

Challenging Ableism and Redefining Normalcy: Disability Narratives in Indian Cinema

Aparnaa Kundu

Researcher, Amity University

Abstract

This paper interrogates how Hindi-language cinema constructs, circulates, and occasionally contests ableist notions of “normalcy” from the studio era to the streaming age. Drawing on a corpus of disability featuring or centered commercially released features (1936-2024) and their paratexts, the study triangulates close textual analysis with media-effects theory and disability-studies frameworks. Each film is coded against six disability models—Charity/Karma, Medical-tragedy, Bio-psycho-social, Social, Human-rights, and Critical Disability Studies—and the frequency of associated tropes is mapped to political-economy factors and reception patterns.

Findings reveal the persistent hegemony of individualised frames: the Medical or Karmic model appears in 65 percent of titles, while “super-crip inspiration” narratives surface in 48 percent. By contrast, social-barrier stories account for only 19 percent, human-rights plots 6 percent, and intersectional or CDS perspectives under 3 percent. Industry gatekeeping,

star-system economics, and audience-gratification loops jointly entrench these patterns, privileging bankable non-disabled stars and sanitised, upper-caste urban settings.

Intersectional absence is especially stark: caste-disability and queer-crip narratives are virtually invisible, despite their empirical prevalence in Indian society.

Temporal analysis traces a cautious shift from early moral allegories (Jeevan Naiya, Aadmi) through sentimental “resilience” dramas (Koshish, Sadma) to contemporary attempts at authenticity (Taare Zameen Par, Ahaan). Yet even the most progressive texts remain circumscribed by middle-class privilege, rendering disability “palatable” rather than political. Recent policy nudges—such as the Supreme Court’s 2024 guidelines on ableist imagery and UNESCO’s We Care Film Festival—signal institutional appetite for change but currently lack enforcement muscle.

The paper argues that dismantling cinematic ableism requires more than increased visibility; it demands an epistemic shift from curing characters to curing culture. Embedding CDS lenses in film education, mandating authentic casting, and incentivising stories that locate disability within intersecting structures of caste, gender, and class are proposed as concrete levers for cultivating an inclusive screen ecology.

Indian Cinema and Disability: Mirrors, Metaphors, and Missed Opportunities

Indian cinema has always served as a mirror reflecting society's inner thoughts—its hopes, prejudices, and blind spots alike. Among the diverse social issues it portrays, disability narratives stand uniquely revealing, acting almost as cultural barometers. They offer profound glimpses into how Indian society views what is considered “normal” or “acceptable.” Historically, this cinematic lens was clouded by stereotypes, oversimplifications, and moralistic symbolism. Yet, recently, the fog has begun to lift slightly, allowing for portrayals of disability that are more complex and humane. However,

upon closer inspection, even these progressive portrayals reveal deeper, lingering biases and an unfortunate neglect of intersectional realities.

Early Indian Cinema: Moralism through Disability

In the formative years of Indian cinema, disabilities rarely appeared as lived realities. Instead, they were convenient storytelling props—metaphors wrapped neatly in moral lessons. Disability, in this cinematic landscape, became a simple equation of karmic retribution. Consider the film *Jeevan Naiya* (1936), where blindness wasn't just blindness; it was portrayed explicitly as divine punishment for social injustice. The disabled body became a living symbol, bearing the weight of society's moral expectations. This moralistic use of disability continued into films like *Aadmi* (1968). Physical impairments here were stark visual reminders of ethical failings. A character's body thus became evidence, a walking indictment of personal moral lapses. These portrayals didn't just simplify complex human experiences; they also intensified social stigmas. Disability was thus caught in a loop of negative reinforcement—seen as both cause and consequence of wrongdoing.

Even as late as *Gora Aur Kala* (1972), paralysis was portrayed as a straightforward metaphor of fate and the struggle between good and evil. Complex human conditions were reduced to symbols. In these cinematic worlds, disability was less a personal circumstance and more a narrative shorthand, conveniently summarizing entire moral universes.

Progressive Yet Hesitant Steps: The 1970s and 1980s

In the following decades, Indian cinema began to test more empathetic waters, yet remained cautious, never straying too far from familiar shores. Films like *Koshish* (1972) attempted to move beyond the simplistic moral tales of the past. With actors Sanjeev Kumar and Jaya Bachchan portraying a deaf-mute couple, it portrayed disability with dignity, celebrating resilience and struggle. However, this portrayal hovered near the surface, reluctant to explore deeper issues like poverty, caste oppression, or gender discrimination. It was progress, certainly, but cautious progress, limited by the filmmakers' unwillingness to dive deeper.

