

## Representation of Women with Disabilities in Hindi Cinema

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Women with disabilities are being discriminated in socio-economic and political participation in India. A woman with disability is doubly discriminated. Their right to have sex and reproduction has been grossly denied, indicating human rights violations. Their social and economic participation is grossly undermined. In this context, the role of Hindi popular cinema is of paramount importance to address their issues. Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, is one of the biggest film industries in the world. Many of the Hindi popular cinemas are being globally consumed. This study attempted to identify the nature of representation of women with disabilities in Bollywood from *Koshish* to *Margarita with a Straw*. The study covered the aspects of models of disability, socio-economic participation, and right to sex and reproduction while analyzing the films.

Keywords: Women, disability, sexuality, human rights, Hindi cinema, Bollywood, India

Film as a medium of communication, has the potentialities of instruction and motivational for realisations in various fields. Since a film appeals to both the mind and the heart, it is a part of behavioural communication strategy. It is a source of knowledge and reinforces emotional satisfaction and liberation. It can be considered as an effective medium which reflects socio-economic and political participation of a given society (Hopkinson, 1971; Saravanan, 2016). Needless to say, it informs, educates and entertains the public and has proved a significant space in the domain of communication.

Hindi cinema industry known as *Bollywood*, has been found as one of the largest film producers in India (Gulzar, Nihalani & Chatterji, 2003; 'Economic Contribution of the Indian Motion Picture and Television Industry, 2014). *Bollywood* biographer Lord Meghnad Desai claims that *Bollywood* is a suitable medium which reveals story, freedom struggle and national integration (Jones, 2010). The journey of first Indian Hindi movie from *Raja Harishchandra* directed and produced by Dadasaheb Phalke (Awaasthi, 2013) to *PINK* directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury in 2016 are noteworthy. *Bollywood* industry has produced the films like *Mother India*, *Mughal-E-Azam*, *Guide*, *Ankur*, *Anand*, *Koshish*, *Mera Naam Joker*, *Water*, *Lagaan*, *Omkara*, *Rang de Basanti*, *Taare Zameen Par*, *3 Idiots*, *My Name is Khan*, *Aarakshan*, *Barfi!*, *PK* and *PINK* which have strong bearings on the Indian society.

*Bollywood*, as a medium communication, has the responsibility to address the issues of disadvantaged sections like disability. Hence, it is imperative to understand the human rights of women with disabilities in India.

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## Human Rights and Women with Disabilities

Needless to say, the disabled are subjected to series of deprivations even though certain rights are constitutionally guaranteed by the government in India. The Census of India claims that there were around 1.18 crore disabled women in the year 2011 (The Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2013). Their conditions are quite shaky in terms of social and political participation. Cases are rampant when they are subjected to domestic violence and sexual assaults. In this context, it is unfortunate to note that the Indian feminist movement has failed to streamline the disabled women to the mainstream society (Ghai: 2002, 2009).

When the model of disability are taken into discussions, disability rights activists are not content with the pity or charity and medical model of disability which invite numerous criticism. However, the social model and rights model of disability provide overall space to the disabled in the society (Arthur & Robert, 1995). The social or rights model of disability attempts to break the social barricades and fosters the idea of participation and empowerment.

In a startling revelation, a research report indicates that around 50% of married disabled women's husbands have extra-marital affairs in India. Mostly they do not have financial autonomy, causing over dependency on their husbands (Masoodi, 2014). Another study claims that there are more divorced wives with disabilities than husbands with disabilities. Almost all the disabled women are grossly exploited by their husbands (Nayak, 2013). To talk on sexuality and reproductive health openly is found very scant as far as social climatic condition in India is concerned. Sexuality of disabled women is still conceived as a taboo in India ('Sexuality and Disability in the Indian Context,' 2010).

When there are debates over of sexual rights and reproductive rights of the disabled, it is unfortunate to note that gender has a lot to do while segregating the population of the disabled in India in affording and enjoying the same. The vicious circle of poverty grips the women with disabilities. However, disability legislation in India also adheres to such norms and hence, is found biased (Das & Agnihotri, 1999). Moreover, women with disabilities are often pushed for double discriminations because of so-called weaker sex. However, several research findings reveal that the types of disability have direct bearings on the magnitude of discriminations. Persons suffering from physical disability have edges over the persons suffering from sensory, mental health and emotional, intellectual, autism spectrum and developmental in terms of tapping their rights. Hence, disabled women other than physical disabilities face three types of problems which have crossed the syndrome of 'double discrimination'. This state of issue can be called as 'treble discrimination' which is yet to be detected and termed accordingly.

