

***Rautu ka Raaz: An Attempt at Normalising Disability***

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### **Abstract**

Recent research on disabilities has been crucial to critical examinations of the human body and psyche. Beyond the field of medicine, disability and the disabled ‘body’ are difficulties that might give rise to identity issues or pose challenges to the idea of body identity. The field of disability studies is a young one, having outgrown its original definition and focus in relation to medicine. The study gained significant traction in the 1980s and 1990s, but it was first introduced in Europe and America in the 1960s.

A limitation in participation is a barrier any disabled individual finds when engaging in life’s activities; a constraint to activity is an issue an individual encounters while performing an action; and a disability is any sort of obstacle linked to the structure or operation of the body. Physical disabilities, which are related to the body, can coexist with mental, neurological and psychological conditions, which include dyslexia, Asperger’s syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, amnesia, and others.

The present paper is an attempt to understand visual disability as portrayed in the movie *Rautu ka Raaz* (Surapur 2024).

**Keywords:** *disability, visual impairment, portrayal of disability, inclusion, Rautu ka Raaz.*

## ***Rautu ka Raaz: An Attempt at Normalising Disability***

### **Introduction**

Recent disability studies have played a significant role in critical studies of the human body and mind. Disability and the disabled 'body' are issues that extend beyond the realm of medicine and have the potential to raise concerns about identity or provide challenges to the concept of body identity. The area of disability studies is one that is currently developing and has expanded from its initial scope and meaning related to medicine. The study first appeared in Europe and America in the 1960s, but it began to gain traction in the 1980s and 1990s. Disability studies are interpreted by various researchers through diverse angles.

An overview of disability as defined by the World Health Organization is "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (*Disability* n.d.). The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 defines disability "as any one of seven general categories, including *low vision, mental illness, blindness, hearing impairment, and locomotor disabilities*. Mental illness is defined as any mental disorder other than mental retardation, while mental retardation is defined as a condition of arrested or incomplete mental development in a person, particularly characterized by subnormal intelligence" (Persons with Disabilities Act 1995).

"Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (United Nations 2006).

Thus, a disability is any form of impediment relating to the structure or operation of the body; a constraint to activity is a problem an individual faces while carrying out a task; and a limitation in participation is a barrier an individual encounters when participating in activities in life. Disability can be physical as well as mental, neurological or psychological. Physical

disabilities have been mentioned above whereas mental, neurological and psychological disabilities include dyslexia, Asperger's syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, amnesia, etc.

### **Literature Review**

According to Kanter: "It is now well accepted that Disability Studies has emerged as a new and exciting field of academic inquiry. Disability Studies applies social, cultural, historical, legal, philosophical and humanities perspectives to understanding the place of disability in society. It explores disability as a social and cultural construct and as a phenomenon reflecting and constituting identity formation by incorporating the 'real-lived' experiences of people with disabilities. Furthermore, Disability Studies adopts a cross-disability perspective and explores differences and commonalities in the experiences of the diverse groups of people society have defined as 'the other' based on their disability" (Kanter 2011: 404).

A disabled body is a trapped or marginalised place that the 'able-body' is juxtaposed against in both culture and politics. Simi Linton writes: "As rendered in disability studies scholarship, disability has become a more capacious category, incorporating people with a range of physical, emotional, sensory, and cognitive conditions. Although the category is broad, the term is used to designate a specific minority group" (Linton 1998: 12).

Disability studies are interconnected with other social and critical concerns, such as gender, race, class, caste (in the Indian context), as a result of this exclusion. Different countries and cultures depict disabilities in different ways, yet they always include the subtext of discrimination or the 'other/ third space.' Even though there are many similarities between this minority group and other oppressed communities, the differences are significant. It might be argued that the existence of a disability-specific language, shared by a specific marginalised group, has created a bigger risk to the 'normative' framework of the society. An important example of this is the use of sign language by those who cannot hear or speak. This is a uniquely

different language, which has held its position compared to the varied linguistic distinctions of the speaking-hearing communities.