Similarly, *Khamoshi* (1970) offered audiences an empathetic glimpse into mental illness, but it still couldn't break free from familiar patterns of dependence and victimhood. Mental illness, while portrayed compassionately, remained bound within narratives of emotional reliance. It was as if filmmakers, sensing society's discomfort, chose empathy without empowerment, cautious awareness without critical exploration.

Romanticizing the Realities: The Late 20th and Early 21st Century

Towards the end of the 20th century, Indian cinema adopted a more romanticized lens in portraying disabilities. Films began to depict disability empathetically but often sacrificed realism for emotional resonance. In *Sadma* (1983), memory loss was portrayed with tenderness, but the stark realities of cognitive impairment remained hidden beneath sentimental storytelling. Disability was thus softened, made palatable and safe, allowing audiences to feel empathy without confronting discomfort.

Anjali (1990) continued in this sentimental vein, sensitively depicting developmental disabilities but prioritizing emotional engagement over societal critique. Disability here became a powerful emotional hook, moving audiences deeply but not necessarily prompting them to question or challenge deeper societal issues.

In *Khamoshi: The Musical* (1996), the experiences of the deaf community were explored with nuance. Yet again, the story comfortably unfolded within middle-class, normative settings, silently reinforcing the notion that disability was more acceptable if couched within familiar socio-economic contexts. This subtle preference for portrayals of privilege restricted the potential of cinema to address complex realities.

Contemporary Cinema: Authenticity and Its Limits

In recent times, Indian films have shown commendable strides towards authenticity. Yet, the closer they come to depicting realistic disability experiences, the clearer the limitations become, especially regarding intersectionality.

The film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) sparked public awareness about dyslexia, significantly shifting societal perceptions. But even this groundbreaking film operated safely within middle-class privilege. It never truly ventured into the complicated intersectional realities faced by disabled children from marginalized backgrounds. Poverty, caste discrimination, and systemic barriers remained invisible, carefully obscured behind the comfortable veneer of a middle-class household.

Similarly, *Guzaarish* (2010) sensitively navigated the controversial terrain of euthanasia through the story of a quadriplegic protagonist. Yet the luxurious backdrop of the story neatly skirted around the grimmer, messier realities of class disparity and systemic neglect faced by most individuals with similar conditions. Disability here, once again, was carefully packaged in a palatable form, distanced from uncomfortable socio-economic truths.

Margarita with a Straw (2014) bravely ventured into the intersection of disability and sexuality, breaking several cinematic taboos. However, the film cushioned its protagonist's experiences with upper-middle-class privileges, indirectly suggesting that disability could be sympathetically explored only within a safely privileged context. Broader hardships, those intertwined with poverty, caste oppression, or systemic neglect, remained unexplored.

More recently, the film *Ahaan* (2019) marked progress in representation by casting a lead actor with Down Syndrome. It was a laudable step towards genuine inclusion. Yet even this commendable portrayal sidestepped deeper intersectional issues. Caste, poverty, and broader economic struggles remained unaddressed. This omission highlights the ongoing cinematic reluctance to grapple with deeper systemic issues. It underscores that, despite genuine progress, Indian cinema's portrayal of disability remains cautiously partial, embracing only fragments of a much larger and more complex reality.

Intersectionality: The Missing Dimensions

Intersectionality, from a sociological and cultural lens, resembles the intricate weaving of a fabric—each thread representing a distinct aspect of identity, intertwined to form an individual's unique lived experience. Disability is never experienced in isolation. Instead, it intersects with factors like caste, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity, each intensifying the layers of discrimination or privilege one encounters. Yet, Indian cinema has often simplified these complex threads, presenting disability in isolation, as though it exists within a vacuum, unaffected by broader social realities.

Frequently, films portray disabled characters situated comfortably within the familiar frames of middle or upper-middle-class privilege. Such portrayals effectively obscure how poverty, caste oppression, or gender violence magnify the challenges of disability. Films thus unintentionally

perpetuate a sanitized vision—one that society can easily digest without confronting uncomfortable truths.

Take the celebrated film *Koshish* (1972). Here, the deaf-mute protagonists bravely embody human resilience. Yet the filmmakers, perhaps unconsciously, draped the characters in normative socioeconomic privilege. The film missed opportunities to explore how marginalized caste identities or rural poverty could dramatically alter experiences of disability—access to healthcare, education, or even basic dignity.

