

# REVOKING DISABILITIES AND INVOKING INCLUSION: A CRITICAL STUDY ON SELECT INDIAN FILMS

**Dr. Ajoy Ghosh**

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata

---

## ABSTRACT

Cinema is considered to be a powerful medium that reflects the happenings in a society. While it is caught up between the real and reel life. Disability is an important issue that is widely misunderstood even today in India. The concerns of physically disabled (differently abled) group of the society have also attracted the filmmakers throughout the world including many from Indian film industry. Many mainstream Bollywood (the film industry which produces Hindi films) movies have depicted the experiences of differently-abled people either as a part of the plot or as the main subject of the story while exploring varied ways of fascination with the topic. This paper is an attempt to discuss on how Bollywood mainstream cinema incorporates the idea of disability in their movies, what the level of sensitivity is when it deals with issues of disability and whether the idea of disability has been romanticized or patronized in Bollywood movies. It is an attempt to present a progressive outlook towards disability in cinemas.

**Keywords :** *Disability, Bollywood, Education, Impairment, Cinema*

---

## INTRODUCTION

The term '*Disability*' means an individual who has different capabilities to the average person. It is an umbrella term, and can be used to describe a wide spectrum of disabilities, from blind people to amputees, to wheelchair users. It is an alternative description for a disabled person. A specially abled is also known as differently abled. In this case study, we will focus on specially abled children as portrayed in the Indian Cinema. Specially-abled children need 'special care'. Dedicated attention, both physically and mentally, is crucial for their well-being. Though families play a big part, yet the support from a trained system of care cannot be denied. Apart from health, such children also need special facilities at schools, colleges and workplaces.

Cinema is a motion picture usually played in movie theatres but in present day and age also played in 'Over the top' also known as OTT platforms. Cinema is considered to be a powerful medium that reflects the happenings in a society. While it is caught up between the real and

reel life, it still serves as an important medium of entertaining people, educating them and bringing a behavioural change in their practices and attitudes. Given the reach of the Indian film industry in India and across the world, it has been particularly effective in changing people's perception and uprooting societal stereotypes.

Given the lack of awareness and direct experience with disabled children, media representations such as film representations can provide powerful and memorable definitions for the public. In films that depict a character with a disability, the character rises to the occasion in order to exemplify people with that particular disability showing to the audience how individuals with that disability behave, feel, communicate, exhibit symptoms and experience life. It, thus, becomes important that children who are disabled are represented responsibly. The idea of disability is not something new to Bollywood either. Old movies like *Koshish* (1972), *Sparsh* (1980), *Sadma* (1983) and *Khamoshi* (1996) have sensitively explored the life and problems of the disabled people. With movies like *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003), disability even started featuring in the so called "masala" or entertainment movies.

In this study the researcher will focus on five movies in Indian Cinema (Black, February 2005, *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, May 2005, *Taare Zameen Par*, December 2007, *Paa*, December 2009 and *Hichki*, March 2018) which have played very important roles in describing the issues of inclusivity in society as well as the education system and a sense of awareness amongst people regarding the specially abled and the challenges they face in life.

## OBJECTIVES

- To study the different disabilities affecting the main characters of the movie.
- To discuss the main reasons behind the disabilities and the challenges faced by the disabled in the movies.
- To understand and evaluate how these movies have brought about an inclusivity in society with focus on education.
- To analyse the general perception of these movies in the Indian Society.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the different disabilities affecting the main characters of the movie?

- Why does the disabled person in the movie face challenges and what are the main reasons behind it?
- How have these movies have brought about an inclusivity in society with focus on education?
- What is the impact of these movies in Indian society?

## METHODOLOGY

The method central to and used for the data collection pertaining to this research was the qualitative method of study. The procedure which was used for carrying out the study was watching the respective movies, which were produced during time span from 2005 to 2018 has been taken into consideration. Five films have been taken into consideration for the purpose of the study and these films revolve around the theme on disabled person. Reading different articles also have been studied while making critical analysis of the films. Each movie is studied independently. The present observer has followed documentary analysis to develop the study. A notebook is coded to record the data in various categories related to the nature of representation of the disabled characters in terms of gender, profession, nature of the disability, characterization, social positioning, peer-group responses etc. Researchers collected data after repetitive and intensive watching of the movies on the computer.

## ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

The analysis and interpretation of the data is carried out in accordance with the respective research questions and keeping in mind the objectives of the case study: -

### **R 1- What are the different disabilities affecting the main characters of the movie?**

In the movie *Black*, Rani Mukherjee is the protagonist of the story as the adult girl called Michelle McNally, who lives in Shimla with her parents Paul and Catherine McNally. Whereas Ayesha Kapur plays the role of young Michelle. At the age of two, Michelle loses her ability to see as well as hear. So, she is blind and deaf. Her world is black and her parents are lost on how to bring her up, with time as she grows, she becomes a violent and uncontrollable child with full of anger and this continues till the age of 8. During this time her mother becomes helpless and her father frustrated. They tie bell around her to know her movements and whereabouts around the house. Until Mr Debraj Sahay the character portrayed by Amitabh Bachan enters into her life, the first alphabet he teaches the insolent Michelle McNally was the word BLACK and not A, B, C, D. He struggles a lot to teach a blind, deaf and dumb girl. His determination is to see his student as a graduate holder. He gives his utmost support to her in every possible way. Finally, the blind girl achieves what she

desired. She becomes a graduate. The climax speech by blind girl is heart-winning

In the movie *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, the role of a protagonist in the story is played by Ajay Devgn, a man who has autism, works as a waiter in a coffee shop, even though he has a body of a grown man he has a mind of a seven-year-old. One day while closing the café, a young woman named Maya Trivedi, asks for his assistance as she has missed the last bus. Indraneel (Ajay Devgn) assists her, takes her home, finds out that she is pregnant, helps her to give birth, agrees to take care of the child, Gungun, and thereafter Maya leaves, never to return. Years later, Gungun has grown up, attends school, and believes that Indraneel is her dad. Then their world is changed upside down when Maya's dad, Dayanath Trivedi, arrives from London, Britain, to take custody of his grandchild, if necessary, through the courts. Indraneel refuses to depart from Gungun, and as a result a case is filed in Court when Gungun disappears. It is Niti Khanna a role played by Sushmita Sen who is also Ajay Devgn's lawyer who helps her to get custody of the child. The idea of autism is integrated into a more generalized experience of parenthood, while addressing the doubts regarding heteronormative experiences of the disabled people. The optimistic views of the movie would present a positive scenario, but the way they achieve it is worth analysing as certain pertinent social issues are also laid bare in the process.

In the movie, *Taare Zameen Par*, Ishan Awasthi is a child who is portrayed as someone who dislikes studying overall. He suffers from Dyslexia. He cannot read or write properly and is overshadowed by his over accomplished brother. His parents do not understand his problem rather they belittle him. They are so much annoyed with him that they send him to boarding school. Even, they wanted to get rid of his excuses of study and he can continue his study under strict guidance. It is his teacher in the boarding school Mr Ram Shankar Nikumbh who comes to his rescue and understands him.

In the movie, *Paa*, Mr Amitabh Bachan played a lead role of a boy who is 13 years old and is called Auro. He is the illegitimate son of Vidya Balan and Abhishek Bachan who suffers from a rare disease called Progeria. This story focuses on a father and son relationship and narrates how a son tries his best to find his father and accept his own identity.

In the movie *Hichki*, Rani Mukherjee played the role of Naina Mathur. Naina Mathur, the protagonist of the story has completed Bachelor of Education and Master of Science, wants to be a teacher, but is repeatedly rejected as she suffers from Tourette syndrome, which causes her to make uncontrollable sounds likened to hiccups. Despite failing for five years, she is supported by her mother Sudha and her younger brother Vinay, while her father Prabhakar sees little potential in

the idea and wants her to take a banking job. Naina eventually receives an offer at the St. Notker's School to teach the class 9F. Once, she is inducted as a teacher, however, she realizes that the school was desperate to find a new teacher for 9F, as all other teachers had failed to control the class. Naina finds that the students are unruly, misbehaved, and visibly different. Shyamlal, the school's peon, tells her that the 9F students come from a nearby slum and were admitted to fill the government-prescribed quota for the underprivileged after a previous municipality school on the St. Notker's football ground was closed due to mounting maintenance costs.

