

Dynamics of Disability in Indian Film, Politics and Sports

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Abstract

'Dynamics of Disability in Indian Film, Politics and Sports' is a study of the representation of the disabled in Indian film, politics and sports where the representation of anything matters the most since these three are the major cultural texts of the country. Indian film had a sympathetic yet pessimistic approach towards the disabled as they were seen as victims or as after effects of a 'sin'. But recent trends show a bolder representation as they even discuss the sexuality of the disabled. Indian politics has its share for the disabled with its limited accessibility to contesting and even voting. The skills of able-bodied politicians are adjectivised to describe the politicians with disability whose magnanimity often surpasses the former. Indian disability sports suffers from issues like lesser participation from disabled women and lack of awareness. Film, sports and politics form the cultural fabric of Indian society. Being underrepresented

in them is like being underrepresented in Indian society in general. With more awareness and funding, the disabled can get the equal status and opportunity as said in the Indian constitution about all citizens.

Key words: ableism, film, Indian film, Indian politics, sports, representation

The three major cultural texts in India where representation works are cinema, politics and sports. These cultural domains serve as mirrors, offering glimpses into the essence of Indian society. Ableism presents a cultural challenge in India, and it carries an elevated level of associated stigma. The significance of representing individuals with disabilities in film, politics, and sports is paramount, as it contributes significantly to advancing India's nationalist objectives. Upon India's signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007, there was a notable embrace of greater inclusivity in addressing the socio-cultural and local needs of individuals with disabilities. Yet, the challenges and drawbacks in this inclusivity remain subject to relevant discussion in our socio-cultural context.

The UNCRPD defines persons with disability as people:

...who have *long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments* which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (The International and European Framework of Disability Law)

The understanding of disability is continually evolving. The term 'disability' has been linguistically dynamic, undergoing changes over time in response to various social interpretations and shifts in semantics. In Babylonian Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism¹, men who are "lame, sick, blind and old men who can't go on their feet" (Rodkinson) are excluded from holocaust just like women, bondsmen and the queer are excluded. In Bible the defect is linked to sin²:

...aberrancy within the species not only threatens the future and

the continuation of this species, but also announces, threatens, signifies a condemnation by the gods; a condemnation of the group (Stiker)

Within Hindu mythology, individuals with disabilities are often depicted negatively, viewed through the lens of the law of *Karma*³. The disabled people were not portrayed with any justifiable representation in any Indian art form. Among the rasas elucidated by *Nāṭyaśāstra*⁴, the predominant rasas through which disabled persons are represented are *bibatsa*, the one that evokes disgust and *bhayānaka*, the one that evokes fear (Das). Disgust is consistently linked to thoughts of danger, encompassing the inherent risks of pollution, contamination, and the potential for defilement. This perception of danger contributes to the establishment of hierarchies within the political order of a society. In other words, disgust means inferiority (Miller).

In Western culture, disability was perceived as an individual medical issue or a 'personal tragedy.' The influences of industrialization, urbanization, and ideologies such as liberal utilitarianism, medicalization, eugenics, and social Darwinism further fuelled ancient fears and prejudices against individuals with disabilities (Nick Watson). The Nazi government in 1930s found the disabled as 'useless eaters' and established mass 'euthanasia' policy. Until the second World War there was not much to hope for the disabled people. The desperate labour shortage America faced after World War II brought disabled citizens into workforce. For the first time there was a disability activism produced in the U.S.

The speed of production, the massive growth of industry, the dangers inherent in war production, and the influx of unseasoned workers and new machinery combined to produce an explosion of industrial accidents, swelling the ranks of disabled citizens and increasing the need for disability services (Jennings).

The rise of the new social movements like feminism, queer, working class and black civil rights movement enhanced the radicalisation

of disabled people in the West.

