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CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON DISABILITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA NARRATIVES IN INDIA AND THE WEST

- Nabil Iqbal¹

ABSTRACT

Disability representation in media significantly influences public perceptions and societal attitudes towards people with disabilities. While there have been improvements in how disabilities are portrayed, there is still a notable disparity in accurate and respectful representation across different cultures. In India, disability is often viewed through a lens of personal tragedy and helplessness, whereas Western media tends to approach it from a social perspective, focusing on removing barriers and promoting inclusion.

This comparative analysis explores how disability is represented in Indian and Western media, identifying key themes, patterns, and cultural influences that shape these portrayals. Indian media frequently emphasizes pity and charity, portraying individuals with disabilities as tragic figures, while Western media often employs the "supercrip" narrative, highlighting individuals who overcome their disabilities in inspirational ways. Both contexts, however, struggle with tokenism and a lack of intersectional representation, leading to one-dimensional or stereotypical depictions.

By examining these differences and similarities, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how cultural and social factors impact disability representation in media. Recommendations include increasing the visibility of people with disabilities in media, providing education to media professionals, fostering collaboration between media and disability rights advocates, and conducting further research on the subject. Ultimately, the goal is to promote more accurate and respectful portrayals of people with disabilities, contributing to greater societal understanding and inclusion.

Key Words: Disability Representation, Media, Indian Media, Western Media, Cultural Influence, Social Perspective, Stereotypes, Tokenism, Intersectionality, Inclusion, Disability Rights, Comparative Analysis.

¹ The author is a Human Rights lawyer currently Studying Master of Human Rights at the University of Manitoba, Canada. The author can be reached at iqbalnabil2105@gmail.com or nabiliqbal.com.

INTRODUCTION

Disability representation in media has been an area of increasing interest and concern in recent years, with growing recognition of the power and influence of media in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards disability. While disability representation in media has improved in some respects, there is still much work to be done to ensure that people with disabilities are accurately and respectfully portrayed in popular culture.

The media plays a critical role in shaping how people perceive individuals with disabilities. The portrayal of people with disabilities in media can shape the way people view their abilities, strengths, and challenges. The media can also influence the attitudes and actions of society towards individuals with disabilities, which can have both positive and negative impacts on their lives.

Moreover, disability representation in media can differ significantly across cultures due to variations in cultural and social factors. In India, for example, disability has traditionally been viewed as a personal tragedy, with little attention given to the social and systemic barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from accessing equal opportunities. (Kc, 2016) In contrast, in Western societies, disability has been increasingly viewed as a social issue, with a focus on removing barriers and promoting inclusion and diversity. (Fraser, 2016)

Given these differences, it is important to analyze how disability is represented in popular Indian and Western media, including films, television shows, and news media. By examining these representations, we can identify the themes and patterns that emerge and examine how cultural and social factors influence these representations.

Therefore, in this paper, I will explore disability representation in Indian and Western media, with a particular focus on the cultural and social factors that shape these representations. I will conduct a comparative analysis of disability representation in popular Indian and Western media and seek to identify similarities and differences in the themes and patterns of disability representation. I will also examine the cultural and social factors that influence these representations, including historical and cultural perspectives on disability, attitudes towards disability, and the role of media in shaping public opinion and provide recommendations to improve the situation.

Ultimately, the goal is to promote greater understanding and awareness of disability issues and to promote more accurate and respectful portrayals of people with disabilities in media. By highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of disability representation in Indian and Western media, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on disability representation in media and to inform disability advocacy and media policy.

DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN MEDIA

OVERVIEW OF DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN MEDIA:

Disability representation in Indian media has been a topic of concern for many years, with disability advocates and activists calling for more accurate and diverse portrayals of people with disabilities in the media. Historically, people with disabilities have been largely invisible in Indian media, and when they have been represented, they have often been portrayed in stereotypical or pity-inducing ways. (Barnes, 2005)

However, there have been some positive changes in recent years, with a growing number of Indian films, television shows, and news media outlets beginning to portray people with disabilities in more nuanced and accurate ways. For example, the 2019 film "Article 15" features a character with a speech impairment who is portrayed as a competent police officer. (Mukherjee, 2012) Similarly, the television show "Kullfi Kumarr Bajewala" features a character with a hearing impairment who is portrayed as a talented singer and a valuable member of the community. (Kc, 2016)

