

# Different Bodies

*Essays on Disability  
in Film and Television*

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## *Physical Disability and Indian Cinema*

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The 2010 film *Lafangey Parindey* centers on a dancer, Pinky Palkar (Deepika Padukone), who becomes blind before a major competition, briefly loses her faith in her abilities, and then is mentored back to excellence on the dance floor by the prizefighter One-Shot Nandu (Neil Nitin Mukesh) who caused her blindness in an accident and who specializes in blind-folded freestyle fighting. The film has an interesting mixed message. On the surface, it emphasizes the point that people with disabilities can achieve and overachieve in what may be considered a mainstream activity for the able-bodied. At the time of its release it was lauded by the popular press for Padukone's attempts at method acting for which she spent several months "[observing] a lot of blind people" to prepare for the role (*Daily*).

But not far beneath the surface of the plot lurks a hodgepodge of stereotypes cloaked by the storyline of a blind protagonist's determination delivered as a fast-paced romance. After the accident, Pinky broods gently over her shattered dreams of being a prize dancer and the guilt-ridden, thuggish Nandu decides to turn Bodhisattva by leading her to redemption. He starts by beating her and nearly drowning her in a vat of water, emphasizing that her desire to overcome her disability needs to be as desperate as the desire to breathe she felt when he was shoving her head underwater. The argument appeals to Pinky, who proceeds to rectify her disability by sharply honing her listening skills with the repentant thug who more or less eliminates any need for sight by giving her an A-grade Shaolin-templeque training on navigating with sound. The film ends on a note that not only suggests that the rectification of disabilities is largely at the will of the individual, but more importantly that the path can be revealed to the weak woman by an enlightened man willing to mete out some tough love.

Disability on Indian screen is not nuanced with mixed messages. From the occasional supercrip portrayal (Hartnett) of Deaf lip-readers and blind people with near sonar ability to sense objects to discourses of dependency around the pathos of disabled life, Indian cinema seemingly encompasses the range of canonical globally prevalent disability stereotypes. Our goal in this article is to examine screen disability in India and propose thematic buckets through which it can be understood. Mass media has a strong impact on how people imagine disability (Cumberland and Negrine; Norden). This makes our study one in which the lines between conceptions of disability derived from traditional social culture and religious texts blur easily with those derived from contemporary screen portrayals. Thus while

depictions of sensory superiority, such as blind crime fighters dodging swords, could arguably be attributed to the latter, a number of other portrayals such as disability as punitive or deserving of charity are attributable to a reinforcement of patriarchy that has traditionally come from Indian literature and culture. In this article, we focus mainly on four particular trends on cinema — disability as punitive, disability as dependence, disability as disequilibrium, and disability as maladjustment. We explore the roots of these traditional representations and discuss them as they are portrayed in cinema down the years. In conclusion, we consider some contemporary cinema that has departed from the trends we outline and discuss what this may hold for the future of on-screen depiction of disability.

### *Disability as Punitive*

In the climactic scene of the Malayalam action film *Roudram* (2011), the protagonist (Mammotty) wraps up the film by maiming the chief villain (Saikumar) by nailing his legs under a car. He explains that death would be too easy a resolution by saying: “You deserve a life filthier than death. To repent for the sins you have committed, you must live with this half body, to crawl and feel the hell of life before you die. The scene represents an important punitive theme related to disability across Indian film and literature alike. The villain can pay for his misdemeanors through a simple death, or in the words of the protagonist, be subjected to a fitting ordeal.

Perhaps the most enduring portrayal of dismemberment as punitive is that of the Thakur protagonist from possibly the most-watched film in India, *Sholay* (Sippy 1975). In this film the Thakur police officer (Sanjeev Kumar) has his arms amputated by the bandit Gabbar (Amjad Khan). Unable to avenge himself, he employs two mercenaries to clean out the bandit’s gang, but sets up a climactic duel between himself and Gabbar. He begins the duel by noting that even without his arms Gabbar is no match for him and concludes it not by killing Gabbar, but by crushing his arms with spikes. The punishment for evil is not a swift bullet, but an enduring disability similar to the one imposed on the protagonist.

The Thakur in *Sholay* is a critical starting point in the discussion of disability in Indian cinema because its depiction of disability has been parodied in a range of public forums. There have been entire television comedy shows that mock the character without arms, and a popular MTV joke features other characters in the film also losing their hands. Viral videos, often put together by groups of friends and even national advertisements by major corporations, reference the film. For example, Airtel, the country’s largest cellular network, has an advertisement that mocks the Thakur’s inability to type text messages; Monster.com, the international job search site, features the Thakur as a sports umpire who cannot raise his arms to make signals, followed by the catchline “Caught in the wrong job?”; and Channel [V] India’s music television channel spoofs the Thakur’s inability to make a “V” sign for a group photo.

One of the earliest films to use the theme of disability as punishment outside of a mythological context was the 1936 Bombay Talkies film, *Jeevan Naiya*. In a drive for social justice through cinema, screenwriter Niranjan Pal (who earlier wrote a blind character as the designer of the Taj Mahal in the 1929 orientalist classic *Shiraz*) used his script as a means of highlighting problems with traditional beliefs, specifically those related to Hindu orthodoxy. In *Jeevan Naiya* the lead character abandons his wife on finding out she is from a family of dancers (thus impure). He is eventually blinded in an accident, left without

resources, and nursed back to health and happiness by a woman who, unknown to him, is the same devoted wife he abandoned. Thus, the character's path to enlightenment leads away from his flawed social conceptions and is engineered by means of a "punitive" blindness that sets him at the same level of social exclusion as the woman/wife of ignoble parentage.

One of the most important mainstream films on disability, and perhaps among the first that combined a narrative interspersed with some basic discussion of sign language and independent living for the Deaf was Gulzar's 1972 film *Koshish*. The film has four disabled protagonists, two Deaf, one blind, and a fourth who loses a leg in the course of the film. We examine this film in much greater detail in our discussion of dependence and disability, but one striking aspect of *Koshish* is the troubling turn it takes when the chief antagonist, the female lead's brother (Asrani), pays for his sins towards the Deaf couple by finding himself disabled. The focus on the character's remorse as arising from his own experience of disability is clearly an attempt to calibrate the narrative for popular appeal, but the use of disability as punitive in a supposedly progressive film about disability is telling.

This idea of disability as the ultimate punishment for a range of sins appears across Indian cinema. The philanderer (Rajnikanth) ends up in a wheelchair with impotence that offers a fitting outcome for his lascivious ways (and therein also highlights the de-sexualization of the disabled) in *Netrikkan* (1979). The wicked father-in-law (Pran) is blinded in *Aadmi* (1968); the chieftain of a village of criminals (Pran) is disabled in a police attack in *Kasam* (1988); the drug addict (Kiran Kumar) is blinded in *Jalte Badan* (1973); the evil brother (Asrani) who torments his Deaf sister and brother-in-law is himself crippled in *Koshish*, which he takes as punishment for his acts; the rich, arrogant atheist (Rajesh Khanna) is blinded, unable to buy a new pair of eyes for himself, and eventually finds a benevolent donor only when he repents and turns to god in *Dhanwaan* (1981); and when the protagonist (Pradeep Kumar) comes to kill his nemesis (Iftikhar) in *Mehboob ki Mehendi* (1971), he finds him in a wheelchair and decides that he's not worth stabbing since he is already disabled. Allowing him to live would be worse punishment than death, a conclusion echoing the theme of *Sholay* (1975) that disability trumps death as the worst of fates.

The use of disability in terms of physical disfigurement has receded in cinema, but the theme was common when leprosy was more socially prevalent in India. A landmark Tamil film, *Ratha Kaneer* (1954) pairs western debauchery with consequent traditional punitive reprisal in the form of physical disfigurement. In its narrative, the foreign-returned protagonist Mohanasundaram (M.R. Radha) represents the depravity of western ways — alcoholism, sloth, pride, scorn for traditional values, and sexual promiscuity. His eventual end comes through leprosy, disfigurement, and disablement, which he accepts as a punishment for a life lived poorly and magnanimously hands over his wife (who he can no longer have sexual relations with) to an upright friend. The film ends with the erection of a disfigured statue of Mohanasundaram as reminder to all those who may choose to the path of debauchery. The storyline of *Ratha Kaneer* interestingly mirrors that of Samba, son of Lord Krishna from Hindu mythology, who became a leper in part because he was extremely handsome yet dissolute and was cursed with leprosy by his own father for his sexual debauchery.