Disability Bias in Indian Film

The most powerful medium of communication in Indian society is commercial Indian film (Butalia). Joyojeet Pal (2013) in his article, “Physical Disability and Indian Cinema”, discusses the two common approaches to disability popularly shown in Indian film: one as a punitive measure where the hero, instead of killing the villain, chops off his limbs and let him live a miserable life and the second is when disability is shown as a case of extreme dependency on others (Pal). Pal states that a male character is compelled by a disabled woman, most of the time is his sister, to undertake extraordinary risks to resolve a situation, such as resorting to murder for a substantial dowry or concealing the disability and arranging the girl’s marriage, only to later detrimentally impact her life (116-117). A disabled woman is often an object of a man’s sympathy and protection while a disabled man has to face more complex situations (117). Taking the example from the Hindi film *Mother India* (Mother India, 1957), Pal says that the scenario where a disabled man relies on his spouse signifies a profound form of dependence, as he is distanced from his traditional role as a provider and protector. Disability desexualises the character, portraying the character as an object that demands sympathy and charity (118). However, the theme of disability went under a major transition in the 2000s and there are two aspects to this; “firstly a small group of films deny the direct criticism of disability and secondly, disability has become a valuable characteristic of a character in a film that is likely to get recognized with awards, not to mention how it benefits the actor in his or her career” (Pal, 128). The recent fashioning of the disabled character brought some films with the theme of empowerment of the character, like the film *Black* (Black, 2005) and *Mozhi* (Language, 2007). In the 2014 Malayalam film *Bangalore Days*, the character Sarah is a wheel chair bound person. However, her disability is portrayed as an additional challenge that adds to the empowerment of the female character. Sarah maintains

financial and emotional independence, refusing to sacrifice her career for marriage. Sarah's complicated relationship with her overprotective mother is finally broken off for good and she finds her emotional freedom at the end of the film. *Peranbu* (Compassion, 2019) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) are two of the very few Indian films which openly discuss the sexual desires of a disabled person.

Ableism in Indian Politics

Ableism in Indian politics exhibits similarities with its counterparts in Western and European countries. In U.S. politics, two primary obstacles for disabled candidates to participate in elections are structural barriers and Social Security Administration policies. Notably, the representation of individuals with disabilities in U.S. politics is more prominent among three specific groups: young people, Native Americans, and veterans from recent wars. This underscores the importance of being actively involved in governmental decision-making processes for effective representation. Additionally, racial ableism, aboriginal disability concerns, and challenges associated with multiple disabilities are pervasive issues faced by both candidates and voters with disabilities on a global scale.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and dismantles structural barriers while advocating for policies that promote inclusivity and equal representation in political spheres. Recognizing the diverse experiences within the disabled community and working towards eliminating systemic obstacles can pave the way for a more inclusive and representative political landscape worldwide.

India's political fabric is different considering the caste and geographical disparities present in the country. The intersection of disability with caste is of serious concern since Dalits already struggle with the public sphere due to segregation and discrimination. The latest National Statistical Office (NSO) survey reports that there are 2.2% disabled people in India's population (Godara). But they remain politically and artistically underrepresented. The inclusive approach

towards people with disabilities by the Indian government commenced in 2007, coinciding with the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) by India. Though there are reservations for SCs, STs and other minor communities, there are no such reservations for PWDs in Indian parliament. Before the 2000s, voters with disabilities faced barriers to accessing election booths, as features such as elevators, Braille ballot papers, ramps, and disabled-friendly toilets were entirely absent from the Lok Sabha polls. Some Panchayat Acts of Tamil Nadu in 2000s even banned disabled candidates from contesting in the election. Few representatives in the Indian political sector, including figures like Jaipal Reddy, a significant participant in the Andhra Pradesh Separation Movement, and Sadhana Gupta, India's inaugural blind parliamentarian, stand out as advocates for disability inclusion. The main reason for the underrepresentation of the disabled candidates in Indian election is the lack of funding and the stigma that is attached to the disability that the individual is seen as not 'capable' by the political parties (Walia). A disabled person's body requires a different timeline than their peers when contesting in election according to Shahana Hanif, a young, disabled American politician who is a member of New York City Council (Loppky and Green). There is also a question of institutional gap since only 28-29 % of the disabled Indians are literate. Beyond the statistical examination, there exists a representational challenge concerning disabled politicians in India. The public perception of a disabled politician must be flawless, and there is an expectation for them to embody an angelic figure in the eyes of the public. *The Hindu* says this about Jaipal Reddy in their obituary:

Throughout his eventful and challenging political life, he stuck to his Nehruvian socialist and secular ideology, never compromised on values, and truly led by example, keeping to the adage that he must not only be above suspicion but must be perceived by the people to be above suspicion. He kept to his ideology and

moral compass, which guided him and showed him the way forward (Borker).