Historically, people with disabilities have always been perceived negatively and/ or as agents of evil. Since the classical era, disability has been represented in several artistic fields bearing the same unfavourable implication. Disability has historically been seen as a type of abnormality or anomaly, and a clear division was made between what was primarily considered to be 'normal' and 'normalcy.' Gartner states: "Just as whites have imposed their images upon blacks, and men upon women, people without disabilities have imposed their image upon people who are disabled. These images have told us not only what is beautiful and right; they have also warned us that the image of disability is ugly and evil" (Gartner 1984: 3).

In the Indian context, a popular belief/ superstition is that disability is the consequence of bad *karmas* of a past life and any disability, in whichever form, is the manifestation of those *karmas*. "... the ancient Hindu text ... *Manusmriti* states that the disability is the suffering for punishment of the crime which the person has committed in the previous life" (Kaur and Arora 2019).

"Disability as punishment in Hindu mythology is not solely related to individual's sins in current birth — a disability can also be 'deservedly' acquired in the womb or in the previous incarnations. Thus *Ashtavarka* [mentioned in *Advaita Vedanta*] 'deserved' his disability from his scholarly vanity as a foetus and *Ajamukhi's* fate as a goat-faced woman came from her sins as the lustful beauty *Chitrlekha* in a previous birth. In *Surupnakha's* case, she is reborn as *Kubja*, a penitent hunchback" (Pal 2013: 113). *Manthara*, in *The Ramayana*, is a hunch-back, who is responsible for poisoning *Kaikeyi's* mind and sending *Rama* to an exile of 14 years. "Her hunch is the externalization of her twisted mind and hence the traditional view of her as a crooked person" is portrayed very effectively by *Valmiki* (Rangan 1985). In *The Mahabharata*, *Shakuni*, *Kauravas'* maternal uncle, walks with a limp and plays an important

role in poisoning *Duryodhana's* mind, adding fuel to the fire of ambition that is ignited by his father *Dhritrashtra* (Mani 1975). Both *Manthara* and *Shakuni* are looked down upon and considered to have an evil streak in them.

Disability has often been portrayed as a barrier, as a confinement that depends on the non-handicapped body to survive. It presents itself as a missing component of the body; it has no distinct identity of its own. Incapacity has representation in visual culture and the media, but the portrayal is frequently a discourse of sympathy or as an antithesis to its counterpart who is physically 'able.' The portrayal is frequently very far from reality. The disabled is transformed from an individual to an object — a target of dread, vulnerability, sympathy, derision. Such portrayal actually excludes the disabled. This dehumanisation links disability with important concerns of sexuality, gender and race. Disability, thus, can be thought of as a highly treacherous term that connects with various areas and adopts several personas. Disability has, in fact, been represented throughout history in a wide range of artistic mediums, most notably painting, theater, and film. Nonetheless, disability has always been portrayed as a deplorable condition and as something repulsive in all genres of art. People with disabilities are typically marginalised members of society who do not have the right to marry, work, or receive an education. Disability-related stereotypes have also been popularised in films, such as the idea that those with disabilities are helpless and need others to provide for their fundamental needs, that they possess a sixth sense, or that they are occasionally compared to angels.

### **Disability in Hindi Movies**

The movie theater is an effective way for attracting big audiences. In many respects, cinema is a reflection of life. Despite being torn between reality and fiction, entertainment has a vital role in enlightening the public, changing the views and actions of individuals and providing amusement. Cinema has been especially successful in altering the perceptions of

people and dismantling societal prejudices because it changes how a person perceives society. Consequently, the movie theater, as a potent mass communication tool, ought to assume some accountability. Since it is a portrayal of society, it ought to exercise caution while presenting specific demographics as “mass media has a strong impact on how people imagine disability” (Cumberland and Negrine 1992; Norden 1994). Traditional representations of disability in Hindi cinema often revolve around destitution and begging. Such depictions in film have drawn criticism over time. It has consistently fuelled societal misconceptions about violence, emotion and love. Disability is always employed as a plot device to create comedic episodes and/ or to evoke feelings of empathy and angst. Kannan and Batra quote Mohipatra (Mohipatra 2012): “... the imagery surrounding disability in films swings between these two extremes – pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, lampooning and awesome heroism are at one end of the spectrum while discrimination, coping-up, emotional swings and aspirations of the human soul are at the other end. And the world over, cinema has either been charitable towards people with disabilities, pitying or laughing at them or portraying their concerns with real sensitivity” (Kannan and Batra 2015).