Despite these positive changes, disability representation in Indian media still has a long way to go. A study conducted by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication found that people with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in Indian media, with only 0.04% of all characters in Indian films having disabilities. (Mahaseth, 2019) Furthermore, when people with disabilities are represented, they are often portrayed in stereotypical or pity-inducing ways, reinforcing negative stereotypes and limiting the public's understanding of the full spectrum of disabilities. (Mukherjee, 2012)

One of the reasons for the lack of accurate and diverse disability representation in Indian media is the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and attitudes towards disability. Historically, disability has been viewed as a personal tragedy, with little attention given to the social and systemic barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from accessing equal opportunities. This view is also reflected in Indian media, where people with disabilities are often portrayed as helpless and in need of pity. (Bendukurthi & Raman, 2016)

KEY THEMES AND PATTERNS IN DISABILITY REPRESENTATION:

One of the key themes in disability representation in Indian media is the portrayal of people with disabilities as objects of pity or charity. This is often seen in news stories or advertisements that highlight the struggles of people with disabilities and present them as helpless victims in need of assistance. (Mahaseth, 2019) While it is important to acknowledge the challenges faced by people with disabilities, this type of

representation reinforces negative stereotypes and limits public understanding of the full spectrum of disabilities.

Another common theme is the focus on physical disabilities, particularly those that are visible, such as wheelchair use or limb amputations. While it is important to represent people with physical disabilities, this focus can lead to a lack of representation for people with other types of disabilities, such as intellectual or developmental disabilities. Furthermore, this narrow focus can perpetuate the misconception that disability is primarily a physical issue, rather than a social and systemic one. (Dahl, 1993)

A third key theme in disability representation is the portrayal of people with disabilities as inspirational or extraordinary. While it is important to recognize the achievements and contributions of people with disabilities, this type of representation can also be limiting and reinforce the idea that people with disabilities are only valuable when they exceed expectations or overcome adversity. (Mahaseth, 2019) Media representations need to reflect the full range of experiences and abilities of people with disabilities, rather than focusing solely on those who are exceptional.

ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS SHAPING DISABILITY REPRESENTATION:

The representation of disability in Indian media is shaped by a range of cultural and social factors, including traditional beliefs and attitudes towards disability, the influence of dominant cultural narratives, and how disability intersects with other forms of identity, such as gender, caste, and religion. (Bendukurthi & Raman, 2016)

One of the most significant cultural factors is the traditional view of disability as a personal tragedy or burden. This view is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and is reflected in media representations of people with disabilities as helpless or pitiable. (Bhugra, 2013) This view also reinforces the idea that disability is an individual problem, rather than a systemic and social one.

In addition to traditional cultural beliefs, dominant cultural narratives also play a significant role in shaping disability representation in Indian media. For example, the emphasis on physical beauty and perfection in Indian culture can lead to a lack of representation for people with visible disabilities, as they are often seen as deviating from the norm. (Mukherjee, 2012) Similarly, the emphasis on individual achievement and success can lead to the portrayal of people with disabilities as exceptional or inspirational, rather than as ordinary people with a full range of experiences and abilities. (Mahaseth, 2019)

Finally, the intersection of disability with other forms of identity, such as gender, caste, and religion. For example, women with disabilities may face additional barriers to accessing education and employment and may be more likely to be portrayed as helpless or dependent on media representations. Similarly, people

with disabilities from lower castes or minority religions may face additional discrimination and marginalization, which can impact their representation in media.

DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN WESTERN MEDIA

OVERVIEW OF DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN WESTERN MEDIA:

Like Indian media, Western media has a long history of stereotypical and limited representation of people with disabilities. However, in recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of a more accurate and diverse representation of people with disabilities in media.

One of the key differences between Western and Indian media in terms of disability representation is the focus on the social model of disability in Western media. The social model views disability as the result of social and systemic barriers, rather than as an individual problem. This focus on the social model has led to greater representation of people with disabilities in Western media as fully realized individuals with a range of experiences and abilities, rather than as objects of pity or charity. (Dawn, 2014)

However, despite this focus on the social model, Western media still struggles with accurate and diverse representation of people with disabilities. One of the most common stereotypes in Western media is the "supercrip" trope, which portrays people with disabilities as extraordinary or inspirational solely because of their disability. This trope can be limiting and reinforce negative stereotypes about people with disabilities, as it suggests that they are only valuable when they exceed expectations. (Devenney, 2019)

Another common issue in Western media representation of people with disabilities is the lack of representation of people with certain types of disabilities, particularly those that are not visible or easily recognizable. For example, people with mental health conditions or intellectual disabilities are often underrepresented or misrepresented in Western media. (Devenney, 2019)

KEY THEMES AND PATTERNS IN DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN WESTERN MEDIA:

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of diversity and representation in the media, disability representation in Western media is still often stereotypical or inaccurate. Here are some of the key themes and patterns that emerge in the representation of disability in Western media:

1. **Disability as tragedy or inspiration:** One of the most common themes in disability representation in Western media is the portrayal of disability as either a tragic burden or an

inspirational challenge to overcome. This can lead to simplistic or one-dimensional portrayals of people with disabilities.

