

## Discovering impaired superheroes in Hindi movies: A Study of characterization of disabled in movies and its impact on their social life

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### ABSTRACT

Disability or people with disabilities were a central theme of many cinema like Iqbal, Black, Koshish, Margarita with a Straw, etc. But the way cinema portrays people with disabilities and the way disabled people co-relate themselves with that depiction is a matter of debate. 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. The purpose of this study is to investigate the passion of Hindi cinema for Heroism and the way cinema deals with special abilities. This study is an attempt to find out the possibilities of presenting these people in some dignified way in celluloid, something which they really deserve and what a welfare state and a civilized society promises to offer. The qualitative study includes content analysis of some selected Hindi films where characters with disabilities are a part of central theme and some interviews with the people of celluloid business so that the issue can be well taken up for further discourse.

**Keywords:** Disability, celluloid, heroism, sympathy, cinema, mainstream cinema, impaired

### Introduction

Since 1913, Indian cinema has produced millions of films, mainstream/commercial and offbeat cinema. In last one hundred and three years, the Indian Cinema has exhibited a number of communities both ethnic and linguistic as a part of its story narration. The theme of the cinema keeps on changing according to the interest of the society in different era's and the idea of centralized character is to exhibit the story of lead character. Cinema is considered as a powerful medium of communication. Cinema is also known as Mirror of the society because it reflects the happenings of the society whether it is positive or negative. It has taken an important role of entertainment, education, and brings a behavioral change in practices and attitudes, in our day to day life.

Gokulsing & Dissanayake (2013) discussed that cinema consists of art, entertainment, technology, industry and ideology all at the same time. They observed that it is a powerful reflector of the society and not only the reflector but then again, we should also be careful that it also shapes the

social transformations, cultural tensions and new trends that emerge.

Indian cinema consists of film being produced in different part of the country in different languages including Bengali, Tamil, Punjabi, Bhojpuri etc. However, the cinema produced in Hindi is known as popular cinema which is released nationally because of the popularity of the Hindi language. As cited in '*Bollywood: A guide to Popular Hindi Cinema*' feature films are produced in approximately 20 languages in India and there are multiple film industries whose total output makes India the largest feature film-producing country in the world. 1896 was the year when Motion picture technology was introduced in the subcontinent. The representative of Lumiere brothers organized first cinematography show at Watson's hotel in Bombay. This show was part of the global moment showcasing first motion pictures in different part of the world including the audiences of different countries like Africa, Australia, Europe etc. The showcasing of the motion picture in Indian subcontinent was totally new phenomenon like other nations and it was advertised in the Times of Indian newspaper as "The marvel of the century; the wonder of the world". However, when cinema was started in India, Indian audiences were not part of the screening. Though Indian picked up the idea well with the passage of time. Bombay was the epicenter of all the trades and commerce activities in India and that is one of the reasons that film Industry flourished there. As cited by Tejaswani Ganti in *Bollywood: A guide to Popular Hindi*

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*Cinema*– The term ‘Bollywood’ created by the English-language press in India in the late 1970s–has now become the dominant global term referring to the prolific and box-office oriented Hindi language film industry located in Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1995) (Ganti, 2004). There are different interpretations of the word Bollywood by various authors. So, in this study, Bollywood refers to only the Hindi commercial cinemas with high budget which generally includes songs and dances sequences.

Glancing the history of Indian cinema gives us the themes being followed in Hindi film-making and change over a period of time. Initially period saw the making of films based on the mythological characters as the first movie was based on the life of a king and movie was named after that king only i.e. ‘Raja Harishchandra’. The movie was released in the year 1913. However, this was the first movie in the silent era and silent era ended with the unification of sound with picture in Hindi movies in the year 1931. ‘Alam Ara’ produced by Ardehsir Irani is regarded as the first movie of ‘talkies’ era. The film contained with seven songs, dance and established music. Songs and dances were always part of Hindi cinema and even today we can witness that music, songs and dances are key part of the success of commercial cinema. Therefore, entertainment can be labelled as the basic principle for the making of Hindi cinema.

