

## Representation of disability in Hindi cinema

Gunin Mishra

Department of English  
Dyal Singh College (Morning)  
University of Delhi  
guninmishra@gmail.com

---

### Abstract

Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky once said “cinema uses life not vice versa”. Disability which is certainly a part of life rarely finds its space in cinema especially in hindi cinema. More often than not Indian cinema particularly the Hindi cinema, in dealing with disability has found itself on the wrong side of the tracks. One does not easily find a film in hindi cinema that deals with disability with the sensitivity and nuance that it requires. Most of the films that do have a “representation” of physically or mentally challenged individuals find themselves soaked in caricature for “comedic purposes” or being shown disability with unsurmountable sympathy almost to the degree of loathsome pity. Through this paper an attempt is to try and establish how these prejudices are projected through the lens in Hindi cinema and how perhaps there's a silver lining after all.

Keywords

Representation of disability; Hindi cinema; Comedic purpose; Pity; Silver lining

---

While the definition of disability is “the physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities”, the differently abled in society are not just seen as

individuals who possess a physical or mental impairment. It is the social treatment, mostly on the offensive or that of condolence that surrounds the life of a person that is 'disabled'.

Paraphrasing the sociology book titled 'Indian Society', "The very term 'differently abled' is significant because it draws attention to the fact that public perception of the 'disabled' needs to be questioned. These common features central to the public perception of disability all over the world and which perhaps requires questioning that:

1. Disability is understood as a biological given
2. whenever a disabled person is confronted with problems, it is taken for granted that the problems originates from his/her impairment.
3. The disabled person is seen as a victim.
4. Disability is supposed to be linked with the disabled individual's self-perception.
5. The very idea of disability suggests that they are in need of help."

The representation of these prejudices and premonitions often find themselves in rooted in various art forms especially in our cinema and how perhaps one can find a silver lining after all.

More often than not Indian cinema particularly the Hindi cinema, in dealing with disability has found itself on the wrong side of the tracks. One does not easily find a film in hindi cinema that deals with disability with the sensitivity and nuance that it requires. Most of the films that do have a "representation" of physically or mentally challenged individuals find themselves soaked in caricature for "comedic purposes", an example being that of 2005 film *Deewane Huye Paagal* where both Paresh Rawal and Sunil Shetty play almost cartoon versions of individuals having a hand disorder and a limp. Perhaps the most recent of such endeavours and the more successful and popular one is seen in Rohit Shetty's *Golmaal* franchise where Tushaarkapoor plays the iconic role of a dumb person named lucky and ShreyasTalpade is seen as having a stutter. All of these examples are ploys that are written into a film in order to generate a cheap laugh.

The other side of the spectrum shows people with disability being shown with unsurmountable sympathy almost to the degree of loathsome pity and are deployed in order to present the "goodness" of a character particularly the "hero". For example a scene in the 1999

film *Hum SaathSaath Hain* where Salman Khan is shown feeling “compassionate” towards a poverty stricken man who has a walking disability which has no relevance to the film or the most commonly used “andhimaa” characterization that was so ubiquitous in the films of the 70s and 80s.

These stereotypical and caricature characterizations of people in films suffering from a disability and therefore normalizing this culture that disability can be used as a scapegoat for a cheap laugh is “alright” and “okay” and is accepted by the “masses” is setting up a wrong precedent, requiring correction.

Despite these shortcomings some genuine attempts have been made to humanize people having disabilities on screen and telling their stories from an intricate and personal lens.

Films like *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Hichki* (2018) are both well-made attempts from big production media houses at trying to showcase both physical and social challenges that are faced by people having disabilities both female characters - played by Kalki Koechlin and Rani Mukherji the former having cerebral palsy and the latter having tourette syndrome- and their inner and external struggles to overcome these challenges. Even independent films like *Iqbal* which was about a boy who cannot speak and is hard of hearing, has a dream of playing for the Indian cricket team.

Another exceptional film that wasn't appreciated for with which it dealt with the delicacy and sensitivity, of a blind man running a school for the visually impaired falls in love with a woman who's “normal” was the 1980 film *Sparsh*. *Sparsh* saw its central character played by Naseerudin Shah as normal as anyone else without subjecting itself to unnecessary outwardish sympathy for people who are disabled and humanizing them in a studied manner. One of the finest scenes of the film is when the character of Anirudh is seen contemplating the thought whether the woman who loves him is because of his impairment or is she genuinely interested in what he constitutes as a person.

Perhaps the bravest and the most interesting of these attempts has been in Anand L.Rai's 2018 film *Zero* about a vertically challenged man falling in love with a woman having cerebral palsy. The film despite its flaws in terms of the narrative does has its share of striking beats. The most striking of them all is the fact that nowhere in the film does the disability of the characters is

shown with a lot of sympathy or pity so much so that at one point in the film the male character Bauua Singh tells Aafia, the female lead that he maybe not as smart as her but she couldn't pick a pen from the ground. This might appear to some as offensive and rightfully so but never does it ever become a sob story. Bauua Singh is shown as a larger than life character who does the most absurd of things. He spends lakhs of rupees just to woo a woman, swipes the sky like a screen and a stationary star shoots across the darkness, enters into a dance competition to meet a celebrity crush and literally goes to space in order to prove his love.

