

From Pity to Collective Agency: Reframing Disability in Indian Cinema (2010–2025) with Special Reference to *Sitaare Zameen Par*

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes disability representation in Indian cinema from 2010 to 2025, foregrounding two primary texts—*Sitaare Zameen Par* and *Hichki*—and situating them alongside *Margarita with a Straw*, *My Name Is Khan*, and *Guzaarish* to trace evolving tropes, aesthetics, and politics across the period. Informed by Disability Studies, Narrative Theory, and Cultural Studies, the research assesses how these films break away from stereotypical depictions—disabled characters were previously objects of pity, moral lessons, or narrative burdens—toward more dignified and inclusive representations. The chosen films place at centre stage disabled characters' autonomy, emotional depth, and intersectional identities, breaking away from ableist and savior-oriented tropes. Specifically, *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025)

initiates disability representation by foregrounding a team of intellectually disabled basketball players as protagonists, shifting the narrative from pity to empowerment and emphasizing social integration over individual correction. The critique reflects upon how evolving societal perspectives, influenced by legal provisions like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and educational reforms, have gradually shaped cinematic sensitivities. It also questions the intersectionality of disability with education, class, and gender—the variables that constitute the lived experience and film representation of disabled people. The paper concludes that Indian cinema has started to redefine disability as a site of agency, resistance, and shared humanity, even as it continues to grapple with what remains of residual tropes.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Indian Cinema, *Sitaare Zameen Par*, Representation, Neurodiversity, Intersectionality, Narrative Agency, Inclusive Education, Cultural Studies, Bollywood

1. Introduction

Film, as both cultural mirror and location of ideological construction, exercises a determining influence over public thinking and attitudes towards marginalized identities. In India, where film most notably mainstream Hindi film has unparalleled emotional and cultural access, its representations of disabled people have profound social consequences (Deb 166–77). Traditionally, disability has been depicted through reductionist perspectives either as a pity object, narrative handicap, or moral absolute broadly marginalizing the richness of actual disabled existence. They tended to reinforce prejudice rather than criticize. Between 2010 and 2025, though, there has been a clear trend toward a different cinematic approach to disability. Movies have begun to invert stereotypical tropes and bring characters with disabilities into the foreground as multi-dimensional characters who are able to exercise autonomy and agency in their worlds (Gupta and Anand 89–96).

It is this phase that signifies a major shift brought about by different factors: the greater visibility of disability rights movements, the effects of state legislation such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and an emerging need for inclusive narration. *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Hichki* (2018), and *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) stand as important benchmarks in this transformative shift. These movies not only question the tradition of ableist stories but also challenge the paternalism and moral superiority characteristically placed by "savior" figures. *Sitaare Zameen Par*, in contrast to its oft-confused predecessor *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), is especially noteworthy for portraying various types of intellectual and developmental disabilities through the casting of neurodivergent leads. In contrast to having a triumphant single protagonist, the movie forms a group narrative of belongingness, identity, and resistance to social invisibilization (Biswal 723–36).

This study grounds its analysis in Disability Studies (Garland-Thomson; Shakespeare), Narrative Theory (Bal; Genette), Representation Theory (Hall; Rojek), and Cultural/Postcolonial Studies (Murthy), in order to examine how these chosen filmic texts represent, subvert, or perpetuate hegemonic discourse on disability. The argument steps beyond a positive/negative binarism, in favour of examining how disability is inscribed within intersecting matrices of gender, class, education, and identity. For example, *Margarita With a Straw* portrays Laila, a young woman with cerebral palsy, whose journey of exploring her bisexual identity while navigating physical limitations provokes key questions about autonomy, embodiment, and belonging. Likewise, *Hichki* complicates normative conceptualizations of professional competence and social success in the figure of a female teacher with Tourette Syndrome, opening up wider questions about class and access to education (Tekyeh, Molaei, and Falarti 743–76).