The relationship of disability and punishment in Indian cinema is complex as disability can either be seen as punitive or therapeutic, where the tolerance of a disability is a form of self-abnegation that emerges as an act of redemptive righteousness. Both these ideas have strong mythological roots. The idea of self-abnegation most strongly resonates with Gandhari, the queen of Kurukshetra and wife of the blind king Dhritarashtra in the *Mahabharata*. Gandhari's father, King Subala of Kandahar (in present-day Afghanistan) receives an offer

of alliance from Bheeshma, the head of the Kuru dynasty, an alliance that cannot be refused. When Gandhari finds out that her soon-to-be husband is blind, she takes a blindfold, ties it around her eyes, and never takes it off except once for the rest of her life (the reasons for which are debated). Gandhari's act of "disabling herself" raises her in the epic from a mere human to someone with extraordinary powers (*Mahabharata*, Book 1, Chapter 103, Verses 12 & 13) — she is able to grant the boon of near invincibility to her son, she curses Krishna (an avatar of the Lord Vishnu) and eventually causes the annihilation of his entire clan. Her ability to do this is attributed to her status as an exemplar of a *sati* who takes on an ultimate sacrifice for her husband. In perhaps the most Gandhari-esque moment of Hindi cinema, the heroine Usha (Sadhana) in the film *Arzo* (1965), in an attempt to equate herself with the hero (Rajendra Kumar) who has an amputated foot, places her own foot on a chain-saw.

The standard purely punitive view of disability in Indian cinema has deep roots from multiple sources in mythology and folklore. Among the most important and enduring are the figures of the sage Ashtavakra and the demonesses Surpanakha and Ajamukhi. In all three cases, disability is caused by some infraction, but the distinctions between the stories of each figure are interesting and go to the root of how disability is figured as punitive. Ashtavakra, whose name literally means "eight deformities," is mentioned in the *Chāndogya Upanishad* scripture, and was born disabled. His disability was caused by a curse cast when he was still in his mother's womb. As a young fetus, already very learned because his mother listened in on lectures by scholars during her pregnancy, he made the error of correcting his father, the sage Kahola, when he mis-stated some scriptures. For his act of filial impiety, Kahola cursed Ashtavakra with eight deformities for the eight times that he had committed this transgression. After Ashtavakra is born and grows up, he eventually redeems himself by proving to be a stellar scholar, following which his body is restored to one of perfection. This idea of redemption and the consequent restoring of the able body is a persistent theme in Indian cinema. We discuss this further in the "Disability as Disequilibrium" section below.

In Puranic myth, Ajamukhi, the sister of demon Surpadman, suffers amputation when she attempts to seize Indrani on behalf of her evil brother. Ajamukhi is the reincarnation of Chitrlekha, a lovely but debauched Brahmin's wife who is cursed for her lust by a sage, Durvasa, to be reborn with the face of a goat. Thus the lustfulness and demonization of Ajamukhi serves as a setup that strips her of the qualities of ideal womanhood at the point of her amputation. The second character in Hindu mythology with an amputation is Surpanakha, the widowed sister of Ravana and the antagonist of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. North and South Indian versions of the *Ramayana* differ on the physical description of Surpanakha. The North Indian variants note her as having thinning hair, a dissonant voice, being cross-eyed, and having oversized breasts, whereas the Kamban's south Indian version of the epic notes her as extremely beautiful. Surpanakha's key role in the *Ramayana* arises from her spurning by Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, and her subsequent disfigurement by Rama's brother Lakshmana who cuts off her nose in the events that follow her rejection. Surpanakha's fate ultimately leads to the war between her brother and Rama. Surpanakha's disability represents an intersection of both disability, punishment, and gender roles. Her condition is specifically attributed to lust and vanity, a theme that repeats itself in films where women who act against social rules are rewarded through some form of disfigurement. Disability and disfigurement as sexual punishment thus represents its opposite — "the perfect body" — as the trope of desirability. Thus the punishment for departures from the social

norm in Indian cinema, especially for female characters, can often be some form of disfigurement.

An early example of a film where disfigurement is pointedly used as punishment is Sohrab Modi's 1958 film *Jailor*. This complex work represents disability in multiple ways. Modi plays a disfigured jail warden whose wife leaves him for a doctor. The wife and doctor are then aptly punished for this debauchery: the doctor loses his eyesight, and the wife suffers facial scarring. She is also jailed in the basement of her own home, kept away from seeing her own child, and eventually dies. The blind doctor, now a roaming mendicant, falls in love with another blind girl, who in turns ends up having her sight restored by the disability-avenged jail warden. Tamil filmmaker K. Balachander used the disability as punishment theme for women a few times in films like *Moonдру Mudichu* (1976) where a woman (Vijaya) who lives by her good looks is disfigured in a fire, and in *Arangetram* (1973) in which the protagonist (Pramila), a prostitute, eventually loses her sanity. Likewise, in *Vazhayadi Vazhai* (1972) Pramila (who came to be typecast in "bold" roles) replayed the character of a wife who refuses her husband (and motherhood) to preserve her good looks, engineers a situation for her own sister to marry a disabled man, and both mocks her and causes marital discord. Her comeuppance at the end of the film has her ending up disfigured, separated from her husband, and symbolically lowered in status below her crippled brother-in-law. The specific use of actresses known for playing the roles that went against social convention is an interesting comment on the distancing of the "punished disabled" from the desexualized Polyanna-ish representation of the faultless demure woman, usually the hero's sister (*Saccha Jhootha* 1970, *Vishwanath* 1978, *Naan Vaaza Vaippen* 1979).

Disability as punishment in Hindu mythology is not solely related to individuals' sins in the current birth — a disability can also be "deservedly" acquired in the womb or in previous incarnations. Thus Ashtavakra "deserved" his disability from his scholarly vanity as a fetus and Ajamukhi's fate as a goat-faced woman came from her sins as the lustful beauty Chitrlekha in a previous birth. In Surpanakha's case, she is reborn as Kubja, a penitent hunchback. Similarly, the punitive view of disability in cinema is often projected as an outcome of transferred punishment, thus the righteous are disabled for the sins of the evil. The consequent disability then becomes the moral mirror through which the evil are eventually driven to repent upon seeing the plight of the righteous, who bore the punitive consequences of their acts. The classic mythological case of this, of course, was the blind Dhritarashtra himself, who was born blind because his mother Ambika was so repulsed by the looks of the sage Vyasa, Dhritarashtra's father, that she closed her eyes during intercourse.

An early example of a film dealing with disability and its derivative punishment was Manilal Joshi's 1925 mythological/historical *Veer Kunal*, featuring action star Raja Sandow. Kunal, the righteous son of Mauryan emperor Ashoka, is blinded because of court intrigue involving his step-mother, but the film ends with Ashoka realizing that his own sins brought risk to his son's eyesight. Likewise, in the Hindi film *Upkaar* (1967), a wayward brother is eventually moved to regret his actions when his upright brother loses his arms for his sins. In *Kaalida* (1981), the responsible elder brother (Kader Khan) loses his arms, which turns out to be a symbolic punishment for the slacker younger brother Amitabh who gets his act together thereafter. And in *Sone Ka Dil Loh Ke Haath* (1978), a father's act of murder causes his son to be blinded. In each case, the narrative's resolution occurs through an act of disablement that brings about equilibrium.

The corollary to the idea of disability as punitive is the idea of service for the disabled as a means of repentance for penitent sinners. The redemption of the thug from *Lafangey*

*Parindey* (2010) follows a long tradition of some of India's top leading men playing roles in successful mainstream films that use this theme. In *Prince* (1969), a bratty alcoholic womanizer Shamsher (Shammi Kapoor) is reformed when he has to pose as the son of a poor blind woman; in *Dushman* (1971), an alcoholic, foul mouthed man (Rajesh Khanna) is turned around by the experience of serving the disabled parents and family of a man he killed; in *Dada* (1979), a murderer (Amjad Khan) is reformed by having to take care of a blind child; in *Mera Dost Mera Dushman* (1984), having to live with a blind woman reforms a dacoit; and in *Satte Pe Satta* (1982), an assassin is unable to bring himself to kill his target — a woman in a wheelchair — which eventually brings him around to being a good man.

At the logical extreme of this trajectory, rectifying the disability of another can provide the ultimate salvation for evil. In *Hawas* (1974) the lustful criminal (Bindu) gets her redemption by donating her eyes to the hero's virtuous blind sister as she lies dying. *Suhaag* (1979) goes a step further as the villain of the piece (Amjad Khan) donates his eyes to the blind hero (Shashi Kapoor) in the last scene and accepts life as a blind man in repentance.

