

Frames of Inclusion: Bollywood's Journey from Stereotype to Sensitivity

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the evolution of disability representation in Bollywood cinema from 1936 to 2024, highlighting its role in shaping societal attitudes, cultural narratives, and policy discourses. Historically, Indian cinema has relied on stereotypical portrayals of disabled characters casting them as objects of pity, comic relief, or moral caution marginalized the lived realities of disabled individuals. These portrayals overlooked the lived experiences, dignity, and potential of individuals with disabilities. In recent decades, however, Bollywood has witnessed a significant shift toward more nuanced and authentic depictions. Using qualitative, interpretive content analysis, this research analyzes over 40 purposively selected films across diverse disability categories i.e. physical, sensory, intellectual, neurodevelopmental, and terminal conditions. Key parameters include narrative centrality, representational tone (tragic, comic, inspirational, or realistic), application of medical versus social models, intersectional perspectives (gender, class), and audience reception. Secondary sources, including academic literature, legal frameworks, and disability advocacy materials, were used to contextualize these cinematic portrayals. Films such as *Taare Zameen Par*, *Hichki*, *Margarita with a Straw*, *Ghoomer*, and *Srikanth* reflect a progressive reimagining of disability emphasizing resilience, agency, and inclusion. These narratives have contributed to increased public awareness, reduced stigma, and, in some cases, tangible policy reforms, particularly in education. Despite these advancements, authentic representation remains a challenge. Disabled individuals are still underrepresented in creative roles, and disability is often employed as a dramatic tool rather than portrayed as a natural part of human diversity. For Bollywood to serve as a truly inclusive cultural force, it must not only tell diverse stories but also amplify disabled voices within the storytelling process. This paper highlights cinema's transformative power to foster empathy, challenge prejudice, and promote a more inclusive and equitable society.

Keywords: Disability in cinema, Bollywood, inclusive storytelling, representation, disability rights, Indian films, social inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema serves as a powerful medium of storytelling, capable of both reflecting and shaping societal values, perceptions, and attitudes. In the Indian context, where films hold immense cultural resonance and influence, the representation of marginalized communities particularly individuals with disabilities becomes a matter of significant social concern. Bollywood, as the dominant force in Indian cinema, has historically depicted disabilities through reductive and often problematic lenses. Characters with disabilities were frequently cast as villains, objects of pity, comic figures, or passive sufferers, reinforcing societal prejudices and contributing to widespread misunderstanding and marginalization.

These portrayals not only perpetuated stereotypes but also failed to represent the lived realities and diverse identities of people with disabilities. By reducing disability to a narrative device used to evoke sympathy, fear, or humor cinema contributed to a culture that overlooked the capabilities, dignity, and rights of disabled individuals.

In recent decades, however, a discernible shift has taken place. A growing number of films have begun to present disability with greater sensitivity, complexity, and authenticity. These portrayals move beyond mere tokenism to highlight the resilience, agency, and aspirations of disabled individuals. They advocate for inclusion, accessibility, and respect, aligning with global and national discourses on disability rights and social justice.

This paper seeks to address a critical gap in existing research by tracing the evolution of disability representation in Bollywood cinema. It examines the transition from stereotypical and exclusionary portrayals to more inclusive and empowering narratives. Furthermore, the study explores the role of cinema in influencing public perception and advancing social inclusion. Through the lens of selected films spanning multiple decades, this analysis underscores Bollywood's potential not only as a cultural artifact but also as an instrument for challenging prejudice, fostering empathy, and promoting equity within Indian society.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive content analysis to examine the evolving representation of disability in Bollywood films from 1936 to 2024. The research explores how cinematic portrayals have shifted from stereotypical depictions to more inclusive and realistic narratives. A purposive sample of over 40 films was selected based on thematic relevance, diversity of disabilities represented (physical, sensory, intellectual, neurodevelopmental, and terminal conditions), gender perspectives, and cultural or critical impact. Each film was analyzed using key criteria: the centrality of the disabled character, nature of representation (e.g., tragic, comic, inspirational, or authentic), application of the medical or social model of disability, intersectional dimensions (such as gender and class), and audience reception.

To enhance contextual understanding, secondary sources including academic literature, film reviews, legal frameworks, and advocacy documents were consulted. This integrated approach aims to provide a well-rounded perspective on how Bollywood influences societal attitudes toward disability.