The landscape of disability representation in Indian cinema has undergone a meaningful, albeit gradual, transformation over the past two decades. From stereotypical

portrayals steeped in pity, tragedy, or caricature, there has emerged a more thoughtful, inclusive cinematic imagination that strives to present persons with disabilities as complex, autonomous, and socially embedded individuals. *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) marks a pivotal moment in this evolving representational trajectory. Different from the earlier *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), which centered on the savior-student relationship and framed dyslexia through the redemptive eye of a teacher, *Sitaare Zameen Par* pioneers a collective narrative by portraying a basketball team composed of individuals with varied intellectual and developmental disabilities. The film depicts conditions such as phobias, cognitive delays, and social communication challenges—for instance, Guddu’s overwhelming fear of bathing and other players’ difficulties with focus and coordination. By showing how these struggles intersect with moments of triumph on and off the court, the film resists the lone-hero trope and instead celebrates a shared journey of resilience, interdependence, and social integration. It goes from rescue to recognition, from sympathy to solidarity (Srivastava 1–13).

The strongest aspect of *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) lies in its authentic casting of actors with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which not only challenges Bollywood’s normative aesthetic but also brings lived realities to the forefront. The film carefully avoids reducing these children to passive recipients of care; instead, they are portrayed as active agents negotiating their own lives and struggles. For example, Gulshan’s dialogue— “*sab apne apne normal pe tike bethe hein. Tumhara normal tumhara, unka normal unka*” (Everyone remains confined within their own idea of what is ‘normal.’ Your normal is yours, and theirs is theirs) — foregrounds the idea of multiple normalities, disrupting the homogenizing standards of ability and success in mainstream culture. Similarly, moments such as Guddu’s victory over his deep-seated fear of bathing or the team’s determination to continue despite repeated setbacks mark crucial narrative shifts that celebrate resilience and collective strength. The school and training ground are not backdrops for pity but spaces where difference is honoured

and inclusion is practiced, thereby illustrating the philosophical transformation from integration to inclusion. This grounded realism, reinforced by empathetic direction and context-specific dialogue, positions *Sitaare Zameen Par* as a landmark in Indian disability cinema (Shailendrabhai 42–53).

The representational tactics employed in the film, from focalisation through the voices of the children, lack of melodramatic overstatement, and reduction of the able-bodied saviour trope, permit a more balanced narrative architecture. Rather than the able-bodied protagonist changing the lives of disabled pupils, the film permits the children themselves to become protagonists of their own narratives. Their hopes, resentments, social relations, and artistic abilities are depicted with dignity and sensitivity. This turn deconstructs the hegemonic viewing that has dominated disability definition in Indian cinema and presents a fresh language of filmmaking based on empathy, rather than spectacle (Chetan and Ranganathan 301–08).

Significantly, *Sitaare Zameen Par* resonates closely with current disability rights thinking in India, particularly in its critique of the social and institutional barriers that impede inclusion. Instead of depending on miraculous cures or pity-driven resolutions, the film stresses systemic transformation and social consciousness. This is evident in Gulshan's powerful realization when he asserts: "*Sab apne apne normal pe tike bethe hein. Tumhara normal tumhara, unka normal unka,*" reframing disability not as deviation but as difference worthy of respect. Similarly, the dialogue "*Joh baaki log se alag hote hai, unke liye kisi na kisi ko ladna padta hai*" (Those who are different from others—someone, somewhere, has to fight for them.) positions disability within a collective struggle for dignity and rights, reflecting the advocacy language of disability justice movements in India. Another striking moment occurs when Gulshan confronts entrenched patriarchal attitudes with the remark: "*Mardon aur husbands ki height kitni bhi ho ... unka ego sau foot ka hai,*" (No matter how tall men or husbands are, their ego is a hundred feet tall.) extending the critique of ableism into intersections with gender and

power. These scenes highlight how barriers are social rather than individual, whether in the form of stigma, family prejudice, or structural exclusion. Even Guddu's overcoming of his fear of bathing is not framed as a miraculous 'cure' but as the dismantling of shame imposed by social neglect. In its resolution—where the team celebrates their growth despite losing the final match—the film refuses to locate value in victory alone, instead affirming community, resilience, and recognition. Through such moments, *Sitaare Zameen Par* demonstrates how cinema can transcend simple representation to become an instrument of advocacy and cultural change, situating disability as one thread in the rich tapestry of human diversity (Basumatary 63–70).

