

BIZARRE TO BOLD: DEPICTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DISABILITIES IN BOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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Abstract

Popular culture plays an important role in promoting socio-cultural harmony. It allows heterogeneous sections of people to identify collectively by serving as an inclusionary role in society as it unites the masses on ideals of acceptable forms of behaviour. Change that is promoted by the people through popular culture is determined by the interactions between people in their everyday activities like dressing style, use of slang, greeting rituals and foods. Socio-cultural dynamics are influenced to a large extent by means of popular culture. By using the medium of movies, we can achieve success in bridging the gaps in societies. Aspects of popular culture make information more relatable to multiple audiences, evolve with changes in how information is disseminated, and bring more people to the discussion (Street, Inhorn, and Scott, 2015). This article is a study to explore inclusiveness through the depiction of early childhood disabilities through Bollywood movies.

Keywords: Inclusiveness; Early childhood special needs; Representation of Disabilities in Bollywood Cinema; Taare Zameen Pe

Introduction

As per Census 2011, in India, “disabled” person's is 2.21% of the total population. Even the sustainable development goal also focuses on “inclusive development”. So, this highlights the essential for solidification disability figures in the Nation. Special education is designed for the students who need special care and attention. The students with special need should be the part of regular classes but demand is they must be taught with great spirit, patience, motivation and determination. Every child of every country is special: special with respect to parents love and care and special with respect to special needs which he/she require for his/her growth and development. Right now, Countries are focusing special care, rights and policies for such students who need special care for their proper growth and development. The education of special need children never received such amount of consideration and special efforts were made by government and non-government agencies in past as in present.

The role of the movies

There is a popular saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words”. This saying is not only endorsed but hyphenated to an elevated degree through motion pictures. It is an established fact that how individuals and groups are represented in popular media can have a substantial effect on the ways they are viewed by society at large. One such case is the portrayal of people with disabilities in movies. Physical limitations can make life challenging. But it is not impossible. People with disabilities find ways to overcome their limitations and lead life as they want. Movies made on this theme can help build compassion and tolerance among viewers who are not differently-abled and courage in people who can relate to the plot.

Cinema that is generally studied in literature under the genre of popular literature is not only a common medium of mass communication but also serves to echo and mirror society. Irrespective of the name used to refer - cinema, film, movie - it is a tool for socio-cultural awakening, change, a collective voice and a powerful medium of expression and storytelling. As a popular American filmmaker, David Lynch writes, “Cinema is a language. It can say things—big, abstract things. And I love that about it. I’m not always good with words. Some people are poets and have a beautiful way of saying things with words. But cinema is its own language. And with it you can say so many things, because you’ve got time and sequences. You’ve got dialogue. You’ve got music. You’ve got sound effects. You have so many tools. And you can express a feeling and a thought that can’t be conveyed any other way. It’s a magical medium”. (Lynch, WS)

Major appeal of cinema is the visual mode, which allows all - literate, illiterate, men, women, children, adults, and people from rural or urban areas – to watch and admire. It is considered as an art form, a source of fun/entertainment, a society’s document as well as a critique. Perhaps, this may be the primary driving factor for the government to patronise and extend support to the possible extent to movie industry.

Early twentieth century: Bollywood themes

When we analyse the major themes represented in Bollywood movies since the early twentieth century, there is very limited representation and portrayals of people with disabilities. This is a clear indication that people who are already made to live in margin are further marginalised. No depictions of people with

disabilities endorses that they are treated as non-existent and invisible. And, even if there are a few characters with disabilities in a movie they were stereotyped as clowns or minor supporting characters or as 'objects' of pity. Nevertheless, some of the commercial movies have also experimented with disabilities as heroism. But as a whole, it depicts a very poor status and a matter of concern.

Changing perceptions

There is a noticeable shift in the themes, depictions, representations of people with disabilities in the twenty-first century Bollywood cinemas. By the early 2000s, cinema started evolving as more inclusive, accommodating and welcoming new realities with 'broad' or 'bold' movies coming to mainstream. Barring the use of quotations, the author of the article draws attention to the commendable success of inclusiveness in Bollywood productions. This paradigm shift of the new era, changed perspective with broad outlook and an agenda of inclusiveness gave a few iconic films dedicated to disabilities. These movies have represented, with a decent level of sincerity, their empathy toward the real issues of children with disabilities.