## **R 2- Why does the specially abled person in the movie face challenges and what are the main reasons behind?**

The disabled person/ child in the above mentioned movies face several challenges, most of these challenges coincide or are similar to each other. The researcher will highlight few examples from the movie.

- i. **Lack of understanding:** The very first challenge faced by the children in the movies is a lack of understanding by none other than their respective parents, siblings or peers. In the movie *Black*, we see how Michelle McNully was treated by her parents with a bell around her waist like a cow to know where she is or Ishan Awasthi in the movie *Taare Zamene Par* where he tries to tell his mother that he can't read properly since the words get jumbled up. The parents instead of trying to understand his problem send him to boarding school. In the movie *Hichki*, Naina Mathur's father never really believed on her daughter. He feels so much embraced for her daughter that he left home and could never believe that she could bag a teaching job due to her Tourette syndrome. In *Paa*, Vidya Balan never understands the need of Auro trying to get in touch with his father even though she raised him with all the love and care.
- ii. **Education facilities:** Education is a basic right of all human. In this world, education should be free and available to everyone, as dreamed by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, but the reality is far from it. A large number of children with disabilities remain out of school and thus they are deprived of basic education. We can see this in the movie *Black*, where a special teacher had to be called for the blind and deaf child instead of sending the child to regular school. In the movie *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, Ajay Devgn was autistic. He worked as a waiter and faced several hardships. If he was educated, he could have got a better job. In *Hichki*, we see how a child with the Tourette syndrome has been asked to leave school because she makes noises during class which aren't under her control. In *Taare Zamene*

*Par*, Ishan Awasthi is made fun in class when he tells his teacher that he cannot understand the alphabets or number since they fly in front of him. He is thrown out of class and is sent to the principal. Lack of educational facilities for people with disability is one of the major challenges faced by them.

- iii. **Being teased and bullied:** Often people find satisfaction in putting others down. They find superiority in bullying the weak and underprivileged. Specially abled people often find themselves at the receiving end of such violent and disgusting actions. In *Black* we see how a string of cans has been tied to the hip of a deaf and blind child who is struggling to get it out from the staircase where she has got stuck. In *Paa*, we see that despite Auro having a very good friend circle other people look at him and judge him because according to them he is not normal. We see in *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, how a powerful man, Dayanath Trivedi tries to bully Ajay Devgn into giving up the custody of his granddaughter, in *Taare Zamen Par*, Ishan is bullied by his school friends and made fun off since he cannot read and is always acquiring low scores. He is bullied so much that in his new school he goes into depression, anxiety and isolation.
- iv. **Feeling of being discouraged:** A specially abled child is always looked down upon with sympathy and they gain support with a lot of difficulty. Very few people actually understand what these special children go through. When we see Ishan in *Taare Zamen Par*, his father refused to accept that his child has dyslexia even though his teacher Mr Ram Shankar Nikhum tries to convince him otherwise. He just says his son is lazy and is mentally retarded. In *Black*, we noticed how Michelles' dad was ready to send her to the mental asylum since her presence was dangerous for her younger sister. In *Main Aisa hi Hoon*, we see Mr Dayanath Trivedi fighting on the grounds that Ajay Devgn has autism and he cannot take care of himself nor of anyone else. What he failed to see is that he had been taking care of his granddaughter since the last 7 years. In *Hichki*, Naina's school authority has thrown her out of class. He father is so much ashamed with the her that he left house. When she expressed her dream that she wanted to be a teacher, her friends made fun of her.
- v. **A sense of isolation:** Children who are specially abled, they always face the problem of being isolated by the rest of the class since they are not considered normal by the society. This injects in them a sense of isolation and they are only dependent on themselves. They are also compelled to question their existence and wonder why they are born like this. The feel less loved and valued. In *Hichki*, all of Nainas classmates made fun of her during Hindi

classes so much so when she got the leaving certificate from school. In *Paa*, we observe that Auro is isolating himself from others and he prefer to communicate with his friend over internet. In *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, no one was willing to take up Ajay Devgn legal affairs, since they didn't believe he had scope. It was only after Nita Khanna's son Rahul became friends with Ajay Devgn and his friend convinced his mother to take up the case. In *Taare Zamane Par*, Ishan is very lonely and he has no friends, he is bullied so much that he despises going to schools and one fine day he runs away from school.

