



Research Paper

Representation of Disability in Indian Movies: A survey of perception of parents of Kolkata who live with it.

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Abstract

Disability is an important issue that is widely misapprehended even today in India. People with disability are considered to be one of the most unsafe sections of the community who are grossly overlooked and neglected by all. Individuals with impairment are still socially excluded and lack of cognizance in the general public about the exact mental or physiological condition aggravates the foothold of such individuals. While several NGOs and activist groups have employed different strategies to break these stereotypes and bring about public awareness but without much success. Joining hands with NGO s media can play a effective role to educate and bring up the level of awareness and sensitivity among common man who are so called neuro-typical. Media has a boundless outreach as from rural to urban it has set its foot in every household. Cinema is considered to be the mirror image of the society, which we believe in, which we try to internalize ,feel and always make attempts to associate with. It has the power to sculpt the slant of the people. How often do we see the people with some kind of impairment on the screen? How willing are writers and directors to cast people with dysfunction ?

The obvious question that arises is whether television has effectively played its role in sensitizing the masses about disability. Are the so-called neurotypical understanding and accepting the differently-abled? This research wants to bring forward the perception of the parents who are living with children or adults with special needs. They are the ones who have been witnessing the issues, tantrums, severity, meltdowns that are commonly associated with any kind of disability. The families that actually feel, deals, accepts and loves their children ,as they are the ones protecting them from the vicious , brutish and abhorred world outside which is either solacing their conscience or has express their intense loathing towards the impairment. This paper wants to highlight the perception of such parents ,what they feel about how media or cinema has represented the issues of disability.

Keywords: Disability, Impairment, Marginalization, Awareness, sensitize

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I. Introduction

A special needs parent is a person who has children with special needs. These can include physically challenged, deafness, blindness, and intellectual disabilities such as autism. Special needs parents often face substantial challenges than other parents when it comes to child rearing. They encounter challenges on a daily basis, but in the process learn to enjoy the journey along with their little ones. Joan Ryan had once said, "Motherhood is about raising and celebrating the child you have, not the child you thought you would have. It's about understanding that they are exactly the person they are supposed to be and that, if you're lucky, they just might be the teacher who turns you into the person you are supposed to be." This stands true for all parents who have children with special needs.

In society people with disabilities are either neglected, pitied or treated with disgust. But the question arises what shaped the ideas of the society? May be the old doctrines, religious conviction Or maxims .The most apposite query that arises is how has disability been adjudged by different theological decree? Buddhism and Hindism both believe that disability is caused by negative karma, but this is not imposed by an outside punitive force or God. Hinduism also views gentleness in offering a pay to those in need, as a deed that will invigorate a person's good karma for their next life. Hinduism stipulates that it is the Dharmic duty of all able-bodied individuals to care for those with a disability and extend charity to them. In Islam, the cause of disability is not attributed to wrong doing by the disabled person or their parents. Islam views disability as a challenge set by

Allah. The Qur'an encourages people to serve people with intellectual disabilities with cordiality and to shield and safeguard people with disabilities.

Religion has endorsed the beliefs regarding disability since ages antediluvian. The idea of ourselves is a picture of what human beings are supposed to be like. If people digress conspicuously from the predictable, many find it disconcerting. The fact that disabled are different from normal results in discrimination against them. Usually men avow that they mostly regard mental encumbrance as an ineptitude for living in the society. It is an unvoiced truth that if one fits into the non afflicted structure one can pull through. These people and families who affront and deal with the estrangement know in actuality the agony their juvenile or scions go through when people ogle and stare at their loved ones with multitudinal queries in their eyes. A very impressive part can be played by media here. Media has a huge outspread which many other mediums do not enjoy. Cinema remains the most accessible form of media in the country and is, therefore, the biggest influencer of the public (Prasad, Kashyap & Rabindranath, 2018). It can be used as a powerful tool for changing the chronicle and moulding the impression of multitude.

Since its beginning in 1913 Indian cinema has had a great impact on the Indian masses. Cinema has the power and magic to influence the society. While it is caught up between the real and reel life, Cinema still serves as an important medium of entertaining people, educating them and bringing a behavioral change in their practices and attitudes. Given the reach of the Bollywood industry in India and across the world, it has been particularly effective in transforming people's perceptivity and deracinating societal cliché. In Bollywood, disability is either seen as symbolising damnation or as a goofy or petrifying individual, and seldom do we have movies where it is realistically portrayed. The aspect of disability in the film is used mainly for a dramatic effect, rather than to familiarize and sensitize the audience about the disability. The disabled character is often used for a commercial gain, or for adding the element of fear or an object of pity. Very recently some movies like 'Kaabil', Magarita with a straw, *Taare Zameen Par* helped break the stigma around disability in the country.

