

Visibility of Disability: Ableism in Indian Film, Politics and Sports

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Abstract

“Visibility of Disability: Ableism 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 aftereffects 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 suffer 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.

Keywords: ableism, film, Indian film, Indian politics, sports, representation

Introduction

Representation in India mainly runs through three major cultural texts—cinema, politics, and sports. What is reflected in these realms is the specimen of Indian society. Ableism is a cultural problem in India and a higher level of stigma is associated with it. The representation of the disabled in film, politics, and sports matter the most because these further India's nationalist cause. When India signed the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 the socio-cultural and local needs of the disabled were embraced with more inclusivity. 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 definition to disability is constantly evolving. The word “disability” has been one of the linguistically unstable words which has changed in time according to different social interpretations and semantics. In Babylonian Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism,¹ 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. In Bible the defect is linked to sin:²

...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)

In Hindu mythology, the portrayal of people with disability is also negative and seen as a law of *Karma*.³The disabled people were not portrayed with any justifiable representation in any

¹The 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?”

³The 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.

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 always accompanied with the thoughts of danger, the danger inherent in pollution and contamination, danger of defilement and work to hierarchise the political order in a society. In other words, disgust means inferiority (Miller).

Disability was viewed as an individual medical problem or “personal tragedy” in the Western culture. Industrialisation, urbanisation, and ideologies such as liberal utilitarianism, medicalisation, eugenics, and social Darwinism contributed to the ancient fears and prejudices against the disabled (Nick Watson). The Nazi government in 1930s found disabled people 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.

Ableism 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 lets 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 disabled woman character makes the male character to take unusual risk to rectify the situation, like murdering for making a huge dowry or hiding the disability and marrying off the girl to a man only to ruin her life later (116–117). A disabled woman is often an object of a man’s sympathy and protection while a disabled man must face more complex

⁴ A Sanskrit treatise dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE on the performing arts.

situations (117). Taking the example from the Hindi film *Mother India* (1957), Pal says that the case of a disabled man depending on his spouse represents the worst form of dependency as he is removed from his conventional role of provider and protector (118). 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* (2005) and *Mozhi* (Language, 2007). In the 2014 Malayalam film *Bangalore Days*, the character Sarah is a wheelchair-bound person. But her disability is shown as an extra hurdle to be proud of in the process of empowering the female character. Sarah remains independent financially and emotionally. She does not compromise 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 shares common features with other Western and European countries. In the U.S politics, structural barriers and the Social Security Administration Policy happen to be the two major hinders for the disabled candidates to contest in election. The three groups with disability who are most represented in the U.S politics are young people, native Americans, and veterans from recent war, and this shows that you have to be part of the government decision-making in order to be well represented. Racial ableism, aboriginal disability, and multiple disability are other issues both candidates and voters with disability face all over the world.

Ableism in Indian Politics

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. It was only from 2007, the year in which India signed the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD),that the Indian government started an inclusive approach to people with disability. Though there are reservations for SCs, STs, and other minor communities, there are no such reservations for PWDs in Indian parliament. Until 2000s, voters with disability could not access the election booth since elevators, Braille ballot paper, ramps, and disabled friendly toilets were completely absent from the Lok Sabha polls. Some Panchayat Acts of Tamil Nadu in 2000s even banned disabled candidates from contesting in the election. Politicians like Jaipal Reddy, who played a seminal role in the Andhra Pradesh Separation Movement, and Sadhana Gupta, who was India’s first blind parliamentarian, are the very few who represent disability in Indian political sector. 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 elections, 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. Apart from the statistical analysis, there is a representational issue with regard to the disabled politicians in India. The public image of a disabled politician must be spot-free, and the pressure to be an angelic figure to the public is demanded from them. *The Hindu* says this about Jaipal Reddy in its 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 Business line* in 2019. All the adjectives used to describe Reddy’s contribution to Andhra politics have been of ableism, and they stand out since there are no suitable adjectives to describe a smart disabled politician in Indian politics.

Disability Sports in India

Inactivity or restricted mobility for a disabled person is fostered by the social stigma that is attached with disability. Sports, on the other hand, highlights the skills of a disabled person and in the process, gives identity to the sportsman other than being just a “disabled person.”

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)—have implemented sports and games for the disabled.

Indian disability sports face various issues such as lesser participation from women candidates since they came across other intersectional problems in society. Lack of proper facilities to nurture their skills in athletics and games becomes another matter of concern. Lack of private sponsorship, lack of confidence, and lack of accessibility to relevant information regarding disability sports are some of the issues disabled sports persons of India face.

Conclusion

Film, politics, and sports form the cultural fabric of Indian society. Films portray the artistic representation, while politics represent the social and economic representation of the disabled. Sports show us the possibilities and scope of the disabled community of the country. Disability is not only physical. The invisible disability such as mental disorders and other intellectual challenges remain a major subject of discussion in the inclusivity discourse. Indian constitution provides ample scope for the development of legal instruments for the disabled. Equality of status and opportunity and a life with dignity are among the fundamental rights guaranteed under part III of the Constitution of India. However, materialising them will take its own time and more awareness among the public.

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Bionote:

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