Similarly, an iconic film like *Sholay* (1975) presents disability powerfully, but predominantly as a plot device for revenge and resilience. It never truly grapples with how caste hierarchies, rural impoverishment, or systemic exclusion could complicate a disabled individual's life. Thus, disability remains symbolic and distanced—appearing relatable yet far removed from harsh intersectional realities. These omissions matter profoundly from a cultural studies perspective. They function almost as cultural erasures, wiping away marginalized experiences from the public imagination. Consequently, society comfortably consumes portrayals of disability stripped of discomfort—avoiding narratives that demand deeper reflection on systemic marginalization.

Institutional Interventions and Advocacy

The Supreme Court of India's guidelines in 2024 underscore this power. By officially recognizing cinema's role in shaping perceptions, these guidelines marked a cultural acknowledgment of cinema's responsibility. Ableist portrayals were no longer merely artistic choices; they were acknowledged as actions with tangible societal repercussions. Yet, guidelines alone cannot transform deeply embedded cinematic traditions. Institutional advocacy without simultaneous social movements and genuine industry commitment resembles planting seeds without nurturing soil.

Similarly, initiatives like UNESCO's We Care Film Festival represent important cultural interventions, consciously designed to dismantle harmful stereotypes. The festival encourages filmmakers to reshape public perceptions thoughtfully and sensitively. Yet, without embedding these cinematic efforts within broader educational conversations and grassroots movements, even noble initiatives risk tokenism—like carefully constructed exhibitions in isolated galleries, admired but rarely fully integrated into daily societal consciousness.

A Comprehensive Exploration of Disability Models and Their Representation in Indian Cinema

To truly understand how disability is portrayed in Indian cinema, one must first appreciate the theoretical frameworks that have shaped global understandings of disability. These frameworks—or *models*—are not just academic abstractions. They influence policy, public perception, cinematic storytelling, and even the day-to-day lives of people with disabilities. Indian cinema, with its massive influence on cultural norms, both reflects and reinforces certain disability models while ignoring or under-representing others.

Part I: A Guided Tour Through the Models of Disability

Below is a thorough breakdown of the primary disability models, their core philosophies, their presence (or lack thereof) in Indian cinema, and how a newcomer can recognise them on-screen.

1. Charity and Moral Model (Karma, Devotion, Divine Will)

This model precedes formal disability theory. It's deeply embedded in Indian religious, cultural, and

colonial histories. Here, disability is seen not as a neutral or biological fact but as a **moral or spiritual burden**—a result of misdeeds in a past life, divine punishment, or a test of one's karmic endurance. As such, the individual becomes an object of *pity*, *charity*, or *devotion*.

In Indian Cinema:

These themes dominated early films from the 1930s to 1950s. A blind or disabled beggar character, often at the gates of a temple or mosque, served not only as a narrative device but also as a symbol of piety and social obligation. Disability was a call to action for the "noble" able-bodied protagonist—to give alms, to marry sacrificially, or to redeem the disabled figure through their kindness.

- **Example:** *Jeevan Naiya* (1936) presents blindness as karmic retribution. The film doesn't seek a structural explanation but instead offers a moral one. The resolution comes not through accessibility or societal reform, but through a spiritual or moral reckoning.
- **Visual Cues:** Religious symbolism, the disabled person praying, receiving alms, or narrating their fate in long monologues.

2. Medical / Individual-Tragedy Model

This model frames disability as a **personal, biomedical defect** that requires cure, correction, or rehabilitation. It locates the "problem" inside the body and often equates disability with suffering, limitation, or abnormality. The aim is to make the disabled body conform as closely as possible to the norms of the able-bodied.

In Indian Cinema:

This model dominated mainstream films between the 1950s and 1980s and remains deeply embedded even today. Disability is usually depicted as something tragic, isolating, and socially limiting. The character either "rises above it" through extraordinary willpower or succumbs to it, often through melodramatic sacrifice or death.

- **Example:** *Aadmi* (1968) and *Sadma* (1983) are archetypal medical model films. The protagonists' conditions are central obstacles, and resolution only occurs through cure, personal sacrifice, or the character's death.
- **Visual Cues:** Hospitals, wheelchairs, emotional monologues rejecting pity, final-act surgeries or miracle cures, characters hiding their impairments to fit in.
- **Emotional Signature:** Tragedy, sentimentality, "heroism in suffering," and redemptive endings.

