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Reframing Disability: Representation of Women with Disabilities in Contemporary Indian Media

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Abstract

The portrayal of women with disabilities in Indian media plays a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes, cultural perceptions, and discourses of inclusion. While visibility has increased in recent years, representation often remains constrained by stereotypes that limit disabled women's agency and social participation. This study examines the contemporary landscape of media representation and evaluates its influence on public perception and the empowerment of women with disabilities, with particular emphasis on the significance of positive role models.

The research seeks to identify representational barriers, structural challenges, and socio-cultural factors that restrict the visibility and involvement of disabled women in Indian media. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the study integrates critical review of literature, qualitative and quantitative analysis of media depictions, and interviews with women with disabilities. By combining textual analysis with lived experience, the study highlights the need for inclusive storytelling and participatory representation.

Keywords: Multimedia representation, Portrait figures, Media images, Disability, females, Integration, Stereotypes, Diverse media, Women with disabilities, Women's rights and power, Women disability intersectionality

Introduction and Historical–Industrial Context of Disability Representation in Indian Media : The representation of women with disabilities in Indian media constitutes a critical yet underexamined domain within cultural and media studies, as it significantly shapes public perception, social policy imagination, and collective attitudes toward disability. Media, as Stuart Hall (1997) argues, operates not merely as a reflective apparatus but as a constitutive force that produces and circulates meaning. Through representational practices, it defines what is considered normal, desirable, deviant, or marginal. Within this semiotic framework, women with disabilities occupy a complex intersectional position marked by layered invisibility and symbolic distortion.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality provides an essential analytical lens for examining this positionality. Intersectionality posits that social identities such as gender, race, class, and disability do not function independently but intersect to produce compounded forms of marginalization. For disabled women, discrimination is not additive but simultaneous; they are marginalized both within patriarchal gender structures and within ableist social orders. As Garland-Thomson (2002) observes, disabled women experience a dual erasure—rendered invisible within feminist discourse and marginalized within disability discourse that is often male-centered.

Disability Studies scholarship has long critiqued dominant cultural representations for adhering to the medical model of disability, which conceptualizes disability as an individual pathology requiring cure, rehabilitation, or institutional care (Oliver, 1990). Within this paradigm, disabled bodies are framed as defective, incomplete, and socially burdensome. Media narratives shaped by this model often portray disabled women as passive recipients of care, reinforcing paternalistic attitudes. Shakespeare (2006) notes that such portrayals depoliticize disability by obscuring structural barriers and redirecting attention toward bodily impairment.

In contrast, the social model of disability reframes disability as a socially produced condition emerging from inaccessible environments, discriminatory policies, and exclusionary attitudes. From this perspective, limitation does not reside solely within the body but within the interaction between body and society. However, Indian media has historically been slow to adopt this framework, continuing instead to reproduce medicalized and charitable imagery of disabled women.

Feminist Disability Theory further complicates this discourse by interrogating how gender norms shape the representation of disabled bodies. Garland-Thomson (2002) argues that dominant constructions of femininity are anchored in ideals of beauty, fertility, physical grace, and domestic competence. Disabled women, whose bodies diverge from these normative aesthetic codes, are therefore positioned as unfeminine or sexually undesirable. This desexualization is particularly visible in cinematic narratives where disabled female characters are rarely granted romantic subjectivity or erotic agency.

Media portrayals frequently oscillate between two reductive representational tropes: the tragic victim and the supercrip heroine. The tragic victim evokes pity and moral sympathy, while the supercrip narrative celebrates exceptional achievement “despite”

disability (Schalk, 2016). Although seemingly empowering, the supercrip trope reinforces ableist ideology by framing success as extraordinary rather than structurally facilitated.

Hindi cinema offers instructive case studies. Films such as *Sparsh* (1980) depict visual disability through emotional vulnerability and relational fragility, centering suffering as the narrative core. Similarly, *Black* (2005) constructs disability through adversity and perseverance, privileging affective spectacle over systemic critique. While these films humanize disability to some extent, they remain embedded within what Norden (1994) terms the cinema of isolation, wherein disabled characters are narratively segregated from normative social participation.

A more subversive representational shift is visible in *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), which portrays its protagonist as intellectually assertive, sexually expressive, and emotionally autonomous. By foregrounding desire, self-exploration, and political consciousness, the film aligns with feminist disability frameworks that insist on recognizing disabled women as complete social beings (Kafer, 2013). Such portrayals disrupt the desexualization and infantilization historically imposed on disabled female characters.