Movies of New Era

Since the year 2000, we see signs of positive change, acceptance, and responsible portrayal of psychological and learning disabilities. In the year 2003, a movie named "Koi Mil Gaya" portrayed the plight of an intellectually disabled young adult, his struggles, conflicts and the social stigma with mixed emotions of pity, hatred and inferiority. Following the success and critical acclaim of "Koi Mil Gaya", there was another movie release in the year 2005, with the name "Main Aisa Hi Hoon". This movie showcased the problems of an autistic father. In some ways it was a new dimension showing a father fighting for his daughter and his disability. Though this movie was not a blockbuster, it was successful in bringing in the fold disabilities as part of life. "My Name is Khan", 2010, with big star cast, was another one that strikes a chord and brings children and people with disability on the silver screens and multiplexes without making jokers of them. In this movie the protagonist suffers from Asperger's syndrome. Although it is somewhere on the lines of autism, it is not exactly a learning disability. The story was woven not only around the difficulties of being disabled but also the gross realities and genuine problems in being treated as an equal human being. These movies somehow contributed to mitigate the general stereotypes associated to such characters before. Film "Barfi", released in September 2012, is to be judged as one that can change Bollywood's outlook about the abilities of the disabled. The commercial success, artistic pleasure and a well-researched storyline; where there is a scope for absolutely usual life with love, relationship, suspicion, jealousy and every human phenomenon including errors.

An Iconic movie on learning disability in children

The greatest movie of all on the theme of children with learning disability that left an incredible impression on Indian society is "Taare Zameen Par". This movie beautifully convinces that adults are victims of ignorance and these children are sufferers in the trap of ignorance. This movie sensitised the stakeholders of academia, parents and society regarding the learning disability among children. It is a fruitful effort to take the concept of psychology to the masses. A child who is just eight-year-old, walking alone on streets, attempting to catch fishes in his water bottle, befriending pet animals like cats, dogs and playing with butterflies, kites is a common site in Bollywood movies. In these scenes the boy's world is filled with wonders; colours, dogs, fishes etc.; but, while he tries to solve Math problems, tables, he is transported on the flight of fantasy where his imagination sees war of planets, where one planet is smashing the other ones. Obviously, most of the patrons of Bollywood cinema must be reminded of the movie "Taare Zameen Pe". A boy who is otherwise brilliant when it comes to math. He does not get the table 'right', words keep soaring, patterns are altering, numbers are hovering and everything makes sense but 'abnormally' and 'differently'. In his world letters are inverted, words are misspelled things that cannot be liked by 'any' teacher from 'any' student. Subsequently, endless poor academic performances and resultant 'progress report' place him in the category of 'irresponsible behaviour'. Parents in their anxiety and guilt of being failed at parenting commonly decide to send such 'irresponsible behaviour' children to a boarding school in order to 'discipline' them. In any real-life situation, all these things are so frequently witnessed that we hardly find fault either with the teachers or parents. Credit goes to movies like "Taare Zameen Pe" where the society is acquainted with the problems in treating every child's behaviour without paying heed to their psychological aspects and special needs.

Impact of Cinema on creating public awareness

In the words of Samuel Weber, "the world itself has become a picture whose function is to establish and confirm the centrality of man as the being capable of depiction." (Weber, 22) It is also opined by Saul Morson that a film is just not a mirror in which we see legal and social realities reflected in some more or less distorted way. (Morson, 117) Movies remind us of the possibilities of our legal and social arrangements.

"Taare Zameen Pe" is an iconic movie that introduced us to the deeper psychological dimensions and subtleties of a boy named Ishaan Awasthi. The unforgettable movie is about a disability, mental challenge, and to be more precise it depicts the learning disability of Ishaan with so much conviction, maturity and sincerity, from beginning through the end. The boy requests, pleads, cries and shouts to sympathize but all was in vain. Though he appears to be quiet, he is filled with grief. He is disheartened and carries a heavy load of emotions,

seemingly hopeless situation as his parents left him at the hostel and went away. Things do not improve for the boy in the new school. Indeed, he feels his problems have increased manifold because of the added ordeal of separation from his family. He faces the same old challenges of poor marks, improper homework, disorder and untidiness. In his effort to fit in, the boy begins to lose all his self-esteem. The happy go lucky kid turns quiet and aloof. Until the day, there arrives a teacher! The accomplishment of this movie was to be able to authenticate the fact that children like Ishaan are labelled 'disabled' because, we, as a society are incompetent to understand that they are differently abled.

Initiatives for Inclusiveness through Movies

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) distinguishes that Individuals with Disabilities are valuable human resource for the nation. So, they must be provided special facilities, equal opportunities, and rights in society. When there was acknowledgment for disability as just any other concern to be shared, several celebrities came forward and talked about their struggles with similar disabilities. Films and film stars are expected to create an emotional connect with general public. Schools across the country welcomed this movie. It was year 2005, when the first international disability film festival in India was organized by the Chennai-based NGO, the Ability Foundation. These kinds of festivals are unique as they promote films from around the world with an objective of raising awareness about disability issues and breaking stereotypes about people with disabilities. With growing internet and media revolution, society in general got somewhat informed. Although, being honest, the kind of impact film industry is known for has been missing when it comes to awareness about learning disabilities. In the words of Morris, "Disability in film has become a metaphor for the message that the non-disabled writer wishes to get across in the same way that beauty is used. In doing this, movie makers draw on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people, knowing that to portray a character with a humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience. Unfortunately, the more disability is used as a metaphor for evil or just to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed." (Morris, 93)