This research also considers the influence of institutional intervention governmental policy, inclusive education legislation, and public sensitisation campaigns in shaping cinematic imagination. While disability remains somewhat misrepresented or romanticised in some films, others are increasingly keen to prioritize realistic and socially engaged storytelling. This transformation is not merely a thematic one, but a representational tendency that betrays a greater cultural re-envisioning of disability from one of deficiency to one of potential. By examining the formal, narrative, and ideological aspects of disability in contemporary Indian cinema, this paper hopes to contribute to an extended debate on ethical representation, cultural citizenship, and the media's politics of visibility.

2. Review of Literature

The scholarship that currently exists around disability within Indian cinema has increasingly become critical of how mainstream films construct public opinion about intellectual and physical difference. Paromita Deb writes on the changing artistic strategies in representing intellectually disabled persons in Bollywood, claiming that films have transcended stereotypical representations and gone towards more empathetic, humanizing narratives (Deb 166–77). Gupta and Anand discuss the transition away from traditional

representation towards "re-presentation" of disability in literature and film, promoting counter-narratives to hegemonic norms and promoting inclusivity (Gupta and Anand 89–96). Santosh Kumar Biswal concentrates on mainstream Odia films, examining how disability is constructed through excess and deficiency, which serves to reinforce cultural conceptions of the "other" and tends to isolate disabled protagonists (Biswal 723–36). In a similar vein, Tekyeh, Molaei, and Falarti discuss the representation of women with disabilities in Bollywood after 1970 and how gender and disability intersect to create a multi-faceted form of marginalization (Tekyeh et al. 743–76). Combined, these studies offer a critical framework through which the current research considers the following Hindi films, especially *Sitaare Zameen Par*, to better comprehend the larger representational trends and directions of Indian film discourse on disability.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive method based on literary and cinematic analysis to examine the representation of disability in some Indian films. Since the research comes under the field of English literature and cultural studies, it is using mainly the instruments of narratology, theory of representation, and the study of disability to deal with visual texts as narratives that construct, support, or subvert cultural notions of disability.

1. Textual and Narrative Analysis

The major methodology consists of close reading and textual analysis of five Indian films *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Guzaarish* (2010), and *Hichki* (2018). The texts are considered not simply as films but as cultural stories that inform and create social understandings of disability (Lipenga 77–85).

Major areas for analysis include:

- Plot structure and narrative focus (e.g., is the disabled character center or margin?)

- Character development and subject positioning (agency, victimhood, heroism, normalcy)
- Dialogues and language used around disability
- Cinematic devices such as mise-en-scène, lighting, sound, and camera angles to highlight or hide disability
- Symbolism and metaphors used to present the disabled body or mind

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on theories of

- a) Disability Studies (Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Tom Shakespeare):** This makes us recognize the distinction between the medical model (disability as a personal issue or flaw) and the social model (disability resulting from social barriers). It enables us to identify whether films attribute disability or issues related to disability to the person or the system for the difficulties that disabled characters' face (Garland-Thomson 1557–87).
- b) Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory:** These theories position Indian cinema within the broader cultural and historical context. They explore how films mediate Western/global concepts of disability with Indian cultural perceptions, showing how identities are constructed in a postcolonial, modernizing world (Murthy 197–215).
- c) Representation Theory (Stuart Hall):** This is concerned with meaning-making through image, dialogue, and repetition of stereotypes in movies. It discusses how audiences learn about disability depending on how it is represented and repeated on screen (Rojek 49–62).
- d) Narrative Theory (Mieke Bal, Gérard Genette):** This theory assists us in examining how the stories are narrated who is speaking, from whom, and how time is manipulated. It's beneficial to observe how the viewpoint and structure of the film influence our perception of the disabled character's life (Bal 263–96).