Beyond fictional narratives, mediated visibility of real-life figures has also contributed to reshaping public discourse. Athletes and performers such as Deepa Malik and Sudha Chandran challenge entrenched assumptions that equate disability with incapacity. Their representation reflects what Sen (1999) conceptualizes as the capability approach, which evaluates human flourishing through access to opportunities rather than bodily conformity.

Importantly, the politics of representation extends beyond visibility to authorship. Historically, disability narratives in Indian media have been produced predominantly by able-bodied creators. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) describe this phenomenon as narrative prosthesis, wherein disability functions as a metaphorical device to advance plot or moral messaging rather than as an authentic lived experience. This authorship imbalance has contributed to stereotypical and paternalistic portrayals of disabled women.

To fully understand contemporary media depictions, it is necessary to situate them within their historical and industrial contexts. Representation is shaped not only by ideology but also by cinematic traditions, production structures, and audience expectations.

Historical Trajectories of Disability Representation

Early Indian cinema frequently employed disability as a symbolic shorthand for suffering, moral testing, or karmic consequence. Influenced by mythological storytelling and theatrical melodrama, bodily impairment was often linked to divine will or ethical retribution (Virdi, 2003). Disabled women were portrayed as virtuous sufferers whose endurance reinforced moral order.

The melodramatic mode of Hindi cinema played a decisive role in consolidating these tropes. Melodrama relies on emotional excess, moral polarization, and bodily spectacle to communicate ethical conflict (Gledhill, 1987). Disability thus became a narrative instrument for intensifying pathos. Female characters with disabilities were often depicted as sacrificial daughters, dependent wives, or tragic lovers whose bodily difference heightened emotional stakes while limiting agency.

Such portrayals align with Norden's (1994) notion of the cinema of isolation, wherein disabled characters exist on the margins of social participation. Their narrative arcs revolve around cure, abandonment, or death, reinforcing the perception that disability lies outside normative life trajectories.

Industrial authorship structures reinforced these patterns. The Indian film industry has historically been dominated by able-bodied male creators, resulting in representational frameworks shaped by external observation rather than lived experience. Adlakha (2007) argues that this authorship gap produces portrayals rooted in paternalism and voyeurism, where disabled bodies are aestheticized but rarely self-articulated.

Post-Independence Indian cinema saw the emergence of social realist storytelling addressing poverty, caste, and labor inequality. While this movement broadened cinematic engagement with marginalization, disability representation remained limited. Disabled women were rarely central protagonists; instead, they appeared as narrative adjuncts reinforcing moral lessons. Ghai (2015) notes that disability in Indian public discourse during this period was framed largely within charity and welfare paradigms rather than rights-based frameworks. This ideological positioning translated into media portrayals that emphasized care and sympathy rather than empowerment and autonomy.

Economic liberalization in the 1990s transformed Indian media industries through globalization, satellite television, and multiplex exhibition cultures (Athique, 2012). Exposure to international disability rights movements and global cinema introduced new representational possibilities.

Television serials began incorporating disabled characters within domestic narratives. However, these portrayals often reproduced dependency frameworks. Female characters with disabilities were framed through marriage anxieties, family burdens, or inspirational suffering (Dwyer, 2014). Such narratives reinforced the cultural linkage between femininity and bodily "wholeness." Alternative media spaces—particularly documentary cinema—played a crucial role in reframing disability discourse. Nonfiction storytelling foregrounded lived experience, accessibility barriers, and activism. Ghosh (2016) observes that documentary films helped shift disability representation from charity to citizenship, emphasizing rights, participation, and dignity.

The rise of digital streaming platforms has further diversified representational space. OTT media disrupts commercial formula constraints, enabling character-driven storytelling and marginalized subjectivities (Lobato, 2019). This shift has allowed for more layered depictions of disabled women encompassing sexuality, ambition, and political consciousness. Yet industrial inequities persist. Structural barriers continue to

limit participation of disabled professionals in media production. Shakespeare (2014) emphasizes that authentic representation requires not only inclusive narratives but inclusive authorship.

The historical trajectory of disability representation in Indian media thus reveals a movement from mythological moralization to melodramatic pity, from social realism to partial empowerment, and from invisibility to conditional visibility. However, this evolution remains incomplete, shaped by industrial hierarchies, cultural ableism, and commercial imperatives. Understanding this trajectory is essential for evaluating contemporary portrayals of women with disabilities, which continue to oscillate between progressive inclusion and residual stereotyping.