### **R 3- How have these movies introduced inclusivity in society with focus on education?**

Cinema is considered as one of the most powerful mediums when it comes to influencing the audience. India is the largest producer of feature films in the world with global reach and Bollywood industry contributes largest numbers of films in Indian cinema; hence portrayal of any issue in Indian cinema becomes quite noteworthy. These movies have brought about inclusivity in society with focus on education.

- i. ***Black (2005)*** made the educational institutions aware of the fact that there is the lack of infrastructure present in our country even today even after many years after independence. There are lack of schools and study materials for the blind as well as the deaf. No inclusivity in society can exist without including these specially abled people. Everyone has to be included, nurtured and given equally importance. That is why one of the major Millennium Developmental Goals focus is on inclusive education.
- ii. ***Main Aisa Hi Hoon (2005)*** is based on the life of a mentally challenged father (Ajay Devgan) who raises his daughter (Rucha Vaidya) as a single parent. Everything is ideal in their life, until Vaidya's maternal grandfather returns to India to take her back with him to the UK, thinking Devgan to be irresponsible. A legal battle ensues where Sushmita Sen not only defends his case, but also raises important questions about society's perception of the specially abled. One such instance is about the use of appropriate terminology, particularly the issues with using such words as "retard", "paagal", "handicapped" and "bichare". It is indeed noteworthy for a Indian Cinema to take cognizance of something as subtle as this. The mention of international legislation goes to show the team's sincerity and research. Interestingly, many of the points (including terminology) raised in the movie have been incorporated in the draft of India's new disability law, which is slated to be introduced in the Parliament and made into a law. This will give protection to the specially abled people and it will make them more inclusive towards society.

- iii. **Tare Zameen Par (2007)** directed by Aamir Khan, revolves around the life of a 10-year-old dyslexic boy, played by Darsheel Safary. The movie was not only a super hit, but also was widely appreciated by disability groups across the world. The movie leads to a greater appreciation for the limitations faced by people with intellectual disabilities, and resulted in several educational institution and authorities across the country taking action to include these students in the mainstream. On December 31, ten days after the movie was released, the Central Board of Secondary Education issued a circular granting students with disabilities extra compensatory time to complete their exam. The movie also had a spill over effect on Chandigarh. The education administration started a course for teachers to deal with children with learning disabilities in early years of their schooling and screen the movie as the first *sensitization lesson*. Besides new provisions in favour of people with disabilities, the movie also helped the existing disability advocacy across the country. According to a social activist working for the empowerment of people with intellectual challenges in Delhi, *“Funding increased substantially and, more than that, we had so many more organizations wanting to support us in empowering these children. The Government officials were also far more cooperative and understanding than before”*. The movie also had some very specific effects. Since the release of the movie, fashion shows have become organized as one of the primary sources of raising funds for disability organizations across the country, especially those working for people with intellectual challenges.
- iv. **Paa (2009)** has brought into light a very rare disease called Progeria which was unknown to a large section of the population. This movie transacts a social message that a person can be specially abled in his physical appearance but can be highly intelligent like Auro, and being specially abled doesn't make him/her mentally specially abled. Auro, was technologically savvy. We can observe from the movie that Auro was talking to his friends via video conference as well as through emails. Alok (his father) tells him that how much he hates him because of the media attention.
- v. **Hichki (2018)** has brought to light the Tourette Syndrome, the inclusivity in education is brought about by the fictional character Mr Khan who was also the Principal of St. Nroke School when he calls upon Naina Mathur and asks her about her condition, telling her that she will be treated equally like any other student in class. She doesn't have to thank him, rather he has to thank her, since everyone got to learn something from her. He told her this is a school and everyone comes here to learn so do you and so will you. The movie helped

in changing the mindset of people who didn't know why some people keep making hiccup noises.