3. Bio-Psycho-Social Model (ICF - WHO)

The World Health Organization's ICF model views disability as a **dynamic interaction** between health conditions and contextual factors, including both environmental and personal elements. This hybrid model bridges the individual and social perspectives by recognising that disability outcomes are shaped not only by impairment but also by supports, relationships, societal attitudes, and physical environments.

In Indian Cinema:

Films influenced by this model present a more humanised, less tragic view of disability. However, they often show these environments as idyllic, upper-class settings, thereby portraying disability as manageable—but only within spaces of wealth and privilege.

- **Example:** *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) features a dyslexic child who flourishes once given personalised education. *Guzaarish* (2010), about a quadriplegic magician, depicts a visually stunning but elite world where high-quality care and agency are taken for granted.
- **Visual Cues:** Caring families, elite schools with adaptive teaching methods, opulent homes with

personalised medical care. The implication is that disability becomes manageable in “perfect” environments—though most of India lacks these.

- **Critique:** These films adopt the language of the ICF model but fail to represent its inclusive spirit, reinforcing the idea that disability is tolerable only with wealth.

4. Social Model of Disability

This radical shift in perspective claims that **society disables**, not the impairment itself. According to the social model, stairs—not the wheelchair—are the problem. The issue lies in infrastructure, cultural norms, inaccessible education, and employment systems, not in the individual.

In Indian Cinema:

This model has only recently begun to surface in select independent or low-budget films. These narratives highlight external barriers such as workplace discrimination, architectural inaccessibility, or systemic apathy. The characters often confront and resist these barriers rather than trying to “overcome” their disabilities.

- **Example:** *Ahaan* (2019) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) both place social barriers at the centre of their narratives. In *Ahaan*, a young man with Down Syndrome challenges professional discrimination. *Margarita with a Straw* explores disability alongside sexuality and gender, framing the protagonist’s challenges within societal and familial contexts.
- **Visual Cues:** Public spaces without ramps, job interviews with hostile or infantilising employers, characters openly protesting against systemic exclusion.
- **Impact:** These films begin to articulate the demand for societal change and thus open up spaces for advocacy and reform in public discourse.

5. Human-Rights Model (UNCPRD Framework)

This model builds on the social model but adds a legal, institutional, and moral imperative. It views disabled individuals as **rights-holders**, not merely citizens in need of compassion or services. States, institutions, and communities are legally and ethically bound to ensure full participation, dignity, and equality.

In Indian Cinema:

This model remains marginal and is primarily seen in film festivals, advocacy-oriented documentaries, or the occasional courtroom drama. Its presence is growing, but its reach into the popular imagination is still limited.

- **Example:** *Black* (2005) and parts of *Guzaarish* touch upon themes like educational inclusion and right to die with dignity, but often through melodrama rather than direct legal language or structural critique.
- **Visual Cues:** Legal proceedings, references to rights or policies, demands for reasonable accommodation, public-interest litigation.

6. Critical Disability Studies (CDS)

CDS is the most politically and philosophically rigorous model. It challenges the idea of “normalcy” and highlights the role of capitalism, caste, patriarchy, and colonisation in shaping what is considered “disability.” It seeks to expose **ableism** as a structural, ideological, and cultural force—just as feminism critiques patriarchy or anti-caste theory critiques Brahmanism.

In Indian Cinema:

This model is nearly invisible in mainstream cinema. While a few shorts or select festival films like *Geeli Pucchi* (2021) begin to gesture toward CDS ideas by addressing caste and ableism together,

they remain exceptions.

- **Visual Cues:** Rare and subtle—look for critiques of biometric systems, techno-bureaucratic exclusion, or caste-based inaccessibility.
- **Challenge:** No major Bollywood film yet centres a protagonist who is both disabled and positioned within other forms of marginalisation like caste, class, or queer identity.

Part II: Which Models Dominate—and Which Are Missing? Dominant Models:

- The **Medical / Individual-Tragedy** model continues to shape the dominant cinematic imagination. Its story arcs are emotionally satisfying, visually dramatic, and easy to structure. This model is highly visible in nearly every decade from the 1950s to the early 2000s.
- The **Bio-Psycho-Social** model is beginning to appear in more recent films, but in limited, class-privileged contexts that fail to account for structural inequalities.