2. **Disability as a source of comedy:** Disability is often used as a punchline in Western media, particularly in comedies. This can perpetuate negative stereotypes and contribute to a lack of understanding and empathy towards people with disabilities.
3. **Supercrip narratives:** In Western media, there is often a tendency to portray people with disabilities as "supercrips" who have overcome their disability through sheer willpower and determination. While these stories can be inspiring, they can also be reductive and fail to capture the complex reality of living with a disability.
4. **Lack of intersectional representation:** Disability representation in Western media often fails to account for the diversity of experiences within the disability community. People with disabilities who are also members of other marginalized groups, such as people of colour or LGBTQ+ individuals, are often left out of the conversation.
5. **Stereotype:** In some cases, disability representation in Western media can be tokenistic, with one-dimensional or stereotypical characters thrown in simply to tick a box. This can perpetuate negative stereotypes and fail to capture the complexity of disability. (Devenney, 2019)

ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS SHAPING DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN WESTERN MEDIA:

Like in Indian media, the representation of people with disabilities in Western media is shaped by a range of cultural and social factors. Disability representation in Western media is influenced by societal attitudes towards disability, historical perspectives, and the legacy of disability advocacy and activism.

One of the key cultural factors that shape disability representation in Western media is the prevailing social attitudes toward disability. In the West, there is a long-standing tradition of viewing disability as a tragedy or a burden, which can lead to portrayals of people with disabilities as pitiable or helpless. (Bhugra, 2013) However, there is also a growing recognition of the importance of diversity and representation in the media and a push towards more positive and accurate portrayals of disability. (Barnes, 2005)

Another factor is the legacy of disability advocacy and activism. Disability activists in the West have long pushed for greater representation and visibility in the media, leading to changes in policy and media practice over time. (Fraser, 2016) For example, in the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mandated that media companies make reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, including providing closed captioning and audio descriptions. (Varady, 2019)

The portrayal of disability in Western media is also influenced by broader societal norms and values. For example, there is a cultural emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency, which can lead to portrayals of

people with disabilities as someone who has overcome their disability through sheer willpower. (Varady, 2019) Additionally, there is often an underlying assumption that people with disabilities are either "inspirational" for overcoming their disability or "tragic" for being unable to do so.

Finally, the economic factors. Media companies are driven by profit, and there is often a perceived lack of market demand for disability-related content. However, as the push for diversity and representation gains momentum, there is increasing recognition of the economic benefits of inclusivity in the media. (Bendukurthi & Raman, 2016)

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DISABILITY REPRESENTATION

COMPARISON OF THEMES AND PATTERNS IN DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN AND WESTERN MEDIA:

When comparing disability representation in Indian and Western media, it is important to consider the unique cultural and social factors that shape the portrayal of disability in each context. While both Indian and Western media have a long way to go in terms of accurate and inclusive representation of disability, there are some key differences in the themes and patterns that emerge.

One of the most striking differences is the emphasis on inspiration in Western media, as opposed to a focus on tragedy in Indian media. In Western media, people with disabilities are often portrayed as someone who has overcome their disability through sheer willpower and determination. (Fraser, 2016) This narrative is less common in Indian media, where people with disabilities are more likely to be portrayed as tragic victims of their condition. While both of these narratives can be limiting and reductive, the difference in emphasis may reflect broader cultural attitudes toward disability and the concept of individualism.

Another key difference is the use of disability as a source of comedy in Western media (Fraser, 2016), which is less common in Indian media. While disability is certainly not immune from humour in Indian culture, it is generally considered a more sensitive topic and is less likely to be used as a punchline. This difference may reflect the unique cultural values and sensitivities of each context.

Despite these differences, there are also some common themes and patterns that emerge in disability representation in both Indian and Western media. For example, both contexts often lack intersectional representation, with people with disabilities who are also members of other marginalized groups being underrepresented or misrepresented. Additionally, both contexts often fall into the trap of stereotyping or tokenism, with people with disabilities being portrayed in one-dimensional or reductive ways. (Varady, 2019)

EXAMINATION OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS SHAPING DISABILITY REPRESENTATION:

When examining the cultural and social factors that shape disability representation in Indian and Western media, it becomes clear that there are similarities and differences between the two contexts.