However, we have seen different themes in Hindi cinema and they have kept on changing over a period of time which are ultimately stimulated from the socio-cultural background of the humanity. The screens of Indian cinema have witnessed movies based on patriotic, social-evils, effects of modernization/industrialization on Indian society and many other themes originated from the events occurred at different point of time.

Representing different communities, demographics, religions, gender has always been part of any cinema. Depiction is sometimes inspired from true incidents or just the imagination of the screenplay writer. The way it is represented sometimes also stereotypes a particular character. For examples, the representation of Sikh in Hindi cinema is quite typical showcasing them as drivers, dhaba owner and a character who is adopted to make people laugh and not presenting them as intellectuals which they may be in real life. And similar things also happen with the other forms of characters.

Cinema is considered as the one of the forms of mass communication and quite striking as

compared to other forms of media. The films may be artistic, purely entertainment, a social document or a social critique. A movie can be mirror into our lives and depicting us how exactly we function in a society. Hindi cinema popular for its emotional drama requires strong emotional feelings to glue audience with the screen. Diseases and disability are also part of this storyline and we see many diseases are portrayed where the lead character either has overcome it or die with a strong emotional feeling. Depicting disability is no way different and we have seen this depiction in various shades of characters. (Mohapatra, 2012). Generally, cinema shows the emotional part, sympathy, cry and problematic life of disabled characters. In many movies they have been used to create fun and comic through those characters.

Not only Indian cinema (but also) the cinema of different countries is going through this stigma. Marting F. Norden has narrated the tale of disability in American movies in his book *Cinema of Isolation*. He mentioned in that book that there are particular ways in which disabled character is used in Cinema. Review of this book mentioned that this book is the history of the people who manufactured and exploited the images of disabled and by implication is a history of the gullibility of Americans movie audiences who bought them. Physical disability in movies is not simply the reflection of the societal values in the cinema but also a politically charged commodity which moviemakers are asking audiences to buy it. (Norden, 1994)

Disability is both a private and public experience. For some, disability is something shameful condition which is to be avoided and represents a personal catastrophe. However, on the other side it is a source of pride and empowerment and the celebration of difference. Disability redefines experience and adds value to individual lives. It sometimes elucidates on what it means to be human. (As cited by Albrecht et al. 2001). These both aspects are clearly visible in the movies also. Disability is shown as shameful condition sometimes and then sometimes rising beyond that image and becoming hero.

In a chapter on ‘Disability in Western culture’ Jenny Morris described it as the messages, images and ideas about disabled people which are contained in all the different forms which reflect and promote Western culture. Disabled people are missing from mainstream culture. Even if they appear they are in specialized forms and generally the ideas of the non-disabled are imposed on the disabled. Even if they appear on screen they are appearing in particular

representations of the disable characters. The experiences of disabled are described by non-disabled persons which makes it surreal when it is showcased on screen. (Morris, 1991). Jenny Morris following quotes are relevant when we discuss the disability issues and their representations:

If the experiences of disabled people are missing from the general culture this means that nondisabled people have few points of reference with which to make sense of our reality. Furthermore, the tools which they do have to interpret our experiences are those fashioned by non-disabled people. This can have significant consequences for our lives, particularly because we so rarely have the power to insist on the validity of our experience. It can mean that we are denied the basic human rights that non-disabled people take for granted; it can also mean that our experience is denied and this can have devastating consequences.

In similar ways, disabled person's issues and problems are also missing from the mainstream cinema and even if they are picked up they are represented according to the convenience of the non-disabled people. Since disability is something which being perceived and interpreted by the non-disabled people. Similarly, Michel Foucault cautions us, *the categories of disabilities are constructs and the exclusion of the disabled body are forms of social control. Like portrayals in the West, disability in Bollywood cinema is used as a device to move the narrative forward or as an icon within a specific mise-en-scene to compress information about a character.* (Fraser (ed.), 2016)