## Literature Review

Cunha (2016) explores that disability in *Bollywood* is projected as inferior which needs to be sorted out. The disabled characters does not play central role and if there are any, the character does not get permanent. So far as the sexual orientation towards the disabled is concerned, film projects hetero normative path in order to resolve their issues. Moreover, the film shows a disabled person needs an abled-person to ensure him/her a better life.

Pal (2012) finds that even though there have been changes in terms of portrayals of disability in Hindi films, but the marks of dependence, discrimination, and euthanasia are still prevailing.

Buncombe and Waheed (2011) underline that in the past India's film industry was not representing the issues of the disabled especially the mental illness. However, with the making of *Black*, *Taare Zameen Par* and *Guzaarish*, the approach of *Bollywood* has changed towards this disadvantaged group.

Rattanpal (2005) claims that there are certain films represented women with disabilities in lead roles, but many in secondary roles. However, the film, *Margarita with a Straw* has stressed on the issues of sexuality and disability into the realm of popular Indian cinema.

The rationale behind carrying out the current study is of paramount importance. Since there are huge numbers of women with disabilities in India and their problems are many, there should be proper portrayals in *Bollywood*. To understand this complex situation, there should be judicious amount of proper researches on these aspects relating to *Bollywood*. However, there is a scarcity of researches on *Bollywood* and women with disabilities. Whatever the existing literature on this topic available, are mostly perspective writing in nature. The discussions on women with disabilities pertaining to the models of disability, levels of participation, sexual and reproductive health rights are missing. Moreover, there are lapses in incorporating suitable research methodologies. The current study attempts to bridge the research gaps.

## Objectives

This study has attempted to undertake the address the following points:

- (i) To explore the nuances of representation of women with disabilities in *Bollywood*;
- (ii) To find out the level of social, economic and political participation of women with disabilities represented in *Bollywood*; and
- (iii) To study the rights of women with disabilities represented in *Bollywood*.

## Methodology

Owing to understand the nuances of representation of women with disabilities in *Bollywood*, popular and award-winning Hindi films like *Koshish* (1972), *Sadma* (1983), and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) have been taken for analysis. These films are popular among public and qualitative content analysis was used to understand the trend of representation. The current study incorporated Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, Sigmund Freud's position on sexuality and Sherry R. Arnstein's ladder of participation (Leitch, 2001; Hey, 2016; Arnstein, 1969). The dialogues and visual portrayals of disabled characters in the given films were considered into account to understand the critical nature of representation in *Bollywood*. In addition, in-depth interviews with film director, film critic and media educator were conducted to raise perspectives on the issue.

## Findings and Analysis

In a view to understand the nuances of disabled women characters in popular Hindi cinema, three films have been considered for analysis.

### ***Koshish***

*Koshish*, a popular Hindi cinema directed by Gulzar in 1972 portrayed Sanjeev Kumar and Jaya Bhaduri who played disabled characters of Hari Charan Mathur and Aarti Mathur,

respectively. Both Hari and Aarti were speech and hearing impaired persons. Both played the couple who strives for survival. It was seen as the first major female disabled character played in the film.

The female disabled character along with male disabled character was projected as matter of fun for audience when both tried to make prank calls. In addition, there were couple of scenes where both the characters were made mockery of being their disability features and hence, their social inclusion was largely missing.

For around half of film, the role of Aarati indicated certain non-stereotyped subjects. However, for maximum times in the film, she played various levels of stereotyped roles like taking care of her husband, child and family in large. However, she played the second lead role after Hari, who was a male disabled character. It could be because of maximum influence of dominant class, indicating ideological state apparatus under the theory of ideology by Althusser (Leitch, 2001). Moreover, disability rights model was missing in terms of representation.

