

Disability Representations in the Modern Hindi Social Film Genre: Advocacy and Engagement in the London Borough of Newham.

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0.1. Abstract:

Grounded in the London Borough of Newham, this thesis documents the engagement of diasporic disabled South Asian viewers with disability representations in the modern Hindi social film genre. Using a participatory, mixed-methods approach guided and evaluated by those central to it, the study interrogates the genre's portrayals of disability and their reception. The research further examines how participating viewers interpreted the portrayal, visual aesthetics, and disability mechanisms, confronting dominant representations celebrated by filmmakers and society. It further examines disabled people's proactive engagement with representational concerns, guided by relational ethics and collaborative inquiry.

Emphasising participant agency, this study introduces 'cooperative enquiry through the ethos of friendship', an interlocutor-driven methodology that integrates allied identities and established disability research practices. Key to this approach was the co-creation of a grassroots initiative involving over one hundred and thirty disabled participants, named the 'Kahaani' film club, meaning to share stories. These collaborators variably selected and screened thirteen Hindi social films and participated in surveys, focus groups, and interviews with filmmakers to express their interpretative responses to those representations of disability.

The research highlights the perspectives of these disabled viewers on modern Hindi social films' use of superficial, stereotypical, yet emotionally resonant portrayals of disability. However, participants demonstrated a critical awareness of the pitfalls in these portrayals, advocating for structural changes in the Hindi film industry alongside other reforms that aim to foster their inclusion. These include disabled casting, authentic storytelling, the involvement of disabled consultants throughout production, and changes to India's film certification board. By documenting this collective engagement, the research offers key insights into how diasporic disabled South Asians in Newham interpret modern Hindi social films through the lens of their lived experiences. It contributes interdisciplinary perspectives to Disability Studies, Diaspora Studies, and Reception Studies, while calling for participatory representational practices across the Hindi film industry.

0.2. Declarations:

I declare that this thesis represents my own original and independent work, carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and with all necessary ethical approvals. Specific acknowledgements are provided in the text where I have drawn upon the work of others.

No part of this thesis has been presented to any other institution or for any other award. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this work does not infringe upon any third-party intellectual property rights, and I have obtained all necessary permissions for any copyrighted material included herein.

There are no known conflicts of interest, personal or financial, that could have influenced this research or its findings. The views expressed are my own and do not represent those of the University of Gloucestershire unless explicitly stated.

This thesis comprises 80,001 words, excluding front matter, figures, tables, bibliography, and appendices.

This work is protected by copyright. Copying or quoting from this thesis for academic purposes is permitted provided full acknowledgement is given.

Declared sincerely and without prejudice,



Krishan Anil Chadha

26 September 2025

0.3. Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, and in all things, I must acknowledge my partner and better half, the soon-to-be Dr. Rittika Dasgupta. This thesis is an ode to you. I owe my growth utterly to your inspiration and guidance. Quite frankly, your steadfast confidence in my potential rescued me from a life of functional illiteracy and little prospect. Thank you for carrying me through this journey and for never giving up on me. My pursuit of this studentship and the rehabilitation of my confidence, irrespective of any perceived limitations, are entirely thanks to you. I will forever cherish our nights of idea exchange as we watched Hindi films and toiled on our prospective theses. As you continue to fulfil all my wants and dreams, I sincerely hope that the output of this thesis satisfies the aspirations you held for me.

I, too, must acknowledge my father, Anil Kumar Chadha, who never ceases in his subtlety and boundless acts of service, through the good times and bad. Thank you for equipping me with the life lessons that I rely on most. I also wish to thank my maa, Joyasree Dasgupta and baba, Mukut Dasgupta, who continue to treat me more like newfound kin than as their son-in-law. Your warmth, kindness, and example have been invaluable as I tackle the many challenges of adulthood. My baba once told me that ‘life does not begin’ until one ‘gets married’. How right he was. Thank you, baba, for your words of wisdom.

I am further thankful to my siblings, Nikita Aashi Chadha and Shalini Chadha, for their unexpected support and heavy lifting during fieldwork. I could not have done it without you. If you are reading this, I genuinely mean that; those bags were hefty. Thank you both for physically and mentally keeping me, and therefore my work and my spirits, metaphorically lifted.

I also express my deep appreciation to the University of Gloucestershire’s School of Creative Arts, particularly to my thesis supervisors, Prof. Abigail Gardner and Tracy Symonds, for their dedicated mentorship and guidance. Their insightful tutelage proved indispensable in refining this thesis’s grammar and structure, as well as in copyediting and positioning it within the relevant scholarly contexts.

It would also be prudent at this juncture to acknowledge the many interlocutors and peers who contributed to this thesis and wish to have their names mentioned. Muna Ali, Tias Basu, Dr. Rohit Kumar Dasgupta, Dattatreya Ghosh, Terence King, Sarla Meisuria, and Samantha Ulysses all provided crucial ways of thinking that guided this work. Your allyship and critique were a true privilege.

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To that end, Cllr. Susan Masters, and Cllr. Lakmini Shah, thank you for supporting my fieldwork with the Council. I grew up in and around Newham, and while this study is not auto-ethnographic, I certainly owe my regional framing to the Borough's unparalleled communal diversity. Jai Shree Newham!

As I conclude with this rather lengthy and abstract list of acknowledgements, my thoughts turn to dear loved ones whose passing occurred while I prioritised this thesis and my professional growth in recent years. Namely, my dadi-ji and namesake, Krishna Devi Chadha; dada-ji, Prem Nath Chadha; nani-ji, Swarn Kohli; nana-ji, Devraj Kohli; mama-ji, Devinder Singh Kohli; and stepfather, Kevin George Rose. I long for any scrap of information that you left behind, and while no document ties our names and lives together while you lived, I have faith that this thesis, albeit in memoriam, does. You all inspired me to develop and grow, and provided me with a model which I could follow. Your absences weigh heavily on me, as I have no doubt it does for all the lives you touched.

0.4. Thesis Support Plan:

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0.4.1. Disability Characteristics:

To those concerned, please:

- > Be aware of any learning support information regarding this student.
- > Monitor their progress and alert the Disability Team if any concerns arise.
- > Consider the following guidelines when giving student feedback.

Krishan has identified challenges related to the following areas:

- > Has to over-learn to gain understanding, adding to their workload.
- > Information processing speed (may need more time).
- > Oral and fine motor skills.
- > Pain management.
- > Proofreading (may not be able to spot tense errors and repetition in writing).
- > Short-term sequential and working memory skills.
- > Spatial awareness and visual acuity.
- > Time management.
- > Visual stress (impacts on computer screen reading).
- > Written expression through repetitive word choices, order and general writing skills such as spelling, grammar and punctuation.

0.4.2. Reasonable Adjustments:

To ensure Krishan can fully demonstrate their abilities during assessments, the following accommodations have been agreed:

- > Krishan structures their thesis using numbered paragraphs to organise thoughts and maintain a logical flow to facilitate information processing.
- > Krishan would benefit from explicit models and practical examples to learn and adapt writing styles.
- > Krishan has also agreed to utilise Grammarly and Screen Reader tools in their thesis for additional support.
- > Allow Krishan to bring a copy of any questions asked and their notes into any viva or panel interview for reference.
- > Allow Krishan time to organise their thoughts, and it follows that hostile questioning should not be part of any viva exam or panel interview.
- > Krishan would benefit from extra time (around 25%) to read and process questions before and during the viva or panel interview.
- > Krishan may use kinaesthetic prompts, such as positioning information visually with their hands to aid memory recall during a viva or panel interview.
- > Krishan may also require infrequent breaks throughout any assessment to use the restroom and access medication or for other subsistence.
- > Allow Krishan to transcribe any feedback from any viva or panel interview for later reference.

These reasonable adjustment practices address processing speed, memory, and organisational challenges. They do not reflect Krishan's sound cognitive abilities.

0.4.3. Confidentiality:

These guidelines are produced collaboratively with the student and the University's Disability Team. If you have any questions, please contact:

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0.8. List of Abbreviations:

Audio Description (AD)

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

British Sign Language (BSL)

Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC)

Critical Disability Studies (CDS)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Deaf or Hard of Hearing (d/Deaf)

Disability Media Studies (DMS)

Frequently-Asked-Questions (FAQ)

Indian Sign Language (ISL)

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)

London Borough of Newham (LBN)

Over-The-Top (OTT)

Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH)

Portable Document Format (PDF)

Question-and-Answer (Q&A)

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWDA)

South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM)

Television (TV)

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

Chapter 1 – Prologue.

1.0. Preamble:

We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always “in context”, *positioned* [...] it is worth remembering that all discourse is “placed”, and the heart has its reasons.

(Hall, 1989: 89–90)

Like many who share my neurodevelopmental profile, I have often struggled to envision how to introduce a body of work. That said, I have chosen to begin this thesis with the words of Hall, who reminds us that all knowledge production and communication are inherently situated and never neutral. This powerful insight underpins my approach to this research, acknowledging that my positionality as a disabled researcher and advocate, as well as the experiences and cultural backgrounds of those who participated in this study, profoundly shaped the interpretations and findings presented herein. My own educational experiences serve as a powerful testament to Hall’s assertion. Far from a traditional academic trajectory, my schooling, or lack thereof, instilled in me a deep understanding of how societal perceptions limit and marginalise individuals categorised as ‘different’, ‘disabled’, or otherwise ‘special’ due to their neurological or bodily differences compared to the base population. This lived experience, rather than any formal training on disability matters, has given me an invaluable perspective for this inquiry.

It is paramount to emphasise that my background deviates from that of an academic researcher in any traditional sense. Indeed, until this juncture, my educational path did not include any university attendance, and consequently, I had not received any formal training in established research methodologies until this point. It is still quite a surprise to now call myself a researcher. I, like many young black and brown men of my age growing up in the United Kingdom (UK), was considered ‘educationally subnormal’. Although the phrase ‘special educational needs’ replaced ‘educational sub-normalcy’ in UK discourse in the 1990s, my schooling and others’ perceptions of what I could do overwhelmingly shaped me as a person, and now, as a researcher. While my non-disabled school peers benefitted from a normative educational

experience, I spent time drawing my feelings with crayons, lest I harm myself with actual stationery, being told how burdensome it was to supervise me, and when the teacher was not looking, learning from BBC Bitesize, the only website not blocked from my school's internet service. What I did know, however, if I can indeed call it an education, was how others would perceive me; this awkward, hyper and clumsy young man, who did not speak much, could hardly spell, let alone read with any degree of fluency. Suffice it to say, when beginning this research, I had not been armed with the rigour required to undertake a study at this level. All I had, for which I mostly relied, was what I taught myself after leaving school at seventeen and the advice I sought from others along the way. Yet, what I was fortified with was an understanding of how those categorised in similar contexts contextualise the world and those who position our bodies in a place of subjection and difference. It is through this lens that I commenced this research, as a disenfranchised but nevertheless capable member of society seeking to contribute to how those who are similarly categorised conceptualise the world and themselves in it.

1.1. Preliminary Remarks:

In 2021, while working on a co-authored paper, I explored how London's South Asian disabled youth cultures are shaped by the UK's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities system, along with its Christian facilitators. This research sought to understand how institutional structures and cultural intermediaries influence religio-cultural identity formation among marginalised South Asian disabled youth communities. During this study, I observed that many of my interviewees subtly and often unexpectedly encoded their responses in a layered mode of communication, which required thoughtful interpretation and mediation. Although my initial focus was on how younger disabled peers navigated their religio-cultural identities during formative stages of schooling, I became increasingly drawn to the symbolic frameworks they used to articulate their experiences. A recurring pattern emerged in which participants drew on characters and tropes from contemporary Hindi films to convey meaning associated with their disabilities and the everyday challenges they faced. This suggested to me at the time that Hindi films provided more than entertainment; they served as a mechanism for culturally resonant vocabulary for

expressing complex social realities. Although I could not formally document these discourses within that project's parameters, the impressions they left were profound. I became deeply interested in how diasporic disabled South Asians turned to Hindi films as a meaningful and accessible point of reference. These films appeared to serve as a shared cultural archive, enabling those with similar disability experiences to intuitively understand our participants' perspectives. What initially seemed like incidental references quickly emerged as central semiotic devices, forming a reservoir of metaphors and critiques that fostered mutual understanding on the subject matter. This shared understanding became acutely evident in the way we comprehended comments that, on the surface, seemed casual but were rich in nuance. I spent countless hours reflecting on the ease with which we understood the underlying meanings of these participants' remarks.

Two such examples illustrate this phenomenon. I recall how one participant of that study said, "Barfi is good [...] I don't do sign anymore [...] 'cause they will use their hands to talk about me". This reference referred to the film *Barfi!* (2012), which features a deaf-mute protagonist, subtly conveyed a deep discomfort with how visible disability can lead to social stigma and misinterpretation. The reference to "cause they will use their hands to talk about me" in effect was a paraphrasing of a key scene in the film, which sought to convey that being physically disabled would likely be equated to social exclusion. Another participant said in response, "She's a bloody Kaminey" and, "you can't fix it [...] if she acts like a Priyanka [...], at college they won't treat her so nicely". Rather than 'Kaminey' implying the Urdu word for 'vulgar', this statement referenced the film *Kaminey* (2009), known for portraying two speech-impaired brothers. It also hinted at the gendered dynamics of disability when drawing comparisons to Priyanka Chopra's character, who was perceived as less deserving of empathy due to how she emulated the protagonist's impairment in the film. It was in these filmic interjections that I recognised something profound. Hindi films, particularly those from the modern Hindi social genre, served as emotional and cognitive anchors. Participants used cinematic characters and plotlines to explain their encounters with disability as an interpretive vocabulary that was both familiar and subversive. The referencing of films like *Barfi!* (2012) and *Kaminey* (2009) carried

layered meanings, signalling the complexities of living with visible or non-normative embodiments, alongside how these are received within familial, cultural, and societal contexts.

Although I had never been a devoted fan of Hindi films myself, I came to recognise through these conversations with participants that I, too, had internalised many of the narratives they referenced. Like them, I was deeply invested in how South Asian and disabled bodies were depicted on screen, with exclusively Hindi films in which I could readily make such observations. These shared cultural references were not coded to entertain by comparing ourselves to these films; they facilitated our communication through mutual recognition of our complex lives as disabled people. Upon reflection, I realised I was already familiar, in some manner, with the films participants mentioned, indicating a collective cultural literacy that transcended my viewership preferences. This realisation led me to question how such representations operated within broader frameworks of disability discourse. As a disability consultant and now student at a local Law School, and lay representative for disability-related matters in my constituency in the London Borough of Newham (LBN), I have dedicated much of my career discerning how disabled people relate to said identity labels. My work has consistently prioritised lived experience research, but until this point, I had not fully appreciated how filmic representations can function as a shorthand for articulating these experiences, especially within minoritised and diasporic contexts.

At the time of proposing this study to my thesis supervisors, I was employed at a local Disabled Persons Organisation. My involvement with this disabled community specifically developed over many years through earlier research collaborations, teaching roles, advocacy work, and shared camaraderie. This sustained engagement had further given me valuable insight into how disabled people interpret and connect with disability portrayals. More importantly, I noticed that these portrayals played a functional role by helping disabled people articulate their experiences to disabled and non-disabled members of their broader communities. I came to understand that these cinematic references were not purely illustrative. They acted as tools for dialogue and negotiation, bridging cultural, generational, and in most cases, ability-

based divides. In this context, Hindi films were not used as sources of entertainment or nostalgia. Their emulation formed a symbolic language that enabled these diasporic disabled South Asians to assert identity, claim agency, and communicate in ways they could not articulate previously. Armed with this newfound knowledge, I began this body of research. Yet defining the specific types of Hindi films for analysis posed a dilemma for this relative ‘newbie’ to Hindi films. Fortuitously, a chance encounter with Rekha, a future interlocutor discussed in Chapter 4.2, directed my attention to the Hindi social film genre, providing essential context for my subsequent research.

1.2. Hindi Social Nomenclature:

So, at this outset, this thesis necessitates a clear explanation of its terminological choice of the phrase ‘Hindi social film’. While acknowledging the prevalent use of ‘Bollywood’ as a catch-all reference to denote productions originating from India’s Mumbai film industry, this study deliberately refrains from adopting this designation. This choice is informed by perspectives within the industry itself, most notably by actor Shahrukh Khan, as observed in a conversation with Vasudevan (2011a: 8), who noted that “it’s a term only foreigners who don’t know our films use”. Therefore, in alignment with a linguistics and industry-centric perspective, this thesis adopts the term ‘Hindi film’ as its primary referent for films created in the Hindi language.

Likewise, this thesis actively seeks to avoid the analytic slippage that often occurs when Hindi films are casually equated with Hollywood, a comparative framework that has become prevalent within academic diasporic literature and commentary (see: Desai, 2006; Dudrah, 2002; Kaur, 2002; Kureshi and Sood, 2011; Thussu, 2008). Mishra (2006: 1) consequently notes that “the triumph of the term ‘Bollywood’, over other regional cinemas is nothing less than spectacular and indicates the growing global sweep of this cinema [...] as cinema qua social effects and national cultural coding”. As Mishra (2011: 586) further notes, the thematic breadth and narrative scope of Hindi film productions are both remarkable and unparalleled. Consequently, any narrowly confined or overly reductive definition of the medium would inevitably fail to do justice to the complexity and heterogeneity of this

cinematic field. In light of this, the present study consciously refrains from engaging in direct comparative analysis between the Hindi film industry and other regional or national cinematic traditions, particularly those designated analogously with the ‘-wood’ suffix. That said, to ensure clarity and accessibility for readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of film industry terminology, the phrase ‘Hindi films’ will be employed consistently throughout this thesis. Exceptions occur, however, when citing primary and secondary sources that explicitly state ‘Bollywood’.

Turning now to the ‘social’ component of the term, it is vital to acknowledge the contribution of Vasudevan (1996), who was among the first to document their application of this concept concerning Hindi films of the 1950s. However, the specific conceptualisation of the Hindi social film adopted by this thesis is more directly indebted to Nandy’s (1981) insightful and profoundly reflective analysis of evolving production patterns during that Era. Nandy’s first principles interrogate a discernible trend in Hindi films of the period, whereby films increasingly moved away from specified geographic locations, concrete historical referents, and grounded social realities. Instead, they tended toward broad, sweeping generalisations about the experiences of the social groups they purported to represent. Nandy further observed a seemingly contradictory narrative orientation, as these films aimed to diverge from modern modes of cultural representation yet simultaneously presented increasingly stereotypical cinematic characters. Nevertheless, Nandy contends that these very stereotypes functioned to solidify the characters’ integration within the filmic social fabric, noting that “the more stereotyped a character in such a movie the more socially embedded he or she is [sic]” (ibid.: 91). Consequently, this mode of storytelling established a distinct and recognisable cinematic logic, deserving of closer scrutiny. It is precisely within the interpretive framework established by Nandy’s observations that the Hindi social film terminology is employed in this thesis. This designation is, therefore, intended to capture a particular trajectory of narrative form and thematic concern that has, over time, come to constitute an emergent mediatype within the broader domain of Hindi films. Having concisely defined the Hindi social film term as used herein, the following section articulates the rationale and significance of researching this cinematic form.

1.3. Research Rationale:

The early twenty-first century witnessed a notable evolution in the thematic focus of Hindi films, particularly their willingness to confront pressing social issues, such as disability, in ways that undermine the various sociocultural stigmas associated with it (Deb, 2022: 168). Doing so, the Hindi social genre has gained traction within India but has also found widespread acceptance and popularity in international markets such as the UK, drawing considerable interest from diverse audiences, including individuals outside the immediate South Asian diaspora (Lee, 2007). This transition underscores the increasing global significance of Hindi film and its growing ability to resonate across cultural and national boundaries.

Historically, Hindi films have consistently addressed various social concerns, including poverty, caste discrimination, gender inequality, and, more recently, disability (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2004: 27–28). That said, the portrayal of disabled people in Hindi films often relied on reductive stereotypes and exploitative tropes, framing characters with disabilities either as figures of pity or as metaphors for moral deficiency (Shivane and Yadav, 2021: 7). As Malik et al. (2011: 176) contend, depictions tended to reinforce rather than challenge prevailing religio-cultural attitudes. In recent years, however, as Mohapatra (2012: 129) explains, this representational approach has undergone a significant shift, with filmmakers increasingly moving away from outdated narrative conventions, such as using the circumstance of a disabled character's disability to advance the plot. Instead, they seem to embrace more nuanced, complex, and empathetic portrayals that aim to educate viewers about the experiences of disabled people (ibid.: 128). As Sinha (2024: 728) explains, these newer portrayals often frame disability as a critical lens through which broader themes of justice, identity, and belonging can be examined.

This evolving cinematic language has emerged alongside a growing body of academic work in Disability Studies, Filmic Representation Studies, and transnational audience reception. The international success of films focusing on disability reflects not only the growing reach of modern Hindi social films but also the increasing visibility of disability as a socially and culturally significant issue worldwide. Academic literature

has documented the rise of such Hindi films, particularly in terms of their influence on viewers and contribution to public discourse (see: Friedner, 2017; Saha, 2017; Ghosh, 2022). Much of this research, however, has centred on the perspectives of non-disabled audiences in shaping social attitudes and norms (see: Srinivas, 2001; Venkatesan et al., 2015; Gawande and Kashyap, 2017; Prasad et al., 2018); not giving focus to how disabled people themselves contend such materials.

As inferred above, despite this growing scholarship, a significant and pressing concern remains in the apparent lack of focused inquiry into how these films are received and understood by disabled viewers. This gap is especially pronounced in multicultural diasporic settings such as the UK, as Dudrah (2001: 9) and Eichhorn (2019: 69–72) allude to. Key questions remain unanswered, particularly how intersecting identities, such as race, disability, migration status, class, and cultural affiliation, shape the experiences of these viewers. For example, how do diasporic disabled people, whose identities exist at the intersection of Western and South Asian cultural influences, engage with modern Hindi social films that purport to speak on their behalf? As Gupta (2019: 90) observes, how people assign meaning to disability and bodily difference plays a crucial role in shaping the spatial and social organisation of life, and this relationship is reciprocal. Filmic representations, therefore, likely serve a key function in shaping how disability is understood and enacted in daily life (see: Hyler et al., 1991 in Safran, 1998: 227). Within this context, cinematic portrayals of disability function as more than aesthetic choices or narrative devices; they are ideological acts that can profoundly influence public awareness and cultural norms. Williams (2017: 33) further notes that such portrayals can provide audiences with new ways of seeing and understanding disabled bodies, shifting the frame from a model of deficit to identity.

As Borey (2011: 2) asserts, these depictions are incredibly influential for viewers who lack personal experience with disability, as they often inform foundational beliefs and perceptions. According to Dyer (2013: 127), filmic representations mirror dominant cultural narratives and enable audiences to position themselves within those frameworks. This reflective function becomes even more meaningful when disabled viewers engage with such portrayals and assess whether they offer genuine

recognition or reinforce marginalisation. As Johanssen and Garrisi (2020: 16) suggest, film can prompt viewers to consider whether these narratives provide new frameworks for conceptualising the self and relationships with others, thus opening up possibilities for transformative engagement.

As the following chapters will explore in greater detail, modern Hindi social films are among the most influential tools for shaping public discourse on minority issues (see: Mohapatra, 2012: 124; Singh and Pandey, 2021: 1). Despite this recognised influence, the question of how disabled and diasporic audiences interact with such content remains largely unanswered. This study aims to address this significant gap by conducting a detailed ethnographic analysis of disabled viewers' motivations, interpretive strategies, and emotional responses, with a particular focus on the roles of cultural identity, diasporic experience, and disability. The importance of this research extends beyond academic inquiry to broader cultural and economic implications. Gaining a clearer view of how disabled viewers engage with modern Hindi social films that reflect their lived realities can thus offer insights into broader film consumption patterns, identity formation, and representation.

The Hindi film industry, which is frequently recognised as the most prolific in global film production, continues to command a strong international market presence (Zaidi, 2017: 63). In 2017, it experienced a 27% increase in revenue, primarily driven by international ticket sales (Dastidar and Elliot, 2020: 101). The UK alone accounted for 15.5% of the \$367 million generated internationally, according to FICCI and EY (2018). This market data highlights the need for the Hindi film industry to reflect on whether its portrayals of disability effectively engage the audiences they aim to represent. After all, if the needs and expectations of disabled viewers remain unaddressed, the Hindi film industry poses the risk of alienating a growing and economically significant demographic. Concurrently, incorporating the perspectives of disabled viewers can significantly improve both inclusivity and commercial viability. The financial cost of exclusion is well documented, as seen in the 'Purple Pound' campaign, which highlights that UK businesses lose an estimated £274 million annually by failing to adequately cater to disabled consumers (Williams, 2017: 97).

Further, scholarship in the creative industries has consistently demonstrated the benefits of inclusive content in promoting social equity and economic sustainability (see: Romero-Fresco, 2019). Given its historic commitment to addressing social issues and its influential status as a global cinema (Shenoy, 2013: 2), the Hindi film industry is uniquely positioned to lead the way in disability inclusion. This will require treating diasporic disabled viewers as active media recipients and cultural participants whose insights can shape the future of filmic representation. Some initiatives have addressed access issues, such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People's "Bollywood for All" campaign, which focused on improving accessibility for visually impaired Hindi film audiences worldwide (Rai, 2009). However, no comprehensive study has yet investigated how disabled audiences engage with Hindi film more broadly, and as a pan-disability endeavour. This research fills this gap by examining the practices, motivations, and interpretations of disabled diasporic viewers and by suggesting strategies the industry can employ to better cater to this demographic. Therefore, the rationale for conducting this research lies in the dual importance of addressing a critical gap in academic literature and responding to the real-world needs of this underrepresented audience.

Although modern Hindi social films have been widely studied in terms of their cultural impact and their appeal to general audiences, there is a significant absence of data on how disabled viewers, especially those in diasporic and multicultural contexts such as the UK, perceive and relate to these portrayals. This study aims to correct this by focusing on the perspectives of diasporic disabled audiences. By doing so, it seeks to challenge assumptions in audience research that often overlook or erase disabled viewpoints. The research also supports the growing academic trend of using intersectional approaches to study media and culture, acknowledging how factors such as race, disability, migration, and cultural identity combine to influence how viewers engage with media in unique and intricate ways (Ramasubramanian and Banjo, 2020: 391).

Beyond scholarly contribution, this research has tangible implications for the Hindi film industry. As Hindi films increasingly rely on global markets for revenue, particularly in countries with large and diverse diasporas, understanding the

expectations and needs of disabled audiences becomes not just a matter of ethics but also of commercial sustainability. Disabled people are, after all, a potential consumer base of 1.3 billion people according to the World Health Organisation (n.d.). By offering in-depth insights into how disabled viewers engage with Hindi films, this study provides practical guidance for developing more inclusive content, improving audience outreach, and fostering meaningful representation. In essence, this research aims to deepen academic understanding of modern Hindi social film viewership among disabled people while also seeking to influence industry practice. It embodies a commitment to inclusive inquiry and social justice, making it timely, relevant, and impactful.

1.4. Research Aims:

Through a detailed examination of modern Hindi social film viewership, this research seeks to explore the complex relationship between disability and cultural identity as experienced by disabled people within the South Asian diaspora in LBN. The study focuses on how this community receives, interprets, and engages with cinematic portrayals of disability, aiming to understand how such portrayals shape and reflect the real-life experiences of its viewers. Central to this investigation is the construction of a conceptual framework that connects mediated disability representations with real-world experiences of marginalisation, identity negotiation, and resistance. This framework integrates perspectives from Disability, Diaspora, Film, and Ethnographic Audience Studies, offering a multidimensional approach to understanding how diasporic disabled viewers engage with these media texts.

To establish the academic context of this inquiry, the research begins by surveying existing scholarship on diasporic and disabled engagements with Hindi films. This review highlights that both cultural and academic discourses tend to prioritise Hindi films in their analysis of diasporic identity, reflecting what Takhar et al. (2012: 267) describe as a strong cultural fixation on Hindi cinematic narratives. While there has been substantial work on the conventions of character representation and film reception in diasporic contexts, these studies often neglect the active interpretive role of audiences, especially those navigating the overlapping challenges of race,

migration, and disability (see: Banaji, 2012; 2013; Desai, 2004; 2006; Dudrah, 2001; 2002; 2006; Parekh et al., 2003; Pradhan, 2020). This research addresses this gap by combining a close analysis of modern Hindi social films with ethnographic insights drawn from diasporic disabled South Asian viewers, employing the methodology outlined in Chapter 4.

The study is grounded in fieldwork conducted in LBN, a location characterised by its significant ethnic diversity and presence of disabled people from South Asian backgrounds. This setting provided a rich site for investigating how filmic representations intersect with personal and communal narratives. By examining the relationship between on-screen portrayals and everyday experiences, the study offers insights into the processes of collective identity formation, as theorised by Din and Manzoor (2023: 357). Further, the research investigated the cultural and emotional tensions that emerge when diasporic disabled viewers encounter representations that may affirm or challenge prevailing social attitudes. These tensions are analysed regarding their impact on self-perception, cultural mediation, and the broader dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion.

The study also examines how film consumption influences disability attitudes and contributes to identity development within diasporic contexts. By documenting how disabled diasporic viewers navigate these portrayals, either by embracing, resisting, or reinterpreting them, the research reveals how they assert agency in shaping their cultural identities. These acts of interpretation are thus positioned not as passive reception but as forms of everyday resistance and interpretive authorship.

This thesis, therefore, aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how modern Hindi social film texts are reworked within marginalised communities to align with personal and collective experiences of disability. This inquiry captures the interpretive strategies employed by disabled South Asians in LBN and analyses the mechanisms that inform their strategies. In doing so, it contributes to broader academic and social discourses surrounding the negotiation of cultural identity through media. Previous studies have highlighted the structural and attitudinal barriers faced by diasporic disabled people (see: Hussain et al., 2001), while recent analyses underscore the influential role of Hindi films in reinforcing or subverting

dominant narratives about disability (Yadav and Jha, 2023: 3). Building on this foundation, the current study intends to demonstrate how diasporic disabled viewers use modern Hindi social film as a tool to challenge societal norms and construct empowering identities.

This research's overarching objective is therefore twofold. Firstly, it seeks to provide an in-depth account of how modern Hindi social films are consumed and reinterpreted by diasporic disabled South Asians in LBN, a key segment of Hindi films' international audience (see: Rai, 2009: 4). Secondly, it aims to amplify the voices of this underrepresented group by centring their perspectives within academic and cultural discourse. By highlighting their interpretive practices, the study contributes to reshaping how disability is understood and represented in diasporic and media contexts.

Further, this research's findings can potentially influence cultural policy and media production. By identifying discrepancies between audience experiences and industry portrayals, the study offers valuable insights for Hindi film creators, policymakers, and advocacy groups committed to creating more inclusive and representative landscapes. These insights could also inform culturally relevant media literacy programmes that engage with disabled people and their experiences.

This study makes theoretical and methodological contributions to Disability Studies, Media Studies, and the emerging field of Disability Media Studies (see: Ellcessor et al., 2017). Its interdisciplinary approach further combines film analysis with ethnographic participant-led research and critical theories, offering an innovative model for studying how marginalised audiences engage with cultural texts. Rather than viewing audiences as either passive consumers or radical resisters, the study presents a more detailed grasp of their engagement, shaped by structural, cultural, and embodied factors. Ultimately, this research aims to shed light on how disabled diasporic viewers in LBN interpret and respond to modern disability representations in Hindi social films. By doing so, it contributes to scholarly and social efforts aimed at fostering more equitable and inclusive representational landscapes of disability representation, while also supporting the empowerment of disabled communities in both the local and global contexts.

1.5. Refining Research Questions:

Throughout the research cycle, the research questions guiding this study were progressively refined, informed by the ongoing literature review, insights gained from fieldwork, and a deepening comprehension of the complex viewership dynamics under investigation. Rodrigues-Júnior (2006: 20) posits that such an approach facilitates understanding “how everything is dynamically interconnected in a live unpredictable system”. While the overarching research aims to examine the engagement of diasporic disabled people with modern Hindi social films, particularly those that depict disability, the specific research questions were subject to iterative refinement throughout the thesis writing process.

Before fieldwork, the research initially aimed to explore the nature and prevalence of disability imagery in modern Hindi film. Subsequently, a secondary aim was set to determine how this medium influenced the perspectives of disabled South Asian communities in the UK, particularly regarding their diasporic and disability-related experiences, sense of belonging, and identity. However, as outlined in Chapter 4.3, the fieldwork provided critical insights that necessitated a revision of the research focus. My developing role as a disabled disability researcher and advocate, as described in Chapter 4.2, further provided a heightened appreciation for the subject’s complexities. The fieldwork experience, particularly the need to justify film choices based on culturally specific disability sensitivities due to participant access requirements, demonstrated the crucial nature of making and justifying real-time adjustments to this body of research. Another pivotal juncture, prompting a significant re-evaluation of the thesis, occurred during an informal discussion with my interlocutor group in 2023, on the first Hindi social films we had all seen growing up. This discussion revealed that their diasporic and disability-related experiences significantly shaped their engagement with modern Hindi social films. This finding contradicted my initial hypothesis of the reverse influence. As a result, the research questions were further revised to focus on how participants, mirroring my interlocutors, employed the medium to challenge disability narratives that contradicted their experiences as diasporic disabled South Asians. The research analysis in Chapters 6 to 9 thus became driven by three interconnected questions:

How do disabled South Asian viewers in LBN find, access, value, and experience modern Hindi social films featuring disability representation? This question seeks to understand the entire journey and subjective engagement of disabled diasporic South Asian viewers in my research locality with Hindi films that portray disability. In doing so, it aims to uncover the practical methods viewers use to discover and obtain these films and assess what aspects of the films they deem significant. Consequently, it examines their personal and emotional responses, as well as the overall impact of watching such representations.

How are disabilities portrayed in modern Hindi social films, and how do disabled diasporic South Asians interpret and engage with these portrayals concerning their own lived realities? This question first analyses the specific ways disabilities are depicted within modern Hindi social films, examining the themes, stereotypes, or nuances present. Subsequently, it investigates how disabled South Asian viewers in the diaspora understand and react to these cinematic portrayals, explicitly exploring how these fictional depictions connect with or diverge from their actual experiences of living with a disability.

What considerations are taken by the Hindi film industry and its disabled diasporic South Asian viewers in mediating the affective nature of disability representation? This final research question examines the emotional impact of disability representation, investigating how it is created and perceived. It seeks to identify the intentions and methods employed by the Hindi film industry when crafting emotionally resonant portrayals of disability. It also examines how disabled diasporic South Asian viewers process, navigate, and respond to the feelings evoked by these representations.

These refined research questions, shaped through ongoing development during the thesis writing process, thus aimed to explore the complex relationships among media production, audience reception, cultural expression, and the formation of collective identity politics among disabled viewers of modern Hindi social films in LBN.

1.6. Thesis Overview:

The front matter of this thesis contains a title page and abstract, followed by a declaration of originality and authorship. Following this, I express my gratitude to those who supported this study, and address challenges I faced in relation to my disabilities during the writing process. This section closes with a list of contents, tables, figures and abbreviations used throughout.

Chapter 1 outlines the rationale for the study, focusing on defining the Hindi social genre and drawing attention to the experiences of diasporic disabled viewers. Subsequently, it articulates the research aims and questions, providing an overview of the thesis structure and formatting in its entirety before reinstating the research's purpose.

Chapter 2 contextualises the genesis of the Hindi social genre within its production locality and its relationship to portrayals of disability. Further, it documents the reception and engagement of this Hindi film sub-genre within India and the UK.

Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical groundwork for this research. It explores how Reception, Diaspora, and Disability Studies relate to modern Hindi social film viewership and the UK disabled viewer. This approach broadens the conceptual scope for addressing the research questions presented earlier in the thesis.

To explore the cultural practices of diasporic disabled viewers engaging with modern Hindi social films that depict disability, a collaborative, mixed-methods, and ethnographic methodology was implemented. Chapter 4 details this theoretical practice framework, which involved co-facilitating a nine-month film club project at a local library from spring 2023 and engaging closely with a group of participants and interlocutors to understand their viewership patterns and cultural practices. I then describe my research positionality, including that of the co-facilitators and participants, and outline the research design, data collection methods, analysis, and fieldwork implementation in detail.

Chapters 5 through 9 present the empirical analysis of the original data collected. They present their findings in the manner in which they were gathered and through a narrative framing, as outlined in the previous chapter.

Chapter 5 comprehensively analyses the preferences of participating viewers regarding disability representation in modern Hindi social films. The findings, presented through tables and graphs, were reviewed by a committee of co-facilitators, as discussed in the previous chapter, whose feedback informed the subsequent analytical chapters. The survey employed in this chapter aimed to elucidate the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’, and ‘why’ of participants’ viewing practices by examining both demographics and viewing habits. Participants were also invited to recommend preferred films featuring disabled characters and explain their appeal, thus offering a deeper grasp of their viewing choices.

Chapter 6 begins by presenting participants’ accounts, which demonstrate the significant impact of regularly viewing modern Hindi social films featuring disabled protagonists on disabled viewers. This synthesis contributes to a re-evaluation of the ‘character struggle’ archetype discussed in the chapter, revealing how these films, despite potentially unrealistic portrayals, resonate with and empower viewers to understand and articulate their own experiences of systemic discrimination and other social barriers. Subsequently, the chapter explores how viewers, drawing parallels between their own lives and the characters’ on-screen struggles, consider how non-disabled audiences might interpret the films’ messages about disability. In conclusion, this chapter explores how shared film viewing enabled disabled participants to assert their cultural ownership. I illustrate how this empowerment model unfolded through their collaborative interpretation of films and their articulation of a unique understanding of the disabled characters, ultimately establishing their cultural rights over the genre and positioning it as a space designed for their communities alone.

Chapter 7 examines how disabled participants utilised modern Hindi social films to create a cultural space that challenged their perceptions of societal approaches to inclusion. It explores how film narratives prompted critical reflection on discourses on disability in the UK and facilitated discussions free from external pressures. It also discusses how participants appropriated film language for inclusion and how this demonstrates a sustained response to filmmakers’ social commentary on the part of

the participants. The chapter outlines participants' views on UK disability discourses, contrasts them with film portrayals, and analyses their critique of current representations. It concludes by addressing barriers to inclusion and the paradox of using representations to promote change while not empowering those excluded from those production processes.

Chapter 8 examines participant inquiries posed to Hindi social film professionals during the 2023 South Asian Heritage and Disability Pride Months and is structured in four parts. The first section examines how India's prevailing political climate at the time of writing influences the portrayal of 'disabling imagery' in modern Hindi social films. Next, it explores questions posed about the Indian government's 'Divyangjan' disability framework. Then, it dissects how this framework shapes on-screen portrayals and viewer considerations. Lastly, it addresses participant views on prioritised disability groups for collaboration with industry, highlighting the exclusionary nature of the Divyangjan hierarchy and its potential for marginalisation and political exploitation.

Chapter 9 empirically demonstrates the perceptual impact of disabled-led filmmaking practices on audience reception of disability representation in modern Hindi social films. Based on these findings, the chapter proposes practical reforms to India's Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), including a standardised consultative framework that empowers disabled people throughout the film production and viewership process. It also advocates for expanding the film club project to foster a sustained dialogue between industry professionals and disabled communities, driving improvements in disability representation in modern Hindi films and, consequently, changing societal perceptions of disability.

The concluding Chapter 10 summarises the key findings and limitations of this thesis's empirical discussions. It also outlines the research's contributions and limitations, as well as identifies areas for future study. Finally, the backmatter contains a bibliography and an appendix.

1.7. Thesis Structure:

This section details the formatting and structural choices to ensure the thesis's accessibility and clarity. This includes font style, spacing, page numbering, content organisation, referencing, quote presentation, transcription, translation, transliteration, presentation, and addressing potential structural inconsistencies.

Microsoft Word was selected for thesis writing and formatting, with the final document exported as a PDF. The visually accessible font, Microsoft Aptos, was used for readability, with 1.5 cm indentation and 8 pt line spacing, reduced to 1.15 cm for direct quotes. Text sizes varied with 20 pt for the main title, 18 pt for chapter titles, 14 pt for headings and subheadings, and 12 pt for the core text. Text was justified with a 1-inch left margin, and page numbers were placed in the bottom-right corner. A multi-level numbering system was further employed to aid navigation.

Sections and subsections were clearly labelled using bold, underlined, or capitalised text. Footnotes were avoided in favour of a '(see: author, date, page number)' system for additional reading listed in the bibliography. A generated table of contents and separate lists of tables and abbreviations were included.

Statistical data were presented visually using figures and tables with central indentation and descriptions. Percentages and simple denominators were also used to enhance readability over more precise number systems.

I adapted the referencing style used from a version of the University of Gloucestershire's derivative of the Harvard referencing system, with semicolons replacing 'pp.' to denote page numbers. Direct quotes were enclosed in quotation marks, and paraphrased sources were also acknowledged. Zotero software was further used for consistent citation management in the bibliography. Apart from explicitly referenced material and use permitted under the 'fair dealing' exceptions of Section 29 of the 1988 Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, all work presented in this thesis is original. Participant excerpts were carefully selected to evidence arguments, with verbatim transcription prioritised. Pauses and ellipses were noted as '[pause]' and '[...]', respectively. Contextual additions or emphasis were enclosed in square brackets. A consistent 'according to X' format was used for in-text citations.

Due to personal challenges concerning working memory and organisation, however,

some formatting and structural inconsistencies may be present, including potential word or phrase repetition. That said, I proactively employed every reasonable measure to mitigate potential structural issues, including using Git v2.45 for version control and data retrieval, and Grammarly spell-checker software for editorial review and readability enhancement.

Out of necessity, I have sought to integrate translations of relevant Hindi, Urdu, and Bangla terms used in the thesis into English text. I have further provided the corresponding transliterated word, which is included in gol koshtak (rounded brackets). While I maintained this system of converting participant input into English, I diverge from some practices commonly observed in Anglophone translation traditions in this regard. I decided to leave many everyday words and concepts, such as *achcha*, *darshan*, *zulm*, and so forth, wholly untranslated, regardless of whether they have an exact or similar English equivalent.

I often found that transliterating a word proved the most effective way to convey its intended meaning, rather than attempting some bombastically paraphrastic approximation of the original word. It strikes me as odd, and frankly somewhat coarse, that simple everyday words in the English lexicon, like *masala*, are commonly and carelessly translated to phrases like ‘a diverse combination of elements’ or ‘a culinary spice mix’. By forcing words into such equivalent English, one prevents the native speaker from appreciating their fuller meaning or adding a compelling new term to their linguistic repertoire. Contextualising new words, therefore, pushes the boundaries of spoken language and demonstrates possibilities within existing words, expressions, grammar, and familiar patterns.

Drawing on my experience as an ongoing patient of traditional Speech and Language Therapy, I recognise that the human experience is adept at inferring the meaning of new words from context. In this way, its relative use is usually enough to comprehend how a particular word is used. If all else proves insufficient, one may consult Google Translate for a more concrete definition that encapsulates their regional linguistic framing of said word. While I am certainly no linguist, working on this research has led me to believe that there are no reasonable justifications for avoiding the adoption of new words or phrases across different language contexts.

Similarly, Hindi honorifics, used to signal a wide range of complex social relationships and emotions, such as *bhāī*, *devī*, *dī*, *jī*, and *sāhab*, linguistically presented a similar challenge. While English speakers may grasp some of their meaning within their original linguistic and cultural contexts, such as ‘brother’, ‘madam’, ‘sister’, ‘respected one’, or ‘sir’, prospectively, these systems largely lack direct Western equivalents for their intended use. I have thus attempted to convey this social information through other means, though some aspects inevitably remain in the transliteration.

With the research topic, its scope, aims, and questions clearly defined, and structural concerns such as formatting and transliteration addressed, the following chapter will provide a reading of the Hindi social film genre and its reception.

1.8. Reinstatement of Purpose:

I conclude this introduction by highlighting what this thesis offers. This thesis presents an academic investigation into cinematic representation through a journey into the lived experiences of diasporic disabled South Asians in LBN, who find a mirror in modern Hindi social films, a vocabulary, and, at times, a battlefield for their social identities.

As popular media continues to shape public discourse and private self-understanding, this study challenges dominant narratives by placing disabled diasporic viewers at the centre of interpretive power. Through their voices, a new understanding of cultural belonging, media agency, and representational filmic justice emerges, compelling the reader to reconsider what it means to see and be seen through being represented on screen.

To follow this research is to witness how ordinary moments of film watching transform into extraordinary acts of cultural negotiation, resistance, and self-assertion. This thesis, above all, is thus a call to action. It tasks us with listening closely to the insights of those who have long been excluded from both media and academia, and with rethinking the power of film-viewing cultures not just as places of storytelling but as spaces for shared interpretive agency.

Chapter 2 – The Modern Hindi Social and its Reception.

2.0. Introduction:

With the research focus established, I now review how modern Hindi social films depict disabled people and how UK audiences perceive these portrayals. This dual approach is crucial because the creation and consumption of these films are intertwined with cross-border connections of meaning, commerce, and identity (Vasudevan, 2011b: 5). By situating Hindi filmic representations of disability within the specific socio-cultural and economic contexts of both India and the UK, this chapter highlights the reciprocal influence between on-screen depictions and evolving patterns of transnational Hindi film consumption.

My review begins by tracing the genre's evolution in portraying disability and its thematic concerns, followed by an evaluation of existing research on Indian and UK reception. This historical overview seeks to map the development of disability representation alongside the dominant beliefs and societal attitudes that have shaped these portrayals. Understanding this historical context is thus essential for deciphering contemporary representations and their impact on disabled South Asian modern Hindi social viewers, whose perspectives on disability are shaped by their distinct cultural norms, media landscapes, and the social frameworks that underpin their lives. Finally, I argue that this two-part strategy will enable a deeper comprehension of the global flow of cultural meaning and the complex interaction between the cinematic portrayal of disability in modern Hindi social films and audience interpretation across diverse socio-cultural settings.

2.1. Disability Representations:

The representation of disability within Hindi film has been an evolving phenomenon, mirroring the complex cultural, religious, and political landscapes of the subcontinent (Sengupta, 2011: 11). From the Silent Era of the early twentieth century through to the 'New Bollywood' of the 1990s and into the contemporary cinematic environment of the 2020s, portrayals of disability have undergone significant transformation. These portrayals have never existed in isolation; instead, they have

been shaped by broader ideological currents and shifting societal norms (Punathambekar, 2013: 6). Influenced initially by colonial interventions, later by sacred traditions, and subsequently by postcolonial nation-building and rights-based activism, the depiction of disability, as I have described in this chapter, has served both ideological and commercial purposes. This continuous negotiation between spiritual, political, and economic discourses highlights how cinematic representations of disabled bodies have functioned as narrative devices and robust indicators of India and its diaspora's evolving socio-cultural self-image. Therefore, disability in Hindi film, as I argue in this chapter, becomes a lens through which we can trace the tensions and contradictions about disability within Indian and UK modernity itself.

2.1.1. British Raj Films:

The inception of the Hindi film industry coincides almost precisely with the final decades of British colonialism, a period when visual culture was increasingly recognised as an emerging tool of influence. As Rajadhyaksha (2016: 61–62) outlines, cinema was introduced to India as part of a broader colonial strategy; an imported spectacle that initially served imperial propaganda. Since its inception, early Hindi films tended to depict the commonplace and everyday reality of a minor, able-bodied elite (Saldanha, 2002: 341).

The British East India Company's early use of cinematic technologies was not a neutral technological transfer but rather a calculated attempt to reinforce colonial ideologies, to reframe India's past as backward and its future as necessarily tied to British "civilising" missions (Rajadhyaksha, 2016: 10). In this context, the medium of film carried the same discursive weight as written colonial historiography, but with the additional affective power of spectacle and mass accessibility (Mathur, 2007: 29). This context is essential to comprehending why the medium has historically portrayed disability as a sign of moral or karmic failure, and how this portrayal was incorporated into colonial narratives that associated physical difference with civilizational inferiority (Gaventa and Newell, 2005: 1377).

2.1.2. Silent Era:

Given the cornerstone of the industry's conception, early Indian filmmakers would thus inherit a medium already laden with moralising frameworks about bodies, ability, and societal value (Virdi, 2003: 6). However, pioneers such as Dadasaheb Phalke rapidly sought to indigenise this imported medium, most notably through his production *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the first full-length Hindi film (Rajadhyaksha, 2016: 30). Drawing from Hindu mythological sources, Phalke's film reasserted cultural autonomy at the very moment when British visual narratives sought to deny it (ibid.: 19). Yet, even as Phalke resisted colonial aesthetics, his films, like much of industry, remained steeped in a worldview where physical difference was symbolically charged (ibid.: 67). As Shenoy (2013: 141) notes, during the Silent Era of 1911 to 1930, disabilities were often used as narrative tools to mirror spiritual imbalance or moral punishment. The intertwining of cinematic and mythological traditions meant that early portrayals of disability were almost invariably metaphorical, rooted in deeply entrenched cultural ideas about karma and cosmic justice (see: Feaster et al., 2018: 211). Such depictions were less about the experiences of disabled people and more about reinforcing religio-moral order, suggesting that suffering and impairment were inevitable consequences of past misdeeds (Gawande and Kashyap, 2017: 54). This early cinematic deployment of disability reveals the extent to which visual culture was implicated in broader religious and ethical systems of meaning-making. Rather than offering radical new representations, Silent films largely echoed the socio-religious common sense of their time (Vasudevan, 1994: 95). Moreover, because literacy rates of the period were low, particularly in rural areas, Hindi film became one of the most potent vehicles for reinforcing these traditional notions of disability (Eleftheriotis, 2006: 104). In privileging disability as karmic punishment, early Hindi films contributed to a cultural script that naturalised social exclusion and minimised bodily agency (Grover, 2023: 206). Thus, from its earliest phase, Hindi film reflected and reinforced a disablist religio-cultural economy of viewership (Gorai and Rai, 2024: 164).

2.1.3. Golden Age:

I now move on to the Golden Age of Hindi film, roughly spanning the 1940s to the 1960s, which coincided with the nation's most intense political transformation.

India's independence from Britain in 1947 unleashed a wave of nationalist cultural production, with cinema positioned as a key instrument for constructing a sense of unified national identity out of the subcontinent's overwhelming ethnoreligious diversity (Vasudevan, 1996: 61). Jawaharlal Nehru's often-cited vision of "unity in diversity" (see: Nehru, 1946) provided this ideological scaffolding for filmmakers, who were tasked with narrating a story of modern India in a medium accessible to all its citizens (Mahaan, 2023). Disability, however, remained conspicuously marginalised within this new national imaginary (Parekh, 2008: 187). Although Hindi film narratives from this period often emphasised collective struggle, resilience, and hope, disabled characters were primarily relegated to sentimentalised background roles, embodying personal rather than collective suffering (Team Abir, n.d.). Though progressive in many respects, films by iconic directors of their time, such as Raj Kapoor and Bimal Roy, often resorted to using disability simply to elicit pathos (Bawa, 2018: 4961). Disabled characters were frequently portrayed as victims of cruel fate, deserving of pity rather than systemic justice. This narrative move had significant ideological consequences (Misra, 2016: 189). By portraying disability as an apolitical private suffering, Golden Age films subtly aligned with Nehruvian developmentalism, while focusing overwhelmingly on economic modernisation and infrastructural development, often to the exclusion of marginalised bodies (see: Goswami, 2023: 2).

2.1.4. Indian New Wave:

Alongside the prevailing cinematic style of the Golden Age, the West Bengali 'Parallel Cinema' movement, also known as the 'Indian New Wave', arose (Sodhil, 2019: 79). Spearheaded by visionary filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak this movement paved the way for the modern Hindi social film (Sodhil, 2019: 80). These filmmakers explicitly rejected the glossy escapism of mainstream Hindi productions of their time in favour of a more realist, socially conscious aesthetic (Biswas, 1999: 1–2). Films like Ray's *Aparajito* (1956) and Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) depicted marginalised characters with a degree of psychological depth and political nicety rare in regional films of its time (Singh, 2021: 71). In these works, disability was occasionally represented not as karmic punishment but as a symptom of distinct societal dysfunction, poverty, displacement, or familial breakdown (Allemand, 2015:

24). However, even in these richer portrayals, disability was often mobilised metaphorically, symbolising national traumas and existential crises rather than being explored as an experience in its own right (Ray, 2024: 118). As Prasad (1998: 36) notes, even the radical aesthetics of Parallel Cinema were not immune to bourgeois moral frameworks that deeply entrenched disabling assumptions within Indian film production.

2.1.5. Classic Era:

The Classic “Bollywood” Era of the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a further ossification of disability tropes, albeit now within an increasingly commercialised and melodramatic narrative structure. As Das (2010: 142) observes, this period was dominated by the “morality model” of disability, wherein physical impairments served as visual shorthand for internal moral failure or deviance. Disabled villains, in particular, became a recurring motif, their bodily abnormalities serving as external manifestations of internal corruption (Das and Bhattacharjee 2022: 822). I note, however, that films like director Ramesh Sippy’s *Sholay* (1975), the biggest box office hit of this period and heavily influenced by the Indian New Wave, somewhat complicate this framework. This is observed by the protagonist Thakur Baldev Singh, played by Sanjeev Kumar, who was portrayed as a tragic hero rather than a villain. This film was the first instance in the genre where a disabled character played the leading protagonist role (Shukla, 2023: 80). That said, the dominant trend remained where disability equated to narrative and karmic punishment (Mohan et al., 2022: 207). This cinematic coding of disability reveals deep anxieties about bodily integrity and social order in a period marked by political upheaval, including the ‘Emergency’ of 1975 to 1977 and growing social unrest (see: Bhasthi, 2024). Disabled bodies in Hindi films of the period, therefore, became sites upon which these anxieties were projected and contained (Rajadhyaksha, 2009: 96). Goswami (2023: 4) notes that disabled characters were often depicted as ostracised and marginalised within narrative worlds and the moral imagination of the audience. Their suffering was individualised, and so, their agency was minimised. In effect, Classic Hindi film consolidated a social consensus in which disabled bodies were viewed as pitiable or malicious threats to social harmony (Mishra, 2009: 441).

2.1.6. New Bollywood Era:

By the 1990s, a new set of representational possibilities emerged, catalysed by India's economic liberalisation and the increasing penetration of global media influences (Punathambekar, 2013: 116). The 'New Bollywood' Era saw Indian filmmakers increasingly exposed to Western cinematic traditions, notably Hollywood's depictions of disability (Boray, 2001: 3–5). As Ghai (2012: 270) explains, the "medical model" of disability, framing impairment as a technical problem requiring medical intervention, began to infiltrate Hindi film narratives. However, the importation of the medical model did not entirely displace older karmic frameworks. Instead, as Ghai (*ibid.*: 279) argues, Hindi films of this period often blended Western medical discourses with indigenous spiritual narratives, producing a hybrid representational economy. In this way, disability could be both a past-life punishment and a current-life medical problem, requiring both spiritual redemption and scientific cure. This hybridity complicates any simplistic narratives of linear progress; instead, it underscores the messy entanglements of tradition and modernity within Indian cultural production. Ellcessor et al. (2017: 3) suggest that the increased visibility of disabled characters during this period coincided with broader global trends toward disability rights and inclusion. Yet visibility alone did not guarantee positive representation. Indeed, New Era films often framed disability as an archetypal character's "struggle" to be heroically overcome, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and individual perseverance while ignoring systemic barriers and collective responsibilities towards this group (Singh and House, 2010: 14). "In doing so, making disability the loci of [perceived] realism, resonance and reflexivity for audiences' affective engagement" (Sinha, 2024: 729).

In Ganti's (2020: 199) analysis, the New Bollywood Era indeed earns the label 'Old', as it consistently delivered underdeveloped characters, predictable narrative progressions, and struggled to create new engagement among audiences due to its unrealistic and unrelatable elements.