But till date Disabled people have been grievously disparaged in Indian culture. A lack of awareness and sensitization among the masses attribute to the exclusion of this group.

II. Review of Literature

Sameer Boray in his article "Depiction of Disabilities in Movies: disability portrayal in the media through the eyes of Bollywood and Hollywood" has said that films which treat the subject of mental or physical disability should adopt a responsible approach, it should be treated with sympathy and understanding by the film maker.

In his article "The first Century of Disability Portrayal in Film" Stephen P Safran Stated that though negative imagery is predominant but scattered positive portrayals of disability have also been spotted which makes us anticipate that this trend will accelerate.

In a publication of Stanford University, they stated in depicting disability, Bollywood has come a long way.

Chatterjee (2016) studies the representation of disability in Indian cinema by focusing on four Hindi films i.e., Koshish, Sparsh, Black and Barfi. According to his article, unlike the traditional idea of disability as ungodly or wicked; representation of disability in Bollywood seems to be more varied and diverse.

Pal (2012) has categorized various ways in which disability has been portrayed by the filmmakers. In few movies, people with disabilities were presented in punitive tone. He further alludes to the fact that disabled people were also portrayed to be dependent on others especially those who are not capable of taking care of themselves, who require treatment and assistance. The article argues that the stereotyping of disability has been done in a few important ways, and citing over 200 examples primarily from Hindi and Tamil cinema.

Mohapatra (2012) brings out the present trend which perhaps justifies the contribution of Bollywood to the society. According to this study, the portrayal of disability in early days was social but punishment and dependence were a major theme. However, the new trend has started educating the audiences and also it persuades the people. Researcher argues that dissemination of knowledge about various disabilities for attitude and behavior change among the audience is perhaps the best contribution to cinema. Bringing various diseases to public eye against the frequent conviction that the physical and mental malformation is the only cause of disability, is remarkable.

Sundar (2006) states that mainstream Indian cinema rarely addresses the issue of disability, and it is rarer still to find a film on the plight of the disabled woman. She suggests that Indian filmmakers should refrain from showcasing disability just for the sake of a different plot.

Objectives of the study

The following are the principle objectives of the study:

- To understand the perception of parents(with special need children) towards representation of Disability in Indian movies.
- To understand their perception about a movie displaying disability.
- To check how many of them have watched Indian movies that have portrayed disability of any form.
- Find out which according to parents is one of the worst movies that has dealt with some sort of disability.
- To gather information from parents as to whether they have been able to connect with any of the Indian movies relating to disability.
- To note and analyze which movie do the parents find as the best one to have done justice to the issue.
- To offer valuable suggestions to improve the portrayal of such characters with disability.

Scope of study

To offer valuable suggestions to improve the portrayal of such characters with disability.

III. Methodology

The present study is confined to such parents of Kolkata ,who have children with special needs.The study was conducted through survey method through a well structured questionnaire and interviews with respondents.the secondary data was collected from books,journals related to ‘ Representation of disabilities in Indian movies. ’ A sample size of 200 parents were taken in and around the city of Kolkata.

Data analysis and discussion

Table 1 shows the different kinds of disabilities that the children (of the respondents) are suffering from.

Table 1: Kinds of disabilities

Type of Disability	Number of children	Percentage
Visually Impaired	29	14.5
Hearing Impairment	15	7.5
Locomotor Impairment	5	2.5
Mental Retardation	19	9.5
Learning Disability	47	23.5
Autism	85	42.5
Total	200	100

In this survey 42.5% of the parents had children with ASD(Autism spectrum disorder),23.5% children are coping with problems of learning disability.

The opinion of parents to the question ‘Do you think movies related to disabilities are able to represent the intricacies of the disorder?’ has been recorded in Table No 2.

Table 2 : Representation of intricacies of disabilities in movies

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	5	2.5
No	152	76
Maybe	43	21.5
Total	200	100

76% (152 Respondents) parents feel that Indian movies are unable to represent the intricacies of a particular disability . 21.5 % of the respondents are not sure about whether Indian movies are successful in depicting the intricate details of any disability. Its really strange to note that only 2.5% of special parents feel that the intricacies of any disorder are well represented in Indian movies.