### *Disability as Dependence*

Arguably, the persistent portrayal in popular culture of people with disabilities as unable to live independently has been a very important setback to the independent living movement worldwide. In Indian films, the idea of dependence on charity or on the largesse of heroic characters is quite typical. The following three films are critical examples because they underline the pervasiveness of dependence as a disability theme even when the disabled characters are key figures in a story.

The 2010 *Ashmakatha* starring Premal has two blind protagonists who work at a candle factory. The film has its moments of tragic romanticization around the death of one of the protagonists in a road accident that seems to highlight the dangers of being blind and traveling independently on Indian roads. However, overall the film portrays the protagonists as relatively independent, highlighting one striking fact that most films about vision impairment forgo — the protagonist (Sreenivasan) has no particular desire to be sighted. As the film progresses, we find that his daughter also shares his genetic condition, which will lead to her loss of sight. While her adjustment to this eventuality forms the crux of the film's narrative and the film ends with her losing her sight completely, she is entirely at peace with it. Through a range of strategies, including the use of stock benevolent characters and stereotypical situations (the protagonist is a candlemaker — a job visually impaired people are frequently "channeled" towards in training institutes for the Blind in India), the audience is introduced to a variety of strategies through which the vision impaired may complete their daily activities. Several of these are for effect, but the film still focuses consistently on the idea that someone who is blind may live a full life. That the filmmakers felt the need to say this and thought the story premise would make a good film is a good indicator of just how poorly the idea of independent living has been portrayed in Indian cinema.

The 1964 Rajshri classic *Dosti* features two disabled protagonists, Ramu (Sushil Kumar), who uses crutches to walk and Mohan (Sudhir Kumar), who is blind. At the start of the film, we see Ramu distraught — everything about the state works against him — cars cause him danger on the street, water tanks on the street have no water, people don't respond when he speaks with them, and the only person who does insults him when Ramu requests a job by saying, "What work can be done by someone like you?" Mohan, the blind youth, likewise enters the film asking people to help him cross the street to no response. For most

of the remainder of the film, the two youths are shown as being in situations where their disability makes them deeply dependent for their basic existence.

Throughout the film the two youngsters are humiliated for their disabilities; students refuse to accept that a disabled boy is studying in a school, and crowds laugh when the blind Mohan claims his sister is a respectable nurse. To make a living the duo begs on the streets — Mohan sings while Ramu plays the harmonica. The film makes a distinction between the two characters and their respective disabilities when it hits a turning point: Mohan concludes that his friend has a future — since he can see, he can study and potentially have a career of some kind. So Mohan goes forth and ramps up his begging activities, eventually supporting Ramu through his studies and helping him to become successful in life. While Ramu slowly edges ahead in life, the blind Mohan's condition worsens as he is abandoned by his own sister and Ramu alike. The importance of the film *Dosti* cannot be overstated. Not only because of the cultural power of its narrative and its two leading disabled characters, but also because of the timeless appeal of its music. Songs from the film are regularly heard in commuter trains and streets where people perform for spare change. The song Mohan sings as a beggar is particularly common: "*Jaane walo zara mudhke dekho mujhe, ek insaan hoon, main tumhari tarah*" (Passers-by, turn and see me for a moment, I am also human, like you).

While mental illnesses have frequently been exploited in crude terms in Mumbai and South Indian cinema alike, physical or sensory disabilities, especially of male leads, have seldom been the central theme of mainstream films. Gulzar's *Koshish* is an exception in which the male and female leads (played by Sanjeev Kumar and Jaya Bhaduri, respectively) are deaf-mute, and the third main character (Om Shivpuri) is blind. The film, often seen as a landmark in the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema, opens with sign language alphabet in its credits, and at several points the film takes what may be called an 'educational' stance to its audience by instructing one or another character in the film how a Deaf person may communicate, participate economically, etc. Though the protagonists in the film live independently, at several points their ability to do so is threatened by society and the people around them. An exploitative brother-in-law cheats and steals from them, their own infant child dies because they do not hear him cry, and they are frequently poor and generally depicted as kind-hearted unfortunates. Two sequences in the film are particularly troubling — when the couple watch their infant cautiously to find out if he is deaf. Initially they are much relieved when an aunt tells them that he can hear and speak. Later they run into a panic when they again fear that he may be deaf, only to find out to their delight that he is not.

At the film's climax, we find that Sanjeev Kumar's boss invites him home for dinner and asks him to bring along his son. The scene unravels when the boss offers his daughter's hand in marriage to Sanjeev Kumar's son. Sanjeev Kumar is shocked at first, and signs that there is a huge class schism between the two, at which point the boss confesses with tears that his daughter is Deaf-Mute and he is looking for a patient man for her. As he says this, his face crumples in shame, his body language changes, and the camera focuses on the girl's ears and mouth — ostensibly defective. At this point, Sanjeev Kumar puts aside the class difference and agrees to the marriage, but the son refuses emphatically because he does not want to be with a Deaf person. The ending is particularly disturbing for its combination of class and disability, implying that a disabled girl should expect a class adjustment if she hopes to marry. The boss's search for a patient man reinforces the idea of dependence on a benevolent hearing person for a successful life.



Perhaps the most important disabled character from Hindu mythology is Dhritarashtra, the blind king in the *Mahabharata*, and central character in the war between his sons, the Kauravas, and his nephews, the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra is complex because he has some traits that are atypical for disabled characters in Indian narratives. First, he is incredibly strong — at one point in the *Mahabharata* he crushes a metal statue to powder. He is also not desexualized — he sires 100 sons and one daughter. However, Dhritarashtra remains deeply dependent through the entire epic, on his wife, his sons, and his advisors. For the most part, the critical events in the story emerge from Dhritarashtra's dependence on the judgment of his advisors rather than trusting his own judgment. Arguably the entire conflict in the *Mahabharata* hinges on one key factor — Dhritarashtra's incompetence as a king, his inability to do the righteous thing as he is blinded both physically and metaphorically and only practices statecraft through his advisors. Thus, despite being the regent whose kingdom is fought over in the epic, he is sidelined as a supporting character to the battery of stronger sighted players — his uncle, brother, sons, and nephews.

Besides Dhritarashtra, the other key mythological character representing dependency in disability is Shravan. The slaying of Shravan is a particularly emotive tale in Hindu mythology, typically invoked to underline the importance of filial piety, but more specifically to underline the importance of the family in caring for the disabled. Shravan is not disabled, but his parents Shantanu and Gyanavanti are blind. As a dutiful son, Shravan spends most of his time caring for them, carrying them on his shoulders and tending to their needs. Shravan is eventually killed accidentally by Dasratha, the father of Lord Rama of the *Ramayana*, leading his dismayed father to curse Dasratha for having taken away their only support system. This curse eventually triggers the events that lead to the *Ramayana*.

In Indian cinema, disability is most commonly characterized in terms of dependence, particularly in those films where a disabled character is not the lead player, such as in *Atmakatha*, *Dosti*, or *Koshish*. These characterizations include disabled parents who depend on the goodness of their children or others to survive (*Avtaar* 1983, *Allah Rakka* 1985, *Jaydaad* 1989, *Laadla* 1994, *Zordaar* 1996), dependent disabled daughters (*Apradhi* 1947, *Patita* 1953, *Aai Phirse Bahaar* 1960, *Dil Tera Diwana* 1962, *Biradri* 1966, *Sharaabi* 1984), dependent disabled siblings (*Payal* 1957, *Apne Dushman* 1975, *Brashtachar* 1989), dependent disabled romantic interests (*Barsaat Ki Ek Raat* 1983) or disabled characters who are purely dependent on the goodness of random do-gooders for their survival (*Deedar* 1951, *Bharosa* 1963, *Marte Dam Tak* 1987). In some films, the disability/dependence relationship is the narrative framework through which the faults of modernity implode. Typically when an older male suffers a disability, such as in *Bharosa*, *Aap ki Parchhaiyan* (1964) and *Avtaar*, their usefulness in the family is immediately perceived as reduced, followed by their dependence, marginalization, humiliation and eventual ejection from their homes, usually by their own children. In such films, part of the extremely popular family melodrama category aimed at mixed-gender audiences, the theme of the disabled parent abandoned by ungrateful children, and reduced to penury and dependence on random benefactors, is not uncommon. These films stress the disintegration of traditional values, using the helpless disabled elder as the tragic indicator of decay resulting from the onslaught of Westernization.