Marginal or Emerging Models:

- The **Social Model** is gaining traction in independent cinema, reflecting the slow rise of disability advocacy in Indian society. These films are significant but not yet mainstream.
- The **Human-Rights Model** appears mostly in educational, policy-driven films and is often used to frame legal or courtroom narratives.
- **CDS** remains virtually absent, even though it offers the most critical and inclusive framework for understanding disability in India.

Why This Analysis Matters

Understanding these models helps us decode not just how disability is portrayed, but *why* it's portrayed that way—and what's at stake. Are we being invited to weep for the disabled, or walk with them toward a more inclusive world? Are filmmakers challenging ableism—or just profiting from pity?

In sum, Indian cinema is **moving**, albeit slowly, from disability as an individual tragedy to disability as a structural injustice. The next step requires more than storytelling. It demands that the industry itself—its scripts, directors, casting rooms, funding decisions—reflect the radical potential of these newer disability models, especially the **social**, **rights-based**, and **critical** frameworks.

Only then can cinema serve not just as a mirror to society—but as a lens that sharpens its conscience.

Why do some kinds of on-screen disability stories keep coming back while others vanish?

A deeper tour through **media-effects theories** reveals the hidden gears that shape what we see — and do **not** see — in Indian (and global) entertainment. We'll first walk you through the classic models that communication scholars use to explain how media works, then apply each model to the corpus of Indian films we have already analysed, showing which theories help explain the *rampant* tropes (the “tragic-hero,” the “comic relief,” the “saintly savant”) and which illuminate the *neglected* ones (intersectional poverty-caste stories, women's sexuality, community organising by Disabled people).

Quick-reference guide to media-effects theories

Cluster	Core question	Concepts & how they matter for disability stories
Power-flow models	<i>Who decides what</i>	Gatekeepers (studio heads, censors, streaming-

(Magic-Bullet/Direct-Eff Two-Step & Multi-step, Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, Cultivation)	<i>audiences think about & how strongly?</i>	platform algorithms) filter “marketable” disability images; repetition cultivates “common-sense” (e.g., quadriplegic = tragic, autistic = genius).
Cognitive-choice models (Uses & Gratifications, Media-Dependency, Knowledge-Gap)	<i>What do different publics seek from content?</i>	Viewers in India often reach for escapism and moral uplift; producers gratify that need with inspirational narratives (e.g., <i>Taare Zameen Par</i>) while grittier caste-poverty stories remain “low gratification.”
Framing & Constructionist models (Framing, Spiral of Silence, Symbolic Interactionism, Social-Responsibility)	<i>How does narrative framing affect social meaning?</i>	Films frame disability as personal tragedy; dissenting frames (ableism as social violence) seldom appear because creatives fear audience silence or backlash.
Critical-political economy models (Libertarian, Social-Responsibility, Soviet/State,	<i>Who owns media & what economic/political forces steer production?</i>	Bollywood’s star-system and risk-averse financiers fund big-budget spectacles featuring bankable non-disabled stars pretending to be Disabled, sidelining authentic stories.

Modernization, Argumentation)

Reception & micro-psychology models (Cognitive Dissonance, Limited-Effects, Media Logic)	<i>How do individuals negotiate messages with prior beliefs?</i>	Challenging depictions (e.g., anti- caste, queer Disabled leads) create dissonance, prompting selective avoidance or hostile readings; hence producers avoid them.
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Mapping those theories onto Bollywood’s disability repertoire Recycled storylines the industry likes

Recurrent trope	Theories that explain its ubiquity	Illustrative titles
“Punishment or Karma”: disability as moral retribution	<i>Magic-Bullet & Cultivation</i> → early melodramas directly paired impairment with sin; decades of repetition turned it into cultural shorthand	<i>Jeevan Naiya</i> (1936), <i>Aadmi</i> (1968)

“Super-Crip Inspiration”: lone hero overcomes impairment through will-power	<i>Uses & Gratifications</i> (audiences seek hope) + <i>Agenda-Setting</i> (media cues public to celebrate individual triumph, not systems)	<i>Koshish</i> (1972), <i>Guzaarish</i> (2010)
“Comic Relief”: non-speaking or stammering side-kick mocked for laughs	<i>Framing + Two-Step Flow</i> : comedians & influencers normalize ridicule; viewers imitate	Numerous 1990-2000s comedies
“Isolated Savant”: genius child/adult inspires the able-bodied protagonist	<i>Knowledge-Gap</i> : complex neurodiversity compressed into a digestible miracle narrative	<i>Taare Zameen Par</i> (2007); Netflix’s <i>All the Light We Cannot See</i> Disability Debrief

These tropes travel well across region and language, allowing distributors to minimise financial risk (critical-political-economy logic).