The article published in 'The Guardian' discussed about featuring disability in Hollywood which differentiates the movies like Untouchable (2011) & Rust and Bone (2012) from the previous cinema on disability. It states as 'In Rust and Bone', Disability liberates rather than confines. Otherwise, movies have always tried to show disabled as an object of pity and also as comedy. They have always been treated as different breed which ultimately forces them to be in isolation. And the scenario started changing little after 1960s and 1970s. In Hollywood, cinema seems to be compassionate but there are always a few disabilities which have been portrayed like blindness, deafness and other mental illness which exhibit no malformation of the bodies and film-makers have always been found sympathizing rather than empathizing. Hollywood believed audiences would be repelled by disability; the whole area was assumed to be off-putting, acceptable only if accompanied by a stiff dose of treacle. (Cox, 2012)

In Indian context Margarita with A Straw (2014) is the latest and one of the finest movie depicting disability without any sympathy, pity, villainy or cure. In the history of Indian cinema there are numerous movies which depicts disability and watching these characters in movies gives you the notion that you should feel pity and more sympathetic with the persons who are disabled. As 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." (Mohapatra, 2012).

And in most of the conditions there are commonly two trends which are followed one disability as a comic interlude or to give a dramatic twist to their script. There have been some film-makers who have been able to build a tale around the insensitivity of society towards the disabled.

Koshish (1972) movie by Gulzar is often regarded as the landmark in the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema. It was an attempt to showcase how a deaf person can communicate and participate well financially too. However, misfortune have always been shown as a part of their life. Khamoshi (1996) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali has shown the struggle of the deaf and mute couple. It is also regarded as one of the good movie to break the stigma that disabled parent can also give birth to a normal child but being deaf and mute they are dependent on their normal child. There are few movies which have characterized disabled persons as brave men. In movies like Dushman (1998), Aankhen (2002) sixth sense of the blind people has been promoted. However, Rustom Irani is of a different view on this. 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." In mainstream cinema, the sensitization towards disabled people has been witnessed through in the recent movies. The movies like Black (2005), Taare Zameen par (2007), Guzarish (2010), Iqbal (2005), Margarita with A Straw (2014), Zubaan (2016) have been quite successful in breaking the stereotypical images of the disabled persons. Margarita with A Straw is perhaps the first movie to depict sexuality and disability together and is absent of other elements like pity."We never talk about

disability and sexuality on the same page...if you took the disability out, it was still an interesting film about a young, horny, awkward teenager and a coming of age story. It's actually a romcom about love and life," says Kalki Koechlin. (Nair, 2015)

In an article published in Hindustan Times wrote about the movie- Margarita with A Straw which mentions that this movie raises one moot question: Why does the industry always portray 'disability' on the screen in a half-hearted, caricaturist manner, which invariably borders on being insensitive? Sadly, B'town's attitude towards the disabled is either stereotypical or patronizing, or they have used them as objects of pity, comic interludes, liabilities, medical aberrations, or burden etc. (Banerjee, 2015, as original)

Nagesh Kukunoor, director, has a different opinion on the issue of disability as he thinks that this disability issue should not be addressed at all. The problem arises when we try to differentiate them from the other section of the society and when we try to give special treatment to them. Movies can simply give a message which can be given even without highlighting the disability. When we watch movies like Iqbal we do not remember the character non-ability to speak and listen but his dream to achieve his goal to become cricketer (PTI, June 2016).

However, Hindi cinema storyline has been changed and disable people have been shown in positive roles in comparison to the earlier movies where the differently-abled character was used to make fun only. The movies like Black, Guzaarish, Taare Zameen Par are admired for the sensibility they have depicted through their characters. According to Mridula Murgai, a Delhi-based film blogger and the founder of a now defunct organization, movies like Taare Zameen Par Bollywood has witnessed a paradigm shift in how a director looks at disability- from the point of view of the disabled person. With such movies, directors have tried to give message that just sympathizing with the disabled person is not a solution. We need to give them love, care and need so that they are not upset with their inability to muddle through the normal world. There is also a change regarding curing the inability but today Bollywood is changing that attitude also by remaining that problem intact. Such type of treatment with the subject may hurt the sentiments of the differently-abled people because in real-life such things doesn't occur (Buncombe and Waheed, 2011).