2.1.7. 'Social' Era:

Following 2006, Hindi films' engagement with disability further evolved, reflecting

broader societal shifts and emerging global discourses around human rights and representation (Shekhar and Sahani, 2024: 182). The growing influence of international disability activism and changing audience expectations prompted Hindi films to adopt distinct, albeit problematic, portrayals (Dhandhukia, 2023: 153). Fraser (2016: 11, 105) notes that films during this period began to shift away from using disability as a plot device towards a more deliberate effort to raise awareness about specific impairments. Titles such as *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) exemplified this new orientation, where dyslexia was foregrounded not as a moral failing but as a different cognitive mode that deserved recognition and support (Chakravarty, 2009: 102). However, even these well-meaning projects were not immune to underlying, disabling assumptions. The narrative arc typically centred on the rehabilitation or 'saving' of the disabled person, often by a charismatic able-bodied saviour, thereby reinforcing hierarchical relationships between the disabled and non-disabled (Goswami 2024: 341). Quayson (2007: 10–14) notes that despite these shifts, the basic metaphorical economy remained intact; disability continued to serve as a stand-in for more significant social anxieties about failure, deviance, and redemption. In this sense, Hindi films' post-2006 disability narratives mirrored patterns within global popular culture, where disability functions as a flexible symbol that can be mobilised for a range of emotional effects, from inspiration to horror (Cheyne, 2019: 7). Kanani (2014: 11) and Longmore (2001: 15) further emphasise that by continually framing disability as a narrative device rather than an ontological reality, films, like the Hindi film medium, risk reinforcing rather than dismantling societal prejudices. The aesthetic of sympathy, however well-intentioned, can easily slide into the aesthetic of pity, maintaining disabled people in a position of dependency rather than empowerment (Rasgotra and Vats, 2017: 6).

A significant representational shift during this period was the increasing reliance on comedy and the hero-villain archetype to frame disabled characters. Shenoy (2013: 2–4) highlights the sheer number of post-2006 productions that depict disability as tragic or inspirational, as well as a source of humour or eccentricity. While this move diversified the emotional registers through which disability could be portrayed, it also risked trivialising the experiences of disabled people. As Garland-Thomson (2005: 3)

observes, the use of comedic tropes often re-inscribes notions of the disabled body as abnormal and laughable, echoing long-standing traditions in Western and Indian popular culture where physical difference is rendered into spectacle for the entertainment of the able-bodied gaze. This phenomenon of “enfreakment” or virtual staring, as Haller (1999: 15) describes, has deep roots in global visual culture, stemming from early Western fascination with freak shows and grotesque displays of disability as seen in the film *Freaks* (1932). The Hindi Social Era’s adoption of similar representational strategies underscores the transnational circulation of these ableist visual economies (see: Nowicki, 2019: 26). The disabled character, whether presented as pitiable, comedic, or villainous, remained fundamentally ‘othered’, positioned outside the norms of able-bodied citizenship and subjected to forms of symbolic containment. These narrative patterns reveal the difficulty of achieving representational inclusivity within the cinematic traditions of this period, as they invested in idealised bodily perfection as a marker of moral and social worth.

The romanticisation of disability also emerged as another significant trend in the mid-2010s, mediating shifts in the emotional and thematic repertoire of Hindi social films. Films such as *Bangalore Days* (2014) and *Peranbu* (2019) have attempted to move beyond the binaries of pity and villainy by portraying disabled characters as complex individuals capable of love, desire, and agency. Augustine and Abhaydev (2023: 52) note that these films linked disability with broader narratives of female empowerment, suggesting a more intersectional approach to representation. Notably, disabled female characters were portrayed as struggling against physical limitations alongside societal prejudices around gender, sexuality, and capability (ibid.: 51). However, these portrayals were not without critique. Dawn (2023: 17) argues that such romanticisation often risks replacing one form of objectification with another, and by framing disabled people as hyper-sympathetic or morally superior beings, Hindi social films of this period inadvertently stripped their representational characters of ordinary human complexity.

The “supercrip” trope, wherein disabled characters must demonstrate extraordinary virtues or achievements to be deemed worthy of respect, remained a pervasive undercurrent in the medium (Chetan and Ranganathan, 2025: 306). Further, as

Sundar (2006) critiques, Hindi films were particularly negligent in addressing the intersections between disability and sexuality in this period. When disabled characters were portrayed as sexual beings, it was often through male protagonists, reinforcing heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions about desirability and agency (Malinowska, 2018: 373). Chatterjee (2016: 18) observes that while these representations varied across disability types, there remained a consistent tendency to infantilise disabled characters as either innocent, asexual, or emotionally pure. Consequently, this narrative pattern served to desexualise disabled people, denying them participation in the worlds of romance and intimacy.

Thus, even as the thematic scope of disability narratives expanded in the 2010s, representational pitfalls persisted. Mohapatra (2012: 131) describes this ambivalence, noting that depictions of disability in Hindi films oscillate between pity and heroism, caricature and sympathy, often failing to capture the mundane and complex realities of disabled life. This oscillation mirrors wide-ranging societal attitudes toward disability in India, where moments of progressive advocacy coexist uneasily with entrenched disablism and exclusion (Berry and Dalal, 1996: 9).

The increased visibility of disabled characters during this period must also be contextualised within more significant political and legal developments. The 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) marked a global turning point in disability advocacy, establishing a framework for recognising disabled people as full rights-bearing citizens. India's 2007 ratification of the UNCRPD and the subsequent passage of the 2016 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWDA) created a new legal and moral landscape for disability representation. Mahaseth (2019) argues that modern Hindi social films like *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* (2005) helped shift public perceptions of disability, contributing to the cultural momentum that made such legal reforms possible. However, Tiwari (2022: 4850) cautions that while public disability discourse has become more progressive, filmic representations have often lagged behind their legislative ideals.

Moreover, Saha (2017: 141) highlights the sporadic nature of positively received disability portrayals, emphasising that they are usually the result of individual directorial vision rather than systemic industry change. In this context, directors like

Sanjay Leela Bhansali, who consistently engaged with themes of disability in films such as *Khamoshi* (1996), *Black* (2005), and *Guzaarish* (2010), stand out as exceptions rather than the rule. Bhansali's work illustrates how disability can be integrated into complex, emotionally rich narratives that neither fetishise nor marginalise disabled characters (Prakash, 2024: 2552). Yet even in these more refined portrayals, critiques persist regarding the framing of disability as an aestheticised condition, designed to elicit emotional response rather than to represent lived realities authentically (ibid.: 2551).

Compounding these representational challenges is the increasing politicisation of Hindi films under the influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since the mid-2010s. Banerjee (2019) argues that Hindi films have increasingly become a vehicle for propagating right-wing nationalist ideologies, with disability representation shaped accordingly. Campbell (2008: II) notes that these constructions of normalcy serve dominant political interests by reinforcing ideals of national strength, self-sufficiency, and bodily integrity. In an Era when muscular nationalism and idealised able-bodiedness are valorised, disabled characters risk being recoded as symbols of deficiency and threat, or, at best, patsies to nationalistic sentiment.

Thus, while the contemporary period has witnessed essential advances in disability representation, it has also revealed new fault lines and contradictions. The struggle for authentic, empowering, and diverse portrayals of disability within Hindi film, therefore, remains ongoing, shaped by the interplay of cultural traditions, political forces, market logics, and activist interventions.

2.1.8. The Modern Hindi Social:

Shaped by India's prevailing political climate, the late 2010s and early 2020s are a period of complex evolution in how Hindi films portrayed disability and how these portrayals were received, a dynamic that this thesis seeks to document. While the earlier Social Era of Hindi films saw a shift towards raising awareness and showcasing the struggles of disabled groups, the primary influence in this more recent period is the nationalist ideology of India's ruling party (see: Sidhu and Rushmeen, 2024). This has resulted in blending narrative tropes from earlier film Eras with a discernible,

though perhaps not always explicit, effort to represent disability in ways that align with dominant government views, as I discuss in further detail in Chapter 8.

While scholarship on disability representation in this period of Hindi film is limited, a central discussion in this thesis examines the conceptual shift of *Viklang* in early 2010s portrayals to *Divyangjan* from the late 2010s onwards. As highlighted earlier, Hindi films, whether seeking to escape differing representational models, rely on a social/moral and karmic hybrid model of disability representation. This framing, in essence, aligns with the Indian concept of “viklang, which translates to ‘one who has an inferior or useless limb/organ’” (Dhillon and Bhattacharya, 2025: 470). The onscreen personification of viklang reflected both the societal perception of and engagement with disabled people in India, as Gawande and Kashyap (2017: 55) point out, and consequently mirrored the imaginaries of the directors who conceived these portrayals. Despite international advocacy through the UNCRPD, onscreen interference in disability persisted, and as I discuss further in Chapters 4, 7, and 8, the portrayal of disability as viklang remained the dominant cinematic norm.

2015 marked a turning point, with the representational narrative shifting from the inferior viklang to the concept of divyang, meaning “God-like or something uniquely superior”, to counter societal discrimination and dejection towards disabled people (Jain, 2024: 232). In these contexts, ‘God-like’ would refer to a reimagining of the limbs of disabled people as synonymous with the divinities of deities from the Hindu religious pantheon (see: Mahabharata, XII.290, 67, Trans. Debroy). I argue that this legal mandate, primarily driven by India’s current ruling party and without significant academic scrutiny of its effects, profoundly impacts the Hindi film industry’s portrayal of disability in the contemporary Era. Therefore, this Era of Hindi film marks a fascinating juncture where the ongoing struggle for authentic and empowering disability representation intersects with the reimagining of older tropes in a modern, politically charged context.

2.2. Contemporary Receptions:

Having established how the modern Hindi social film’s depiction of disability has evolved through the co-option of representational models since the British Raj, I now

explore how Indian audiences and the South Asian diaspora both receive these portrayals.

2.2.1. Regional:

Concerning its contemporary reception, Venkatesan et al. (2015: 107) explore how disability is represented in modern Hindi social films, through group discussions with twenty-seven non-disabled Indian students. Their analysis focused on how participants received selected contemporary films, examining aspects such as the speed and length of participant recall, the main themes they identified in the content, their attitudes towards disability, and the presence of clichés and stereotypes mentioned. The study also analysed the attributes viewers associated with film characters with disabilities based on significant thematic findings. The researchers found that female participants primarily remembered portrayals of mental illness, often linked with expressions of pity or sympathy. In contrast, male participants tended to recall physical disabilities, frequently associating them with narratives of struggle or defeat. The findings further indicated that viewers perceived disability portrayals in the selected films in a largely negative, struggling, anguished, or aggrieved manner, reinforcing preconceived notions of the disabled experience as inherently tragic. This pattern of reception suggests that, despite growing international discourses around disability rights and representation, modern Hindi social films continue to present disability through emotionally loaded but reductive tropes. Although noteworthy, the study did not consider the effect of disabled people's views on the medium, thus limiting its scope in understanding the full spectrum of audience reception. Nevertheless, it proves a strong basis for the methods used, establishing a foundational approach for further reception studies in Indian and diasporic contexts. The absence of disabled participants' perspectives leaves a significant gap that underscores a critical tension in Disability Studies more broadly; the frequent marginalisation of disabled voices even in research ostensibly focused on their representation (see: Charmaz, 2008: 17).

Except for Venkatesan et al. (2015), very few studies have addressed the reception of disability in this genre or medium, particularly outside its production region. This lack

of scholarly engagement points to the marginalisation of Reception Studies within Hindi film scholarship, where production and text-based analyses have traditionally dominated (Dudrah, 2006: 22). It also indicates the relative novelty of Reception Theory in non-Western contexts, mainly as applied to issues of disability and media. Further, the paucity of research signals a structural problem within the Indian and diasporic film industries themselves, where disabled audiences remain largely invisible both as consumers and as subjects worthy of critical engagement. This gap moreover highlights broader societal exclusion and reveals a significant opportunity for interdisciplinary research that bridges Film Studies, Disability Studies, and Cultural Sociology. Reception Studies, especially those involving diverse disabled perspectives, are vital to understanding how filmic representations reinforce, resist, or transform social attitudes toward disability.

Friedner (2017: 360) addresses this limitation by shifting their analytical gaze towards the reception of disability representation among the everyday disabled Indian labourer. In doing so, Friedner offers a necessary corrective to earlier studies focusing exclusively on non-disabled audiences. Friedner argues that modern Hindi social film, influenced by the political climate, exploits the apolitical perception of “being disabled” to use disability representation as “a form of non-threatening ‘feel good’ diversity”, designed to control public perception of disability (ibid.: 359). This strategic deployment of affect illustrates how disability is commodified within a neoliberal framework where diversity is celebrated superficially without challenging underlying structural inequalities. The ‘feel-good’ affect attached to cinematic disability narratives, according to Friedner, fundamentally serves to depoliticise disability, transforming it from a site of struggle into a consumable narrative of individual triumph. In this sense, Friedner’s work highlights how modern Hindi films do not just reflect societal attitudes but actively shape and constrain the ways disability can be imagined within the public sphere. This affective process, Friedner contends, is part of expansive political mechanisms that control public views, in which idealised national values are imagined, transmitted by producers, and reimagined through media consumption. Modern Hindi social film, as Friedner infers,

becomes a key conduit through which ideological formations around bodily integrity and citizenship are naturalised.

Friedner further argues that by doing so, viewers are presented with the impression that the success of disabled characters seen onscreen is conducive to “the success of the nation” (ibid.: 351). The triumph of the disabled subject can thus be rearticulated as the triumph of the Indian nation-state, neatly aligning narratives of personal overcoming with nationalist projects. This linkage illustrates how seemingly apolitical filmic texts are deeply entwined in state-building exercises, particularly in postcolonial societies where film industries play a pivotal role in shaping collective imaginaries. Friedner’s analysis thereby challenges traditional models of passive media consumption, revealing instead a dynamic circuit of meaning-making in which films, audiences, and state ideologies interact in complex, often contradictory ways. Friedner’s main contention, therefore, is that India’s cinematic apparatus exploits the Nehruvian apolitical perception of being disabled to suppress discussions about the current state of disabled people’s lives (ibid.: 349). By consistently framing disability as an individualised problem requiring personal resilience rather than collective systemic change, modern Hindi social films depoliticise disability discourse and marginalise activism. This approach aligns with wide-ranging neoliberal logics that emphasise individual responsibility over structural critique, further entrenching the invisibility of disabled people’s political agency (Williams, 2024: 13). In considering the role of disability activism in national social and political preoccupations, Friedner’s work illustrates how Indian film industries, mainly modern Hindi social films, have become receptional tools of the state, quelling disability activism through carefully curated depictions of disabled people’s lives. Thus, filmic representation becomes a form of soft power through which the state disciplines public consciousness about disability matters (Henry and Saini, 2024: 30). This phenomenon is illustrated by Chatterjee (2016: 12), who highlights that the intended message received in these films is that, for a disabled character to thrive in their life onscreen, they must first become independent for society to accept them. The valorisation of independence reflects the entrenched neoliberal ideals prioritising self-sufficiency and economic productivity as prerequisites for social inclusion.

Consequently, “in the Era of consumerism, corporate greed, and corruption, it seems [...] disabled people have turned their disabilities into strengths in a world of perfect beauty achieved through simplicity” (ibid.: 21).

Conversely, Therwath (2010: 3003) argues that modern Hindi social films allow viewers to study caricatures of themselves, which paradoxically dictate patterns of normality and act as agents of social engineering. This reflexive process reveals that media consumption is not a passive act, but an active process of identity formation and a site of regulation. Through the repetitive portrayal of normalised bodies and behaviours, modern Hindi social films create aspirational models of citizenship that audiences are encouraged to internalise. Using this reverse-Nehruvian mechanism of politicising the apparently unpolitical, the BJP employs modern Hindi social films to deliver messages that prompt the masses to confront the party’s ideologies and deviate from group norms (see: Hussain, 2020).

This strategic deployment of disability narratives demonstrates the malleability of film as a tool for ideological reconfiguration, subtly shifting public sentiment without resorting to overt propaganda (Keith and Dalley, 1992: 191). It highlights how disability representation, far from being an isolated cultural phenomenon, is deeply enmeshed in broader governance and nation-building processes. Thus, the xenophobic Hindu nationalism evident in modern Hindi films underscores the need to examine the connections between social behaviours and spectatorship (Mankekar, 2000: 311). The politicisation of modern Hindi social films, therefore, highlights the extent to which media shapes not just attitudes toward disability but also eclectic conceptions of national identity, belonging, and exclusion. The BJP’s influence extends beyond nationalism; by appointing members to the CBFC under Article 53(1) of the ninety-ninth ratification of the Indian Constitution, the BJP effectively controls the release of films perpetuating disability narratives. This institutional control over film media allows the state to manage the symbolic economy of disability, ensuring that only depoliticised, feel-good representations reach mass audiences. They do so to subtly manipulate nationalist and neoliberal social agendas by depicting disabled people as apolitical beings on society’s fringes, thus reinforcing dominant narratives of normalcy and productivity. The BJP, further, continues to exercise regional power over

the Hindi film industry to create the illusion of progress on disability rights, despite the absence of disabled people in production and the lack of tangible improvements in their lives. The creation of cinematic spectacles of empowerment without corresponding material changes on the ground reveals this disjuncture between filmic representation and lived reality. While Mohapatra (2012) suggests that modern Hindi social films' portrayal of disability has evolved to be more inclusive and sympathetic, despite the reception of a range of competing historical, religious, and comedic tropes, this analysis, building on Friedner's (2017) concept of feel-good diversity, reveals a different reality. What I contend is that the Hindi film industry does not portray disability to educate or promote inclusion, but rather to manipulate public perception of how disability is received to align with prevailing dis-political views. The resulting dissonance between representation and reality thus challenges any simplistic celebration of increased visibility of disability onscreen as inherently progressive. Friedner reminds us that any study of modern Hindi social films' reception should not, or dare I say, cannot, ignore the socio-political workings that control the medium.

2.2.1. Diaspora:

Modern Hindi social films, much like their traditional counterparts, continue to play a pivotal role in shaping understandings of national identity and "normative" social behaviour within India (Therwath, 2010: 3001). However, their influence extends far beyond the borders of national or regional film production. In the UK, these films contribute significantly to articulating a transnational identity among the South Asian diaspora (Desai, 2006: 127). The circulation of modern Hindi social film across borders underscores its capacity to shape diasporic consciousness and foster cultural continuity. As Takhar et al. (2012: 226) argue, these films communicate a renewed sense of "Indian-ness" to diasporic audiences, an identity constructed less through legal citizenship and more through imagined community and shared cultural memory. This process highlights the critical role of media consumption in identity formation, where Hindi film functions as a form through which diasporic individuals and their communities negotiate belonging and self-representation. While the precise mechanisms through which Hindi film cultivates this diasporic awareness

remain debatable, its affective and symbolic impact is well recognised (Vertovec, 1997: 278). In this context, Hindi films often serve as a surrogate homeland, where fragmented identities find emotional cohesion and narrative grounding (Alessandrini, 2001: 329).

Expanding on this understanding, Gillespie's (1995: 2) ethnographic study, which examined Hindi film consumption among the Sikh diaspora in London, demonstrates how these films foster a shared identity that transcends class, regional, and religious divisions. Their findings show that the scarcity of authentic South Asian representation in Western media has led diasporic audiences to turn to Hindi film for cultural affirmation. This lack of representation amplifies the symbolic value of Hindi films, transforming them into a vital resource for community building and cultural continuity. Although Gillespie's research does not explicitly address disability, their observations on media identification and collective identity are nonetheless key. They raise critical questions regarding how disabled members of the diaspora might engage with, interpret, or even challenge the portrayals of disability within this filmic tradition.

Since 2006, the advent of the Social Era of Hindi film has further amplified this significance, ushering in a new wave of popularity among UK-based South Asian audiences. According to Dudrah (2002: 22), earlier waves of consumption emerged during the late 1990s, when mainstream UK film distributors began tapping into the growing British South Asian market. This period of heightened visibility gave rise to a new form of 'diasporic consciousness' around media consumption (ibid.: 24). A notable peak occurred in the early 2000s, often referred to as the 'Indian Summer', which represented one of the most concerted efforts to showcase Indian culture globally (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 2004: 50). Remarkably, Hindi films were outperforming British productions at the UK box office at this time (Hindustan Times, 2006), indicating not just their entertainment value but their deep cultural resonance among diasporic audiences. Therefore, the commercial success of these films reveals the depth of diasporic investment in modern Hindi social films, transforming it into a significant cultural industry within the UK itself (Thussu, 2008: 104).

By 2016, the UK had emerged as the second-largest international market for Hindi films, with several titles consistently appearing in the UK box-office top ten (VisitBritain, 2016). This substantial viewership has influenced production decisions within the industry, as filmmakers increasingly tailor content to the tastes and preferences of diasporic audiences (see: Lee, 2007). As Novak (2010: 40) observes, the Hindi film industry's global reach has extended far beyond South Asia, connecting with diverse audiences worldwide. Yet, for the diaspora specifically, the affective bond with modern Hindi social films runs deeper, serving as a cultural anchor that links diasporic lives to a shared imaginary of the homeland (Mohammad, 2007: 1018). As Desai et al. (2005: 121) explain, Hindi social films act as conduits for the flow of economic, cultural, and emotional ties between India and its global diaspora.

Despite the growing scholarship on diasporic viewership and disability representation in modern Hindi films, there remains a notable gap concerning how disabled people within the diaspora receive and interpret these portrayals. This research addresses that gap in LBN, where diasporic identity politics, accessibility, and representation intersect in unique and complex ways. Desai et al. (ibid.: 116) highlight that diasporic audiences do not passively consume these films. Instead, they engage actively with their emotional, cultural, and ideological content. As Banaji (2011: 5) highlights, viewers often draw upon personal and communal experiences to make sense of these narratives presented on screen. For diasporic and disabled viewers, this interpretive process is further layered by the intersection of race, culture, and disability (Parekh, 2008: 184). These subdivisions become particularly key when modern Hindi social films rely on conventional tropes of pity, moral triumph, or redemption to depict disabled characters as previously described. Thus, by foregrounding the voices of disabled diasporic viewers, this study contributes to a broader reimagining of both disability representation and diasporic identity. Consequently, comprehending diasporic reception of disability in modern Hindi social film requires close attention to the cultural, familial, and political contexts that shape how films are watched, discussed, and remembered. After all, it is through these interpretive practices that new forms of cultural belonging and resistance develop (Takhar et al., 2012: 272).

2.3. Conclusions:

The reflections on existing authorship presented throughout this chapter demonstrate that modern Hindi social films maintain a deeply embedded relationship with their evolving portrayals of disability in their production locality. This relationship is neither incidental nor superficial but is intrinsic to how these films negotiate national identity, social anxieties, and the expansive politics of disability representation. Emerging from a complex history of cinematic nation-building, religious moralism, and neoliberal realignments, Hindi social films have consistently reflected the shifting contours of Indian society's engagement with marginalised bodies.

The production locality, defined broadly as India's specific socio-cultural, political, and economic context, has also played a decisive role in shaping how disability has been depicted on screen. From the early mythologically inflected Silent films to the karmic narratives of the Golden Age and the morality-driven stereotypes of the Classic Era, disability has been a powerful visual shorthand through which social, spiritual, and political anxieties have been negotiated. Even in the contemporary period, with the influence of global human rights discourses and disability activism, modern Hindi social films often straddle a tension between progressive inclusion and entrenched disability tropes. Rather than abandoning older frameworks entirely, the Hindi industry has selectively incorporated newer disability narratives, producing a hybrid representational regime where traditional religious imagery, neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency, and rights-based discourses coexist, sometimes uneasily, within these cinematic texts.

The localised production context has also shaped the intended affective economy surrounding disability representations. As discussed through the work of Friedner (2017), disability is often mobilised within modern Hindi social films as a form of 'feel-good diversity', a non-threatening marker of difference that aligns neatly with state-sanctioned projects of nationalism and neoliberalism. This process has been acutely political, although it has often been framed as apolitical. By producing sanitised, uplifting narratives of individual overcoming, modern Hindi social films

subtly reinforce the broader societal expectation that disabled people must transcend their impairments through personal willpower rather than through collective structural change. These narratives thus serve to naturalise prevailing inequalities, positioning the success of disabled characters as metonymic for the success of the Indian nation itself, while sidelining the persistent systemic barriers that many disabled people continue to experience.

The reception and engagement of the modern Hindi social film genre within India itself mirrors this complex interplay between representation and ideology. Venkatesan et al. (2015) reveal that Indian audiences, particularly non-disabled viewers, continue to receive Hindi film portrayals of disability through lenses of pity, sympathy, and tragedy. Although there is some evidence of growing awareness and critical reflection among younger viewers, the predominance of emotionally reductive responses suggests that the structural framing of disability as personal misfortune rather than systemic injustice remains largely intact in public consciousness. Moreover, as Friedner (2017) highlights, disabled audiences within India perceive modern Hindi social disability portrayals with a critical awareness of the gap between onscreen fantasy and their everyday lived realities. For many, modern Hindi social films' selective visibility of disabled lives functions as a means of pacification rather than genuine empowerment, offering feel-good narratives that mask the deeper exclusions of disabled viewers from their social and economic participation.

This dual function of modern Hindi social films as both a mirror and a manager of societal attitudes extends beyond India's borders into diasporic contexts. The reception of modern Hindi social films in the UK has been marked by enthusiastic engagement across diverse South Asian communities, as well as complex processes of identity negotiation. As Dudrah (2001) and Gillespie (1995) demonstrate, Hindi films have long served as crucial cultural touchstones for diasporic audiences, offering a sense of belonging and continuity amidst the dislocations of migration and multiculturalism. With their increasing emphasis on social issues, modern Hindi social films have only deepened this role, functioning twofold as entertainment and as a site for articulating transnational solidarities and critiques.

However, the engagement with disability-themed Hindi social films in the UK reveals its own set of tensions and blind spots. While the global circulation of modern Hindi social films has enabled wider conversations around inclusion, there remains a striking paucity of research on how disabled diasporic audiences interact with and interpret these narratives. Much of the existing literature on diasporic modern Hindi social reception, as I discuss further in Chapter 3.2, focuses either on general identity formation or on issues of ethnicity and nationalism, often neglecting disability as a critical axis of analysis. As noted throughout this chapter, scholars such as Venkatesan et al. (2015), Saha (2017), and Friedner (2017) have made significant contributions to understanding the reception of disability in Indian contexts. Still, there is very little systematic research that centres the experiences and interpretations of disabled viewers within diasporic communities.

This gap in the literature is particularly significant, given the demographic and cultural importance of the UK as a central hub for Hindi social film production and consumption (Dastidar and Elliott, 2020: 102). As reported by FICCI and EY (2018), the UK contributes substantially to the Hindi film industry's international revenue, underscoring the economic imperative for understanding its diverse audience engagements. Yet, beyond questions of physical access (see: Rai, 2009), there remains a critical need to explore the interpretive dimensions of disabled audiences' engagement and how they emotionally, cognitively, and socially respond to the cinematic narratives that purport to represent aspects of their experiences with disability. This study, therefore, emerges from the recognition of this critical gap. It seeks to centre the voices and perspectives of diasporic disabled modern Hindi social viewers, exploring how they receive and interpret disability-themed content, and how these engagements intersect with varied questions of identity, belonging, and resistance. As the Hindi film industry increasingly positions itself as a global cultural powerhouse, its responsibility to diverse audiences becomes all the more pressing.

In conclusion, the modern Hindi social film genre's relationship to its production locality and its evolving portrayals of disability reflects a complex interplay of tradition, modernity, nationalism, and neoliberalism. While the genre has made

significant strides in moving beyond older, stigmatising portrayals of disability, its representational politics remain fraught, often oscillating between genuine attempts at inclusion and subtle forms of depoliticisation and containment. The reception of these films within India and the UK further illustrates how cinematic representations of disability are interpreted through diverse cultural, emotional, and ideological frameworks, shaped by both local and transnational contexts.

Yet, despite the growing body of scholarship on Hindi films' global circulations and their engagement with social issues, a critical lack of research remains on how disabled audiences receive and interpret these films. Addressing this gap is not only an academic necessity but a political and ethical imperative, particularly in an Era where questions of filmic representation, accessibility, and inclusion are increasingly central to cultural discourse (Patel, 2024: 43). This study, by foregrounding disabled viewers' experiences, therefore, aims to contribute meaningfully to these ongoing conversations, offering new insights into the possibilities and limitations of filmic representation in shaping social imaginaries.

Having established the historical context, representational dynamics, and reception patterns of modern Hindi social films concerning disability, this thesis now turns to a more detailed theoretical engagement. By grounding the research within a robust hypothetical landscape, the study seeks to develop a rigorous, interdisciplinary lens to analyse the complex relationships between disability representation, diasporic identity, and modern Hindi social film engagement. The next chapter will explore the theories and conceptual frameworks that underpin this study, including approaches from Disability Studies, Diaspora theory, and Audience Reception Theory.

Chapter 3 – Hindi Social Films and UK Disabled Viewers: A Literature Review.

3.0. Introduction:

The previous chapter provided an overview of the evolution of Hindi social films featuring disability and their known reception by disabled and non-disabled audiences. In this chapter, I discuss interconnected concepts from Reception, Diaspora and Disability Studies to establish a theoretical framework for this research and further contextualise the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.5.

The chapter commences by examining relevant Reception Studies theories on how diasporic viewers engage with modern Hindi social films. Theories of joint action, affect, and spectatorship are explored, arguing for a form of affective spectatorship involved in the group viewing of these films, particularly among mixed audiences comprising both disabled and non-disabled people. This perspective emphasises the viewer's active participation in meaning-making rather than their passive reception of the intended messages in films they consume. Drawing on Prasad's (2009) concept of constructing film spectators as subjects and Ahmed's (2014) exploration of affective states, this study examines how the subject matter of disability, as perceived by audiences, can collectively shape their viewership. I then explore the role of the star system in the success of Hindi films in the UK and other relevant reception theories. Most prominent among these is Dudrah's (2006: 21–46) sociological perspective on analysing modern Hindi social film patterns, including their storylines, characters, and the impact on diasporic audiences.

Moving to Diaspora Studies, the literature highlights the unambiguous influence of modern Hindi social films on the UK's South Asian diaspora. I highlight how the medium serves as a way for diasporic communities to connect with their homeland, preserve cultural heritage, and negotiate their identities. I further explore Mohammad's (2007) assertion that this form of viewership is rooted in the multiple oppressions faced by these groups in the UK. I then explore how modern Hindi social films have evolved to cater to these diasporas, including hosting and thematising

productions in the UK. The imagined image of the diasporic viewer is also shifting in the countries of production and export, which I document in this chapter. This shifting imaginary, as I demonstrate, highlights that the consumption of this medium is inherently a socio-political process, involving dialogue, negotiation, and debate about identity. In turn, this process supports the cultivation of diasporic identity, disabled or otherwise.

This chapter finally explores Critical Disability and Media Studies in relation to engaging disabled audiences. I highlight the evolution of Disability Studies, which has shifted from viewing disabled people as research subjects to considering them within less oppressive frameworks. However, these fields, as the chapter argues, often overlook the diverse experiences of racially and religiously minoritised groups, who are marginalised by both the majority and by the researcher. To address this, I consider Castrodale and Zingaro's (2015: 1–2) call for interdisciplinary and critically reflective enquiry, involving the participation of all disabled people throughout the research process as a pan-disability endeavour.

3.1. Reception Studies:

According to Artaud (1988: 149), film does not simply tell a story but develops a series of states of mind derived from one another. Artaud describes how, just as one thought is derived from another without this thought reproducing a reasonable sequence of events, so too does film produce a series of states of mind in its viewers. Such states are derived from real psychic, or indeed psychosomatic situations, among which the mind seeks some subtle means of escape. What Artaud attempts to convey is that the states of mind created during film viewing are not simply a series of random thoughts but are connected in ways that are not always consciously obvious. As such, the viewer may not be able to explain why they feel the way they do, but they can still feel the film's emotional impact. Therefore, the objects and gestures seen in the film are not merely props or actions; they are symbols that represent the characters' inner lives. The viewer can see the character's thoughts and emotions reflected in the objects and gestures that they see.

Conversely, Kazmi (1999: 215–6) states that conventional films do not solely reflect

the tangible world but construct a social reality that reinforces the status quo and excludes opposing viewpoints. Flaxman (2016: 180) further elaborates that film viewing requires openness and willingness to be affected by the images presented on screen. When we watch a film, according to Flaxman, we are exposed to a series of images and sounds that can evoke a wide range of affects, which can be powerful and can have a profound impact on the viewer. However, the viewer is also powerless to do anything about these states, as one cannot control how they feel or how the images affect them. The viewer can only experience them. Flaxman argues that this kind of receptivity is essential to the role of film as it allows for a powerful impact on others. Without this receptivity, the film would be another form of entertainment. “Short of closing one’s eyes, [...] or walking out, the experience of cinema lies in ceding perception, in becoming the medium for images that are not our own” (ibid.: 181).

As Staiger (2000: 52) implies, identities informed through spectatorship are shaped by intersecting and contingent aspects of history and experience. Hickey-Moody (2013: 80), drawing on a Deleuzian understanding of affect (see: Deleuze, 2020: 8), considers the role of affect in “the margin of modulation effected by change in capacity”. As such, Hickey-Moody calls for researchers to pay attention to the way texts “facilitate bodily changes by increasing or decreasing a body’s capacity to act” (ibid.: 93). After all, “critique and enjoyment do not preclude each other, and spectatorship, is always an articulation of emotion and rationality, cueing inflexions and readjustments of both politics and identity” (Banaji, 2013: 400). The affective nature of screening films can be articulated further by grounding it in Ahmed’s affect theory who argues that:

Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or drags along. It can be a physical sensation, a sense of atmosphere, or a feeling. Affect is often seen as a private or individual experience, but it is also social and political. Affect can be used to regulate social behaviour, to create and maintain power relations, and to justify political action.

(Ahmed, 2014: 2)

For Ahmed, one’s emotions are not just personal feelings; they are also shaped by our social interactions and relationships, which are influenced by the people around us,

the events we experience, and the culture in which we live. As such, emotions can be used to create and maintain power relations, “often based on stereotypes and misinformation [...] used to justify policies that restrict rights and opportunities” (ibid.: 51). As Banaji (2012: 61) highlights, viewers interpret affect in films in complex and often contradictory ways. Additionally, Plantinga (2006: 85) notes that the elicitation of affect in an audience stands firmly at the core of the film-going experience, influencing the poetics, aesthetics, rhetoric, and ideology of film viewing. Plantinga thus argues that researchers cannot ignore the role of emotion elicitation and affective experience in film viewing if they wish to expand their conception of the poetics of film. Hanich (2014: 352), however, would argue that in film “the fact that the audience remains quiet often functions as a precondition for a synchronised collective experience [...] and hence [...] act jointly and experience something collectively”. That said, this phenomenon is not what is observed through the backdrop of Hindi film viewership. In fact, in the Hindi film audience, whether in India, other countries in the subcontinent, or here in the UK, another experience is observed. “Rather than discovering a coherent ‘diasporic response’ to Hindi films, major differences may be found between the film-viewing contexts and experiences of British Asians from different communities” (Banaji, 2013: 399). “Or is viewing more about the audience than the film, with the films simply slotting into a role designed for them?” (ibid.: 391).

Prasad (1999: 876) supposes that Hindi films have been mainly analysed using Western film theories, which reflect the power and influence of capitalism, Euro-American cultures and their cinematic institutions. As such, Srinivas (2002: 155) observes that “Film Studies in India, guided by a Western bias, appear not to have progressed beyond a reflection hypothesis and effects research”. Indeed, Srinivas notes that traditional models of spectatorship, which view the audience as passive recipients of meaning, are insufficient for understanding Hindi film audiences. Srinivas suggests that these audiences actively participate in meaning-making, bringing their cultural experiences and expectations to the cinema. Gopalan (2012: 399–423) further argues that Hindi films are marked by a unique aesthetic characterised by the “constellation of interruptions”, such as song-and-dance

sequences, flashbacks, subplots, intermissions, and censorship. As such, Golpalan claims that these interruptions challenge the traditional rhythms found in Western media and the dominant nationalist readings of Hindi films in film theory. Instead, they create a new kind of mediated perspective for Indian audiences that transfigures the overlaps between “local” and “global” cultures. Taking due consideration to spectatorship in the Indian context as Srinivas defines above, and Ahmed’s stance on Affect theory, one can comprehend an ‘affective-spectatorship’ whereby Hindi film characterises itself by its emphasis on affect, as a central method to construct its spectators as its subjects (Athique, 2011: 8–9). Such “studies combining audience data or political history and textual discourse find clear patterns within, and connections between film discourses and discourses circulating in viewing communities” (Banaji, 2013: 391).

Alas, the focus of this research departs from traditional industry-centric approaches to Hindi film viewership and spectatorship. Instead, I propose incorporating an auteur-based analysis, arguing that individual directors’ distinctive filmmaking style and vision are more significant cultural signifiers within regional and national contexts. This shift is crucial to transcend the limitations of historical and industrial methods, which often constrain film’s construction and reception to rigid national frameworks (Staiger, 2000: 44). As Elsaesser (2005: 37) aptly notes, focusing on individual auteurs within national film exposes the inadequacy of reductive binaries, such as ‘Hollywood-versus-national’, in defining artistic style. By examining cinematic movements like the ‘German New Wave’ and ‘New German Cinema’, which flourished by critiquing and rebelling against their internal industry norms, Elsaesser highlights the inherent complexity and internal tensions that reside within national film industries themselves. Therefore, we can truly unpack the historical, political, and cultural intricacies of modern Hindi social films and their consumption through situating directors within this dynamic, interconnected framework. Elsaesser’s auteur theory offers a powerful tool for dissecting the complexities of national cinemas, such as Hindi films. It moves beyond the limitations of traditional, industry-centric approaches that often paint national cinemas with a broad brush. Instead, auteurism focuses on individual directors’ unique artistic fingerprints, distinctive

styles, and visions. By examining how these auteurs engage with, subvert, or critique the dominant commercial film industries and broader historical, political, and cultural contexts, we gain a deeper understanding of the internal tensions and dynamics that shape the identity of Hindi films as an international film medium. Building on Elsaesser, Mehta (2018: 9–10) argues that Hindi melodramas, the genre cousin to modern Hindi social films, have unique effects on Indian audiences, which Indian filmmakers intentionally incorporate as part of a regional auteur-style.

Another element of the regional auteur style in Hindi film is the significant role of film stars in diasporic viewership. By positioning these individuals as role models and/or representatives of Indian culture, Hindi films leverage the power of celebrity to engage their audience. As Dwyer and Sengupta (2021: 186) highlight, studying cine-political stardom in Hindi film can provide valuable insights into the social dynamics of fandom and the filmic manifestations of political ambition. As Ebrahim explains:

Bollywood is best understood as referring to a specific set of industrial practices, a particular manifestation of the star system, a distinctive aesthetic, pan-Indian cultural values, an overall entertainment ethos, and an ideological investment in conservative Hindu nationalism.

(ibid.: 2006: 2)

Unlike how fame or stardom are considered in the West, Indian Net Zone (n.d.) highlights that the Indian star system is driven by a combination of factors, including the actors' desire for divine status, the transposition of the secular tradition of hero worship to the screen, and the importance of film in South Asian cultures. Dwyer and Sengupta (2021: 185) contend that these “ingredients produce a heightened stardom enhanced by the two-way scopic regime of ‘darshan’ where the pleasure [experienced by the audience] lies in looking at the star and the feeling of being looked at”. As Chakraborti (2022: 1) contends, Hindi film stars are best understood as living religio-anthropomorphic incarnations in hyperreal simulations that allow capitalism to promote the illusion of wealth and success. To Chakraborti, stardom is a phenomenon in which stars assume the role of living representations of our ideals and aspirations, promoting the capitalist system by creating a sense of possibility and hope. Equally, Chakraborti argues that the interdependent nature between stars and

fans reinforces and normalises these stars as a method for producing social norms (see: Foucault, 1977: 184). To Chakraborti (2022: 5), stardom is a two-way street; the audience creates the stars, and the stars shape the audience.

“Star personae in India are constructed like melodramatic character types partly because of their repeated association with certain roles” (Consolaro, 2014: 30). As such, some of the UK’s most popular non-disabled stars have portrayed over-dramatised disabled characters, including UK household names such as Shahrukh Khan, Aamir Khan, Ranbir Kapoor, Hrithik Roshan, and Priyanka Chopra. As Dyer and McDonald (2019: 12–38) argue, these stars are not merely honest people who have become famous; instead, they are social constructs, carefully conjured, crafted and maintained by media industries to promote particular personas or ideologies for conventional appeal.

There are exceptions to this “physics and metaphysics of stardom” as highlighted by Chakravarty (2013: 199), who proposes that stars like Shahrukh Khan’s success hinges on a unique ability to tap into and express emerging cultural shifts and utilise technological forces. “A close watch suggests characterising persons with disabilities is a kind of cinematic investment with which the filmmakers wanted to reap benefits with its abled-bodied superstar cast” (Kumar, 2019: 241). Thus, it is safe to assume that these able-bodied actors benefit both monetarily and critically when taking on such roles. “This would not be such a big issue if there weren’t an abundance of disabled actors being rejected and not getting hired because of their disability” (Ghosh, 2022b: 4).

To close this trail of thought, Chakravarty (2013: 199) argues that our relationship with stardom must “fade and die”, but that modern technologies and different modes of viewing keep our ties with stardom alive. Chakravarty thus suggests that seeing these together can help us understand our fascination with stardom. However, as this study aims to investigate, it may be appropriate to state that those with access to modern technologies may be more likely to be influenced by the effects of stardom. In contrast, those with unmet access needs in these modes may not experience the same effect.

I now consider cultural transmission's role as a key propagator of disabled people's viewership of Hindi films. According to Zeitlyn and Banks (2015: 86), the dominant voice in individual households typically determines the household's film viewing trends. This would confirm that the dominant household member uses Hindi films to convey their cultural perspective(s) on disability matters to disabled viewers, in a process similar to what Gillespie and Cheesman (2002: 129–130) describe as the familial values transfer of Hindi films to South Asian diasporic groups. The socialisation process I am describing aligns with cultural transmission theory, which suggests that increased integration into a deviant subculture leads to greater adherence to its norms, even if they conflict with broader societal values (Spencer et al., 2022: 23). Further, cultures activities that include contradictory messages are more likely to inadvertently promote deviant paths to culturally valued goals (Nickerson, 2016). In so doing, Mehrotra and Calasanti (2010: 799) argue that by studying the dynamics of cultural transmission among diasporic groups who consider particular ways of 'doing family', one can gain a clearer understanding of the significant distinguishing aspects of their cultural identity and internal oppressions. Thus, "it would be theoretically interesting to see how these groups of migrant consumers pursue intergenerational cultural transmission and how they navigate mythic structures particular to their socio-cultural configurations" (Pradhan, 2020: 227).

I now explore Dudrah's (2006) work on the theoretical development of the sociology of cinema, with a particular focus on the cultural significance of Hindi films to audience reception. Dudrah begins by critiquing the limited attention sociology has initially paid to film, highlighting how early studies in America, such as the Payne Fund Studies, primarily focused on the negative influence of cinema on youth, underscoring "the measurable effects of film on particular social categories of audience" (ibid.: 22). This approach, while pioneering for the time, primarily focused on behavioural impacts rather than the broader social and cultural contexts of film consumption. Dudrah thus traces the evolution of sociological inquiry into film, noting the mass communications paradigm of the 1940s and 1950s, which for the most part stressed a passive audience model, treating audiences as

“undiscriminating dupes who were being injected with, and taking on board, media messages wholesale” (ibid.: 23). However, by the 1960s, structuralist and symbiological approaches emerged, highlighting the textual constitution of subjects, yet neglecting the diversity of audience experiences and broader social contexts (ibid.: 24). Dudrah further highlights the significant contributions of Denzin (1998: 407) in exploring how America became a cinematic culture through filmic representations of race, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, exploring Denzin’s (1991: 60–65) work, Dudrah (2006: 26) draws on the concept of the “sociological imagination”, distinguishing between “personal troubles” and “public issues” and underscoring how films often reflect societal struggles.

Turning to Hindi films, Dudrah critiques Western and Indian scholarly neglect of their sociological dimensions. Dudrah argues that Western critiques often dismissed Hindi films as “escapist fantasy for a mass audience” (ibid.: 26), while early Indian film theory, drawing on Frankfurt School ideas, similarly marginalised popular Hindi films as ideologically deceptive (see: Bottomore, 2002: 7). Dudrah, therefore, calls for a nuanced understanding of Hindi films, emphasising their ideological portrayals, audience reception, and global impact. Doing so, Dudrah (2006: 30) advocates for an interdisciplinary approach combining Sociology, Film Studies, and Cultural Studies to examine the film industry as a worldwide force, films as cultural artefacts, and the dynamic between films and their audiences. Similarly, Dudrah critiques the reduction of Hindi films to simplistic categories and argues for a more dynamic understanding that considers the complex ways in which audiences interact with these filmic texts.

Concurrently, Dudrah analyses how Hindi film functions as a significant cultural force in shaping diasporic identities among South Asian communities, serving as a medium for navigating themes of migration, belonging, and cultural hybridity. In doing so, Dudrah examined how Hindi films are marketed and consumed globally, highlighting their role in shaping national and transnational identities. Dudrah’s work calls for a more comprehensive sociological engagement with Hindi films and advocates for researchers to comprehend film’s role as part of broader social, cultural, and economic processes. This approach, Dudrah contends, necessitates examining both the production and reception of films alongside their ideological and

representational dimensions. Building upon Dudrah's precedent, this research equally seeks to reconcile sociological analysis with film criticism, thereby fostering a broader conception of Hindi film's significance in contemporary society.

Having drawn on Reception Studies, particularly theories of joint action, affect, spectatorship, and cultural transmission and considering the impact of disability and the star system on audience engagement, I will now explore how Diaspora Studies can illuminate the cultural context and diverse experiences that shape disabled and diasporic communities' relationship with modern Hindi social films.

3.2. Diaspora Studies:

According to Averill (1994: 259), wherever diasporas reside, these groups construct issues of identity. As Malhotra and Alagh (2004: 25) further state, watching the latest Hindi film at the theatre on weekends has become a way for Indians to gather, reconnect, and reaffirm their cultural identity. Therwath (2010: 3012) goes on to note how "Bollywood film-watching is a central practice in the reenactment of Indianness in the diaspora while being one of the most common forms of Indian entertainment". So much so that according to Sharma (2010), "Bollywood was selected long back to connect the Indian people residing across the world, hence both intra/inter connectivity are facilitated by Bollywood [...] and [so] becomes a focal point of connectivity". Hindi film after all, "is widely considered a microcosm of the social, political, economic, and cultural life [...] and a contested site where meanings are negotiated, traditions made and remade, identities affirmed or rejected" (Bhoopaty, 2003: 505).

To fully appreciate the subjective experiences of South Asian diasporas, one must consider the complex interplay of individual, textual, producer, and socio-cultural factors in film consumption, as suggested by Banaji (2013: 400). Foucault's (2019b: 264) concept of subjectivation offers a key framework to conceptualise the process through which individuals are invited to recognise their moral obligations and explore their relationship with the self. After all, subjectivity is intertwined with identity, shaping how one interprets their circumstances and empowers themselves as agents of social change (Kelly, 2008: 103).

Despite the wealth of focus in this area on postulating the influences of Hindi films on how these groups negotiate their identities, there seems to be a lack of consensus on how these mechanisms operate.

Sarwal (2017: 90–101) concerns themselves with the intersection of Hindi film and Diaspora Studies. Particularly, how Hindi films shape the experiences of diasporic populations and the broader socio-cultural dynamics of globalisation through the backdrop of these groups' connection to the medium. Sarwal argues that Hindi films play a crucial role in the lives of diasporic South Asians, providing a means for them to connect with their homeland, preserve their cultural heritage, and negotiate their identities.

Sircar (1995: 326) posits that Hindi films have transitioned from the idyllic representation of pastoral life to a contemporary focus on materialism, consumerism, and moral corruption attributed to India's socio-political shifts post-1971, marking the end of Nehruvian idealism. "Although an important site [...] Bollywood has conversely become a crucial discourse of disidentification for middle-class subjectivity, which complicates the role of media consumption in modern self-making" (Novak, 2010: 52). As Novak saliently infers, Hindi films have become an essential part of South Asian culture. Nevertheless, they can also serve as an important site of expression for South Asians to challenge the traditional view that people's identities are shaped by the media they consume. As Kaur (2005: 313) highlights, the role of Hindi film viewership is performative in the construction of diasporic identity, and nostalgia also plays a significant role in this process, alongside other broader socio-political pressures. After all, as Kaur infers:

The diaspora is particularly prone to lap up rosy pictures of Indian society. They feel neither shame for their motherland's poverty nor guilt about their comparative riches [...] Bollywood films are not about what India as a whole is but do reflect the reality of the resurgent urban middle class, far removed from the woes of the rest of India.

(ibid.: 208)

This is especially true for the diasporic Hindu community, who increasingly see themselves represented in a positive light in Hindi films (Malhotra and Alagh, 2004:

25). Despite this, Hindi films “offer those diasporic South Asians that partake in its activities a means for contemplating a wider set of representations and possible lives than those offered in mainstream cinema” (Dudrah, 2002: 34). Hindi films, after all, are the most popular and influential cultural product in the South Asian diaspora, and they play a central role in shaping and debating South Asian diasporic identities (Desai, 2004: 153). As Palmer (1999: 314) postulates, “individuals draw upon the differing identities available to them to construct their sense of who they are and how they fit in”. Simply, the medium can inspire audiences worldwide to express their identities in new and creative ways, as Hindi films are used to create new meanings and interpretations and to adapt to new contexts. Indeed, modern Hindi films “have grown to become a crucial channel of socialisation among ‘South Asian’ diasporic communities and a key site for the creation of imaginary ‘homelands’ for diasporic subjects” (Mohammad, 2007: 1018). “In other words, Mother India resonates only in the diaspora” (Mishra, 2006: 10).

Whereas Mehta (2005: 64) contends modern Hindi social films are the only connection that many members of the South Asian diaspora have with their home countries. Indeed, the apparent, as emphasised by Rajadhyaksha (2003: 37), is that Indian nationalism is now being exported to other countries as a commercialised and simplified version of Indian culture as seen in modern Hindi social films. Therwath (2010: 2006), however, draws attention to the nationalist underpinnings of global Hindi films. Indian nationalism, commercialised and repackaged for international consumption, is a central appeal of modern Hindi films. Therwath, therefore, highlights this shift from “jus soli” to “jus sanguini” conceptions of citizenship, illustrating how Hindi films position the Indian migrant as the epitome of modernity and nationalism (ibid.: 2007). This portrayal aligns with India’s broader geopolitical aspirations, framing Hindi films as a cultural ambassador of soft power.

However, this nationalist framing is not without critique. Pathak (2017: 175) observes that modern Hindi social films differ from Western counterparts in that they centre on collective, rather than individual, struggles. Thus, Pathak questions the commodification of Indian culture in Hindi films, raising concerns about authenticity and representation when addressing global audiences.

Indeed, as Gillespie and Cheesman (2002: 132) note, Hindi film production, circulation, and consumption are playing an increasingly significant role in shaping South Asian national and transnational political and cultural landscapes, particularly in the areas of religious re-nationalisation and diasporisation in the UK. As Durham (2004: 153) notes, Hindi films are the most popular and essential cultural product in the South Asian diaspora, and they play a central role in shaping and debating South Asian identities and politics. According to Kaur (2002: 207), South Asians in the UK are prouder of their heritage than ever before, as evidenced by the increased popularity of media consumption, particularly Hindi films. Thus, Hindi films provide a way for diasporic bodies to stay connected to their culture and heritage, even though they may be living far away from the film productions. As Novak (2010: 41) aptly describes, Hindi films provoke “creative disidentifications” among audiences, particularly those in diasporic and international contexts. This disidentification signifies more than just consumption but an active, interpretative engagement where viewers reinterpret and repurpose Hindi film media to fit their unique cultural contexts. This fluidity underscores the medium’s adaptability, allowing its narratives to transcend linguistic and geographic boundaries.

According to Rajadhyaksha (2003: 29), by the twenty-first century, the medium had become a prominent platform for catering to a diasporic audience, sometimes exporting diasporic cultural customs into India rather than vice versa. According to Hannam (2004: 266–267), the South Asian diaspora in the West has been the focus of a vast majority of empirical research due to the innate diversity and complexity of these groups. With a great deal of this work focused on “cultural consumption based on music, fashion, food and the media have also spearheaded the niche arrival of the Indian diaspora in the world of Western consumerism” (Parekh et al., 2003: 1). Therefore, “it is, perhaps not surprising that the incidence of academic usage replicates this privileged diasporic reference point for the category’s emergence and usage in trade and popular discourse” (Vasudevan, 2011a: 7).

As Kerrigan and Ozbilgin (2002: 200) note, Hindi films have become more mainstream and have broken free from the stereotype of being a niche product due to Western South Asians gaining commercial viability. The medium’s global reach is amplified by

its ability to resonate with diasporic experiences of migration, displacement, and cultural preservation, effectively blending Indian traditions with global contexts (Khan and Dandwate, 2022: 43). Further, as Desai (2006: 116) suggests, Hindi films abroad act to produce and articulate transnational cosmopolitan subjects. However, Kaur (2002: 201) questions the suggestions that the “South Asian diaspora is patronising new art forms out of nostalgia or that Hindi film producers have finally perfected the formula to make Non-resident Indians buy cinema tickets as too simplistic”. “It is imperative, therefore, to recognise that any discussion of cultural consumption which juxtaposes East and West remains powerfully inflected by the historical exercise of power in the Indo-European encounter” (Athique, 2008: 308). Further, Kaur (2002: 202) identifies “the contract between the audience and the producer is not based on an equal partnership, as the latter is engaged in production while the former can only express its opinion by choosing to patronise or not”.

As indicated, the South Asian diaspora therefore constitutes a vast market for Hindi film, with its film industry being the primary cultural form in the everyday life of its members (Mishra, 2006: 13). Mishra (2002: 238) cites that Hindi films do so for the diaspora by bringing “the global into the local, presenting people in Main Street, Vancouver, as well as Southall London, with shared ‘structures of feeling’ that [...] produce a transnational sense of communal solidarity”. However, Sarwal (2017: 30) cautions against defining “South Asianness” as a unifying force but acknowledges that Hindi films promote unity and solidarity within the South Asian diaspora. Thus, the discussion presented by Sarwal earlier becomes unclear when presenting “Indianness” as a representation of the diverse and complex Indian subcontinent; as the very use of “the term ‘Indian’ encapsulates diversity and brings into play various contradictory viewpoints, about identity and cultural dimensions” (ibid.: 31). As highlighted by Rahemtullah (2010: 9) the term is “very problematic as it erases various historical specificities and experiences which have been homogenised under the label ‘South Asian’”.

That said, Mohammad (2007: 1023) further elaborates that Hindi film viewership amongst the South Asian diasporas is particularly valued due to the multiple, interlocking oppressions these groups contend with in the UK. As Ang (1993: 40)

describes, “identification with an imagined ‘where you are from’ is also often a sign of, and surrender to, a condition of actual marginalisation in the place of ‘where you are at’”. Thus, one can argue that the connection between diasporic disabled South Asians in the UK with a medium such as Hindi film is reinforced in the context of “a racist Britain [which] degrades the Indian diaspora to such an extent that it retreats into the secure spectacle of Bombay Cinema” (Mishra, 2002: 246). Indeed, according to Banaji (2013: 394), the cultural and economic flows between South Asia and the West are fuelled by the nostalgia and sense of disconnection felt by first-generation South Asian immigrants and their children. However, when considering this viewpoint, one must be wary not to conflate the connection between Hindi film viewership and diasporic identity. It is important to emphasise that the construction of “diasporic identity, as is all identity, is inherently a socio-political process, involving dialogue, negotiation and debate as to ‘who we are’ and what it means to be ‘who we are’” (Tsagarousianou, 2017: 60).

Therefore, the study of Hindi film use occupies a unique cultural and geopolitical nexus, profoundly influencing the lives of disabled South Asian diasporic communities. Rather than merely providing entertainment value, these films can serve as a medium through which diasporic bodies negotiate complex identities, challenge marginalisation, and maintain cultural heritage. Nevertheless, its representations of South Asian identities raise critical questions about authenticity, representation, and the politics of culture. As globalisation continues to reshape cultural landscapes, the significance of Hindi films in Diaspora Studies is poised to grow. The field’s ability to reconcile the tensions between tradition and modernity, homogeneity and diversity, with local and global contexts makes it a compelling theoretical framework for exploring the intersectional nature of disabled and diasporic identities. As such, it provides a suitable lens for this research.

As previously highlighted, the Hindi film industry remains a multifaceted cultural force in shaping South Asian diasporic identities, despite the complex interplay between individual, textual, producer, and socio-cultural factors that influence their creation and consumption. They function as a medium for cultural transmission, a source of nostalgia, and a platform for challenging dominant narratives. As

globalisation continues to shape cultural landscapes, studying the impact of modern Hindi social films on diasporic communities remains a crucial area of inquiry in Diaspora Studies. Having reviewed the literature on the diasporic body, I now consider Hindi film viewership from a Disability Studies perspective.