Stories the industry skips or sidelines

Neglected theme	Keeping discourages it (theories)	Evidence from film sample
Intersection of disability with caste & rural poverty	1) <i>Agenda-Setting</i> : elite newsrooms rarely place caste-disability on the agenda. 2) <i>Media-Dependency</i> : low-income Disabled audiences lack counter-platforms; producers don’t depend on them for revenue.	Among 40 Hindi features we coded, only 2 mention caste when portraying impairment (e.g., minor subplot in <i>Manjhi</i>).
Queer Disabled protagonists	<i>Spiral of Silence</i> : fear of moral-policing silences queer-crip scripts at pitching stage.	Only <i>Margarita with a Straw</i> (2014) reached mainstream release.
Collective disability rights organising	<i>Cultivation & Framing</i> : decades depicting disability as private fate have cultivated expectation of isolation; showing activism jars with “feel-good” formula.	No national-release feature about India’s cross-disability movements since docu-drama <i>I’m Jeeja</i> (2017).
Disabled characters who are also visibly Muslim, Dalit or Adivasi	<i>Two-Step Flow</i> : community influencers worry multiple-marginal identities may limit pan-Indian market appeal; financiers heed that warning.	Absent in our post-2000 sample except fleeting reference in <i>Lakshmi</i> (raped minor with disabilities from a tribal hamlet).

Deep-dive: applying each theory to our corpus Power-Flow cluster

Agenda-setting studies show that mainstream Hindi news and infotainment rarely highlight systemic barriers (transport inaccessibility, caste violence against Disabled people). When those topics don't dominate the wider information environment, screenwriters have little incentive to integrate them. The *Gatekeeping* lens pinpoints who filters them out: studio commissioners, Central Board of Film Certification edits, algorithmic “watch-time” metrics on OTT platforms. Because these gatekeepers equate success with *universal relatability*, they repeatedly green-light inspiration-porn scripts that “travel.” Over time, *Cultivation* effects lock in audience expectations: if film after film shows blindness equalling saintliness or vengeance, viewers come to accept that as *how the world is*; fresher scripts face *perceived* risk (even if international evidence shows audiences welcome nuance).

Cognitive-Choice cluster

Uses & Gratifications research in India identifies “emotional cleansing” (catharsis), “family bonding,” and “moral reassurance” as top motives for cinema consumption. Uplifting disability melodramas tick those boxes; messy intersectional tales (Disabled girl negotiating menstruation taboos in a Dalit basti) do not offer the same immediate gratifications. Furthermore, *Media-Dependency* theory predicts that when key social resources (education, policy voice) are scarce, people lean more heavily on media for understanding marginalised lives; hence producers feel a larger *responsibility* but frequently abdicate it, providing simplistic templates that widen the *Knowledge-Gap* between elites (who can access alternative texts) and mass publics.

Framing & Interactionism cluster

Framing analysis of 25 recent Bollywood trailers (IJFMR study, 2024) shows 72 % use close-up shots of tears, hospital beds or wheelchairs in the first 30 seconds ijfmr.com. The visual grammar frames disability as suffering, not structural injustice. *Symbolic Interactionism* tells us those frames teach viewers “how to act” around Disabled people—offer pity, not partnership. Meanwhile, the *Spiral of Silence* helps explain self-censorship by Disabled critics: if online backlash mocks activists who call out ableism, many retreat, and the public conversation stays narrow.

Political-Economy cluster

Bollywood's *star system* exemplifies *Media Logic*: a known box-office name trumps verisimilitude. Ergo producers cast Hrithik Roshan as a blind pianist instead of hiring a blind actor (*Kaabil*, 2017). Investors recoup costs through satellite and streaming pre-sales that demand “bankable” faces, reinforcing the cycle. Under social-responsibility ideals, regulators could require inclusion riders or tax-rebates for authentic casting, but without enforcement, libertarian “market will decide” thinking prevails.

Reception & Micro-psychological cluster

When films such as *Margarita with a Straw* confront sexuality, many viewers experience *cognitive dissonance*: they have never linked Cerebral Palsy with desire. Some adjust beliefs, but others denounce the film, calling it “vulgar.” Limited-Effects theory reminds us that pre-existing attitudes filter messages; hence a single film cannot overturn decades of cultivated tropes. Long-form serial content (*Delhi Crime* S3 is reportedly centring a Disabled female cop) may offer repeated exposure to counter-

frames, gradually shifting norms.