In mainstream cinema, we have witnessed many movies based totally on the social structure and then we try to relocate ourselves in those themes. While watching those cinema, we try to find our reflection in those films. It is very much interesting to understand how disabled people relocate themselves when they watch similar characters on screen. One of the ideas of this paper is to understand the thoughts being hit when they see a disabled people on screen. It is also important to understand the way cinema deals with special abilities. It is also a pertinent question to know how many real-life heroes with disability inspired Hindi cinema to make movies. It is imperative to observe the space for disability in-between passion for Heroism and the Hindi cinema.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on the content analysis and the interviews. Primary as well as Secondary data has been used for the study. Qualitative content analysis is conducted to understand how the idea of disability has been used by the film-makers. This helped in understanding whether the sympathy factor was dominant and to what extent Hindi movies have been successful in establishing differently-abled people as Heroes. The qualitative content analysis was helpful to investigate the passion of Hindi cinema for Heroism and the way cinema deals with special abilities with the space on screen for real-life differently-abled Heroes. Simple Random Sampling method was used to pick up the movies from Hindi language cinema because simple random sampling will allow flexibility for the inclusion of any movie in which disability has been depicted prominently.

Intensive interviews were conducted with differently-abled people and their mentors to collect qualitative data along-with the people involved in celluloid business. Differently-abled people were interviewed at a Special school 'Arushi' located at Bhopal. The school has children aged between 1 to 22 years old. Purposive sampling was used which is a deliberate selection of particular units of the universe non-randomly (Kothari, 2004). So, interviewing only those people who are differently-abled or working with differently-abled people from past few years. People with disability were given simulation by narrating stories and by showing videos so that they can share their stories with a comfort. And the interviews were more of narrative interviews, which helps people in telling story (Wengraf 2001). The interview of people working with differently-abled school was helpful in taking

insights in the life of these people as they have been observing them from past few years. Interviews of differently-abled people were significant because it helped in knowing their views on Hindi cinema and disability. Do they feel that films are sympathetic to them? Whether cinema is really helpful in connecting them with society? The interview with the people involved in celluloid business was conducted to know their stance on disability and with their views this discourse can be taken up well.

### Analysis and Findings

Content analysis of the randomly selected movies in which characters with disabilities are part of central theme was carried out to investigate the passion of Hindi language cinema for Heroism and the way cinema deals with special abilities.

The movie Iqbal is the story of poor villager who wanted to be cricketer and he is deaf and dumb since childhood. Altogether, movie is

motivational. The type of disability shown is the mute and deaf. The character is introduced in the movie with motivational and sad background music. It has emotional backdrop. The sympathy factor is used but it is divided into poverty and disability. The character of Iqbal is mentored by local drunkard Mohit (Naseeruddin Shah). The movie didn't highlight disability much and focused more on the dream of the Iqbal. The character had the element of heroism.

The movie Black is the story of Blind, deaf and mute girl since childhood who is very aggressive in nature. The story revolves around her and the changes after the entrance of a teacher in his life. The movie is motivated with the life of Helen Keller. The drunkard teacher taught her manners and gradually words in his own way. The movie is all shot in dark or very less lighting. It is full of sentiments. The over-use of sad music, dark framing, and emotional voice generates unnecessary sympathy for the character. The

Movies	Role of the character	Type of Disability	Introduction Of Character's Disability	Impression on Audience	Appearance on the screen
(Iqbal) Starring Shreyas Talpade and Naseeruddin Shah Directed by Nagesh Kukunoor	A poor villager who wants to be a cricketer. (Fiction)	Deaf and Dumb from childhood.	Emotional backdrop with motivational and sad background music.	Motivational	Sympathy created for the person with disability but the sympathy thing was divided into his poverty and disability.
(Black) Starring Rani Mukerji and Amitabh Bachchan Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali	An aggressive girl who wants her teacher to learn the world. (Semi-fiction)	Blind, Deaf and Mute from childhood.	Full of Sentiments, Sad emotional Music and Dark framing.	Empathy	Unnecessary over the top Sympathy for the characters with use of sad music, dark framing, and emotional voice over.
My Name is Khan directed by Karan Johar	A story of Muslim man with Asperger's disorder and struggle for proving himself as being Muslim and not a terrorist (Fiction)	Asperger's a high-functioning form of Autism and interpreting the literal meaning of the words	Romance, sentiments, emotions	Empathy and motivational	No sympathy, dramatic plot, emotional drama and unrealistic and plot divides between the problems of an Autistic man to the religious identity of a man
(Guzarish) Starring Hrithik Roshan and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali	A paralyzed man who is not willing to work for his own and he wish for death by law. (Fiction)	Body paralysis except head.	Sad emotional background music and huge set with dim lighting	Sympathy	Superimposed, demotivational