3.3. Disability Studies:

Concerning Hindi film viewership from a Disability Studies viewpoint, theoretical framings of disability have evolved since the 1970s, when the first emancipatory model, known as the “social model” of disability, emerged in academic discourse (Oliver, 2013: 1024–1026). However, these models served as an “oppositional device” to the ideals which pose disabled people as problematic to the social order, which internalises and individualises their exclusion (Beckett and Campbell, 2015: 276). As the discipline developed, particularly in the occidental world, the concept of disablement, as demonstrated below, continued to abstract the experiences of those whose lives were underpinned by such categorisations.

Conversely, there are multiple gaps in scholarly understanding of South Asians through the lens of Disability Studies, despite their majority-minority identity experience in the UK and abroad. The theoretical frameworks that exist to explain or encompass the subcultural inversions of the UK disabled South Asian experience equally produce problematic assertions and discourse around their selfhood and identity constructions (see: Hussain, 2005: 524). Similarly, as noted by Dudrah (2001: 9), concerning diasporic South Asian identities in the UK, there is a further lack of engagement with the subject area in relation to transnational media.

Despite the historically poor relations between the researcher and subject in which the study of the lives of disabled people as Woodin (2017: 32–38) contends; problematising disability in society through the study of disabled people themselves continues to be one of the few over-analysed (Marks, 1997: 89) yet fundamentally theoretically and methodologically inadequate aspects of social research (Barnes and Oliver, 1993: 1). These modern studies of theorising disability, namely, the medical, human rights, social and more the recently Critical Disability Studies (CDS) models of disability are where most social science involving disabled people globally

situates itself currently (Berghs et al., 2016: 300). These models and conceptual schemas place an emphasis on the individual, social, political, and cultural contexts of being categorised as disabled (Winance, 2016: 100). Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009: 49) define CDS as the idea that disability is a social construct, enabling researchers to view their participants through a non-prejudicial lens. CDS withstanding, these “Western philosophies, conceptual schemas and research frameworks, specifically in our case, Disability Studies, have become the benchmark for thinking about both disablement and ablement” (Campbell, 2021: 24), and thus “disability research has attracted much methodological criticism from disabled people who argue that it has taken place within an oppressive theoretical paradigm [...] and set of unbalanced social relations” (Stone and Priestley 1996: 1).

Early, more critical Disability Studies scholars such as Oliver (1998) and Shakespeare (2006a: 198) have sought to redefine the paradox presented by these early disability activists; promoters of the social model of disability, who define disability as a construct whereby society imposes ‘barriers’, thus ‘disabling’ those with ‘impairments’. To these early progenitors of CDS, the subjective nature of what constitutes a barrier, impairment or indeed a disability requires further examination. Shakespeare (2005: 147) advocates for a broadened scope in Disability Studies, extending beyond the social model to encompass intersecting identities, the realities of impairment, and global contexts. Shakespeare argues that this call is required mainly because early Disability Studies often neglected both the social and biological dimensions of disability in its reception (ibid.: 142). Additionally, wider socio-political and other influential factors such as to affect/effect of texts on those categorised as disabled, require further consideration according to Ellcessor et al. (2017: 2). “Since culture denies access to social, political and economic opportunities, disabled people [...] cannot help but respond and assert their right of equal access to social opportunities” (Ghai, 2012: 271).

At this juncture, I will note that as a disabled researcher operating in various disciplines, I utilise a holistic approach to considering disability matters as advocated by the early CDS theorist, Shakespeare (2006b: 54–67), rather than situating myself within one particular school of thought. Although the social model is

considered paramount in the formation of the disability identity in the UK, as Shakespeare (ibid.: 74) postulates, “the majority of disabled people do not identify themselves with the social model [...] the issue is the extent to which the disability rights movement is representative of disabled people”. Shakespeare (2006c: 75) provides examples of why this is not the case, particularly concerning ethnic ‘minorities’ who “have felt ignored by disability groups”, and thus, observes why disabled South Asians may consider other values outside of the social model to seek identity and connection with other disabled people (see: Islam, 2008: 46). Additionally, according to Khanlou et al. (2001: 1845), diasporic disabled people and their families may not subscribe to local models or understandings of disability. Thus, taking any specific theoretical lens to observe the views of this participant group would be fruitless without further examination of the models they employ. By presupposing any imposed view, “the colonised intellectual is uncritical and imitative [...] dominated by an external source, whose thinking is deselected from an independent perspective” (Alatas, 1977: 692).

As Stuart (1992: 177) proposes, disabled South Asians experience multiple layers of discrimination, which impact the way they perceive their life experiences. Stuart notes these layers in the formation of a collective singular experience of discrimination rather than a ‘doubling’ thereof, such as racism and disablism, religious persecution and disablism, sexism and disablism, and so forth. To Stuart, this form of marginalisation is mainly reserved for UK ethnic minority communities, portraying the disability experience as a failure to integrate into Western society.

As elucidated by the Confederation, O.I.O. (1986), “it is assumed that these people have to contend with the disabling experience of impairment within a social environment which is discriminatory and bigoted against ethnic minority communities in Britain”. This highlights the justifiable rationale of why disabled South Asians may shy away from the UK’s mode of disability identity, advocated by the social model, and turn to alternative identity mechanisms, such as identification through filmic portrayals, as explored herein.

Disability Media Studies (DMS), as defined by Ellcessor et al. (2017: 4), bridges the traditions of Disability Studies and Media Studies concerning disability

representation. Akin to CDS, DMS utilises Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to focus on the power relationships present in society as expressed by the use of language and practices through texts (Fox, 2008: 10) via “textual analysis of media representations to consider more fully the role of media within economic and ideological circuits of production” (Barden, 2018: 1673). Ellcessor et al. (2017: 13–15) maintain that both schools of theory intersect by “the identification of relations of power and oppression and the transformation of those relations via critique and activism aimed at both representations and structures”. Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick (2009: 139–144) further argue that Media Studies can gain valuable insights into power dynamics, media aesthetics, and labour practices, while also fostering greater inclusivity and diversity by considering disabled viewership. To do so, DMS concerns itself with matters of media accessibility, representation, and the depiction of disabled people. Barnes (1992: 19–20) notes DMS’s stance on the power dynamics employed by film industries by their use of disabling and ableist terminology in their products as a method of cultivating institutional discrimination of disabled viewers, by way of non-disabled viewers internalising the messages conveyed. Cameron (2010: 51), in particular, takes aim at ‘the media’ being the primary influencer in society’s negative perceptions of the disabled body in dominant discourse.

As Darke (2004: 100) points out, disability representation in media often relies on stereotypes and focuses on impairment rather than the social aspects of disability by using clichés, archetypes, and a lack of political significance. Mitchell and Snyder (2001: 196) argue that inadequate disability representation stems from two dominant historical approaches, the over-reliance on symbolic imagery and the frequent use of disability as a convenient tool for character development. Thus, according to Darke (2004: 104), the “war of words” among disabled people regarding representation has only intensified, with academics disagreeing on the nature and impact of disability imagery, with some prioritising artistic value over the potential for disempowering disabled viewers. Given how seamlessly disability stereotypes align with the focus on images, individuals, and bodies in Hindi films, developing a genuinely disability-focused film practice and theory necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of filmic language and its potential (see: Crutchfield, 1997: 286).

Later thinkers on disability representation and the social sphere adopt a more universalistic approach to define disability, equating it with a precarious characteristic (Campbell, 2011) or a universal human experience (Hughes, 2007; Devlieger, 2018). As Titchkosky (2000: 197) contends, little has changed, as later critical theorists have allied with other disciplines to develop their knowledge and abstractions of the disability experience. Particularly in areas “including philosophy and Anthropology, History and Sociology, Ethnology and Archaeology, Literary Studies and Linguistics, Media Studies and Religious Studies” (Waldschmidt, 2018b: 71). Unlike the medical and human rights models of disability, CDS denotes a critical perspective on ‘traditional’ or British Disability Studies and is thus an umbrella school for differing viewpoints on the area (see: Minich, 2016: 2) focused on the problematisation of the nature of disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon (Haller, 1999: 14; Hall and Zalta, 2019). CDS concerns itself with emancipatory research, a paradigm that produces knowledge for the benefit of those being researched (Vehmas and Watson, 2014: 640). After all, Noel (2016: 4), drawing on the work of Groat and Wang (2002: 135), emphasises that CDS operates on the premise that “multiple realities exist, and that research is not exclusively shaped by the ‘dominant or elite researcher’”.

As elucidated above; CDS mainly concerns itself with Foucauldian reflections on the historical conditions of disability and theorises, measures and/or observes the current state of disability classification, as well as politics and discourse (Tremain, 2005: 2) by recognising that the physical state of disabled people’s realities are socially constructed by the forces which produce them (Anders et al., 2013: 3). Being an interpretive discipline, CDS, like most social research; stems from primary assumptions about the nature of truth, knowledge and its acquisition as theory (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002: 350). Epistemologically, CDS considers knowledge context-dependent, in which multiple truths or knowledge may exist concurrently among differing social actors within a community or group (Fox, 2008: 660). CDS, being an interdisciplinary set of philosophical, largely interpretivist approaches for analysing and evaluating the experiences of those demarked as disabled (Goodley et

al., 2018: 202–204), lends itself to ethnographical flexibility considering the effect of our socially constructed world on these groups (see: Williamson, 2006: 86).

Minich (2016: 3) and Schalk (2017: 1) argue that CDS can be applied as a theoretical framework, research approach and method of data collection rather than a subject-specific study of disabled people themselves. CDS theoretically explores “the social conditions that concentrate stigmatised attributes in particular populations” (Koçsoy, 2021: 1056) to engage theoretically and methodologically with markers not usually of concern to social model thinkers such as, age, race, caste, class, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (see: Chataika, 2012; Soldatic and Grech, 2014; Goodley and Swartz, 2016; and Yoshizaki-Gibbons, 2021) and thus attempts to challenge the normative assumptions, focus, and direction of research involving all disabled people (Hammell, 2006: 185–200). Crip theory in particular, as an offshoot of CDS, challenges the state of emerging disability ideologies through “a critical process, considering how certain bodily or mental experiences, in whatever location or period, have been marginalised or invisibilised, made pathological or deviant” (Cassabaum and McRuer, 2021).

Further, CDS seeks to problematise the simplicity of binary thinking used to differentiate between disabled and non-disabled people in the postmodern world (Shildrick, 2012: 35). Where the field of CDS falls short in its application as a universal grounded theory is in its sole advocacy for considering disability as a human rights issue. This is consequently because CDS tends to focus on its theoretical underpinning rather than concerning itself with practical applications (Danforth and Gabel, 2005: 16). Nor does CDS trouble itself much with considering sub or countercultures, or in this case; diasporic- and disability-specific or pan-cultures or identity expression (Waldschmidt, 2018a: 68). This is due to CDS scholars falling back on utilising universalistic human rights model approaches to analysing disability (Bickenbach, 2009: 1113) and thus, may not encompass the depth of disability experience or culture. However, in conjunction with compatible theories, such as co-production discussed in Chapter 4.3, CDS can act to scaffold understandings from other fields, examining the exclusion contended by those with non-normative differences in varying contexts.

From the perspective of my research aims, CDS, in conjunction with other relevant theories, can break down the pluralistic boundaries between abled and disabled, rather than exploring the supposed cause of disability, representation, and identity. This research will therefore employ a participatory democratic approach that integrates action and reflection, theory and practice to address pressing concerns for disabled people and their communities (see: Reason, 2001: 301). CDS provides a means to analyse the engagement, affect, and outcomes associated with the present state of the area of inquiry. That being, the processes by which disabled modern Hindi social film viewers form attitudes around representation, their inclusion, how they experience these mediums, as well as their patterns of consumption. After all, commercial film production is more than just a cultural project; it is also an urban-industrial cultural form practised by people with their own personal experiences and socio-political beliefs (Kaur, 2002: 201).

3.4. Conclusions:

This chapter highlighted the interconnected concepts from Reception, Diaspora, and Disability Studies as they relate to modern Hindi social viewership, establishing a theoretical framework for this research and further contextualising its research questions. The exploration of Hindi films underscored their complex and multifaceted role in shaping identities, fostering cultural connections, and addressing socio-political dynamics, particularly within diasporic and disabled communities. Hindi films' unique aesthetic and narrative techniques actively engage audiences, enabling diverse interpretations that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. For diasporic South Asians, the medium acts as a repository of nostalgia and a platform for negotiating identity amidst marginalisation and displacement. However, its narratives also provoke debates on authenticity and inclusivity, given its reinforcement of nationalist and middle-class ideals.

Integrating frameworks such as CDS and DMS into the discourse thus enriches our understanding of how Hindi films portray disability and influence diasporic disabled audiences. These theoretical approaches illuminate the intersections of cultural representation, accessibility, and power dynamics, highlighting the gaps in traditional

models that often fail to capture the nuanced experiences of disabled diasporic South Asians' lives. By addressing these gaps through interdisciplinary approaches, this research demonstrates how Hindi films operate as both a cultural force and a site of resistance, allowing audiences to engage with and reshape narratives around identity and inclusion. Conclusively, this synthesis reveals Hindi films' dual role as a dynamic cultural artefact that reflects and shapes societal values while challenging researchers to consider their evolving impact in the broader contexts of globalisation, identity, and representation.

These theoretical lenses offer nuanced insights into how disabled diasporic South Asians engage with modern Hindi social films. They also enable researchers to move beyond simplistic binaries and examine the complex intersections of race, disability, culture, and identity. By addressing the gaps in traditional disability models in disability research and emphasising the lived understandings of diasporic audiences, this approach sheds light on how Hindi films are consumed, interpreted, and repurposed by disabled viewers as tools for identity construction and cultural connection. This theoretical foundation thus highlights how Hindi films operate not merely as a form of entertainment but as a transformative cultural force, influencing both individual perceptions and collective solidarities within diasporic communities.

To summarise the lessons learned in this chapter, Hindi film is the most popular and accessible medium, with the power to influence mass audiences more than any other popular culture (Prasad et al., 2018: 43). As such, the portrayal of disability in film significantly impacts how people perceive and stereotype disability in reality (Singh and Pandey, 2021: 3). "Therefore, it is needed to understand how the country, its society, and its people are represented in films produced" (Prasad et al., 2018: 44). After all, disabled people are part of the diaspora, and modern Hindi social films play a key role in shaping their identity, representation, and shared experience (Takhar et al., 2012: 271).

Chapter 4 – The Project Kahaani Methodology.

4.0. Introduction:

The preceding chapters offer a historical overview of modern Hindi social viewership among disabled and non-disabled audiences, both domestically and internationally. A theoretical and conceptual framework, alongside a review of existing literature, was also established. This chapter, however, outlines the research methodology employed. To explore the cultural practice of modern Hindi social viewership of disability-focused films among disabled diasporic viewers, I conducted a constructed ethnographic study by co-facilitating a nine-month film club project at a local library, starting in the spring of 2023. I approached ethnography in this film club collaboratively with a group of participants/interlocutors, using it as my primary research method to understand this demographic's cultural practices and viewership patterns.

To explore these issues, it was necessary to spend a significant amount of time with the individuals involved in this cultural practice, both prior to and during the fieldwork itself. Extended collaboration with these interlocutors enabled a detailed examination of their perceptions, opinions, and actions concerning disability. This investigation was essential to uncover the subtle forms of subjective resistance and the exercise of agency in discussions about the nature of disability that participants highlighted throughout the project regarding their media engagement.

Participant observation and focus groups, conducted both before and after viewing the selected modern Hindi social films, were the primary data collection methods employed during my fieldwork, alongside surveys, which are discussed further in this chapter. I later explain the rationale for creating a constructed ethnographic site organised by and for disabled Hindi social viewers and outline the research design. I then clarify this research's ethical principles, methods used to collect and analyse data, and the execution of the fieldwork. Simultaneously, a reflexive analysis is undertaken, focusing on researcher-participant relationships, the influence of the interlocutors' positionalities on the research process, and my often-conflicting roles

as a disabled researcher and disability advocate. I also address the methodological challenges of recruiting participants through affiliate groups, alongside considerations of informed consent, confidentiality, and copyright.

4.1. Theoretical Overview:

When embarking on this research, I initially considered a positivist approach to studying disabled viewers' perceptions of disabled characters in modern Hindi social films. However, reflecting on my positionality as a disabled disability advocate, as discussed in the following section, and considering the desired impact of this research, I shifted towards an emancipatory framing. Therefore, instead of solely concerning myself with knowledge production, I prioritised the empirical process and its impact on participants and researchers, as highlighted by Fine (1994: 78) and Prasad (2013: 227). This approach, inspired by Oliver (1992: 100), aimed to empower participants and challenge social oppression by facilitating a "politics of the possible". This differs from the power dynamics often inherent in positivist research, as discussed in Chapter 3.3. Further, as Riddell and Watson (2014: VI) note, accessing specific disabled communities can be challenging due to the power dynamics involved. This is because specific action groups often restrict access to potential participants to protect their funding or ongoing programmes. Therefore, to fully include participants across the disability spectrum, it was crucial to consider these power structures to avoid undue influence in this work. To mitigate potential gatekeeping, this research adopted an approach akin to that of those specific action groups by prioritising accessibility for all participants and emulating the central values of those organisations. This involved ensuring accommodations for individuals with visual, auditory, physical, speech, cognitive, psychosocial, or neurological impairments who wished to participate in this research, and subsequently establishing this work as a pan-disability endeavour.

As discussed in previous chapters, an exploration of disabled people's perspectives on their engagement with modern Hindi social films has, to my knowledge and according to the supporting literature of this thesis, yet to be undertaken. This is especially true for research focused on the reception of disabled characters.

Concurrently, there has been an increased academic and industry scrutiny into the concerns of disabled people interacting with media worldwide (Baumgartner et al., 2023: 74). Therefore, a logical approach to engaging deeply with these issues was through an ethnographic methodology that explored their media consumption trends. This framework offered a powerful tool for ensuring that the knowledge produced in this thesis benefits the inclusion of those who participated, as Noel (2016: 469) discussed in their introduction to the co-production methodology. After all, co-production, meaning to work alongside, challenges hierarchies of traditional knowledge production, process and power dynamics (Lokot and Wake, 2021) for those who understand the need for cooperative and reflexive inquiry (Greenwood and Levin, 1998: 240).

Despite the apparent “limits to the ‘democratisation’ of the research relationship, process and product” (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014: 5), co-production calls for participants to critically engage with all stages of this research, with the researcher facilitating their efforts as equal partners. After all, “if co-production is an obligation, it is de facto no longer co-production, but yet another form of coercion” (Fisher, 2016: 2). However, while the co-production methodology offers the preferred emancipatory approach, the constraints of submitting this thesis as part of a Doctoral degree necessitated maintaining a level of control over the research process. Thus, I chose to undertake co-production, informed and partially analysed by this demographic, co-operatively, alongside my own analysis and conclusions.

To do so, I elicited the expertise of disabled people in conceptualising, facilitating, and analysing the main aims of the primary research questions. Thus, this research project was guided and controlled by the disabled communities it aimed to serve, embodying the principle of ‘nothing about us, without us’. This slogan emphasises disabled people’s demand for direct involvement in all decisions, policies and processes that affect their lives (Germon, 2000: 160–166). This principle is foundational to Disability Studies, as explored in Chapter 3.3, and the practice of disability advocacy, as detailed in Section 4.2. My positionality as a disability advocate, therefore, underpinned the breadth of my approaches to this research.

Tillmann-Healy's (2003: 737) concept of "friendship as method" further proved instrumental in collating the study's findings, which the researcher and interlocutors collaboratively gathered through a friendship-based approach that emphasised open-ended dialogue, diverse perspectives, and emotionally rich interactions. Thus, traditional data collection methods were employed by prioritising fostering and maintaining the mechanics of friendships throughout the research process. As Castrodale and Zingaro (2015: 1–2) state, friendship as a method in Disability Studies is a critical analytical lens to examine and reflect on disability social dynamics through "allied identities to [...] examine questions of access, disclosure and inclusion". I define the combined approaches as 'cooperative enquiry through the ethos of friendship' and adopt this as its methodological approach. Thus, I chose to elicit data cooperatively through this ethos of friendship, given my positionality, as I later discuss, and the gatekeeping mentioned above that disabled participants and researchers encounter.

While I experimented with a positivist and co-productive decolonial approach to studying disabled people's engagement with modern Hindi social films, after careful consideration, it became clear that incorporating an ethnography of direct observation was essential. Decolonial critiques and methodological reflections have significantly reshaped direct qualitative social science research methods, such as ethnography, since its anthropological origins (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021: 98). This approach involves immersing oneself in the daily lives of a particular group to understand their culture and behaviours. Ethnography's flexibility allows researchers to both generate and test theories, blending inductive and deductive perspectives (Madden, 2010: 17). This makes it a powerful tool for understanding complex social phenomena, especially when dealing with meaning systems, controversial traditions, or cultural creations (Schlecker and Hirsch, 2001: 73).

Since the late twentieth century, ethnography has been widely used in Media Studies to investigate topics such as audience reception and media production practices (Drotner, 1994: 344). This method provides a holistic perspective, enabling researchers to examine how media and communication are integrated into people's daily lives (La Pastina, 2005: 139). In these respects, this study may not be classified

as a traditional ethnography of culture and social life, as the fieldwork was a short-term endeavour. However, considering this body of work as an ethnography of media and its reception, it would be an extensive, mixed-methods ethnographic approach comprehensively undertaken in a relatively brief period (see: Srinivas, 2013: 378–80). After all, as Spitulnik (2002: 340) contends, very few ethnographies profoundly comprehend audience practices and the intersubjectivity of their media engagement. Additionally, I elected to take field notes and later conduct focus groups to explore how participants engaged with the research and discussed their lived experiences with modern Hindi social films in greater detail. As Prosser and Loxley (2008: 55–57) assert, methodologically diverse, visually focused, mixed-method, and interdisciplinary ethnographic approaches employ a range of creative methods, perspectives, and theoretical frameworks to support their fieldwork.

4.2. Positionalities:

As a second-generation British researcher with hidden disabilities from the Indian diaspora, I acknowledge my semi-insider status within my research community. Hailing from a Punjabi, Kshatriya, and Hindu-reformist background, my identity and presumed caste ideology further serve the majority-minority experience represented in the UK mainstream media and its prevailing counterculture. For reference to the issues presented with such a position, and as summarised by Yengde (2018: 510), mainstream modern Hindi social films effectively erase non-scheduled caste identities by avoiding explicit mention of their caste. Instead, hints of their low-caste status are used to justify their social exclusion, hardship, and oppression while perpetuating dominant caste privilege, namely, my own, through the names and identities of the characters presented. For these reasons, I understood that my outwardly presenting elevated position within caste-aware groups and that of my very name may affect my data collection. However, as a co-ethnically represented researcher, I aimed to immerse myself with participants in the field, allowing my perspective impairments to facilitate participant ease when discussing their reactions and/or understandings of disabled character portrayals in the selected films. After all, as Beals et al. (2020: 595–596) argue, the unique connection and understanding forged between researchers and marginalised communities can be

immensely valuable, particularly within academic inquiry. This insider knowledge thus provides crucial insights often inaccessible to outsiders.

Aware of my potential bias as a semi-insider and avid film viewer, I employed Denzin's (1997: 262) post-structural ethnographic approach to ensure my research remained objective. This approach acknowledges the fluidity of meaning and identity within social and cultural contexts, enabling reflexive analysis through a poststructural lens (ibid.: 270). Employing the described holistic approaches, I leveraged my dual position as both a semi-insider and outsider, as my insider status facilitated participant access and enabled the creation of focus groups (Sixsmith et al., 2003: 580). At the same time, my outsider perspective contributed objectivity and fresh insights into participants and research goals (Kerstetter, 2012: 11).

That said, I came to understand that my early months on the project were tinged with assumptions about a uniform South Asian identity based on my British-born yet non-British upbringing in East London in the 1990s; a time and place marked by inter-South Asian community solidarity (see: Ramamurthy, 2006: 57). Later participant interactions and literature review challenged this, revealing Shukla's (2001: 551) observation that South Asians in the UK navigate diverse ethnic and national allegiances within the broad term 'South Asian'. As Maxwell (2006: 736) highlights, some exhibit strong integration with British institutions and communities, while those with recent migration histories do not. Rahemtullah (2010: 5) posits that some also have complex relationships with national belonging and naming conventions. Conversely, one must then be cautious to "reject any homogenised notion of Britishness (and by extension British Disability Studies) through careful reading of disabled people of South Asian origin in Britain" (Goodley and Chataika, 2024: 346) when ethnographically observing this demographic. A practice I rightly adhere to within my research positionality and fieldwork.

I further note that my dual roles as a disability advocate and researcher presented inherent challenges in conducting this research. This tension reflects the historical divide between disability activism and academia in the UK, first noted by Oliver (1992: 101). That is, while activists often prioritise the social model's simplicity to educate about disability matters, researchers tend to consider the nature of disability more

holistically. As a result, engaging organisations that strictly adhered to the social model in this research required more effort than those that did not adhere to social model principles. After all, as Oliver argues, despite its influence, the social model has done little to confront social oppression or isolation, nor has it enacted any change or policy that benefits disabled people (2013: 1025–1026). Thus, for “people’s narratives to be heard and engaged with, there is a need for a social model of disability which is open to their experiences” (Islam, 2008: 47).

4.2.1. Committee Positionalities:

As discussed, this project aimed to co-create knowledge with those representative of the target population. To this end, a committee was formed to ensure a balanced representation of disability perspectives, thereby avoiding what Friedner et al. (2018: 2) describe as the common tension within disability communities of prioritising one’s unique accessibility needs over others. The committee used pseudonyms inspired by popular Hindi film actors to preserve anonymity. The positionalities of these interlocutors are detailed below.

Committee member (A) ‘Salman’ is a second-generation British Pakistani Punjabi male in his early thirties who grew up in a UK residential special school. Salman has a developmental delay and an interest in Urdu and Hindi films. He describes his passion for film as a means of engaging others in his community, primarily due to the difficulties he faced in integrating at his supported residence in a predominantly white, outer-city area.

Committee member (B) penned ‘Ananya’ describes herself as a hard-working Tamil ‘with disabilities and attitude’, referring to the live-action superhero television (TV) series *Power Rangers* (1993–present). Ananya is a proclaimed Tamil film fan who has started watching Hindi films more recently due to challenges finding accessible content. Ananya is in their late twenties and came to the UK as a child. Ananya joins the committee with her elder sister, nicknamed Sridevi, who facilitates her sister’s care responsibilities. Ananya sought the group to enhance her public speaking skills and connect with new people in the community. She and Sridevi often enjoy referencing popular culture catchphrases, much to my own amusement as well.

Committee member (C) 'Alia' is a third-generation British female in their late twenties whose parents originated from Nepal. Alia is a reproductive health advocate and is the founder of a grassroots organisation aiming to increase awareness of the needs of those with mental health conditions in South Asian communities. Alia has been involved in lived experience research previously and joined this project due to their interest in modern Hindi social films and their growing popularity among non-Hindi-speaking South Asians.

Committee member (D), identifying with 'Shahrukh'; or 'SRK', his familiar media moniker to avoid confusion, is an Autistic male originally from Haryana. SRK was diagnosed with autism in his late forties and is eager to share his perspective on the connection between late diagnoses and film, as well as the difficulties migratory groups experience accessing health care. SRK joined this committee to network with other disabled film enthusiasts and get the opportunity to inform the direction of this research from his own experiences.

Committee member (E), known as 'Aamir', is another young Khan from Bangladesh who stutters and has a visual impairment. Aamir 'found his voice' when he turned eighteen and is eager to speak out on inclusion, particularly with those who have speech, language, and communication needs. He joined the group, drawn to the fact that the selected films and the medium featured several sensory-disabled characters who shared similar experiences.

Committee member (F), affectionately named 'Rekha', is a Deaf Rajasthani female in her late fifties who is involved in film club projects and grassroots community groups in the UK and India. Rekha joined the committee to share her experiences as an ethnic Deaf person, advise on this research, and ensure films screened are accessible to the Deaf community.

Committee member (G) reminds the group of the actress 'Kajol'. Kajol is a queer female Hindu Odia in her seventies who has been recognised for her contributions to the arts. She has long been involved in research focusing on disability and dementia and works predominantly with first-generation South Asian communities.

While a Shahrukh Khan fanboy myself, I adopted the pseudonym 'Krrish' as suggested

by Ananya. My decision to claim this moniker likely mirrored Ananya's view of this research; influenced by our fondness for the *Koi... Mil Gaya* (2003), *Krrish* (2006), and *Krrish 3* (2013) trilogy. In the series, Hrithik Roshan's character, with a touch of alien intervention and the camaraderie of his friends, transformed from living with a developmental disability into a celebrated non-disabled filmic superhero. Perhaps my project pitch during our interview cemented this connection through the research's aim to amplify underrepresented voices like theirs, thanks to their guidance and support. Aside from my pen name reservations, to ensure consistency with the agreed thesis identification method, I used the pseudonym Krrish throughout this work.

4.3. Research Design:

Now that I have outlined the positionalities behind this project, I explore the complexities of each research design stage. Given the challenges of conducting co-productive, ethnographic, mixed-methods research with a marginal, sparsely populated demographic, as detailed in the following chapter, this project did not follow a linear process. This section outlines the research process, including data collection methods, data analysis, and the ethical considerations that guided the project. I begin by justifying the selection of texts for this study, the research location, and providing an overview of the data collection and analysis methods.

4.3.1. Justification of Texts:

I selected twenty-five modern Hindi social films from 2005 to 2017 depicting disabled characters for the proposal stage, with the potential to include additional films from later years. However, as I later discovered when selecting disability-related content, the BJP's significant influence on post-2018 Hindi films would have made screening them to a UK-based audience challenging. This is evident, given that, since their inception, Hindi films have been used for political purposes (see: Rajadhyaksha, 2016: 73–79). This includes the former Indian National Congress, which also used the Hindi film industry to promote a softer form of Hindutva (Asrar, 2006: 15–19). That said, the current BJP has taken a more aggressive stance on the issue, particularly in its portrayal of that which I coin the 'all Indian' disabled national. Concurrently, by

exploiting constitutional powers outlined in Singh (2011), the BJP has systematically tightened its grip on the Hindi film industry through appointments to the CBFC, the gatekeeper of Hindi film certification and releases. “It is doubtful if a trade-sponsored self-censorship organisation will ever garner the same kind of [...] control over the filmmakers as the CBFC now does on account of government fiat” (Bhowmik, 2013: 305).

Further, unbridled by the CBFC, Hindi films, under Hindu nationalistic influence, have embraced overt anti-Islamic themes and visuals using disabled characters as a focal point. As Matusitz and Payano (2011: 74) argue, these themes and visuals overlook their coded impact on diasporic audiences, rendering them unsuitable for this research’s aims. There is also the matter of the CBFC removing disability as a screening category despite “eschewing content that disparage and denigrate disability” (Khujumi et al, 2022: 40). All the while disability represented in films are ‘protected’ under Article 8 of the UNCRPD during the BJP’s rise to power (see: OHCHR, 2010: 73). Therefore, although filmic depictions of disability continue to propagate post-2018, I took an informed stance as a disability advocate not to support exclusionary nationalism by focusing on BJP-endorsed materials. While falling outside the scope of this thesis, the discovery of the coded ‘anti-Islamic, disabled Hindu-national’ character in post-2018 productions raises an unexplored area of research that warrants further academic scrutiny.

Going back to film selection, I chose films from the initial twenty-five texts that offered diverse portrayals of a wide range of disabled characters. However, given the spectrum of genres, themes, actors, directors, and production houses involved in each film, I elected a democratic selection process for choosing films that this thesis later analyses. This choice was crucial as analysing films by genre became tricky due to the popular ‘Masala’ style of filmmaking, which freely blends action, comedy, romance, and drama, defying traditional genre boundaries (Ganti, 2004: 139). This, therefore, made analysing the impact of representation and reception of disability by genre type within the context of these films outside the scope of what could reasonably be achieved by the project. Further, provided that a ‘Bollywood’ film tackled a social issue, it would be considered a ‘Hindi social’. So, after making little

progress narrowing down the film choices, I engaged in discussions with several disabled postgraduate students to determine which of the initially identified films they believed would attract a diverse audience. The following films were chosen: *Black* (2005); *Iqbal* (2005); *Taare Zameen Par* (2007); *Kaminey* (2009); *Guzaarish* (2010); *My Name Is Khan* (2010); *Barfi!* (2012); *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), and *Kaabil* (2017).

4.3.2. Field Selection:

Traditional ethnography is rooted in anthropological principles and the necessity for “thick description” (Geertz, 1972: 414). In contrast, a constructed ethnography blends traditional ethnographic methods with the creation of a specific research setting to illuminate particular social or cultural phenomena (Gille and Riain, 2002: 278). Indeed, ethnographic fieldwork necessitates defining the boundaries of inquiry within particular human groups or institutions, thereby constructing a site of the researcher’s control (Madden, 2010: 38–39). As detailed in this section and throughout this thesis, establishing controlled viewing conditions to accommodate the diverse perspectives of all participants likely to participate in the project was the most effective method for gathering a comprehensive range of responses. This approach replaced observing participants in their natural viewing environments, which might otherwise have been impossible. Therefore, following the geographic analysis presented in Chapter 5.1, LBN’s local libraries were identified as an optimal location for this ethnographic study. At this location, I would thereby construct, in co-production with my interlocutors, the conditions that would enable me to uncover the data this thesis focuses on. This site then offered the potential to engage with a diverse population of participants and provide the necessary context for in-depth observation and interaction.

4.3.3. Fieldwork Planning and Design:

Having defined the research problem, justified the texts chosen for focus, and selected a site to construct the project’s conditions, I followed a three-pronged approach to planning fieldwork. I recruited participants through two main channels. One involved reaching out to affiliated groups listed in Table 1, and the other was by

developing a dedicated website, www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/. I partnered with these groups to distribute promotional materials and engage participants by directing them to the website for further information:

Hindi Film Clubs	South Asian Groups	Disability Groups
– London Spice; – UK Asian Film Festival; – Apne Film Club; – Indian Film Festival; – Deaf International Film.	– Asian People’s Disability Alliance; – Asian Disability Network; – South Asian Heritage Month.	– Access My Events; – Deafroots; – Disability Rights UK; – Deaf Ethic Women’s Association.

Table 1 – Participant Engagement Channels.

Eager to incorporate diverse perspectives, I recruited seven passionate disabled Hindi film enthusiasts from different South Asian backgrounds, ages, and genders to form the ‘Kahaani Committee’. This committee served as a crucial advisory group, informing the direction of the fieldwork stage based on their experience and understanding. To ensure the research position reflected multiple viewpoints, careful consideration was given to forming a committee that was diverse in terms of South Asian backgrounds, abilities, ages, socioeconomic classes, caste, sex, gender, and disability identities. ‘Kahaani’, meaning to ‘share stories’ across various South Asian languages, depending on its spelling, was the committee’s inaugural creation and effectively captured its core purpose of disseminating lived narratives.

In the next stage, the committee and I elected to survey 120 participants, comprising 18% who were non-disabled and 81% who were disabled, to explore how they experience modern Hindi social films. The paper-based survey received 43 responses, while the online survey garnered 77 responses.

To further analyse how selected modern Hindi social films influence viewers’ perspectives on disability, the committee and I established the film club in LBN Libraries. This structured setting served as a valuable research site. Participants watched films, and their reactions were documented through observation and focus group discussions after each screening. The project initially ran for nine sessions, involving over 130 participants listed in Appendix C, who collectively analysed disability portrayals in modern Hindi social films. Additionally, as elected by the

interlocutor committee, four additional screenings were held, featuring discussions with thirteen disabled filmmakers and industry professionals. These sessions offered unique insights into the industry's representation of disabilities. The four short films screened were *Double Discrimination* (2014), *Fruit Chaat* (2020), *Incredible Insight* (2020), and *Wheels* (2022). Following each film screening, I facilitated small focus groups with participants and filmmakers to explore their experiences and thoughts related to the film.

4.3.4. Ethical and Logistical Considerations:

Research ethics encompasses my responsible conduct toward participants and those affected by the research. Ethical considerations, therefore, arise throughout the research process, from planning to reporting. While some ethical issues may seem straightforward, they often involve complexities, and social researchers are responsible for safeguarding the rights, privacy, and well-being of the individuals and communities they study (Bryman, 2016: 125). According to Section 2 of the University of Gloucestershire's research ethics handbook, researchers must adhere to two primary ethical principles. First, researchers must safeguard the physical, social, and psychological well-being of all participants, including themselves and other researchers, and avoid harm to the field's reputation. In keeping with active participant research, "I also needed to listen ethically and be aware of my own prejudices, privileges, and expectations" (Ratcliffe 2005: 29 in Gardner, 2023: 41). Secondly, researchers must obtain participants' informed consent, being non-deceptive and ensuring transparency, while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

Although gathering information about viewership trends, film opinions, and accessibility needs posed limited ethical risk, the research topic had the potential to probe into sensitive areas of participants' lives and/or behaviours. This was particularly concerning if the research involved 'vulnerable' populations as identified by the university. While there is no legal or universally recognised definition of vulnerability (Limanté and Tereškinas, 2022: 5), and disability does not inherently equate to vulnerability (Scully, 2014: 213), in December 2022, as seen in Appendix A,

I obtained formal approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee before commencing my fieldwork.

While the subsequent section provides a more detailed exploration of the logistical and ethical hurdles encountered during the initial stages of this research, it is essential to note that these challenges were of key concern to both my supervisors and me. Data privacy laws, establishing trust with participants, and ensuring accessibility for all while adhering to copyright restrictions were among the primary obstacles. As detailed in this section, my approach prioritised ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent from 'vulnerable' participants and creating an accessible research environment for all involved.

To prioritise user privacy and data security, I designed the website in strict adherence to data protection regulations, including the 2002 e-Privacy Directive, 2016 General Data Protection Regulation, and 2018 Data Protection Act. Given the website's purpose as a signposting platform, I minimised data collection to key information such as email addresses and consent forms for research participation. I also avoided using cookies, tracking technologies, and third-party services to enhance data privacy. Conversely, by implementing robust data encryption and hosting the website on a UK-based server, I ensured the protection of user data. I further consulted with my supervisors and the university ethics lead throughout the design process to guarantee full compliance with research ethics guidelines.

Acknowledging the complex dynamics of informed consent for individuals with differing limitations in decision-making, I initially implemented a comprehensive consent process. However, having personal experience with changes to reality perception and cognitive function, I was concerned that many participants may disengage if overly burdened with an overwhelming or condescending process. I created a dedicated webpage, www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/signup/, with all the study information in Appendix B to address this. This way, participants could access and review details at their own pace, leading to a more empowered and self-directed consent experience. Additionally, I reviewed each submission to ensure understanding and minimise any intrusiveness. Before in-person interactions, participants received an information sheet, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), and a

debriefing statement to review. We then discussed the project's purpose and assessed their views on risks and benefits to ensure they made an informed choice. For those unable to independently consent, I encouraged them to involve a trusted representative who could consent on their behalf if they wished to participate. Those who were able to consent independently reviewed everything and signed the forms.

My early interactions with participants highlighted the limited autonomy many experienced in daily life, prompting me to consider their broader wellbeing. While enthusiastic about participating, I noticed that some in this project hesitated to discuss their involvement with loved ones. I addressed family concerns sensitively, ensuring anonymity and avoiding revealing personal details. Throughout the research, I prioritised participant safety and privacy, checking in regularly while avoiding intrusive questions. When sensitive issues arose, I encouraged participants to seek appropriate third-party support. Balancing potential risks with the desire to advise them myself, I directed participants to local resources. Evidently, however, the project fostered a strong sense of community and support, extending beyond the research through peer advocacy and camaraderie. Further, recognising the challenges of navigating diversity in research, I was mindful of my language and engagement style. As Ahmed and Swan (2006: 99) note, “diversity work means working with problematic terms”, so I aimed to use language responsibly, avoiding harmful stereotypes and respecting nuanced experiences.

Securing a fieldwork location initially proved challenging after losing access to the planned host site due to disagreements over the medium and demographic focus in this research. With only a month to spare, I found hosts in LBN libraries, which serve as a community space that offers affordability and wheelchair accessibility. Moreover, given LBN's 42.2% South Asian population, according to the Office for National Statistics (2021), these locations offered a diverse participant base.

Accessibility was further prioritised for all participants. While ‘access conflicts’ could have arisen when one person's needs interfered with another's, or technical hurdles were present, overall, participants reported that their needs were generally well met. However, one potential access conflict arose when a participant inquired about Audio Description (AD) for a film attended by a d/Deaf group. Fortunately, a solution

was found in consulting with an ex-colleague at the English National Opera. We arranged for the venue to provide a laptop and headset, allowing the participant to stream the film with AD alongside the projected screening. This enabled both viewing groups to watch the film separately but still participate together in post-viewing discussions.

The final methodological challenge from an ethical perspective was the issue of copyright restrictions. To fully understand the variables, I consulted an intellectual property barrister to learn about the ‘fair dealing’ exception for non-commercial research purposes. So, while I actively sought permission from copyright holders, I was prepared to screen films under fair dealing when necessary. In all cases, I purchased original copies of each film in its intended region of sale. This proactive approach enabled me to use copyrighted material responsibly, in accordance with university guidelines, while complying with legal requirements and supporting my research objectives.

4.4. Data Collection:

This section outlines the methodologies employed to collect data for this project. It covers secure data storage through a custom website, committee formation and structure, survey design, film club project implementation, and associated observations, reflections, discussions, and focus groups.

4.1. Film Club Website:

To ensure secure communication and data storage while engaging committee members and participants, I developed a compliant central hub for project updates, contact management, and data privacy. After carefully analysing data protection and privacy laws, I opted for a self-hosted ‘WAMP’ server to maximise my data security. Using WordPress DIVI as the design framework, content management system, and custom plugins for internal functionality, I removed any reliance on third-party tools to do this work. Following development and beta testing with a digital accessibility group in 2023, the website was optimised to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 by optimising the website for inclusivity across all disability domains

as outlined by Caldwell et al. (2008: 3–10). The website’s eight pages, including a welcome page, FAQs, event and committee recruitment updates, film summaries, user terms, privacy and accessibility statements, and a custom consent page, were designed for easy navigation. After beta testing and ensuring legal compliance, the website was disseminated through LinkedIn, and flyers shared in Appendix E were used to recruit potential committee members to guide the project’s direction and facilitation.

4.2. Forming a Committee:

Anticipating the commencement of fieldwork in the summer of 2023, I proactively engaged with LBN’s disabled South Asian communities. Recognising the challenges of working with Disabled Persons Organisations on non-social model research (see: Chadha and Dasgupta, 2024: 163), I partnered with disability advocacy groups and Hindi film clubs, both online and offline. Through these partners, flyers and website links were circulated. I then formally requested their collaboration in recruiting film club committee members from their networks. These individuals, with a vested interest in the project, would play a crucial role in shaping its direction.

By establishing a dedicated committee, I aimed to achieve several goals. Firstly, the committee collaborated in planning and executing engaging screenings, discussions, and club activities. Secondly, they provided invaluable support in managing access needs and offered advice on these matters. Thirdly, as a united front, they effectively promoted the club and its events to broader communities, attracting participants and offering additional touchpoints for information. Further, the committee’s involvement supported my research on audience interests and habits. They played a crucial role in selecting additional short films, as noted in Section 4.3, and planned screenings catered to participants’ diverse interests. Essentially, the film club committee’s primary function was to oversee the club’s operations and ensure it met the expectations of its audience.

During the final project stages, the committee and I collaboratively analysed data collated from various film clubs. My contribution involved scrutinising the collective analysis to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive perspective was presented. Akin

to Friedner et al.'s (2018: 9) multimethod approach, my thesis weaves together our shared committee discussions, engagement in disability and Hindi film viewer communities, dialogue with disabled and non-disabled folk from various backgrounds, and active participant observation to gain a nuanced perspective of the topic at hand. I posted a call on the Kahaani website to recruit committee members, seeking applicants interested in disability representation in Hindi films. Applicants anonymously answered questions via the website plugin tool. I selected seven committee members based on their interests, skills, and personal qualities. They were briefed on their roles and responsibilities and collaboratively defined their functions on the committee, as outlined in Table 2 below:

This Meetings Agreements:				
Group: To Co-Steer the Film Club through Monthly Meetings and Screenings				
Chair	Secretary	Treasurer	Liaisons	Facilitators
Leads meetings and speaks on the group's behalf	Organises project and takes minutes	Manages committee expenses and funding	Places, organises and manages the project	Observes, analyses and guides the project
Next Meetings Actions:				
Group: Meet Again on 24 Feb. 2023; Teams Link Emailed with Minutes				
Chair	Secretary	Treasurer	Liaisons	Facilitators
Meet interim chair to book a hall for the film club	Meet chair and book a hall for the film club	Meet interim chair to talk about funding and finances	Visit the main website and report any errors	Visit survey website and report and errors

Table 2 – Committee First Meeting Actions. Date: 27 Jan. 2023.

Initially, I chaired the first committee meeting due to my familiarity with the project. After being elected secretary, I actively supported the chair whilst respecting their authority. We established ground rules for a private WhatsApp group, which was used to discuss issues such as location, equipment, promotion, and survey refinement. Once the film club project began, committee members co-facilitated screenings and discussions, relating character portrayals to participants' experiences. The committee fostered a collaborative environment based on friendship, shared values, and respect. We prioritised confidentiality, boundaries, and support, creating a

positive and productive space. With this strong foundation, we first refined the initial survey approved by the university's ethics committee, as discussed in the following section.

4.3. The Viewership Survey:

During the second Kahaani committee meeting, I shared access to the initial survey that the university's ethics committee had approved. The purpose of this was threefold. Firstly, to ensure that the research efforts were truly cooperative, I required the direct input of my fellow committee members on the order, structure, and lines of questioning. Secondly, the committee members considered the value of additional questions and refined the original lines of survey reasoning. Finally, the Kahaani committee members were essential in advising on accessibility and the language used. The initial survey, approved by the University's ethics committee, provided a strong foundation, but it was not yet finalised. It was at the second committee meeting where members actively reordered questions, suggested valuable additions, and, most importantly, ensured the language was accessible.

The survey was hosted on www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/survey/. Keeping the survey confidential was crucial. For those who had not opted into the research, the survey remained invisible on the main website homepage with a lock icon hovering over the survey link. For participants who had given their consent, access was straightforward. Once consent was established, the consenter would be automatically redirected to the survey link. The survey provided qualitative and quantitative data, enriching the study while identifying its participant base. Data on age, gender, ethnicity, and disability were collected from participants to analyse variations in viewership consumption, and with sufficient participants sought, we planned the next stage, the Kahaani Film Club.

4.4. The Kahaani Film Club:

To elicit emotional resonance, explore group dynamics, and analyse emerging Hindi social film themes concerning disability representations, participants were brought together to watch selected films in a safe and supportive environment. This aligns with audience research traditions that view viewers as an informed and experienced

interpretive community (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 122). Each Saturday from 05 May to 05 September 2023, at noon BST, East Ham Library and Stratford Resource Centre hosted these film screenings, followed by 90-minute open discussions.

To reaffirm their informed participation, I began each viewing with a briefing. Participants re-learned about the study's aims, who's involved, and how to join or withdraw. I discussed data collection methods, including recording, transcription, observation, and data access, as well as their intended use. I also ensured everyone felt comfortable by explaining the club's accessibility arrangements, what to expect from the venue, and what to do in the event of unexpected events, such as a fire or power outage. Before each film, I would also discuss the chosen films and ask what participants would like to watch next, whilst setting up the provided projector and sound system. The committee and I observed participant dynamics and engagement during the viewings, anonymising notes. Following each film, an open discussion forum allowed participants to share their perspectives and experiences.

With an attendance capacity of around twenty participants for each screening and a consistent 90% turnout, the Kahaani Film Club fostered a vibrant shared space for film exploration. As described earlier, I prioritised participant anonymity throughout the observation stage. While relying on some descriptive markers for internal notetaking, I avoided identifying participants by name. Handwritten observations were recorded in journals and then uploaded to secure folders on the project website for later analysis. Upon project completion, journals were destroyed and replaced with digital copies. Additionally, participants were encouraged to engage in reflective freewriting during screenings to aid recall during focus groups and provide valuable data for my analysis. These were handled similarly, notably when participants identified themselves in these writings.

The film club discussions were deliberately unstructured to encourage genuine dialogue, allowing participants to freely share their unprompted thoughts and emotional responses to each film. These rich conversations were captured for later analysis using an omnidirectional microphone. Discussions typically lasted 90 minutes, and participants could engage further by emailing additional thoughts or scheduling one-on-one discussions. All responses were converted to audio files and

then transcribed for later analysis. Following the final screening, the film club committee and I met to compare notes on emerging themes and prepare for the upcoming focus groups. To ensure the inclusion of Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users and those with speech impairments, I sought the group's permission to video-record focus groups when relevant. This approach prioritised capturing direct communication over potential variations in interpretation. All screen recordings and focus group transcripts were stored securely on the website server. I then facilitated four additional focus groups, each gathering thirteen disabled professionals from diverse roles within the Hindi film industry. These sessions, lasting three hours, centred on their creative input in four short films chosen by participants in previous film clubs for their portrayals of disability. After each screening, a Question-and-answer (Q&A) format elicited the professionals' perspectives on the films' effectiveness in representing and serving their respective audiences. Specifically, participants and I sought their views on how the Hindi film industry caters to the voices of those whose disabilities are portrayed.

4.5. Data Analysis and Tools:

In keeping with the committee's choices, I undertook thematic analysis as a flexible method to identify and analyse recurring themes in the various types of qualitative data collected. Similar to applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), where appropriate, as discussed below, I found great use in Hall's (2010: 570) encoding-decoding framework in uncovering recurring patterns, motifs, and socio-political messages that filmmakers convey to their audiences. Applying this further, by encoding and decoding participants' differing film readings, identifying themes, and grouping them, I could gather a consensus on a 'collective reading' of each film selected. Thematic analysis was further instrumental in identifying themes in transcribed data related to the parapsychological mechanisms involved in film reception as described by Rock et al. (2008: 180).

I further found myself greatly influenced by Feltham-King and Macleod's (2016: 1–5) innovative application of CDA through a Foucauldian and constructionist lens, which proved particularly insightful for interpreting the study's mixed-methods data and

deeply inspired my approach. CDA offered a potent tool for unpacking how language constructs and perpetuates societal power imbalances, especially those related to disability. As Smart (2004: 42) emphasises, our understanding of ability and disability constantly evolves, making CDA's focus on discourse's role in shaping individual realities even more compelling. Echoing Banaji's (2012: 60) call for audience agency, CDA enables participants to "talk back" and illuminate their interpretations and interactions with narratives, thereby revealing the imaginary binaries among dis/ability discourse.

I was also compelled by Charmaz's (2006: 127) interwoven theoretical and methodological approach to constructivist grounded theory. They advocate for a flexible, iterative data collection and analysis process, focusing on constructing meanings from the data. That is not to say that we, as conscientious researchers, invent findings, warns Charmaz, but that we must recognise our active participation in meaning-making through participant interaction and the data itself. Despite distinctly advocating for a systematic analysis in their methodological approach, Bordwell (2007: 152) acknowledges the value of a grounded theory in examining thematic motifs. They highlight that iteratively combining qualitative participant data on films, even when motifs might differ across films, can reveal how "narrative and stylistic principles of those films constitute a logically coherent mode of cinematic discourse". Thus, one can iteratively and systematically code their data using a constructive grounded approach to pursue theory development from the data collected.

Concerning my findings, I was particularly drawn to Olsen's (2004: 3–23) concept of data triangulation, which bridges the gap between subjective, constructivist interpretations and objective quantitative findings in mixed-method research. Olsen argues that combining diverse data types from multiple sources or methods can enhance the validity of research claims, going beyond simply mixing methods. This triangulation fosters a deeper understanding of how power and ideology shape participants' perspectives, ensuring findings are grounded in the rich tapestry of the data collected. Greene (2007: 159) concurs that data triangulation can improve research rigour by comparing different data sources or perspectives. Weller (2019:

13–16) further utilises the methodology to capture the quantitative complexity of migration phenomena whilst providing qualitative input, demonstrating a basis for its use in the service of this research.

Given the complexity of the data collected and analysed, I present my findings using a narrative structure. As Holloway and Freshwater (2007: 8) suggest, when feasible and without compromising anonymity, a conversational storytelling approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences than just reporting isolated interviews. Further, since neither I nor my various interlocutors are academic researchers, I opted to employ this narrative reporting approach. This storytelling format is known to be engaging for non-researchers, as Gannon (2009: 74) highlights, this reporting method further allowed for its findings and analysis to be more transferable to a broader reading audience.

Regarding the tools used to analyse my data, I began by importing transcripts from audio and video files into NVivo. I created hierarchical nodes representing themes and concepts relevant to my research. I then coded data segments and assigned them to appropriate nodes. I refined the coding process as I progressed, adjusting node names and merging or splitting nodes as needed. Using NVivo's coding queries, I explored node relationships and identified patterns. I analysed the coded data to generate insights and address my research questions, resulting in a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Additionally, I used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) tool to analyse my data's emotional, cognitive, and social aspects. I created codes for each theme identified through NVivo and set interlinked LIWC codes between overlapping sections. This allowed me to quantify the prevalence of specific themes within each chapter. The order of themes in my findings and analysis reflects their frequency as identified by LIWC.

4.6. Conclusions:

This chapter outlined the theoretical framework underpinning my mixed-methods ethnographic research at a constructed site. Central to this framework is a collaborative, inclusive approach, conceptualised as 'cooperative enquiry through

the ethos of friendship'. This orientation was deliberately chosen to challenge the power dynamics often present in research involving disabled people. By embracing this ethos, I positioned myself reflexively within the research, acknowledging the co-constructed nature of knowledge and the importance of reciprocity in researcher-participant relationships. I discussed the positionalities of all involved, including my own, highlighting how our identities and experiences influenced research encounters and outcomes.

I then outlined the research design, justifying the chosen methods, selection of materials, and field site, alongside the ethical and logistical considerations that informed the study's implementation. The mixed-methods ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis was multifaceted, incorporating website design, a project committee, surveys, and a co-created film club. Within the Kahaani Film Club, data were gathered through participant observation, collaborative discussions, and focus groups.

For analysis, I drew on CDA, Constructivist Grounded Theory, data triangulation, and a narrative analytic framework. NVivo and LIWC software supported the interpretation of textual and linguistic data.

With this methodological foundation now laid, Chapter 5 turns to the results of the survey conducted among the Kahaani Film Club; a group of disabled enthusiasts of modern Hindi social films.

Chapter 5 – Surveying Disabled Hindi Social Viewers of Newham.

5.0. Introduction:

While Chapter 2.2 recognises the surge in popularity of modern Hindi social films in the UK (Thussu, 2008: 103) and the increasing presence of disability representations within them (Mohapatra, 2012: 131), a notable gap persists in existing literature, as Chapter 3 examined. This gap pertains to the viewpoint of disabled audiences and their interaction with this content genre, which this chapter endeavours to investigate. To achieve this, a committee was established as detailed in Chapter 4.3 to refine the structure, questions, and accessibility of a ‘Bollywood viewership’ survey. This survey was launched online alongside a paper format to ensure accessibility while maintaining participant privacy and preventing it from snowballing to ineligible participants.

As documented in Appendix D, this survey gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. Anonymised demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, and disability information, were collected to analyse diverse viewership patterns and identify participants for further research stages. The survey aimed to understand the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’, and ‘why’ of participants’ viewing practices by analysing both demographics and viewing habits. Participants were also encouraged to recommend their preferred films featuring disabled characters and articulate their appeal, thereby deepening the understanding of their preferences. Data collection continued until a sufficient number of responses, comprising 120 participants, were obtained. Upon closure, the data was consolidated in Excel and analysed using NVivo software to identify trends.

In essence, this chapter serves as an exploratory foundation to provide an inclusive understanding of participants’ preferences regarding disability representation on screen. The findings, visualised through Tables and Figures, were presented to the project committee, which guided further analysis, beginning with identifying the target audience. Coherently, the remaining chapters of this thesis analyse viewers’ responses to the themes identified in this exploratory chapter.