THE PROBLEMATIC LEGACY OF DISABILITY PORTRAYAL IN BOLLYWOOD

● Disability as Punishment and Villainy

Early Bollywood films often depicted disability through negative and punitive lenses. Disabled characters were used as plot devices to evoke pity, fear, or moral lessons rather than as complex individuals. For instance, *Jeevan Naiya* (1936) portrays blindness as karmic retribution for societal misdeeds. *Mother India* (1957) exemplifies this trend, where the depiction of suffering though not exclusively about disability reflects societal attitudes towards hardship and disability. Similarly, *Dhanwaan* (1981) presents blindness as divine retribution for arrogance, reinforcing the tragic consequences of disability. Such portrayals reinforced societal stereotypes, contributing to a cultural understanding of disability as something to be feared or pitied.

● Disability as Comic Relief

Another prevalent trope in early Bollywood was using disability as a source of humor. Characters with disabilities were often exaggerated for comedic effect, trivializing their experiences. For example, in *Golmaal* (1979), a character pretends to be mute to secure a job, leading to humorous misunderstandings. This trend continued in films like *Housefull 3* (2016), where characters with disabilities are mocked for cheap laughs, reflecting a broader cultural insensitivity towards disability issues. *Padosan* (1968), *Deewana Mastana* (1997), *Judaai* (1997), *Mujhse Shadi Karogi* (2002) and *Golmaal Series* (2006-2017) are some other movies where limitations have been exploited for comic effect and unfortunately, have often reinforce the existing stereotypes in an attempt to connect better with the audience. Such portrayals diminish the real experiences of individuals with disabilities, reducing them to sources of laughter rather than acknowledging their humanity.

● Women with Disabilities: The Double Burden

Women with disabilities in Bollywood have often been depicted through patriarchal norms and gender biases. These portrayals frequently depict them as dependent and helpless, defined primarily by their relationships with able-bodied men. For example, in *Anuraag* (1972), the suffering of a blind flower girl is romanticized, while in *Sadma* (1983), Sridevi's character, suffering from retrograde amnesia, is shown as reliant on the male protagonist for care. These portrayals reinforce the notion that women with disabilities are doubly burdened by their gender and disability, often lacking agency and autonomy.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS: TOWARDS MORE EMPOWERING REPRESENTATIONS

● Disability as Strength and Resilience

Recent Bollywood films have increasingly embraced empowering and authentic portrayals of disability, shifting away from narratives of pity and helplessness to ones that celebrate strength, resilience, and human dignity. Early examples like *Sparsh* (1980) and *Koshish* (1972) set the tone by presenting disabled protagonists as independent, capable, and emotionally rich challenging societal prejudices and demanding respect over sympathy. This evolving perspective continues in films such as *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* (2005), *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003), and *Hichki* (2018), which center on characters with cognitive and neurological differences navigating societal barriers with determination and grace. Similarly, *Salaam*

Venky (2022) and *Dil Bechara* (2020) portray individuals with terminal illnesses as emotionally strong and purpose-driven, emphasizing the value of meaningful relationships and inner strength. The trend is further strengthened by biographical dramas like *Srikanth* (2024) and *Chandu Champion* (2024), which spotlight real-life heroes who overcame disability to achieve extraordinary success. These narratives not only inspire but also redefine societal perceptions, portraying disability not as a limitation but as a dimension of lived experience marked by courage, potential, and perseverance.

- **Complex Characters and Realistic Narratives**

Bollywood has evolved to present disability through more complex and realistic characters. Films like *Khamoshi: The Musical* (1996) offer a complex portrayal of a deaf and mute woman, exploring her emotional landscape and relationships with greater depth. *Mann* (1999) features a subplot involving mental health issues, presenting the challenges faced by the protagonist in a more realistic and empathetic manner. More recent films, such as *Andhadhun* (2018), provide sophisticated portrayals of disability, challenging audiences to engage with the characters' complexities and moral ambiguities. *The Sky is Pink* (2019) depicts a family's challenges with a terminally ill child, presenting their experiences with sensitivity and respect.

- **Inclusive Portrayals across Eras**

Bollywood films have increasingly included characters with disabilities in respectful and empathetic ways. *Pyare Mohan* (2006) provides a humorous yet empathetic look at disability through the experiences of two blind protagonists. *U Me Aur Hum* (2008) explores the impact of Alzheimer's disease on a couple's relationship, offering a respectful and heartfelt portrayal of the disease. *Dear Zindagi* (2016) addresses mental health issues through a subplot, portraying struggles and personal growth with sensitivity. *Lal Kaptaan* (2019) features a subplot about disability, adding to the film's narrative on resilience and inclusivity. *Laal Singh Chaddha* (2022) features a protagonist with developmental disabilities, presenting him as a capable and integral part of the narrative. These films represent a shift towards inclusive storytelling that recognizes the dignity and humanity of disabled individuals.