Disabled women are particularly at risk. First, there is the recurrent theme of the difficulty of finding a spouse for a disabled woman and the burden this poses to her male relatives (*Santhi* 1965, *Thokar* 1974, *Saccha Jhutha* 1978, *Naan Vazhavaippen* 1979, *Bhairavi* 1996). Such narratives often feature men taking unusual risks to rectify the situation, like committing crime for a larger dowry, leaving a traditional home to move to urban locations

for jobs, and so forth. With the unmarriageable disabled person theme, films often justify some unusually callous action. In the Tamil film *Santhi* (1965)—remade in Hindi as *Gauri* (1968)—a concerned father gets his blind daughter married to a man without telling him she is blind. The daughter is abandoned and considers suicide, though she eventually gets her vision back. Where such a parent does not exist, the alternatives could be worse, such as in *Dhoop Chhaon* (1977) in which Hema Malini plays a woman who loses her eyesight and is thereafter abducted and sold into prostitution or in *Jheel Ke Us Paar* (1973) where a blind woman is sold off as a wife to an evil man. She eventually has her sight restored, at which point it is possible for her to marry the kind protagonist who arranges for her sight to be restored. On the “progressive” end are films such as *Barsaat Ki Ek Raat* (1983) in which a pity marriage happens with a desirable groom, right after the bride’s parent delivers a speech on “Who will marry my disabled daughter?”

The importance of a male protector for women with disabilities is commonly reinforced by highlighting the risk of sexual exploitation. Such exploitation of disabled women is frequently dealt with crudely. In films like *Imaan Dharam* (1977), *Insaaf* (1987), *Brashtachar* (1989), *Khuddar* (1994), and *Humko Tumse Pyaar Hai* (2006) blind women are aggressively pursued or sexually assaulted when they don’t have a man to look out for them. Perhaps the most egregious plot belongs to the Kannada classic *Katha Sangama* (1975; remade in 1984 in Tamil as *Kai Kodukkum Kai*) in which a blind wife who is the sympathy wife of a rich man is raped by a thug (Rajnikanth in his first Kannada role). The thug then goes on to blackmail the woman, but all ends well when the husband forgives the wife and they live on. The bizarre interpretation of virtue signals two important themes which are remarkably common. First, that the act of being with someone who is disabled is essentially an act of social service. Second, that disability allows for certain anomalous concessions—the pollution of a wife’s virtue by another man can be forgiven, but it takes a particularly heroic husband to do that.

Women who are disabled are frequently the object of a man’s sympathy or protection, but a disabled man has a much more complex fate in terms of dependence. Disability is typically a proxy for a male character’s failure to provide or protect. The underlying theme is the inherently exploitative nature of the social system, which means that men must act to their fullest capacity in order to fulfill their duties to family and society. Disability is figured as an inhibitor that prevents men from doing so. For male characters, the loss of arms has been a very important theme in Indian films, highlighting inability. Examples include the farmer played by Raaj Kumar in *Mother India* (1957), the woodcutter played by Suresh Oberoi in *Lawaris* (1981), the mill worker played by Kader Khan in *Kaalida* (1982), and the cab driver played by Farooque Shaikh in *Toofan* (1989). In each case, characters die after they acquire their disability. The farmer and the mill worker both suffer amputations and are thereafter shown as unable to provide for their respective families, and eventually perish. In *Lawaris* and *Toofan*, the hero’s respective sidekicks (Suresh Oberoi and Farooque Shaikh) likewise perish, but for different reasons. In these cases, the amputees are unable to protect women from the lecherous gaze of villains. Both *Lawaris* and *Toofan* feature the often repeated theme of a male star who plays role of social protector and avenger, while his sidekick, lacking the protection of Amitabh (a celestial Buddha), dies. In *Toofan*, specifically, the theme is taken to an extreme—the cab driver’s wife is molested and murdered in front of his eyes and his ten-year old son is left the task of protecting him from the attacking villains. The son manages to do this relatively effectively for a few minutes before he is finally overpowered. Thus even the child becomes the “man of the family” replacing the disabled male.

A disabled man dependent on his spouse represents the worst form of dependency in most films, especially in those cases where the disability is acquired. The man is removed from his role as provider and protector, and the consequence is often catastrophic for the family as a whole. Thus in *Mother India*, the disability of the protagonist (Raj Kumar) results in his wife becoming a manual laborer in the fields. The shame and penury of the family is resolved in his mind only when he removes himself as a burden from the family by running away from home. In *Kasauti* (1974) the disability of a husband (Bharat Bhushan) leads his wife to take the role of provider by turning to sex work. In *Pati Patni* (1966), *Zameen Asmaan* (1972), *Vakil Babu* (1983), *Qatl* (1986) and *Vaada* (2005), the protagonist's blindness leads to dependence on a wife who eventually has (or is suspected of having) an affair. The gender complexity of male disability extends to females providing support. Films like *Parita* (1953) *Waqt ka Shahenshah* (1987), and *Sharaabi* (1984) in which supporting a disabled parent forces a daughter to become the provider in a household, come with a whole set of female gender issues in the subtext.

The desexualization of people with disabilities is part of this discourse of dependence as well. This desexualization occurs with both males and females, but is particularly sharp in neutering the disabled male character both sexually and socially. Thus in *Joshila* (1973) the disabled Thakur's wife Rani (Bindu) quite openly flirts with other men and in *Khandaan* (1979) when a disabled older brother is unable to get married, it is suggested that he commit suicide so that the younger brother can marry out of turn without trouble. In light of this desexualization, various films feature a disabled person who tries to engineer a break-up of their own relationship with their non-disabled partner out of apparent consideration (*Deedar* 1951, *Arzoo* 1965, *Kannan en Kadhalan* 1968, *Jal Bin Machli Nritya Bin Bijli* 1971, *Saajan* 1991). On the other hand, while most disabled beggars in Indian films are male, female disabled beggars appear as unprotected sexual objects. In *Sahara* (1958) the protagonist is a beautiful orphan turned blind beggar whose sexual vulnerability is offset by having her sing at temples with objects typically associated with pious mendicancy, such as the *Iktara* instrument typically used by itinerant Hindu and Buddhist monks.

The close association of disability and charity is inherent to all the key religious traditions of India (Miles; Maysaa and Hateb; Gupta 2011) and the appearance of disabled people as recipients of charity in Indian cinema has aimed to underline the idea of a social responsibility. However, one of the most problematic and persistent portrayals in film is the blind beggar. The blind singer/mendicant character derives from a popular folklore figure, Surdas, a 15th century Braj region singer/saint who was a wandering musician for much of his young life. Right from the earliest days of talkie cinema, singer/actor Krishna Chandra Dey (uncle of playback singer Manna Dey and mentor to musician S.D. Burman) sang for films. Since it was typically required that he be given some kind of on-screen role, his default character became a blind beggar, often in films where his only scene would involve singing a song. Dey played Surdas a few times, found much popularity in the industry for his music, and ultimately set the stereotype for the blind singer/beggar that has been replayed consistently over the decades (*Insaan* 1944, *Deedar* 1951, *Parineeta* 1953, *Cha Cha Cha* 1964, *Bahaaron Ke Sapne* 1967, *Pyar Ka Mausam* 1969, *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* 1975, *Sapnon Ka Mandir* 1991, *Kaasi* 2003).

Historically, actors who played characters with disabilities have frequently been typecast. Blind characters have often been played by a few character actors who had built reputations for tragic roles, a practice that collapses the distance between the persona of the star and the personas of the roles, thereby reinforcing the idea of someone who is disabled as being

predictably dependent and pitiable. Thus Nazir Hussain (*Kashmir ki Kali* 1964, *Aap ki Parchhaiyan* 1964, *Prem Pujari* 1970, *Pandit aur Pathan* 1977, *Abdullah* 1980) and A.K. Hangal (*Sholay* 1975, *Sharaabi* 1984, *Ek Chaddar Maili Si* 1986) were repeatedly cast as disabled father figures in tragic roles. Bharat Bhushan several times reprised roles of a blind destitute person (*Pyar ka Mausam* 1969, *Kasauti* 1974, *Shravan Kumar* 1984, *Dariya Dil* 1988). When they were not playing the disabled, all three actors — Hussain, Hangal, and Bhushan — were typecast through much of their later careers as weak or unfortunate characters.