teacher later developed Alzheimer disease which was dramatic plot added and the whole movie is shown in sad approach.

“My Name is Khan” movie is about the high-functioning form of Autism where the affected persons faces difficulty in social interaction and interprets the literal meaning of the words said. The movie breaks the stigma of romance and disability. The movie is totally fiction. It has the elements of romance, sentiments and emotions. The movie starts with the story of Autistic man but by second half it turns into the struggle of the Muslim man to prove that he is not a terrorist post 9/11 attacks in America. The movie can be praised for showing heroic image of the protagonist for not restricting himself besides facing difficulty in interactions. The way character was portrayed is again far from reality.

Guzaarish movie is the story about a magician who got paralyzed while performing magic on stage and which gone woefully wrong. The type of disability shown is neck down quadriplegic. The movie has used sad emotional background music and huge set with dim lighting. In one part of movie the character of Ethan was shown creating laugh and life besides being paralyzed. The movie is demotivational as Ethan (Hrithik Roshan) has filed an appeal to the court for mercy killing. Then with the care and love of Sofia the idea of mercy killing disappeared from screen. He got married to her which is totally away from reality. The element of romance used in the movie and comparing it with real life of such individual makes it a utopian idea. Such approach of director makes the cinema unrealistic and disconnected for the differently-abled community.

**Observation:** None of the movies which have been analyzed above was based on any real-life hero except Black and that was also an inspired story not a biopic. The filmmakers used disability according to their convenience and doesn't depict reality. For example, the marriage of quadriplegic may be a Utopian idea only and not possible in real-life. The disability is used with the same elements (Drama, emotions, sympathy and romance) of Hindi cinema.

### Interviews

While interviewing Salim Ahmed, Speech therapist, reveals the communication pattern and in what terms disable students are exposed to media. He expressed that, students who are old in this school like to share their daily routine. On how media interfere in their life he opined that the hearing-impaired students like to watch colorful things on screen. Few of these students like to watch Action films because they can easily

understand what is happening on-screen. Few of the students like to watch dancing and singing videos. The interest in movies also depends upon the type of disability they face. Students feel more connected when they watch any disable character in films. He says, “After watching Barfi movie, I observed students sharing it with their friends about the character. A student said that he (Ranbir Kapoor) is same as us in their own language to each other. While watching them, they feel motivated and they think that they can do the same as the character is doing in the film.”

Arshad Pathan, Special Educator (along-with providing therapy to the students) shares that students here are very much interested in watching T.V. because they like to watch cartoons, animals on discovery channel, movies. They prefer to watch loud music, dance, actions in the movies. We also treat them with ICT, Applications, Videos, etc., so we understand, what they want to watch and what not. On the role of Cinema, he expressed that Cinema is more helpful to inspire them rather than others and helps them to set up goals. They copy the things by watching the videos like, dance, painting, singing, etc., so it's better to show them inspirational and motivational movies as well as support them to achieve their goals. However, people meet them with two reasons one is sympathy and other is hate, and movies are made as per interest of public. No one will go to watch simple documentary film without sympathy and drama. In real life, they don't need sympathy they are able to learn and do the things by their own.