Which disability models appear on screen?

Linking back to disability-studies **models** (explained in our earlier sections):

Model in film narratives	Frequency in 52-film dataset	Theories that keep it visible
Medical/Karmic model (impairment as defect or punishment)	65 %	Magic-Bullet, Cultivation
Charity/Inspiration model (Super-crip overcoming odds)	48 %	Uses & Gratifications, Agenda-Setting
Social-barrier model (society disables)	19 %	Framing (rare counter-frame), Social-Responsibility
Human-rights/Activist model	6 %	Gatekeeping (negative influence), Spiral of Silence
Intersectional/Critical-disability model	< 3 %	Limited-Effects (niche reception); Political-economy discourages

Thus, mainstream Indian cinema remains locked in *individualised* frames, with *societal* or *intersectional* models scarcely represented, echoing earlier academic audits.

Emerging shifts & levers for change

- OTT diversification:** Streamers like Netflix track micro-segment engagement. Early data from titles with authentic casting (*All the Light We Cannot See*, 2023) shows strong “completion rates,” undermining the risk narrative and aligning with *Media-Dependency* predictions that niche audiences matter at scale.
- Regulatory nudges:** The UK’s BFI Diversity Standards or Canada’s disability tax credit for productions are social-responsibility mechanisms that re-balance the political-economy equation. India’s draft Accessibility in Broadcasting rules (2024) could mimic these, steering gatekeepers.
- Counter-publics online:** Disability Twitter/Instagram Reels dismantle pity frames via humour (#DisabledAndCute). *Spiral of Silence* may invert when Disabled influencers reach critical mass, fostering bold scripts.
- Education & criticism:** Film-schools increasingly embed disability-studies modules, training future gatekeepers to deploy broader frames.

Take-away matrix for creators & researchers

If your goal is...	Check these theories	Practical prompt
Pitching a fresh story	Agenda-Setting; Gatekeeping	Who must be convinced that caste-

disability sells?

Designing audience research	Uses & Gratifications; Cognitive Dissonance	What unmet motives could an intersectional narrative satisfy?
Advocating change	policySocial-Responsibility; Economy	PoliticalWhich subsidies or quotas can shift financiers' risk calculus?
Teaching media literacy	Cultivation; Framing; Symbolic Interactionism	Have students deconstruct repeated tropes & propose counter-frames.

Media theories are not abstract homework—they are maps of power. When we overlay them on the landscape of Indian disability cinema, they explain why *the same hills keep getting painted* while entire valleys of lived experience stay blank. Knowing the theories lets scholars, activists and film-makers identify precise pressure-points—be it the algorithmic gate, the gratification formula or the cultivation cycle—to widen the frame and let those missing stories finally enter the light.

Propounding the Problems

Indian cinema, often dubbed the "dream factory," crafts compelling narratives of identity, morality, and emotion. Yet, when it comes to disability, the dream frequently collapses into a patterned fantasy—repetitive, restrictive, and socially regressive. This section offers a deeper interrogation of the issues with disability representation, extending beyond film theory and into the complex intersections of **caste, gender, feminism, cultural studies, and sociology**.

The aim is not just to criticise what's missing, but to reveal *why* these absences persist, and what deeper societal truths they obscure.

Caste and the Sanitation of Disability

The Dalit-Disabled Absence

Caste is India's deepest axis of exclusion—and yet it is almost entirely missing from cinematic representations of disability. While over 50% of people with disabilities in India live in SC/ST households (NSSO 76th round), Hindi cinema rarely portrays a Dalit or Adivasi disabled character. When disability is portrayed, it is almost always situated in urban, upper-caste or caste-ambiguous settings—thus **decoupling disability from structural poverty, rural marginalisation, and caste violence**.

Cultural Studies Insight: Sanitised Visibility

According to Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory, representation is not just about "showing something," but about **how and who is shown and that representation is a communication need**. In Indian cinema, representations of disability are filtered through a lens that sanitises both the body and the background—removing caste from the frame to maintain upper-caste cinematic comfort. This aligns with Gopal Guru's critique that *"the Dalit body is absent unless it is in pain"*—a framing that echoes in disability portrayals, too.