BOLLYWOOD'S ROLE IN PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

- **Cinema as a Tool for Social Change**

Bollywood has historically addressed social issues, and the evolving portrayal of disability reflects a broader trend toward inclusivity. *Black* (2005) and *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) have played crucial roles in raising awareness about disabilities and advocating for disabled individuals' rights. *Taare Zameen Par* notably influenced educational reforms in India, leading to policy changes for better accommodation of students with learning disabilities. *Koshish* (1972) portrayed the challenges of a deaf-mute couple, highlighting societal barriers to their inclusion and advocating for empathy and support.

- **The Importance of Inclusive Storytelling**

Bollywood's evolving approach to storytelling reflects a meaningful cultural shift toward authentic and dignified representation of marginalized voices. Films like *Paa* (2009) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) portray disability not as a limitation but as part of complex, emotionally rich identities, challenging long-standing stereotypes. Similarly, *English Vinglish* (2012), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Dangal* (2016), *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019), and *Gunjan Saxena* (2020) highlight women's resilience and agency, redefining gender roles within a traditionally patriarchal society. Blending both themes, *Ghoomer* (2023) tells the powerful story of a female cricketer who, after losing her right hand, reclaims her career through determination and support. These films collectively signal a progressive reimagining of Indian cinema one that places inclusion at its core, fosters empathy, and encourages a broader societal embrace of diversity.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

The evolution of disability representation in Indian cinema has had a transformative effect on societal perceptions, public discourse, and policy frameworks. Early films such as *Dosti* (1964) and *Koshish* (1972) were instrumental in initiating conversations about empathy and inclusion. By portraying disabled individuals as emotionally rich and resilient, these films challenged dominant stereotypes and laid the groundwork for more progressive narratives.

A major turning point came with *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), which sensitively depicted dyslexia and the struggles of a child within an unsupportive education system. The film not only raised widespread awareness but also contributed to tangible educational reforms promoting inclusive practices and better support systems for students with learning disabilities. Its impact highlighted the power of cinema to catalyze real-world change.

Contemporary films like *Barfi* (2012), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), and *Hichki* (2018) have further advanced this shift by presenting disabled characters as multidimensional individuals with desires, ambitions, and agency. These portrayals

have moved beyond sympathy to foster understanding, dignity, and representation, empowering disabled communities and giving voice to their lived experiences.

Biographical dramas such as *Srikanth* (2024) and *Chandu Champion* (2024) have played a pivotal role in challenging societal limitations by celebrating real-life achievements of individuals with disabilities. These narratives inspire not only admiration but also reflection on structural barriers, pushing for more inclusive practices in employment, education, and public life.

The positive reception of these films by audiences and critics alike has strengthened advocacy for disability rights and accessibility. They have encouraged dialogue across sectors, normalized discussions about inclusion, and fostered greater solidarity within society. As a result, there is increasing pressure on policymakers, educators, and institutions to prioritize disability inclusion as a matter of equity and social justice.

Bollywood, through its evolving portrayals, has emerged as a vital cultural force driving social awareness and transformation. By challenging outdated norms and amplifying marginalized voices, Indian cinema continues to reshape societal attitudes and contribute meaningfully to building a more empathetic, inclusive, and equitable society.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of disability in Indian cinema has evolved significantly from limited and often stereotypical depictions to more thoughtful, respectful, and empowering stories. Films across decades, such as *Koshish*, *Sparsh*, *Taare Zameen Par*, *Hichki*, and *Srikanth*, have helped raise awareness, challenge outdated beliefs, and promote inclusion. These stories have not only mirrored changing social values but have also helped shape public understanding and influence important conversations around disability rights.

However, this progress is still ongoing. Many films continue to use disability as a dramatic device or emotional appeal rather than portraying the everyday realities of disabled individuals. Additionally, people with disabilities are still rarely involved in the filmmaking process. For representation to be truly meaningful, it must also be inclusive behind the scenes giving space to disabled actors, writers, and directors to share their own stories.

Moving forward, Bollywood has the potential to play an even stronger role in breaking down harmful stereotypes and promoting equality. This means including disabled characters as part of regular storylines not just in films focused on disability and showing their lives with depth and respect. It also means ensuring that the industry itself becomes more open and accessible to talent from all backgrounds.

Cinema has the unique power to change hearts and minds. As one of India's most influential forms of media, Bollywood can help build a more understanding and inclusive society by telling stories that reflect the true diversity of human experience. Through continued effort and commitment, Indian cinema can contribute to a world where everyone is seen, heard, and valued.

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