In Tamil cinema, an early example of disability as dependence that has important political implications is the film *Parasakthi* (1951). The film was one of the Dravidian movement's key propaganda productions. Written by politician M. Karunanidhi, it features a number of themes intended to appeal to local masses. When a protagonist loses his leg in the war and finds himself shunned by the system, he starts organizing beggars into a union, implying that the obvious occupation for a disabled man is begging.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most problematic portrayal of disability, dependency and pathos appears in Tamil director Bala's film *Naan Kadavul* (2009). Bala, known for a unique brand of violent realism in depicting life in rural and small town Tamil Nadu, centers *Naan Kadavul* around the lives of disabled commuter train performers and mendicants. The film is a particularly grim view of the begging industry and grimly voyeuristic in the vein of the Hollywood 1932 classic *Freaks*, where the body is used as an artifact to underline social incompatibility and ultimately pathos. The film casts disabled individuals, several of them performers in real life, in a narrative of particularly cruel exploitation by the begging mafia. *Naan Kadavul* has been widely cited in popular reviews for its "realistic" depiction of disability, but it does not offer much agency to any of the disabled characters. In its chilling climax, the blind female lead is ritually murdered by the protagonist who offers her *moksha* or release from her disabled life. The portrayal of a disabled life as not being worth living appears in films where a supporting character is disabled (*Mother India* 1957), but more typically in films where a female lead becomes disabled during the narrative, making her attempt suicide or choose banishment over being a burden on the male lead (*Basant* 1960, *Do Badan* 1966, *Kannan en Kadhalan* 1968). In more recent times, *Guzaarish* (2010), which we discuss in detail in the last section, offers a complex view of disability in terms of euthanasia.

The pointed use of pathos in representations of disability has frequently employed the building of tragedy or sentimentality into the narrative. One filmmaker who specialized in this strategy in his "family drama/tragedy" brand of cinema was Tamil filmmaker Bhimsingh who made a series of films with disabled characters in the lead (*Baga Pirivanai* 1959, *Palum Pazhamum* 1961, *Parthal Pasi Theerum* 1962, *Santhi* 1965, *Aadmi* 1968). In Bhimsingh's films disability often functions as a mirror for social duplicities and cruelty wherein disability is shown in terms of extreme sentimentality and helplessness. Disability is ultimately resolved at the end of the film with the protagonist regaining sight, or reversing paralysis or otherwise effecting a cure. Other directors who have repeatedly made films with characters with disabilities include Vinayan (*Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* 1999, *Karumadikkuttan* 2001, *Oomappenninu Uriyadappayyan* 2002, *En Mana Vaanil* 2002, *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* 2003, *Athbhutha Dweepu* 2005) and Sanjay Bhanshali, whose work we discuss in detail later.

While Bhimsingh's motivations are not clear, the importance of his films as commercial successes is key since most of these films, first made in Tamil, were remade successfully in Hindi. One of the most successful, *Baga Piravanai* (1959) remade as *Khandan* (1965), has a lead character, Ramu, who is paralyzed on one side because of a childhood accident. He

is depicted as a pathetic fawning simpleton, intended as an object of the audience's pity and is repeatedly insulted by other characters in the film. His nondisabled brother, with whom he is constantly compared, is sent to school in the city while he is relegated to working the fields. The existence of a single disability — the physical inability to use one arm — is thus extended in eugenic terms to Ramu's other faculties. He is consistently portrayed as stupid, unable to recognize social cues, unattractive, and generally someone in whom to invest only limited resources.

The depiction of disabled characters as fawning unfortunates is common not just when key individual characters are disabled, but even with the broader theme of the disabled as a whole. A remarkably consistent example of this is the portrayal of blind schools in Indian films. These scenes are typically shot by rounding up youths from schools or institutions for the disabled and using them briefly in productions for one or several scenes or songs. In *Parvarish* (1977) a group of blind musicians are gathered by their teacher, played by Vinod Khanna (whose characterization in the film as a blind school teacher is used to emphasize his generosity as a film star), to sing the popular song "*Band Aankh Se Dekh Tamasha Duniya Ka*," which literally means "see the comic irony of the world through closed eyes."

*Anuraag* (1972), another film to show a blind school, likewise caricaturizes and openly uses the pity card when a local politician, Amirchand (Madan Puri), gives a speech at the blind school: "Serving these poor young women is a sort of national social service. I ask, what is their fault for being blind? This is God's mistake, which we humans can fix. To remove the darkness from their life, I urge the young men of this country to come forward and make them their life partners." Immediately following this call for rescue marriages, the minister himself refuses to let his own son Rajesh (Vinod Mehra) marry a blind girl. That girl, Shivani (Moushumi Chatterjee), the film's protagonist, is a blind student at the school. The narrative makes it clear that the only way for her to marry Rajesh is if she were no longer disabled, for which she would need a cornea donor. A candidate appears in the terminally ill cherub of a boy Chandan (Master Satyajit), Rajesh's nephew, who ties all the ends together. The tearjerker is resolved when the tragedy of the child's passing is ameliorated by Shivani's restored sight and Chandan's second chance metaphorically. A very similar plot repeats in *Neel Kamal* (1984) where the hero's kid brother, also a dying cancer patient, donates his eyes so that the heroine can see. *Anuraag* was itself remade in Bangla as *Aloy Phera* (2007).

### *Disability as Disequilibrium*

The theme of the "disability cure" — the conceptualization of disability as a state requiring a cure that the narrative achieves however unrealistically — is not unique to Indian cinema, but the frequency with which disability is proposed as a state of disequilibrium is striking. In most Indian films, disability is marginalized, affecting one of the less important characters. When it does impact a protagonist, almost always in relation to a punitive act or stroke of ill luck, it is typically temporary. In no case is this more of a guaranteed formula than when the protagonist is either blinded or paralyzed. The curing of the protagonist reflects his or her return to a state of equilibrium that the "normal" body confirms.

The idea of disability as disequilibrium is tied to the Hindu conception of disability as related to virtuous suffering, which is a central part of the characterization of Gandhari, one of the key characters in the *Mahabharata*. She is the wife of King Dhritarashtra who willingly takes on a blindfold all her life to "virtuously suffer" with her blind husband. Thus

disability is her *choice*, one which she chooses consciously never to reverse. This linking of choice, virtue, personal fortitude, and impairment is reflected in the case of mythological Ashtavakra whose disability is understood as a temporary state of disequilibrium, which is eventually rectified when he earns back his perfect body after he excels as a scholar. Similarly, the sinful Samba, son of Krishna, reverses his disability when he works off his leprosy by penitent prayer to the Sun God at the Chandrabhaga River.

In both of the latter two cases, the message is important—repentance and/or hard work can reverse a disability. This seemingly fantastic message has a remarkable number of takers in Indian cinema. In countless films, some act of extreme will or fortuitous and deserved shock will make a person in a wheelchair start walking or even running right away (*Basant* 1960, *Aaj aur Kal* 1963, *Kannan en Kadhalan* 1968, *Naan yen Piranthan* 1972), or a person with a speech impairment start speaking (*Sangeet Samrat Tansen* 1962, *Karma* 1986, *Shor* 1972, *Khol de Meri Zubaan* 1989, *Koyla* 1997). Even more surprising are the cases of a paralysis reversed through an electric shock (*Baga Pirivanai* 1959, *Khandaan* 1965), through a near drowning experience (*Aalayamani* 1962, *Aadmi* 1968), or vision restored through some impact such as an accident (*Nau Bahar* 1952), even hitting one's head on a rock (*Amar Akbar Anthony* 1979) or falling down stairs (*Sajaan ka Ghar* 1994) or from a snakebite (*Bairaaag* 1976). In addition to all of these, there is an entire Indian genre of mythological or fantasy film featuring vast numbers of examples of the disabled being cured through some form of magic or divine intervention (*Devta* 1956, *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* 1977, *Ajooba* 1991).

The earned reversal of disability trope is particularly striking when the disability is the fault of another. In such cases, the responsibility for restoration often falls to the perpetrator who must engineer a cure through penitence. In *Thulladha Manamum Thullum* (1999), the hero Kutty (Vijay) causes the heroine Rukmini (Simran) to lose her eyesight in an accident. The hero is repentant and eventually reverses the situation by having his dying mother donate her eyes for Rukmini, and thereafter selling his kidney to pay for the transplant. The film ends happily with the emotional reunion of the now successful Rukmini and Kutty, who has transformed himself into the man who has successfully restored what he destroyed: her sight. They live happily ever after with no disabilities, save for the fact that Kutty needs to cut down on his double martinis. This successful film was remade in Telugu as *Nuvvu Vasthavani* (2000).

The plot of a disability caused by an accident and the quest for its reversal through virtuous penitence derives from the popular mythological story of Sukanya from the *Bhagawata Purana*. Sukanya, the beautiful daughter of the Shraddhadeva Manu poked two shining objects she saw in a termite's nest. They turned out to be the eyes of a meditating sage, Chyavana, who was so rapt in his meditation that he was covered in termites. Her poking blinds the sage, so Sukanya's father offers her in marriage to him to compensate for the loss of his eyes. The sage accepts and Sukanya remains a faithful wife who nurses and serves her husband. At a critical juncture, two suitors approach Sukanya, divine twins called the Ashwins (the fathers of Nakul and Sahadeva from the *Mahabharata*), who offer themselves in partnership instead of her blind, old husband Chyavana. Sukanya rejects their overtures and chooses instead to be faithful in service to her husband. The Ashwins, pleased with her chastity, offer her a small test. If she passes, her husband's disability will be reversed. She does and the story ends with Chyavana's sight and youth restored. The story offers the exemplar for the Indian woman: a wife who selflessly serves a disabled husband and through her selfless service gains his able body back. Thus Sukanya is referred to as "Sati Sukanya."

a standard-setter for the ideal woman. The Sukanya saga has been filmed multiple times and dubbed in various languages in India (*Sati Sukanya* 1959, *Punyam* 2001).