The public participation of the disabled woman character was found paradox. Initially the role of Aarti was shown as a subject of pity and sympathy. Terms like 'Gunga' and 'Bhera' were often used. They were shown as dis-equilibrium and different from rest of the society and it was because of their impairments. Seeing Hari used whistle to communicate while buying something, when she tried to use the same, the shopkeeper uttered, "Ladakiya aisa nahi kiya karti." It shows the gender discrimination between a disabled male and female. However, in one scene Aarati, was given equal chance to choose their son's name. But such kind of involvement is known as non-participative and to kenism (Arnstein, 1969). The film failed to portray citizen control in ladder of public participation, when the character of Aarati was taken into consideration.

The sexual orientation of the female disabled character was complex and latent. There was no scene which specially dealt the sexual orientation and reproduction of woman disabled character in the film. The romantic moments between the couple were realistically portrayed on the screen. Probably it was in a low light as if it should not be shown and thus, reflected the repressions from the society (Hey, 2016). It shows the reproduction of ideologies of dominant class. However, in the given film, hearing and speech impaired couple have their only son.

### **Sadma**

Directed by Balu Mahendra, *Sadma*, a Hindi popular film released in 1983 is a remake of Tamil film *Moondram Pirai*. The story tells about a school teacher, Somu played by Kamal Haasan and young woman, Nehalata/Reshmi played by Sridevi who regresses to childhood and suffering from amnesia caused by an accident.

The model of disabled woman character represented in the film was somewhat complex. Even though Nehalata was a disabled, Somu fall in love with her. He looked after her and brought her memory back. However, the film showed the disabled woman character in the maximum of pity and medical model and a least of social model. When Nehalata or Reshma met an accident, amnesia or state of disability took her parents as surprise. The disabled character was represented as dependent on the protagonist. The film ignored the human rights model of disability through the character.

Sometimes the disability character was portrayed as subject of fun. The dialogues like of Nehalata with the pet dog "Achha tera kya naam hai? Tera naam Hari Prasad hai" proved to be incorporated to entertain the audience.

When Somu wanted to bring Nehalata's memory back, his friend said, "Jo kuchch tum karne jaa rehe ho, kuchch theek nahin laagta." This dialogue showed that the notion of society towards disability is not optimism and sheer discouragements. Moreover, it signalled the attitude of dominant class towards minority class and proved the presence of the ideological State Apparatus (Leitch, 2001).

As far as public or social participation is concerned, the film accommodated the disabled woman character maximally when she was suffering from the state of disability. Soon after her release from amnesia, the film came to an end. There could be certain scenes showing the differences between the character with disability and character without disability. Hence, the practicality approach to disability was missing in the film.

Nehalata's state of disability was maximally exposed to the life of Somu, the protagonist of the film. Her public or societal participation was found deficit and could be termed as non-participation or tokenism in the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969).

When Somu rescued and took Nehalata to his place, her neighbour grandmother says, "Ladki ka aage piche kuch maaloom nahi. Kaun hai tu Janata bhi nahi. Tum upper se bolta hai uski dimaag ka thikana nahi. Phirbhi tum usko yahan utha laya. Log kya bolenge" reflected the voice of dominant class towards a despaired disabled female character. Moreover, it showed that there was no scope for a disabled to live freely in a society and the thought of social model of disability was missing.

The songs like "Ahe zindegi gale lagaa le" and "Surmayee ankhiyon mein" were quite melodious and superficially attempted to foster social participation of Nehalata. Moreover, the songs were on the lines of innocence of the character and drew pity from the audience.

So far as the sexuality of female disabled character is concerned, there was infantile relationship between Somu and Nehalata. Film did not portray sexuality of the disabled even though both Somu and Nehalata were in proximity in several scenes. Here, the desire to have sex could have been repressed (Hey, 2016). Otherwise, it could be the state of asexuality (Bogaert, 2006; Prause & Cynthia, 2004).

### ***Margarita with a Straw***

Directed by Shonali Bose, *Margarita with a Straw* released in 2014, portrayed Kalki Koechlin as Laila, a teenager with cerebral palsy. So far it is the one and only movie which focused on gender, disability and sexuality. It reflected the social and human rights model of disability. The social and public participation of the female disabled character Laila was delegated power and citizen control (Arnstein, 1969).