Role of Law in controlling how disabilities are portrayed in movies

When one thinks of regulating what the audience sees in movies, the first organization that comes to one's mind is the censor board. In India, "The Central Board of Film Certification" is the government regulatory body and censorship board in India controlled by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Its main functions include reviewing, rating and censoring motion pictures. It gains authority from the Cinematography Act, 1952. According to the Supreme Court, commenting on the role of the Censor Board, "the combination of act and speech and sound in semi darkness of the theatre with elimination of all distracting ideas will have a strong impact on the minds of the viewers and can affect emotions." (SC -574) There is also a provision in the Cinematograph Rules, 1983 which mentions that there should be an assessment of public reactions to films as it has already been admitted that movies tend to have an impact on the public mind. (CR, 1983) Based on this provision, if there is a reaction from the public against any film which has adversely portrayed any disability, the Censor Board is given the power to review such movies. This however did not happen with the movie "Golmaal 3" and instead the Indian Stammering Association approached the Uttarakhand High Court to seek a remedy as they see this as a kind of defamation of a person with a certain disability. Besides this provision, the Censor Board is also empowered under its objectives of film certification and remove scenes which "show or ridicule of physically and mentally handicapped persons". (CR, 1983) Thus, there is enough evidence to prove the existence of regulatory bodies to protect the interest of all.

Way forward

Attention should be drawn to the image of disability in the media with a view to an accurate and balanced portrayal of disability as a part of everyday life. Mass media can play an important role in presenting disability issues in a way that could eradicate negative stereotypes and promote the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, options should be developed on how to present persons with disabilities in various media and the importance of supporting the work of the bodies like United Nations to build a peaceful and inclusive society for all. Movies, a popular means of mass/popular culture can do the role of catalyst for promoting inclusiveness. They can work as a tool to enhance the work of the media in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as to promoting their access to education, employment, health and other areas of development on an equal basis with others. Disability-awareness and related sensitivity trainings can also be conducted in organizations in conjunction with such events or be mainstreamed in standard operating procedures.

Conclusion

Today, the demand for realistic disabled movies played by real disabled actors is at the peak. Gone are the days of clichés and stereotypical blockbuster portrayals of disabled characters. Films are rightly touted to be the mirrors of the society we live in. While the Hindi film industry is catching up on the social issues that the Indian society faces, it has also been conscious of the people with physical and mental disabilities. Media is considered to be a powerful medium that reflects the happenings in a society. While it is caught up between the

real and reellife, 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 Bollywood industry in India and across the world, it has been particularly effective in changing people's perception and uprooting societal stereotypes towards Disability.

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- 1) Barfi (2012): Story of deaf boy and his associations with two females, (who are autistic)
- 2) Black (2005): Story rotates near a blind and deaf girl, and her liaison with her teacher who himself after develops Alzheimer's disease.
- 3) Central Board of Film Certification, Ministry Of Information & Broadcasting, Government Of India, Annual Report, 2009 Film Censorship 10. But this right is subject to "reasonable restriction" on grounds set out under Article 19(2) of the Constitution. Reasonable limitations can be imposed in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence
- 4) Cinematograph Rules, 1983. Section 11 Assessment of public reactions to films. With a view to determining the principles to be observed in certifying films, the Board may take such steps as it thinks fit to assess public reactions to films, and for that purpose, the Board may hold symposia or seminars of film critics, film writers, community leaders and persons engaged in the film industry, or such other persons and also undertake local or national surveys to study the impact of various kinds of films on the public mind.
- 5) Iqbal (2005): Story of a deaf and mute boy, with imaginings of playing cricket for India and ultimately realises his dreams overcoming his difficulties.
- 6) Section 5B(2) Cinematograph Act, 1952, Principles of Guidance in Certifying Films i) anti-social activities such as violence are not glorified or justified (ii) the modus operandi of criminals, other visuals or words likely to incite the commission of any offence are not depicted; (iii) scenes showing involvement of children in violence as victims or perpetrators or as forced witnesses to violence, or showing children as being subjected to any form of child abuse; showing abuse or ridicule of physically and mentally handicapped persons; and showing cruelty to, or abuse of animals, are not presented needlessly (iv) pointless or avoidable scenes of violence, cruelty and horror, scenes of violence primarily intended to provide entertainment and such scenes as may have the effect of de-sensitising or de-humanising people are not shown; (v) scenes which have the effect of justifying or glorifying drinking are not shown; (vi) scenes tending to encourage, justify or glamorise drug addiction are not shown; (vi-a) scenes tending to encourage, justify or glamorise consumption of tobacco or smoking are not shown.