3. Comparative Analysis

A comparative approach is used to trace common patterns and divergences across the selected films, especially in the portrayal of:

- Neurodevelopmental / intellectual disabilities (e.g., the team of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities in *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025); Tourette's in *Hichki*).
- Physical disabilities (*Guzaarish*)
- Developmental and neurodivergent conditions (*Margarita with a Straw*, *My Name is Khan*)

Particular focus is given to *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) as a contemporary and culturally significant film, examining how its basketball-centered storyline foregrounds the lived experiences, interpersonal growth, and collective agency of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Rather than relying on tropes of individual heroism or miraculous cures, the film highlights teamwork, resilience, and social inclusion as central to its narrative arc. By portraying the players not as objects of pity but as active participants in shaping their own destinies, the film reframes disability as a collective human experience and underscores the importance of integration, dignity, and acceptance within broader society. The research considers whether its box office and critical popularity has had an impact on wider representational patterns in Bollywood (Gayathri 28–34).

4. Contextual and Reception Analysis

Where applicable, the research also engages with contextual analysis, considering:

- Media reviews, interviews, and audience response
- Sociocultural discourses around disability in India
- The role of mainstream vs. independent cinema in framing disability

This helps situate the texts within their broader socio-political and cultural context, understanding the impact of representation on public consciousness.

5. Scope and Limitations

Although five exceptional films are the point of focus, the research here does not undertake an exhaustive overview of disability in Indian cinema. Rather, it is a representative account of new and varied representations across gender, class, and types of disability. The focus is still on qualitative richness over quantitative depth.

4. Findings

The analysis of the chosen movies uncovers a multifaceted and dynamic portrayal of disability in Indian cinema, marked by the progressive change from stereotypical and pity-oriented images to more empathetic, nuanced, and agency-granting narratives. Nevertheless, even in progressive representations, some limitations and problematic tropes continue to exist. The findings prove how film texts are sites of both reinforcement and subversion of prevailing cultural narratives of disability (Gibson 14–21).

The changing portrayal of disability in Indian cinema reflects an evolving sensitivity toward the lived realities of people with disabilities, though it continues to grapple with cultural stereotypes and audience expectations. *Sitaare Zameen Par (2025)* marks a significant step in this transformation by focusing on a group of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities who come together through basketball. Rather than depicting disability as an individual burden or as a tool for evoking pity, the film situates it within collective struggle and solidarity. This shift is evident in the dialogue, “*Joh baaki log se alag hote hai, unke liye kisi na kisi ko ladna padta hai,*” (Those who are different from others—someone has to fight for them.) which underscores the necessity of advocacy and resistance against systemic barriers. The children are not presented as passive recipients of charity but as active participants capable of building friendships, competing with dignity, and asserting their place in society.

This departure from the lone savior or “special child” narrative makes the film a culturally significant intervention in how disability is represented.

Moreover, the film connects disability to broader social critiques, weaving in gender and power dynamics alongside issues of inclusion. A striking instance is the line, “*Mardon aur husbands ki height kitni bhi ho ... unka ego sau foot ka hai,*” which, while humorous, critiques patriarchal arrogance that mirrors the rigidity of ableist social structures. These dialogues enrich the narrative, showing that the children’s journey is not confined to personal growth but resonates with wider struggles for dignity and equality. The climactic basketball sequence, where the children demonstrate teamwork and resilience, resists the trope of miraculous triumph by framing their victory not as exceptional genius but as the result of collective effort, discipline, and recognition of their worth. In doing so, *Sitaare Zameen Par* presents disability not as a deviation from the norm but as one thread in the tapestry of human diversity, pushing Indian cinema toward a more nuanced, justice-oriented portrayal of difference.