You are made to believe all of this simply because the world that the film has created is such. This world is bizarre, absurd even obnoxious and although the people in this world are physically disabled they are tried shown through a 'normal' lens. They feel and react to emotions same as we do. They make the same mistakes as we do. As film critic BaradwajRangan writes in his review of the film “the way Bauua treats Aafia, at first, is horrible. (He wants to establish his superiority over her.) But he’s a man who wakes up every morning and clicks a selfie. The way he looks at it, he’s been screwed over by life, too, and when he doesn’t pity himself, he can’t bring himself to pity others. (Thus, the very trait that endears Aafia to Bauua – that he doesn’t pity her, like others do – isn’t so much a virtue as unadulterated cockiness.)” The characters and their lives are celebrated.

The lingering issue with these films has been that most of the characters are played by abled bodied actors and are damaging to the overall messaging that they seem to project. Apart from this most of these films haven’t been able to reach a wider audience apart from certain exceptions which poses a further greater challenge as to how to engage an audience that comes and watches these films.

In this regard perhaps the most significant film in this space which both got the commercial and critical attention was the 2007 film *TaareZameen Par* about a boy suffering from dyslexia unable to comprehend the academics and cope up with the educational curriculum. The film hit the right emotional chords and showcased the sensitive issue with the right amount of the much needed nuance and subtlety(a great scene involving the father of the child whose unable to understand his son’s issue and terms his lack of comprehension due to his lazy attitude and unwillingness to learn is asked to read something in a language that is foreign to him implying as to what his child would feel while studying the textbooks of school.

The Indian screen does have its share of films that represent disability with a certain amount of sensitivity and nuance it requires and deserves whilst being highly problematic, the only truth being that even this share is just not enough.

What is perhaps required for us to do is reach a psychological 'normalcy' in how we treat disabled people which will subsequently affect how our cinema is shaped around the issue. As Gulzar said it about his film *Koshish* (1972) which was about a speech and hearing-impaired couple persisting through unforgiving obstacles to be accepted by society and live a life of dignity, "The film revolved round the theme of creating a special and separate world for the disabled, an idea which appeared to me to be very reactionary. From that time onward, I wanted to prove that the disabled are part and parcel of society."

### Works Cited

Uppal, Shweta, editor. *Indian Society: Textbook in sociology for class XII*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2007

Bhatt, Vikram, and Nadiadwala, Firoz, director and producer. *Deewane Huye Paagal*. Performances by Paresh Rawal and Sunil Shetty, Shemaroo Entertainment Limited, 2005. Youtube Movies,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dip\\_PwY5Crc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dip_PwY5Crc)

Shetty, Rohit, director. *Golmaal Film Series*. Performances by Shreyas Talpade and Tusshar Kapoor, Shree Ashtavinayak Cine Vision, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2017.

Barjatya, Sooraj, director and writer. *Hum Saath Saath Hain*. Performance by Salman Khan, Rajshri Productions, 1999. Amazon Prime Video

=[https://www.primevideo.com/detail/oMRWUSP7C777J4RGUZAI7KPKHW/ref=atv\\_sr\\_fle\\_c\\_Tn74RA\\_1\\_1\\_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=Bo7MP1CNCJ&qid=1651395612](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/oMRWUSP7C777J4RGUZAI7KPKHW/ref=atv_sr_fle_c_Tn74RA_1_1_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=Bo7MP1CNCJ&qid=1651395612)

Bose, Shonali, director and writer. *Margarita with a Straw*. Performance by Kalki Koechlin, Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2014, Netflix

<https://www.netflix.com/in/title/80018695>

Malhotra, Siddharth, director and writer. *Hichki*. Performance by Rani Mukherji, Yash Raj Films, 2018. Amazon Prime Video

[https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.aeb1d26f-3869-27dd-2096-c70cf86aco51?autoplay=1&ref\\_=atv\\_cf\\_strg\\_wb](https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.aeb1d26f-3869-27dd-2096-c70cf86aco51?autoplay=1&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb)

Kukunoor, Nagesh, director and writer. *Iqbal*. Performance by Shreyas Talpade, Mukta Searchlight Films. Zee5,

<https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/iqbal/0-0-2383>

Rai, Anand L., Sharma, Himanshu, director and writer. *Zero*. Performances by Shah Rukh Khan and Anushka Sharma, Red Chillies Entertainment, 2018. Netflix,

<https://www.netflix.com/in/title/81005364?source=35>

Rangan, Baradwaj, Rev. of *Zero*, Film Companion, December 23, 2018.

Gulzar, director and writer. *Koshish*. Performances by Sanjeev Kapoor and Jaya Bhaduri, Produced by Ram N. Sippy, 1972. Youtube Movies,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsfGsMGdobw>

Khan, Aamir, Gupte, Amol, director and writer. *Taare Zameen Par*. Performances by Aamir Khan and Darsheel Safary, Aamir Khan Productions, 2007. Netflix,

<https://www.netflix.com/in/title/70087087?source=35>

---

**Author's bio-note**

Gunin Mishra is a student of BA English Honours (2020-2023) in Dyal Singh College (Morning) University of Delhi. He considers himself to be a cinema enthusiast.

---