Mrs Roy,(an IT professional)mother of a child with learning Disabilities (name of respondents have been changed) says that Movies do not work on the emotional part of the child and families. Mrs T. Bakshi pointed out that even if films are looking at the emotional aspect very less importance is given to the spreading of awareness. Another parent (Mrs. P .Bhattacharya) pointed out that ‘Most of the times Indian movies fabricate the disabilities. Like they have some inner qualities. Which are often overlooked by most filmmakers except for Taare Zameen pe .’ Mr. B.Mukherjee ,father of a child with Autism highlighted the fact that ‘Content shown in Movies are highly melodramatic and they fail to address real issues.’ Dr. Banerjee rightly focused on the fact that ‘They show the salient features of a disorder only.’ Mr. Horo (Father of a young adult with mental retardation) says ‘ Indian movies on disability always shows only the positive sides, means some good outcomes or happy ending or winning situations . But in reality it's not the same always. Their struggles, negative sides of

the disability, means in some cases conditions worsen in later stage of life, many can't afford the treatment cost, many can't accept the condition, many parents some time end their child's life etc. those areas never come up in movies. May be they don't want to demotivate the parents. But we can't deny the reality.' Mrs Ganguly said that 'I think they are not practically exposed with a differently abled child for a long time to observe their detailed behaviour, need and their daily cycle.'

Some parents agree that None of the movies till date gave any social message to the society about the inclusion of the special kids in all sectors and even if , To some extent one movie can represents the real picture of any disability but for marketing purpose all movies should be having an happy ending but in reality it is not so "all is well" situation and that is where the big difference comes.

Table 3 :How many parents feel that Indian Movies have created ample awareness about different disabled among masses.

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	25	12.5
No	125	62.5
Unsure	50	25
Total	200	100

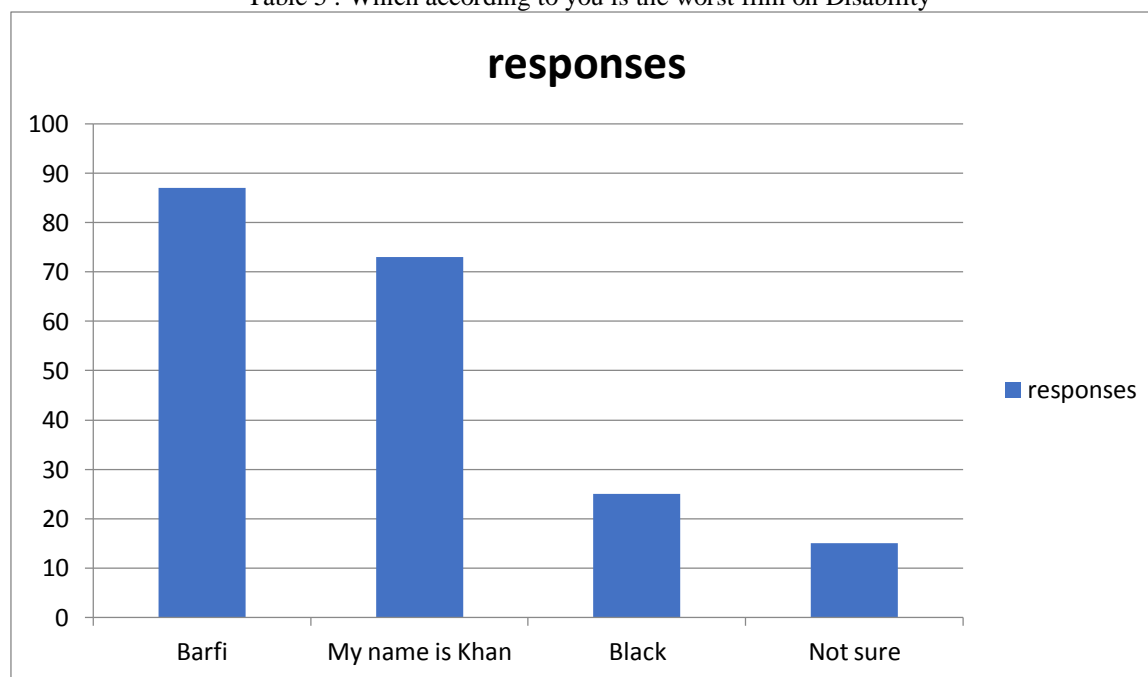
62.5 % of the respondents feel that Indian movies have not created adequate awareness about disability .Most of the respondents feel that mental illness, autism are a huge spectrum, where every child or adult is different from the other. Dr. Sen (parent of a child with ASD) feel “ Even if depiction of different conditions is seen ,rarely movies work on the awareness or acceptance issue.” 25% of the respondents are not sure whether at all awareness has increased or not.