In relation to other recent Indian films representing disability *Margarita With a Straw* (2014), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Guzaarish* (2010), and *Hichki* (2018), the change becomes more evident. All these movies have a disabled protagonist and try to center the agency and humanity of the character. *Margarita With a Straw* fearlessly ventures into the convergence of disability, sexuality, and identity, introducing a protagonist with cerebral palsy who claims her independence and experiences romantic relationships overturning the stereotypical trope of disabled desexualized subjects (Tekyeh et al. 748). In like manner, *Hichki* features a teacher afflicted with Tourette Syndrome who will not let her difference define her and instead leverages her difference as a pedagogical advantage, although the film at times strays into “supercrip” territory (Biswal 728).

But not all representations have been able to escape flawed frames. *Guzaarish*, although richly artistic, upholds the “better dead than disabled” cliché by focusing on a quadriplegic

man's request for euthanasia. It provokes philosophical concerns regarding autonomy and dignity, but also unwittingly evokes the idea that life with profound disability could be not worth living (Rojek 52). *My Name is Khan* depicts a man with Asperger's Syndrome whose innocence and moral innocence are bound to his disability, evoking a symbolic register more mythic than real (Murthy 203).

What connects these films is their slow progression toward humanized and central characterizations of disabled people, but they vary in tone and scope. While *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) is distinctive for its authentic casting of neurodivergent children and its refusal to rely on reductive stereotypes, the film also reflects Indian cinema's broader struggle to balance between subverting old tropes and inadvertently creating new ones. By centering the lived experiences of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it marks a shift from tokenism towards inclusion, where disability is not merely a backdrop for inspiring others but an identity with its own agency and dignity.

At the same time, the film's emphasis on resilience and collective achievement occasionally risks leaning into the "overcoming disability" narrative, a framework that, though empowering, can still reproduce societal expectations of exceptionalism. This illustrates the paradox within representational practices: while challenging pity-based depictions, *Sitaare Zameen Par* simultaneously navigates the danger of attaching value to disabled lives only through struggle or accomplishment, thereby echoing ongoing tensions in disability discourse (Mishra 4–5). The disabled character in Indian cinema is progressively being accorded voice, narrative privilege, and affective depth but is yet to achieve the complete normalized, non-spectacularized status. As Mieke Bal points out, the focalization in a narrative has the power to play a central role in the elicitation of audience empathy; in *Sitaare Zameen Par*, the perspective is firmly rooted in the experiences of the children themselves rather than authority figures like teachers or parents. This narrative choice allows the audience to access the world

as seen through neurodivergent subjectivities, fostering a more authentic emotional connection and avoiding the savior complex that has traditionally dominated disability portrayals in cinema (Bal 268).

Between 2010 and 2025, there has been a gradual but considerable shift in the cinematic representation of disability in Indian cinema. The earlier representations were in big way dominated by tropes of tragedy, pity, or divine retribution, while recent narratives increasingly center on empathy, agency, and individuality. Movies like *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) created a way for a more humanizing representation of learning disabilities, and by the 2010s, films like *Margarita With a Straw* (2014) and *Hichki* (2018) presented characters with neurological and physical disabilities who challenge traditional victim narratives. They mark a shift away from the medical model of disability where what is sought is to cure or mend the disabled body toward the social model, where disability is placed in the social barriers and prejudices encountered by individuals (Garland-Thomson 1559). Disabled heroes increasingly are no longer passive objects of pity but are presented as pursuing education, sex, and personal aspiration on their own initiative.