Reddy is glorified as an ‘able’ politician again by *Hindu Businessline* in 2019. The descriptors used to characterize Reddy’s impact on Andhra politics have all been rooted in ableism, underscoring the lack of appropriate adjectives to portray an astute disabled politician in Indian politics.

Disability Sports in India

Social stigma associated with disability fosters inactivity or restricted mobility for disabled individuals. Conversely, sports not only showcases the skills of a person with a disability but also provides them with an identity beyond merely being labelled as a ‘disabled person.’ Sports, in this context, becomes a platform for empowerment and recognition.

Through sport, persons with disabilities acquire vital social skills, develop independence, and become empowered to act as agents of change. Sport teaches individuals how to communicate effectively as well as the significance of teamwork and cooperation and respect for others. Sport is also well-suited to reducing dependence and developing greater independence by helping persons with disabilities to become physically and mentally stronger. These skills can be transferred into other new arenas including employment and advocacy work further helping to build self-sufficiency (Disability and Sports).

With the first competitive sporting event for people with disabilities in 1948, the first Paralympics competition in 1960, and the beginning of the Special Olympics in 1968, international efforts to promote the social and emotional well-being of children with disabilities through participation in recreational sports and physical fitness activities got underway. The Special Olympics are presently the largest recreational programme for people with intellectual disabilities, with more than a million participants competing in 125 nations. Despite these initiatives, people with impairments had greater rates of obesity, lower levels of muscular endurance, and lower levels of cardio pulmonary fitness than

people without disabilities. In addition to the physiological advantages of decreased body fat and improved overall fitness, regular physical activity for children with disabilities has been shown to help control or slow the progression of the chronic disease, improve overall health and function, and mediate the psychosocial impact of the condition on children and their families (Rimmer).

India made its first Paralympics debut in Israel in 1968 without winning any medals. Murlikant Petkar became India's first Paralympic gold medallist in the 1972 Summer Paralympics, in Heidelberg, Germany. India's first Deaflympic participation was in 1977 in Romania and received the first medal in 1981 Koln, Germany Deaflympics. The 2020 Tokyo Paralympics was the best performance of India so far in Paralympics. The Indian Blind Cricket Team has won in Blind Cricket World Cup and many international tournaments. Through the Khelo India Scheme launched in 2015 and another set of operational guidelines on "Promotion of Sports among persons with disabilities" three sport bodies—Para Olympics Committee of India (for physically disabled sportspersons), Special Olympics Bharat (for the intellectually disabled) and All India Sports Council of Deaf (for sportspersons with hearing and speech impairment)—implemented sports and games for the disabled.

Indian disability sports encounter a range of challenges, including lower participation from female candidates who grapple with various intersectional issues within society. The inadequate provision of facilities to cultivate athletic and gaming skills emerges as a significant concern. Additionally, a shortage of private sponsorship contributes to the hurdles faced by disabled sports persons. A lack of confidence and limited accessibility to pertinent information about disability sports further compound the challenges for individuals with disabilities in the realm of sports in India. These multifaceted issues not only impede the growth of disability sports but also hinder the broader goal of fostering inclusivity and equal opportunities in the sporting arena. Addressing

these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach, including efforts to enhance facilities, secure sponsorships, boost confidence, and improve access to information for disabled athletes. Such measures can play a pivotal role in creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for individuals with disabilities in the realm of sports in India.

Conclusion

Film, politics, and sports collectively constitute the cultural tapestry of Indian society. Films offer an artistic portrayal, while politics serves as a representation of the social and economic aspects related to disability. Through sports, we witness the potential and possibilities within the disabled community of the nation. It's crucial to note that disability extends beyond the physical realm, encompassing invisible conditions like mental disorders and other intellectual challenges, which remain significant topics in discussions on inclusivity.

The Indian constitution offers substantial opportunities for the development of legal instruments to support individuals with disabilities. Fundamental rights, including equality of status and opportunity, as well as the right to live with dignity, are explicitly guaranteed under Part III of the Constitution of India. However, the actualization of these rights requires time and increased public awareness. Achieving these objectives will be a gradual process, necessitating ongoing efforts to enhance understanding and promote inclusivity.

Endnotes

- 1 The mainstream form of Judaism since the 6th century CE, after the codification of the Babylonian Talmud.
- 2 John 9:2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
- 3 The force generated by a person's actions held in Hinduism and Buddhism to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine the nature of the person's next existence
- 4 A Sanskrit treatise dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE on the performing arts

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