5.1. Who:

This first section identifies diasporic disabled people concerned with disability representation in modern Hindi social films. As discussed in Chapter 3.2, and as noted by Shankar (2004: 320) and Banaji (2012: 62), South Asian diasporic communities are increasingly embracing this media, adopting its language and storytelling, and thus developing complex cultural identities. That said, diasporic Indians constitute the largest audience for modern Hindi social viewing in the UK (Krämer, 2016: 45). As Malhotra and Alagh (2004: 25) contend, this is a direct result of the industry increasingly depicting their diasporic experience positively, resulting in greater relatability and significance for this audience. Consequently, as Kaskebar (1996: 366) notes, the wider South Asian diasporas have become chiefly “obsessed” with the medium.

With South Asians as their primary target audience, these films have a significant market in the UK. The recent UK Census shows around five million individuals of South Asian heritage, making up about 8.5% of the country’s population (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This diverse group comprises 3.1% who identify as Indian or British Indian, 2.7% as Pakistani or British Pakistani, and 1.1% as Bangladeshi or British Bangladeshi. The remaining estimated 1.6% comprises individuals from various other South Asian or British South Asian backgrounds, such as Sri Lankan, Nepalese, Bhutanese, and those of mixed heritage. Their presence in the UK results from waves of generational migration on the remit of successive and draft bills such as the repealed 1948 British Nationality Act (1948, c56; Miles, 1989: 434–5), or even earlier, with some dating back to the seventeenth century (see: Visram, 2002: 2).

But what of disability in the UK? As disability occurs across all ethnic groups, one can approximate a disabled viewer base of the medium. It is believed that 24% of the UK population is disabled, that is, an estimated 16 million people, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (2023). The UK Disability Unit Survey (2021: Q4 and 6) highlights that 1% of UK disabled respondents identified as Asian or Asian British and fewer than 1% identified as Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh. However, it is key to remember that the relationship between disability, ethnicity, and religion is more

complex than presented in the output of this report. As Williams et al. (2020: 919) emphasise, diasporic South Asians exhibit a considerably higher prevalence of disability compared to native populations across Eurasia, even when accounting for socioeconomic and cultural factors, which also significantly influence these groups. Respectively, disabled South Asians were highly underrepresented in the UK government survey compared to their overall representation in the general populace. Therefore, as a crude and conservative estimate, if 24% of the UK population has a disability, and of those, 8.5% are South Asian, then approximately 2.04% of individuals in the UK are potentially both disabled and of South Asian heritage. That could mean that, at the most liberal measure, the UK could host a potential 1.2 million disabled viewers of Hindi films.

This identified 2.04% of the UK population encounter broader gatekeeping challenges in participant-led research recruitment and other professional activities, as discussed in Chapter 4.2, and systematically face exclusion in participating in research about their very lives (Goldsmith and Skirton, 2015: 438). Such contentions predominantly exist for those of my categorisation; learning-disabled people and those with physical or mental health conditions that face psycho-social barriers. These challenges appear to stem from the misinterpretation of the Mental Capacity Act (2005) where incapacity is based on racial bias, confusion between mental health and capacity, misunderstanding best interests, neglecting supported decision-making, and excluding individuals from decisions (Series, 2013: 100). Familial relations and social action groups further negatively influence these groups' participation (Collings et al., 2016: 499). Accessing this demographic methodologically can thus be quite challenging. These challenges are particularly pronounced in the context of this research, as detailed in Chapter 4.3.

As a disabled South Asian in the UK, I recognise that my participants and I belong to a fractional and dispersed demographic, primarily concentrated in cities like London, Birmingham, Leicester, and Bradford, where either we or our forebearers initially settled. The geographic distribution of South Asians in the UK, particularly in London and the Midlands, is primarily influenced by industrial factors, social networks, and a desire to maintain cultural identity within existing ethnic and religious communities

(Williams, 2013: 10). In London expressly, South Asians represent 13.2% of the population, mainly housed in ghettoised areas of the city (see: Smith, 2005). The World Bank has highlighted a strong connection between higher poverty rates and the prevalence of disability rates (Mont, 2007: 1). This correlation is evident in LBN, which was identified as one of the most ethnically diverse Boroughs in the UK since 2017 (Mintchev and Moore, 2017: 570). As of 2021, LBN had a 37% poverty rate (Trust for London, 2021) and a significant 42.3% South Asian population (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Based on these figures, LBN boasts a significant disabled South Asian base, with an estimated 10.15% of the population, creating an ideal location for ethnographic and participant recruitment efforts in this research, particularly given the scarcity of this demographic elsewhere in the UK. By targeting a specific demographic and region, with LBN serving as its focal point, I was able to identify a group of diasporic disabled people interested in disability representation in modern Hindi social films. I now present the survey results that highlight the characteristics of this group. Given the various demographic data collected during the survey, including age, gender, disability status, and viewing habits, I conducted additional segmentation to highlight more specific insights.

5.1.1. Disabled Viewers of Newham:

When statistics like those presented in this chapter categorise participants based on age, gender, disability, and ethnicity, they often reduce them to singular labels. As individuals occupy a diverse range of perceived roles and statuses according to Kertzer and Arel (2002: 8–9), so should these statistics be interpreted critically. After all, there is far more variation within single populations than between them (see: Witherspoon et al., 2007: 355). This is all too apparent when examining groups that defy easy categorisation, such as twice-migrated second- or third-generation South Asians, who may identify less with such categorisation than say their non-South Asian counterparts (Rahemtullah, 2010: 7). That said, Table 3 below shows the ethnic breakdown of the participants surveyed in the LBN.

Of those, 70% identified as Asian or Asian British, and 11.67% identified as mixed or multiple ethnicities, including Asian or Asian British. 10% identified as Black, Black British, African or Caribbean, and 8.33% identified as White or White British:

Ethnicity	Count	Percentage
Asian or Asian British	84	70%
Mixed or Multiple Ethnicities (Including Asian or Asian British)	14	11.67%
Black or Black British	12	10%
White or White British	10	8.33%

Table 3 – Participant Ethnic Backgrounds.

Approximately one-fifth of the study participants were non-South Asian, suggesting that the Hindi film industry is gaining traction with a broader and more diverse audience in the UK than previously recognised. To ensure the inclusion of non-South Asian viewers in future research stages, where their insights, alongside those of their South Asian counterparts, would be invaluable, the committee and I opted not to exclude them from the survey. However, as this chapter focuses on South Asian viewership patterns, their responses were not included in the analysis. This unique non-South Asian viewership profile nevertheless presents a promising avenue for future audience research.

As observed in Table 4, of the ninety-eight South Asian participants, 22% identified as neurodivergent or having a long-term health condition. 20% identified as disabled or non-disabled. 12% were d/Deaf or hard of hearing, and 2% chose not to say. Unlike other survey areas, participants provided multiple response options to capture the diverse configurations of their disability identity. Despite limitations in reflecting LBN's overall disabled population, the study's sample size provides robust comparisons between the various disability groups included.

Notably, some participants who initially did not disclose a disability or identified as non-disabled later revealed they were d/Deaf, had a long-term health condition or noted feeling pressure to avoid identifying as disabled due to various social stigmas. Chapter 6.2 explores this topic in further detail concerning their modern Hindi social disabled character viewership:

Ability Groups	Count	Percentage
Neurodivergent	22	22.3%
Long-Term Health	22	22.3%
Disabled	20	20.3%
Non-Disabled	20	20.3%
d/Deaf	12	12.3%
Chose Not to Say	2	2.3%

Table 4 – Eligible Participants’ Reported Ability Groups.

Among the ninety-eight eligible participants, female participation was higher at 57% compared to the male involvement at 39%. Additionally, 4% identified as non-binary or transgender. Considering Hindi films’ male-dominated and targeted audience (Sundar, 2006: 5), one would presume a larger disabled male audience than that of disabled females. Providing context where disability is concerned, Venkatesan et al. (2015: 107) suggest female viewers might be more inclined to view disabled characters with “pity-sympathy”, particularly for characters with mental health conditions. This emotional connection could lead to higher viewership among female participants with similar disabilities, who seek relatable themes and content. While exploring potential gendered viewership trends would have been valuable, this topic was not the primary focus of this research. Therefore, although this was another promising avenue for future research, particularly when considering South Asian disabled modern Hindi social film viewers, it was beyond the scope of this study.

The primary audience identified by the survey was young adults aged 30–39, comprising 40% of the participants. However, a significant portion of viewers were older. The smallest group was aged 40–49, followed closely by the youngest group, the 18–29-year-olds. The Ormax Media report (2020: 19–20) on India’s theatrical audience suggested that 70% of Hindi film viewers were male and under 30 years old. Thus, the committee and I were curious to see if this trend held in LBN to enquire whether the location and nature of this research had an impact on viewers attending. Our findings indicate a clear divide in viewership based on age and gender, mainly where disability is considered. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, I elected not to seek participants under eighteen, limiting any analysis of their viewership. Figure 1 provides a detailed breakdown of participant demographics, including age and

gender. The subsequent sections of this chapter explore the viewing interests and access needs of these identified subgroups:

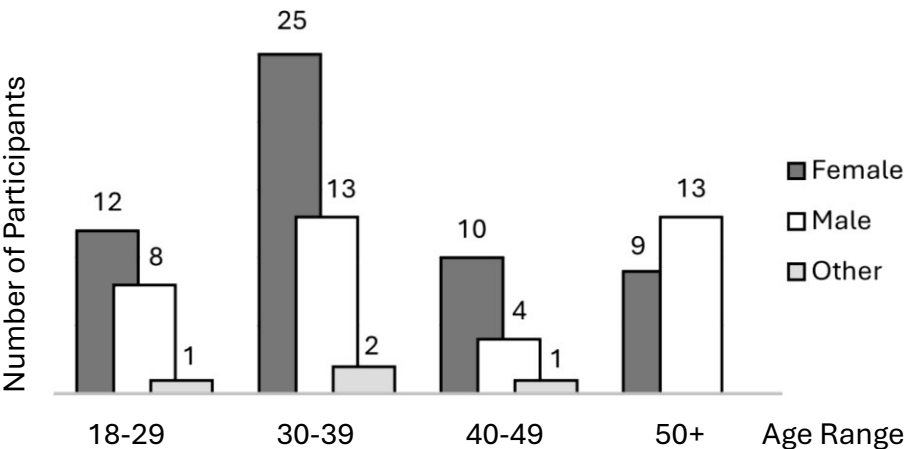


Figure 1 – Eligible Participant Demographics by Age and Gender.

5.1.2. Towards the Average UK Disabled Viewer:

Using the survey data collected in LBN as a petri dish to approximate the average disabled viewer in the UK, one can infer a few identifying features, as shown in Tables 4, 5, and Figure 1. Whilst India has a higher proportion of young disabled male viewers, LBN’s audience is more diverse, with disabled women in their 30s being a significant viewing group. Whilst rates of disabled female viewership are higher across all age ranges for those surveyed, it is the 50+ male group whose viewership only slightly surpassed that of their female counterparts in this age bracket. Despite the various disability identification methods available to them, these women in their 30s overwhelmingly categorised themselves as neurodivergent, having chronic health conditions and/or d/Deaf, frequently alongside seeing themselves as either disabled or non-disabled, as did the female participants reaching this age bracket. Based on their qualitative survey responses, Section 5.4 explores how this group of primarily women in their 30s engages with the content through the lens of their perspective disabilities. This analysis also examines the reasons behind their increased viewership compared to that of disabled men.

5.2. What:

While the previous section of this chapter identified a diasporic disabled audience engaged with modern Hindi social films, this section examines the specific content within this genre that these groups consume. To achieve this, I analysed participants' survey data, focusing on the types of Hindi films they regularly or semi-regularly watched. I also asked for examples of recent films they viewed to understand their opinions on the 'social' elements depicted. The primary question of what these participants were watching was not straightforward. Whilst Rajadhyahsha (2003: 33) defines the Hindi social genre as one that shares specific rationalist drives that fit a civil-social agenda to educate and reform film audiences, this merely describes the motivations behind the genre's form of storytelling. As discussed in Chapter 2.1, modern Hindi social films often blend elements of Parallel Cinema and Masala films, creating a unique hybrid regime that combines action, romance, dark comedy, thrillers, and social drama themes into a single film. This modern reflexive 'neo-Bollywood' style of genre-blending that emerged in the mid-2000s, as noted by Hardy (2014: 9), makes genre classification particularly challenging for audiences accustomed to Western cinematic conventions. To address this, the committee and I explored the role of genre classification in shaping audience preferences, recognising potential differences in how participants interpret Western materials compared to those derived from Hindi source conventions. We therefore created a survey methodology with various answer choices to understand the different types of modern Hindi social films that disabled viewers might prefer, given the diasporic nature of their viewership. Qualitative responses were further analysed to determine how participants define the formulations of the genres they enjoy viewing.

Although 66.47% of survey respondents identified specific media-type preferences, they also selected a "mix of genres/other". In so doing, they described a blend of social commentary, coming-of-age action thrillers, and romantic comedy themes in one film. The remaining 33.53% of respondents eschewed the single genre labels and opted for a mix of genres/other, indicating a preference for films that combine popular genre elements with a deeper focus on social themes commonly found in modern Hindi social films. While it is unsurprising that Hindi film fans would have diverse perspectives on modern Hindi social films that blend genres and social commentary,

the intriguing aspect is their acknowledgement of the genre's ambiguity. Similarly, although all participants were somewhat expected to appreciate modern Hindi social films, the varying responses to the different configurations of these films, based on age, gender, and disability type, are uniquely noteworthy. This is particularly evident when examining the examples of films with disabled characters that participants shared. In many cases, participants even mentioned films they disliked, highlighting the disparities in their engagement with differing types of disability representation between various subgenres of disability-themed content.

5.2.1. Viewership by Age and Gender:

While all the subgroups demonstrated interest in various genre themes, subtle variations emerged based on age and gender. These differences are outlined below.

Within the 18–29 group, young women primarily leaned towards romantic comedies and social dramas. Men and non-binary viewers gravitated towards a mix of high-action films featuring male and female romantic leads. All in this age range strongly preferred coming-of-age films, often citing the relatability of themes and experiences portrayed. Regarding disability representation, most females reported not noticing many disabled characters on screen. Other groups in this range also shared their concerns about disability representation between production houses, with some finding disability portrayals in differing productions to be “outdated” and/or “usually a mixed bag”:

For example, *My Name Is Khan* [2010] beautifully highlights the struggle ... disabled guy? Or terrorist? ... you choose... it was clever, but *Zero* [2018]??? What was that??... It's not Shahrukh [Khan's fault], it is the producer, Aanand [L. Rai] [...], but Karan [Johar] knows how to sell a story.

[Response – 73]

Participants aged 30–39 were the largest audience to consider themselves regular viewers. They primarily reported an interest in thriller-heavy, modern Hindi social films with plot twists and action. Women in this age range also reported interest in romantic comedies and coming-of-age stories.

Film recommendations from this participant group also offered a glimpse into their perspectives on disability representation in modern Hindi social films. Notably, participants' comments focused on disability representation rather than themes seen in those films. Sentiments such as, "*Taare Zameen Par* [2007] [...] we aren't often awarded the 'right' to be disabled – it was ahead of its time!!" **[Response – 102]** highlighted these viewers' approval of the film's portrayal of disability, which they framed as progressive. "*Nazar Andaaz* [2022] because it portrays some of the challenges faced by a person with visual impairment [...] and the way the people around him make the world more accessible" **[Response – 36]**, another participant explained to emphasise the film's choice of disability depiction and the importance of social support. Another shares this sentiment, echoing the desire for realistic disability portrayals; "*Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* [2006] as it is the closest I've seen to real life situations" **[Response – 7]**.

The 40–49 age group had the fewest viewers who regularly watched Hindi films. Genre preferences included action, thrillers, and social drama combinations. No participant chose the option for coming-of-age films or romantic comedies, suggesting a lack of interest in lighter film genres targeted at younger age groups. This could be due to a preference for more complex narratives that address social issues, or simply a reflection of the types of stories that resonate with people at this stage. Indeed, some reflected that while films seen with loved ones can become comforting to watch later in life, early exposure to genres can shape lifelong preferences. Although there were more immediate differences in genre choices between genders in this age range, it was noticeable that most female participants described their interest in films that "have a moral behind it" **[Response – 37]**.

Tied with the 18-29 age group, viewers aged 50+ represented the smallest segment of viewers. They primarily watched social dramas with some action elements at the cinema with family or friends. Unlike younger viewers, they showed little interest in romantic comedies or coming-of-age films. Social and religious themes in the content they consume also resonated with this group, with some describing how melodramas' heightened emotions and dramatic situations are engaging and emotionally cathartic. To avoid excessive violence and mature content, this group

valued films with cultural and familial themes that could be shared with viewers of all ages. When surveying this group, a few noted some of the films in the promotional flyer by age rating, enquiring if they were “good value films” and implying their interest based on whether they could invite family members.

One of the most frequently cited films was *Sholay* (1975), a story about a retired police officer, Thakur, who seeks revenge on a bandit who amputates his legs. According to this participant group, the film’s appeal lies in its depiction of disabled characters as representations of resilience and courage, demonstrating that disability does not detract from a person’s strength or determination.

5.2.2. Trends by Disability Type:

Although direct comparisons by age, gender, and disability type were inconclusive due to limited sample size, specific trends emerged, albeit inconsistently, by disability type. While these findings represent the survey population, notable differences are observed between d/Deaf participants and those who identified as neurodivergent and/or have a health condition, particularly when compared to non-disabled neurodivergent participants.

d/Deaf participants, accounting for one-eighth of the survey population across all age groups, strongly preferred informative films that avoided negative portrayals of disability. While their sub-genre interests remained diverse, no d/Deaf participant indicated an interest in comedies.

Indeed, many cited comedies as films they disliked due to their representation of disability. In all their disrecommendations, such as the *Golmaal* (2006–2017) series, which one participant noted as “slapstick crap” **[Response – 98]** or “making living with disability a joke like *Pyare Mohan* [2006]” **[Response – 27]**, leaving these participants to oppose comedic disability films strongly. Other d/Deaf participants appeared to be concerned about their viewership, with “only those with disabled actors, where are they?” **[Response – 91]** highlighting displeasure with the lack of disabled cast in industry productions. Where recommendations were given, they focused on highlighting the inclusion of the character:

I would recommend *Taare Zameen Par* [2007] because the boy was struggling with reading and writing in words, and many assumed he was lazy, which was not true because he had dyslexia [...] It shows accessibility to the deaf and dyslexia peoples [...] it is important to show to make their future better.

[Response – 39]

Female neurodivergent participants and/or those with a health condition, who comprised the majority of the audience in this study, strongly preferred coming-of-age Hindi social films, often citing the relatability of the themes and experiences portrayed. Within this, these participants noted that they sought films featuring various storytelling arcs centred on disabled characters. Based on survey responses, these characters appear to have deeply resonated with the participants, relating to their experiences and presenting universal themes that connected with their life experiences. Comments about films like “*Salaam Venky* [2022] because it shows the confidence of disabled people through trials and challenges and I learn a lot from them about other people’s experience” **[Response – 17]** and “I watched *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* [2006] recently, I was interested in how this character who limped internalised their problems but was later confident” **[Response – 51]** demonstrated their interest in watching the disabled character’s life journey unfold onscreen. Another participant remarked, “I would recommend *Margarita with a Straw* [2014] because we do not see enough disabled queer representation” **[Response – 8]**.

Neurodivergent and non-disabled respondents showed significantly different viewership patterns compared to other disability groups. Their survey responses revealed a strong interest in thriller and romantic comedy elements within the genre. Unlike other groups, they appeared less concerned with on-screen disability representation and focused primarily on production aspects, such as direction, actors, and cinematography. One participant shared, “The most recent one I could not wait to watch was *Hichki* [2018] with Rani Mukherjee. It was her comeback film, so I watched it, and it is now on Amazon” **[Response – 59]**. Another participant “would recommend *Black* [2005] and *Andhadhun* [2018] because it has very nice cinematography” **[Response – 62]**. However, all members of this group enjoyed modern Hindi social films that focus on protagonists navigating life with a disability.

These survey discussions, especially those around disability, revealed a variety of essential but differing perspectives emerging when respondents were asked about on-screen disability representation. Before continuing to the discussion in Section 5.4, I now turn to the next section, where I highlight how these groups access the content they watch and the challenges they experience in doing so.

5.3. Where:

Building on the previous analysis of the popularity of modern Hindi social films among diasporic disabled audiences, this section examines their content access methods and key accessibility considerations. Specifically, it aims to understand how these viewers find and engage with such films and their motivations for doing so. Given the advancements in accessibility technology of the early 2000s (see: Romero-Fresco, 2019: 13–20), this section also examines whether these technologies have influenced viewership patterns since then. Whilst Rai's (2009: 6) study found a lack of AD and a corresponding absence of vocal disabled viewers who require it, the study also noted growing industry interest and adoption of accessibility practices since their participant-led findings emerged. Since then, little attention has been given to whether the increased adoption of accessibility features, especially on specific platforms, has led to higher viewership among disabled audiences. To gather these insights, participants were asked about their sources of content access, accessibility barriers, and specific difficulties they encountered. I wanted to understand how accessibility challenges varied by type of disability. To this end, I examined the platforms participants used, their ages, and disabilities to understand how these factors influenced their engagement with this medium and their film viewership choices.

5.3.1. Platforms Used:

As seen in Table 5, participants regularly accessed the following modern Hindi social films that interested them. Nearly half, 49.37% of participants, watched films via over-the-top (OTT) streaming services, highlighting the popularity and convenience of this method in part due to the accessibility concerns they noted. The increased use of OTT platforms suggested they potentially enhanced the accessibility experience of

film viewing through wider reach and by offering features specifically designed for viewers with diverse needs. Despite the rise of streaming, cinemas still held a notable share of interest among disabled viewers, at 19.23%, indicating that nearly a fifth of this participant base valued the big-screen experience for film viewing. A significant number of participants, 16%, reported using torrent sites to watch modern Hindi social films. This suggested a potential price barrier for some viewers who may be unable to afford subscriptions to streaming services offering these films. This factor remained prominent in those respondents' answers to their viewing motivations. A small percentage, 7.7%, attended film clubs or festivals, indicating a specific audience interested in a more curated or communal viewing experience. The data further suggested that traditional home-media viewership methods, such as TV or physical media purchases, 6.4% are diminishing in popularity, with those reporting this access point, citing a lack of accessibility features in its use. Overall, the data indicated a growing trend towards OTT platforms as the primary choice for watching content due to their convenience and ease of use, while traditional viewing methods still held appeal for specific preferences:

Content Sources	Count	Percentage
OTT	77	49.37%
Cinema	30	19.23%
Torrents	25	16%
Festivals and Clubs	12	7.7%
Physical Media	5	3.2%
TV	5	3.2%

Table 5 – Participant Content Sources.

5.3.2. Accessibility Concerns:

Regarding accessibility issues, participants persistently faced difficulties viewing modern Hindi social films that interested them. Around 65% of participants reported problems accessing their usual content. Notably, 41% of those reporting issues categorised them as serious, primarily stemming from accessibility and subtitling limitations. These limitations included a lack of AD, closed captions or closed caption formats that were small, blurry or otherwise difficult to read. Interestingly, the issues were more technical for those 24% with fewer access concerns, such as

buffering during streaming or poor contrast between subtitles with the background image. This suggested that addressing accessibility barriers, particularly subtitling in regional formats, would significantly improve the viewing experience for many disabled Hindi film enthusiasts. That said, over a third, or 35%, of participants reported no access concerns. Those viewers without accessibility concerns primarily used OTT streaming services; however, some often complained about these services removing older content due to licensing issues, among other reasons.

5.3.3. Age and Access Concerns:

While some differences in accessibility concerns existed among disabled participants across various age groups, they were more pronounced between viewers under and over 30 years old. The eldest survey respondents, participants over 50, cited wholly different access concerns from the rest of the audience. While younger viewers under 30 appeared accustomed to using these emerging technologies, older viewers, mainly those unfamiliar with OTT platforms, reported difficulties with navigation and access. Moreover, older participants expressed fewer concerns about closed captioning, as their primary need stemmed from hearing loss rather than language comprehension or processing issues. Unlike younger audiences, who favoured individual viewing, older participants often preferred collective viewing experiences, like film clubs and cinema-going, where some report not having the same concerns as younger audiences due to the larger screen size.

Under 30s in the survey population overwhelmingly favoured OTT platforms, with occasional cinema viewing, and some 10% of their collective viewership was reserved for family outings. Most prominent in their choices for OTT viewership were comments such as “I like my films in one place” **[Response – 83]**, where one can “tweak the algorithm” **[Response – 108]**, demonstrating their appeal in the ability to optimise their OTT viewing experiences. However, two-thirds of this age group expressed concern that the availability of accurate or simplified closed captioning limited their film selection choices. Many participants reported inconsistencies in closed captioning options across different OTT platforms. Most expressed concerns about language and information processing, highlighting the importance of closed

captions alongside other accessibility features for those who require them. While some in this age group discovered films through friends or Torrent sites, most used OTT platforms to avail themselves of closed caption options. Regardless of whether they accessed their films of interest through theatres or OTT platforms, younger participants tended to search for films based on specific actors, directors, or production houses rather than titles or themes. This suggested a preference for familiar names over exploring new content, as discussed in Section 5.4.

Viewers aged 30 and above, on the other hand, frequently watched films with family or friends, with nearly 19% attending theatres like Cineworld, Odeon or Vue to watch the latest releases. When unable to access theatres, many sought film clubs and OTT platforms. Some participants mentioned specialised cinemas as their only option for accessing content and expressed frustration with mainstream theatres' lack of disability-focused films. This group's primary concern was not about availability or accessibility, but rather palatability, the themes addressed in the content. They remained casual viewers and emphasised the importance of the social experience of watching films together. For home viewers, closed captions were a key reason for their preference. Cinemagoers often checked listings beforehand to ensure that closed captions, AD, or dubbing options were available, noting that some films are not released with these features in cinemas.

Further, over 60% of viewers in the 50+ age group reported watching films in cinemas with family or friends or at home via TV or physical media. Many, especially more senior participants, keenly watched films on TV channels like Zee TV, Star Gold, and B4U Network. These participants highlighted the limitations of streaming platform use, noting, "I don't have all the platforms, so I don't have access to some films at all" **[Response – 4]**. Physical accessibility challenges were also mentioned, such as "films in London are difficult to access for deaf people, even with subtitles" **[Response – 79]**. Additionally, concerns about content pacing were raised, with one participant commenting, "there is too much going on, and you can't keep up with the story" **[Response – 31]**. These comments underlined the need for film creators and distributors to consider accessibility more broadly for older viewers, including in character representation and straightforward storytelling.

Diversity and inclusion were essential to older participants. While they appreciated seeing more diverse characters, they felt there was room for improvement. One viewer commented, “yes, but I don’t look for them specifically. I think it is good to see these people represented, but accessibility should be addressed to watch them first” **[Response – 117]**. Another echoed this sentiment, stating, “I don’t feel like there is a massive representation of such characters” **[Response – 23]**. While most older participants did not report issues with closed captioning, they preferred films with it for viewing with younger audiences.

5.3.4. Disability-Related Concerns:

The data collected on viewership suggested that although participants appreciate some accessibility features in Hindi films, there is considerable room for improvement in all modes of access for all those who participated. That said, irrespective of age, there were broad concerns posed by learning-disabled, d/Deaf or otherwise neurologically- or sensory-disabled participants on accessing Hindi social film content. Regarding content accessibility on OTT platforms, the most prominent issue raised across these demographics was inconsistency in closed caption quality, particularly among d/Deaf participants. These groups expressed a desire for more precise English closed captions or dubbing, as well as simplified formats, to better comprehend the storylines of the films they are viewing. The pacing of modern Hindi films concerned some of these viewers, as they found the rapid shifts between sub-genres overwhelming and challenging to process the corresponding emotions for each new scene while reflecting on the previous one. Further, participants with physical disabilities who rely on home viewing for modern Hindi social films noted dissatisfaction with the lack of accessible theatres. They highlighted specific physical barriers, such as unclean and inadequate lifts, ramps, accessible toilets, pocket doors, and other absent but necessary accommodation options, as the reasons for their decline in viewing recent releases.

Other observations by disability type can be seen in neurodivergent participants and/or those with health conditions who primarily preferred OTT platforms for viewing films, followed by a marginal noted preference for watching films in the theatres.

While they, especially female participants, represented the average disabled audience engaged in this project, their viewing habits, as indicated by survey data, were complex. Despite appearing heavily involved in individual viewing practices, they reported doing so to enhance their engagement in collective viewing. While it is difficult to discern due to the limited input on these questions, those who did provide insights cited repeated viewings of films they wanted to share with others or sought comfort in memories of group viewings of those films at the cinema. When seeking comfort in reliving a collective experience, they revisit these films through the productions' associated OTT partner, which, according to Dubey (2022), can take up as little as a month after the films' screening.

5.4. Why:

Having considered how disabled participants in LBN find and access modern Hindi social films, I now turn to their viewership motivations for seeking such content. When choosing films, participants in this study were influenced by various factors, as seen in Table 6. The most significant factor, at nearly 28.33%, was the involvement of actors in the films, followed closely by the influence of recommendations from friends, family, or other sources at 21.67%. Genre configuration preference also played a significant role, with 20.83% of participants choosing films based solely on genre. However, some participants made their selections based on more practical considerations. For example, 12.50% opted for films with subtitles in their preferred language, while 9.17% considered viewership based on the director involved in the production.

In a few cases, around 5%, the decision was not entirely in the participant's hands, as someone else in their household made the final call. It is also worth observing that a remarkably small percentage based their choice primarily on the film's plot, with only 1.67% citing that as a deciding factor. Overall, diverse factors influenced how diasporic disabled South Asians chose configurations of modern Hindi social films. While some prioritised star power or recommendations, others focused on genre, practical considerations, or even external influences in their household:

Decision Factors	Count	Percentage
Actors	68	28.33%
Recommendations	52	21.67%
Genre Configuration	50	20.83%
Subtitling	30	12.50%
Direction	22	9.17%
Not Own Choice	12	5%
Plot	4	1.67%

Table 6 – Participant Film Choice Factors.

Exploring their motivations for choosing certain films over others, participants provided further rationale in their survey responses regarding how they initially discovered those films. Among this group, as shown in Table 7, friends and family were the most influential source of film discovery, accounting for 23.22% of their decisions to watch a particular film over another. TV and cinema advertisements followed closely at 19.05%, while social media adverts contributed 18.45%. Film reviews held sway for 9.52%, primarily among older viewers over 50, while written advertisements and word-of-mouth recommendations played a more minor but equally significant role at 8.33% each.

Notably, participation in social groups and clubs also influenced film selection for 8.33% of this group. Searching streaming sites directly appeared to be the least common approach, with only 4.76% of respondents using this method. Recommendations from close circles, such as friends and family, were thus highly influential on this participant group, indicating the importance of word-of-mouth and peer influence for their film consumption.

Although slightly less impactful than personal connections, social media and advertising still played a significant role, suggesting that tailored online marketing may be effective for this viewing group. Compared to social media and recommendations, trailers and reviews held less sway, indicating a potential shift in information consumption habits. The relatively low percentage of participants directly searching for films on streaming platforms suggested a preference for passive discovery through recommendations and advertisements:

Source of Film Access	Count	Percentage
Friends and Family	39	23.22%
Internet or TV	32	19.05%
Social Media	31	18.45%
Film Reviews/Cinema	16	9.52%
Advertisements	14	8.33%
Word-Of-Mouth	14	8.33%
Social Groups or Clubs	14	8.33%
Streaming Sites	8	4.76%

Table 7 – Participant Content Access Source Methods.

5.4.1. Star-Power:

The primary factor driving the film choices of disabled survey participants was the involvement of renowned actors. As highlighted in Responses 59 and 73, these participants were avid followers of their favourite film stars. Throughout the thesis, it became evident that the allure of stardom, regardless of other film characteristics, was a key motivator for many. While they enjoyed a variety of modern Hindi social films, their perceptions of the actors' involvement profoundly influenced their decision-making regarding which films they felt were worth watching.

Beyond actors, the participation of renowned producers and directors also played a significant role. Producers, as the driving forces behind film production, often have strong reputations and followings for creating successful films (Lorenzen and Täube, 2008: 292). Their involvement can lend credibility and prestige to a project, attracting both audiences and industry professionals (ibid.: 290). Directors, responsible for the artistic vision and execution of a film, were further seen to significantly impact the appeal of certain films' styles of direction, storytelling techniques, and past successes for disability portrayals. For participating disabled audiences, particularly those with limited access to film information, the presence of well-known actors, producers, and directors was a major draw. The familiarity and trust these figures were observed to have made it easier for these viewers to choose films that aligned with their interests. For the disabled participants in this study, the comfort and familiarity provided by respected figures in their favourite films also appeared to reduce perceived barriers, allowing them to engage with and enjoy the cinematic

experience more readily. As observed in their combined survey responses, these renowned directors have loyal followership and are eager to see their latest works, regardless of genre or subject matter.

5.4.2. Recommendations:

Following closely behind the star power behind productions, recommendations from personal connections, OTT platforms, and traditional marketing significantly impacted viewers' choices when selecting modern Hindi social films that featured disability representation. This trend was especially noticeable in a context where viewers frequently relied on outside opinions to help them choose from the wide range of film choices available. Participants cited that "I trust their taste in films, chances are I will too" **[Response – 90]** and "if a good advert comes up, I'm going to go watch it next" **[Response – 67]**, cementing the value of passive recommendation to them. In some cases, participants were so influenced by film recommendations that they even disregarded Hindi social films starring their favourite actors. Take the reception to Responder 73's response as an example. So potent was this trusted recommendation from a disabled peer that, upon reading the participant's survey response in the fourth committee meeting, committee member SRK successfully advocated for removing the film *Zero* (2018) from the project, despite it featuring their favourite actor, Shahrukh Khan.

As with the project's committee, survey participants often found it challenging to disregard recommendations, even when they conflicted with their preferences. One participant, for example, suggested watching "*Qala* [2022] and *Bulbbul* [2020]. I haven't seen it yet, but my sister keeps recommending it. Both deal with mental health, and Tripti Dimri is in the lead role" **[Response – 10]**. This recommendation was notable because neither film aligned with the participant's stated enjoyment of comedy and romance films, as indicated in their other responses to the survey.

Surpassing the influence of personal recommendations, the popularity of any particular film at the time itself emerged as a significant factor in viewer choice. A film's widespread discussion and positive reception created a powerful sense of social proof, making it appear more desirable and appealing. By leveraging the

opinions of others, respondents in this survey were seen to be able to streamline their viewing and avoid films that might not align with their interests.

5.4.3. Thematic Viewing:

Despite the increasing popularity of celebrity-worship-driven recommendations, a niche group of viewers meticulously researched films that aligned with their specific sub-genre preferences and thematic interests. This demographic, primarily male and over 30, with many over 50, sought out “feel-good family titles” [Response – 113] that offered what they perceived as “meaningful social commentary” [Response – 5]. They were also mindful of their viewing habits with younger audiences. They avoided films with “tulip scenes” [Response – 120], a dated Hindi film trope from the 1990s that depicted intimate scenes using two tulips pressed together. No doubt that, much to their satisfaction, this trope has largely fallen out of favour in early twenty-first-century Hindi films.

While primarily associated with the above age and gender range, thematic viewing was also favoured by those younger participants under 30. These younger viewers often preferred familiar single sub-genre films to Western counterparts, citing films such as “*Laal Singh Chaddha* [2022]” [Response – 41] and “*Margarita with a Straw* [2014]” [Response – 29] as key examples. They highlighted the familiarity of these films with their respective older Western influences, *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989). In some instances, participants were younger than the Western films they named as inspirations for the modern Hindi social film they would recommend, yet their familiarity still influenced them. Notably, similar patterns were observed where younger participants actively sought out information about any potential Western films equivalent:

SH: I kind of cheated a little and looked into *Black* [2005] before coming, and I saw an interview with the director talking about what inspired him [...]. Has anyone seen *Lolita* [1997]? Oh, God. There were bits that played into that. I wouldn't have thought if I hadn't seen the interview.

[Black Screening – 00:07:21]

5.4.4. Disability Representation:

Whereas, unsurprisingly, disabled people who participated were drawn to a ‘Bollywood survey’ focused on disability representation, the specific trends in film interest identified, and the reasons behind them were particularly noteworthy. This was especially true for the disabled women in their 30s identified in Section 5.1. These women overwhelmingly watched the most recent Hindi social film they could find and access, to see how a disability similar to their own was portrayed. While participants’ favourite films varied based on their disabilities, as discussed, they generally sought films with protagonists who shared their condition, as they felt represented by their portrayal, as mentioned in Section 5.2. This would enable them to inform others about their experiences by recommending these films. Further, when these participants provided condemnation for films, they often did so in a way that challenged the societal norms about disability portrayed in those films.

Following Gillespie’s (1995) research, as discussed in Chapter 2.2, popular Hindi films have a complex history of reinforcing and subverting traditional cultural and familial norms among diasporic South Asian viewers. Likewise, this survey similarly found that older participants, particularly men, used film recommendations to engage in culturally specific conversations about disability. Their motivations differed significantly from those of the younger women. Indeed, some older men had even used film recommendations to challenge my and the committee’s perspectives. For instance, one participant who later attended four film screenings with his adult son initially objected to the screening of *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), due to its depiction of sexual activity. He expressed the Abrahamic belief that “you should not show such things to people closer to the wonders of Allah” [PBUH], implying the notion that, due to suffering, disabled people are somehow considered closer to God and therefore semidivine. It is worth noting that this participant chose not to attend that particular screening, opting instead to limit their viewership to representations that aligned with culturally specific politics of the disabled body.

5.5. Conclusions:

Survey participants highlighted a complex relationship with modern Hindi social films, driven by personal identity, accessibility, and the pursuit of disability

representation. These films provided a platform to explore cultural and social issues that mirrored their own experiences. For disabled women in their 30s in particular, a key appeal of their preferred films was the accurate representation of their lives, particularly in terms of disability. While films like *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) were praised for their empathetic portrayals, the quality of representation in certain films remained a significant concern. Many participants criticised the industry's inconsistent portrayal, often reducing disabled characters to objects of pity or comic relief. For example, trivialising disability through humour was deemed offensive and harmful, as seen in films like *Pyare Mohan* (2006) and the *Golmaal* (2006–2017) series.

Despite participants expressing concerns about representation, well-known figures often influenced their film selections. Familiarity with actors, producers, and directors played a key role, suggesting a passive reliance on past viewership and star appeal. While sub-genre styles and recommendations were also influential, the presence of popular figures was observed to lower barriers for these disabled viewers by fostering a sense of familiarity and trust. Similarly, younger participants related these films to familiar Western themes and recommendations from trusted sources, which sometimes even overshadowed the appeal of a favourite actor. Despite other factors discussed, the power of star appeal remained a primary driver in these participants' viewing habits, emphasising its significant role in shaping their engagement with the medium.

Accessibility was another crucial factor highlighted during the survey, influencing the viewing habits of those who participated. While OTT platforms offered convenience and some accessibility features, such as closed captions or AD, the inconsistent quality of these features across platforms compared to other consumption methods was a source of frustration for many disabled viewers. For older or physically disabled participants, the tangible inaccessibility of cinemas also limited their ability to watch films despite their interest in doing so with family and friends. Regardless of age, the lack of accessibility led these participants to rely more on OTT platforms to view films instead of their preferred viewing option, attending the theatre. Despite these challenges, modern Hindi social films still resonated deeply with this disabled South

Asian audience. These films helped these viewers stay connected to an idealised notion of their disability identity and explore themes that resonated with their values and experiences. For many, watching these films was not just an entertainment activity but a way to engage with critical social issues and spark meaningful conversations about disability, society and how those matters are portrayed on screen.

In conclusion, disabled participants' choice of modern Hindi social films was closely tied to their desire to share their understanding of the disability experience and personal identification. They valued the opportunity to see an agreeable version of the disability experience that mirrored their own or was an idealised portrayal that they wished to convey to others. These films provided a space to connect with other viewers, engage in discussions about disability representation, and advocate for their inclusion. This engagement was observed in the survey responses to be both emotional and intellectual, allowing viewers to navigate deeply personal narratives while contributing to broader cultural discourses on disability. Participants described feeling seen and validated through disability portrayals, even when imperfect, and saw Hindi social films as a powerful tool for shifting public perceptions. The viewing of modern Hindi social films, therefore, became an essential mode of cultural participation around self-representation.

Given the reasons for this audience's interest, the following chapter now examines how participants engaged with specific storytelling narratives concerning disability in the modern Hindi social film genre.

Chapter 6 – Identifying the Disabled Character’s ‘Struggle’ through the Lens of Experience.

6.0. Introduction:

The modern Hindi social film genre, like any compelling cinematic storytelling narrative, relies on visually and emotionally showcasing its protagonists’ internal and external conflicts (Bivalkar, 2023: 33). As Chapter 2.1 discussed, these ‘struggles’ drive the plot, create suspense, and deeply engage the audience. This chapter examines how disabled participants connected with, and made sense of, each character’s ‘struggle’ in the selected films for this project, drawing on their disability experience understandings. As Chapter 4.3 discussed, the analysis presented herein is thematic, grouping insights across the selected films rather than treating them as separate individual filmic readings. This approach draws on fieldwork observations, post-viewing discussions, transcripts, and written reflections, alongside NVivo for manual coding. Key phrases related to disability and its representation were identified and linked to original video and audio recordings, followed by exploring the prompts and questions that elicited these responses. Participants’ reflections were further categorised for deeper analysis, iteratively combining observations and discussions, with excerpts and dialogue from the screened films themselves.

This chapter does not assume that participants’ responses reflect their core beliefs, acknowledging that the screened films’ emotional impact and group dynamics may have influenced their reactions. Thus, this chapter adopts the concept of one’s ‘position’ to reflect these various inputs. Such a position imitates a combination of one’s social standing and their current perspective, influenced by the information available to them (see: Andreouli, 2010: 14.11). In essence, it captures how people perceive themselves and how they think others perceive them. Incorporating this approach aligns with Rioux’s (1997: 109) criticism of Disability Studies’ tendency to reduce disabled people’s lives to inoperable “disability facts” without considering the biases which create them. Therefore, this chapter’s thematic structure aims to foster a broader discourse on how modern Hindi social films influence the perspectives of diasporic disabled South Asians on disability-related matters. However, it does not

seek to definitively conclude that all diasporic disabled South Asian viewers of disability themed modern Hindi social films would uniformly share related interpretations on the subject.

Building on the findings in Chapter 5, this chapter's initial section presents various accounts that highlight the profound influence of regularly viewing modern Hindi social films with disabled protagonists on disabled viewers. This contributes to the broader development of a redefined understanding of the 'character struggle' archetype in the following subsection. As observed within, witnessing disabled characters navigate systemic and social barriers served to mirror the challenges these viewers report encountering in their lives. Participants expressed that such films, however unrealistic the portrayal may seem, empowered them to understand and articulate the discriminatory experiences they contend. While their perspectives were influenced by diverse factors, including age, class, disability type, gender, religion, and other intersecting social concerns, I describe how they collectively shape a new receptional model of the character struggle archetype.

The following section examines how participants, after drawing parallels between their experiences and the characters' struggles, consider how non-disabled audiences may interpret the films' message about disability and, in turn, their own.

The final section considers how collective film viewing cultivated a sense of ownership over the genre and medium itself among the disabled participants in this project. While remaining discerning about the disability representation screened, they collaboratively constructed a shared narrative about the supposed intent behind such portrayals. They further differentiated themselves from non-disabled viewers, claiming a more privileged understanding of the characters' experiences. Through this, they asserted cultural rights over the genre, positioning it as a product designed solely for their communities alone.

However, before any analysis of the film club discourse can occur, it is prudent to revisit my researcher/advocate positionality, as highlighted in Chapter 4.2. Namely, by structuring this chapter's themes into a cohesive narrative, I aimed to stimulate a broader discourse on the topics of greatest interest to those who have participated. This narrative framework thus functioned as a platform to elevate and illuminate the

issues that held their significance. It is also important to acknowledge that the following analysis engages with potentially unsettling subject matter, including abuse, end-of-life decision-making, homicide, rape and suicide. While the sensitive nature of these topics is wholly recognised, a safe space for discourse was established with those involved, and strict protocols were implemented to safeguard those attending and disclosing. All films analysed were rated as age-appropriate, and to safeguard against identifying individuals in this chapter and the thesis as a whole, participants' responses remain anonymised.

6.1. Recognising the Disability Struggle:

I begin this section by paying homage to Deaf participants-turned-interlocutors Rekha and MK, who championed BSL accessibility throughout the research. Even before the project commenced, they reached out to ensure the films had BSL interpretation and highlighted the issues regarding Deaf participant engagement if this measure was not met. During the first screening, when the BSL interpreter was delayed, they made sure we did not start until everyone present could participate. They had even noticed me reading into their conversation enough to figure out I knew some BSL and asked why I had not prepared a BSL presentation or video explaining the project. Indeed, MK went so far as to use a few choice signs to criticise me when I passively explained that my dyspraxia made it difficult to continue studying BSL. When the interpreter did not attend, however, Rekha had graciously 'RELAY'ed our discussions and pulled me aside at the end of the first screening to record the purpose and aims of the project in BSL video format to use at any remaining screenings. After all, for participants across the disability spectrum, effective communication and understanding were crucial for their engagement. For these reasons, I begin my analysis with those like Rekha and MK, whose needs, as those of other groups, were prioritised to ensure they could fully participate.

Reflecting on the character struggle plot device discussed here, Rekha provided their thoughts on the first film screened called *Barfi!* (2012) as they related to the love triangle between the autistic character Jhilmil 'J', the deaf-mute Barfi 'B' and the 'hearing lady' Shruti:

Rekha: J and B support each other, she can hear, he cannot. If you're disabled, your family keeps you at home, so you won't go out. To protect you. Some of us can share. Some are discriminated already. Don't get freedom to experience. [...] The deaf man didn't understand when the hearing lady came to visit to express her feelings. If B were with the hearing lady, they [would] not support each other like B does J, as understanding is not there. For love, you don't need to hear. J and B accept each other as they see and accept their differences. Hearing lady does not. I['m] jealous, angry of hearing lady "it is her right" to B. [...] All of B's life he was abused [and] beaten. Barfi is emotional and touching. I became teary when watching the end. I think of my life as B lies on his deathbed. J is unaware of his dying. B cannot hear J is there, but that's okay. J is there for B.

[Barfi! Reflection – 14]

For Rekha, *Barfi!* (2012), through its love triangle, reflected the intricate dynamics of ableism and disablism at play in the real world of relationships. This was not just evident in the central question of the film's 'who-gets-the-boy' narrative, but also in the societal pressures that weigh more heavily on a bi-disabled relationship compared to a hearing-d/Deaf one. Simply put, Rekha interpreted the film as paradoxically portraying societal preference for inter-abled couplings over bi-disabled ones. Such an interpretation negatively portrays the hearing-d/Deaf relationship, as Rekha does theirs in post-viewing discussions, implying the Deaf characters loved ones would also face prejudice after others discover their disability. This further contradicts the usual happy endings that viewers, particularly female ones, expect from modern Hindi social films (see: Suri, 2019: 17). Yet, there can be an unintended and encoded happy ending that only those with Rekha's experience could decode. This can be observed in how "J is unaware of him dying" and "B cannot hear J is there, but that's okay" because, irrespective of how their disabilities impact their communication, their shared comprehension of disability assures "J is there for B".

Reflecting on the film and their experiences working with Rekha, MK highlighted their views on the medium at large and how the film's plot reflected the experiences of other d/Deaf people being 'heard' in society:

MK: Bollywood don't want to tell the truth about disability. Their movies are based on happiness, fun and enjoyment. They say if they show real-life situations,

society will become depressed and suicidal. Deaf man uses resources and acts out to her, to build trust to make Jhamil feel safe. Good [...] I feel the deaf man is always escaping from the police as he has communication difficulties. This happens. [Rekha's name redacted] sees the Deaf boys in the system because of miscommunication. Authority unable to express our truth [...] Hearing lady got to explain her journey. We need more support for disabled people in film to explain their reality [...] recognition is important.

[ibid. – 11]

MK's example of the d/Deaf character, Barfi, highlighted the communication barriers the d/Deaf community often faces, which can result in misunderstandings with those outside of it, as illustrated by the interactions between characters Barfi and the policeman. Thus, MK emphasised the need for more films created by and starring d/Deaf or disabled people to represent these miscommunications authentically. While MK acknowledged the film's attempt to portray d/Deaf characters through gestures, they believed it is not enough to emulate the communication challenges; instead, it should facilitate access for those represented.

How participants conceptualised the character's journey in the films screened was closely linked with their evolving sense of identity. Participants observed how prejudice and discrimination fuelled the film's story, with acceptance of the character and their disability(s) by the supporting cast, closing the film's denouement. Discussing the film *Guzaarish* (2010), participants KH and ZM explored how this plot device resonated with viewers like themselves who became disabled in later life. Throughout the discussion with the pair and other participants, they reflected on how the film portrayed the individual journey toward self-acceptance, and how society often struggles to see beyond a person's disability. To these participants, the film highlighted the challenges disabled people face in gaining acceptance for who they are, rather than the circumstances leading to disability:

KH: What I say is that this film reminds us that every human being is resilient, but disabled people are tested on their resilience, and then some. For we are tested all the time, every day, every waking minute that gets tested, and even when trying to sleep. If you're in pain, try the fact that you're also being tested to test for it [...] We can learn from Hrithik [Roshan's character]. He had to endure right from the get when he had his accident [pause]. Otherwise, what kind of life could he have lived? We can all be more resilient. It's just that disabled people don't

need to be tested all the time on their resilience like this. But that's the reality being played out in front of us.

ZM: I get that's how you see things, but I felt from the beginning that Ethan's story [namely, Hrithik Roshan, the protagonist] was all about his internal acceptance. Ending his life was his decision. He fought for that right, and I totally respect that [...] This is a resilience story most of us share. It's about the right to be treated the same, to make choices and decisions, and to be valued.

[Guzaarish Screening – 01:07:52]

Indeed, most participants in attendance shared KH and ZM's views, as seen in their written reflections. They observed that, like the film, disabled people's resilience is 'tested' when they advocate for their rights. Providing but one of these reflections highlighted the importance disabled participants placed on having agency and the right to make critical decisions about their lives, even when those decisions are tough for non-disabled people to comprehend, and are final:

Disabled people aren't given autonomy. People around them take it away. The thing about *Guzaarish* [2010] is, despite suicide and euthanasia being dire situations, they are still a RIGHT. People conflate suicide with euthanasia, which is not right. Suicide is generally not a choice but a last resort. But Ethan spends years fighting for the right to be euthanised.

[ibid. Reflection – 2]

Expanding focus to the broader participant group, their responses overwhelmingly indicated that these portrayals linked the discrimination they encounter to feelings of suffering and the question of individual choice in end-of-life decisions that some disabled people experience. They emphasised autonomy, criticising limitations placed on people's decision-making and control over their bodies, in film and reality:

Euthanasia requires a high level of empathy that society tends to lack for disabled people, so it is seen as a selfish act and not one down to choice and autonomy [...] She [the co-protagonist] does her very best to keep him alive, but eventually understands it isn't her decision in the end – good!

[ibid. – 13]

While some participants recognised the potential for immense hardship faced by some disabled people attending, others perceived the film's intended message, conveyed through the character's struggle, as excessively negative. They instead

emphasised the value of living despite the discrimination faced. Ultimately, participants grappled with the ethical considerations of the topics highlighted in the film, such as euthanasia, as they relate to people's right to informed choices about autonomy and quality of life throughout:

Sofia says she'll take on [the] wish of imprisonment as "it is nothing compared to your life imprisonment", aka his disability. "Haven't seen Ethan this happy in years" because he can finally end his life on his terms. And, it is fitting that Ethan hosted his own funeral.

[ibid. – 8]

ML: And I feel like a lot of these films tell us how the hero is made to be weaker than they are. They limit them and take away their choices to control them [...] Everything has to be a fight. To be seen. To be heard. Like, I feel there has to be better ways of showing the barriers.

[ibid. Screening – 01:15:39]

Going further, participants extended beyond the film's narrative to question the very processes by which disability is defined, and how these definitions impact the rights, autonomy, and overall quality of life of those categorised. This exploration was evident in their observations on the portrayal of speech disabilities in the film *Kaminey* (2009). BH, after the screening, focused their thoughts on the fundamental right to define disability itself. They also noted that some speech disabilities may not be considered as such in different regions, raising the question about who holds the power to define what constitutes a disability:

BH: You know, in Bengali you don't pick up lisp words, and you can avoid it in other Indian languages. It is English and the Europeans that have this sound [...], and the Spanish do it on purpose. So, I'm inclined to think Indians have this here because if you go back [to the Subcontinent], this is just normal. Who's to say what disability is for some and not others?

[Kaminey Screening – 00:32:26]

Another participant, in their written responses, challenged the film's representation of speech disabilities. They argued that the film depicted the character Guddu's speech disability in an exclusionary manner that reinforced a limited and harmful view of these groups:

Guddu explains his life of crime because of vulnerability and confidence issues. He feels like others controlled and shaped his life because of how he sounds. Glorifying this is dangerous for us. It's low-key including and excluding [speech disabled] people and not giving them a choice.

[ibid. Reflection – 6]

The idea that film influences life choices for disabled characters and thereby shapes public perception of disabled people was a recurring theme throughout the project. Indeed, in this very screening, a participant FN posed the question of “controlling the narrative” as seen in the genre, as a means of broadening the scope of how disabled people perceive themselves through such material:

FN: I want to say this [film] was made to reflect an ideal of my life across the pond [...], it is up to us. We can try controlling the narrative or be complacent with another Khan telling that story.

[ibid. – 00:39:44]

During the screening of *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), a film which explores a disabled character's sexuality, numerous participants shared similar sentiments, drawing parallels between the protagonist's struggles depicted and their personal experiences:

EE: I thought it was a very realistic portrayal of a young 20-something finding their sexuality [...] the only caveat is her Cerebral Palsy and others fighting her from experiencing those things.

[Margarita with a Straw Screening – 00:32:26]

Participants were particularly drawn to scenes that mirrored intentions they related to and to those that highlighted the similarities between themselves and the disabled protagonist. Scenes such as “Laila cropping her photos to hide her wheelchair” **[ibid. Reflection – 5]** or the “joy when Laila falls off her chair and isn't treated with fragility” **[ibid. Screening – 00:03:05]**, as participant BP reported, resonated deeply with them. They described how these scenes served as a powerful affective tool, which brought them back to regularly viewing films. Others reflected on their desire for acceptance and recognition by non-disabled people, to be seen as ‘normal’ and, in turn, socially desirable, which they observe being played out on screen:

The “Jared could see me” brought that physical need “to be seen” [...] Khanum sees her, but being who Laila is, she thinks Khanum can’t SEE her – because she’s blind. And if she did, she wouldn’t want her playing into Laila’s insecurity. This speaks to Laila’s very real feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt because they are both disabled, and the feelings are exemplified by the way they are introduced.

[ibid. Reflection – 9]

The final character struggle observations discussed here are seen in the reflections and post-viewing discussions of the cerebral-turn-romantic action-thriller *Kaabil* (2017). Beyond the struggle of being a blind voice-over actor, this film’s protagonist grappled with the trauma of his wife, who was also blind, being raped and ending her life. The events that follow see the protagonist use the skills he is ‘kaabil’, meaning ‘capable’ of, in heroic fashion, to target the non-disabled goons responsible. Although participants acknowledged the film’s unrealistic premise, it sparked essential conversations about how they, too, have felt judged by society when expressing discontent with the discrimination they encounter:

Disabled folks are always labelled as victims [...] Disabled characters can’t have happiness, but we can have revenge? “But he’s blind, he couldn’t have done this”. “I must say, although you are blind, you are quite gutsy”. Ableism power: who is the victim and who is the vigilante?

[Kaabil Reflection – 4]

DS: The blind hero was the killer of the people who hurt his wife. Poetic justice in the end, really. But a man avenges her killers, and the only witness is blind. Shame if no one can believe it. He even tells them, ‘I did it’, yet no one believes.

AM: What worries me is how this so easily became a revenge story about her death [...] I feel like Bollywood did a great job raising the awareness of rape in India and globally [...] This film is great but it is hard to see it is so easy for them to show people like us and is kind of, you know, telling us that society won’t seek justice for us. They stopped these stories, but when disability is involved, they think it is acceptable because we are down here, and they are up there.