Government policies like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and Accessible India (Sugamya Bharat) campaign have contributed significantly to influencing public discourse and promoting more accommodating attitudes. Policies focusing on accessibility, inclusive education, and employment reservations have brought persons with disabilities into the limelight in public life. Whereas the direct impact of government policies on mainstream film is complicated, a more holistic national narrative definitely plays a role in reforming how disability is culturally represented. These transformations resonate subtly within film, which has begun portraying disabled characters in normalized settings such as schools, universities, offices, and families (Murthy 200). The establishment of forums such as the International Film Festival for Persons with Disabilities by the Ministry of Social Justice

and Empowerment has also facilitated sensitive storytelling and prompted producers to tackle the topic in a sincere manner.

Regarding claiming dignity and subverting stereotypes, *Hichki*, *Sitaare Zameen Par*, and *Margarita With a Straw* are compelling cases in point. In *Hichki*, the protagonist Naina, who suffers from Tourette Syndrome and works as a teacher, not only accepts her condition but also employs it as a strength to inspire and transform a poor classroom, thus avoiding the "supercrip" stereotype while nonetheless calling attention to persistence (Rojek 55). The changing portrayal of disability in Indian cinema now signals a growing sensitivity to lived experience, yet it continues to negotiate cultural expectations and cinematic tropes. A prime example of this recent shift is *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025), which centers on a court-ordered basketball coach, Gulshan Arora, and his work with a team of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Rather than presenting disability as an individual defect to be cured, the film foregrounds social inclusion and collective agency: Guddu's struggle and eventual overcoming of a crippling fear of bathing, the team's qualification for the Mumbai tournament, and Gulshan's own growth (overcoming his lift phobia and personal rigidities) all function as instances of mutual transformation rather than miraculous remediation. The film's authentic casting of neurodivergent performers, and moments of explicit reflection—such as the line “*Sab apne apne normal pe tike bethe hein. Tumhara normal tumhara, unka normal unka*”—work together to reframe “normal” as plural and to challenge the spectator's expectations. Importantly, the team's loss in the final is narrated not as failure but as a collective achievement and affirmation of dignity, thereby resisting a victory-as-validation logic and stressing recognition, community, and systemic change over singular heroism.

Comparatively, the representational moves in *Hichki* and *Margarita With a Straw* also offer concrete instances that show how contemporary films negotiate agency and stigma. In *Hichki* (2018) the protagonist Naina's Tourette-like tics are shown on-screen in classroom

settings and later employed as part of her pedagogical style, turning a stigmatized symptom into a resource for learning and for building relationships with underprivileged students—this locates the problem in rigid institutional attitudes rather than in the individual alone. *Margarita With a Straw* (2014) anchors its intervention in Laila's lived experience of cerebral palsy: scenes of her studying abroad, pursuing artistic work, and entering intimate relationships explicitly challenge the desexualized, infantilized framing of disabled bodies and assert sexual and creative autonomy. Together these films show that disability in Indian cinema is increasingly narrated through concrete practices (coaching, teaching, traveling, making art) and moments (ritualized fear-confrontation, classroom management, intimate scenes) that reveal social barriers and possibilities for inclusion — rather than through abstract pity or symbolic martyrdom.

5. Discussion

Indian cinema, between 2010 and 2025, has seen a perceivable change in the representation of disability on screen. The earlier films had represented disabled characters largely within narratives of pity, tragedy, or divine retribution, where disability functioned either as a moral test or as a symbolic trope designed to elicit sympathy from audiences. For instance, *Dosti* (1964) portrays a blind boy and a physically disabled boy whose friendship is constructed primarily through shared suffering, reducing disability to an emblem of pathos. Similarly, *Koshish* (1972) frames the lives of a deaf-mute couple in terms of hardship and sacrifice, foregrounding the struggle for survival rather than agency or joy. Later, in *Sadma* (1983), the female protagonist's memory loss is depicted as tragic innocence that heightens the film's melodrama. In all these cases, disability remains a device to generate audience sympathy rather than an authentic exploration of disabled subjectivity. It is only slowly, though, that this shifted with the emergence of more humanizing and empowering representations, in tune with both international disability rights discourse and India's changing legal and cultural

environment. Significantly, *Margarita With a Straw* (2014), *Hichki* (2018), and *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) depict this shift vividly, each bringing different insights into disability as lived experience rather than cinematic conceit.