We see the same plotline in *Paalum Palamum* (1960) and *Saathi* (1968), where the blind protagonist is nursed by a devoted and persevering female partner and eventually regains his sight. While the theme of a dedicated, chaste woman nursing a disabled man to a cure is actually most common in films dealing with mental illness, which we do not discuss much here (see *Khamoshi* 1969 and *Khilona* 1970), it has also been used for paralysis. In a dark twist on the theme, *Anjaam* (1996) features a woman seeking revenge on a disabled man. She decides that it is necessary first to pretend to be his devoted wife/nurse until he is well again before wreaking vengeance.

A woman's devoted service to a disabled man is well in keeping with the ideal of the virtuous woman, but when a man nurses a disabled woman to good health the objective is undeniably to highlight his heroism. In *Aaj aur Kal* (1963) a heroic young doctor/psychiatrist (Sunil Dutt) cures the grieving heroine (Nanda) of her paralysis by using his wit and love. In some films, even though the doctor actually provides the cure, the hero is the man who gets the woman to the operating table, as in *Jheel ke us Paar* (1973), *Sunayna* (1979) and *Humko Tumse Pyaar Hai* (2006).

In no case is the heroism of the "disability curer" in sharper focus than in the 1968 film *Kannan en Kadhalan* where the hero, played by MG Ramachandran (MGR), cures his love interest who is paralyzed from the waist down (Kanchana). She is literally so enthused by his singing that she gets out of the wheelchair and starts walking. The scene (a reprise of an earlier ham scene in which a crooked Jayalalitha gets out of her wheelchair and starts dancing vigorously) came at a time when MGR's popularity was at an unimaginable high. At this point, MGR was already a two-time legislator and his populist films were thoroughly propagandist, pushing the idea of him as a larger-than-life man who looked out for the poor, weak, aged, women and children, and every other group that was excluded economically and socially. Thus playing a hero who cures a disabled person becomes a vehicle to reinforce the heroic persona of the star himself. More dangerously, it emphasizes that disability is only in the mind. All it needs is a good heroic cure.

In a troubling parallel case the upright Dr. Amar (Shatrughan Sinha) cures a young polio-afflicted boy Rahul (Master Tito) in *Aa Gale Lag Jaa* (1974). Dr. Amar's approach is to beat Rahul repeatedly in a closed room until in desperation the young boy gets up and runs towards the door. The weak mind of a child is thus strengthened by Dr. Amar, who understands the right time for tough love. Just as MGR plays the gendered card of taming the child-like mind of a woman who does not understand that the disability is ultimately in the mind of the patient, so Dr. Amar teaches Rahul to toughen up and choose to live an able-bodied life.

Alternatively, the narrative of curable disability may posit the cure as a prize for good behavior, much in the vein of the mythological Ashtavakra or Samba. In this case, righteous people who suffer some form of disability are inevitably relieved of the disability by the end of the film. Typically it is the faultless blind who are cured (*Deedar* 1951, *Nau Bahar* 1952, *Raji en Kanmani* 1954, *Santhi*, *Gauri* 1968, *Amar Akbar Anthony*, *Perazhagan*). This cure for the righteous is almost necessary in narratives where the hero is disabled. For the most part, if the lead character in an Indian film — either male or female — is disabled for some reason, this is inevitably reversed. For a hero, often featured as the perfect male, the state of being disabled is inevitably one of disequilibrium that needs to be reversed (*Aalayamani* 1962, *Prem Patra* 1962, *Suhaag* 1994, *Vijaypath* 1994). Usually the only exception to this is

when the disability is due to some act of valor, especially war wounds (*Hum Dono* 1961, *Major Chandrakanth* 1966, *Subhaag Raat* 1968, *Prem Pujari* 1970, *Kandukondain Kandukondain* 2000).

In contrast, a female lead character's disability functions to reinforce the male lead's heroism, but an element of disequilibrium remains, necessitating a cure for her regardless. In *Kannan en Kadhalan*, MGR's hero agrees to marry the apparently disabled Jayalalitha out of pity, but she is desexualized as unworthy of a good man. Likewise, in films like *Basant* (1942), *Aaj aur Kal* (1963), *Santhi* (1965), *Jheel ke us Paar* (1973), *Sunayna* (1979), and *Humko Tumse Pyaar Hai* (2006), the consummation of the relationship of the heroine with the hero comes only after the woman has lost her disability. A happily-ever-after ending cannot have one incomplete body.

### *Disability as Social Maladjustment*

The stories of Manthara and Shakuni from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are important sources of the idea of disability as a form of social maladjustment and a pathway to evil. Manthara is the scheming, evil hunchbacked maidservant of King Dashrath's wife Kaikeyi who constantly feeds negativity into the mind of her mistress. She eventually gets Kaikeyi to guilt her husband into banishing her stepson (and Dashrath's heir to the throne) Rama into exile so that her own biological son Bharat can be king. Rama's exile is the turning point in the epic.

Shakuni is a somewhat more nuanced character. Shakuni is the son of Subala, father of Gandhari, the mother of the Kaurava clan and is famously known as the crippled, scheming uncle who cheats in dice and causes the Pandavas and Kauravas to go to war. In one version of the *Mahabharata's* retelling, Subala and all his sons are imprisoned by the Kauravas and threatened with starvation. Each is given a grain of rice to eat, so Subala decides that they will pool their rice and give it to the youngest son, who will live at the cost of all the others, grow up, and avenge them with the Kaurava clan, using dice with magical powers made from the bones of Subala himself. This youngest son was Shakuni, who grew up both orthopedically impaired and scarred by the experience of his family's decimation. As a result of his disability-marked social maladjustment, he determines to bring about the downfall of his own sister's clan by marriage, which he eventually succeeds in doing by taking them down the path of evil.

Both Manthara and Shakuni are frequently used as models for characters in Indian cinema and have appeared in their own right in media productions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The classic Manthara in the televised version of *Ramayana* was played by Lalita Pawar. The casting of Pawar is particularly significant since she herself had strabismus (a squint eye condition), which led to her being frequently typecast as an evil woman in cinema. Pawar's stereotyping in Hindi cinema was so powerful that the squint in particular, rather than disability in particular, came to be seen as an indicator of evil. The Shakuni stereotype has usually been employed for wicked supporting characters, such as the scheming crippled brother-in-law played by Prem Chopra in *Ram Tera Desh* (1984).

A more common personification of the disgruntled disabled man appears in Rajendra Kumar's superhit film *Gora Aur Kala* (1972) in which the actor played twin sons of a royal family named Gora and Kala who are separated at birth. One grows up good (*gora* meaning white), as a prince, while the other becomes bad (*kala* meaning black), as a bandit. The two terms are indicative of a prevalent dichotomy in Indian narratives: the fair skinned



prince is suave, kind, and desirable, whereas the bandit is dark skinned, cruel and, most importantly, has a paralyzed left arm. The grouping of negative characteristics is particularly striking: skin color, looks, and disability come together to make one brother unmistakably evil. The film was extremely successful and was eventually remade in Tamil as *Nerum Nerupum* (1971) starring M.G. Ramachandran. Similarly in the film *Vaali* (1999), Ajith Kumar plays twin brothers, one of whom is deaf. The deaf brother, Deva, is an evil genius of sorts modeled on the "supercrip" personality, with extraordinary lip reading powers. He is however perennially jealous of his speaking twin, Shiva, and constantly schemes against him. Eventually, when the evil twin dies, his soul expresses the sadness of never being able to speak of his feelings towards his brother. The film was remade in Kannada as *Vaali* (1999) and was very successful in both releases.

Both the Kala and Deva characters are fundamentally maladjusted. This theme of maladjustment is remarkably common with the characterization of maladjustment ranging from disgruntled evil to caricatured comic with a full spectrum of poignant or pitiable in the middle. The key to this representation of maladjustment is the mismatch between disability and the required embodiment of a standard hero. Because of the cultural perception of this mismatch, there are at this writing only a handful of films in all of Indian cinema in which the lead protagonist is permanently disabled and stays that way through a film. Even in these unique narratives, the sense of maladjustment remains central to the characterization, reflecting the disconnect in cinema between the figure of the hero and the presence of disability.