Taking these opinions into account, we can conclude that, while analysing the conventional representation of disability in Hindi cinema, the very nature of disability in Hindi cinema is “either punishment or dependence” (Pal 2012). A thematic analysis of the concept from the outset of the interaction between Hindi film and disability would demonstrate not only societal attitudes regarding the particular idea but also the perspectives of the ‘non-disabled’ regarding disability. When examining how society is changing in its perception of the handicapped, specifically regarding the movies, Morris explains: “Disability in film has become a metaphor for the message that the non-disabled writer wishes to get across in the same way that beauty is used. In doing this, movie makers draw on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people, knowing that to portray a character with

humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience. Unfortunately, the more disability is used as a metaphor for evil or just to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed” (Morris 1991).

Portrayals of the disabled are unreal and distant from reality. It is difficult to locate a Hindi movie that addresses disability with the appropriate empathy and sensitivity. The fact that non-disabled performers portray disabled persons is also an issue in our industry. The belief that people with disabilities cannot act or work in the industry prevents filmmakers from casting handicapped people as disabled characters. Robert Mccrue places disability in its historical perspective, contending that the system of forced heterosexuality, which creates queerness, is a replication of the system of forced able-bodiedness, which creates disability in a genuine manner. “Compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa” (Mccrue 2013). A film maker is apprehensive of using a disabled person to portray a disabled character. She/ he are anxious that the disabled might not be able to do justice to the role. It is ironical that the director does not have faith in the disabled to present a disabled on screen. Such a stereotypical attitude results in less authentic movies about the disabled and their disabilities.

### ***Rautu ka Raaz***

*Rautu ka Raaz*, released on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2024 on Zee 5, comes as a refreshing change. *Rautu ki Beli*, a sleepy village in the *Garhwal* area of *Uttarakhand*, wakes up to the death of Sangeeta (Narayani Shastri). She is the warden of *Sewadham*, a school for the visually impaired. What appears to be an ordinary case of a heart attack turns into a murder mystery after the post-mortem report raises suspicions.

‘... *waise bhi 15 saalon mein Rautu ki Beli mein koi murder huya hai kya ?* (... In any case, has there been any murder in *Rautu ki Beli* for the past 15 years?)’, asks Constable Dinesh Pant (Vicky Dutt).



‘*Body to le hi ja rahein hain hum post-mortem ke liye* (we are taking the body for post-mortem)’, Dimri [Rajesh Kumar] tells the Principal.

As they come out of the warden’s room, Negi tells Dimri: ‘*Body ko post-mortem ke liye bhej kar de na yaar tera kya ja raha hai?* (Send the body for post-mortem. What do you have to lose?)’.

The police personnel, however, are not used to investigating. They are as laid back as the village and its residents. The post-mortem report elicits an honest response from Dimri, with an abusive epithet.

‘*Kaam badh gaya* (Sh\*\*, work has increased)’.

Nevertheless, Negi (Nawazzudin Siddiqui), who suffers from insomnia and PTSD, sets to work. Everyone comes under suspicion; the school trustee Manoj Kesari (Atul Tiwari), Manoj Kesari’s son Tanmay, Ashraf Jaani (Nitinn Rana), Gobind, who tries to rape a blind girl (Parimal Alope) and, Principal Vishwanath Kumai (Kailash Kandwal). The murder gives Negi a purpose and it is up to him to solve the intrigue behind the death and catch the culprit.

Negi questions Ashraf Jaani in the police station.