#### **R 4 - What is the impact of these movies in Indian society?**

Studying the cinematic narratives of specially abled is important because it affects the way people understand, visualize and stereotype about physically challenged people in the real life. The Indian cinema is considered to be the major source of entertainment for the common people which is responsible for bringing change in their practices and attitudes. The ways in which individuals and groups are portrayed in popular media can have a reflective effect on how they are viewed by society at large. This is significant because much of the common people get a lot of its information from the media (films) and is strongly influenced by what is shown. People with disabilities are often seen as “different” from “normal” people in society and are frequently attributed stereotypical characteristics. The portrayal of disability can change attitudes or reinforce them. The impact of these movies in Indian society is as follows:

- **Increase in awareness:** These movies increased the awareness on the people who are living in the society with multiple disabilities, the challenges that they face in everyday life and how life is not fair to them. They also need to work 10 times harder than an average individual.
- **Lack of employment:** Employment of any citizen is based upon his education and skills he has picked up along the way. When the specially abled people are deprived of basic education, they are bound to fall behind other candidates for that job. Even though the government has introduced schemes which should guarantee jobs for specially abled people, it has not yet reached its target.
- **Empathy and understanding:** It has made people understand that all five fingers are not the same. But that doesn't make an individual any less capable. Everyone has their own timeline of tasting success. For Michelle McNully it took her 12 years to taste the success.
- **Opening of more specially abled institutes:** More specially abled institutes have been opened up by the government, schools have started hiring teachers who can work with specially abled children aiming towards the inclusive education.
- **Disability Movement:** It has become stronger in India when the Indian Parliament passed the act the Right of Persons with Disability Act, 2016. It strengthens their movement. Also preserving the fundamental structure of the Constitution by maintaining equality under Article

## FINDINGS

- After a thorough understanding of the five movies, the researcher came up with the following observation: -
- Specially abled children are as capable as normal average children, sometimes even more brilliant. They just need a proper teacher like Debraj Sahay or a Ram Shankar Nikumbh to show them the path to light.
- The major problem is in the mind-set of the parents, they are always concerned about what the society will say, rather than addressing the situation at hand in a non-biased manner. Example- Ishan's Father who sent him to boarding school.
- Schools which are inclusive can give a proper foundation to the children suffering from diseases which are not within their control and expand the horizon of the other students by bringing in diversity. Teaching them how to be more empathetic towards each other. Example- St Notker's School.
- Specially disabled children are capable of being caring as well as being responsible adults when they grow up. Example- Naina has become a headmistress and Ajay Devgn in *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* was looking after a small baby girl even though he has autistic syndrome.
- Lack of proper accessible facilities for children with disabilities in a huge country like India.
- Children who are specially abled have clear goals in mind. Naina in *Hichki* wanted to become a teacher. Auro in *Paa* wanted to be acknowledged as well as meet his father. Ishan wanted to excel in anything other than studies. Michelle wanted to complete her graduation at any cost and Ajay Devgn in *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* wanted his daughter's custody at any cost.

### ***Summary of this study***

| Movie                    | Nature of disabilities | Message                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Black (2005)             | Deaf, Blind            | A teacher can be a friend, philosopher and guide and can transform the life of a student                                                                              |
| Main Aisa Hi Hoon (2005) | Autism                 | Differently abled doesn't make an individual incapable of fulfilling their responsibility. They can do everything. They just need more time as compared to the other. |
| Tare Zameen Par (2007)   | Dyslexia               | All children are special and they all of have their own way of expressing and learning. They should be given time to flourish.                                        |
| Paa (2009)               | Progeria               | It brings into light the disease called progeria and how they are perceived wrong by our society though they have intelligence.                                       |
| Hichki (2018)            | Tourette syndrome      | The audience came to know about the Tourette Syndrome. It sent across a message that if you have a will, you will always have a way.                                  |

### **CONCLUSION**

While there seems to be an increasing understanding of people with disabilities in the industry, it is important to portray if the medium is playing any role in furthering the disability movement in the country. This section attempts to do so by using five case studies- *Black (2005)*, *Tare Zameen Par (2007)*, *Main Aisa Hi Hoon (2005)*, *Paa (2009)* and *Hichki (2018)*. It is gratifying to see that many of these films are indeed moving closer to an inclusive view of disability as part and parcel of society. In this movement, we can see disabilities have been portrayed sometimes as a punishment and maladjustment, sometimes comic interlude or romantic way.