[ibid. Screening – 00:47:39]

As DS and AM highlighted in these reflective discussions, there is a central question for these participating disabled viewers around film narrative where a disabled character’s struggle and agency are solely expressed through violence, while

happiness remains elusive to them. Moreover, they criticised the film for perpetuating stereotypes about disability, yet at the same time, they commended it for showcasing the disbelief surrounding a blind man's Kaabil to pursue revenge. This, they argued, mirrors deeply ingrained prejudice that disabled people are inherently helpless and prone to sabotaging those who do not share their worldview. Finally, these participants argued that while the film may appear progressive in some ways, it reinforced the idea that society is less likely to believe in or pursue justice for disabled victims. In their view, this film failed to challenge the stereotypes that perpetuate harm toward them. Instead, they think it opted for an alternative portrayal of disability, which, albeit still empowering, paradoxically resonated with them and, consequently, garnered their support.

6.1.1. Towards an Archetypical Disabled Struggle:

As considered in the first section of this chapter, participants through the breadth of this project emphasised differing elements of a collective understanding of the 'character struggle' archetype in modern Hindi social films by reflecting on their experiences as disabled people. The characters' journeys towards self-acceptance, their battles against discrimination and injustice, and their fight for autonomy and choice deeply resonated with participants, particularly those with the disabilities portrayed. These films provided a platform for them to connect their struggles with those on screen and foster a sense of recognition and understanding with those characters.

When disability was concerned, the characters' struggles also sparked conversations about complex issues such as end-of-life choices and the right to self-determination, encouraging participants to reflect on their values and beliefs concerning disability and societal expectations of disabled people. Participants also highlighted the power of specific scenes that evoked a strong affective response, emotions and memories, demonstrating the profound impact of these relatable portrayals. The participants' responses extended far beyond the narrative itself, as they questioned the very definitions of disability and how these definitions shape their rights and life choices. In essence, watching the character's struggle archetype catalysed connection, reflection, and advocacy, empowering participants to engage in meaningful dialogue

about disability, identity, and social justice. Further, many participants throughout the project reported only having those discussions when watching similar films with others.

The traditional ‘character’s struggle’ archetype in modern Hindi socials, often centred on overcoming personal flaws or external obstacles, therefore needs to be redefined, particularly when concerning stories focused on disability. According to those attending this project, the narrative model, in actuality, highlighted the struggle against the perceptions of disability, showcased in the characters’ resilience and agency in navigating a world that often marginalises and misunderstands them. For these participants, unlike other genres of film, the modern Hindi social demonstrated that the ‘struggle’ for disabled characters is not just internal, but also deeply intertwined with societal barriers and prejudices. The characters’ fight for acceptance, autonomy, and the right to define their identities in the face of discrimination became a powerful narrative tool that challenged traditional notions of heroism and resilience in the genre.

These films emphasised showing the diverse realities of disabled experiences, moving past stereotypes to reveal characters’ emotions, desires, and ambitions fully. This directly aligns with the global call from disabled communities to their film industries, as noted by Florer (2024: 9). Therefore, modern Hindi social films about disability redefine the “character’s struggle” to include broader societal and personal dimensions, offering participants a more empowering view of their challenges by fostering a sense of societal reflection in the content they consume.

6.2. What ‘Others’ Must Think:

Shakespeare (2006b: 189) rightly emphasises the crucial need for Disability Studies to seek to define the roles of the non-disabled in the experiences of disabled people. With this in mind, I now consider disabled participants’ perspectives on the films screened as they consider how non-disabled viewers may frame them. While participants often identified with the struggles faced by the disabled protagonists in the project films screened, they frequently shifted focus to speculate on how non-disabled viewers might perceive those same struggles. This tendency was

widespread throughout the project, particularly among participants with visible disabilities. They commonly began by sharing their insights but reframed their perspectives to anticipate non-disabled reactions. Like the protagonists facing off against a non-disabled antagonist in the films, these participants seemed to cast non-disabled viewers as antagonists in their own narratives. This pattern was evident at each screening, sometimes prompting me to offer input to challenge the idea that “you’re the researcher Krrish [...] while I speak from my experience” [**Kaminey Screening – 00:19:48**], as participant ZY put it, and avoid being positioned as an outsider to those discussions.

Considering the frequent shifts in discussions noted, this section focuses on instances observed in the remaining screenings not yet analysed in this chapter, *Black* (2005), *Iqbal* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), and *My Name Is Khan* (2010).

The first example I present is the screening of the modern Hindi social film *Black* (2005). This film, loosely based on Helen Keller’s (1903) autobiography, profoundly impacted the participants early on in this project. It prompted them to reconsider their earlier written reflections before the film screening, particularly concerning the non-disabled characters portrayed. Initially, they questioned the attitudes of supporting characters towards the disabled protagonists. However, this introspection expanded to their personal lives, challenging their views about close family and friends, some of whom were present during the screening. Almost all pre-discussion reflections mentioned the protagonist’s treatment by supporting characters, with comments like, “Sara is a hater – is she meant to be a jealous glass child?” [**Black Reflection – 11**], in reference to the protagonist’s sister, who was deemed “disgusting. No empathy and full of resentment! We’re better than her!” [**ibid. – 3**]. The protagonist’s parents faced criticism also for “giving her up to the teacher’s demands” [**ibid. – 14**] and for seemingly dehumanising her in dialogue like “‘this is her identity’ putting a BELL around her neck? Her father is the worst” [**ibid. – 6**]. Participants also questioned, “why are we encouraged to feel more empathy when the teacher started to lose his sight?” [**ibid. – 17**] implying dissatisfaction with the shift in film narrative focus away from the main protagonist. The teacher’s role was generally perceived as “coming with a lot of emotional baggage [...] and an agenda

[...] his behaviour towards the young [disabled] girl was very traumatising and brutal” **[ibid. – 10]**. Such behaviours participants reported being “inappropriately co-dependent” **[ibid. – 9]** on the disabled protagonist and sending the wrong message to their loved ones. After the screening, as participants shared what they thought of it, they quickly wondered how their loved ones might react:

RB: Yeah. For me, that would be a red flag. [...] I believe people learn bad behaviours from these films and think that wanting love can be taken advantage of, as I have been.

[ibid. Screening – 00:49:33]

RB’s experience of being exploited in relationships, consequently, due to disability, created a strong link between their lived reality and the relationship patterns frequently shown in modern Hindi social films. This connection led them to be wary of romanticised portrayals of disabled characters in the screened films, viewing them with utter scepticism. Participant RT provided a similar example, beginning with the scene they previously mentioned, explicitly referring to their father, who had chaperoned them to the project, and was outside in the local café at the time:

RT: Maybe they’ll achieve great things because you pushed them, but at what cost [...] And I think, oh poor Michelle, you will never be an animal [...] people must be careful with how these things get internalised [...] don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that they’re all like that. My father was an awful son of a [swearing redacted] [...] If he could get away with it, he’d put a ‘bell’ on me.

[ibid. – 00:27:20]

As GT posed, “the father and the teacher were both sorta like villains in a way” **[ibid. – 00:51:45]**, as a filmic representation of repressive non-disabled men in their lives who have sought to impose their will on the protagonist and themselves due to their disability. SD further reflected how they “can’t count [the] times I’ve lost out ‘cause a caregiver is ‘beside themselves’ about ‘poor’ Michelle” **[ibid. – 00:12:57]**. By stating “poor Michelle”, they related to the screened character’s struggle, by highlighting a recurring pattern of participants reporting being denied opportunities because of the constraints of those supposedly involved in their care. Another participant KL wondered whether others would “see this film and think like deaf-blind people are un-dateable because just getting around for Michelle is just so damn hard on

everyone” [ibid. – 00:05:49]. KL, who is Deaf, frequently discussed their sporadic dating life in relation to the screened films on this project. KL often perceived themselves as a burden on others, a theme also reflected in earlier scenes of those films. The prevalent worry of ‘what might they think’ in response to scenes that resonated with participants’ life experiences highlighted their genuine fear that others, who do not share their experiences, may be privy to private moments or thoughts they would rather keep hidden. This underlying tone was present throughout the project, particularly during this screening. While identifying with the disabled protagonist, participants were concerned about being equated with them and having their struggles viewed through that lens. Effectively, they worried that these perceptions might affect how others treated them in real life.

During the screening of *Iqbal* (2005), an early Hindi social film about a d/Deaf village boy who aspires to play professional cricket, participants further discussed their experiences pursuing their personal interests. They highlighted striking parallels between the character Iqbal’s treatment in a Hindu-majority village and their experiences growing up in LBN. They observed a pervasive pattern of disablism, where non-disabled people take advantage of those they perceived as disadvantaged. Of particular novelty highlighted in this research, their input reflected a deep-seated societal injustice that these participants have encountered and expressed to the participant group. One participant shared the complex reality of deaf people who ‘pass’ as hearing, acknowledging the benefits and burdens it carries. While this strategy appeared to offer them some protection from prejudice and open doors to potential achievements, as they felt reflected in the film, it also creates an internal conflict between authenticity and self-protection in those who engage in it. This internal struggle, exemplified in the film, is further compounded by the challenges participants faced in disclosing their disability. They reflected that generally revealing this part of their identity can lead to vulnerability, highlighting the difficult choices people with non-apparent disabilities often navigate:

MP: You know, I grew up here [...] but this is village life [...] they treat him like a slave, like Iqbal’s father. We saw it [...] They think because we are disadvantaged, they can take advantage of us [...] My brother is that innocent, but I see how people treat me when they work it out, it is not helpful to cover your cochlear, but I’m

lucky that I pass. So, if I can avoid it, I will [...] Iqbal's silence at the end says it all. If you can hide it, you can achieve great things.

[Iqbal Screening – 00:27:42]

Participants like MP expressed a powerful admiration for the defiance of Iqbal's character at the film's end. His refusal to compromise his values resonated deeply with participants' desire for agency and control in a world they believed often tries to define them. Iqbal's silence in the scene symbolised empowerment for these participants, demonstrating the strength that can emerge from challenging societal expectations. That said, for some participants, their sense of belonging was not tied to their contributions or responses in the face of adversity. Instead, it is formed by how they believed non-disabled people expect them to be, which is further perpetuated by its on-screen depiction, as GB pointed out:

GB: You know, even though he has the skill and technique to play cricket professionally, he's stuck with the hearing person for the opportunity to. So, you know, it doesn't matter how skilled or good you are at something, unless the abled guy gives you that chance. It just does not happen. They don't know where we come from, what we have done, and they think we don't belong here.

[ibid. – 00:31:56]

In *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), a film about a young dyslexic boy's school experience, a similar view was presented by WU regarding the film's opening scene. While some participants raised concerns about the film's portrayal of disability, many also drew on their schooling experiences to connect with the character's struggles:

WU: I think it sets off well with the boy watching the writing turn into this whole imaginary sequence. He's thinking about the meaning and trying to make sense of the words, which is quite common [...] My time in school was like this little guy's, but there was no teacher who magically knew how to work with me, so I dropped out. And that's the thing [...] there are teachers who just don't understand the problems. They all say. Oh, that's a dumb kid. [WU's name redacted] *intentionatly miss-spelled*. That's right.

[Taare Zameen Par Screening – 00:21:49]

Similarly, ON "held the school record for being in 'isolation'. It was a room where they sent all the thick kids. Just me and a guy with Down syndrome" **[ibid. – 00:57:02]**. ON

thus reported, how akin to the young protagonist, they were typecast as delinquent for having genuine learning needs and requirements. “If you were having issues or were acting out, you went to isolation” [ibid. – 00:34:16] and like participant WU, and dare I say, in my own experience growing up with cognitive disabilities, “I don’t think my family knew either. And like, I didn’t tell them. I was embarrassed” [ibid. – 01:10:00], as AX reported.

Participants throughout the screening openly expressed these sentiments, but most prominently, in their reflective writing, “how they treat Ishaan reflects how those with additional needs are treated. No support, no care, think he’s being naughty when he’s struggling, saying ‘the letters are dancing’” [ibid. Reflection – 1]. Regarding the dancing letters phrase in the film, which refers to difficulties dyslexics face with reading, another participant reflected on the protagonist’s punishment because of those dancing letters and noted, “the boy’s spirit is broken. I hope Ram, his new teacher, understands him” [ibid. – 7]. Their hope in their perception of the newly arrived antagonist Ram was rewarded, however, “I saw myself in a mirror after all these years’ the power of a shared lived experience only Ram understands what Ishaan is experiencing/going through” [ibid. – 12]. As further explained, this is because, as later revealed, the teacher, Ram, is himself dyslexic.

In this screening, participants reported appreciating the representation and concerted efforts to build awareness about matters related to the disability portrayed. There seem to be two key reasons why participants reacted differently in opposing the antagonist teacher archetype in *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) compared to the previously discussed scene from *Black* (2005). The first was that, unlike *Black*, *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) withheld disclosing their second protagonist’s disabilities for dramatic effect. This reportedly allowed viewers to connect with those characters and develop a desire to understand their struggles. Many participants, including those with the same learning disability, reported learning more about it through the film’s exploration of the seemingly non-disabled antagonist-turned-dyslexic co-protagonist Ram, over a reflection of their own experiences. This was despite both films relying on similar storytelling arcs to discuss disability. Secondly, participants favoured the idea of the reframed non-disabled hero and co-protagonist having the

same disability as the protagonist whose struggle they identified with. As RM put it, “that was powerful and all too what you would wish for in his shoes” **[Taare Zameen Par Screening – 01:01:38]**, as it allowed for participants to perceive that the antagonist, and in turn their non-disabled antagonisers, are fundamentally no different than themselves.

The final screening, *My Name Is Khan* (2010), saw the most observations about the perceived viewer reactions discussed thus far, although these were more subtle than in other screenings. My interlocutor Kajol also noticed this while assisting with facilitation. After reviewing the recordings and the overall atmosphere during the screening, the film club committee and I concluded that the film’s broad appeal, particularly among non-disabled viewers, created an environment where our target participants felt uncomfortable expressing their reactions openly. This popularity was mainly due to the actors in the film, who many non-disabled viewers credited for educating them about specific disabilities through their portrayals:

Its cinema is for the masses [...] Everyone, even your driver or dishwasher in the house, will go for that Friday release when it’s Shahrukh Khan. If any Tom, Dick or Harry were in it, it would not be so popular [...] which is how we learned about autism. We didn’t have these words before. We always said, oh, they’re a bit mentally wrong, or special. We didn’t have this language before [...] And there’s lots to be done, but these films have put them out there for us people who used to think they’re just a bit special.

[My Name Is Khan Reflection – 7]

That said, however coded disabled participants’ responses were in this screening, they nevertheless manifested themselves in opposition to the views expressed by the non-disabled audience attending. Concurrently, very few participants provided a written reflection. Proclamations such as DK’s, “come off it” **[ibid. Screening – 00:30:27]**, HS’s “what do you know” **[ibid. – 00:13:51]** and PL’s “course you’d say that” **[ibid. – 00:47:49]**, when responding to a non-disabled viewer’s contribution, were evident attempts at silencing their views. Some, like in the conversation with the non-disabled ally TJ, KG, who is a wheelchair user, and I, chose to quietly interject our response when we felt that a vital talking point about disability representation in the film that we related to was being sidelined for another topic:

TJ: I'm going to come back to you [...] It is like I normally love his stuff [Karan Johar], but in this one, I tried not to like, think about what was happening [...]

KG: So, I have a different view [pause] I'm not so sure what it wants to say. Is it how we treat disabled people with different faiths, how you put them in a little box and think that's what they're all about, or how we must prove ourselves to the world? I think he [Karan Johar] does this a lot, but something doesn't sit well when you see yourself as that person. When I think of it *like that*, it is discouraging the way everyone singled Rizwan [the disabled protagonist] out.

[ibid. – 00:22:47]

The most prominent divides between disabled and non-disabled participants emerged during screenings with a mixed audience, such as this. Those with invisible disabilities found themselves navigating a delicate balance. They could either disclose their disability and share their perspective from that standing, or act as a devil's advocate, considering how non-disabled viewers might interpret the film. This was evident in instances such as participant RN's humorously received rephrasing of the film's catchphrase, "hi, my name is [redacted], I may be autistic, but I'm not a terrorist" **[ibid. – 00:19:23]** or in participant TC's response "I'm just saying, we're all minorities, we gotta see things from their side" **[ibid. – 01:01:28]**.

These instances highlighted the complex struggles those with invisible disabilities faced in navigating social interactions and advocating their views between the dominant perspectives in the film club dynamic. Caught between two opposing forces, these participants seemed to align with one side or the other when reporting their viewing habits. When I observed this during screenings, I frequently noticed inconsistencies between participants' reflections and their post-viewing discussions. I could not determine which one, if any, or perhaps a differing position altogether represented their truest perspective on the matter. Over time, I came to realise a key observation that these disagreements lay in a broader tendency to polarise opinions about perceived ability, forcing individuals into opposing camps that fail to represent the nuances of their actual beliefs. After all, as participant MP previously emphasised, when participants move between the worlds of ability and disability, with the option to 'pass' between them, deciding which identity to express in group settings like the film club becomes central to those concerned.

In closing this section, I wish to draw attention to a participant who, akin to my role as the inquiring researcher, seemed more preoccupied with observing audience responses to the film than engaging in reflection on it. This was likely due to the ‘us-versus-them’ dynamic that emerged during this screening, as we later discussed one-on-one after the post-viewing discussion concluded. Their notes included brief mentions like “notable heads shaking in our side of the room” **[ibid. Reflection – 11]**, during the scene where the protagonist was unfairly detained for a misreading of their autistic behaviours and “wheelchairs at the front, angry by the stimming scene” **[ibid.]** suggested that they were paying close attention to how their peers interpreted the film and their reactions to perceived ‘others’ in the room. They also noted scenes with “visible laughter on the left when someone walked into him, and his brother – and he tried to hit them both” **[ibid.]**, which highlighted their observation of the non-disabled group’s amusement at seeing the disabled protagonist react to the onscreen offence. Most notably, their shorthand notes suggested their general worry about the disabled audience’s strong reactions to scenes that they felt might challenge or offend their disability-specific sensibilities.

6.3. These Films Were Made For ‘Us’:

I now consider how collective viewing cultivated a sense of ownership over the genre and medium among disabled viewers. As explored in the first section, while remaining discerning about how representation was viewed, participants actively and collaboratively came together to construct a shared narrative about the intent behind such portrayals with other disabled people. In doing so, they actively sought to articulate and resist the unjust discrimination experience in their lives, a stance validated by the characters’ eventual triumph over their perspective challenges. As CQ illustrated below, this onscreen victory mirrors their own anticipated triumph over the non-disabled world, which they perceived as the source of their struggles:

CQ: She [the protagonist] got upset because of all the barriers people put up. Without access, she’s treated less than human [...] I wish I saw this earlier to explain [...] that someone like me could be the *Hero* against discrimination.

[Margarita with a Straw Screening – 00:32:41]

Through the film club environment and similar initiatives that I attended during my Doctoral research, I observed how disabled participants had reimagined their cultural viewership. Their interpretations created an alternative to mainstream readings of these films, envisioning new possibilities for the representation of disabled characters in the medium. These receptional understandings not just extended to the characters depicted but also their perception of the choices made by those involved in development to visually portray them:

SU: I know we're talking about the characters right now, but I wanted to bring up the film's use of mirrors [...] I think we're talking about wanting to see ourselves reflected in the main guy's disabilities, and I want to believe the producer knows that and uses this as a concept in the props. I feel that's where we started seeing them fall in love with each other [referring to the disabled co-protagonists]. But it was played out on screen that way [...] when he uses the mirror, the reflection is like when he looks at her, what does he see. He sees himself. It is as if he recognises himself in her. And I think that's why he fell in love with her, just like we fell in love with them.

[Barfi! Screening – 00:54:15]

Section 6.2 highlighted how disabled viewers distinguished themselves from non-disabled viewers, believing their experiences with disability gave them unique insights into the characters' struggles, regardless of the film's portrayal of disability:

LT: Movies like these kinds of influence us, and, you know, make us understand, give us sight of how to think, and how to influence others' thinking. They can give awareness when you're part of it and get it in that way [...] I can say, did you see the new Shahrukh Khan film [...] He played this good, and is autistic, maybe now more will see us.

[My Name Is Khan Screening – 00:16:39]

By contrasting themselves with non-disabled viewers, they identified with the characters' struggles and saw non-disabled viewers as the source of those same struggles. This connected their experiences of subversive oppression to the characters', prompting them to differentiate themselves from those perceived to be involved in that subordination. This can be seen in KP's views of the 'other' being those in societal shaping roles, which, to KP, made them the individuals responsible for the systemic barriers they have contended:

KP: We saw who the problem was. The police, teachers, even doctors, all those who put up walls to keep us in our place [...] don't wanna be rude but who invited the uncle. Swear down he was defending the *Black* [2005] teacher.

[Kaminey Screening – 00:14:11]

As observed, they emphasised their opposition to the 'other' in their perspectives, thereby challenging the fundamental structures of their lives in a manner they felt empowered to, as a means of advocating for themselves. Shakespeare (2006b: 185) notes this contention, "growing out of this analysis, identity politics bolsters the self-esteem and pride of the minority community, [which] further separates disabled people from non-disabled people". Participants also used these films as examples to articulate those experiences to the 'other', as reflected below:

Shahrukh Khan shows how he deals with the everyday autistic stuff, like talking to people, which can be tough, noises, crowds, and all that. It helps you see how people think of those on the spectrum. It isn't perfect – The film gets you thinking about the differences, which is good understanding for people who see the world differently.

[My Name Is Khan Reflection – 16]

Through this mechanism of affective response to observing 'their experience' being reflected onscreen, they asserted cultural rights over the genre, positioning it as a product designed specifically for their communities. As VV put it:

VV: I wasn't always like this, so I feel for Ethan [...] imagine that. It was all a magic trick gone wrong [...] seriously though, that's why I got Ethan. His story is mine, so why shouldn't I get a say in it [...] It was made with people like me in mind.

[Guzaarish Screening – 00:19:09]

Referring to my favourite critic, MK, whose position on the medium was discussed in the first section, they, too, while denouncing the first film they viewed, go on to praise other films they attended. They highlighted in the *Kaminey* (2009) screening, a call that they repeat in some manner in each screening:

MK: We need more to get deaf and disabled people into film [...] These are our films, our lives, and we should get to tell them [...] and decide who sees them.

[Kaminey Screening – 00:05:51]

When participating viewers identified with the depictions in the films screened, they effectively claimed figurative ownership, a concept well-established in both the historical development of the Hindi film industry and the modern Hindi social genre. The very progression of the genre, in essence, chronicles its endeavours to reappropriate its stories and portrayals to align with the Nehruvian pledge of 'unity in diversity' given to the industry in 1947, as detailed in Chapter 2.1. Indeed, many cultural, ideological, and practical resources have been employed in the genre's pursuit of universality in the reception of their storytelling. Therefore, staking a claim of such portrayals is a complex process, full of contradictions and inexorably tied to how one identifies and differentiates oneself through those materials. Understanding these processes hinges on analysing the participants' perceptions of the current and common disability discourses in UK media. Therefore, extrapolation and interpretation of societal discourse would provide essential context for interpreting their filmic discourse, as discussed in the following chapter.

6.4. Conclusions:

In conclusion, this chapter highlighted the significant impact that modern Hindi social films featuring disabled protagonists have on disabled audiences. These films support viewers in rethinking the idea of the character's struggle by reflecting the systemic barriers they experience in reality. Through these narratives, participating viewers gained clarity and confidence in expressing the discrimination they encounter in daily life. The experience of watching these films as a group added a shared dimension to the interpretations, encouraging viewers to consider how non-disabled audiences might perceive these stories and how those perceptions influence their understanding of disability. Through this process, participants developed a strong sense of connection to the genre and the medium itself. By reflecting on these portrayals collectively and comparing them with their perceptions of non-disabled viewers' perspectives, participants claimed a unique cultural connection to these films. They called for greater authenticity in storytelling and more inclusive practices in the Hindi film industry. This underscores the close relationship between identity, representation, and how modern Hindi social films are received by different audiences.

Participants also responded emotionally and personally to key scenes, using them as starting points to share experiences that are often left out of mainstream disability narratives. These films gave them a way to express complex emotions and ideas about love, independence, pain, and hope in the backdrop of the suffering, anguish and discrimination they report experiencing. The shared experience of watching and discussing these portrayals allowed disabled participants to challenge negative stereotypes, resist marginalising stories, and find empowerment in new interpretations. As a result, the screenings became more than entertainment; they served as powerful cultural moments that shaped how participants saw themselves and how they wanted others to see them.

This engagement further highlighted how participants imagined themselves within modern Hindi social film stories. They related to the characters, questioned the storytelling choices, and paid close attention to how others in the audience responded. These reflections show that films can serve as interactive and collaborative spaces for meaning-making. They also reveal a growing desire among disabled viewers for stories that better reflect their lives, values, and experiences. With these insights in mind, the next chapter examines how participants utilised modern Hindi social films as a means to challenge prevailing notions about disability in the UK.

Chapter 7 – ‘Not Handicapped, but Handy-Kaabil’: Documenting Disability Representation Discourses.

7.0. Introduction:

This chapter applies the methodology from the preceding chapter to analyse how project participants, through communal engagement with modern Hindi social films, forged a cultural space in opposition to their shared experiences of disability in the UK. A key focus of this chapter lies in their articulation of how immersion in the narratives of fictional disabled characters facilitated critical reflection on prevailing UK discourses surrounding disability. This chapter, therefore, aims to demonstrate the success of the Kahaani film club project in creating a context conducive to rational discourse on disability matters, primarily insulated from external social pressures. Concurrently, this chapter explores these participants’ resistance to the aforementioned disability discourses. I describe how, rather than internalising these ideas, they appropriated the language and terminology of the films selected to articulate pathways towards their social inclusion. In contrast to the previous chapter’s emphasis on the transient, affectively driven nature of its findings, this chapter interprets its observations as a sustained viewership response to filmmakers’ and producers’ deliberate use of content as a catalyst for social introspection.

In the first section, I provide an overview of what participants perceived as familiar disability discourses that they encounter in the UK as they reflect on the narratives presented in the films screened in this project. Even though participants recognised the negative and uneven media coverage of disability, as Briant et al. (2011: 59) observe, they still hoped that the fictional depictions of disabled characters in modern Hindi social films could offer a figurative respite from their experiences. I swiftly move to an in-depth exploration of the dominant ideals articulated by the participant group about society’s differing methods for fostering their inclusion, drawing on filmic discourse presented in discussions of those films. In this section, I further provide divergent viewpoints among this cohort. I then analyse the participants’ critique of the medium’s contemporary representations of disability and

their endorsement of a monomythic narrative structure to illustrate the disabled character's struggle narrative discussed in the previous chapter. I conclude this chapter by considering the various barriers that participants identify as hindering the realisation of a society that treats disabled people as "not handicapped, but handy-kaabil" [Kaabil Screening – 01:12:38], using modern Hindi social films to catalyse opinions. In doing so, I contemplate a path forward that navigates the paradoxical challenge presented by participants of effectively utilising disability representations within the genre to address contemporary issues while simultaneously amplifying disabled people's agency and their active involvement throughout the creative process.

7.1. What Society Says:

The history of society's reception to disability is a complex and evolving journey, marked by significant shifts in social construction (see: Oliver, 1990: 80; Silverblank and Ward, 2020: 520). As detailed in Chapter 3.3, disabled people have traditionally faced marginalisation, stigma, and exclusion from mainstream society. While progress has been made in recognising disability rights and promoting inclusion, pervasive negative stereotypes, misconceptions, and discrimination continue to persist (Bagenstos, 2000: 425). These negative attitudes, coupled with inaccessible environments and limited opportunities, hinder disabled people's full participation in various aspects of societal life (ibid.: 429). This section, therefore, examines the prevailing narratives surrounding disability in the UK, as articulated by project participants during their engagement with the films screened. After all, "modern-day media plays an important role not only in reflecting public attitudes and values regarding disability, but also in shaping them" (Gold and Auslander, 1999: 709).

I further examined the questions posed to participants, which were designed to elicit reflections on the films themselves. Although explicit questioning was sparse, the resulting responses, when offered, revealed a consistent trend in which participants frequently alluded to particular scenes or character interactions, subsequently juxtaposing these with the realities of their own lives. This indicated that, even within their film-focused reflections, participants were inherently drawing parallels and

contrasts between their disability experiences and those depicted onscreen. While numerous instances of this phenomenon were evident in the preceding chapter, the following examples further illuminate this observation.

This exploration begins by first examining a reflection from Alia, an interlocutor and active participant of this project, as expressed post-screening of the film *Kaminey* (2009). Alia described the changes that participating in discussions about disability on the project brought to her understanding of her own disabilities, “being here you all really helped me realise it’s not disability that disables me it is the way the public treat us [...] and how we overcome” **[Kaminey Screening – 01:03:41]**. Through an outward view of disability, gained from engaging with other participants and sharing their stories, Alia identified a collective experience of societal and systemic discrimination within the group:

Alia: It is not just the way they treat Guddu [the film’s stuttering protagonist], it is what we’ve seen across Kahaani [film club]. People are being excluded and treated differently, and there’s always a reason behind the reason. And no one [in society] really owns up to the way they discriminate against us and create barriers [...] to just be you in all parts of life, you know, getting from a-to-b, meeting someone [...] you know, we are limited from actually interacting and building social skills, then blaming us for not being social. Or say we can’t do it because of disability. How are we meant to be included for inclusion’s sake when being blamed for being excluded [...] it makes no sense. They make us out like benefit scroungers but refuse us at every turn for work, for education, healthcare, and even housing and it is all a real mess really [...] How can they, on the one hand, say they want to include us but on the other so clearly finding reasons not to.

[ibid. – 00:22:53]

Notably, what is most interesting was how these views had developed through the project from one that internalised disability impact to a model that placed the onus on society. In so doing, Alia highlighted the systemic discrimination experienced by disabled people like herself being replicated onscreen, as illustrated throughout Chapter 6. She pointed to the cyclical nature of exclusion, where disabled people are limited in their opportunities and then blamed for their lack of participation (Morris, 2001: 167). Moreover, her points critiqued society’s hypocrisy towards disabled people, arguing that while there are national pushes for inclusion, numerous

attitudinal barriers continue to hinder disabled people's access to services and opportunities (ibid.: 179). Alia further indicated her reflection on how society perceives and frames meeting disabled people's basic needs and how these, in turn, impact their broader social participation. As shown, such a reception triggered by a film screened in the film club environment was nothing new to the project. As discussed in Chapter 6.2, participants regularly considered a broader range of ideas in conceptualising disability and others' reception of it. Indeed, every screening presented a broad narrative of participants reflecting on film scenes that mirrored aspects of their personal journeys and discussing society's role in shaping those disability-related experiences. As YP inferred, "our disabilities are different, even, but we have the same problems [...] the way people treat us, look down on us, think we are not as kaabil" [**Kaabil Screening – 00:07:49**].

ZS: You will be treated differently if you're disabled. It is because in this part of the world, if you have a disability, that's it. You are marked as different [...] They look at it as bad luck, and that's unfortunate; they could be us.

[Guzaarish Screening – 00:47:12]

As ZS inferred, their perception of UK life is that disabled people are "marked as different". They highlighted the observation that "people don't expect to become disabled. Yet it is more common to acquire a disability than it is to be born with a condition or impairment" (Tear, 2023). Likewise, participant JQ, reflecting on this very point in an earlier screening, considered the fragility of society discriminating against disabled people, framing it paradoxical from pursuing other forms of discrimination:

JQ: That's just it, it is like a weird kind of racism because they could end up with the same problem. A bad fall, or a new variant [...], we could have the same life, so why not show some dignity while you can.

[My Name Is Khan Screening – 00:09:33]

While the consensus among participants was that they had been subject to varying degrees of discrimination, meaninglessly, by a non-disabled society, some asserted that their experiences constituted literal, rather than symbolic, subjugation:

NR: They treat us as servants [...] they think we are disadvantaged, so they put us away like we are an inconvenience, you know. That is just what happened for my

brothers [...] Film is meant to bring people out from that slavery, that whole body politic that makes them believe they are better or stronger or whatever.

[Taare Zameen Par Screening – 00:46:58]

The harsh realities of societal discrimination against disabled people, as highlighted by NR, are pervasive, as reflected in the films screened. Through mirroring such experiences, participants like NR often described finding themselves marginalised, undervalued, and relegated to a lower social status. This societal prejudice, as reflected onscreen, therefore, further perpetuated a cycle of exclusion and inequality. As EW poignantly said, “they tell us to fit in, but we don’t fit into their world. Not if they don’t make space or let us tell it as it is” **[Margarita with a Straw Screening – 00:27:32]**. Another participant, CD, highlighted the experiences of infantilisation of disabled people, echoing this very sentiment, “it is true, like Michelle [the protagonist], they like to treat us like children” **[Black Screening – 00:14:19]**.

Further, the dehumanisation of disabled people was a recurring theme, as participant FI lamented, “they treated her [Michelle] like they would treat us, like an animal. Less than human. They have no morality” **[ibid. – 00:31:56]**. This systemic discrimination was further seen to reinforce the idea of negative behaviours in disabled people, as participant UV noted, “if you treat people that way, of course they will act out and they will say, see. It is not a disability thing. It is their behaviour” **[Iqbal Screening – 00:05:41]**. Moreover, participant KY contended that the films screened exposed a profoundly ingrained societal culture of disablism, characterised by the devaluation and marginalisation of disabled bodies. Through identifying this ‘hearing’ culture, KY highlighted its discriminatory practices that confine disabled people to a lower social status and subject them to dehumanising treatment. As KY pointed out, this systemic oppression is rooted in a cultural bias that prioritises able-bodied norms and excludes those who deviate from them:

KY: It’s their culture as hearing people, you know, without disabilities to abuse people differently abled to them. It’s just the culture of elitist exclusion, and we are treated like this in the social order we have [...] I think I’ve not seen many people telling me any different but the same stories they see in these films.

[Barfi! Screening – 00:23:39]

The question of who defines what constitutes a disability and controls its narrative, thereby influencing any discriminatory treatment, has been highlighted in Chapter 6.1. What is of intrigue here is the sharing of those discourses. For instance, a recurring theme during reflections on society and Hindi films' role in shaping disability discourses was the scapegoating of disability issues on religious or cultural grounds, framing them as beyond individual or societal control:

LW: So, did somebody do a curse on me? Some kind of black magic [...] There's that mentality that it is our fault. It happens. You know, films have kept this idea alive, that mindset that exists that God blames us and made us this way [...] It is how you look at it [...] But what future exists if it is God? Is it really God, or is that just making up for people's point of view [...] it's people, not God.

[Iqbal Screening – 00:09:21]

The societal perception of disabled people was a key reflection point throughout the project, as examined in Chapter 6.2, despite conscious efforts made during the open discussions to prompt participants to consider the scenes or characters. Participants nevertheless gravitated towards broader societal narratives and stereotypes concerning their inclusion, often reflecting the dominant cultural discourse they perceived. This was evident in the discussions about modern Hindi social films' role in framing and proliferating said narratives:

MJ: Kind of, you know, I've been thinking about how these films are really a reflection of what humanity wants to see [...] I feel that by focusing on these narratives, we relive the oppression and kind of allow it to play out over again.

[Margarita with a Straw Screening – 00:27:52]

MJ's statement, among others, underscored modern Hindi social film's role, like all forms of visual media, in shaping societal perceptions. By re-enacting and circulating these familiar tropes of marginalisation, these films not simply mirrored existing prejudices but risked validating and perpetuating the forms of exclusion audiences recognise from experience (see: Clelland-Stokes, 2002: 52). With this in mind, I now discuss participants' perspectives on how the genre can more effectively promote their inclusion and help break the cycle of systemic discrimination experienced by these viewers.

7.2. What We Say:

The concept of resistance is subject to ongoing debate. Seymour (2006: 305) offers a definition, positing resistance as deliberate and conscious acts of defiance or opposition by individuals or groups with less power against those with more. Similarly, Foust (2010: 9) proposes a rigid definition, suggesting that resistance should only be applied to actions that the actors themselves designate as attempts to defy, subvert, undermine, or oppose dominant power structures. These definitions provide unambiguous parameters for identifying instances of resistance. While my fieldwork revealed instances of disabled viewers actively resisting disablism and constructing counter-ideologies in opposition to such narratives as detailed in Chapters 6.2 and 9, their responses to dominant societal forces were more complex than Seymour and Foust suggest above. In the compound interplay of resistance and power, I observed how participants often employed strategies that, while opposing narratives, did not strictly conform to these traditional definitions of resistance. As Foucault (2019a: 95) suggests, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority with power”.

As participants discussed throughout the project, it became clear that while they disagreed with undermining narratives in modern Hindi social films, they did not entirely abandon them. Instead, they sought to curate their viewing choices, developing rationales for the types of content they preferred. They aimed to subvert traditional viewing practices to increase their access and inclusion and proposed practical solutions for the industry to better accommodate their needs. Indeed, as PB reflected, “if we don’t say something reasonable, they’ll just ignore us” [**Iqbal Screening – 00:47:54**]. Participants further pointed to their demographic spending power to mediate their call for better access and inclusion with industry professionals, as a means of bargaining. I discuss this latter point in further depth in Chapter 9.4. However, this section’s primary concern is to explore those means and solutions participants identified to foster their inclusion and access within the medium and broader society. I begin this analysis by tracing the development of insights from their appearance during the project’s first screening to its last.

The first reflection on the subject came from a regular participant, HD, who considered an early scene in *Barfi!* (2012) where the deaf-mute protagonist, not so incidentally named Barfi, intentionally places the co-protagonist inches from a falling streetlight. Inferred in the scene was that Barfi was testing the co-protagonist's loyalty, and, as HD pointed out, the film further sought to imply that Barfi's mistrust of others stems from his disabilities. While not outright opposing the scene, HD suggested an improvement by, "maybe, narrating a monologue explaining the guy's intentions [...]" **[Barfi! Screening – 00:12:51]**.

HD: Like, why leave it out there for the audience to work out what's going on? Did none of the writers think, what would the audience take from what's happening here [...] It could work, with this guy being the narrator. Oh, maybe his words could appear onscreen for what he's thinking [...] it is not like he can say what's going on in his head [...] at least I won't be wondering why there's some MAD deaf guy out here. You know, like properly playing mind games.

[ibid. – 00:26:05]

For HD, Barfi's lack of agency as a character prevented him from fully expressing himself, leaving the audience to speculate on his intentions and actions. While the director may have intended to portray Barfi nefariously in the scene in question, HD objected to such interpretations, highlighting how the character, being deaf-mute, cannot conventionally speak for themselves. HD, thus, proposed giving the disabled character a 'metaphorical voice' as the film's narrator, allowing the character the agency HD called for. HD further suggested that, as a d/Deaf character, providing closed captioning for the narration would be more appropriate, aligning with the scene's context, while identifying and accommodating the access needs of both the character and the audience.

Conversely, concerned with the stylised performance of physical and sensory disability in the film *Black* (2005), participant PF drew parallels with such representations and horror film motifs. PF therefore proposed that, if the Hindi film industry persists in casting non-disabled actors in such roles, it should engage the expertise of disabled acting coaches to foster more authentic portrayals of disability and, consequently, better inform the film and its audience on its disability matters:

PF: Why make it out to be like *The Exorcist* [1973]? Michelle's actor is a cute kid, but the way she acts up is extreme, like possessed [...] I know they [the film's production] wouldn't have hired a blind actress for this, but they could've hired someone who could teach them how to act more believably. They get minus points for that.

[Black Screening – 00:07:15]

The screening of *Iqbal* (2005) revealed similar insights. As VT and their cohort put forward, the production would have benefited from engaging deaf acting coaches or Indian Sign Language (ISL) Interpreters to guide accurate sign language performance and signology:

VT: Good film, but that girl [the protagonist's sister] was not using ISL. It's all gobbledygook, made-up signs. Okay, you can try read her face but there's nothing [...] Deaf people read very rich facial expressions, if your back is turned what can I understand? [...] we have all said, this is why you need Deaf people, Deaf jobs, spreading Deaf awareness, so more people can watch and enjoy it.

[Iqbal Screening – 01:01:47]

Given the ongoing assisted suicide debate in the UK at the time of writing, and the portrayal of this issue in the film *Guzaarish* (2010), I provide the following screening insight. The film is often credited with influencing Indian society's support for the 2019 Euthanasia (Regulation) Bill, which sought to garner the right to a dignified death for terminally ill individuals (The Tribune, 2018). While the film acquired significant interest from the UK diaspora upon its release, hitting the UK top ten (see: PTI, 2010), it was the proposal for the 2024 Terminally Ill Adults Bill that brought the issue into widespread UK public discourse. However, the film's reported compelling narrative about a newly paralysed English-speaking Goan man seeking state-assisted death provoked diverse reactions from our film club audience in 2023. Such reactions merit consideration within the UK's ongoing assisted suicide debate. While some viewers empathised with the protagonist Ethan's character and his decision, others expressed frustration with both his choice and the societal resistance to it, as also depicted in the film. Despite these differing opinions, a consensus emerged during the post-screening discussion, initiated by JN. JN highlighted the need for more films to explore the complexities of end-of-life decisions from multiple standpoints to broaden viewers' perspectives and allow them to reimagine the variables associated

with the subject. This call for further cinematic exploration suggests a potential avenue for film industries to engage with this crucial debate meaningfully:

JN: We might not agree [about euthanasia], but society needs to keep having these conversations [...] We might not want to have them, but we need to, because it affects so many [...] A good film should leave you thinking more than before about it all and we like this [film] to broaden people's minds.

[Guzaarish Screening – 00:28:11]

Above all, participants at the *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) screening expressed a desire for the Hindi film industry to avoid overemphasising the protagonist's reactions to their disability. Comments like MY's, "yeah, the whole cropping out her wheelchair thing, you don't need to spell it out to know what she was thinking" [**Margarita with a Straw Screening – 00:10:44**], and "ya huh, it was awkward with the wheelchairs bumping together as if they hadn't thought about how they'd do 'the deed'. It felt a little over the top if you know what I mean" [**ibid. – 00:42:29**] by participant IC suggested a need for filmmakers to trust the audience's reception of the character's struggle and, therefore, foster a more empathetic viewing experience of it.

Indeed, another participant, TB, at the screening of *My Name Is Khan* (2010) echoed similar sentiments, highlighting this film's use of a medical card as a prop. TB noted, "first they say you need this, and even if you get it, they will risk manage everything but how badly they treat you" [**My Name Is Khan Screening – 00:23:04**]. TB argued that introducing props to dictate how to treat people with specific conditions can be a harmful narrative tool, potentially leading viewers to seek similar documentation as a form of paper-thin protection against any discrimination experienced. Instead, TB urged filmmakers to avoid perpetuating harm to disabled viewers by neither oversimplifying nor overemphasising their disability experiences onscreen through the use of props or disability aids. The final insight into how disabled participants negotiated disability representation that I will discuss here emerged during a screening of *Kaminey* (2009). Comparing the film's portrayal of speech disabilities to the *Golmaal* (2006–2017) series, AA provided the Hindi film industry with the following advice when comedically portraying disability:

AA: I don't see *Kaminey* [2009] as a movie dealing with speech impairment. I kind of forgot about it. But we see, series like *Golmaal* [2006], and, you know, when you talk about misrepresentation and, you know, speech impediments being like comic relief [...] this film was tackled in a completely different way [...] how people speak differently isn't a joke to reinforce it and makes it worse for the person [...] *Kaminey* [2009] was making jokes with saying SS and FF with the brothers [pause]. But you know, those came from the guy they killed, so jokes on them. It wasn't the focus of the story, is what I'm saying. And that's the point, I'd rather watch a film where the impediment isn't a joke, but a whole part of the story that's properly dealt with.

[Kaminey Screening – 00:18:13]

AA's overall message was that filmmakers should treat speech impairments respectfully and avoid using them for comedic relief. Instead, filmmakers could integrate disability into the story in a meaningful and nuanced way, as AA believed had been done in *Kaminey* (2009). These observations regarding the enhancement of film access and representation of disability are not novel to the Hindi film industry (see: Florer, 2024). Nevertheless, they highlight these participants' desire for meaningful engagement with the medium by seeking negotiation in how disability is portrayed. Indeed, the overall reception to all screened films was remarkably positive, with participants rationalising their concerns about disability representation while simultaneously advocating for better inclusion in production. These participants contended that by including disabled people in both the narrative and logistical aspects of film production, and by portraying the challenges faced by disabled characters with sensitivity, both disabled and non-disabled audiences can gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and cultivate empathy towards the disability being depicted.

7.2.1. Divergent Thoughts:

Although dissenting opinions were expressed throughout the project, they tended to be marginalised in favour of the dominant participant narrative of each screening, as observed in Chapter 6.2. As Balch and Mertens (1999: 272–275) highlight, this phenomenon is a frequent occurrence in focus group dynamics. Nevertheless, a close examination of the transcript data bears a persistent undercurrent of resistance to the sanitisation of disability representations posed by the project's disabled group

majority. These disenfranchised participants proposed alternative methods to their inclusion in modern Hindi social films, which I now discuss. A salient demonstration of this alternative perspective, as discussed herein, surfaced during the screening of *Kaabil* (2017), where participant OU vehemently disagreed with the majority participant's view, that I inadvertently seemed to endorse:

LB: Release just that. I love it, love it.

Krrish: Find me a disabled cast and a couple of crores, and consider it done [...]

OU: I mean, if you want to make a flop B-grade film, then go ahead [...] it'll be *Golmaal* [2006] but without acting. Man, you need the drama, the action, the suspense, something that makes you want to watch it. And then what good comes from policing something until no one wants it anymore? [...] And disability is new, the new in-thing, like in the mainstream. It is because of the Hrithik's [Roshan, the film's protagonist], of the world out there spreading the word [...] like, who's going to watch my life, played by me.

[Kaabil Screening – 00:24:59]

OU, critical of my endorsement, argued that overly sanitised portrayals of disability, as suggested by the group majority, would lead to dull and unappealing films for a general audience. Instead, OU proposed that dramatic, suspenseful, and action-packed storylines are essential for creating engaging and commercially successful films about disability. OU believed that the current Hindi film industry trends of 'mainstreaming disability' are primarily driven by the allure of stardom, with famous actors playing disabled character roles being key to raising disability awareness.

As Dyer (1998: 112) points out, these films cast commercially successful actors to portray heroes who either adhere to societal norms, rebel against them with grace, or subvert them in a way that resonates with audiences. These actions foster a new perspective and the creation of a morally sound individual, the star persona. This persona reflects the social function of stars and validates the film's underlying ideology. Consequently, the star's presence becomes crucial for effectively conveying the film's intended message and achieving thematic success. Building on the findings of Chapter 5.4, stardom was a significant factor in participants' interest in modern Hindi social films. Regardless of other cinematic qualities, the perceived involvement of actors proved crucial in viewer decisions. As further illustrated in

Chapter 6.2, the popularity of non-disabled actors portraying disability in *My Name Is Khan* (2010) was a key factor in its attendance, even on this project.

Indeed, as Chakraborty (2024: 12) emphasises, the frequent casting of actors in similar roles, often under their real names, as exemplified by *My Name Is Khan* (2010), can lead audiences to conflate their on-screen personas, blurring the lines between the “reel and real”. OU therefore questioned whether non-/disabled audiences would engage with modern Hindi social films without a non-disabled star cast, even if these films addressed disability themes or featured disabled actors to enhance authenticity, as the group advocated. Moreover, OU was not alone in their scepticism towards sanitising disability narratives led by an inter-disabled cast, as participant WG’s reflections on the film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) highlighted. WG particularly expressed concern that disabled actor portrayals may inadvertently hinder rights progress and recognition by adding trauma to the experiences of those depicted:

WG: I have autistic brothers and I have dyscalculia, but I never understood [...] When this [film] came out, we watched it for Aamir Khan, but I left grieving for Ishaan like a part of me [...] In the Indian context, you need the big actors and their craft leading the way [...] part of the battle is to stop the abuse, not to act it and relive it ourselves.

[Taare Zameen Par – 00:06:10]

Discourses surrounding authentic disability representation emerged central to all film club discussions; however, this pursuit presents an inherent industry challenge. Many participants advocated for the inclusion of disabled actors to enhance realism, while simultaneously seeking to address perceived inaccuracies in the portrayal. However, dissenting voices, such as those of OU and WG above, caution against what they infer as sanitisation of disability narratives. They argued that such sanitisation could diminish the film’s artistic integrity and commercial appeal and hinder the progress of the disability rights movement. OU and WG, therefore, emphasised the importance of compelling storytelling and the allure of star power in capturing audience attention and raising awareness about disability matters. They highlighted that achieving meaningful filmic representation requires a delicate balance between the style of authenticity the group calls for and the film’s commercial viability, which includes the inclusion of a known star cast. The interplay of these diverse

perspectives, even when seemingly contradictory, can, however, when carefully considered, lead to innovative filmmaking approaches. As the combined group emphasised, filmmakers can create compelling stories that entertain diverse audiences while driving social progress towards disability inclusion. This can be achieved, as they highlighted, by skilfully balancing artistic vision with market realities, thereby enhancing public understanding of the disability-related narratives depicted.

7.3. The Hero Within:

Following an analysis of film club perspectives on methods of disabled people's filmic inclusion, including their dissenting viewpoints, I now examine participants' support for the monomythic narrative structure employed by early 2000s Hindi social films to depict the disabled character's archetypal 'struggle'. As detailed by HG in Chapter 6.1, a central narrative thread woven through this project emphasises participants' recognition of the disabled characters' struggles, as seen through the lens of their experiences. This potent narrative device profoundly shaped participants' perceptions of heroism and resilience by positioning disabled people as the central figures in their own stories. Similarly, this directly contradicted the longstanding convention of portraying them as adversaries in earlier iterations of this genre, as highlighted by RM in Chapter 6.2. Indeed, as CQ observed in Chapter 6.3, the "Hero against discrimination" [**Margarita with a Straw Screening – 00:32:41**] storytelling structure is seen to empower disabled viewers to envision overcoming the obstacles presented by the non-disabled world, which has been noted to be the source of disabled viewers' real-world struggles. Further, as CQ outlined; by depicting disabled characters as heroes in their narratives, disabled viewers can more effectively comprehend, articulate, and challenge the unjust discrimination they have encountered. This perspective, CQ contended, is further strengthened by the hero's ultimate triumph over societal challenges and their successful integration by their filmic society when presented onscreen. This is also evidenced by, among other instances, the discourse between QA, FG, and RN concerning Laila's representation as the protagonist in the screening of *Margarita with a Straw* (2014):

QA: That's the thing, this [film] could have gone a whole other way with Laila, she could have lost everything. But we grew with her [...] from the first scene in the car, you realise it is her story, her family are there, but she's the focus. Then at the end with the Margarita, and a straw on her little self-date, in that same way, she's giving her advocacy and confidence, her freedom, because she can do things for herself now.

FG: Yeah, it brought it all together. Imagine if it [the film] was about the family, that's the usual m.o. [motive]. But it was good, I think it should be a staple or like a general duty for these disability films [...] you should show disability without there being some guardian angel to save the day.

RN: Absolutely. Watching Laila work out the world felt like watching life, you know? I felt seen in a mirror, and it's empowering to see a character overcome those obstacles and find herself, like we all eventually do. It's about showing that we can be the hero achieving great things [...] we are not here for your entertainment, we're here to uplift each other. Laila's inspiring, not because she's disabled but because she worked through her own goals, not those others gave her.

[ibid. – 00:43:14]

Indeed, participants QA, FG, and RN agreed that the film screened presented a significant shift in disability representation by empowering its disabled character, Laila, as the sole protagonist. They celebrated Laila's self-determination and agency, particularly her personal growth and transformation journey, which began with loss and culminated in self-advocacy and confidence. QA highlighted the film's impact by centring Laila's perspective, emphasising how her journey fosters audience growth alongside her own. Likewise, FG advocated for similar narratives where disabled people overcome challenges on their terms, considering this a "general duty" for disability-focused films. This perspective emphasised the importance of representation that avoids reliance on saviour figures and instead focuses on empowerment and autonomy. RN echoed this, framing Laila's journey as emblematic of universal perseverance. RN emphasised that Laila's heroism as a character stems from her determination to navigate societal challenges and pursue personal goals, not from her disability. RN therefore asserted that disabled people are not "here for your entertainment" but to inspire and "uplift each other", reflecting a broader call for the continuation of such heroic-leaning portrayals in modern Hindi social films. QA,

FG, and RN collectively celebrated Laila's portrayal as a hero who embodied resilience and self-advocacy. They thus promoted filmic narratives that centre disabled voices as agents of their empowerment. However, as HX pointed out, this model of filmic inclusion elucidated by QA, FG, and RN in *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) is not universally applicable to all modern Hindi social films featuring disability:

HX: Oh, but there is a fine line, my friend. You must look and see other films Hritik [Rohshan] is in, and you will see something about the making of a good film. *Koi... Mil Gaya* [2003], yes, is still a very good film in its own right, but Hritik as this man-child, that is what Rakesh Roshan makes of the learning disability [...] But *Kaabil* [2017], vah achcha hai, that was good. You had everything, the story, the drama, action and the fighting for justice. He was fighting a wrong, and he was kaabil. Not handicapped, but handy-kaabil, very good. Very clever that Sanjay Gupta, he gives you what you want and food for thought, only. You see how the tale is flipped? Hritik, disabled in the hand, and how you say, in mind, he always plays the hero, and Sanjay plays him to his best strengths.

[Kaabil Screening – 01:11:09]

HX argued that while the film *Koi... Mil Gaya* (2003) addresses QA, FG, and RN's criteria for responsible disability representation, but it may still perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Explicitly, HX contended that the film erroneously portrayed Hrithik Roshan's character, Rohit, as a "man-child" figure, thereby foregrounding the character's learning disability to the audience negatively. Conversely, HX praised the screened film *Kaabil* (2017) for presenting a more complex and empowering narrative. In the latter film, Hrithik Roshan's blind character was depicted as a capable and resourceful individual fighting against injustice, hence HX's play on the words "handy" and "kaabil", meaning both disabled and skilled. HX thus commended the latter film's direction for effectively employing a blend of action, drama, and social commentary to engage audiences while showcasing a disabled protagonist who utilises their internal strengths to overcome external obstacles. Given that the same production company produced both films, HX emphasised that the director's choices significantly impacted how disability was portrayed. Simply, the chosen director ensured the represented character possessed genuine depth and agency, as

benefits any well-developed figure, by avoiding the use of tired industry disability clichés.

As Sharma and Rani (2024: 1678) highlight, modern Hindi social films often feature intricate plots that mirror the complexities of human experience, frequently employing monomythic storytelling structures to convey such narratives. They explain that the hero's journey, characterised by a series of plot points, guides character development, from initial conflict to profound internal and external transformations, which are central to modern Hindi social films. Indeed, as Chakraborty (2021: 8–9) observes, the main narrative driver is “the hero [who] has to fight this personal battle first and only after that is secured can he take it upon himself and act against social injustices and discrimination”. As participants in this study described, they were receptive to the recent use of the monomythic pattern in Hindi films to portray the journeys of disabled characters. For these participants, disabled characters must first overcome their internal struggles, such as their disability perception or impact, before challenging the external non-disabled world against their exclusion.

This concept of the monomyth, introduced by Campbell (1968: 23), describes a hero's journey through supernatural wonder, culminating in a decisive victory and the power to bestow boons onto fellow man. So too, participants of this project described framing disabled people as those very journeying heroes in their own stories who serve to bolster disability inclusion, as such a societal boon. They argued that the monomythic structure enhances the reception of the core message in modern Hindi social films screened, as well as the disabled people's struggle against oppression within a non-disabled society. Further, they contended that the monomythic structure was crucial to the success of modern Hindi social films. Chakraborty (2021: 12) supports the participant's claim that Hindi film, through its monomythic structure, reflects Nehruvian ideals of “Unity in Diversity” to promote social integration and advancement, as elaborated in Chapter 2.1. This is further evident in the frequent depiction of protagonists as champions of justice who bravely oppose all manner of “zulm”, as Chakraborty (ibid.: 5) highlights.

While traditional representations of disability in this genre, as Mohapatra (2012: 131) notes, often fell into karmic, comedic, sympathetic, caricaturing, charitable, or otherwise pitiable categories, modern Hindi social films are adapting to their disabled audiences by incorporating disabled characters within the then prevalent Nehruvian monomythic narrative. This research suggests that participants perceived this altered representation of disability in modern Hindi social films as crucial for promoting social integration and advancing disability discourse. While various obstacles impede the complete fulfilment of participants' vision for increased industry inclusivity, as I will elaborate, they unanimously asserted that the Nehruvian monomythic narrative framework serves the current suited approach for depicting disability issues within this medium.

