

## Portrayal of Disability in Media

Mainstream media, like cinema, has the potential to entertain, educate and influence societal behaviour both amongst the less literate and educated class of society. Their vast reach can be used to reshape the narrative of disability, which continues to be misunderstood, in our country.

Historically, on one hand, disability is associated with '*bad karma*' in a prior life or seen as retribution for a '*sinful life*'. The film '*Jeevan Naiya*' produced by Bombay Talkies in 1936 which deals with society's ostracism of dancing girls is an early example. In this so-called 'social justice' movie, the lead character, who abandons his wife due to her family's background of dancers, is blinded in an accident (a punishment) and is nursed back to health by the woman (his wife) whom he rejected. In regional cinema, we have the movie '*Netrikkan*' (1979) where the womanising hero, Rajnikanth ends up confined to a wheelchair as a 'just' punishment for his wayward life. In some other movies like *Sholay*, disability has been portrayed as a fate worse than death. Films like *Dosti* in the sixties and *Khamoshi* in the nineties perpetuated this image of individuals with disability being incapable of independent existence. On the other hand, disability, both physical and intellectual, has been represented as a comic interlude such as in films like *Pyare Mohan* and *Golmaal* (2006). Such portrayals erode the very essence of the disability movement's quest for an equal and independent life in society. However, despite the many movies that may have played a detrimental role in the journey of empowerment of individuals with disability over the years there have been a few shining stars like *Sparsh* (1980) which explored the issue with the realism and sensitivity that it deserves.

Hearteningly though we are seeing the birth of a new breed of filmmakers, actors, technicians etc who use their platform to create awareness and foster change. In the last decade, around the world, tremendous change in the portrayal of disability can be observed. Movies are being made by engaging directors and actors with disabilities to provide a more authentic portrayal and level the playing field. International film festivals that focused on films dealing with disability have brought about a paradigm shift in how Indian cinema deals with disability. One recent movie that touched me was *Jalsa* (2022) which centres around the life of a child with cerebral palsy. Such movies, which portray disability through the lens of actors with disability, not only ensure cinema that is truer to life but also provide the actors with the opportunities they deserve.

Cinema has transformed and continues to change inside out. Yet, Indian cinema seems to lag in its portrayal of disability with recent productions like *Barfi* (2012), *Zero* (2021) and *Atrangi Re* (2021), which dealt with various forms of disability and mental illness, felt amateurish in their lack of real appreciation of issues surrounding disability. Much remains to be done to educate the general public at large about their potential. To quote a vocal advocate of disability "*a diminished sense does not mean a diminished life*", it is our duty as a society to make this dream a reality.