Contemporary Media Landscape, Representation Politics, Role Models, Impact, and Media Responsibility

The contemporary Indian media landscape reveals a transitional moment in the representation of women with disabilities—marked simultaneously by progressive inclusion and the persistence of deeply embedded ableist frameworks. While disabled women are increasingly visible across cinema, television, advertising, and digital platforms, the ideological framing of that visibility remains contested. Representation has moved from near erasure toward conditional presence; however, visibility does not automatically translate into empowerment. As Gill (2007) argues within feminist media studies, representation must be evaluated not only by frequency but by narrative positioning, authorship, and symbolic power.

Mainstream Hindi cinema provides a revealing site for examining this transition. Films such as *Black* (2005) foreground the intellectual and emotional development of a disabled female protagonist, marking a shift away from purely ornamental or peripheral roles. The narrative invests in her subjectivity, education, and relational world, thereby complicating earlier stereotypes that framed disabled women as socially dependent. Yet, even within this progressive frame, the storytelling relies heavily on adversity, suffering, and pedagogical redemption, reinforcing what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) identify as narrative prosthesis—the use of disability as a structural device to generate moral and emotional depth.

Similarly, earlier films such as *Sparsh* (1980) portray disability through emotional realism and relational fragility, inviting empathy but remaining anchored in affective spectacle. Such representations align with Norden's (1994) observation that disability cinema often situates impaired bodies within narratives of isolation rather than integration.

A more radical representational departure emerges in *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). The film disrupts desexualized portrayals by presenting its protagonist as intellectually assertive, politically aware, and sexually expressive. By foregrounding bisexual desire, self-exploration, and independence, the narrative aligns with Kafer's (2013) feminist crip theory, which calls for recognition of disabled individuals as agents of pleasure,

politics, and identity formation. The film thus challenges both patriarchal and ableist assumptions surrounding disabled femininity.

Beyond cinema, television serials have gradually incorporated disabled female characters within domestic and professional settings. However, these portrayals often remain mediated by matrimonial anxieties, familial sacrifice, or moral inspiration arcs. Dwyer (2014) notes that Indian television frequently situates female worth within marriageability and caregiving capacity, thereby rendering disabled women symbolically “incomplete” within patriarchal family structures.

Advertising media has also begun cautiously integrating disability imagery, often in the context of corporate social responsibility campaigns. While such representation signals growing inclusivity, it risks commodifying disability as a marketing virtue signal rather than advancing structural inclusion (Mehrotra, 2013).

A significant transformation has emerged through digital and social media platforms. Unlike traditional media, digital spaces enable disabled women to produce, curate, and circulate their own narratives. Ellis and Kent (2011) argue that new media technologies facilitate participatory visibility, allowing marginalized communities to bypass institutional gatekeeping. Social media influencers, activists, and performers with disabilities use these platforms to articulate lived experience, critique accessibility barriers, and mobilize advocacy networks.

This shift toward self-representation resonates with Fraser’s (1990) concept of counter-publics, wherein marginalized groups construct alternative discursive spaces. Disabled women’s digital storytelling destabilizes dominant medicalized narratives by foregrounding everyday life, humor, sexuality, and professional ambition.

Despite these advances, stereotypical framing persists across mainstream media. Disabled female characters continue to be disproportionately depicted through pity, dependency, or inspirational exceptionalism. Schalk (2016) critiques this reliance on the supercrip trope, wherein disabled success is framed as extraordinary perseverance rather than structural accommodation. Such narratives place the burden of overcoming on individuals rather than addressing systemic exclusion.

Tokenistic inclusion also remains prevalent. Disabled women appear sporadically and often occupy secondary roles lacking narrative depth. This aligns with Tuchman’s (1978) concept of symbolic annihilation, wherein marginalized groups are either omitted or trivialized, reinforcing social invisibility.

Commercial imperatives further complicate representation. Disability is sometimes instrumentalized as emotional spectacle to enhance dramatic appeal. Norden (1994) observes that cinematic disability frequently operates as a visual metaphor for moral testing or emotional redemption, reducing lived experience to narrative utility.

Representation as Counter-Stereotypical Discourse

Representation possesses transformative ideological potential. Hall (1997) emphasizes that meaning is constructed through cultural imagery; altering representation can therefore reshape social knowledge. When media portrays disabled women as activists, professionals, and leaders, it destabilizes entrenched myths of dependency.