Filmmaker Sanjay Bhansali's three films — *Khamoshi: The Musical* (1996), in which the protagonists are deaf-mute, *Black* (2005), in which one protagonist has Alzheimer's and another is deaf-blind and mute, and *Guzaarish* (2010), in which the protagonist has quadriplegia — are particularly salient and complex examples of this dynamic. Not commenting on Bhansali's own personal perceptions of disability or reasons for picking scripts that feature it repeatedly, the consistently alternating narrative of pith and fortitude in his films strongly reinforces an othering view of disability in India.

*Khamoshi* features Nana Patekar and Seema Biswas as a deaf-mute couple who bravely face a number of difficulties in raising their children (one of whom dies). The film uses some rudimentary Indian Sign Language (ISL), but even though it uses more sign per se than *Koshish* (1972), the portrayal of deafness as deficit is often disquieting. The central theme of the film is the importance of music in the lives of two of the four characters: the hearing mother (Himani Shivpuri) and the hearing daughter (Manisha Koirala) of Nana Patekar. Through most of the film, Patekar and Biswas claim to "hate music" which itself is disappointing to their daughter who wants to be a musician. The film frequently turns to the value of rhythm and notes in the lives of Helen and Koirala who love dancing and singing, yet both are required to sacrifice their love of music for the deaf couple through a series of situations. This comes to a climax when Koirala starts screaming inside their home to make a point about this family dynamic to her suitor who wants to encourage her to have a career in music. She says in frustration, "Scream and shout, there is nobody who can hear you here."

Perhaps the most unsettling facet of the film is its emphasis on exaggerated situations in which the characters are insulted for their disability. At the start of the film Patekar is told "You have no option but to beg. I pitied you because you were deaf, but you cannot handle any job." When he does have a job as a salesman, he is dehumanized by its logistics. He takes his daughter along door-to-door as an interlocutor in scenes that reverse the role

between adult and child, thus placing more agency in the child who rattles off the sales-pitch and reducing the father to the menial carrier of goods. Later in the film, Patekar burns a hand and a doctor tells his employer, "Why do you keep such disabled people at work. Because of his not being able to hear, any mishap can take place," following which he is promptly fired. While exclusion from the workplace is central to the lived experience of disability in India, the use of melodramatic cruelty in films caricaturizes its economic reality and turns the individual into a recipient of charity by focusing pointedly on an inability to perform one kind of task or another and highlighting the economic burden disabled parents (assumedly) are on their children.

The choice of Nana Patekar in the lead role in *Khamoshi* is interesting because he had already come to be stereotyped as an actor who played maladjusted, usually unhinged characters. In the film, Patekar is frequently volatile and histrionic in difficult situations, reinforcing the idea that deafness is not compatible with social living. Besides the repeated references to his incompetence at work, the deaf couple are generally awkward whenever they are around hearing people, complicating situations such as their daughter's marriage planning by behaving oddly in front of the in-laws. When Patekar dismisses a suitor for his daughter, the man eventually protests, "Okay go ahead, keep your daughter in 'your world.'" Patekar then proceeds to violently throw his daughter out of their home when she finally desires marriage, to which she responds, "I was never a child, only a voice for you [...] I have supported you all your life, given you support and help, now it is your turn." Through most of the film, the relation of dependence flows from the daughter to her parents, a striking inversion of social norms.

The film climaxes with Patekar making a poignant speech in which he apologizes for how difficult his daughter's life has been because of having deaf-mute parents and acknowledges how helpful she has been in their own lives, finally ending his speech with how grateful he is to his son-in-law for giving his daughter a much better life than he himself could have given her. The film ends with Koirala lying in a coma while her father dances in the hospital room hoping this will revive her.

The portrayal of a character with a disability either voluntarily or through association behaving in a manner appropriate for a child helps not just confirm their maladjustment, but their pitiful dependence on the socially mainstream figures in the film. This pattern appears in several different variations. One of the most common ways it is achieved is by having a disabled character (especially a blind one) fooled by another (sighted) character into believing some alternate state of affairs. Such "misleading" can be caricaturist, such as in *Kakakuyil* (2001), remade as *London* (2005) in Tamil and *Golmaal* (2006) in Hindi, in which a crew of crooked protagonists trying to fool a blind old couple through fake identities. Or else it appears in films featuring the "for the best of the already burdened blind person" theme, such as *Zakhmon ka Hisaab* (1993) in which a blind mother is made to believe that her husband is alive and well though he is dead. Likewise, there is the "disabled deserve a break" theme of *Imaan Dharam* (1977) in which the two protagonists (Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor) want their blind neighbor (Aparna Sen) to be happy. So they pretend that her application to sing at a large contest has been approved and take her to an empty rented auditorium where they pretend there is a massive audience in attendance to whom she tearfully sings, "I wish I could see all my audience members." She is portrayed as a particularly pathetic character, frequently telling her suitor to go chase after the light elsewhere instead of the darkness in her life.

Physical disability as a source of social maladjustment is fairly common in supporting

character roles where the exploitation of the disabled character adds some spice to the film without having any real bearing on the plot. These include the occasional sidekick, such as the cynical disabled farmer Malang (Pran) from *Upkaar* (1967) who sings songs about the evil in the world around; the dancing army veteran with an amputated foot Balbir Singh (Utpal Dutt) from *Imaan Dharam* (1977); the crippled gymnast Jasjit (Pran) from *Don* (1978) who ends the film performing a tightrope escape between two buildings holding two children and a walking stick; and the singing, skateboard-riding street beggar/informant Abdul (Mazhar Khan) from *Shaan* (1982). In most of these films the disabled character acts as a minor and vulnerable player, and often ends up as an extension of the hero's patriarchy by being situated among the broad range of people who share a patron-client relationship with the hero, including the children, women, and the sick. A great example of this pattern is the film *Kalicharan* (1978) in which the hero (Shatrughan Sinha) has to face a socially maladjusted street fighter (Danny Denzongpa) in hand-to-hand combat. Only when the duelists are face to face does the hero realize that the fighter has only one leg. In line with his heroic image, he ties one foot to offer his opponent a "fair fight" and the two men engage in a stick-fight on one leg each. Through much of the remaining film the fighter turns over to the good side, moved by the generosity of his opponent who adopted a disability to fight him.

Perhaps the strangest use of disability as maladjustment in Indian cinema is that of the disability fake. In *Punjabi House* (1998), remade in Hindi as *Chup Chup Ke* (2006), the hero pretends to be mute for financial benefit. In the Tamil film *Sollamale* (1998), remade in Hindi as *Pyaar Diwana Hota Hai* (2002), the hero pretends to be mute to win over a woman, but on being discovered as not being disabled, cuts off his tongue to stay true to his disability. Pretending to be blind for some form of benefit has historically been frequently employed. Perhaps one of the earliest films to do this was Mohan Bhavnani's *Prem Nagar* (1940) in which the hero goes blind but upon regaining his sight continues to pretend to be blind in order to perceive people's true attitudes towards him. Similarly, the combination of charity with disability fraud has been a convenient means of depicting disability, as with the street beggar who feigns blindness in *Baat Ek Raat Ki* (1962), or films in which feigning blindness is a means for the hero to appear harmless while plotting some form of revenge, as in *Parvarish* (1977), *Vaada* (2005) or *Chess* (2006). There are also a host of films in which pretending to be blind is a ploy used by men to appeal to the sympathy and thereafter love of women. These include *Johar Mehmood in Hong Kong* (1971), *Poikkal Kuthirai* (1983), *Dil* (1990), *Badshah* (1999), *Kandaen* (2010), and *Rascals* (2011).

Finally, there is the disturbing trend of films where disability as social maladjustment is integral to the comedy. The success of this theme is evidenced by its repeated use across languages, perhaps among the most common of which is the use of multiple disabilities as part of a comedy-of-errors. Examples include the Hindi film *Hum Hai Kamaal Ke* (1993) a remake of *See no Evil Hear no Evil* (1989) featuring Kader Khan as deaf and Anupam Kher as blind, which was again remade in Tamil as *Andipatti Arasampatti* (2002) with Mansur Ali Khan and Pandiyarajan, and yet again in Hindi as *Pyare Mohan* (2006). Similar themes are used in the Tamil films *Ennavale* (2000), *123* (2002), and *Tom, Dick, and Harry* (2006), in which the interactions between blind, deaf and mute characters are used for comic intent. In *Mujhse Shaadi Karoge* (2004) the entire gamut of disability is rolled into a single character, Duggal (Kader Khan), who has a disease that gives him a new disability each day of the week. He has a sign outside the door of his home that indicates the disability of the day. In the film he is blind, mute, deaf, and cognitively impaired.