‘*Jameen ke liye Kesari ko patane gaya tha. Wahan uske saath uski wo item bhi thi* (I had gone to convince Kesari to sell the school land. His **item**/ woman was with him)’, says Ashraf.

‘Mind your language. *Ladies ke baree mein is tarah baat karte ho?* (How can you talk like this about women?)’. Negi is not only intelligent but has a lot of respect for women.

Like the hamlet, the police work to solve the murder at their own pace. They make queries, get the call logs of the suspects, interview (Ashraf Jaani, Manoj Kesari, Govind), nab the rapist and keep a close watch on the suspects, without the usual violence and chase sequences of other murder mysteries. A suspect sneaks out of the back door and is caught by

Negi. There is no car toppling/ car burning, waving of sophisticated weaponry aka Rohit Shetty style. The scene is simple yet brilliant and its unique flavour cannot be missed.

Co-writer Shariq Patel and director Anand Surapur create a story that is strong in its straightforwardness. The purposefully sluggish tone creates a slow-paced environment that gives the impression of the investigation being drawn out and occasionally disorganised. This strategy, nevertheless, also draws viewers into the daily activities of the small community, where everyone appears innocent save for a few clear suspects. The film's attraction is its capacity to hold the attention of the audience until the very end when the truth is ultimately exposed.

Visually impaired students are also a part of the story line. They study, climb stairs, play cricket, learn music, practice judo moves, read braille without any problems and stand by silently while the investigation is going on. Even though the facilities in *Sewadham* are limited, these visually impaired students are trained well. The desire to learn drives them. Rajat (Pratham Rathod) and Diya (Drishti Gaba) are friends and everything about their lives — from their abilities to their hardships — hits a deep emotional connection. The tales of Rajat and Diya are intriguingly interwoven into the drama, giving the location and background more nuance. Rajat's poetry, his motivational speeches and Diya's desire to sacrifice her studies for her friend are painfully humane.

*'Bahut tej hai wo aur ajeeb bhi hai* (He [Negi] is sharp and weird)'. *'Deepak Negi sab pata kar lega* (Deepak Negi will find out everything)', two village men, acting as chorus, continue to repeat after every major scene.

Rajesh Kumar portrays the ideal supporting role. His Dimri is not just a mindless acolyte. He exudes the awkwardness of the character. He does not even try to be funny. He handles his juniors with the same mocking attitude as Negi treats him in a sequential fashion. Just one more cog in the system of power.

The magnificent mountains and forests that surround the small village add to the ambience of the movie. Sayak Bhattacharya's cinematography is particularly noteworthy since it captures the scenic beauty of the region while retaining a persistent air of discomfort. The plot is interesting and moves through at a slow yet engrossing pace. One of the highlights of the film is the outstanding performance of Siddiqui mixed with the striking aesthetic appeal of the movie.

The movie also has moments that are radiant, such as when Negi closes his eyes and tries to descend the stairs after seeing a child with vision impairment sprint up them or when he and a blind school student debate the meaning of a painting.

*'Sir, kya aap painting dekh rahe hain? (Sir, are you looking at the painting?)'*.

*'Haan, lekin ... (Yes, but ...)'*.

*'Sir, kya aapko samajh mein aayi? (Sir, have you been able to understand it?)'*.

*'Nahin (No)'*.

*'Mujhe bhi nahin aayi (Even I have not understood it)'*.

*'Sir, aap aise kya dekh rahe hain? (Sir, what are you looking at?)'*.

The interactions between Negi and the impaired students, especially Rajat and Diya, are shown normally, without invoking any feelings of pity or sympathy.

During the interrogation, Gobind says:

*'Saab, Galti ho gayi ... Main to us ladki ke andhi hone ka faayda utha raha tha ... main us roz night duty pe tha ... maine thodi budki laga rakhi thi ... to thoda saroor aa gaya tha (Sir, I made a mistake ... I was trying to take advantage of her blindness ... I was on night duty that night ... I had had a few drinks ... I was a bit high)'*.