The film represented disability, sexuality and queerness through disabled women characters. The character Laila questioned and argued for her sexual rights and attempted to fill the vacuum between the myth and reality. The dialogues like "How dare you! This is my privacy" utterly spoke for the right of sexuality. Gathering courage, Laila revealed her sexual relationships with Jared. Moreover, Laila spoke her mother about her bio-sexual behaviour with Khanum and her mother was taken aback. The story stressed on sexuality of two female disabled characters: Laila and Khanum-indicating the human rights for discussion.

Coming down heavily on the wrong notion that disabled women are asexual and they do not have inner desire to have sex like other abled-bodies, the film with the strong message have come forward to defend for their support and hence, brought awareness for disability rights of sexuality, woman and disability simultaneously. Moreover, the repressions from the society towards disability were exposed through the message (Hey,

2016). In a view to protect sexual and reproductive rights, this film tried to strike a right chord within the issues of sexuality, woman and disability by disseminating the right answer to the Indian society.

The study of Hindi popular film reflects that there has witnessed the paradigm shift in representing female disabled characters. It has transitioned from *Koshish* to *Margarita with a Straw*. Gone are the days when *Bollywood* used to follow more of pity, charity or medical model of disability, forgetting the social and rights model of disability. With the release of film *Margarita with a Straw*, the discourses on three pertinent issues on three different areas— women, disability and sexuality- have widened the scopes, unraveling the fundamental flaws in these three different areas.

The issue of sexuality of women with disabilities has been marginally touched in mainstream Hindi cinema and hence, there is an urgent need of showcasing sexuality of the disabled so that mindset among general public can be changed.

On the silver screen first of its kind, the story of a disabled suffering from cerebral palsy has lively portrayed the issue of sexuality which has been a delicate issue in the Indian society. Of late, it is a laudable job on the part of *Bollywood*, attempting to spearhead the social campaign for the rights model of disability, especially for claiming the right to sex of a disabled woman. Thanks to the winner of seven national and international awards for the film *Amu* on the suppressed history of the genocidal attacks on Sikhs in Delhi in 1984; the producer, writer and director Bose who finally has succeeded to make the audiences contemplating on women, disability and sexuality.

### **Film Personality and Media Educator Views**

Snehasis Das, a documentary filmmaker and national film awardee points out, "There is no doubt there is a dearth of film making on disability issues in India. Moreover, the mainstream *Bollywood* market is not able to meet the requirements. The apprehension lies in the issues of marketability of such socially-oriented films. Along with the mainstream filmmakers, independent documentary filmmakers can raise the issue by making short films."

A prominent film critic Ajit Duara claims, "*Bollywood* uses the genre of melodrama in the films like *Koshish*, *Sadma* and *Margarita with a Straw*. So they are pop culture versions of disability...which is not to say that they are untrue, but must be seen as not actual documentation of disability, but an attempt to fit the problems the characters face into an acceptable format."

Krishna Sankar Kusuma, a media educator from AJK Mass Communication Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi opines, "I believe *Bollywood* is changing in terms of representation of women with disabilities in popular Hindi cinema, but in a slow pace. Significantly, the position of such characters in terms of social and political participation and sexuality has been in a bad light even though things are changing. In this context, the role of media education is really immense. Students meant for film making should be socially and technically oriented to translate the social issues of such kind on to silver screen for mass consumption on a large scale."

### **Conclusion**

It is observed that *Bollywood* has transformed in terms of disability portrayals covering the model, social and public participation and sexuality of disabled women. However, it remains a daunting task to deal with disability and sexuality, especially to the Indian

viewers who are grossly ignorant of such human rights. Films to be based on research inputs should look forward to break the social and attitudinal barriers in the mind of people on sexuality rights of women disabled.

The communication through the cinema should attempt to portray the discourses, providing due considerations to the dimensions of gender, level of participation, social and human rights model of disability. However, the portrayals should not reduce down to derogatory remarks, losing its credibility and relevance. Films to be made should be human rights in nature. In a view to bring awareness in the society, commercial and art film makers should come forward to address such a critical issue. The co-operations from activists, NGO personnel, government officials, film-makers, and the disabled, especially disabled women are of utmost importance. Last not the least, the feminist movement, highlighting the right to sex and reproductive is of highly sought pertaining to the rights of women disabled women.

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