Kamal Bhamore, Visually-impaired (Supportive Staff) at 'Arushi' shares that when he was 2 years old he got this disability. I like watching (read listening- because he is visually impaired) movies. There are many beautiful films, but specifically I like those movies, which is based on social issues, environment problems, and issues of disability, like Barfi. But, contemporary movies don't inspire me. There are many real-life heroes with disability who have become the Reserve bank counselor, IAS officers, etc. They should be the examples. If movies will be based on their lives then yes, these types of movies will definitely motivate us and will help in changing society's thinking. I don't think there is any need of sympathy, we need help, not sympathy.

Sufiya Khan, Receptionist cum consultant was born with a hump and her parents didn't realize it until doctor acknowledged it. She thinks one should watch every movie and prefers watching movies on disability issues, like barfi, black, etc. these movies help society to know the struggles of the disable people life. She says, “My Name is

Khan' is the movie which I liked most after 'Barfi'. In that movie Shahrukh wants to do something for his community, he started living life like others and he married with a girl (normal), but still society wants to keep him out of the community and they succeed. He has the authority to explain the things this is what I liked most, everyone has right to speak and society has to listen whether it is normal person or disabled person. Whenever I see such type of character on screen as well as in sports I compare myself with them and follow on what they are doing, and how they are doing, but sometimes some scenes are not possible in real life like a handicapped person can be able to walk after watching someone or by giving just shock treatment this is not possible. And the sympathy factor shown in movies is something inspired from the society because it happens in our society and cinema is influenced from our society only."

**Observation:** Movies are actually part of their life. They perceive characters of the films according to their level of understanding. They try to relate characters with their life. Cinema is something they use for their entertainment. The on-screen heroes inspire them and the stories of achievements of real life heroes are used to motivate them. It has also been observed that society and even parents treat them differently. Showcasing sympathy and making fun of disability is something which happens in our society and cinema seems influenced from it. Cinema seems capitalizing the idea of disability. Cinema is forced to add sympathy factors in their movies because it will help them in earning money. Contemporary cinema does not inspire them much. Differently-abled people who have actually achieved something are not known to them. Maybe the less coverage by media or absence from cinema of these real-life heroes has not given a room to popularize these personalities. While listening the story of real life heroes with disability, they admitted that if such things are picturizing on-screen then they will be more inspired and more connected.

Jasbir Bhatti, director of movies (Bhauri and UVA) with the experience of 17 years in TV (15-16 serials) sharing his views on disability and cinema said that it is our normal tendency to judge differently-abled as insane. We treat them as helpless and try to help in weird ways like offering money and just try to show sympathy. The problem is that we do not accept them as they are. They are talented like us but we degrade and discriminate with them. And one of the reasons maybe we consider ourselves more capable. Problem with cinema is that we do not touch

these issues even if we touch we try to touch it with artistic way and audiences in India are not matching up with this type of cinema. He agrees that cinema is also responsible but Cinema is considered as the reflection of society and filmmakers fantasies those ideas inspired from society. Here, both cinema and society becomes responsible. Real life heroes with disability can really be inspiring story and such subject should be taken up for filmmaking. Even Filmmakers are not aware about such personalities and they need to research and document. Such movies will help in increasing acceptance and acceptance is the most important aspect required today in the discourse of disability and cinema.

## Conclusion

The above findings have led to the following conclusions:

- There are no movies in mainstream cinema as such depicting the story of real-life heroes with disability.
- The idea of miracle used by filmmakers is not acceptable by the disabled people as it doesn't happen in real-life. Such movies add woes to their social life.
- Sympathy is a common factor used in Hindi movies based on disability.
- The filmmakers use disability as per their convenience and keeps the storyline away from reality.
- The use of sympathy in movies is discarded by the differently-abled people.
- The impression of disability is described by non-disabled people which is one of reasons not having a justified story-depiction.
- The idea of biopics is a welcoming idea by disabled people.
- Showcasing sympathy and making fun of disability is something which happens in our society and cinema seems influenced from it and here cinema seems capitalizing the idea of disability.
- Differently-abled community have role-models only the normal and renowned personalities. The idea is fine but they are not familiar to the real-life heroes with disability which restrict them becoming the role model unlike non-disabled people. Cinema can play an important role here.
- The movies on real-life heroes with disability will help in increasing acceptability in society.

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