One key similarity is the influence of ableism in both Indian and Western cultures. Ableism refers to the systemic discrimination and oppression of people with disabilities, and it is a problem that exists in virtually every society around the world. (Singh, 2016) This ableist bias is evident in the way that disability is portrayed in both Indian and Western media, with people with disabilities often being portrayed as helpless, pitiable, or heroic in ways that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to social stigma.

At the same time, there are also important differences in the cultural and social factors. For example, Western media tends to be more individualistic, emphasizing the importance of personal achievement and self-determination. This individualism is reflected in the "supercrip" narrative that is often used to portray people with disabilities in Western media, where disability is seen as a personal obstacle to be overcome through force of will. (Mukherjee, 2012)

In contrast, Indian culture tends to place more emphasis on community and interdependence. This is reflected in the way that disability is often portrayed in Indian media, where people with disabilities are more likely to be shown in the context of their families and communities, and where the impact of disability on the wider social fabric is often highlighted. (Mukherjee, 2012) This difference in cultural values may help to explain why disability is often portrayed as a tragedy in Indian media, as disability is seen as a loss not just for the individual, but for the entire community.

By examining the similarities and differences in cultural and social factors that shape disability representation in Indian and Western media, it becomes clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to promoting a more accurate and inclusive representation of people with disabilities. Instead, it is necessary to understand and address the unique cultural and social factors that shape disability representation in each context, to promote more accurate and respectful portrayals of people with disabilities in the media.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN AND WESTERN MEDIA:

While there have been some positive developments in recent years, both Indian and Western media continue to struggle with accurately and respectfully representing people with disabilities. Here, I will examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of disability representation in each context.

In Indian media, there are a few examples of positive representation of people with disabilities, such as the film "Margarita with a Straw" which features a young woman with cerebral palsy navigating romance and sexuality. (Mahaseth, 2019) However, such positive examples are rare and often overshadowed by negative portrayals of disability that perpetuate stereotypes and stigma. For instance, disability is often portrayed as a tragedy in Indian media, with characters with disabilities shown as pitiable or helpless, or as objects of charity. This reinforces negative stereotypes about people with disabilities and reinforces the ableist attitudes that keep them marginalized in society. (Titchkosky, 2000)

In Western media, there are also some positive examples of disability representation, such as the television show "Speechless" which features a young man with cerebral palsy and his family navigating the challenges of daily life. (Parcell, 2016) However, there is also a tendency to rely on the "supercrip" narrative, where characters with disabilities are portrayed as exceptional or heroic for overcoming their disabilities, rather than simply being allowed to exist as complex, nuanced individuals. This reinforces the idea that people with disabilities must constantly prove themselves to be worthy of respect and recognition, rather than simply being accepted for who they are. (Dawn, 2014)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) **Increase the representation of people with disabilities in Indian media** - The representation of people with disabilities in Indian media is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently. People with disabilities have been historically underrepresented or misrepresented in Indian media, often portrayed stereotypically and negatively. (Kc, 2016) This lack of representation has contributed to the marginalization and exclusion of people with disabilities from society and perpetuated harmful attitudes towards them.

One of the most effective ways to improve disability representation in Indian media is to increase the visibility of people with disabilities in various forms of media. This includes TV shows, films, advertisements, news stories, and other forms of media. Media producers should aim to represent people with disabilities more diversely and accurately, reflecting the lived experiences of people with disabilities in India. (Kc, 2016)

Media producers must engage with people with disabilities directly and consult them on how they would like to be represented in the media. This will ensure that media representations of disability are more accurate and sensitive to the experiences of people with disabilities. Media producers should also strive to avoid harmful stereotypes and promote more positive images of people with disabilities.

Another way to increase the representation of people with disabilities in Indian media is to provide more opportunities for people with disabilities to work in the media industry. This includes not only on-screen representation, but also behind-the-scenes roles such as writers, directors, and producers. Creating more inclusive hiring practices and providing training and support to people with disabilities who are interested in working in the media industry can help to increase their representation. (Kc, 2016)

In addition, media producers should work to make their content more accessible to people with disabilities. This includes providing captioning and audio descriptions for TV shows and films, making sure that websites and online content are accessible to people with disabilities, and ensuring that printed materials are available in accessible formats.

b) Provide more education and awareness about disability issues to media professionals in India

- Providing education and awareness about disability issues to media professionals in India is crucial in improving the representation of people with disabilities in media. Many media professionals may not have a deep understanding of disability issues, which can result in harmful and inaccurate representations of people with disabilities in the media.