Table 4: Has any Indian film made a mockery of disability

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage
Most of them	160	80
None of them	15	7.5
Not sure	25	12.5
Total	200	100

Respondents (parents) have also come up with names of several movies which according to them have ridiculed the disorder. According to Mr Sreeram (father of a young boy with Learning disability) in the movie“My name is khan(hero was so called autistic),except for self declaration, nothing was there to say that he is autistic.It was like ridiculing the syndrome.” Parents mostly agree that Bollywood movies whether it is My name is Khan, Barfi, Black, Krazy4 are more of a melodrama and are for crowd amusement.

Table 5 : Which according to you is the worst film on Disability



43.5% of the respondents feel that Barfi was the worst movie on disability. Parents feel that proper research on the condition of disability should have been done. The character of Jhilmil (played by Priyanka Chopra) looks over exaggerated at times. Though the movie has received several prestigious awards like Best Foreign Film in 85th Academy awards, still parents involved in this survey are of the opinion that “ It could not portray the real issues of autism. Director was more busy arranging the plot of the movie not on highlighting the real problems.” Another parent also pointed out at the ‘Happy Ending’ of the movie. According to Dr. Kashyap, ‘ such endings are utopian ideals for us .’ Mrs Banerjee, points out that ‘I think they are not practically exposed with a differently abled child for a long time to observe their detailed behavior, need and their daily cycle.’

Table 6 : Which film do you feel has best portrayed any kind of disability

Names of Movies	Response	Percentage
Taare Zameen pe	98	49
My Name is Khan	29	14.5
Margarita with a straw	44	22
Barfi	5	2.5
Black	7	3.5
Koshish	10	5
Unsure	7	3.5
Total	200	100

The table above shows that 49% of the respondents feel that disability has been best represented in Taare Zameen Pe. One of the respondent said that ‘ Many people became aware that children are not always lazy or purposely not learning. They are really having challenges in those areas where they need support to overcome those challenges. ‘ According to Dr. Kashyap ‘Tare Jamin per , is a film where we find how parents misunderstood their children disabilities.’ Some parents also opine that ‘ In the movie Taare Zameen Pe..the importance has been given to Love, Patience, kindness & understanding which can change the situation. ‘Taare zameen pe was a movie which had gone to the depth of the problem of Dyslexia.

22% respondents found that the movie Margarita with a straw was also close to their heart ‘Margarita with a straw (2014)

It’s the story of Laila (played by Kalki Koechlin) who is suffering from Cerebral Palsy. Her journey from a girl to an independent woman, her shortcomings, and her honest acquiescence all is portrayed beautifully in the movie.’

IV. Conclusion

This survey conducted among parents and caretakers of differently abled clearly delineate that according to them the two most poignant movies of recent times namely ‘Taare Zameen Pe’ and ‘ Margarita with a Straw ‘have done considerable justice to the dysfunction that was depicted. The main conundrum is that the ones who can in reality take up the charge of sensibilizing the public has very scant or no lived experience with disability so the story is told through a nondisabled perspective.. It is assumed that audience is nondisabled and this is why we often see more importance being delegated to the other unimportant aspects of the story rather than the actual disabled persons.

“Usefulness, efficiency and power, “are the three important hallmarks for subsisting in the society, people who lack these facets are made to feel that their lives are not worth living.

When it comes to portraying characters with disabilities, it is especially onerous, as these characters are seldom reproduced outside of their prototype while the ones who are ambulatory, uncrippled and unimpaired are more likely to have a refined representation. Disability is commonly used as commodity for creating easy and cheap comedy by Indian film producers. In several comedy movies, characters with some sort of impairment are included just to create heterogeneity ,a character which would be clowning around and create situations for mirthful laughter. In such movies, disabled characters are given inconsequential roles and other lead characters of the movie very often resort to sneering them for being impuissant especially when it comes to impressing a girl, or confronting the baddie. etc.

Disabled characters are rarely shown as unswerving, steadfast, unfaltering, diligent, enterprising , self sustained professionals. In most of the films, disabled are not even shown socially-occupied or associated with

some trade. They are usually shown as hingeing on their family and combating their disability. Despite being quite sympathetic towards disabled characters, directors ultimately leave the viewers with emotions of great trepidation and empathy about disability that should never happen with anyone. Respondents of this survey have variegated presuppositions. Some feel that the social stigma that the mentally disabled are facing leaves a momentary hope for justice. These children or adults experience a despicable exclusion without any fault of their own. They are dogmatized as impotent, ineligible, incompetent, naïve and powerless and thus cast aside as “Useless eaters” and have been disparaged and denigrated for years.

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