Act. Perhaps this is why, today,

the persons with disabilities have made their presence felt in all walks of life—education, employment, social service, technology, etc. Thus, exhibiting overall improvement in their life. The Act proved to be a catalyst in empowering and inter-alia improving the image of persons with disabilities. It is a matter of satisfaction that these changes have been noticed and accommodated by the silver screen, particularly Hindi films.

After the enforcement of this Act, says Sameer Boray, “Hindi movies have been screening more sensitive, enlightened and tolerant views of Disability.” Now, movies are often portraying disabled people’s struggle for a quality life. The end of the twentieth century, perhaps, ended the era of stereotype depiction of disabilities. Several movies—*Iqbal*, *Koi Mil Gaya*, *Tera Mera Saath Rahen*, *Black*, *Iqbal* and *Athmakatha*, *Taare Jamein Par*, *Margarita with a Straw*, *Hichki* and *Kabil* have depicted more humane and rights based, though at times unrealistic, perspective of disability. However, in the author’s opinion three movies—*Black*, *Hichki* and *Zero*—deserve special mention as these movies not only present realistic views of disabilities but also reflect the impact of government policies.

Black (2005) directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, inspired by Hellen Keller’s life in *The Miracle Worker*, underscored the importance of education in empowering a person even with multiple disabilities. The entire film is centered on the relationship of a teacher, named Debraj Sahai (Amitabh Bachchan) and his student Michelle McNally (Rani Mukherjee), a girl, with hearing, speech and visual impairment. Devraj Sahai makes conscious intervention to arouse the other functioning senses of his student. Michelle’s strong will power and ambition enable her not only to learn sign language but also enter the world of formal education. She successfully completes graduation. The most empowering scene of the movie is when Michelle turns to be a teacher of her former teacher who is now suffering from Alzheimer disease. To sum up, *Black* underlines that an efficient teacher can bring fundamental change in the life of a student, no matter whether the student is able or disabled. Moreover, access to opportunity can unravel hidden potentials of a disabled person.

Released in 2018, *Hichki*, directed by P. Malhotra, is based on Brad Cohen’s autobiography *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome made me the teacher I never had*. This film depicts a cruel reality—humiliation, fun, exclusion, rejection and denial of opportunities—that every disabled person has to face during schooling, college and even at work. The story highlights the struggle of a disable

body to carve out a place among the able bodies. Naina Mathur (Rani Mukherjee), the lead character, suffers from Tourette Syndrome (uncontrollable movement of lower jaw, creating disturbing sound particularly during conversation). Her disability causes exclusion and marginalization in the class. However, undeterred by these challenges, she overcomes all odds to score brilliantly in school and College exams. Finally, her dreams come true, when she gets a job as a school teacher in an elite institution. Her unceasing dedication and uncanny ability to help downtrodden students earns her respect and social acceptability.

Zero (2018) produced and directed by Gauri Khan and L. Anand Rai respectively, presents the story of mainly two disabled persons—Bauaa Singh (Shah Rukh Khan) and Aafia Yusufzai Bhinder (Anushkha Sharma). The movie has its own shortcomings the way it treats male protagonist Bauaa Singh (dwarf) as an object to replace the chimpanzee for a Mars trip. However, it highlights the potential of both the protagonists. Aafia is a great scientist. Her disability (cerebral palsy) could not deter from discovering water on Mars. She was heading a project to send a chimpanzee on Mars. Santosh Kumar is of the opinion that her qualities—firmness, resilience and an inspirational public speaker—are well presented. Bauaa Singh is shown as an educated and intelligent person who had the ability to fulfill his dream. He dates Aafia, a great scientist and won a dance competition where met his dream girl Babita. His acceptance for the Mars mission shows his courage. Though *Zero* does not raise any issues of disability, it clearly shows that disability is no hindrance to progress. This is what L. Rai, the Director, wants to convey as he is quoted in “Mumbai Mirror:” ‘You can touch infinity even if you are zero.’

Think of thirty years back, when persons with disabilities were a source of comic interlude, object of pity, sympathy. None could have imagined that a hearing, speech and visually impaired girl could be educated or a female with Cerebral Palsy could become scientist. Before the passage of PWD Act (1995), persons with disabilities had to struggle even for the post of peons and clerks. Exceptionally, a few people got good white-collar jobs but that was not the norm. After 1995, as per census 2011, there has been overall improvement in the educational and employment status of persons with disabilities. Indian cinema, especially Hindi movies, cannot afford to overlook these developments as cinema is expected to mirror reality.

Conclusion

In the last twenty-five years, ever since the PWD Act has been enacted, seminal changes can be noticed in the perspective of the Indian state towards persons with disabilities. National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2006 and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 manifest the viewpoint of the state. Now, persons with disabilities are not considered a liability, rather, a human resource (National Policy for Persons with Disability) whose empowerment will empower the nation. The state is ready to accommodate the demands, needs and aspirations of the disabled persons. This is evident from the fact that despite change in the nature of the state owing to the introduction of new Economic Policy in 1991 and subsequent reforms, facilities for persons with disabilities in the field of education, employment, access to resources, though not sufficiently, have significantly increased.

Disability-specific new methodology of teaching and learning are being researched, developed and promoted. So far as employment is concerned, according to Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), 4% jobs have been reserved in all categories namely: C, D, B and A. Moreover, Accessible India Campaign launched in 2015 as a flagship programme of the government for achieving universal accessibility, focuses on enhancing the accessibility of Built-Up Environment, Transportation System and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) ecosystem to make the life of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) more convenient. These little efforts have instilled a sense of security and confidence among the persons with disabilities. They don't want anyone's pity or sympathy but an inclusive, accommodative and just society where disability is not considered as inability but seen as diversity.

Similar changes can also be seen in the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema. Over the last two decades, Hindi movies have raised the issues concerning disabled persons—education, employment, accessibility and sexuality. Their ambitions, aspirations, apprehensions, confusions, independence, creativity discernment, ability to cope up have been frequently depicted. In other words, like the state, cinema presented a social model of disability. As cinema is perhaps the most powerful medium of entertainment, characterization of disabilities in a positive manner can play a vital role in improving the image of disabled persons in society.

However, as Hindi movies have audiences across the globe, it has a larger responsibility to screen realistic notions of disability. Absurd representation—

super heroes, concept of sixth sense or object of pity or charity—can be counter-productive. Today thousands of persons with disabilities are working as professors, lawyers, doctors, officers, so on and so forth. Production of movies on real life heroes would help build an inclusive, just and humane society, where disabled and so-called abled will co-exist, interact and learn from each-other.

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