From a pitiable to an independent and self-reliant person with disability, Indian Cinema has come a long way in depicting disabilities. While disability has often been represented as dependence and punishment, several recent films have dealt with the issue very sensitively, and have had significant impact on the disability movement in the country. Observing the current trends, one can be hopeful of the appropriate and effective utilization of the powerful medium of films. However,

there have still been some movies that have presented disability in the stereotypical conventional light or for comical effect (the controversy regarding Golmaal 3 poking fun at people who stammer is one such example).

Thus, festivals such as the international disability film festival must be continued and promoted to ensure that the Indian film fraternity is even more sensitized and the disability sector is able to make full use of Indian cinema for getting its message across to the public and have a huge impact around the globe. It only when this will happen can we truly say that we as citizens have taken part in the disability movement. Helping that section of the society which needs it the most. One should always give back to society and keep in mind the everyday struggles faced by them in their daily lives. Kyunki 'Kho Naa Jaye Yeh Taare Zameen Par.'

## REFERENCES

- Andrade C, Shah N, Venkatesh B. K. (2010). The depiction of electroconvulsive therapy in Hindi cinema. *JECT*, 26(1), 16-22.
- Bhugra, D. (2006). *Mad tales from Bollywood: Portrayal of Mental Illness in Conventional Hindi Cinema*. Maudsley Monographs: Psychology Press.
- Buncombe, A. & Waheed, A. (2011). *From Dancing to Disability: Bollywood Gets Serious*. The Independent. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/from-dancing-to-disability-ndash-bollywood-gets-serious-2197790.html>
- Dissanayake, W. (2003). *Rethinking Indian popular cinema: towards newer frames of understanding*. In A. Guneratne & W. Dissanayake (Eds.), *Rethinking Third Cinema*. Routledge.
- Jaikumar, P. (2006). *Cinema at the End of the Empire*. Duke University Press.
- Mohapatra, A. (2012). Portrayal of Disability in Hindi Cinema: A Study of Emerging Trends of Differently-abled. *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research*, 1(7), 124-132.
- Nair, K. (2015). *Getting Real on Reel with Disability*. The Times of India.
- Naithani, A. (2008). *Tare Zameen Par Could Change the Face of Education in India*. The Economic Times.
- Pal, J. (2012). *Sensory Impairments and Cinema in India*. Film Impression.
- Pal, J. (2012). The Portrayal of Disability in Indian Cinema: An Attempt at Categorization. *Phalanx*.

Sen, A. (2021) Autism and Parenthood: A Comparative Analysis of I Am Sam and Main Aisa Hi Hoon. Journal of the Department of English, 14, 46-53.

### Internet Sources

- <https://stanford.edu/~kartiks2/disabilityInBollywood.pdf>
- [file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/FramingDisabilityinthe Contemporary Bollywood CinemaDevVratSinghandNehaPandey. pdf](file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/FramingDisabilityintheContemporaryBollywoodCinemaDevVratSinghandNehaPandey.pdf)
- <https://postscriptum.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Swagata-chatterjee.pdf>
- <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0375611/plotsummary#synopsis>
- <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0444874/plotsummary>
- <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0986264/plotsummary>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J72Rlp5WAcA>
- [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0PHXMBR0NM48WQBNOQPF9T500H/ref=atv\\_hm\\_hom\\_%7C1\\_c\\_cjm7wb\\_2\\_1](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0PHXMBR0NM48WQBNOQPF9T500H/ref=atv_hm_hom_%7C1_c_cjm7wb_2_1)
- <https://www.narayanseva.org/blog/10-problems-faced-by-people-with-disabilities>