In *Sitaare Zameen Par*, the story focuses not on one "inspiring" individual but on a group of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities—including Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, and specific learning difficulties—portrayed by actors with lived experience. By showcasing their teamwork, personal quirks, and resilience within the basketball narrative, the film breaks away from Bollywood's dominant savior trope and instead highlights disability as a collective human experience rather than an isolated condition.

This decision instantly bypasses conventional portrayal by discarding able-bodied imitation, currently frowned upon in Disability Studies as "cripping up" (Garland-Thomson 1563). The narrative occurs in an inclusive classroom environment that resists standardized education and punitive discipline, providing instead a pedagogy based on patience, sensory experience, and emotional connection. The movie represents a radical departure from Indian cinema in its depiction of disability not as an aberration to be overcome but as a difference to be loved. Significantly, emphasis here is not on redemption or cure but on social accommodation, consistent with the social model of disability (Garland-Thomson 1559). In contrast, *Hichki* offers a more personalized story of a woman with Tourette syndrome coping with prejudice both in personal and institutional contexts. Naina's character subverts the "supercrip" character—a special disabled individual who conquers all odds—by not avoiding her condition but incorporating it into her pedagogy. Her achievement as a teacher to disadvantaged students complicates the politics of representation; although she does "succeed" from an ableist perspective, her professionalism and dignity are maintained without erasure of disability (Rojek 55). What is unique about *Hichki* is its refusal to locate disability as a site of limitation to ambition or empathy. Rather, the movie quietly critiques the social and

educational systems that exclude difference, highlighting the overlap of class, gender, and disability.

Margarita *With a Straw* goes one step further in being intimate and intersectional in exploring Laila, a woman with cerebral palsy, who is discovering her bisexuality, exploring her artistic dreams, and figuring out her emotional needs. This representation is revolutionary in its handling of the disabled body as anything but an object of pity, but rather a space of pleasure, desire, and agency. The film takes bold stabs at subjects like masturbation, queer identity, and conflict between mother and daughter—subjects never touched on before in Indian cinema, much less within the realm of disability. Laila's narrative undermines societal expectations as well as conventions of cinema, insisting that disabled people are not desexualized or infantilized subjects but sophisticated human agents. As Bal points out, the application of focalization here is strong—the narrative also maintains a close alignment with Laila's subjective life, depriving the viewer of the luxury of an outside agent's vision or voyeuristic distance (Bal 270). Together, these films help build a larger cinema grammar that looks at disability through a lens of personhood instead of pathology. They reflect larger cultural shifts initiated by legislative and policy changes, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), which broadened the definition of disability and included inclusive education and equal opportunity (Murthy 201). The Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), also, brought about physical and ideological changes towards normalization of disabled presence in public and cultural life. Cinema can't reflect policy directly, but it tends to resonate with and reinforce contemporary social trends. These legal and social changes hence express themselves in the greater frequency of positive, realist portrayals in popular culture.

In particular, these portrayals also highlight the role of intersectionality. In *Sitaare Zameen Par*, the basketball team members face layered challenges—not only their intellectual