The underlying premise of disability as maladjustment across all of these films is that the disabled character cannot be viewed with the same lens as the rest of the characters; thus whether it is the villainy of the Shakuni type figure, the melodramatic pathos of the deaf couple and their longsuffering hearing relatives in *Khamoshi*, or the celebrated sidekickery of the Jasjits or Abduls, the central idea is that the maladjusted are fundamentally not reasonable, regular folks. In each of these cases that we discuss as maladjustment, the condition of being disabled is caricaturized to be more than the sensory or functional impact of the impairment itself. Disability results in the character being relegated to an object of righteous scorn, derision, pity, or comedy. In short, the state of disability necessitates a reaction of some kind from the other 'normal' characters, and in turn from the audience itself.

### *The New Disabled*

*I suggested to the director that my role be turned into that of a blind man just [...] I wanted to challenge myself as an actor. I felt that the man has a lot to say but I did not want it to look preachy [...] We are not showing him as a fakir, he is a modern man, so beyond a certain point it would have been very boring with this man continuously talking about life and how it should be. The thought of him being blind turned the film upside down but it made the film's message deeper [...] Playing him as a blind man was very exciting for me.*

— Anupam Kher on his role in the 2012 film  
*Chhodo Kal Ki Baatein* (Express)

*I interacted with a lot of paraplegic patients before taking up the film. Before that I used to be irritable and edgy, but they taught me to live. My character of a paraplegic touched my heart.*

— Hrithik Roshan on his 2010 role in  
*Guzaarish* (Dabholkar)

*This is a good beginning, in time as we evolve as a society, it will become easier to see reason in the concept of [passive] euthanasia as a boon for those who are suffering to a degree, which you and I cannot even imagine.*

— Hrithik Roshan on the 2011 Indian Supreme Court  
verdict on passive euthanasia (Times)

Anupam Kher's comments on his role in the 2012 film *Chhodo Kal* reflect an unusual period of transition in the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema. On one hand, he seems to fetishize playing a character with vision impairment as a test of his abilities as an actor and to endorse the assumption that disability produces or legitimizes wisdom in the vein of the blind seer character of Western culture. On the other hand, by at least publicly reflecting on the experience of playing a disabled character, Kher opens the door for discussion. Similarly, Hrithik Roshan's interview in the *Times of India* on his experience of portraying a paraplegic's legal case for euthanasia in Sanjay Bhansali's *Guzaarish* (2010), based loosely on *Mar Adentro* (*The Sea Inside*, 2004), reinforces assumptions by extolling disability for the life lessons it offers the nondisabled. Yet it also marks a moment of public discussion about disability with Roshan's subsequent comments on the Indian Supreme Court decision in favor of passive euthanasia for those in a persistent vegetative state (PVS). Kher's and Roshan's statements are examples of the increasingly common phenomena of prominent Indian leading actors reflecting on disability and its portrayal

in the media, but they also betray the extent to which the idea of a disabled person as a standard participant in social or economic circles is still so alien in India, and how deeply ingrained is the need to view disability through a lens of pity or heroism as part of our national discourse.

While the portrayal of disability in film in the period leading up to the early 2000s was offensively caricaturist, a new wave of cinema is changing the portrayal of disability on screen. There are two aspects to this new movement. First, a small subsection of popular films have narratives that reduce blatant denigration, although the sentimentalizing of disability is still deeply prevalent and very effectively sold to the market. A second related factor is that disability itself has become a fairly valuable avenue for actors to emphasize their talent, similar to the way in which playing a disabled character became a fairly strong indicator of Academy Award success in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The sheer list of awards that have gone to the actors playing a disabled character since the 2000s in the Filmfare and Filmfare South best actor and actress awards speaks to this: Amitabh Bachchan for *Black* (2006) and *Paa* (2009), including the National Award, Vikram for *Kasi* (2001) and *Pithamagan* (2003), including the National Award, Surya for *Perazhagan* (2004), Mohanlal for *Thanmatra* (2005), and Shah Rukh Khan for *My Name is Khan* (2010). Actresses included Rani Mukherji for *Black*, Kajol for *Fanaa* (2007), and Pooja for *Naan Kadavul* (2009).

Casting lead actors as disabled characters has precedent in a few films that, despite falling to stereotypes, nonetheless set the stage for portraying people with disabilities as regular protagonists, in relationships with mainstream partners. Sai Paranjpe's *Sparsh* (1980) for the most part remains unparalleled in this regard. In the film Nasseruddin Shah plays a blind school principal who has a relationship with one of the volunteers at the school. The film does not sentimentalize the relationship. Instead, it highlights social expectations and assumptions about pity and dependence, and the role these play in coloring relationships between disabled and nondisabled people. The following year Singeetham Srinivasa Rao made *Raja Paarvai* (1981), which featured Kamal Haasan as a blind violinist living independently. While the film is not sternly unsentimental, it nonetheless emphasizes a perfectly reasonable romantic relationship between disabled and nondisabled mainstream characters. More importantly, the use of Kamal Haasan in the lead role brought to cinema a disabled character who appears to be a "regular" person. The film ends on a bright note with a *Graduate*-like escape where the heroine, played by Madhavi, dumps the groom selected by her family and, in her wedding dress, bolts with Kamal Haasan.

The recent re-emergence of disability in cinema with a hint of an empowered bent has not only brought a range of disabilities to the screen, but has also brought actors with disabilities. Deafness and deaf-blindness are characterized in *Pattiyal* (2006) in which the hero is a deaf assassin; in *Black* the two protagonists are deaf-blind-mute and an Alzheimer's patient respectively; and in *Mozhi* (2007) the lead actress is deaf. In the biggest hit of 2009, *Nadodigal*, Deaf actress Abhinaya appears opposite the lead actor who is hearing. She was instantly popular and went on to score supporting roles in a number of major productions. The same year, blind actor Nasser Khan played a sighted person in the film *Shadow*. The actor Ajay Kumar, who has a growth deficiency and is also known as Guinness Pakru (for being the shortest actor in the world), has typically played comical supporting characters or fantasy characters such as the prince of dwarves in *Adbhuta Dweepam* (2005). He landed a starring role as the father of Jayaram, a major Malayalam star, in the 2010 hit *My Big*

*Father*. The same year, Bala, who earlier dealt with subjects of disability in *Kasi* (2001) and *Pithamagan*, released *Naan Kadavul*, which featured an entire star cast of disabled performers.

However, if we read into the narratives of these films, we find a lot that is unsettling. *My Big Father* has a number of derogatory references to Ajay Kumar's size, repeated poking fun at his character. In a comic scene his own son chases the running father (Kumar) and traps him in a rubbish bin. A hero treating a parent in such a manner would never be shot in any popular film featuring nondisabled actors and characters. *Naan Kadavul* (2009), a disconcertingly provocative film, deals with itinerant performers and beggars, and creates an intentionally freakish visual ethic where the disabled body is an object of voyeurism. In the name of realism, the disabled characters are exploited and sometimes abused on screen, and the chief female protagonist — a blind commuter train singer — is eventually murdered in the name of sympathy by the hero who offers her *moksha* (deliverance). The film was both critically acclaimed and well received in popular circles for its apparent foray into the underbelly of the begging underground. The disturbing nature of its narrative on disability, however, has not found much discussion.

A number of other mainstream films have been released in recent years about a range of conditions, although they rarely get serious discussion in the public sphere. These include Progeria (*Paa* 2009), Alzheimer's (*Thanmatra* 2005; *U Me aur Hum* 2008), dyslexia (*Taare Zameen Par* 2007), autism (*My Name is Khan* 2010), and cerebral palsy (*Angel* 2011; *Vinmeegal* 2012). While some of these films indeed move closer to an inclusive view of disability as part and parcel of society, and several are significant on multiple levels because they discuss concepts that have never been featured before, there are still far too many films at the other end of the spectrum that continue the strong foundations of othering that years of Indian cinema have facilitated. In a country where studies show that even a vast number of the disabled themselves consider the role of a past birth as playing a part in one's disability, things like the public discourse of disability in popular culture are of critical importance.

## Notes

1. In an interesting piece of political trivia, the amputee protagonist sets up an Unamutror Maruvazhvu Nilyam (Disabled Rehabilitation Center). Years later when Karunanidhi, the writer of the film, became chief minister of the state, he set up the likewise named Pichaikarar Maruvazhvu Nilyam (Beggar Rehabilitation Center) in much the same vein as in the film.

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