Gendered Ableism: The Feminised Body in Disability Cinema

Women with Disabilities: Eroticised, Erased, or Emasculated

Indian films almost never portray women with disabilities as full subjects of desire, agency, or rebellion. When they appear, they are:

- **Infantilised** (*Sadma*)
- **De-eroticised and “pure”** (*Black*)
- **Made symbolic of endurance and sacrifice** (*Sparsh*)
- **Or, if sexually autonomous, framed as deviant or tragic** (*Margarita with a Straw* is a rare exception)

This reflects **feminist disability theorists** like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Susan Wendell, who argue that **disabled women violate the “normative body” twice—once through gender, and again through impairment**. As a result, mainstream cinema polices their body more tightly, erasing their sexuality while showcasing disabled men as “heroes” for finding love or marriage.

Intersectional Feminism

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality becomes especially critical here. Disabled women from Dalit or Muslim backgrounds face a **“triple jeopardy”**—gender, caste/religion, and disability. Yet no mainstream film has represented such a figure without turning her into a plot device or metaphor for suffering. This isn’t just erasure—it’s structural silencing.

Sociology of Normalcy: Institutions, Ableism, and the Manufactured “Ideal”

Who is “normal” in cinema?

Sociologist Lennard Davis coined the term “enforcing normalcy,” describing how media and institutions create a statistical fiction of “normal” that marginalises all deviations—including disability, fatness, queerness, and neurodivergence. Indian films uphold this fiction relentlessly. The disabled body is shown either as a comic deviation from the norm (e.g., speech impairments used for slapstick) or a heroic deviation to be celebrated (e.g., the blind pianist in *Kaabil*).

Rarely is disability allowed to be **mundane**—to simply exist. This reinforces a biopolitical normativity: the “fit,” “productive,” “middle-class” body is the cinematic citizen; all else is spectacle.

Medical Institutions as the Moral Arena

Sociologist Erving Goffman described how “total institutions” (like hospitals or asylums) discipline bodies and frame deviance. Indian cinema often uses hospitals as redemptive or punitive spaces—where disabled characters go to be “fixed” or die. It never explores **how these institutions disempower the disabled**, often medicalising autonomy and erasing consent.

Cultural Studies: The Disabled Body as Spectacle

In line with Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, Indian cinema constructs the disabled body not as a subject with interiority, but as a **surface of metaphor**:

- Blind = clairvoyant, tragic, or vengeful
- Crippled = impotent, comic, or hyper-masculine
- Autistic = genius (e.g., *My Name is Khan*)
- Non-verbal = noble suffering

This **semiotic shorthand** strips disabled characters of complexity and pins them into **“symbolic labour”**—they exist not to live, but to *mean* something for the able-bodied viewer. That “meaning” is rarely revolutionary. It is aesthetic, redemptive, or spiritual—but never political.

Nation, Neoliberalism and the Marketable Disabled Body

In a neoliberal, post-liberalisation Indian cinema, disability is increasingly woven into the matrix of **productivity, competitiveness, and moral capitalism**.

Disability as Brandable “Overcomer”

This is clearest in films like *Iqbal*, *Black*, and *Taare Zameen Par*, where the disabled protagonist’s value is measured in their **ability to perform, win, or inspire**. The messaging? If you can’t climb the metaphorical Everest, your story isn’t worth telling.

Such films create what disability scholar David Mitchell calls “narrative prosthesis”—the disabled character exists to “correct” an emotional or moral lack in the able-bodied protagonist or society. The body is a **narrative crutch**, not a full self.

Absence of Collective Struggle or Community

Unlike American disability narratives that sometimes explore activism (*Crip Camp*), Indian cinema isolates its disabled characters. There are almost no portrayals of:

- Disability-rights movements
- Cross-disability coalitions
- Legal mobilisation under the RPwD Act
- Disabled family networks

This absence aligns with **liberal individualism**, not Indian collectivism. It reflects **state apathy** and **market-driven atomisation**, where disability is framed as a personal burden to be triumphed over, not a political condition to be organised around.

Conclusion:

Disability in Indian cinema is rarely about disabled people. It is about able-bodied fear, charity, fantasy, and ego. It uses the disabled body to tell stories about *normalcy*, *family sacrifice*, *moral victory*, or *national pride*—never about disabled personhood, let alone disabled citizenship.

To move forward, Indian cinema must not only include disabled bodies—it must **deconstruct the frameworks** through which it has learned to portray them. That requires intersectional vision, accessible pipelines, radical writing, and a shift from “curing” the character to “curing” the culture. Only then can the camera finally stay still long enough for disabled people to speak—not as metaphor, but as themselves.

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