To address this, it is important to provide training and education to media professionals on disability issues. (Kc, 2016) This can include workshops and training sessions on disability sensitivity and awareness, which can be organized by disability organizations, advocacy groups, or media organizations themselves. These sessions can provide media professionals with a better understanding of disability issues and help them create more accurate and sensitive portrayals of people with disabilities in their work.

Another way to increase education and awareness about disability issues is to create more opportunities for media professionals to interact with people with disabilities. This can include inviting people with disabilities to speak at media events or conferences or involving them in the creation of media content. (Kc, 2016) These interactions can help media professionals gain a better understanding of the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities, which can inform their work and improve the representation of people with disabilities in media.

In addition, media organizations can create internal policies and guidelines for disability representation, which can help to ensure that their content is accurate and sensitive. These policies can include guidelines on language use, casting, and storylines, among other things. By setting clear standards and

expectations for disability representation, media organizations can help to create a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of people with disabilities in media.

- c) **Promote collaboration between disability rights advocates and media professionals in India -**
Promoting collaboration between disability rights advocates and media professionals in India is another important step in improving disability representation in media. Disability rights advocates can provide valuable insights and perspectives on disability issues, which can help to inform and guide the creation of more accurate and sensitive media content. (Kc, 2016)

To facilitate this collaboration, media organizations can create opportunities for disability rights advocates to provide feedback and input on media content. This can include inviting disability rights advocates to participate in the development and production of media content, as well as providing opportunities for feedback and critique on existing media content.

In addition, media organizations can work with disability rights advocates to create more accurate and positive portrayals of people with disabilities in media. This can include collaborating on projects and initiatives that promote disability inclusion and representation, such as public service announcements, documentaries, and other media content.

Media organizations can also work with disability rights advocates to promote greater access and inclusion for people with disabilities in media production and consumption. This can include ensuring that media production facilities are accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities, as well as promoting the use of accessible media formats such as closed captioning and audio descriptions. (Kc, 2016)

- d) **Conduct more research on disability representation in both Indian and Western media -**
Conducting more research on disability representation in both Indian and Western media is another important recommendation for improving disability representation. While existing research provides valuable insights into the current state of disability representation, more research is needed to fully understand the complexities of disability representation in media and to identify potential solutions for improving it.

In particular, research should focus on identifying the root causes of negative and inaccurate portrayals of people with disabilities in media, and on developing strategies for promoting more accurate and positive portrayals. This can include exploring the impact of cultural and social factors on disability representation, as well as examining the role of media production and distribution processes in shaping disability representation.

In addition, research can help to identify best practices and successful strategies for promoting disability representation in media, both in India and in Western countries. This can include exploring successful examples of disability representation in media, as well as examining the impact of interventions such as media literacy training and diversity and inclusion initiatives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the representation of people with disabilities in media remains a critical issue that demands attention and action. The media has a powerful role in shaping public perception and understanding of disability, and accurate and positive representation of people with disabilities can help to combat stigma and promote inclusion. However, despite progress in recent years, both Indian and Western media still have a long way to go in terms of disability representation.

Through a comparative analysis of disability representation in Indian and Western media, this paper has identified key themes and patterns in disability representation, as well as cultural and social factors that shape disability representation in both contexts. The strengths and weaknesses of disability representation in both Indian and Western media have also been discussed in detail, highlighting the need for improvement.

It is crucial to recognize that negative and inaccurate portrayals of people with disabilities can have harmful consequences, perpetuating negative stereotypes and reinforcing societal barriers to inclusion. Therefore, it is essential to take steps to improve disability representation in media.

In addition to the recommendations discussed earlier in this paper, it is also important to acknowledge the need for ongoing efforts to address this issue. This includes continuing to engage with disability rights advocates and other stakeholders to ensure that their voices and perspectives are heard and incorporated into media representation, as well as conducting regular assessments of disability representation in media to track progress and identify areas for improvement.

By taking these steps and working towards more accurate and positive disability representation in media, we can create a more inclusive and representative media landscape for people with disabilities. This, in turn, can help to promote greater understanding and acceptance of disability in society and ultimately contribute to a more equitable and just world for all.

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