Media coverage of disability rights advocates such as Malini Chib exemplifies this shift. Her public discourse foregrounds political agency, accessibility rights, and self-definition, challenging paternalistic frameworks that position disabled women as passive recipients of care. Such portrayals function as counter-stereotypical narratives that replace deficit models with capability frameworks.

Documentary storytelling has been particularly influential in this regard. Nonfiction films highlighting disabled women in leadership, education, and governance roles reframe disability as a dimension of social diversity rather than individual tragedy (Ghosh, 2016). These narratives align with feminist disability theory's project of reclaiming disabled embodiment as socially and politically meaningful (Garland-Thomson, 2002).

Role Models and Aspirational Visibility

Media-constructed role models play a crucial role in shaping collective imagination. For marginalized communities, such figures function not merely as celebrities but as validation of possibility. The mediated visibility of women with disabilities in leadership, sports, arts, and entrepreneurship expands what Appadurai (1996) calls the capacity to aspire—the culturally informed ability to envision alternative futures.

Malini Chib's advocacy and authorship exemplify the politics of self-narrativization, wherein disabled individuals reclaim storytelling authority from medical and charitable discourses. By articulating lived experience, she reframes disability from limitation to perspective.

Similarly, public figures such as Deepa Malik and Sudha Chandran disrupt entrenched associations between disability and incapacity. Their achievements in sports and performing arts resonate with Sen's (1999) capability approach, which evaluates human flourishing through access to opportunities rather than bodily conformity.

Television and cinematic portrayals of professionally successful disabled women further contribute to stigma reduction. Repeated exposure to empowered imagery fosters what Bogart (2014) identifies as identity affirmation, reinforcing self-efficacy among disabled viewers while reshaping societal perception.

Impact of Representation

The impact of disability representation operates across psychological, cultural, and structural domains. Positive portrayals influence identity formation, social aspiration, and public attitudes.

At the individual level, empowering representation counters internalized ableism. Disabled viewers who encounter multidimensional characters experience enhanced self-concept and social confidence (Bogart, 2014). Representation thus functions as a site of psychological validation.

At the communal level, public figures with disabilities catalyze aspirational mobilization. Media coverage of achievements in sports, mountaineering, education, and activism demonstrates that structural barriers—not bodily impairments—limit participation. Such narratives embody the politics of possibility central to disability rights discourse (Shakespeare, 2014).

At the societal level, cultivation theory suggests that repeated mediated exposure reshapes audience perception over time (Gerbner, 1998). When disabled women are portrayed as professionals, leaders, and decision-makers, disability becomes normalized rather than exceptional.

Media Ethics, Policy, and Responsibility

The politics of representation is inseparable from questions of media ethics and institutional accountability. Inclusive portrayal requires structural transformation across production, casting, and storytelling practices.

India's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities marked a policy commitment to accessibility and dignity. However, media implementation remains inconsistent (Mehrotra, 2013). Disabled actors are underrepresented, accessibility infrastructure within production spaces is limited, and consultation with disability communities is sporadic.

Scholars argue that authentic representation necessitates participatory authorship—disabled individuals must be involved not only as subjects but as creators (Shakespeare, 2014). Inclusive casting, accessible sets, and disability sensitivity training are essential to ethical media practice.

Streaming platforms offer new possibilities in this regard. Their niche audience models enable risk-taking narratives that foreground marginalized subjectivities (Lobato, 2019). However, without structural inclusion behind the camera, representational authenticity remains partial.

Conclusion

The representation of women with disabilities in Indian media remains a contested and evolving terrain shaped by intersecting ideological, industrial, and cultural forces. While earlier portrayals were dominated by pity, charity, and moral inspiration, contemporary narratives indicate gradual movement toward agency-centered frameworks.

Yet ableist tropes—tragic victimhood, supercrip exceptionalism, symbolic marginalization, and narrative prosthesis—persist. Inclusion remains conditional rather than systemic. Authentic transformation requires not only narrative change but structural participation, policy enforcement, and ethical accountability.

An intersectional media praxis must therefore recognize disabled women as multidimensional subjects—capable of desire, leadership, creativity, and dissent. It must enable self-representation, diversify authorship, and integrate disability into mainstream storytelling without sensationalism.

Such representational transformation holds profound implications. It can reshape public consciousness, dismantle stigma, influence policy imagination, and empower women with disabilities to inhabit social space with dignity and autonomy.

Future research must extend this inquiry by examining audience reception, legislative impact, and longitudinal representational shifts across media platforms. Only through sustained scholarly and institutional engagement can media evolve into a genuinely inclusive cultural sphere.

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