*'Saroor? (Intoxication?)'*, asks Negi.

*'Chadh gayi thi (He was drunk)'*, says Dimri.

*‘Wahin udhar pe ladkiyon wali toilet hai, Saab, to main uska wo moonh daba ke usse andar le ke gaya, Saab, lekin mere kuchh karne se pehle hi wo fisal ke gir gayi, Saab, aur behosh ho gayi thi, Saab. Aur jab main bahar aane laga to wo zor se cheekh padi, Saab. To wahan baaju mein wo madam rehti hai warden madam. Uski cheekh sun ke wo bahar aa gayi. Usne mujhe toilet se bahar nikalte dekh liya ... meri koi galti nahin hai, Saab. Wo ladki akele ja rahi thi* (There is a girls’ toilet, Sir, I put my hand on her mouth, took her inside, Sir, but, before I could do anything, she slipped and lost consciousness, Sir. And, as I was coming out, she screamed loudly. So, nearby that Madam lives, Warden Madam. She heard her scream and came out. She saw me coming out of the toilet ... It is not my fault, Sir. That girl was going alone.)

The camera changes angle. Facial expressions of Negi and Dimri are captured. Words are not required to convey their disgust.

*‘To, to usko jaana nahin chahiye tha? Tu kaun? Kaun hai tu decide karne wala? Sarkar hai? Collector hai? Tu kaun hai? Tu batayega ki ladki ko kis time niklna chahiye kis time nahin?* (Then, then, she should not have gone? Who are you? Who are you to decide? Are you the government? Are you the Collector? Who are you? You will decide when a girl should go out and when not?).’

Despite having only one song, *Rautu* has a distinct musical quality that permeates every scene. It is like a *ghazal* beside the hearth late at night. It can easily be addressed as *Rautu ka Saaz*.

It is a murder mystery that moves slowly. The movie maintains its tense mood throughout, drawing viewers in as the mystery is revealed and it manages to keep the audiences interested all the way to the very end. It is an appreciative attempt at the mystery genre and a welcome diversion from the typical Bollywood fare. The movie includes every necessary component that makes a thriller. But the viewers do not, even for a second, sense that it is an

overdose. It is difficult to combine humorous elements to make terrible issues, such as child abuse and murder, less morbid while still being sensitive. Yet, the movie tackles both with good direction. This is a movie that makes the audiences think about the complexity of human nature while keeping them interested.

This film stands out for its novel take in a time when originality in Bollywood films is scarce. It checks all the criteria for a great Hindi movie and could have easily become a smash hit in theaters even with its lack of action. This film serves as evidence that, less truly, is more.

### **Conclusion**

The director advocates the belief that including disabled individuals in the film-making process will enhance the genuineness of their depiction of disability. Very often the representation is far removed from reality but by employing visually impaired students, the film lends authenticity to the plot. The impairment is not used as a means of ridicule or comic relief. The decision of the director to stay true to the original and preserve reality is its greatest feature. In order to give it a unique feel that appeals to the general public, the creators have focussed on elevating the regional customs and beliefs. For example, there is no scientific apparatus that arises out of nowhere to make SHO Deepak Negi's job easier when he begins connecting the dots — literally — to investigate the murder. The movie depicts how small police departments must make do with the resources at their disposal. Every element — the scenic settings, characters, acting, real-life visually impaired students, a trustee, who wants to keep the school to educate the visually impaired, the suspects, and the final solution of the murder mystery — works towards making *Rautu ka Raaz* a very likeable and watchable movie as it is a breath of fresh air in times of violence, sex, abusive language and equally abusive relationships. The students are treated with utmost respect and compassion, an aspect unseen in Hindi movies of earlier decades. The trend has to continue if the disabled have to be shown any sense of equality and inclusion. It is important to understand that every disabled person is

not evil-minded like *Manthra* and *Shakuni*. The Census gives numbers for the disabled but these numbers can significantly decrease if the society, at large, begins to work pro-actively towards them.

Very often the representation is far removed from reality

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