and developmental disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome, and learning difficulties, but also the stigma of being dismissed as “incapable” within a competitive sports environment. Their struggle shows how disability intersects with class and social perception, since opportunities for recognition are limited for those outside elite spaces. In *Hichki*, Naina must navigate both Tourette’s syndrome and gendered expectations in a male-dominated workplace, where her legitimacy as a teacher is constantly doubted. *Margarita With a Straw* further complicates the discourse, with Laila’s experience shaped by her class and linguistic privilege, which afford her mobility and self-expression abroad even as she confronts cerebral palsy and her bisexual identity. Together, these films emphasize that disability cannot be viewed in isolation but is shaped by intersecting factors of class, gender, and social access. In *Guzaarish* (2010), Ethan’s position as a once-famous magician highlights how privilege and fame grant him a public platform to voice his plea for euthanasia, a platform that many disabled individuals without such cultural capital would never access. Similarly, in *Margarita With a Straw* (2014), Laila’s middle-class and English-speaking background enables her to study abroad and explore her sexuality with relative freedom, while in *Hichki* (2018), Naina’s gender intersects with her Tourette’s, as she must navigate a male-dominated profession and societal expectations. *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) extends this conversation by presenting children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds with intellectual and developmental disabilities, showing how family resources and institutional support systems (or their absence) deeply shape their opportunities. These accounts validate the feminist disability studies claim that disability cannot be analyzed in isolation but should be situated in intersecting structures of class, gender, and cultural capital (Garland-Thomson 1562).

What is left to be done, though, is the ongoing underrepresentation of rural and non-elite disabled characters, as well as over-reliance on individual victory narratives, which occasionally weaken structural critique. Nonetheless, the trend between 2010 and 2025 is

encouraging: a move away from stereotypical tropes to nuanced identity, from isolation to integration, and from victimhood to visibility. *Guzaarish* (2010), for instance, marked an early attempt in this period to portray disability with dignity through the story of a quadriplegic magician seeking the right to die, shifting the conversation from pity to autonomy. Later, films such as *Margarita With a Straw* (2014) and *Hichki* (2018) expanded this trajectory by presenting disability alongside themes of sexuality, education, and gender norms, while *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) foregrounded collective experiences of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Taken together, these films illustrate a growing sensitivity in Indian cinema towards disability as lived identity rather than symbolic burden.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of disability representation in Indian cinema between 2010 and 2025 reflects a broader cultural and ideological shift—from marginalization and pity to affirmation and agency. Films like *Guzaarish* (2010), *Margarita With a Straw* (2014), *Hichki* (2018), and *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) have challenged conventional portrayals by moving beyond stereotypes and offering multi-dimensional disabled characters who assert their dignity, aspirations, and rights. These accounts not only diverge from the 'tragic victim' and 'supercrip' stereotypes but also capture the social and political complexity of disability, placing it within regimes of education, gender, class, and sexuality. The growing authenticity and depth of representation have been reinforced by state-sponsored efforts like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), with films released after its enactment—such as *Margarita With a Straw* (2014) only anticipating the change, while *Hichki* (2018) and *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025) more directly reflect its ethos of inclusion and dignity in their narratives and the Accessible India Campaign, which have brought inclusion to the centre stage of education, work, and public life. These policy reforms have influenced and been reflected in cinematic

representations, which now attempt to normalize difference instead of dramatizing or exoticizing it.

Significantly, these movies also bring to the forefront the intersectionality of disability with class, gender, and education. From *Guzaarish* (2010), which portrayed Ethan's struggle for dignity and the right to die as a quadriplegic, to *Margarita With a Straw* (2014), which explored Laila's negotiation of queer desire alongside cerebral palsy, to *Hichki* (2018), which depicted Naina's professional hurdles as a woman with Tourette's, and finally to *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025), which foregrounded the collective experiences of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, each film underscores how disability in India is shaped by intersecting identities of gender, class, and sexuality. Collectively, these narratives affirm that disability is never experienced in isolation but through layered social positions that complicate access, visibility, and agency. This intersectional vision works to break down monolithic or reductionist representations and create room for more expansive and socially conscious narratives. However, with these developments, there are still gaps—most notably in representing rural, working-class, or multiply-oppressed disabled people. As Indian cinema develops further, the task is one of diversifying stories even more and creating room for disabled voices both on and off screen. In so doing, the medium can be not only a mirror held to society, but an instrument for transforming attitudes, deconstructing ableism, and establishing a culture of authentic inclusion and respect.

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