7.4. Forging New Paths:

I began this chapter considering the often-stark examples of systemic discrimination experienced by disabled participants being replicated onscreen, as illustrated in the previous chapter. I remarked on how participants observed a cyclical pattern of exclusion, where limited opportunities for disabled people are used to justify their under- or mis-representation. Further, participants criticised society and their concurrent film industry's seemingly contradictory approach to inclusion, acknowledging efforts towards inclusivity while highlighting persistent attitudinal barriers that impede their access. Participants also discussed feeling othered by both film portrayals and societal perceptions, emphasising the interconnectedness between media consumption and social attitudes (see: Shrum, 2009: 67).

Despite their critical engagement with the narratives presented in modern Hindi social films, as I have sought to document, participants did not wholly disengage with the genre. Instead, they actively curated their viewing experiences, developing criteria for selecting films that aligned with their values. Simply, they sought to challenge conventional viewing practices to enhance their access and inclusion within the Hindi film industry. Moreover, they offered practical suggestions for filmmakers to foster greater inclusivity without compromising their artistic vision, as they perceived it, providing concrete examples of how this goal could be achieved. The film club

discussions on this project centred on the importance of authentic disability representation, a goal that presents significant challenges for the Hindi industry. While many participants advocated for casting disabled actors, to enhance realism, they also sought to address perceived inaccuracies in portraying disability.

I then traced the shift in traditional disability representations within the genre, observing a transition towards a more positive framing. This evolution likely reflects the Hindi film industry's increasing acceptance of previously marginalised disabled protagonists within this timeframe. Having analysed these accounts, I now explore the various barriers participants identified to achieving a society that views disabled people as “handy-kaabil”, meaning both capable and useful, rather than ‘handicapped’, leveraging film media to influence public opinion. This analysis aims to reflect the paradoxical challenge of using disability representations to address contemporary issues while simultaneously emphasising the agency and active involvement of disabled people in shaping the cinematic landscape.

Reflecting on how to overcome barriers to facilitate the realisation of these participants' vision of filmic inclusion, I first examine their agency in sharing these insights with industry stakeholders. As this chapter has aimed to highlight, the structured framework of the Kahaani film club project facilitated a space where a significant segment of this demographic could engage in rational discourse about disability representation, liberated from the interference of external factors. Such discourse falls in line with Habermas's (1989: 119) theories of how the ‘public’ should relate. Indeed, it was a challenge concluding each film screening discussion, as small groups or individual participants often lingered to continue the conversation. These participants frequently echoed Alia's earlier sentiments from Section 7.1, expressing how the environment fostered a sense of comfort and enabled focused and open discussions on these sensitive topics. As detailed in the subsequent two chapters, which analyse participants' inquiries posed to a disabled industry professional panel, it became evident that many participants may not have fully articulated their perspectives on disability representation or the detrimental consequences of (mis)representation without a central safe space within the project framework for

those discussions. Given the reported limitations on participants' ability to express their experiences, this research thus contended with the possibility that, without the Kahaani film club, their perspectives on the subject may not have been adequately documented. As UD succinctly stated from the first screening, "if I didn't come, I wouldn't have thought anyone cared about my thoughts about this [...] it bothers me now that what people say turned me off watching Bollywood stuff" **[Barfi! Screening – 00:28:44]**. As detailed at the beginning of this chapter, participants, exemplified by UD, expressed feelings of disenfranchisement arising from their perception of how Hindi films and society have historically depicted disability. Consequently, their engagement with film became contingent upon specific conditions, as previously outlined.

Then emerges the contentious issue of casting. With the industry largely unaware of their preferences and the surge in productions portraying disability, disabled viewers are left to grapple with how best to effectively communicate their desire for disabled direction to inform the representation of disability on screen. One proposed solution put forward, as discussed in further detail in Chapter 9.4, was a collective boycott of offending productions until representational demands are met. Conversely, another proposal put forward in Section 7.2 was for non-disabled star actors portraying disability to collaborate with disabled people in a consultative capacity to inform said representation. As discussed, participants who recognised a shift in how disability is represented in the genre sought to leverage the fame of established actors to educate the non-disabled world about disability. This approach, they contended, aims to alleviate the burden on the disabled community to continuously engage in front-line disability advocacy efforts, which they believed, incidentally, and all too often, fall on 'deaf ears'.

A further challenge lies in balancing the director's artistic vision with the needs of access and inclusion. Consider HD's input in Section 7.2 as an illustration. While HD's recommendations served to empower the character and, by extension, the representation of the d/Deaf community, it is conceivable that director Anurag Basu deliberately sought to elicit audience uncertainty regarding the protagonist's

motivations within that particular scene. Although Basu's intent remains uncertain, the question remains whether providing the character with a metaphorical voice would have potentially undermined the sense of realism the scene required. After all, by introducing a narrator's voice, as HD advocated, the film would circumvent the natural communication barriers encountered by d/Deaf people when interacting with hearing or non-signing people. This approach would thus have undermined the real-life experiences that participants like HD consistently reported and advocated for, namely, the need for non-d/Deaf audiences to understand these struggles through their authentic onscreen representation.

While HD's example highlighted how inclusive advocacy on a film's artistic vision can inadvertently contradict its intended goals, AA's example within the same section emphasised the importance of filmmakers viewing disability as more than just a source of audience humour. Therefore, AA argued that films aiming to portray disability narratives in a well-rounded way may garner a more favourable response from the disabled community. AA proceeded to compare two films depicting similar disabilities, advocating for the film that guided the viewer through a monomythic narrative focused on overcoming societal perceptions of disability rather than reinforcing them.

Another participant, OU, in Section 7.2, further compared the act of comically emulating disability as a recipe for filmmakers to make a quote-on-quote "flop B-grade film". OU proceeded to advocate for the development of a modern Hindi social filmic model of disability representation. This model would employ non-disabled megastars to deliver a mixed-masala film blending action, romance, suspense, and a cacophony of other subgenres. With its broad appeal across demographic tastes, OU contended this approach would serve as a vehicle for conveying a central message about disability to a broader audience. Similarly, most participants preferred the monomythic modern Hindi social films selected for this project, primarily due to their emphasis on disabled people's inclusionary activism. This preference surpassed that for any other genre of modern Hindi films in their preference reporting.

The final key barrier participants contend to filmic inclusion that I discuss here is that of artistic direction and production. Even within a single production company employing the same cast, divergent perspectives on the suitability of disability tropes used can arise, as participant HX reflected in Section 7.3. While Chapter 5.4. and HX emphasised the key role well-known figures play in drawing disabled audiences, especially those with limited information about the film, a prevalent concern among the participant group was that any filmmaker can easily create a ‘disability film’ and achieve widespread non-disabled success, regardless of the quality of disability representation. Participants, therefore, called for strong measures to ensure portrayals are authentic and responsible, insisting on an industry-wide, collaborative model that provides a clear and consistent framework for representing disability.

However, despite stating their intention to avoid content that disparages disability, the Indian Film Screening Board, known as the CBFC, eliminated disability as a screening category in 2014 (Sharma, 2022: 4), effectively removing any opportunity for collective agreement on disability representation in film, as detailed in Chapter 4.3. Consequently, until the CBFC re-evaluate these practices, aligning them with the considerations employed by other film industries following Article 8 of the UNCRPD (see: Treaty, 2006: 2515), participants may remain unable to realise a standardised model of representation. This remains true despite the allure of the modern Nehruvian monomythic narrative framework for portraying disability, as discussed in Section 7.3, which concurrently emerged alongside the CBFC’s policy changes.

7.5. Conclusions:

In conclusion, this chapter identified the multifaceted and often paradoxical relationship disabled participants had with their representation in modern Hindi social films. While participants acknowledged significant barriers to authentic representation, including systemic exclusion, accessibility, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, they also demonstrated remarkable agency in actively shaping their viewing experiences and advocating for reform in the Hindi film industry. The Kahaani film club framework provided this crucial platform for participants to express their views, engage critically with media portrayals, and propose actionable

solutions. These solutions included casting disabled actors, collaborative consultation with the disabled community, and implementing narrative frameworks that emphasise empowerment over pity within the industry. While participants coined these proposals as authentically inclusive, they also recognised various artistic challenges filmmakers face in balancing narrative realism with accessibility.

Further, participants highlighted a strong preference for a monomythic modern Hindi social film genre, one which prioritises inclusionary activism for a broad audience appeal. Future studies might aim to translate these insights into concrete policy proposals for the Hindi film industry. Advocacy could also focus on regulatory bodies like the CBFC, urging them to reinstate disability as a screening criterion and promote more accountable representations. Chapter 9.3 explores these findings further concerning the practical strategies outlined here.

Chapter 8 now examines how socially conscious Indian filmmakers navigate inclusive storytelling, with a particular focus on India's recent Divyangjan disability classification system.

Chapter 8 – ‘We [...] the Privileged Few’: Contextualising Disabling Imagery within the Indian Divyangjan Framework.

8.0. Introduction:

Moving away from topics previously covered, this chapter considers the questions posed by project participants to thirteen disabled and non-disabled actors, directors, and producers during LBN’s celebration of 2023 South Asian Heritage and Disability Pride Month’s. Following viewings of the short films detailed in Chapter 4.3, participants probed these film professionals about their choices in disability portrayal and their perspectives on inclusion within the Hindi film industry. While the identities of the responding professionals remain apparent through their cited films, their contributions are anonymised, a practice that mirrors the anonymisation of participating viewers within this thesis. A narrative framework supplants direct quotations employed in previous analysis chapters to better convey the essence of the conversations between participants, the film professionals and me. Thus, the chapter presents questions from the participants and examines the responses of film professionals. While direct quotes from screenings are intentionally restrained, hereon the analysis faithfully represents the source material. This was achieved by using the LIWC data analysis tool to identify key themes and examine the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of the responses, as proposed in Chapter 4.5.

This chapter begins by exploring how India’s prevailing political conditions surrounding disability inform the use of “disabling imagery” in modern Hindi social films to produce media types that portray disabled people as socially inferior (see: Barnes, 1992: II.6). I note that this phenomenon was not confined to a single film or production house; instead, it reflects a broader industry trend moving away from earlier documented industry norms. Next, I examine participant inquiries directed at film professionals regarding their utilisation of the Divyangjan framework. This 2016 Indian government disability classification system, geared initially towards social service delivery, has, I argue, profoundly influenced disability film advocacy. I posit

that the concept of Divyangjan, meaning “one with divine limbs” (Dhar, 2021: 6), has demonstrably shaped the approaches of Indian filmmakers and disabled viewers, as this section seeks to illustrate. The third section examines how the Divyangjan framework has influenced the Hindi film industry’s portrayal of disability. This analysis includes examining which disabilities are deemed suitable for portrayal and the extent to which filmmakers consider the perspectives of viewers with those disabilities. The chapter also finds participants’ perspectives on which disabled groups “ought to be the privileged few” **[Disability Pride Screening – 00:51:18]** prioritised for collaboration with filmmakers to better inform disability portrayals. Particular attention is paid to the excluding of specific disabilities from consultation due to the hierarchical approach embedded within Divyangjan logics. As the film professionals interviewed herein assert, such exclusion reinforces social marginalisation, leaving those neglected disabilities vulnerable to political manipulation and unrestrained artistic license. Before the chapter concludes, it presents its findings on filmmakers’ and participants’ views on the supposed gatekeepers of how disability was depicted in the films.

8.1. Disabling Imagery:

Chapter 2.1 examined how the modern Hindi social film depicts disability using a hybrid visual narrative model that blends Indian and occidental cinematic traditions. This subtype of Hindi film, traditionally employed by the ruling party to address social issues, notably refrained from depicting disability in ways that questioned India’s emerging neoliberal policies (Radhakrishnan, 2011: 199–206). Instead, the Nehruvian Era aimed to construct diverse visual narratives that depicted “appropriate difference” in disabled characters (ibid.: 58–59) in a non-threatening and aesthetically pleasing manner (Friedner, 2017: 358), ultimately seeking to foreground the challenges faced by individuals with such characteristics in Indian society. However, as Mohapatra (2012: 126) observes, in the early 2000s, the increasing influence of Western filmmaking practices on modern Hindi social film began to shift this apolitical portrayal of disability. As India’s conceptual landscape shifted westward, moving away from Nehruvian nationalism in filmmaking, disability began

to be visually represented to “exemplify difference” in diverse characters (Bhargava, 2017).

Comparatively, Western film has historically relied on harmful stereotypes of disabled people since its inception (Black and Pretes, 2007: 67–68). These portrayals, often referred to as “disabling imagery”, tend to depict disabled people as objects of pity, burdens, villains, comedic relief, or “supercrises”, thus reinforcing disablism, social isolation, and unequal power dynamics (Barnes, 1992: II.13). Barnes (2012: 732) contends that stereotypes endure because they provide non-disabled viewers with more manageable and digestible portrayals of disability. This, in turn, reinforces existing social inequalities, validates social exclusion, and creates a filmmaker’s financial incentive through increased non-disabled uptake (ibid.: 733).

In contrast, Prasad (1999: 67) suggests that the Hindi social film genre before the 2000s managed to “incorporate consumerism and other ‘modern’ features [of Hollywood films], without much damage [sic]” in undermining the industry’s core cultural integrity and identity. This section, however, shifts this analytical focus to the under-scrutinised post-2000s Hindi social films, arguing that they have progressively relied on disabling imagery to “signify difference”. This practice, I contend, is attributable to filmmakers’ persistent lack of critical self-reflection on how they employ such representations. This analysis, therefore, aims to examine how these practices shape both the narrative structures and cultural perceptions of Indian filmmakers while simultaneously examining their impact on Western disabled audiences, such as those involved in this project. I start my analysis by examining how 0SR, 0SM, and 10SS, the team behind *Wheels* (2022), visually build scenes to highlight disability experiences. As such, understanding the narrative techniques employed in this inter-abled production became crucial for unpacking their visual portrayal of disability and its implications for societal attitudes:

SALMAN: What ideas did you bring to connect people with the story’s meaning?

0SM: [...] Playing Dia [the film’s protagonist] was hard. What got me when the script came was the missing details, which maybe someone transitioning from a so-called abled to differently abled person would not understand. I told [0SR, name redacted] sāhab you must zoom in on these, actually zooming in on the

difference of becoming differently abled for Dia's character to be understood [...] It was important showing her changing physically and that psychological state of mind she goes through.

[South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM) Screening – 00:18:31]

OSM's recommendation to visually highlight Dia's disability transition through close-ups reflected a broader issue in post-2000s Hindi social films, that being the use of disabling imagery to signify difference. A notable narrative technique employed was the strategic use of close-up shots to create an intimate connection with characters and evoke emotional tension in the audience. While intended to compensate for the cited script's lack of detail, as OSM reflected, this approach risked reinforcing a Western-influenced portrayal of disability as a dramatic transformation rather than a normalised aspect of life. This approach further deviates from the modern Hindi social genre's core principle of collective diversity, especially considering that "over the life span[sic], almost everyone will become disabled" (Buscherhof, 1998: 22). The filmmakers of *Wheels* (2022) skilfully manage this tension, yet their recurring focus on physical impairment, as they themselves acknowledged, risks solidifying a representation solely defined by disability.

Chapter 6.1 observed that this filmic technique used to depict disabled characters often moves between building compassion and reinforcing stereotypes. In this manner, the film, according to its viewers, inadvertently perpetuated the tendency to empathetically frame disabled people as figures of pity rather than as fully realised characters with diverse narratives. By focusing on the visual "difference", OSM's strategy prioritised dramatising struggle over integrating chosen disability seamlessly into the narrative, and by doing so, perpetuating disabling narratives through uncritical visual representational tools. Exploring this visual style further, OSR, in response to OSM, provided the following process and examples behind their influences:

OSR: [...] When I began writing, I had this idea of black-and-white scenes and contrasting moments in colour when Dia reflects on the past and the loss of what made her so valuable. I wanted to show how someone would feel to lose the very limbs that were key to their identity [...] Our cinematographer did an excellent job with this. He knew when to go wide to capture the vastness of her

world, and when to zoom in close-up to focus on her feelings. Everything else was done post-production [...] *Schindler's List* [1993], have you seen? The movie is dark and [pause] visually grey, but the red colour of her coat sets the girl apart from everything around her. That is what I tried to take away and bring to *Wheels* [2022]. To develop that aesthetics into something visually pleasing.

[ibid. – 00:22:19]

The visual style envisioned by 0SR further complicated these representations. Notably, the filmmaker's reliance on stark black-and-white contrasts, an aesthetic choice that accentuates themes of marginalisation and social division. By employing stark black-and-white contrasts and focusing on Dia's emotional suffering through close-ups, the film, as proposed by 0SR themselves, reinforced the idea of disability as a tragic transformation, echoing Western cinematic tropes.

This visual language, which positions disability as a loss of value and an isolating experience, aligns with this post-2000s trend in Hindi social film that prioritises difference over individual agency. This stylistic decision may aim to highlight discrimination against disabled people in keeping with the modern Hindi social genre. Yet, it simultaneously evokes a sense of bleakness that aligns with Western narratives of despair often associated with disability. By deliberately choosing such a contrasting palette, the film invites viewers to reflect on the broader societal implications of these representations. However, it remains unclear whether this choice effectively challenges conventional narratives or reinforces them through its stylistic tropes of signifying difference. My subsequent question, intended for 0SR but answered by 10SS, focused on this difference between local representational models and those that are successful globally:

Krrish: Thank you for that incredible insight. Ah, sorry [90WW, name redacted], that's your one. [...] *Wheels* [2022] felt very much like watching a quintessentially Kolkata style production that JU graduates like you are known for [...] Of course, it went to OTT. How did this affect your pitch and how you presented that story?

10SS: [...] In my involvement [with 0SR], I have wanted my films to have an international appeal. I do not make [films] thinking of my locality or nation. As you say, we don't feel very *Indian* [...] Why pitch to red-taped India? I think some [in the panel] will agree also that we are in the same place, this Stratford

Library, in this discussion happening. We Asians are a global people, and so we should inspire and learn from the globe [...] You were mentioning *Parallel* [films], but what does Amazon [the subscription service] know of this? I feel it made a big difference to the story we've told [...] Right, so, the soundscape, even, that Amazon cared for. I wanted a softness, a quietness, even with the heavy subject [of the film]. I think it works. Yes, it flows for a stronger feeling [...] and the song is very dear to me. Because it holds a memory of Dia's joy and her returning to that joy again. But even this had to be thought through for filming for the international stage.

[ibid. – 00:27:56]

10SS's response demonstrated a clear preference for global marketability over applying their traditional artistic styles of the genre. As a result, the use of Western film styles was presented as a prerequisite for achieving international appeal. This practice, increasingly prevalent in post-2010s Hindi social films, frequently interprets disability through a Western epistemic framework, privileging tragic narratives and visual othering over the articulation of local traditions.

This tension between artistic intention and commercial imperatives, as evidenced by the emphasis on selling internationally, suggested that disabling imagery was deployed to satisfy industry expectations rather than to cultivate region-specific disability narratives. It must be said, however, that as 10SS inferred with their "red tape" remark, such region-specific narratives are indeed subject to the CBFC's stringent oversight.

Thus, the modern Hindi social film, shaped by and directed towards global aesthetic standards, consequently, bolsters ableist structures. They do so by essentialising disability as a visual marker of difference rather than integrating it as an intrinsic aspect of character identity. The analysis of these elements demonstrates that storytelling methods, visual choices, and the pull of international markets conspire to create disabling imagery, fuelling an enduring cycle of misrepresentation and marginalisation.

To avoid singling out *Wheels* (2022) in this analysis, I now consider the perspective offered by the '90% Wheelchair Warrior of India' and their all-disabled film crew. Their explanation for crafting films that "showcase our worth" as disabled people, like

Incredible Insight (2020), lends further weight to this chapter's central argument on disabling imagery:

AV: What's it like making a film about a real person?

45KD: You know, I made this film as a lifetime experience to understand the plight of our regular day-to-day crisis, of how a 90% differently abled person is going through and how they are breaking all the barriers in the society and inspiring the abled [...]

90WW: I guess you have seen that, with this incredible insight, as we know, is travelling every corner of the world and spreading awareness of building an inclusive society and a friendly new nation [...] So, if you want something inspiring, you should watch this space. If I can say one word or line, my film is not about disability but about showing our ability.

[*ibid.* – 00:06:13]

As observed, 45KD framed their film as a profound, lived immersion into the daily struggles and triumphs of disabled people. They described their film as a “lifetime experience” dedicated to understanding the “plight” and “day-to-day crisis” faced by someone who is “90% differently abled”. Their emphasis was on showcasing how 90WW overcomes societal barriers to serve as an inspiration to able-bodied people. Though the narrative of overcoming obstacles can resonate deeply with non-disabled audiences, it carries the inherent risk of reinforcing the Western supercrip trope. Consequently, it frames disabled people as remarkable solely for their ability to function within an inaccessible world.

Conversely, 90WW articulated a resolute purpose in transcending the conventional lens of disability. They champion ‘ability’, flatly denying that their film was a discourse on impairment. This stance, however, unconsciously reinforces the reductive practice of defining individuals by their disability impact or characteristics, a hallmark of disabling imagery. By centring on what disabled people can achieve rather than what they cannot, 90WW, however, sought to forge a narrative that they believed to be both empowering and inclusive. Nevertheless, despite 90WW's good intentions, I will note that the final film was ultimately a product of 45KD's directorial vision as the lesser disabled brother of their filmmaking team.

8.2. Divyangjan:

I now explore how the Indian Divyangjan framework influences disability advocacy for both Indian filmmakers and diasporic disabled audiences. I begin by defining the framework alongside explaining its operational mechanics and significance.

The legal concept of Divyangjan, as put forward by the Indian Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, originates from Narendra Modi's reframing of disability as "divine" during their Mann ki Baat radio programme in 2015 (see: Dhawan and Karpagam, 2021: 233). Key to this conceptual reframing was the assertion that:

We see a person's disability with our eyes. But our interaction tells us the person has an extra power. Then I thought, in our country, instead of using the word "*viklaang*", we should use the term "*divyaang*". These are people who have a limb or several limbs with divine powers which we don't have.

M Karpagam v The Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, 12663.

The introduction to the conceptual change of Divyang and its latter 2016 RPWDA, thus aim to abandon the country's categorisation of one who is deficient body (*viklang*) and replace it with divine body (*divyang*) (see: Dhanda, 2016). Given that 'jan' means person, 'Divyangjan' reclassifies and visually represents disabled people as 'divinely limbed persons' or 'one with divine limbs', shifting the framing from dis-abled to divinely-abled.

Although India's 2016 RPWDA shares origins with Western disability protections, which were secured through significant international activism and the 2006 UNCRPD, as Ghosh (2022a: 2) observes, it employs a distinctly different strategy. Consequently, the RPWDA employs a system of quantifying disability impacts to allocate reparatory resources through statistical medical evaluation boards rather than seeking to define disability (see: NDFDC, 2016). This process prioritises functional limitations due to societal impact, unlike Western systems that rely on medical diagnoses to accurately portray the individual's experience with disability (Economic Times, 2023).

While this strategy seems regionally practical and mirrors the Western social model's view of disability as socially constructed, it ironically undermines the Act's empowerment and barrier removal aims. As Grech (2009: 79–82) observes, such

alignment with Western ideals often overlooks the basic survival needs of disabled people in the Global South, consequently worsening their access to social participation and resources. Operating at the state and district levels, these medical boards employ specialists matched to one's impairment specifics. The assessment quantifies an individual's experience of disability, assigning a percentage that dictates access to schemes, benefits, and funding. Eligibility begins at 40%, with further enhanced inclusions for those graded 80% or higher (Gazette of India, 2024: 508). To achieve the goals of the 2016 RPWDA, the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities was created to spearhead national efforts for disability inclusion. Key to the Acts' success can be observed in the enforced reshaping of portrayals of disability in Hindi films towards an 'empowerment' model (ibid.: 456). Both governors and legislators in India believe that promoting the current regime's vision of a Divyangjan culture through film would inevitably lead to a constructive shift in societal views towards Divyang peoples (HT Correspondent, 2023; Pickle, 2024).

Consistent with Dhar's (2021) observations, this research was hindered by a significant lack of critical academic analysis regarding the Divyangjan system's influence on Indian governance of disabled bodies. With the notable exception of the Jindal Global Law Review, which boldly publishes diverse legal scholarship in the Indian context, this lack of critic and scholarship also extends to Hindi film analysis, a medium frequently viewed as a tool of India's global 'soft power' (see: Thussu, 2013: 143). Such an absence likely stems from academics' understandable fear of jeopardising citizenship or residency rights by questioning the motives of the country's successive ruling party (Taylor, 2014: 722). Consequently, I too must adopt a cautious approach to presenting my findings. While Aggarwal et al. (2024), Rai (2022), and Mahanta (2022) expertly address the political dimensions of the Divyangjan disability redefinition, my focus is on its textual consequences and its subsequent impact on regional filmmakers and diasporic disabled audiences.

Considering the Hindi film industry's reliance on the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, it is notable that both these epics and traditional Hindi films "associate disability chiefly with evil characters" (Kumari, 2019: 40), a trend that continues to

influence filmic discourse. Despite the progress made after the 2000s in moving away from karmic or viklang portrayals, as discussed in Chapter 2.1, it is the cultural shifts initiated by the Divyangjan framework that are of most interest. Above all, I was interested in how this framework has led filmmakers to conversely seek to depict disabled characters as empowered figures, mirroring the conceptual reasoning behind Divyang. Building on Friedner's (2007) research, which explored the effect of "non-threatening feel good" diversity, I sought to understand the mechanisms and intent behind this empowerment narrative for non-disabled audiences and how disabled viewers perceive it in the modern day. I start this analysis considering a straightforward question posed by a non-disabled participant CI, referring to the rationale behind a filmmaker's stage name:

CI: [90WW, name redacted], I was curious, why do they call you that?

90WW: Thank you. I credit myself as the Wheelchair Warrior of India, choosing this name because it speaks for my fight for justice. In my native Bangla, my real name means to be the shining jewel of our Lord Vishnu, the great Preserver [...] but my life has taught me [that] I must not be so serene [...] To be multiply disabled by society, you can either accept the fate life has given or fight for yourself [...] To answer your question, I cannot see myself as 90% differently abled but a wheelchair warrior with a 100% positive attitude [...] I choose instead to embody our Lord Shiva, [the divine Destroyer], with the extraordinary ability to transform the world with the power of my words [...] you can quote me on that.

[ibid. – 00:30:52]

Initially, one might interpret 90WW's stage name as a reference to the epic scale of the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, or perhaps the *Bhagavad Gita*. However, as I learned in detailed conversations with 900WW through their participation in the project, their explanation revealed a more profound meaning to how they conceptualise disability. Their stage name, in actuality, sought to deliberately personify and exemplify their disability identity as one that is 'divinely' abled, a conscious rejection of 'with', 'dis' or 'differently' abled labels. 90WW explained that they chose a stage name they felt empowered by for their advocacy, consciously distancing themselves from their birth name, which they felt implied passivity towards the state of play of disability activism in India. This supposed positive framing, they emphasised, allows them to embody

and experience a perspective beyond their own, enabling them to emulate words and actions that they believe will inspire change in how others perceive their disability. Understanding 90WW's naming conventions was further illuminated by the subtle context of their experience before the conceptualisation of divyaang. As 90WW explained, their desire to draw strength and resilience from a divine personification of disability effectively positions them as a figurative warrior battling a society that they conveyed views disabled people as inferior to their non-disabled counterparts. There was also the interesting omission about requiring a "100% positive attitude", which 90WW linked to the desire to avoid being framed as aggrieved by the status quo of injustices experienced by disabled people.

NF: [...] but, what's the 90% about?

45KD: If I can cut in [...] there are different scales to it. As I am saying, my divyang is 45%, so I have a better opportunity than someone lower than me. I might enjoy it more also, na? [...] But with the proceeds we had been given, [and] better rates of tax[ation], we could take this big chance in the pandemic to make the film, and as [90WW, name redacted] dada says, without Divyangjan we could not show the world the incredible insights we have.

[ibid. – 00:33:27]

Without dwelling on input from the 90WW and 45KD brother's duo, their open reflections on funding revealed fascinating insights into the benefits of filmmakers aligning with India's current regime's view of disability portrayal. 90WW and 45KD described a system where government subsidies for disabled filmmakers creating disability-themed films appear to be dictated by their assessed disability percentage. This ranges from lower percentages like 45KD's 45% to higher percentages like 90WW's, with the caveat that the film's overall Divyangjan message meets the CBFC's approval. Indeed, the brothers appear to be strong advocates of the Divyangjan framework and its benefits to disabled filmmakers who seek to adopt that model of thinking about disability. While 90WW's higher disability percentage as a divyang star afforded greater representation and financial opportunities, 45KD, despite a lower rate, equally benefited from embracing the Divyangjan identity through government exemptions from the 2020 pandemic production restrictions that halted the rest of the film industry (see: Krutika, 2020).

Observing that participants did not fully understand the filmmakers' answers at this point, I directly asked the filmmakers to explain what Divyangjan meant to them. The goal of doing so was to enhance participant understanding of the discussion, allowing them to ask more targeted follow-up questions about the Divyangjan framework:

Krrish: [...] **Do forgive this diaspora kid, my Hindi is much to be desired. I've heard the word divyaangjan a few times now [...] could anyone explain what they mean by this?**

FCTK: Oh, this is a good one for me [...] Divyang is a funny thing, believing, Krrish, I don't subscribe to it. It is for an odd kind of people [...] You are understanding that not everyone can be divyang? The poor, beggars among us are invisible to the world, even. They are not divyang. They are just this only [gestures by lowering their hand offscreen] [...] My work is about sharing in our joint humanity [...] we should expose exclusion for what it is because no one is more deserving [...] Maybe I would be stuck in this thinking if I released in India and not internationally.

[ibid. – 00:48:03]

In FCTK's explanation of the Divyangjan framework, they argued that this categorisation system seems to favour a specific type of disability experience due to its inherent structure. FCTK further highlighted the substantial impact of caste and class on whether individuals within these social categories can access government assistance related to their disabilities. Indeed, FCTK's point was well-supported by the World Bank's estimation that 4 to 8% of the Indian population qualify for disability-related government assistance (see: O'Keefe, 2007).

Consequently, it is not surprising that the 2011 census indicated 2.21% of India's total population as disabled, with a mere 4.5% of this group belonging to a scheduled caste or tribe (see: Indian Census, 2011). Hrishikesh (2023) rightly highlights that a "baffling lack of data is hurting Indians", especially considering the current government's delay in releasing the next Census report (see: Baruah and Singh, 2021). Subsequently, while this chapter refrains from commenting on India's methods of quantifying disability, a significant contention arises. Any quantitative evaluation of the fair distribution of benefits within the Divyangjan system for all eligible persons and the Hindi film industry cannot avoid raising core questions

concerning the very conceptualisation and categorisation of disability within India itself.

But what of FCTK's position on the impact of the Divyangjan system on their filmmaking focused on representing disability? FCTK's stance involved a conscious effort to avoid interaction with divyang reasoning. They achieved this by foregoing Indian government support for their productions. Instead, FCTK opted for international release, effectively bypassing CBFC approval. As a result, they could represent disability in their cinematic work without facing government interference or being bound by Indian censorship regulations.

Once the filmmakers left this Q&A portion of this screening, participants' reactions and responses to the Divyangjan framework filmmakers described were met with mixed responses. NF, among others, raised concerns about the "injustice" FCTK mentioned regarding access to disability benefits. They saw the framework as potentially favouring visible disabilities over non-apparent ones.

Some participants further questioned my awareness of contemporary Indian film incentives, a knowledge gap that became apparent and hampered the focus group's interaction with the filmmakers during the Q&As. Several participants noted that they had to resort to online searches to keep up with the discussion. As a result, the project committee rightly advised participants and me to use the remaining time to develop follow-up questions for filmmakers in future screenings. They also decided to include more film professionals in the next session to explore the Divyangjan framework within the Hindi film industry, a topic of keen interest to this participant group. Therefore, better prepared and with a new set of filmmakers joining a returning audience for another series of short films, I now address the questions developed by the film club committee, participants from the last screening, and myself regarding the operation of the Divyangjan system in the modern Hindi film industry.

8.3. The Privileged Few:

In celebration of 2023 Disability Pride Month, the Kahaani film club held its final screening, reuniting its audience with a diverse group of filmmakers, both seasoned and new to the project. In light of the opinions voiced by the audience during our prior

screenings, I sought to ascertain participating filmmakers' understanding of the Divyangjan system and its relevance to their filmmaking practices. It is worth noting that even before the screening, seven returning attendees pulled me away to ask about being the first to speak, showing they too were ready with their own follow-up. Discussing these questions, it became evident that they, like me, sought to understand more about 45KD's claim that they "have a better opportunity [through Divyangjan] than someone lower than me". Although 45KD could not attend the final screening, six filmmakers, including those involved from earlier screened films were present to answer questions and ask some of their own as well. With the largest capacity of the project yet, 42 participants, we spared no time in moving from the final screening to the filmmaker Q&A. Ananya, who had previously requested that I pose their question to the filmmakers, anticipated their question coming and boldly put forward the following:

Ananya: How does the whole divyang thing work for Bollywood now? [...] Like, does it benefit us somehow?

60VD: [...] now there's a department focussed on our skilling for peoples with these disabilities, we have the divyang network. Now we have fraternity but [...] This is the uncomfortable truth. There are far too many in our nation who do not benefit. We must do more than just commit to empower and we must use of what is only now being offered.

[Disability Pride Screening – 00:05:51]

While not fully answering Ananya's question, 60VD's response offered crucial insights into the broader systemic context undeniably shaping the industry. 60VD described a perceived positive shift in cultural attitudes among some disabled people through governmental skilling incentives, noting a national "divyang network" effort and "fraternity" that has consequently emerged. That said, the "uncomfortable truth", as 60VD immediately stressed, was that a significant number categorised as disabled outside the film's production region are shut off from these benefits, exposing the limited scope of the current system's impact and industry standing. In fact, given the 40% disability qualification and the essentially contested metrics for disability calculation in the Indian context, its mechanisms inherently create barriers to access (see: Das, 2002: 9). Thus, their call for more to be done to empower those

not fitting these categories was a vital point that can resonate within the industry context as well. As concurred by 60VD's filmmaker peer, 90WW, "yes, we need better targeted incentives that bring more of us in. It is the great injustice" [ibid. – 00:38:31]. As Gardner (2023: 39) reminds us, albeit in a differing context, by categorising those at the tail end of governmental policy, their voices are seldom heard for the simple act of listening and the empathy it can foster.

Indeed, the categorisation process by which participating filmmakers described permits further compartmentalisation of disabled voices, both in their production locality and for viewers in this project. The prevailing view among both disabled and non-disabled filmmakers in attendance seemed to align with 60VD's observation that 'divyang' thinking is advancing disability attitudes in the Indian context, but a more robust classification could encompass more disabled people. However, disabled filmmakers like 51SD presented a contrasting argument, supporting the model's strict definition of disability:

51SD: That's very right. We ought to be the privileged few making use [...] Bharat's situation is different to your England. You do not have these Kahaani gathering activities for the most vulnerable people [...] You must target Indian services. We are of a 1,400 million. Imagine my Nani coming with me, and your Nani and your Nani [...] There must be limits to things, or where do people like us go?

[ibid. – 00:51:17]

In stark contrast to 60VD's engagement with the Divyangjan framework, 51SD articulated a perspective deeply invested in selective access as a pragmatic imperative within the Indian context. As 51SD with conviction asserted, "that's very right. We ought to be the privileged few making use", placing themselves as a prime access beneficiary. This declaration stressed their belief in the circumscribed distribution of resources and opportunities within Divyangjan, prioritising a select group of beneficiaries. 51SD anchored this stance in a comparison of Indian and British contexts, noting that pan-disability research would likely not exist in the Indian sphere as it does not target the "most vulnerable". This assessment rationalises the belief that India's vast population scale and specific needs necessitate a more targeted approach to service provision. The hypothetical scenario involving multiple Nani's (grandmothers) illustrated 51SD's concern about the potential for resource

dilution if access is not carefully controlled. Thus, 51SD's anxiety reflected their alignment with neoliberal dis-considerations of scale and the perceived necessity of limitations to ensure effective service delivery within the Indian political context. With 60VD's and 51SD's contrasting viewpoints on the model put forward, I turn to comprehending how this filmmaking group contextualised its influence in their disability filmmaking practices:

Krrish: So, if I got this right, it is about defining what disability looks like in India and who gets support? If I can ask, how does this new way of thinking influence disability in your films?

OKK: [...] For me, it makes it easier [...] you want to learn the right things from the right people. With *Goldfish* [2023], my director and writer [name redacted] had grandfathers with dementia, so they shared a lot of stories. I recall one thing that stuck with me, she told me how, when she was caring for her, she really liked sugary tea, which the film featured [...] In *Margarita [with a Straw]* (2010)], you could not consult people in the same way [...] You don't always get that exposure to people being filmed. But, you know, as our middle class grows, you are seeing more people with special abilities coming out, more of those kinds of services, or thinktanks of those sorts of people that want to help make better films with us, and that is a special thing.

[ibid. – 00:42:26]

OKK further provided their justifications for why they subscribed to this framework for thinking about disability in India and the benefits to the industry's practices:

MK: Call me interested, we have disabled jobs now. How does that play out?

OKK: Yeah. So basically, I did six months prep sitting with [consultants named redacted], at her workplace, which is a disability centre, with divyaang and people who help with them [...] that kind of access was so important [...] You know, they were very protected before, but this is changing for the most specially abled.

[ibid. – 01:12:16]

According to OKK, the newer Divyangjan framework has simplified the process of connecting with individuals with relevant experiences. This, in turn, as OKK reflected, leads to alignment between a film's subject matter and the valuable insights of those involved. To illustrate this, OKK contrasted their work on *Goldfish* (2023) with their earlier film, *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). During the production of *Goldfish* (2023),

OKK emphasised the direct engagement with individuals with personal connections to dementia, the director's grandmother and the writer's grandfather. This shared experience, OKK explained, provided rich and specific details woven into the film, citing the grandmother's disability impact of forgetting that they already had their sugary tea as a key example. OKK noted that such direct consultation and exposure were not readily available during their earlier filmmaking endeavours. OKK attributed this positive shift to the growth of the Indian middle class, which has subsequently increased the visibility and accessibility of those with 'special abilities' and their support networks.

Further, OKK observed the emergence of services and "think tanks" comprised of disabled people eager to contribute to informing filmmaking, a development OKK considers "a special thing" for the Hindi film industry. Elaborating on the practical implications, OKK described a six-month preparation process for a film that involved extensive engagement with disability consultants at a disability centre, alongside direct interaction with "divyaang peoples" and their caregivers. OKK portrayed this level of access as crucial for genuinely understanding and describing their stories. OKK suggested that while disabled people were previously "very protected" in India, this dynamic is evolving, allowing for more direct engagement and collaboration. OKK thus considered this access key to the success of their later productions, a concept unimaginable to them during their earlier films. OKK's remarks highlighted a promising trend of consultancy with disabled people and the degree to which filmmakers value their perspectives in the filmmaking process. However, within the Divyangjan framework, OKK's description of "the most specially abled", coupled with other filmmakers' views, forces one to consider which disabilities are being prioritised for representation by this filmmaking group. Indeed, this point resonated with committee member, SRK, who posed the following question to filmmakers:

SRK: So, you sorta, need to be in it, to win it. To get in the films. Would I get in?

FCMA: Maybe not so much, na. I mean, you got to be from India, coming from those institutions [...] You got to think, do you want to come from there or live life independently? [...] the industry is changing, where everyone was spoken about, now you think of the unfortunate [...] and they help you with this.

[ibid. – 00:54:47]

FCMA's response to SRK strongly signalled prioritising certain disabilities, which was due to the Divyangjan system. Firstly, SRK's direct question, "would I get in?" signalled their awareness of potential barriers related to perceptions of their disability. FCMA's somewhat hesitant reply, "maybe not so much, na", followed by their explanation, reinforced this idea of prioritisation. The emphasis on those "coming from those institutions" further indicated a leaning towards those connected to specific support networks. FCMA went on to describe how this process led to an over-representation of disability types more commonly associated with institutional care, excluding those who live independently or are not institutionally affiliated. FCMA's explicit statement, "where everyone was spoken about, now you think of the unfortunate", offered compelling evidence of a deliberate shift in filmmaker focus. They pointed to the prioritisation of representing those with disabilities they consider "unfortunate", highlighting the marginalisation of others. Conclusively, FCMA's commentary signalled a subtle yet distinct bias within the Divyangjan system towards representing a select group of disabilities deemed "most specially disabled" or "unfortunate", shaping whose stories are validated within this filmmaking context.

As their conversation concluded, the filmmakers' diverging perspectives on the Divyangjan system highlighted a complex narrative of progress and ongoing disparities for disabled people and their representation within the Hindi film industry. The tension between selective access and more comprehensive inclusion, alongside the seeming preference for representing specific disabilities, leaves an unresolved issue regarding which stories will gain prominence, and which voices might remain silent in the medium's evolving filmic representation of disability. This chapter, consequently, must conclude with a close examination from a participant's perspective of which disabled communities' filmmakers ought to be prioritised for partnership to ensure more informed disability representations. Before then, I turn to participants' perceived gatekeepers to realise their representational vision.

8.4. The Gatekeepers:

Reflecting on the various accounts from participants throughout the project, and most notably in the final screenings with filmmakers, a distinct talking point about the

creative control of disability portrayals emerged. While the last section detailed how certain disabilities are prioritised, Chapter 6.3 revealed participants' views on how well-represented disability narratives foster a personal connection and a desire for control over the medium. Yet, I have seldom provided participants' thoughts on how said participants would go about doing so. I now offer these accounts from core participants and their later questions posed to filmmakers about the gatekeeping body keeping narrative control over the medium:

KP: Bollywood these days is wild. Man, you couldn't do that here [...] How'd they get away with so much? Like, who approves that anyway?

[Kaminey Screening – 00:47:22]

I was drawn to KP's incredulity in the transcripts not for its brevity, but for how it initiated discussions among the screening group about the unseen forces that sanction modern Hindi social films. The question, "who approves that anyway?" highlighted the widespread dissatisfaction participants had with modern Hindi social films that feature problematic disability portrayals reaching screens, and under whose authority those mechanisms operate. They referred to the scene in the screened film where the speech-impaired characters are mocked for their lisp and stutter. It is in these early remarks that one can observe participants questioning who has oversight over artistic direction. KP was not alone in this regard; AA, for example, stated, "I want to know who gets the final say" **[Kaabil Screening – 00:42:46]**, highlighting dissatisfaction with the film's creator's direction. Similarly, as SU noted in the project's first screening:

SU: So, I'm sure India has a way of screening, like other countries. Things producers must follow, and I wonder if this is where all the effort is being made [...] there must be hoops to follow to selling such a story?

[Barfi! Screening – 00:56:28]

Curiosity about regulatory systems, that is, who decides which stories are told, how, and by whom, grew throughout the screenings, a trend evident from the very first session. SU's comments suggested, first, that creative control ought to be systemic; second, that disability narratives, particularly those that are unconventional, may require additional justification. Here, SU gestured toward the idea of an overarching

regulatory framework but lacks clarity on the specifics of its operation. Again, SU was not alone in this regard:

VV: I don't know how it works, if there's a sort of council or board, but there has to be a way for people to lobby against a bad movie? [...] they'll listen to us.

[Guzaarish Screening – 00:20:39]

VV, akin to SU, suggested that there should be a way for the public, especially those impacted by harmful representations, to influence or challenge these portrayals. VV, in their response, however, highlighted the hope participants shared for gaining narrative control through participation and institutional responsiveness, as evidenced by their belief that “they’ll listen to us”. While VV also admitted uncertainty about how such a system would function, their comment reflected a broader optimism that regulatory bodies of film could be made more inclusive and accountable, particularly to disabled audiences who are most affected by misrepresentation. In this way, VV’s remark pointed to a vision of reform where the CBFC does not function as a censor board, but as a site of listening. Yet, I recall that no discussion about the CBFC’s role in certifying modern Hindi social films occurred until participants engaged with filmmakers whose disability representations, they either approved of or disapproved of. While I present these accounts now, it is essential to recognise how participants envisioned a film board functioning as a gatekeeper with authority over how disability is portrayed.

Crucially, as a body, participants described their power to collectively bargain and actively lobby against specific productions, given their stake in how their disabilities are represented in the medium. These reflections illustrated a significant shift in participants’ perspectives on media engagement. As I describe, participants no longer wished to play the role of the viewer but asserted themselves as stakeholders with the right to challenge, influence, and co-author the terms of their representation. They articulated a desire not for gatekeeping power in itself but for collaborative authorship. This distinction helps to understand how participating disabled audiences resisted reductive portrayals not by seeking to silence artistic voices but by insisting on being heard within their creative processes.

During the closing sessions of this project between viewers and participating filmmakers, critical attention turned to the gatekeeping function of the CBFC in shaping disability narratives in modern Hindi social films. These discussions concerned the current practices of the CBFC, which do not recognise disability as a distinct certification category, and, according to viewers, are therefore insufficient for safeguarding against harmful or reductive portrayals. They argued that any film portraying disability should undergo mandatory consultation with recognised disability rights organisations. Such a model, it was asserted, would embed lived experience directly into the regulatory process, enabling more widely accepted forms of representational models. This reform, as envisioned through those discussions, would also empower the CBFC to mandate content revisions when disability narratives are found to be misleading or offensive. The CBFC, once seen as a static regulator, is therefore reconceived by participants as an ethical partner for engaging with disabled communities, ensuring that Hindi film portrayals reflect dignity, accuracy, and collaborative authorship.

This shift in perspective reconceives certification as a final gatekeeping framework for inclusive co-authorship grounded in shared experience. After all, in the absence of any targeted criteria in its current form, disability representations under the CBFC are assessed under vague headings such as ‘obscenity’ or ‘offence to cultural sensibilities’ (see: CBFC, 2024). What emerged in these final Q&A sessions was a call not for censorship but for ethical accountability. For example, many participants suggested that films involving disability themes should be subject to a process of mandatory consultation with recognised disability rights groups.

The purpose of this model, they explained, would not seek to restrict artistic vision, but to ensure portrayals carry both accuracy and respect. This idea found particular resonance in a comment by ZS, who drew a stark analogy:

ZS: Say, if you can’t show smoking without a disclaimer on screen, why can my traumas be shown without asking disabled people if it’s right to do?

[SAHM Screening – 00:38:03]

ZS’s question reframed their issue as one of representational ethics, alluding to an

imbalance in how risk and harm are managed across different forms of on-screen content. By using this metaphor of licensing, ZS suggested that representation should also require a kind of disclaimer. This disclaimer, ZS argued, would be grounded in an informed understanding that stems from lived experience. The point being made was not an argument for censorship but a call for procedural fairness. Suppose films that include certain forms of physical risk must undergo oversight to protect public welfare. In that case, as ZS inferred, portrayals of disability should receive similar attention, given the lasting social effects they can produce. ZS's remark raised a critical question about why emotional realism and ethical accuracy are not treated with the same seriousness as technical or logistical elements in filmmaking. While some filmmakers expressed concerns about overreach, others, like ONK, acknowledged a lack of familiarity with the CBFC's approach to disability:

ONK: I also have a problem with how disability is shown. I've never seen these people sit and weep [...] the issue is with CBFC, they do not see disability, only sex, violence, that kind of thing [...] I feel the best way to address disability is not to address it at all.

[ibid. – 00:12:56]

Such remarks exposed a shared ambiguity among both viewers and creators about who, if anyone other than the filmmaker, are responsible for ensuring disability portrayals are carefully handled. These conversations consistently returned to the idea that disability consultation should be a guiding principle of film production. KP put it plainly:

KP: We're not saying we need your permission. We're saying work with people like us before going further [...] Wouldn't it be so much better if it didn't offend the people it's about?

[Disability Pride Screening – 00:37:14]

Similarly, GB's statement, "this isn't about limiting but about responsibility" **[ibid. – 00:12:49]** and "if we're in your film, we should have some say in how it's seen" **[SAHM Screening – 00:41:39]** as IC echoed, grounds these views in the broader principle of visibility and self-representation that participants in this project had advocated for. Ultimately, these discussions reframed the CBFC not simply as a body for censorship, but as a potential site of listening, a platform where disabled audiences,

as stakeholders in filmic representation, could exercise a form of collective advocacy. Rather than policing creativity, the proposed reforms imagined the CBFC as a conduit for embedding accountability into the creative process, especially when it involves communities that have long been misrepresented or overlooked. These themes of responsibility, consultation, and representation will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 9, where I examine participants' visions for a restructured CBFC model that prioritises disability-related ethics.

8.5. Conclusions:

This chapter examined the evolving portrayal of disability in modern Hindi social films, focusing on the impact of the Divyangjan framework. An analysis of dialogues between filmmakers and participants showed that the Hindi film industry operates within a complex landscape shaped by cultural nationalism, global cinematic trends, governmental policies, and the capitalisation of disability-related imagery. This conclusion synthesises the chapter's key insights and considers the broader implications for disability depiction and advocacy within the industry from the perspectives of both viewers and participating filmmakers.

I start by considering the views of participants such as Alia, NR, and ZS, who strongly criticised societal hypocrisy towards disabled people in the UK and expressed considerable scepticism towards the Divyangjan rebranding. They observed the terminological shift from *viklang* to *divyang* as largely superficial, failing to address the fundamental barriers to disabled people's full societal inclusion. Echoing Alia's past frustrations with symbolic gestures in UK disability discourses, these participants argued that mere linguistic redefinition does little to challenge the entrenched social, economic, and infrastructural inequalities that continue to marginalise disabled communities. Beyond concerns about superficiality, participants sought to critique the Divyangjan framework's implicit reinforcement of selective inclusion.

Given their recurring emphasis on the intersectionality of disability with class, caste, and economic precarity, as KY, FI, and UV highlighted, many pointed out the hierarchical structuring of eligibility within the Divyangjan model. Participants argued

that the framework favours more visible, ‘inspirational’, or politically convenient disabilities, excluding those with less apparent or more complex impairments. They further perceived this selective valorisation as creating a new class of ‘model disabled citizens’, exacerbating the marginalisation of less ‘marketable’ disabled groups. As FI previously noted, social acceptance of disabled people often hinges on conforming to normative ideals of productivity and inspiration, a critique that extends to the Divyangjan paradigm.

Further, participants expressed concern regarding the framework’s influence on narrative control within filmic representation. MJ’s observation that films often “relive oppression” suggested participants’ wariness of Divyangjan’s potential to mandate uplifting, triumphalist disability narratives while suppressing stories of anger, resistance, and ambivalence. Participants argued that framing disabled lives predominantly through the lens of divine empowerment limits the expressive range of cinematic storytelling and obscures the realities of systemic discrimination. This critique aligns with broader participant reflections, such as EW’s assertion that meaningful inclusion requires structural space-making rather than the imposition of idealised identities.

However, a minority of participants, particularly dissenting voices like OU and WG, adopted a more pragmatic view of the Divyangjan system. Given their emphasis on the importance of mainstream visibility, marketability, and star power in disability representation, they observed strategic value in aligning with a framework that enhances the public profile of disability narratives. They argued that Divyangjan offers an opportunity to broaden public familiarity with disabled experiences, provided it is leveraged tactically to open further representational spaces. Nonetheless, even among these participants, caution was anticipated regarding the potential for co-optation and narrative oversimplification.

In sum, participants sought to advocate for an alternative, more expansive approach to disability representation than the Divyangjan framework offers. Consistent with their broader advocacy throughout the project, they called for narrative plurality, authentic consultation with diverse disabled communities, and critical engagement

with intersectional oppressions that shape disabled lives. They resisted frameworks that reward only those who embody idealised versions of disability and instead sought to foster a filmic environment that embraces complexity, diversity, and systemic critique. Participants' reflections consistently foregrounded this vision of disability inclusion, grounded not in exceptionalism or divine metaphor in keeping with the name Divyangjan, but in solidarity, ordinary dignity, and full societal participation.

Another primary insight from this chapter was the enduring prevalence of disabling imagery in modern Hindi social film. As exemplified by the film *Wheels* (2022) and other case studies, the visual strategy of employing close-ups, stark colour contrasts, and a narrative focus on physical loss, while intended to elicit empathy and signify difference, inadvertently lost the favour of participants. Instead, they sought to express interest in narratives that they felt integrated disability as a natural aspect of human diversity. Consequently, however, disabling imagery persists as both an artistic shortcut and a commercial strategy, thereby undermining efforts to foster authentic and empowering representations in the proclamations of those disabled participants viewing the material.

This chapter also highlighted the significant interconnectedness between governmental policy and cinematic practices through the Divyangjan classification system. The terminological shift from *viklang* to *diviyang*, while ostensibly intended to promote empowerment, I describe as introducing yet another hierarchical model that prioritises specific disabilities over others. As I have sought to demonstrate, India's implementation of Divyangjan logic determines access to social benefits by encouraging filmmakers to align with politically sanctioned ideals of divine ability. While disabled filmmakers like 90WW and 45KD have benefited from such state-endorsed subsidies and platforms, their narratives often closely adhere to government-favoured themes of triumph, resilience, and inherent capacity. Conversely, disabled people whose experiences do not conform to these narratives, such as those with invisible disabilities, mental health conditions, or intersecting marginalised identities, thus find themselves further excluded from both policy benefits and representational spaces.

Therefore, the Divyangjan framework, while offering a superficial appearance of empowerment, subtly reinforces existing hierarchies by rewarding only those who can portray disability in socially acceptable ways. This performance, I contend, often erases the acknowledgement of systemic barriers disabled people experience through an emphasis on individual overcoming, thereby marginalising critical discussions about accessibility, justice, and collective liberation.

Participants' reflections during the film screenings further illuminated the inherent tensions within this system. While some participants and filmmakers perceived the Divyangjan framework as a positive step towards greater inclusivity and visibility, others viewed it as an exclusionary model that leaves behind those with invisible disabilities that do not neatly fit into state-validated categories. The conversations revealed a concerning trend of prioritisation of certain disabilities deemed "most unfortunate" or most visually apparent, with filmmakers like FCMA openly acknowledging this shift in focus. This phenomenon mirrors broader patterns of filmic tokenism, where a select few are presented as representatives of an entire community, while the diverse range of disability experiences remains obscured (King et al., 2021: 342). FCTK's critique of the Divyangjan system was particularly insightful. By emphasising how poverty, caste, and rural-urban divides intersect with disability, FCTK underscored the limitations of a framework that fails to account for India's deep social stratifications. Thus, without the Hindi film industry taking an intersectional approach, the Divyangjan model risks perpetuating a narrow and exclusionary understanding of disability matters.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this chapter's findings highlighted a deep integration of disability representation within the political economy of Hindi film production. The internationalisation of Hindi film, as pursued by filmmakers like 10SS, intertwines with global market demands that favour familiar, emotionally charged narratives about disability. This convergence of state-driven Divyangjan ideals and global market aesthetics creates a cinematic environment where disability is simultaneously commodified and sanitised, offering "feel-good" empowerment stories while obscuring the structural violence that disabled people continue to face.

Equally novel was finding that disabled filmmakers themselves are not immune to perpetuating disabling imagery. The analysis of 90WW and 45KD's *Incredible Insight* (2020) highlighted how overcoming and exceptionalism narratives reinforce Western supercrip tropes and their reception. This highlighted the critical need for self-reflexivity within disabled filmmaking communities to resist reproducing the very stereotypes their movements aim to dismantle. Participants' persistent questioning of Divyangjan's logic suggested a growing awareness that inclusion cannot be merely symbolic or performative. Genuine inclusion, thus, necessitates structural change in how films are funded, how stories are told, and whose experiences are centred.

In conclusion, while the Divyangjan framework and global cinematic trends have undoubtedly spurred a transformation in disability representation within modern Hindi social films, they have also introduced new layers of complexity, exclusion, and ethical dilemmas. The ongoing task for filmmakers and audiences must critically examine these dynamics, advocate for more expansive and authentic forms of representation, and strive towards a cinematic culture that genuinely reflects the pluralism and dignity of disabled people's lives. To build a future where disability is depicted not as a spectacle or a divine anomaly but as an ordinary, multifaceted human experience, Indian filmmakers must embrace a politics of solidarity, authenticity, and radical inclusion. Only then can the Hindi film industry truly fulfil its historic promise to serve as a mirror to society, reflecting its political aspirations and its urgent need for justice, empathy, and collective transformation.

These recommendations include a standardised consultation system to empower disabled people throughout the film process, from production to viewing. As I have described, their goal aims to foster a lasting dialogue between the Hindi film industry and disabled communities, thereby enhancing disability representation in modern Hindi social films and promoting more positive societal attitudes towards disability. Section 8.4 further foregrounds participants' identification and critiques of the CBFC as a key gatekeeper in this process. Through conversations with filmmakers, participants highlighted the CBFC's failure to recognise disability as a distinct evaluative category. Instead, they called for mandatory consultation with disability

rights groups to fill this gap. These exchanges underscored a shared vision of further regulation being required in the Hindi film industry, not to limit creativity, but to promote representational responsibility by including disabled voices in decisions about how their lives are portrayed.

Having demonstrated how disabled-led filmmaking practices influence audience perceptions of disability representation in modern Hindi social films, the following chapter examines participants' unified recommendations for practical changes to the CBFC in further detail.

Chapter 9 – To Collaborate or Boycott: Advancing Disability Politics in Modern Hindi Social Film Narratives.

9.0. Introduction:

This chapter serves as the culminating analytical phase of this research project, presenting findings on disabled reception of disability representation in modern Hindi social films. Through a comparative analysis of portrayals and perspectives across disabled and non-disabled filmmakers and viewers, it offers empirical support for the reform proposals detailed in Chapter 7.5. Further, this chapter introduces a novel, standardised consultative framework designed to integrate disabled people into crucial creative stages of film production, encompassing script development, casting, and production design, to inform future disability portrayals in the medium.

The chapter commences with a reflective examination of the ethical complexities inherent in modern Hindi social film portrayals of disability, revisiting the central question posed by research participants regarding the relative merit of representations stemming from ‘shared experience’ versus ‘assumed understanding’. Advocating for the primacy of lived experience, the chapter then explores participant proposals for formal consultative roles within the Hindi film industry, critically assessing the practicalities and potential impact of such collaborative initiatives. By integrating perspectives from both disabled audiences and industry professionals, the chapter highlights areas of convergence and divergence in their viewpoints, while also considering the logistical and structural barriers that influence their perspectives. It further presents recommendations from both groups concerning potential modifications to the guidelines and practices of the CBFC body, highlighting a shared commitment to systemic reform.

Additionally, the chapter explores the potential for expanding the project’s film club initiative into a more comprehensive and inclusive platform, fostering sustained dialogue among filmmakers, disabled communities, and other relevant stakeholders. In its conclusion, the chapter emphasises the implicit and explicit demands from disabled viewers for substantive change, arguing that establishing an enduring and reciprocal relationship between the Hindi film industry and disabled communities is

essential for transforming the portrayal and perception of disability in modern Hindi social films and broader society. Finally, the chapter reflects on the potential outcomes articulated by participants if their collaborative proposals are not implemented, explicitly highlighting their call for a collective boycott of the Hindi film industry.

9.1. Representational Ethics:

I begin my top-down exploration of participants' views on the representational ethics of portraying disabled characters in modern Hindi social films by reflecting on discussions with my interlocutors from the project's recruitment phase. Despite our varied experiences as disabled South Asians in LBN, detailed in Chapter 4.2, our shared purpose from the project's start was to contribute our experiences with disability and modern Hindi social films. Salman sought to combat cultural dissonance and utilise the genre as a frame of reference with other disabled viewers. Ananya and her budding sidekick, Sridevi, equally saw this project as an opportunity to bridge cultural divides and connect on their shared filmic interests. Alia, SRK, and Kajol further sought to participate by connecting their real-world experiences with awareness-building activities channelled through engagement with the genre. Whereas Rekha and our other young Khan, Aamir, observed their experiences reflected in the genre and aimed to ensure that their needs, and those with similar requirements, were met when engaging with this research.

Their advocacy and engagement with modern Hindi social films significantly shaped my own evolving positionality, leading me to align with their reasoning for film selections for this project, even after the initial film choices had been made. From their viewpoint, disability portrayals needed to accurately reflect the realities of those depicted to warrant approval. Indeed, in our committee meetings, when justifying future actions, phrases like "from my experience with" and "forget the synopsis, this is what it's like" highlighted a strong preference for understanding the issue through direct experience, rather than relying on research or assumptions.

This preference for lived experience understanding was further reflected in both the development and outcome of surveying the project's participant base. As highlighted

throughout Chapter 5, while participants' favourite films varied based on their disabilities, as discussed, they generally sought films with protagonists who shared their condition, as they felt represented by such portrayals. This would enable them to inform others about their experiences by recommending these films. Further, when these participants provided negative recommendations for films, they often did so from a perspective that challenged societal norms about disability portrayed in those films, drawing on their personal experiences. In so doing, they valued the opportunity to see an agreeable version of the disability experience that mirrored their own or was an idealised portrayal they wished to convey to others. Survey participants further overwhelmingly referred to seeking a space to connect with others, engage in discussions about disability representation, and advocate for their inclusion.

The desire for self-representation in the modern Hindi social films screened was highly influential, as noted in Chapter 6.1. Throughout the project, participants actively collaborated to interpret the filmmakers' intentions behind these portrayals, even while critically evaluating themselves and the representation itself. Their interpretation, seen through the lens of their experience, even when the representation seemed assumption-based, essentially allowed participants to rewrite the filmic narrative for themselves. In so doing, they consciously coded these films to fit a monomythic structure, which led to a more satisfying connection with the media and their imagined futures, especially when the representation concluded with a happy ending. The participants' assertions, as discussed in Chapter 6.2, that a viewer whose own disability is portrayed on screen should find it representative of their experiences and, consequently, possess a privileged understanding of the character were particularly significant. While it seems perfectly logical that disabled people should feel represented in the media they consume, it is nevertheless vital to consider the potentially divisive and exclusionary nature of cinematic inclusion. For instance, across multiple screenings, disabled participants were observed to identify with the characters' struggles and frame non-disabled viewers as the source of those. Through this act, participants connected their experiences of societal subordination to the characters', prompting them to differentiate themselves from those perceived to be involved in that subordination. Yet, from an ethical perspective, absent any

deliberate intent by filmmakers to elicit such an affect, what industry rationale supports an inadvertent differentiation from those integral to the daily existence of disabled people? (see: Shakespeare, 2006b: 187). Perhaps, as Goodin (1996: 334) argues, the aim should be to change the very nature of communities, making them both less exclusive and less inherently inclusive, rather than simply striving for more inclusion. After all, as Chapter 6.3 concludes, the purpose of filmic inclusion from a lived experience perspective would not be to exclude from a privileged understanding but to seek for all to feel represented by the media one consumes.

In seeking to document various differing discourses surrounding how disability ought to be represented in the genre, further ethical dilemmas emerged. As I highlighted in Chapter 7.1, engaging with modern Hindi social films on disability presented a complex ethical challenge for viewers who are both critical of film media's marginalisation of disabled people and passionate about its potential for social change. Participants noted the screened film's cyclical perpetuation of discrimination, mirroring societal exclusion and reinforcing 'otherness'. Yet, they practised ethical curation, selectively engaging with portrayals based on criteria of accuracy, empowerment, and their perception of inclusivity.

Casting controversies were also central to participants' representational considerations. Namely, participants advocated for an 'authentic representation' through disabled actors, citing compromised realism when non-disabled actors portrayed disabled roles without a lived understanding of that disability. Yet, Chapter 8.3 additionally notes concern when one proclaims a privileged relationship with representational filmic portrayals. While some participants saw strategic value in using non-disabled stars for awareness building, provided there was some collaboration with disabled consultants, the ethical question remains on whether individual experience should take precedence over reach. As participants described, the ideal was collaborative practices that avoid exploitation to inform said representation.

Balancing accessibility with artistic vision was another representational concern that participants grappled with. In Chapter 7.2, I provided a salient example considering a participant's view that a d/Deaf character should be closed captioned in the

discussed scene. Yet, as it was reflected, providing the d/Deaf character with a metaphorical voice would have potentially undermined the sense of realism the scene required, and it was also uncertain whether that was the director's specific intent. This created a conflict between access and potential artistic strategies, raising the question of whose perspective should prevail. Conversely, participants articulated concerns about the perceived lack of accountability within modern Hindi social films' representation of disability. Namely, the prior removal of disability as a distinct screening category by the CBFC was highlighted, a decision starkly contrasting with international human rights frameworks such as the UNCRPD. This analysis was detailed through the diverse perspectives of participants and filmmakers, as observed in Chapters 7.2 and 8.4, who viewed the lack of institutional responsibility as a significant risk to the industry. In summary, they believed that this absence could lead to inconsistent and subjective portrayals of disability, thus undermining international standards for progressive representation.

Turning to industry viewpoints, as detailed in Chapter 8.1, I considered how disabled audiences encountered considerable ethical issues stemming from current representations of disability, notably within the Indian government's Divyangjan framework. Although this state-initiated rebranding ostensibly sought to cultivate a more favourable public conversation through language emphasising 'divine' empowerment, participants in this project consistently voiced concern for its perceived lack of depth and propensity to marginalise their individual experiences. These ethical conflicts manifested in their responses to the films led by an inter-abled cast, illustrating a nuanced interaction between individual connection with characters, their actors, the broader political depiction of disability, and the narrative structures employed in their storytelling.

Chapter 8.2 identified another central ethical tension emerging from participants' reflections on the Divyangjan framework, which they characterised as complex and double-edged. On one hand, it enhances the public visibility of disability within Indian society and potentially creates more opportunities for mainstream social inclusion, as participating disabled filmmakers of this project conclude. On the other hand, it simultaneously imposes relatively narrow and often prescriptive expectations

regarding what it means to be disabled, frequently favouring those who conform to readily visible, inspirational, or politically convenient narratives of overcoming adversity. Various participants voiced criticisms of the framework, characterising it as a largely cosmetic change that ultimately fails to address the entrenched systemic inequities that disabled people experience. The linguistic shift from ‘viklang’ to ‘Divyangjan’ was perceived by many participants as not a genuine act of empowerment, but rather as a distracting manoeuvre that diverts attention from the more pressing need for tangible structural inclusion and accessibility. Here, the fundamental ethics lie in the choice between embracing increased visibility, albeit under potentially compromised terms that may not reflect their experiences or rejecting a form of symbolic inclusion that lacks systemic change.

The final central area of representational concern for disabled viewers of this project revolved around the commodification of disability in the genre. Participants’ observations, noted in Chapter 8.1, astutely highlighted the frequency with which modern Hindi social films resort to what can only be described as ‘disabling imagery’. This included stark visual contrasts, emotionally manipulative close-ups of impairment, and overly sentimental or emotionally charged musical scores, all employed to elicit sympathy and affect from mainstream audiences. While such aesthetic strategies may indeed have resonated with a non-disabled viewing audience, as inferred through the chapter, they were considered by those participating in this project as ethically problematic from a disability justice perspective. Participants described feeling that dominant visual strategies often reduced their nuanced experience to spectacles of either suffering or achievement, reinforcing harmful and limiting stereotypes about disability. Films that emphasised physical loss or relied on simplistic overcoming narratives were seen to obscure the everyday, layered, and multifaceted realities of disabled lives. This created a dilemma for disabled viewers, who had to choose whether to welcome the growing visibility of disability, despite its flaws, or critique portrayals that, in their view, failed to reflect the full spectrum of being disabled.

In summary, while disabled project participants saw value in increased visibility, they were critical of portrayals shaped by Indian state-run agendas or sentimental clichés

that did not accurately reflect their lived realities. Their fundamental request to the Hindi film industry was for representation grounded in lived experience, rather than symbolic gestures or commercial appeal. While critical of contemporary disabled-led films in the Divyangjan-leaning Hindi social genre, especially their exclusionary aspects, participants strongly felt that collaborative dialogue was the sole practical route for the industry to create a practical model for representation. Having established the project's representational perspectives, the subsequent section of this chapter focuses on advocating for the primacy of lived experience. In doing so, it seeks to present project participants' proposals for formal consultative roles within the Hindi film industry, critically assessing the practicalities and potential impact of such a collaboration.

9.2. A New Collaborative Exchange:

Throughout this research, participants had consistently expressed a desire for genuinely collaborative and informed representation within the modern Hindi social film genre. However, achieving such collaboration is complex, shaped by disparate methodologies, existing legislative structures, and practical on-set realities. This section explores these areas of contention by synthesising insights from both participants and filmmakers. The aim of this section is therefore to present a workable solution that bridges the common divide between these crucial stakeholders in the Hindi film industry.

To begin, examining the prevailing industry practices for informing representation was essential. Consider the process of scripting disability; it is undeniably intertwined with intricate creative compromises and established institutional power dynamics, as Sinha (2024: 1) observes. The inherent tension between a screenwriter's artistic vision and the industrial constraints imposed by commercial imperatives necessitates proactive negotiation from the earliest stages of development (ibid.: 19). This tension transcends artistic differences; it is deeply structural, reflecting entrenched hierarchies in the Hindi film ecosystem (ibid.: 20).

Yet, Sinha offers compelling evidence of a growing ethical consciousness within the industry, highlighting an increasing commitment to ethical representational

storytelling through meaningful consultation with disabled people. This engagement often moves beyond superficial gestures, frequently involving in-depth ethnographic immersion (ibid.: 12). Sinha describes how writers and researchers actively participate in sustained fieldwork, theatre workshops, and dialogic sessions with disability professionals, fostering trust and enabling a more profound understanding of lived disabled experiences. Indeed, as Sinha astutely observes, screenwriters often operate with a keen awareness of the necessity for authenticity and resonance (ibid.: 13). Many independently verify factual details and actively seek out personal narratives to ensure that portrayals of disability are not just factually accurate but also emotionally and socially meaningful. These choices are frequently driven by a deep sense of emotional responsibility and what Sinha terms ‘ethical reflexivity’, a conscious stance that acknowledges the potent harms of perpetuating disability stereotypes or reductive narratives (ibid.: 14). Through this consultative and self-aware methodology, screenwriters, who contend a precarious position themselves endeavour to craft characters that reflect the multifaceted realities of disabled lives and the intricate social contexts they inhabit.

These efforts include a conscious avoidance of harmful tropes such as the ‘inspirational cripple’, the ‘tragic disabled figure’, or the ‘supercrip’ archetype or narrative device (ibid.: 13) that project participants expressed distain in viewing. Instead, a discernible shift towards intricate characterisation is evident, focused on themes of interdependence, community, and resilience. However, a significant obstacle persists in the often-subordinate position of the screenwriter within the industry’s power structure (ibid.: 18). As Sinha meticulously details, particularly for non-hereditary writers lacking established industry connections, autonomy over creative content is frequently limited. Their work, regardless of the depth of research or ethical grounding, is often subject to the final say of directors, producers, and prominent actors (ibid.: 19). This power imbalance is further compounded by the freelance and often precarious nature of screenwriting as an industry profession.

Verily, the precarious position of industry professionals like screenwriters, researchers, and consultants, who are so dependent on the whims of actors, hinders the effectiveness of current consultancy practices. Consider the instance of OSM in

Chapter 7.1, who, despite being provided with a carefully consulted script, unilaterally altered the representation of disability to align with a perceived palatability for a non-disabled audience. This action effectively diminished the impact of months of dedicated consultation and ethical planning. Similarly, OSR, the project's director, discussed instructing their cinematography team to capture visuals that directly contradicted the script's thoughtfully constructed portrayal, further undermining consultation integrity. As the reflections of 10SS suggested, even when consultation is extensive and rigorous, there is no guarantee that the final product will reflect the script's intended values or narrative structures. The commodification of representation, where authenticity is selectively embraced when convenient, reflects a broader industry tendency to aestheticise disability without genuinely understanding or respecting its profound social implications.

Actor OKK, a figure with considerable experience in this domain, as detailed in Chapter 8.3, proposed a potentially robust model for seeking counsel on disability portrayals postscript, drawing inspiration partly from their interpretation of the Divyangjan system to aid structured consultation. However, OKK also offers a critical perspective on this very system, noting that its inherent categorisation can paradoxically lead to the marginalisation of disabled voices. According to OKK, the authority wielded by prominent actors and directors often supersedes that of consultants, particularly when these influential figures rationalise their decisions based on aesthetic judgment rather than grounded lived reality or empirical insight. In such instances, the hierarchical positioning of non-disabled creatives enables them to dismiss or override disabled ones, rendering any consultation process at best superficial. Participants often described how this results in narratives being subtly reshaped to accommodate non-disabled comfort zones, rather than challenging prevailing social norms or fostering genuine inclusivity. Consequently, while disability consultation is becoming increasingly common, its application remains inconsistent and its impact unstable.

This persistent instability necessitates a critical re-evaluation of the structural and regulatory framework governing representation. This thesis has consistently argued that rigorous scrutiny of the CBFC and its operational procedures is paramount in this

context. While individuals have appeal rights to the Indian High Courts following the dismantling of the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal, the CBFC continues to exert considerable influence. Plainly, the CBFC's mandate to uphold 'Indian social values' (see: CBFC, 2017) conflicts with the principles of inclusivity and progressive representation enshrined through the 1952 Cinematograph Act (Banerjee, 2010: 278). Mitra (2019: 196) observes that while the CBFC remains empowered to prohibit content that degrades or incites against minorities, it seldom applies its regulatory authority to safeguard or empower disabled identities. Thus, existing regulations, while ostensibly neutral, are therefore applied unevenly, and disability-related misrepresentation frequently evades these protective mechanisms. Yet, the 2016 RPWDA and its implementation through the Divyangjan framework introduce a potentially transformative paradigm. They advocate for a culture of inclusion across all industry practices (Sisodia and Jain, 2025: 1573), placing an onus on production houses to move beyond symbolic representation and towards meaningful and substantive participation (Aggarwal et al., 2024: 2-3).

Indeed, without the RPWDA, employment and consultation opportunities for d/Deaf and disabled people within the Hindi film industry would remain essentially non-existent (Barman, 2016). As discussed in Chapter 7.2, participants voiced frustration at their systemic exclusion from behind-the-camera roles and decision-making positions. These concerns were echoed by filmmakers, both disabled and non-disabled, as detailed in Chapter 8.3, who called for a transparent and institutionalised mechanism to integrate disabled perspectives within directorial and editorial processes. Notably, OKK highlighted the growing prominence of 'think tank' collectives of disabled viewers and advisors actively seeking to shape Hindi film portrayals through structured input. These grassroots organisations could provide an informal regulatory function through engaging with production to offer expertise derived from their experience. Yet, as poignantly articulated by actor filmmaker 100RB, without formal recognition or advocacy power, the impact of such efforts remains contingent on the individual director's goodwill. "That's the thing, it's different on every set and really comes down to what the director wants to do. There is no oversight above that" [**Disability Pride Screening – 00:44:12**].

Addressing this critical gap, this thesis proposes a concrete policy intervention; the instatement of disability as a distinct category within CBFC screening protocols. Under this proposed model, any film flagged under this category could be subject to mandatory consultation with recognised Indian disability rights organisations. This approach offers a dual benefit. Firstly, it formalises and legitimises the role of disabled advisors, embedding their input within a framework that producers and directors cannot easily disregard. Secondly, it links ethical representation to regulatory compliance, granting the CBFC authority to reject or mandate modifications to films that misrepresent disability matters during screen testing and test screening. Such oversight would centre lived experience as the fundamental cornerstone of ethical representation, moving beyond the outdated Nehruvian logics that shaped the CBFC, which the current ruling party has since appropriated. Further, this proposal could foster a more equitable distribution of responsibility throughout filmmaking processes. For example, directors, screenwriters, and actors could be required to articulate how consultations have informed narrative and character development. Importantly, this proposed model is not put forward to stifle artistic freedom. Instead, it aims to provide a robust ethical framework within which creativity can flourish, ensuring that imaginative expression does not come at the expense of marginalised realities. By integrating lived experience into the foundation of film production through mandatory consultation and CBFC reinforcement, modern Hindi social films can begin the work of addressing structural industry imbalances towards disability that the RPWDA calls for. Implementing such a model would signify a significant step towards a more inclusive and socially responsible Hindi film industry. This proposed collaborative exchange, underpinned by regulatory oversight, offers a tangible path towards achieving this crucial goal. After all, the moment for authentic collaboration and ethically grounded representation in the modern Hindi social film genre is both urgent and overdue. As Misra (2018: 112-113) contends, that moment is now.

9.3. The Film Club's Future:

Having established methods for actively consulting with disabled people during filmmaking, I now consider the research apparatus of the Kahaani film club as a

model for engaging viewers in the post-production clearance of modern Hindi social films. To that vein, as I highlight in Chapter 7.4, given the reported limitations on participants' ability to express their experiences, this project must thus consider the possibility that, without the film club, their perspectives on the subject may not have been adequately documented. Indeed, various participants throughout the disability spectrum had the opportunity to express their opinion on how disability was represented and the impact said representation had on them. They were further free from extraneous factors and rigid hierarchies that could be seen to influence their focused and sometimes divergent points of view, as discussed in Chapter 7.2. The film club model, therefore, served as a viable means of consulting with disabled people on their viewership and in the rationales behind how they are affected by filmic representations.

As UD poignantly noted in our first film screening, "if I didn't come, I wouldn't have thought anyone cared about my thoughts about this" [**Barfi! Screening – 00:28:44**]. This insight revealed that without an intentional structure, such as the film club, the perspectives of disabled viewers on cinematic content, like modern Hindi social films, risk marginalisation or erasure. Through the film club model, a consultative process emerged that recognised disability not as a subject of representation but as a mode of cultural engagement. As I have contended, the film club created a space where participants could challenge ableist tropes and reinterpret narratives through their own lenses, turning passive viewing into a dynamic act of resistance and reauthoring. As NR observed, "film is meant to bring people out from that slavery that makes them believe they are better" [**Taare Zameen Par Screening – 00:46:58**]. Thus, the club's function was diagnostic in revealing misrepresentations and transformative, enabling participants to situate themselves as epistemic authorities over their portrayal. This process cannot be reduced to mere consumption, but as a dialogic and polyphonic site of interpretive resistance.

As interlocutors such as Alia consistently articulated, viewing films like *Kaminey* (2009) and *Kaabil* (2017) helped them draw structural parallels between onscreen experiences and real-world disablement, often shifting the locus of 'disability' from their bodies to the attitudes and architectures of the society around them. This

reorientation of the problem from person to system was not a natural outcome of the films themselves but was catalysed through the film club's communal discursive structure. "People being excluded and treated differently, and there's always a reason behind the reason" [**Kaminey Screening – 01:03:41**], Alia noted, unmasking the layered mechanisms of exclusion that operate through both Hindi film and society. The Kahaani film club, therefore, represents a model not of entertainment or therapy, but of political pedagogy. It achieved what mainstream panels, policy documents, and inaccessible surveys often fail to do; it provided a culturally literate, affectively rich, and intellectually rigorous mechanism for consulting disabled people on representation (see: Drake, 2002: 380; Hasnain, 2014: 619). Thus, it challenged traditional notions of consultation, where disabled people are often seen as subjects of study, not interlocutors to be heard.

Participants' testimonies through the project routinely foreground the affective labour of being misrepresented. "They treated her [the protagonist] like they would treat us, like an animal" [**Black Screening – 00:31:56**], FI lamented during the screening of *Black* (2005), expressing deep anguish at the dehumanisation often embedded in such portrayals. These expressions were witnessed and legitimised through the film club, creating an archive of lived knowledge that can inform future cinematic representations. Moreover, the club enabled participants to distinguish between forms of representation that uplifted versus those that undermined. AA's comparison of *Kaminey* (2009) to the *Golmaal* (2006–2017) series illustrated a sophisticated media literacy among participants; "it's not a joke to reinforce [...] it makes it worse for the person" [**Kaminey Screening – 00:18:13**]. These critiques were neither superficial nor reactive; they reflected a coherent, grounded aesthetic political framework that participants co-authored through repeated engagement.

Crucially, such frameworks emerged because of the film club model, not despite it. As discussed in Chapter 7.2, a majority of participants advocated for meaningful consultation processes wherein disabled people inform casting decisions alongside narrative development and stylistic choices. Yet divergent views, such as those from OU and WG, remind us of the complexity within disabled communities themselves. OU cautioned that over-sanitised portrayals risk creating unwatchable films and

proposed instead a ‘masala’ model that blends action, drama, and social messages, “if you want to make a flop B grade film, then go ahead” **[Kaabil Screening – 00:24:59]**. This points to a crucial insight that consultation cannot mean consensus. Instead, it must be understood as a dialectical process, negotiating among aesthetics, politics, market logics, and lived truths. The film club fostered precisely such dialectics. It offered a blueprint for ethical consultation by refusing to reduce disability experience to a singular voice or narrative. As JN argued during the *Guzaarish* (2010) screening, even contested representations can be generative, “we might not agree, but society needs to keep having these conversations” **[Guzaarish Screening – 00:28:11]**. In this spirit, the Kahaani model can be extended not as a rigid formula but as a dynamic forum for cultivating critical literacy and representational justice.

Referring back to OKK’s input in this research, it is further confirmed that contexts in India and throughout the localities where Hindi films are produced, like the UK, that multiple grassroots and disabled led collectives exist with this film club project’s very missions and goals. Their independent efforts affirm the urgent need for inclusive, culturally relevant platforms that can challenge dominant cinematic conventions that centre the lived knowledge of disabled people. These initiatives, like the Kahaani film club, do more than provide feedback; they reimagine disability aesthetics, ethics, and agency. But what of this very project? Alas, it simply could not be sustained post-2025 due to lack of available funding. That said, interlocutors and participants continue to meet informally for local screenings and new disability themed Hindi social film releases. *Srikanth* (2025), a modern Hindi social focusing on the real life of Srikanth Bolla, a disabled Indian entrepreneur and employer of other disabled people, attracted nearly all interlocutors and regular Kahaani film club participants. One theatre, aware of our group, even pre-emptively tested their access arrangements for their venue before our bookings. Such gestures underscore how this community, once gathered by research, has taken on a life of its own that positions access rights at its core.

As proud residents of LBN, including myself once upon a time, participants and interlocutors of this project continue to routinely gather at local cinema screenings

for the latest Hindi film release, managing their access and arranging post-screening discussions. This brings me back to a key outcome of this project, though it could not be institutionally sustained, the community the project fostered undeniably outlasted its initial scope. The Kahaani film club became more than a research tool; it became a methodological intervention, a sociopolitical act, and, perhaps most significantly, a cultural access and consultation model. In this manner, the club embodied what Mignolo (2009: 160) terms an act of “epistemic disobedience”, a challenge to the standard ways of producing knowledge that exclude disabled perspectives from aesthetic and critical authority.

The Kahaani film club thus operated as a prototype of what disability consultation can look like in cultural production. It privileged dialogue over tokenism, collective critique over individual reaction, and their experiences of disability as a vital, non-negotiable form of knowledge. While the institutional scaffolding of the club may no longer stand, its blueprint endures in local cinema meetups, in access checks made by film venues, and in the critical language its participants continue to refine and deploy. As such, the film club does not end with this research; it lingers in the practices and vocabularies of a community that has studied not only to watch films but to read, question, and reimagine them.

9.4. ‘If All Else Fails’:

Reflections on the film club’s impact aside, I now turn to the potential outcomes articulated by participants throughout the project if their collaborative proposals to the Hindi film industry are not implemented. Chief among these was their collective call for a boycott, an act not of disengagement but of resistance. Such a boycott as I seek to demonstrate would not be symbolic but would carry the full vigour of a politicised, organised viewership, an audience aware of its representational power and cultural capital. I start by contemplating how many project participants sought to justify such a boycott due to their perception of pervasive misrepresentation and symbolic violence inflicted against disabled people.

As discussed in Chapter 6.2, participants reported a history of being viewed through a non-disabled lens, their experiences sentimentalised or instrumentalised without

context. According to said participants, this aestheticisation of Hindi film media constitutes symbolic violence, reducing complex realities to damaging tropes. As TX lamented, “We’re tired of watching ourselves be imagined, and mourned, but never consulted” [**Kaabil Screening – 01:03:41**]. ZR added, “It’s like our lives are just a costume for their stories” [**Iqbal Screening – 00:38:13**]. This metaphor that TX and ZR lay out highlighted multiple participants’ feelings of being visibly represented, without genuine depth or agency in informing said representation.

Further, consider FI’s description of dehumanising representation, “they treated her [the character Michelle] like they would treat us, like an animal. Less than human. Like, they have no morality” [**Black Screening – 00:31:56**]. Consequently, VB noted, “It’s like they see our disabilities first and our humanity, when?” [**Taare Zameen Par Screening – 00:41:18**]. KY contextualised such representation through the lens of non-disabled culture, “It’s their culture as hearing people [...] to abuse people differently abled than them. It’s just the culture of elitist exclusion” [**Barfi! Screening – 00:23:39**]. FI, KG and VB equally point to the dehumanising tendency of non-disabled filmmakers to define individuals solely by their impairment. CD noted the infantilisation of superficial representation, “it is true, like Michelle [the disabled protagonist], they like to treat us like children” [**Black Screening – 00:14:19**]. EY reflected, “they pat us on the head in these films, like we’re not able to make our own decisions [...] the real fight is for our agency” [**Iqbal Screening – 00:41:10**]. This imagery of patronisation directly contrasts with participants’ desire for autonomy and self-determination. LF stated, “Why is the ultimate ‘happy ending’ in so many of these films the erasure of our disability?” [**Barfi! Screening – 00:17:16**]. EW reflected, “They tell us to fit in, but we don’t fit into their world. Not if they don’t make space for us or let us tell it as it is” [**Margarita with a Straw Screening – 00:27:32**]. The ‘world’ as EW described through film remains non-disabled-centric, marginalising disabled voices. As Alia concluded, “it’s not disability that disables me. It is the way they treat us [...] and how we overcome” [**Kaminey Screening – 01:03:47**].

Another key justification for a potential boycott was structural exclusion and the absence of authorship. PF criticised what they perceived as the extreme portrayals by non-informed non-disabled actors, “the way she acts up is extreme, like

possessed [...] They could've hired someone who could teach them how to act in a more believable way" **[Black Screening – 00:07:19]**. KY further noted, "I think I've seen many disabled people tell me different but the same stories they see in these films" **[Barfi! Screening – 00:23:51]**. This narrow, hegemonic authorship by non-disabled filmmakers was thus seen to shape disabled perceptions of the authenticity of the medium. OW argued, "they wouldn't make a film about a religious community without consulting them, so why is our experience any less valid? Like we have a lot less input" **[Kaminey Screening – 00:13:21]**. OW's analogy powerfully highlights the perceived devaluation of disabled experiences through a lack of consultation regarding representations of their perspective disabilities. Indeed, OW argued that disabled people should also be consulted when other groups are consulted on their representation. GY noted, "they'll take our money at the box office, but refuse to see us in any other way than a caricature" **[Guzaarish Screening – 00:37:32]**. In doing so, GY's statement connects the economic contribution of being represented with the demand for dignified representation. IR asserted, "when we are behind the camera, telling our stories, that's when the real social change can begin" **[Disability Pride Screening – 00:16:29]**. As IR emphasised, the transformative potential of disabled people having control over their narratives can be groundbreaking for inclusion so far as project participants are concerned.

Therefore, participants' demands for inclusion and co-authorship can be viewed as demands for structural change. MK in particular demanded ownership, "these are our films, our lives, and we should get to tell it [...] and decide who sees it" **[Guzaarish Screening – 00:05:51]**. EX noted that "inclusion isn't about having some tokenised character, it's all about who holds the pen and directs those stories" **[SAHM Screening – 00:51:47]**. As EX saliently inferred, participants call for a fundamental power shift in the filmmaking process that empowers disabled people to take the lead in how they are represented. Filmmaker 70AK directly linked an idea of boycotting their own works to the demand for structural inclusion, declaring, "unless we are in the writing rooms and sitting on the director's chair, they will try get those stories wrong [...] If you pack it all in, what will they do" **[Disability Pride Screening – 00:44:12]**. As BS added, "they need to know we are not passive. We are the fifteen per

cent. We can decide to withhold our money [...] speaks to their failure to include us” **[Kaabil Screening – 00:35:53]**. This highlights the economic power and agency of disabled viewers in the UK as discussed in Chapter 1.3. Such a position was supported by ZK, who firmly stated, “why should our hard-earned dough be used to demean us [...] watching is conditional and that’s my condition. If you don’t include us, we ain’t got to be here” **[Barfi Screening – 01:04:53]**. As MN asserted, “it’s not some handout [...], but if they refuse, they just don’t deserve the support” **[Guzaarish Screening – 00:51:44]**. As BS, ZK, and MN highlighted, their demands, as a matter of rights and self-determination, inevitably become one of either collaborating or boycotting Hindi films, for which only the industry can respond.

As UA concluded, “our silence is their acceptance [...] If all else fails, boycotting that [swearing redacted], like with Maccies and Coke, it’s our voice, man” **[Barfi! Screening – 00:48:19]**. Ultimately, such a boycott would be seen by project participants as an act of refusal, as resistance, and reimagination of their advocacy and engagement with the medium. In summary, the participants’ views on potentially boycotting modern Hindi social film viewership are rooted in a profound critique of systemic misrepresentation, structural exclusion, and harmful ideologies, while seeking narrative sovereignty and a reimagining of equitable cinematic practices. Therefore, the call for a potential boycott would be a powerful act to resist and assert the right to self-representation, requiring a fundamental power shift to centre disabled voices as creators for representations that empower them. This collective action would thus underscore a refusal to consume perceived distorted narratives passively. After all, as demonstrated throughout this project, contemporary disabled viewers are actively wielding their agency to challenge the status quo and envision a future of on-screen self-representation. Such a cinematic movement would consequently seek to dismantle ingrained biases towards the perceived disabled imaginary.

9.5. Conclusions:

This chapter has investigated the varied, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints of both disabled and non-disabled viewers on the comparative efficacy of allying with or

rejecting the Hindi film industry as pathways to representational equity. The analysis reveals a complex spectrum of perspectives, unified not in their conclusions but in their foundation within the lived realities, aesthetic appraisals, and political consciousness of disabled participants and interlocutors of this project. Such inherent complexity should not be seen as a flaw of the discourse; rather, it constitutes its ethical strength, indicating a mode of consultation that transcends symbolic effort and prescription, embracing dialogue, contextual depth, and the accommodation of dissenting opinions.

Indeed, the predicament articulated by many participants, who faced the choice between engaging with the industry in hopes of transformation or withdrawing as an act of resistance, resists being reduced to a simplistic binary of optimism versus cynicism. Instead, it mirrors the profoundly ambivalent position occupied by disabled viewers who are simultaneously subjects of depiction and its most incisive critics. Despite the Hindi film industry's performative gestures toward inclusivity, participants' readings remained structurally bound to normative ideals of aesthetic appeal, emotional intensity, and narrative coherence. Within this framework, the realities of disabled people are frequently simplified into stereotypical figures, such as the heroic overcomer, the tragic victim, or the source of comic relief, whose chief function are not to illuminate the social conditions of disability but to elicit particular moral responses from a presumed non-disabled audience. It is precisely this representational economy that participants described as endeavouring to disrupt. Their demands for portrayals extended beyond mere visibility, constituting claims for epistemic justice. To be consulted in this manner thus signifies being asked for input and recognition as knowledge producers concerning the nature of disability, its affective dimensions, and its articulation within the social context.

This chapter has chronicled how participants, through the Kahaani film club project enacted such recognition by reasserting interpretive agency over cinematic narratives. The film club, therefore, served as a crucial hub for interpretation, enabling the development of a critical archive of new aesthetics and understandings. Participants keenly recognised repeated narrative patterns, representational biases,

and ideological underpinnings, linking filmic tropes to the broader disablism they experience. Consequently, they demonstrated a capacity for imaginative reconstruction, envisioning alternative cinematic possibilities that centre on disabled lives, not as sources of inspiration or pity, but as embodying ordinariness, complexity, and aesthetic richness. Accordingly, the consultative proposals advanced by participants transcended their technical adjustments in casting or scripting. They were underpinned by a fundamental philosophical reorientation, a call for cinematic practice positioning the disabled subject as an ontological and ethical point of departure. While profound, this reorientation presents challenges. As evidenced in Chapters 7 and 8, even well-intentioned consultative processes can be undermined by power imbalances within production teams, aesthetic choices lacking contextual awareness, or the discretionary authority of directors and prominent actors.

The model proposed herein, involving mandated CBFC consultation linked to representational ethics, is therefore not solely regulatory but also protective. It aims to mitigate the inherent fragility of informal consultation mechanisms through the authority of institutional oversight, ensuring that disabled perspectives are not superficially acknowledged but actively implemented. Nevertheless, this model's viability hinges on its adaptability. As participants themselves emphasised, consultation must avoid ossification into a perfunctory bureaucratic exercise. It necessitates a flexible, relational, and responsive approach to the inherent heterogeneity within disabled communities.

The very notion of a singular 'disability experience' underwent repeated interrogation during film club discussions. Yet, the criteria for authentic and empowering depiction varied across impairments, backgrounds, and political affiliations. This underscores that consultation cannot be the culmination of ethical filmmaking but an ongoing re-engagement process that demands continuous sensitivity to differences, points of tension, and the evolving nature of both modern Hindi social films' cinematic form and the experience of disability.

Likewise, the reflections articulated by participants in the final section of this chapter

illuminated the consequences of consultation's failure. The call for a boycott, far from being a knee-jerk reaction, was presented as an ethical and strategic recourse when inclusion appears performative or conditional. It was framed not as an act of retreat but as a form of political articulation, an assertion of agency, dignity, and refusal. Participants argued that if the industry was unwilling to engage meaningfully, the audience possess the reciprocal capacity to withhold its viewership.

This mode of refusal carries significant pedagogical weight, demonstrating that participation is not obligatory and that acts of consumption can be imbued with political significance (Streeck, 2012: 45). Just as engagement can represent hope, withdrawal can function as a powerful critique. A boycott's potential also underscores the inherent value of genuine collaboration. Participants did not issue ultimatums lightly. Their views consistently preferred integration and advocated for structures that institutionalised disabled voices in production review from the earliest conceptualisation. They envisioned writers' rooms where disabled consultants function as co-authors, production sets where accessibility is fundamental, and modern Hindi social films where depictions ground themselves in community accountability rather than solely on anticipated audience reactions. These aspirations signal a potential future that the Hindi film industry has yet to grasp but would greatly benefit from pursuing.

Notably, this chapter has also demonstrated that disability consultation extends beyond mere ethical rectitude, embracing aesthetic innovation. Participants' engagement revealed lived experience's capacity to enrich cinematic imagination, introducing novel character development, alternative narrative trajectories, and distinctive visual languages. Rather than constituting a limitation, incorporating disabled knowledge appeared to be a generative force, a resource for crafting more refined, resonant, and ultimately human narratives. This insight, I contend, challenges prevailing industry assumptions that consultation inevitably dilutes artistic freedom. On the contrary, as this project illustrates, it has potential for enhancement.

Reflecting on the enduring impact of this research, I am drawn to the unintended yet

transformative consequences of the Kahaani film club. Despite the project's formal conclusion, the community it fostered persisted. Informal screenings, spontaneous dialogues, and ongoing post-viewing reflections continued to animate a space for cultural critique and solidarity. This continuation supports a central finding that meaningful consultation extends beyond production or exhibition, persisting in audiences' interpretive practices, their support networks, and the critical frameworks they develop for identifying and challenging representation. Therefore, while presented as a dichotomy, the choice between allying and rejecting is more accurately a cyclical dynamic. Failed alliances can precipitate calls for rejection, while the potential for genuine dialogue can avert such actions. Both represent forms of participation and underscore the urgent need to re-evaluate how we conceptualise audience roles, not as passive recipients but as active co-creators of meaning, as ethical interlocutors, and key agents of change.

To this end, this chapter offers not a definitive resolution but an invitation, directed towards filmmakers, policymakers, and cultural workers, to reimagine representational parameters not as a finite objective but as an ongoing ethical relationship. It necessitates humility from those in power and affirmation of marginalised people. Most importantly, it centres the fundamental principle that narratives concerning disabled lives should not be constructed without their substantive involvement. Participants powerfully asserted that representation involves voice, control, and authorship, not mere visibility. Any approach which differs risks falling short by aestheticising oppression rather than dismantling it.

Having chronicled participants' responses to the relative merits of allying with or rejecting the Hindi film industry, I have concluded the analytical chapters of this thesis. These discussions have illuminated the rich tapestry of emotions, critiques, and aspirations articulated by disabled South Asian viewers in LBN as they navigated the representational terrain of modern Hindi social films. From reluctant admiration to outright resistance, their engagements underscore the complex interplay between cultural belonging, political agency, and media consumption. These chapters have not just revealed the interpretive strategies of these viewers but have also exposed

the ambivalences inherent in seeking recognition from an industry that has historically marginalised disabled bodies.

With this groundwork laid, I now turn to Chapter 10, the final section of this thesis, to synthesise the key findings, reflect on this study's methodological and theoretical contributions, and chart potential avenues for future research. In doing so, I aim to offer a cohesive overview of how this research contributes to the field of Disability, Diaspora and Media Studies, and broader discourses on cultural inclusion and representation in Hindi film.

Chapter 10 – Epilogue.

10.0. Prelude:

This thesis has aimed to explore the intersection of disability and cultural identity within LBN's South Asian disabled community through an analysis of audience reception of modern Hindi social films. In doing so, I developed a framework linking filmic representations with the experiences of diasporic disabled participants, aiming to understand how these viewers interpret, negotiate, and sometimes challenge portrayals of disability in relation to their intersecting identities and socio-cultural positioning. To substantiate this study, the research subsequently examined disability representation in over thirteen modern Hindi social films and its resonance with diasporic disabled South Asian audiences in LBN. Employing ethnographic and cooperative methods, the analysis that followed explored how research participants and later participating filmmakers engaged with these media texts, the influence of personal and collective histories on their interpretations, and the processes of cultural mediation involved. Further, the study examined industry-level factors influencing disability representation in contemporary Hindi social films and their real-world implications. I have further attempted to highlight the tensions between production practices, cultural stereotypes, and the lived realities of disabled viewers, demonstrating the crucial role of audience agency in constructing meaning-making. This concluding chapter synthesises the key findings and arguments presented throughout the empirical analysis chapters of this thesis. It revisits the three core research questions: how disabled diasporic South Asian viewers find, access, value, and experience modern Hindi social films with disability representation, how disabilities are portrayed and interpreted by this audience concerning their life experience, and what considerations mediate the affective nature of this representation for both the industry and its viewers. Finally, the chapter discusses the contributions and limitations of this research, proposes directions for future inquiry, and considers the potential of this work to inform media practices concerning disability representation in the Hindi film industry.

10.1. Synthesis of Findings:

This section consolidates the core insights developed throughout the thesis, offering a cohesive overview of how disability, cultural identity, filmic representation, and diasporic experience interrelate within the context of disabled South Asians in LBN. The synthesis highlights the dynamic and layered relationship between media engagement and identity formation by integrating ethnographic observations, participant narratives, and textual analyses of modern Hindi social films. It reflects the complex and, at times, contradictory ways in which participants responded to disability portrayals, shaped by broader socio-cultural influences and their experiences within the diaspora. This synthesis begins with a reflection of literary debates examined in Chapters 2 and 3, before addressing the innovation and significance of the research methodology outlined in Chapter 4. My conclusions shift to the preliminary findings from participant surveys conducted before the Kahaani film club screenings, as detailed in Chapter 5. I then review the findings highlighted in Chapters 6 and 7. These chapters explored the models of representation that resonated most with the participants throughout the project and their articulated perspectives on how disability should be portrayed, considering their cultural, political, and affective orientations. This section concludes by examining how project participants championed direct collaboration with filmmakers to steer the future of authentic and inclusive Hindi film narratives, as detailed in Chapters 8 and 9.

10.1.1. Existing Literature:

As I explored in Chapter 2, historically, Hindi film has often depicted disability through moralistic and symbolic frameworks. Early films used disabled characters to represent karmic punishment or divine retribution (Shenoy, 2013: 141; Gawande and Kashyap, 2017: 54). The Golden and Classic Eras continued this, presenting disability as a source of pity or villainy, thus reinforcing assumptions of disability through emotionally charged simplistic portrayals (Misra, 2016: 189; Das and Bhattacharjee, 2022: 822). Even in more progressive periods such as the Indian New Wave and the Social Era, disabled characters frequently symbolised national trauma or personal struggle rather than being shown as fully realised and aspirational individuals (Quayson, 2007: 10–14; Chakravarty, 2009: 102). As of 2015, a shift from *viklang*, implying inferiority, to *divyang*, inferring divine uniqueness, has been promoted by

India's ruling party to reframe disability within a nationalist context (Jain, 2024: 232). However, this semantic change does not necessarily mean better representation, as explored in the literature. Instead, it often overlays existing stereotypes with spiritual symbolism, aligning disability narratives with state ideologies that value individual triumph over structural inclusion (Sinha, 2024: 729). This thus results in a hybrid model where neoliberal ideals of independence and productivity merge with religious moralism, further politicising disability narratives (Gawande and Kashyap, 2017: 55).

Drawing on Reception, Diaspora, and Disability Studies in Chapter 3, this analysis viewed media engagement as an active, emotive, political, and culturally embedded process. The supporting literature therefore revealed a dynamic and often contradictory relationship between filmic depictions of disability and the experiences of its diasporic audiences. I detailed how South Asian diasporic viewers engage with these films in complex ways, particularly in the UK. The Reception Studies literature explored rejected passive viewership, highlighting how emotional responses shape interpretation and identity (Ahmed, 2014: 2; Flaxman, 2016: 181). It further described how viewers are culturally and historically situated in their viewership. Banaji (2013: 399), in particular stresses the diverse responses among British Asians formed by generational, religious, and class-based experiences shape viewing contexts. This diversity, as I have explained, is notably salient when disabled viewers interpret disability portrayals that either alienate or resonate with their realities of disability.

I also explored how familial networks significantly shape engagement with the medium. Zeitlyn and Banks (2015: 86) describe how household dominant voices often determine media choices and narrative interpretations, acting as conduits of cultural transmission, socialising viewers into collective understandings of ability and identity (Mehrotra and Calasanti, 2010: 799). For disabled people, I hypothesised how this may mean internalising norms from early exposure to films depicting disability as tragic, comedic, or redemptive rather than ordinary or diverse (see: Chetan and Ranganathan, 2025: 306). Hindi films' stylistic choices in melodrama were further described to reinforce ideological messages, embedding normative values related to gender, ability, and nationhood (Gopalan, 2012: 400; Ebrahim, 2006:

2). The repeated casting of non-disabled actors in disabled roles was also observed in the supporting literature to marginalise real disabled voices, commodifying disability for able-bodied consumption while limiting the perceived authenticity of such representation (Kumar, 2019: 242; Ghosh, 2022b: 4).

Despite growing research and interest in diasporic media consumption practices, a gap remained in reception studies focusing on disabled viewers. This was especially true for the UK, which this research sought to fill. Venkatesan et al. (2015: 107) show how non-disabled Indian audiences tend to interpret disability through pity, struggle and defeat. Friedner (2017: 360), however, highlighted how disabled Indian viewers critically engage, seeing disability portrayals as state-led ideological control rather than empowerment. In sum, supported by existing literature, modern Hindi social films are in this thesis considered as cultural products and tools for identity negotiation and ideological reinforcement. For disabled South Asians in the UK in particular, these films, as I have concluded, are crucial sources of cultural continuity and contested sites of meaning-making in the diaspora.

Despite the lack of insight in Disability Studies literature concerning diasporic South Asians conceptions of self, as Shakespeare (2006c: 75) infers, or its cross relevance with media representation (Ellcessor et al, 2017: 10) the field's theoretical application in this research contributed a novel platform for these underrepresented voices.

10.1.2. Employed Methodology:

Integrating the literature findings of Chapters 2 and 3, I deviated from traditional textual or production-focused approaches by employing a participatory ethnographic framework that prioritised the experiences of its disabled participants. As outlined in Chapter 4, this methodological decision directly responded to the long-standing marginalisation of disabled audiences in film criticism and Reception Studies. Drawing from Friedner's (2017: 349) critique, these methods sought a more inclusive, embodied, and reflexive approach to generating knowledge that valued the interpretive agency of those historically excluded from media scholarship. One of the key innovations in this research method lay in its sustained attention to the positionality of participants. This chapter explored how overlapping identities such

as disability, diasporic belonging, racialisation, and, in some cases, religious minority status shaped participants' interpretations of modern Hindi social films. These identities were not seen as static categories but as fluid and continually negotiated through lived, emotional, and social experiences. This understanding drew on Parekh (2008: 184) and Banaji (2013: 400), who conceptualise identity as a process of 'becoming', shaped by cultural interaction. My position as a local diasporic South Asian researcher with a fluidic-disabled identity also played a significant role in the research process. This dual insider-outsider status enabled access to disabled communities in LBN and a deeper engagement with their emotionally charged responses, enhancing the analysis's ethical sensitivity and interpretive richness.

As detailed in Chapters 4.3 and 4.4, the study employed a triangulated method that included participant surveying, observation, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and media co-viewing sessions. This mixed-methods approach, guided mainly by my interlocutors, ensured that they and the project's participants were recognised as co-analysts of their own narratives rather than passive research subjects. Among these methods, the co-viewing sessions proved incredibly generative. These sessions created space for observing real-time emotional reactions and encouraged spontaneous interpretive dialogue. As Dudrah (2002: 20) explains, in so doing, I have attempted to "provide a space for those that partake in this cultural and leisure activity to engage further with their diasporic sense of selfhood". These sessions, conducted in the heart of LBN, in its local libraries, therefore mirrored the informal and communal settings where diasporic media consumption typically occurs (*ibid.*: 25), thus enhancing the reliability of the data.

The thesis further advances its methodology through a framework of 'co-operative enquiry grounded in the ethos of friendship'. As described in Chapter 4.3, relationships with my interlocutors were carefully cultivated through shared meals, informal conversations, project meetings and acts of mutual care. This friendship-based model, initially proposed by Tillmann-Healy (2003: 737), challenged the conventional hierarchies of researcher and participant by fostering a more horizontal, trust-based mode of engagement. This approach aligns with Castrodale and Zingaro's (2015: 2) advocacy for relational and co-produced research in Disability

Studies. In this context, friendship was not incidental but were chiefly central to the research process, enabling more profound emotional disclosures and nuanced reflections when participants discussed their stigmatised experiences or culturally sensitive narratives. Co-viewing further facilitated this by allowing participants to engage with each other's responses, reinforcing a sense of shared community solidarity and interpretive collaboration.

Reflexivity was another core principle throughout the research. Both my interlocutors and I openly acknowledged our positionalities concerning cultural heritage, bodily experience, and our shared affection for modern Hindi social films. This stance fostered trust and allowed participants to express views on complex topics, such as the internalisation of filmic representations or discomfort with dominant Hindu-inflected disability discourses. The analysis employed affect theory to interpret responses, mainly drawing on Ahmed's (2014: 2, 11) concept of affect as "what sticks" and how emotional, broader social and political forces shape responses. Therefore, the ethnographic methodology developed in this chapter contributed an original intervention to both Disability and Media Studies. By foregrounding diasporic disabled voices and integrating co-viewing, affective analysis, and reflexive enquiry, the research offered a politically engaged and context-sensitive understanding of media reception practices. Representation, as the findings demonstrate, is never stable. It is always felt, negotiated, and transformed through the experiences of those most directly affected.

10.1.3. Surveying Disabled Viewers:

Chapter 5 laid the empirical groundwork for this study by analysing a survey of the project's initial hundred and twenty participants. This survey aimed to investigate my primary research question by seeking to understand how they find, access, value, and experience modern Hindi social films, alongside their motivations for engagement, thereby establishing a foundational context for the rationale discussed in later analytical chapters. The ethnographic grounding of this survey in LBN proved critically important, as discussed within the chapter. The Borough's high poverty rate and significant South Asian population offered an ideal microcosm for examining the

experiences of disabled viewers within a culturally specific and economically constrained environment. This focused lens allowed the research to elucidate the convergence of socio-economic, cultural, and systemic barriers in shaping access to modern Hindi social films and the interpretive frameworks employed by disabled viewers.

Regarding content selection, the influence of star power emerged as a dominant initial factor, suggesting a model of consumption driven by familiarity and trust in established actors, producers, and directors. That said, this influence was mediated by peer dynamics, particularly among younger disabled participants who frequently acted upon recommendations from their social networks, both familial and online. These findings complicated simplistic models of audience agency, revealing a layered interplay between personal identification, social validation, and media literacy.

Challenging the earlier literature's contention of a homogenous viewership, the surveyed cohort, predominantly disabled women from LBN in their mid to late thirties, offered rich and reflective insights into the reciprocal relationship between their identities and their Hindi film consumption practices. Their film selections were not largely shaped by disability representation but also by the interplay of cultural identity, accessibility infrastructure, interpersonal recommendations, and the enduring prominence of Hindi film stars. Notably, the survey data indicated that neurodivergent women and those with chronic health conditions formed much of the viewing population, thus questioning prevalent assumptions in literature regarding young male viewership dominance within the genre in the UK context.

While viewing habits varied significantly across age groups and genders within the survey, participants consistently reported engaging with modern Hindi social films to identify with others, gain culturally-inflected knowledge about disability, and advocate for themselves. As elucidated from the survey data, these films facilitated the expression of individual and shared experiences of disability within a culturally meaningful context, with entertainment serving as a secondary consideration.

Yet, despite the impact of their viewership, participants across different ages and

disabilities voiced concerns about the misrepresentation or trivialisation of disability, particularly comedies, which elicited considerable criticism. The intersection of disability and comedy proved to be a particularly sensitive area, with participants objecting to ‘slapstick’ portrayals that they felt devalued the perception of their daily lives. This reaction highlighted a key conflict within modern Hindi social films, namely, the pairing of stories aiming for positive change with deeply ingrained stereotypes that both the filmmaker and audience recognise.

Accessibility also emerged as a critical concern for all participants, irrespective of age or disability. While OTT platforms were the most prevalent mode of viewing, praised for their convenience and captioning features, the inconsistent quality of these features diminished their overall utility. Access to physical cinemas remained both the preferred mode of viewing and a significant barrier, particularly for older participants and those with mobility impairments. I surmised that while offering certain advantages, the shift towards digital viewing clearly risks excluding those uncomfortable with new technologies or unable to afford multiple subscriptions.

In summary, Chapter 5 established the empirical foundation for subsequent narrative analysis by delineating the lived realities of its disabled viewers of modern Hindi social films. Their insights, shaped by intersecting identities, illuminated both the potential and the limitations of Hindi cinematic representation, providing a distinctive analytical framework for examining the emotional and narrative engagements detailed in the subsequent chapters.

10.1.4. Identifying Representational Models:

Having centred LBN as my ambit of data collection, I then investigated how disabilities were portrayed in the under-documented modern Hindi social film genre to address the first half of my secondary research question. Consequently, I analysed the diverse historical, aesthetic, and ideological paradigms shaping disability representation in the films viewed in this project, alongside audience engagement and their interpretive processes. This provided insight into how diasporic disabled South Asian viewers, shaped by distinct social and cultural backgrounds, critically evaluated these portrayals. The analysis also examined how production decisions,

including aesthetic choices and ideological frameworks, influenced disability depictions and their reception by diasporic disabled audiences who prioritised authenticity and agency over sentimental or superficial depiction.

One essential narrative device discussed in Chapter 6 was the ‘hero’s struggle’, often structured through the monomyth of the ‘hero’s journey’. This storytelling apparatus, emblematic of modern Hindi social films, typically featured protagonists as moral crusaders against social injustice. Historically, however, disability had often been excluded from this heroic framing, relegated to caricatures, comic relief, or moral lessons. The modern trend of featuring disabled protagonists in heroic roles, as explored in Chapter 7.4, enabled disability to be understood by participants as a source of both struggle and empowerment, in contrast to the tropes discussed in the literature review. Another key representational model was rooted in ‘Nehruvian film’ conventions, a post-independence scripting style intended to foster social cohesion through culturally-specific representationalism. Although this approach, as discussed in Chapter 8.1, promoted what it called ‘appropriate difference’ by portraying disabled characters in a visually benign and morally Hindu-inflected manner, participants often found these portrayals lacking in political critique. Disabled characters, nevertheless, were frequently depicted as passive or symbolic according to participants. The focus was placed more on visual compatibility than on the lived reality of disability, creating a form of difference that was sanitised or romanticised, as highlighted in Chapters 7.2 and 8.5.

Participants also voiced concerns about Western disability tropes such as the ‘supercrip’, the ‘tragic victim’, and the ‘object of pity’, as discussed in Chapters 8.1 and 9.2. Their critiques of post-2000 Hindi films highlighted the simultaneous use of regional ‘viklang’ tropes, which were characterised by sentimentalisation, emotional manipulation, and the framing of disability as either a burden or a spectacle of triumph. These stylistic choices, participants argued, risked reinforcing disablist assumptions and oversimplifying the complex experiences of disabled people.

A more recent model, explored in Chapter 8, involved the ‘Divyangjan framework’ introduced by the Indian government in 2015 to replace viklang portrayals. Although the initiative was intended to provide social and economic support for disabled

Indian citizens, its cinematic incorporation, as this research explored, presents several ethical challenges. Both filmmakers and participants observed that this framework tended to prioritise the representation of certain disability types, particularly those more visible or aligned with institutional care structures, thereby marginalising others. As noted in Chapters 7.2 and 8, participants expressed concern that modern Hindi social films were increasingly showcasing representational extremes aimed at marketability or emotional impact, often at the cost of representing the true diversity of disabled communities in India and abroad.

The analysis presented in Chapters 5 through 9 revealed that modern Hindi social films are increasingly adopting a hybrid model of representation. This model blends traditional Indian storytelling with Western cinematic techniques and incorporates a participatory-informed understanding of lived disability. The findings suggest that such an approach has the potential to shift the cinematic gaze from objectifying disabled lives to placing them at the centre of the narrative. However, participants also highlighted inconsistencies in the application of this model. They observed that directorial or producer discretion often led to deviations from socio-ethically grounded storytelling, a concern explored further in Chapter 9. Overall, participants' responses portrayed a complex and evolving reception of disability representation in these films. Despite signs of progress, significant challenges remain, highlighting the importance of disabled people's ongoing critical engagement and advocacy to ensure such portrayals meaningfully reflect and support their lived realities.

10.1.5. Positionalities of Representation:

Having identified the representational model's participants engaged with throughout the project, the subsequent summary turns to the second half of my secondary research question. It examines how disabled diasporic South Asians interpret and engage with these portrayals concerning their own lived realities. In so doing, I sought to identify the various positionalities participants described throughout the project regarding how disability ought to be represented in the modern Hindi social film genre. This investigation thus examined the evolving narrative and stylistic portrayals of disability in modern Hindi social films, focusing on their intersection with dominant

political paradigms and influence on audience reception. The interpretive lens of participating diasporic disabled South Asians was central to this inquiry, as their experiences and cultural histories critically informed their reception of these representations. Their engagement with narrative models, such as the monomyth, Nehruvian, or Divyangjan ideals, revealed both resonances and dissonances, reflecting active negotiation with themes that validated or undermined their disability experiences.

Across the project, participants expressed a wide range of responses. Some found deep emotional identification with characters whose experiences mirrored their own. Others raised sharp critiques of portrayals they found inauthentic or ethically troubling, especially those that glossed over the complexities of disabled life or sensationalised suffering. This tension between idealised imagery and the demand for realism exposed the limits of dominant cinematic narratives. Ethical interpretations also varied. As described in Chapters 6.1 and 7.2, modern Hindi social films addressing topics like euthanasia sparked reflections on autonomy and self-determination. Some participants embraced such narratives as emblematic of disabled people's right to agency, while others expressed concern over the conflation of disability with death or despair. These divergent viewpoints underscored the internal plurality within the disabled community and the deeply personal nature of representation. Although the increasing visibility of disabled characters was largely welcomed, participants remained wary of portrayals that veered into stereotype or superficiality. Many objected to casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles, viewing them as exclusionary. Others acknowledged industry demands but insisted that such compromises should not come at the cost of authenticity. These discussions reflected broader concerns about the friction between market-driven narratives and ethically grounded representation.

Beyond content, participants advocated for systemic changes within the Hindi film industry, as Chapter 9 identified. They emphasised increasing the participation of disabled professionals at all levels, from writing and directing to casting and crew roles, as foundational to authentic storytelling. Token gestures of inclusion were widely rejected in favour of sustained engagement with creators. Participants

emphasised the importance of fostering environments where disabled people could be well represented to shape and control the stories being told. What emerged from those conversations was a distinct and politicised discourse on representation. As explored in Chapter 6, participants' politics were grounded in affect, experience, and recognition of systemic misrepresentation. While many articulated the politics of visibility, demanding access and critique in equal measure, others interpreted narrative arcs of autonomy and resilience as mirroring broader disabled rights struggles. Across screenings, participants drew stark parallels between filmic portrayals and their own experiences of marginalisation, using these representations to assert narrative sovereignty. As expressed by its participants, the claim that these films were 'made for us' became both a declaration of ownership of the medium and a demand for cultural citizenship from those being represented.

From the participants' perspective, the politics of representation identified in this project were those grounded in critique, identity, and creative control, reflecting a broader aspiration to transform how disability is portrayed and embedded within visual culture. Participants did not seek to feel included but rather they wanted to be seen, heard, and understood on their terms by those who do not share their identity experience, as highlighted in Chapter 6.2. Irrevocably, their engagement with modern Hindi social films was dynamic, critical, and deeply situated in lived experience. Their reflections reaffirmed the importance of centring disabled voices in Hindi filmmaking processes. Thus, this project's findings stress the urgent need for modern Hindi social film representations to move beyond tokenism and sentimentality, but toward genuinely inclusive narratives and practices that reflect the full diversity, dignity, and complexity of disability.

10.1.6. Representational Politics in/and Practice:

I now review the final research question of this project, exploring the considerations made by the Hindi film industry and its disabled South Asian diasporic viewers in mediating the affective dimensions of disability representation. The relationship between participant engagement and filmmaker intent emerged as a dynamic and complex process of mediation, shaped by criticism of the medium and the shifting

expectations of its audience. Participants consistently engaged with modern Hindi social films through a politicised lens, assessing disability portrayals in light of their experiences and social consciousness. A central theme of their critique, as detailed in Chapters 6 and 7, was the demand for ‘authenticity’. Participants evaluated whether portrayals resonated with their realities and identities, often expressing dissatisfaction with ‘inauthentic’ or ‘stereotypical’ depictions. As documented in Chapter 9.1, this focus on authenticity reflects a desire for films to move past reductive portrayals to address the complexities of disabled lives onscreen. Agency and empowerment were also key concerns. Participants favoured stories where disabled characters were portrayed as active decision-makers or those that challenged dominant assumptions of dependency. As highlighted in Chapters 7.3 and 7.4, this emphasis underscored Hindi social film’s role to support self-worth when countering disablist narratives. Their critical perspectives reflected a rejection of portrayals reinforcing disablism and a call for more ethically grounded storytelling.

Chapter 7.2 highlighted a range of opinions on how disability should be depicted. Some participants advocated for authentic representation with disabled actors, complex narratives, and structural inclusion. Others voiced concerns that overly realistic portrayals limit emotional impact and, therefore, commercial success. Suggestions included drawing on lived experience and improving on-screen accuracy, while contrasting views stressed narrative tension, star appeal, and mainstream viability. These perspectives reveal the ongoing challenge of balancing ethical responsibility with cinematic impact, yet a shared aspiration for richer disability representation remained evident. Intersectional identities further shaped how participants engaged with modern Hindi social films. As discussed in Chapter 5, factors such as disability type, cultural background, gender, and age influenced their interpretations. This intra-community diversity highlights the need for filmmakers to move beyond monolithic portrayals. Chapter 6.2 also shows how participants’ responses were shaped by the emotive and social context of viewing, including awareness of reactions from the non-disabled audience. These factors added depth and complexity to their engagement.

Filmmakers in the modern Hindi social film tradition, as I had come to identify in the

later stages of this research, navigate multiple ideological, aesthetic, and institutional pressures when representing disability. Chapter 8 outlines how the global commodification of disability narratives and the Indian Divyangjan policy framework post-2015 influences these. As I have elucidated, these forces produce a politics of representation that compels filmmakers to negotiate ethical values, commercial expectations, and regulatory compliance. As many filmmakers noted, this often compromises the authenticity and inclusivity of disabled experiences. One persistent issue observed was the use of what Barnes (1992: 4) terms ‘disabling imagery’. In the modern Hindi social context, this concept refers to visual and narrative techniques that rely on stark contrasts, close-ups, or tropes of suffering and exceptionalism, as this research analysed. While filmmakers in this project speculated that such methods might appeal to global audiences or align with cinematic norms, participants of this study contended that these approaches often reduce disabled characters to objects of pity or inspiration. The reception of the film *Wheels* (2022) exemplifies this tension. Its creators acknowledged the emotional effectiveness of these visuals, but also a reliance on Western disability tropes. This issue further appears in *Incredible Insight* (2020), where the disabled creators adopted similar approaches to align with Divyangjan funding expectations. These examples demonstrate how deeply embedded these aesthetic norms have become.

At an institutional level, Divyangjan thinking profoundly influences which disabilities are represented and how they are framed in the medium. While positioned by filmmakers as empowering, it was observed by project viewers to reinforce hierarchies of disability by privileging visible or socially acceptable impairments. Individuals with less apparent disabilities, mental health conditions, or intersecting marginalisations were therefore speculated to be excluded from representation or consultation on said representation. According to filmmakers in this context, access to funding and visibility often depends on institutional affiliation or alignment with dominant ideals of disability, reinforcing selective inclusion. Overlapping social, political, and economic forces thus shape the politics of disability representation in modern Hindi social films. While recent advocacy and collaboration with disabled creatives show promise, genuine change will require more profound engagement

with the structures shaping disability representation in the medium. The project discussions, therefore, highlighted the need to promote an ethics of representation grounded in authenticity, diversity, and inclusion. This thesis contends that such an approach provides a key foundation for advancing disability advocacy in film media.

10.1.7. Film Consulting Futures:

Chapter 9 documents the unintended final findings of the project, which revealed a salient and urgent demand from participants for a fundamental paradigm shift in the representation of disability within modern Hindi social films. Central to this demand was the imperative for the comprehensive institutionalisation of meaningful consultation with disabled people. Participants asserted that this consultation must transcend superficial engagement and entail substantive, sustained, and reciprocal collaboration throughout the entirety of the film production process, spanning narrative conceptualisation to casting and production design.

Participants, as I have taken every opportunity to discuss, explicitly rejected tokenistic advisory roles, advocating instead for a restructured creative paradigm wherein disabled people are recognised as integral contributors. Their experiences, they contended, must be treated as foundational epistemological resources, indispensable for constructing authentic, multifaceted, and respectful portrayals of disability. Without such grounded input, cinematic narratives, participants insisted, remain susceptible to perpetuating harmful misrepresentations that distort lived experiences and reinforce societal stigma. To address this critical gap, participants proposed two key mechanisms for systemic change. Firstly, they called for the formalisation of consultative roles for disabled experts across all stages of filmmaking. Secondly, as highlighted in Chapter 8.4, they advocated for structural reform within the CBFC, calling for the instatement of disability as a distinct category within its film evaluation protocols. Under this proposal, any film depicting disability would be mandated to undergo consultation with recognised disability rights organisations. This could formalise the influence of disabled consultants and empower the CBFC to mandate content revisions when portrayals are deemed harmful or inaccurate. As this thesis proposes, such a reform would shift the onus of

representation from a matter of artistic discretion to a legal responsibility, ensuring that lived experience is a guiding principle in disability depictions.

The Kahaani Film Club framework itself provided a demonstrable model for effective consultation in this regard. It functioned as a critical space wherein disabled viewers could collectively analyse, reinterpret, and respond to on-screen representations from their perspectives. Transitioning from passive media consumers, participants became active co-creators of meaning, developing shared analytical frameworks for evaluating representation and challenging dominant disability narratives. As Chapter 7 contends, the project's structure fostered the articulation of diverse perspectives within the disabled community, underscoring the necessity for consultation to be adaptable and responsive rather than monolithic and prescriptive.

Further, participants stated that the continued exclusion from these processes constitutes not merely oversight, but a form of symbolic violence. The erasure or misrepresentation of disabled voices, in their view, impedes public understanding of disability matters concerning their diasporic bodies and diminishes their dignity. In response to this systemic exclusion, some participants proposed boycotting modern Hindi social films. This action was framed not as a reactive withdrawal but as a deliberate and ethical refusal to endorse a system that misuses or disregards their identities. Such a stance, they highlighted, would assert the agency of disabled audiences and foreground the urgent need for structural transformation in society.

In summation, the proposals articulated by project participants in Chapter 9 extend beyond the improvement of individual portrayals, advocating for a fundamental restructuring of how stories about disability are conceived and disseminated. They envision a Hindi film industry wherein disabled viewers are empowered as storytellers, creative collaborators, and decision-makers. Embedding consultation within both the creative and regulatory infrastructures of the Hindi film industry and reinforcing it through mechanisms such as the CBFC, thus, was deemed essential for ensuring inclusive and equitable representation. This transformation is a matter of possibility and crucial for the Hindi film industry to achieve genuine representativeness and ethical integrity. I speculate that this approach would further ensure Hindi film practices uphold those rights enshrined in India's 2016 RPWDA and better align

with international advocacy of the UNCPRD.

10.2. Research Limitations:

The methodological design informing this thesis was conceived to explore the multi-layered engagement of disabled diasporic South Asians with modern Hindi social films. While this thesis offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged in its scope, sampling approach, and overall methodology. These limitations are particularly relevant when working with a population marked by substantial diversity and complex intersections of identity (see: Rummens, 2003).

One of the most significant constraints concerns the study's geographical specificity. By focusing exclusively on LBN, the research captured the distinct socio-cultural and economic conditions shaping how disabled diasporic South Asians access, interpret, and engage with modern Hindi social films depicting disability. This localised focus enabled a detailed view of how community dynamics interact with broader structural pressures in shaping media engagement. However, LBN's unique characteristics may limit the broader applicability of the findings. Therefore, engagement patterns identified in this setting may not reflect those in other UK regions. For this reason, future research would benefit from expanding to various locations to assess the broader relevance of these insights.

In addition to geographical constraints, this thesis encountered difficulties obtaining a representative sample. Ninety-eight eligible participants participated in the survey phase, with an additional 137 involved through the film club. Due to the constraints of thesis writing, 101 participants contributed directly to the broader analytical dataset. Yet, participation levels were substantial, capturing the entire demographic and experiential range of the disabled South Asian community proved challenging. The wide variation in impairments further made proportional representation difficult within a limited cohort, which may influence the reliability and generalisability of the findings. Nonetheless, the sample allowed for meaningful comparisons across different disability groups, which emerged organically through the analysis.

A disability advocacy-oriented standpoint guided the rationale to adopt a pan-

disability framework, though it also introduced certain methodological limitations. This approach offered valuable insights into understanding disability as a socially constructed form of exclusion rather than a medical or bodily deficit (Mitchell and Snyder, 1997: 5). However, disability categorisation is rarely consistent or uniform. As noted by Darcy and Buhalis (2011: 17), those with different impairments encounter distinct challenges. Media access, comprehension, and engagement are shaped in varied ways by visual, auditory, cognitive, and mobility-related factors (Ntoa et al., 2024). Although this study operates within the CDS framework outlined in Chapter 4, its generalised scope risked overlooking these vital differences concerning film representation (Aspler et al., 2022: 337). Future research would benefit from an impairment-specific analysis of audience experiences to better comprehend the diverse needs and viewpoints within disabled diasporic communities. The work of organisations such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People already illustrates the value of focused approaches, particularly in addressing the viewing needs of blind and visually impaired audiences (Rai, 2009).

While this study focused on disability and diasporic identity, other intersecting dimensions of social identity were not examined in detail. Gender, age, education, and socio-economic status likely affect how modern Hindi social films are accessed and interpreted. While these factors can be elucidated from the findings presented, their considered absence limits the depth of the thesis and points to the need for intersectional approaches in future studies. This is particularly important given that some identity-based engagement patterns did emerge throughout the research, although they were not explored further due to the project's original constraints. Those constraints were my failure to consider this element of viewership when pursuing the aims and objectives of the research.

Focus groups as a primary qualitative method also posed challenges. These discussions encouraged shared reflections but introduced group dynamics that could have influenced responses. Conformity, dominance by more vocal participants, and interlocutor roles as moderators likely shaped the conversations and may have suppressed alternative viewpoints. That said, as demonstrated in

Chapters 6.2 and 7.2, every attempt to mediate minority views in focus group data had been undertaken. Miriro (2024: 36–42), after all, cautions that focus groups are vulnerable to recall bias, question misinterpretation, and socially desirable responding. Thus, when interpreting the qualitative results, these factors must be considered, especially where not supported by the quantitative data presented in Chapter 5.

Finally, the cross-intersectional nature of this research imposed temporal limitations on the conclusions drawn. By capturing data at a single point in time, the research presents a static view of media engagement with modern Hindi social films by their diasporic disabled viewers in the LBN. Yet film consumption patterns, personal circumstances, and societal attitudes continually evolve (Napoli, 2011: 18). Future longitudinal studies could trace these developments over time, offering a dynamic picture of how engagement shifts in changing cultural and personal contexts.

10.3. Future Research Avenues:

This thesis, I contend, has laid a foundation for understanding how diasporic disabled South Asian audiences engage with modern Hindi social films. However, as with most interdisciplinary inquiries, it has also revealed limitations and areas ripe for further exploration. The findings suggest that much remains to be explored in the diversity within disabled and diasporic viewership, alongside the structural and creative dimensions of Hindi film production. The following sections outline key directions for future research, highlighting areas that can deepen our understanding of how identity and practice intersect with disability representation in the genre.

10.3.1. Identity-Specific Viewership Cultures:

While this project maintained a pan-disability focus to seek to capture a broad spectrum of experiences, reflection on the data identified that identity-specific cultures of viewership were vital to how participants interpreted and responded to the films screened. This suggests that future research should more deliberately engage with distinct axes of identity to better understand how these shape engagement with modern Hindi social film.

Age emerged as a key factor influencing film consumption and interpretation. As discussed in the survey findings in Chapter 5, younger viewers were more digitally fluent and often relied on peer recommendations. In contrast, older participants faced more significant technological and physical access barriers. These age-related differences shaped how participants accessed modern Hindi social films and emotionally connected with the content. Future research should examine these generational differences in modern Hindi social film viewership through longitudinal studies to trace how their engagement evolves.

Sexuality also introduced a novel yet underdeveloped perspective within the project. The smaller companion initiative titled ‘Queer Kahaani’, which examined queer representation in British TV through a disability lens, illustrated how queer disabled viewers navigated multiple layers of marginalisation. These viewers sought more complex, affirming, and culturally relevant portrayals that speak to their lived realities. Further studies could investigate how sexual identity informs media engagement within diasporic disabled communities, particularly in relation to non-normative gender and sexual identities. Presenting *Queer Kahaani*’s experimental findings, which briefly explored these dimensions, at the 2023 Edge Hill University’s Critical Studies in Television Conference revealed a significant interest, based on peer feedback, in how intersexually queer and disabled viewers interact with media and the most effective ways to capture those viewpoints.

Gender played another prominent role in shaping the composition and perspectives of participants. As discussed, the majority of viewers in this project were disabled women, often neurodivergent or living with chronic health conditions. This significantly challenges dominant narratives associating Hindi film viewership with young male audiences. It also highlights a critical research gap, as the experiences of diasporic disabled women as media consumers is emerging yet largely unexamined. Future research should prioritise understanding how gender influences both access to and interpretation of disability in film, with a particular focus on female, trans, and non-binary perspectives.

The type of disability further significantly influenced participants’ engagement with modern Hindi social films. d/Deaf and neurodivergent viewers often raised concerns

about sensory design and communication access, while those with physical disabilities highlighted issues related to mobility and representation. Indeed, a vast swath of the project participant base frequently articulated that their experiences were either missing or misrepresented on screen through the praxis of their specific disability. Further research that disaggregates disability categories and explores filmic reception within specific impairment groups would provide a more robust understanding of their media consumption practices.

Finally, race surfaced as a novel area of exploration, revealing further complexities in diasporic media engagement. In actuality, non-’South Asian’ viewership emerged as the fifth-largest audience during the survey. Further, while their input was not analysed in this research, many participants from these backgrounds attended the film club stage of this project. Their attendance was not all too surprising when considering the industry’s portability and influence on other viewership cultures. As a British Nigerian viewer, AB remarked, “Bollywood’s like Nollywood [...] reminding me of home” [**Iqbal Screening – 00:08:56**]. As AB indicated, Hindi films can operate as a broader diasporic touchstone beyond the South Asian context. Therefore, comparative studies between cultural industries could open up meaningful discussions about cross-cultural media identification and diasporic belonging.

Overall, these identity-specific cultures of viewership suggest that media engagement is not a uniform experience among disabled audiences. It is filtered through personal histories, social positions, and emotive contexts. By attending to these differences, future research can develop how representation is received and what it means for different segments of the various disabled communities in the UK.

10.3.2. Filmmaking Practices:

The Kahaani Film Club project not only provided insight into audience reception but conversely offered a space where critical dialogues about production ethics and creative processes flourished. As I have identified, participants consistently emphasised that improved representation necessitated both better stories and fundamental changes in how those stories are made. This highlights a vital area for further research, specifically those very filmmaking practices. One such area is the

use of cinematic techniques to create emotional resonance. Participants were highly attuned to how filmmakers employed close-ups, dramatic soundtracks, and symbolic imagery to evoke specific emotions about disability. While these techniques can be powerful, they were reported to reinforcing disablist tropes when not grounded in lived expertise, as this thesis surmised. Future studies should, thus, analyse the affects produced through this film form and how disabled and non-disabled viewers interpret these choices differently.

Another essential topic emerging through this research was the role of disability consultancy in film production. Throughout this project, it became evident that a new network of disabled consultants and advocacy groups are emerging in India. However, little is known about their influence, strategies, or institutional support. Of particular interest would be their advocacy and application of the 2016 RPWDA, concerning its significance for the 1952 Cinematograph Act and any Amendments in depicting disability, as I have unintentionally identified during this research. Another particularly interesting avenue would reside in how these disabled consultants conceptualise, articulate, exercise, and defend their rights, if at all, in relation to the above Acts. Further research could investigate how these consultants operate within the industry, their challenges, and the impact of their input on creative outcomes. Such investigations would help develop best practice models for meaningful consultation with the Hindi film industry.

Disability rights groups are optimistic that the Hindi film industry will further its remit by including disabled people in creating disability-led films (Bhirani, 2025). This is acutely evident in the reception to Aamir Khan's upcoming *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025), the spiritual sequel to *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) screened on this project, which consults an inter-disabled cast. Further, structural reforms within the broader industry framework, including film certification boards such as the CBFC, warrant further examination. As I have reflected, participants throughout this project called for disability to be reinstated as a distinct classification category, with mandatory consultation from recognised disabled groups. Research into the feasibility, design, and implementation of such regulatory reforms could have a lasting impact, helping

to institutionalise ethical standards for representation.

Lastly, accessibility in film testing additionally requires more critical attention. While some participants in this project praised streaming platforms for offering captions or flexible viewing formats, many raised concerns about the inconsistent quality of these features. Consequently, further research is needed to address the current gaps in understanding how Hindi films are assessed for accessibility before release, and if production houses consider these issues when selecting OTT platforms for distribution after their theatrical run. This includes evaluating whether current practices meet the needs of diverse disabled audiences and how these processes could be standardised across the industry. Again, little is known about how these industry standards align to the 2016 RWPDA or international accessibility guidelines.

10.4. Final Thoughts:

While this thesis has highlighted the interpretive agency of its participating disabled South Asian diasporic viewers in LBN, it is worthwhile to reflect on the broader implications of their engagement. This engagement involved more than audience reception but constituted a form of cultural labour. In this way, participants were not simply consuming media. They were actively involved in decoding, critiquing, reframing, and emotionally managing cinematic narratives that often excluded or misrepresented their experiences. In this sense, their engagement can be seen as both an affective and intellectual contribution to public discourse surrounding disability, representation, and identity. This labour, while crucial, often goes unrecognised in film criticism and industry practice. Thus, patronising a film that renders one's identity marginal, symbolic, or invisible is not a neutral act. For participants in this research, viewing became a space for critical negotiation that demanded emotional resilience, cultural insight, and most certainly, significant effort. Their responses and reflections show how test audiences act as cultural intermediaries. They challenged dominant disability portrayals, developed alternative critical vocabularies, and built an interpretive community through their viewing practices. Their work, I can certainly contend, expands the scope of

Reception Studies by encouraging research to view inter-community spectatorship practices as a form of grassroots cultural authorship.

This kind of audience labour is political. In a media environment where diasporic disabled identities are rarely centred, these viewers thus find themselves filling those interpretive gaps left by film industries. Through their responses, they produced critical perspectives, fostered collective dialogue, and imagined more inclusive futures. Their engagement was not reactive but generative and should be recognised as a creative practice of its own. These disabled diasporic viewers were not simply recipients of cultural narratives but were active participants in the broader struggle for meaningful representation.

These insights also raise important ethical questions for researchers, filmmakers, and institutions. After all, if audiences respond to and correct harmful or incomplete representations, what responsibilities should be followed for those in cultural production? The interpretive work performed by these viewers, especially those from marginalised communities, should thus not be automatically framed as empowering. While resistance and reinterpretation are significant, participants of this project also pointed to failures within the Hindi film industry to create inclusive spaces. As a result, the burden of representation remained unfairly and disproportionately carried by those already excluded.

The discussions around belonging that emerged also indicate the formation of what Werbner (2004: 899) might call diasporic publics. These interpretive communities are built through shared experiences of exclusion and efforts to reclaim narrative agency. As Ebron and Tsing (1995: 125) contend, they do not function solely within national or diasporic boundaries but are shaped through practices like co-viewing, emotional solidarity, and mutual critique. As observed in this thesis, these publics developed in reaction to the films and in response to broader structural exclusions by society and the Hindi film industry. This makes it essential to consider the collective disabled and diasporic audience groups as counterpublics, where visions of culture and representation are actively imagined and negotiated (Asen, 2000: 424).

This perspective also challenges the traditional divide between production and reception. As participants critiqued storylines, questioned decisions, and suggested different narratives, they took on roles usually associated with filmmakers and cultural consultants. Their insights were grounded in lived knowledge and carried the weight of personal and collective experience. Given this, scholars and policymakers must consider who is recognised as a contributor to cultural work. Disabled filmmakers and audiences, particularly those facing intersecting marginalisations, are active agents in media production and meaning-making. As this thesis demonstrates, they shape the representational landscape and require sustained institutional, digital, and educational support to ensure meaningful inclusion in both cultural production and its consumption. There is therefore value in formalising collaborations between filmmakers and represented bodies, transcending consultation into a realm of shared participatory authorship.

These closing remarks invite further inquiry rather than offer closure. They point toward a future where representation is negotiated through visibility and questions of power, authorship, and accountability remain. As this thesis supported, the cultural labour performed by represented and representative audiences is fundamental and must be seen as central to the creation of meaning in those conversations. This research thus contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to change how we understand disability representation while also seeking to identify how film media can become more inclusive, responsible, and just. This study further demonstrated how lived experience and critical engagement redefine cultural narratives, affirming the importance of viewing audiences as active agents of change and advocating for more collaborative and inclusive approaches to storytelling in modern Hindi films.

In closing, and with the consent of everyone recorded, I share a snapshot of the Kahaani film club project with core participants and interlocutors at the close of the 2023 South Asian Heritage Month at LBN's Stratford Library. Rather than a farewell, we offer an applause in BSL, a sign learned from our Deaf peers during our many exchanges of mutual learning about our life experiences through the modern Hindi social films screened on this project:



Figure 2 – Scene from Final Screening. Date: 05 Aug. 2023.

Throughout this research, it has been a great privilege to collaborate with participating disabled Hindi social viewers from LBN, research interlocutors, and filmmakers of diverse bodily and neurological differences. Together, we cultivated a deeper understanding of the narratives shaping our experiences with disability and formed a bond grounded in intersecting identities and reflective dialogue through our lived experience storytelling.

At its core, the act of being represented, whether onscreen or otherwise, must move past symbolism by anchoring itself away from visibility to voice, and validation. After all, if for no other reason, veracious representation matters. As we have honoured this convergence of shared insight and solidarity on this project, we ask whoever comes across this thesis to stand with us as fellow disability advocates; ready to challenge, reshape, and enrich the evolving landscape of modern Hindi social films through our structural critique.

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Lolita (1997) Dir. Adrian Lyne. France: Pathé Films.

Main Aisa Hi Hoon (2005) Dir. Harry Baweja. India: Baweja Movies and T-Series Films.

Margarita with a Straw (2014) Dir. Shonali Bose. India: Viacom18 Motion Pictures.

Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960) Dir. Ritwik Ghatak. India: Chitrakalpa.

My Name Is Khan (2010) Dir. Karan Johar. India: Dharma Productions and Red Chillies Entertainment.

Nazar Andaaz (2022) Dir. Vikrant Deshmukh. India: T-Series Films.

Peranbu (2019) Dir. Ram. India: Shree Rajalakshmi Films.

Pyare Mohan (2006) Dir. Indra Kumar. India: Ashok Thakeria.

Qala (2022) Dir. Anvita Dutt. India: Clean Slate Filmz.

Raja Harishchandra (1913) Dir. Dadasaheb Phalke. India: Phalke Films Company.

Saban's Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (1993-present) Dir. Haim Saban and Shuki Levy. US: Saban Entertainment.

Salaam Venky (2022) Dir. Revathi. India: Connekkt Media, Blive Productions and RTake Studios.

Schindler's List (1993) Dir. Steven Spielberg. US: Universal Pictures and Amblin Entertainment.

Sholay (1975) Dir. Ramesh Sippy. India: Sippy Films.

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Taare Zameen Par (2007) Dir. Aamir Khan. India: Aamir Khan Productions.

The Exorcist (1973) Dir. William Friedkin. US: Hoya Productions.

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11.2. Regulatory Materials:

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UK Public General Acts (2010, c. 15) *Equality Act*. King's Printer of Acts of Parliament: United Kingdom. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/ukpga/2010/15/>. (Accessed: 13 Sep. 2024).

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11.3. Appendix I: Project and Ethics Approval.



PROJECT APPROVAL Reviewer Form

To complete this form, you should have received:

- **Project Approval** form completed by the candidate
- **Project Approval Supervisor Pre-submission checklist** completed by the supervisor(s)

Please refer to the **Project Approval Guidance Notes** for further information. Feedback should be given within 20 days of submission.

Candidate Student Number:	[REDACTED]					
Candidate's Name:	Krishan Anil Chadha					
Date Project Approval Form Submitted:	15 December 2022					
Supervisor Name:	Abigail Gardner					
School:	Media					
Degree:	☐ MA/MSc	☐ MRes	☐ MPhil	☒ PhD	☐ Prof Doc	☐ Euro Doc

(Note: Place the cursor on the box and double click.)

Reviewer Name:	Kirsten Adkins

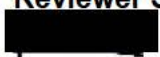
REVIEWER EVALUATION OF PROJECT APPROVAL FORM			
	Reviewer to complete		
	Yes	No	Details of action required (Provide further explanations if required)
Is the title appropriate for the project as currently conceived?	☒	☐	
Has the supervisor highlighted any budgetary implications?	☒	☐	N/A
Do you agree with the assessment of the supervisor in the pre-submission checklist?	☒	☐	
<i>If no, please detail below against the form section the action that the student must take to address your concerns</i>			
	Details of action required		
PROPOSED PLAN OF WORK	<u>No action required</u>		
Aim/purpose of the research			
Research objectives			
Importance and originality of the research			
Proposed research methods			

BIBLIOGRAPHY	
RESEARCH ETHICS	
If ethical approval for the project is required, but not yet received, the PAF cannot be approved.	
ADDITIONAL COMMENTS	
This is a compelling and important research proposal which demonstrates the candidate's thorough grasp of the subject. The proposal also offers a strong contribution to knowledge, a sensitive insight into ethics and an original methodology. The candidate has confidently established the focus of the research, building on a primary question which explores the portrayal of disability in contemporary Bollywood cinema and its implications for spectatorship, identity and identification. The participatory/ethnographic methodology is particularly compelling, as is the focus on specific groups selected for qualitative research. As the project develops, I would be interested to find out more about this focus group and how they will specifically facilitate investigations as outlined in the research questions. The candidate has clearly identified a corpus of films to analyse. I would be interested to find out how and why these were selected and the method for analysis of the films themselves, which I am sure will also come through as the project develops. I am particularly fascinated with the well-considered methodological approach, which has the potential to also add new knowledge and insights into new ways of approaching the academic discipline of spectatorship.	

The PROJECT APPROVAL FORM should be:			Amendment deadline
	Approved as is at first submission	☒	
Resubmission	Subjected to minor amendment	☐	
	Subjected to major amendment	☐	
	Rejected	☐	

If minor or major amendments are required, the student must respond to the feedback given in the assessment of the Project Approval form in the following sections. Your feedback should be written to provide the student with clear guidance on how to proceed.

If a reject recommendation is offered, the student will require feedback on the significant points of failure for their proposal.

Reviewer Signature: 	Date: 15/12/2022

- For minor or major amendments, please forward to candidate (copied to supervisors) for action.
- For approve and reject recommendations please send form to PGR Lead.

PGR Lead Signature: 	Date: 16/12/2022

Via email

Krishan Chadha

krishanchadha@gloucestershire.ac.uk

12/10/22

Dr Emily Ryall
Research Ethics Committee Chair
Reader in Applied Philosophy

Oxstalls Campus,
Longlevens, Gloucester, GL2 9HW

Tel: +44 (0)1242 715237

Email: em.ryall@gloucestershire.ac.uk

Dear Krishan

Thank you for your recent application for ethical approval.

I am pleased to confirm ethical clearance for your research following ethical review by the University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee's fast track Panel (REC Panel).

Please keep a record of this letter as a confirmation of your ethical approval.

Project Title: 'Mixed Dis/ability representations: UK Disabled South Asians engagement with contemporary Bollywood cinema.'

Start Date: 31/08/22

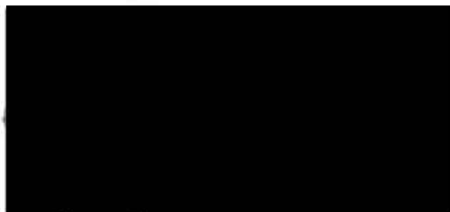
Projected Completion Date: 28/02/25

REC Approval Code: REC.22.110.10

If you have any questions about ethical clearance please feel free to contact me. Please use your REC Approval Code in any future correspondence regarding this study.

Good luck with your research project.

Regards,



Dr Emily Ryall

Chair of Research Ethics Committee



11.4. Appendix II: General Risk and Participant Information.



GENERAL RISK ASSESSMENT

Name:	Samantha Ulysses
Location:	Room 2 – East Ham library, 328 Barking Road, East Ham, E6 2RT.
Event:	Kahaani Film Club
Date:	06/05/2023- 08/07/2023

Likelihood of harm (L)	5	M	M	H	H	H
	4	M	M	M	H	H
	3	L	M	M	M	H
	2	L	L	M	M	M
	1	L	L	L	M	M
	0	1	2	3	4	5

Severity(S)

Matrix Key:	Severity (S)	1. Negligible	2. Minor	3. Major	4. Death	5. Mass Death
	Harm Likelihood (L)	1. Improbable	2. Possible	3. Occasional	4. Frequent	5. Certainty

No.	Hazard Description	Persons Affected	Risk Consequence	Current Controls	S	L	Risk Rating
1	Manual Handling (furniture)	Staff, Facilitators	Muscular pain, strain, sprains, fractures	Manual handling training; carry max 2 chairs; unlock table wheels; report faulty furniture.	2	2	L
2	Electrical	Staff, Facilitators, Public	Electric shock, burns, loss of consciousness	Covered sockets; PAT tested equipment; report faults; keep liquids away; secure cables/mats; facilitator has backup HDMI.	3	2	M
3	Fire	Staff, Facilitators, Public	Smoke inhalation, burns	Staff informed of evacuation; facilitator shows exits/alerts participants; clear fire exits.	3	2	M
4	Anti-social Behaviour	Staff, Facilitators, Public	Damage to persons/property	Code of conduct (breach = removal, police contact); ground rules reminded; invitation-only event; report concerns.	4	2	M
5	Theft	Staff, Facilitators, Public	Theft to persons/property	Code of conduct (breach = removal, police contact); ground rules reminded; advise police contact/CCTV review.	2	2	L
6	Overcrowding	Staff, Facilitators, Public	Impaired safe evacuation	Space for wheelchair users; facilitators aware of access needs and plan evacuation.	3	1	L
7	Safeguarding	Staff, Facilitators, Public	(See attached guidance)	Site & facilitator safeguarding policies adhered to; participant needs known & managed; Facilitator DSO: Krishan Anil Chadha (07448416671).	3	2	M
8	Allergies	Staff, Facilitators, Public	Allergic reactions	Facilitator to clearly label food/drinks; call emergency services if reaction; First Aid (where applicable).	2	4	M

Kahaani Film Club Research Project – Participant information

You are invited to take part in a voluntary research study run by the Kahaani Film Club.

Purpose of the Study

This project explores how disabled people engage with modern Hindi films and the representations of disability within them.

What You Will Do

Survey – Complete a short questionnaire about your Hindi film viewing habits.

Film Screening and Focus Group – Watch and discuss a selected Hindi film at a film club screening, focusing on the film's themes of disability as a group.

Films We Will Watch – *Black (2005)*, *Iqbal (2005)*, *Taare Zameen Par (2007)*, *Kaminey (2009)*, *Guzaarish (2010)*, *My Name Is Khan (2010)*, *Barfi! (2012)*, *Margarita with a Straw (2014)*, *Kaabil (2017)*, plus others to be determined by you!

More details and updates: www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/news

Data and Privacy

- Your information will be kept confidential and securely stored by the Kahaani Film Club.
- Physical copies will be destroyed once uploaded to a secure SharePoint system.
- All results will be reported anonymously for the publication of a thesis.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time before December 2025.

Risks and Ethics

- Some films or discussions may affect your well-being.
- The University of Gloucestershire Research Ethics Panel approves this project.
- If you have any concerns, please contact: Dr Emily Ryall (eryall@glos.ac.uk).

Taking Part

Participation is voluntary. You must be over the age of 18 with a lived experience with disability.

If you would like to join the Kahaani Film Club research project:

1. Please read and sign the consent form.
2. Return it in person or email: info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk. Tel: 07448 416671.

Primary investigator

Krishan Anil Chadha – PhD Student. School of Creative Arts, University of Gloucestershire, Park Campus, The Park, Cheltenham, GL50 2RH.

Informed consent form

Project title:	"Hindi films representations: UK engagement with disability exclusion".		
Researcher:	Krishan Anil Chadha – Doctoral Researcher, School of Creative Arts, University of Gloucestershire, The Park, Cheltenham, GL50 2RH. Email: info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk Tel: 07448 416671		
	Do you understand you have been invited to participate in a research study?	Yes	No
	Have you read and received a copy of the attached information letter and participant debrief letter?	Yes	No
	Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?	Yes	No
	Do you understand that the research will be recorded by video, audio transcription, and by taking field notes?	Yes	No
	Do you understand that you are free to contact the researcher to take the opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
	Do you understand that you are free to refuse participation at any time, or to withdraw your data from the study by December 2025, without consequence, and at your request?	Yes	No
	Do you understand your data will be kept confidential? Do you understand who will have access to your information?	Yes	No
I wish to take part in this study: (Please complete the contact information and consent below to be contacted at a later date)			
Participant name: (appropriate adult name also, if required)			
Signature: (appropriate adult signature also, if required)			
Email Address: (appointee also, if required)			
Phone Number: (appointee also, if required)			
Date signed:			

Working Study Title: Mixed Dis/ability representations: UK Disabled South Asians engagement with contemporary Bollywood cinema

Researcher: Krishan Anil Chadha

Dear Participant,

I warmly invite you to take part in a voluntary research study exploring the experiences of disabled people engaging with contemporary Hindi films.

What to Expect:

Survey: You will begin by completing a brief 5-10-minute survey, available in paper or digital formats, about your access to and engagement with Hindi films. Paper surveys will be digitised, and physical copies securely destroyed. Digital data will be stored in compliance with GDPR. Your anonymous responses may include personal information such as age, ethnicity, gender, and disability status. You can skip any question by selecting “prefer not to answer. All data will be transferred to a secure University of Gloucestershire server and deleted by 2026.

Film Club: After the survey, you may join a film club, where we will watch and discuss films such as *Black* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *My Name Is Khan* (2010) and others listed on www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/, hosted at Newham libraries. Participation is voluntary, and you may bring family and friends. Light refreshments will be provided. Discussions may touch on sensitive topics, but ground rules will be established to promote a respectful environment. Your contributions will remain anonymous, with audio discussions transcribed and securely stored.

Focus Groups: You may also wish to participate in a focus group after each screening on how the films and your personal experiences influence views on disability. Sessions, lasting around 45 minutes, will be recorded for analysis, but no identifying information will be stored.

Accessibility: The Kahaani Committee, a group of disabled volunteer enthusiasts, will assist with hosting and accessibility arrangements. For access requirements (e.g., BSL interpretation or large-print materials), please email info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk.

Ethical Considerations: This study has been approved by the University of Gloucestershire’s ethics panel until February 2026. For concerns, contact Dr. Emily Ryall at eryall@glos.ac.uk.

Sharing Results: The findings of this research may be presented at conferences and published in academic journals. This work forms a key part of the submission for a doctoral degree at the University of Gloucestershire. Interested participants will receive copies of the thesis, and there may be future opportunities to collaborate on related projects.

To participate, please complete and return the consent form to info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk.

With thanks,

Krishan Anil Chadha

Doctoral Researcher

University of Gloucestershire.

Frequently Asked Questions:

> *What's in it for me?*

Join our film club for FREE screenings, unlimited chai and snacks, and a chance to connect with fellow film enthusiasts! You'll also be helping academic research by sharing your thoughts on the movies and how they relate to your experiences.

> *What are the risks?*

This project explores how films can evoke emotions and reflect personal experiences. We aim to prioritise your well-being and want you to feel comfortable throughout. Please know you can skip anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.

> *Will I be anonymous?*

Absolutely! Everything you share will be 100% anonymous. You can even choose a nickname if you'd like to be quoted directly in the research.

> *What is the time commitment?*

The initial survey takes about 10 minutes. Films run for 2-2.5 hours, with a break, followed by a 30-minute discussion. Lastly, there's a roughly 45-minute focus group.

> *Need accessibility options?*

No problem! We offer BSL interpretation, audio descriptions, larger print materials, and hearing aid assistance. Just let us know at info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk

> *Can I bring a friend?*

Of course! Please encourage them to contact us before December 2023 to join (must be 18+).

> *Who's behind the research?*

The University of Gloucestershire is overseeing the project. Your data is only accessible to the lead researcher (Krishan Anil Chadha) and the Kahaani Committee until it is anonymised.

> *What if I want to opt out of the study?*

You can opt out anytime. However, survey data received before December 2023 cannot be removed due to the collection methods. But rest assured, all data will remain anonymous.

> *Have more questions?*

Visit www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/ or email info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk

11.5. Appendix III: List of Contributors.

Name	Characteristics	Role	Film screening data points
Alia	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Interlocutor	Barfi!; Black; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; Taare Zameen Par; SAHM
Ananya	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Interlocutor	Barfi!; Disability Pride; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
Aamir	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Interlocutor	Barfi!; Black; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; My Name Is Khan; Taare Zameen Par
Kajol	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 70+	Interlocutor	Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; My Name Is Khan; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
Krrish	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Researcher	Barfi!; Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; Margarita with a Straw; My Name Is Khan; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
Rekha	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 50+	Interlocutor	Barfi!; Disability Pride; Iqbal; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par;
Salman	Disabled; South Asian; Male; Teen	Interlocutor	Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaabil; SAHM
Shahrukh	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Interlocutor	Barfi!; Disability Pride; Kaabil; SAHM
Sridevi	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Interlocutor	Barfi!; Disability Pride; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
Singer	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	BSL Interpreter	Barfi!; Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; Margarita with a Straw; My Name Is Khan; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
OKK	Non-Disabled; Mixed heritage; Female; 40+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride
ONK	Non-Disabled; Mixed heritage; Male; 50+	Filmmaker	SAHM
OSM	Non-Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride; SAHM
OSR	Non-Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride; SAHM
100RB	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride
10SS	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride; SAHM
45KD	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Filmmaker	SAHM
51SD	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride
60VD	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 50+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride
70AK	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride
90WW	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride; SAHM
FCMA	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride; SAHM
FCTK	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Filmmaker	Disability Pride; SAHM
AA	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Barfi!; Black; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; Margarita with a Straw; SAHM

AB	Disabled; Black; Male; 40+	Participant	Iqbal
AM	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Kaabil
AV	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	SAHM
AX	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Taare Zameen Par
BP	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Margarita with a Straw
BS	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 50+	Participant	Kaabil; Kaminey
BH	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 50+	Participant	Kaminey
CD	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Black
CI	Non-Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Participant	SAHM
CQ	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Margarita with a Straw
DK	Disabled; South Asian; Male; Teen	Participant	My Name Is Khan
DS	Disabled; South Asian; Male; Teen	Participant	Kaabil
EE	Disabled; South Asian; Non-Binary; 30+	Participant	Black; Iqbal; Kaabil; Margarita with a Straw; SAHM
EW	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Margarita with a Straw
EX	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Disability Pride; SAHM
EY	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Iqbal
FG	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Kaabil; Margarita with a Straw; My Name Is Khan
FI	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Black
FN	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 50+	Participant	Kaminey
GB	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Barfi!; Iqbal; Kaabil; Margarita with a Straw; My Name Is Khan
GT	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Kaabil; Kaminey; SAHM
GY	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Guzaarish; My Name Is Khan
HD	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Barfi! Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaminey; Margarita with a Straw; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
HS	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	My Name Is Khan
HX	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 50+	Participant	Kaabil
IC	Disabled; South Asian; Female; Teen	Participant	Iqbal; Margarita with a Straw; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par

IR	Disabled South Asian; Male; 30+	Participant	Disability Pride
JN	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 50+	Participant	Guzaarish
JQ	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Participant	My Name Is Khan
KG	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Margarita with a Straw; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
KH	Disabled; Mixed heritage; Male; 60+	Participant	Guzaarish
KL	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Black
KP	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Barfi!; Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
KY	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Barfi!; Black; Guzaarish; Iqbal; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
LF	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Barfi!
LB	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Kaabil
LW	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 50+	Participant	Iqbal
LT	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Participant	Barfi!; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
MJ	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Margarita with a Straw
MK	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Participant/ Interlocutor	Barfi!; Black; Disability Pride; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; Taare Zameen Par
ML	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Participant	Guzaarish
MN	Disabled; South Asian; Female; Teen	Participant	Guzaarish
MP	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Iqbal
MY	Disabled; South Asian; Non-Binary; 30+	Participant	Margarita with a Straw
NF	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	SAHM
NR	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Taare Zameen Par
ON	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Barfi!; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
OU	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Participant	Kaabil
OW	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Participant	Kaminey; Taare Zameen Par
PB	Disabled; South Asian; Female; Teen	Participant	Iqbal
PF	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Black
PL	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	My Name Is Khan

QA	Disabled; South Asian; Female; Teen	Participant	Margarita with a Straw
RB	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Barfi!; Black; Guzaarish; Kaabil; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
RM	Non-Disabled; South Asian; Female 40+	Participant	Taare Zameen Par
RN	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Participant	Margarita with a Straw
RT	Disabled; South Asian; Male; Teen	Participant	Black
SD	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 50+	Participant	Black
SH	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Black
SU	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Barfi!; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Iqbal; Kaabil; Kaminey; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
TB	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Kaabil; My Name Is Khan; SAHM
TC	Non-Disabled; White; Female; 30+	Participant	My Name Is Khan
TJ	Non-Disabled; South Asian; Female; 50+	Participant	My Name Is Khan
TX	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Kaabil
UA	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Barfi!; Black
UD	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Barfi!
UV	Disabled; South Asian; Female; Teen	Participant	Iqbal; My Name Is Khan
VB	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 40+	Participant	Taare Zameen Par
VT	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Guzaarish; Iqbal; Taare Zameen Par
VV	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Participant	Guzaarish; Kaabil, Iqbal; SAHM; My Name Is Khan
WG	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Kaabil; Iqbal; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
WU	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Participant	Guzaarish; Kaabil; Kaminey; My Name Is Khan; Taare Zameen Par
YP	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 20+	Participant	Kaabil
ZK	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 30+	Participant	Barfi!; Disability Pride
ZM	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 40+	Participant	Guzaarish
ZR	Disabled; South Asian; Male; Teen	Participant	Iqbal; SAHM
ZS	Disabled; South Asian; Female; 20+	Participant	Black; Disability Pride; Guzaarish; Kaabil; My Name Is Khan; SAHM; Taare Zameen Par
ZY	Disabled; South Asian; Male; 30+	Participant	Kaminey

11.6. Appendix IV: Viewership Survey.

Bollywood film survey (Paper version)

This survey is part of an audience research project and should take 5 to 10 minutes to complete. Your answers will be treated with confidentiality and will remain anonymous. The purpose of this survey is to understand how people who identify as disabled find, access, and value contemporary Hindi films, and what motivates them to do so. The survey also aims to gather information about movie preferences, watching habits, and any challenges in accessing content, as well as any film recommendations.

1. Age?

- ☐ 18–24
- ☐ 25–34
- ☐ 35–44
- ☐ 45–54
- ☐ 54+
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

2. Gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non–binary
- ☐ Trans
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other _____

3. Ethnicity?

- ☐ Asian/ Asian British
- ☐ Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British
- ☐ Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups
- ☐ White/ White British
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other _____

4. Disability status? (multiple options – if applicable)

- ☐ d/Deaf
- ☐ Disabled
- ☐ Long–Term Physical or Mental Health Condition
- ☐ Neurodivergent
- ☐ Non–disabled
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other _____

5. Hindi film fan?

- ☐ Yes, watch regularly
- ☐ Yes, somewhat
- ☐ No

6. How do you usually find out about new Hindi films?

7. Where do you usually watch recent Hindi film titles?

(multiple options – if applicable)

- ☐ Cinema
- ☐ DVD or Blu-ray
- ☐ Film clubs or festivals
- ☐ 'OTT' streaming sites like Netflix or Amazon
- ☐ Torrent or websites
- ☐ Other _____

8. What factors help you decide on the type of Hindi film you watch?

(multiple options – if applicable)

- ☐ Actors involved
- ☐ Directors or production houses involved
- ☐ Genre
- ☐ Recommendations
- ☐ Someone else decides
- ☐ Subtitling options
- ☐ Other _____

9. In terms of genre, how would you describe the Hindi films you enjoy?

(multiple options – if applicable)

- ☐ Romantic comedies
- ☐ Thrillers
- ☐ Action films
- ☐ Social dramas
- ☐ Coming-of-age films
- ☐ Other _____

10. Do you watch Hindi films that spotlight disabled characters? If so, what do you enjoy about these films?

11. Any challenges you face in finding or accessing recent Hindi films?

12. Are there any recent Hindi film titles with disabled characters you have watched that you would recommend to others, and why?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your information will be kept in the strictest of confidence. If you would like to join our audience research project, The Kahaani Film Club opens in Spring 2023 to disabled people who have a passion for Hindi films. Please visit www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/ to find out more.

End of survey

****The digital survey accessible until end of 2025 <http://www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk/survey/>.**

11.7. Appendix V: Fieldwork Posters.



KAHAANI FILM CLUB

www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk

scan me

London Borough of Newham

EAST HAM

COMMUNITY NEIGHBOURHOOD

Film club host

- Bollywood fan?
- D/deaf, Disabled, Neurodivergent, and/or SEND?

Fancy joining our film club project in East Ham Library each Saturday starting in May 2023, where we watch Bollywood films featuring disabled characters and talk about how the characters are portrayed? Book tickets or find out more at: kahaanifilmclub.co.uk E: info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk WhatsApp: [07448416671](https://wa.me/07448416671)

Please ask library staff for a consent form or download from the website.

Location: East Ham Library, 328 Barking Rd, London E6 2RT.

Upcoming films:

 Barfi!  06 May 2023 @ 12–3pm	 Black  13 May 2023 @ 12–3pm	 Guzaarish  20 May 2023 @ 12–3pm
 Iqbal  27 May 2023 @ 12–3pm	 Kaabil  10 June 2023 @ 12–3pm	 My name is Khan  17 June 2023 @ 12–3pm
 Taare Zameen Par  24 June 2023 @ 12–3pm	 Margarita with a straw  01 July 2023 @ 12–3pm	 Kaminey  08 July 2023 @ 12–3pm





KAHAANI FILM CLUB

www.kahaanifilmclub.co.uk

scan me



Film club host

- Short film fan?

Kahaani Film Club is proud to be working with Newham South Asian Heritage Month on a film club project at Stratford Library to raise awareness of disability within the South Asian community. Book tickets or find out more at:

kahaanifilmclub.co.uk E: info@kahaanifilmclub.co.uk WhatsApp: 07448416671

Upcoming films:



Fruit Chaat @ 1:30pm | 29 July 2023



Wheels @ 2:15pm | 29 July 2023



Incredible Insight: The story of his ability @ 3:15pm | 29 July 2023



Double Discrimination @ 12pm | 05 August 2023

Location: Stratford Library, 3 The Grove, London E15 1EL.

Please speak to library staff or visit our website for more info.



11.8. Appendix VI: University Author Consent Form for a Research Thesis



UNIVERSITY AUTHOR CONSENT FORM FOR A RESEARCH THESIS

This form must be submitted along with the final version of the thesis.

I confirm that I have read and understood the University's regulations and procedures concerning the submission of a thesis (as summarised below) and have submitted the following items in order to fulfil my requirements for graduation from the University of Gloucestershire:

Author's Name: Krishan Anil Chadha

Title of Thesis: Disability Representations in the Modern Hindi Social Film Genre: Advocacy and Engagement in the London Borough of Newham.

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

School: School of Arts, Culture and Environment

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I understand that requests made by any individual or organisation to the University Library to borrow my thesis will be referred to the University's Research Repository or Electronic Thesis Online Service (EThOS).

I understand that the library will add the following notice to the final version of my thesis:

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Rights granted through this agreement are entirely non-exclusive. I am free to publish the Thesis in its present version or future versions elsewhere and I agree that the University's Research Repository administrators may, without changing content, translate the Thesis to any medium or format for the purpose of future preservation and accessibility.

I understand that work deposited in the University's Research Repository and EThOS will be accessible via the World Wide Web. I understand that once the Thesis is deposited, a citation will always remain visible. Removal of the item is usually only possible for legal reasons.

I understand that as a consequence of depositing the Thesis in the University's Research Repository an electronic copy will be included in ETHOS. In doing so I understand that work deposited in ETHOS repository will be accessible via the Internet. ETHOS, or its agents, may without changing content, translate the Thesis to any medium or format for the purpose of future preservation and accessibility.

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Your thesis will normally be included in the University's Research Repository and ETHOS unless you impose an **Embargo** (maximum of 2 years from the date of the viva voce examination). During the embargo period, your thesis will be withheld from inclusion in ETHOS and no consultation, loan or copying of it will be possible.

Permission to impose an embargo of more than 2 years can only be granted by the Chair of the Research Degrees Committee and is usually applicable only in exceptional circumstances, e.g., when your thesis contains sensitive material.

Please note: Once the embargo period has expired, work will be included in the University's Research Repository and ETHOS. If you require an extension to the embargo period please apply to the Chair of the Research Degrees Committee before the current embargo has expired.

I AGREE AS FOLLOWS:

- That I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the Thesis is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge break any UK law or infringe any third party's copyright or other Intellectual Property Right
- The administrators of the University's Research Repository do not hold any obligation to take legal action on behalf of the Depositor, or other rights holders, in the event of a breach of intellectual property rights, or any other right, in the material deposited
- I have consulted with my supervisor, any co-supervisors and any commercial sponsors regarding the requirement for an embargo (please see notes above) and we agree as follows:

☒ No embargo is required

☐ An embargo is required for a period of _____ years (max 2 yrs)

Reason/s for embargo (must comply with one or more exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 Part II, sections 22-44). http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/pdfs/ukpga_20000036_en.pdf

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Signature:

[REDACTED]

Name (Block capitals): KRISHAN ANIL CHADHA

Student number:

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krishanchadha@

[REDACTED]

Phone:

[REDACTED]

Date:

26/01/2026

END OF THESIS