



# Unveiling Vulnerabilities: Echoes of Childhood Trauma and Disability in Indian Popular Cinema

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**Abstract:** *Disability and childhood trauma are important parts of the human experience that affect people's lives and how society views them. These topics have frequently been depicted in Indian cinema, a potent means of cultural expression that reflects the intricacies and difficulties that people in society experience (Deo 45). The representation of childhood trauma and disability in Indian cinema is briefly examined in this study, with an emphasis on major themes, cinematic devices, and sociocultural ramifications. The paper intends to investigate how childhood trauma and disability are portrayed, investigating how these themes interact and influence cinematic narratives. The study examines narrative devices and recurrent themes used in the portrayal of childhood trauma and disability, such as themes of societal acceptance, stigma, and perseverance. The paper identifies recurring motifs and narrative tropes employed in the depiction of childhood trauma and disability, including themes of resilience, stigma, and societal acceptance in films like Tare Zammen Per, My Name is Khan, Black, Barfi, Paa, etc.*

*The paper examines the role of Indian cinema in both challenging and perpetuating stereotypes surrounding trauma and disability, considering the impact of cinematic representation on public perceptions and policy discourse. It also explores the intersection of childhood trauma and disability representation in Indian cinema, offering insights into the complexities of storytelling, cultural identity, and social change within the cinematic landscape.*

**Key Words:** *Childhood trauma, disability, cinema, resilience, identity.*

Childhood trauma refers to experiences that are emotionally distressing or disturbing and occur during a person's formative years, typically before the age of eighteen. Numerous factors can cause childhood trauma, such as marital violence, sexual abuse, mental or psychological abuse, physical abuse, loss or separation, communal violence, social problems, and relationship problems (Morin). These events may have a significant and enduring effect on a person's physical, mental, and emotional health. When a caregiver or other authority person intentionally hurts a child, that is considered physical abuse. It can involve any kind of violence, such as burning, beating, punching, kicking, or other actions.

Sexual abuse involves any form of sexual activity or behaviour imposed on a child without their consent (Faller 9). This can include molestation, rape, incest, exploitation, or exposure to sexual content. Since emotional abuse involves behaviours that harm a child's self-esteem, emotional well-being, and psychological development, it can include verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, rejection, or constant criticism (Finkelhor et al. 69; Manukrishnan and Bhagabati). Tony Ward and others in the book *Theories of Sexual Offending* believe that gender is the most influencing factor behind child sexual abuse. It occurs due to the patriarchal nature of society (169). Children develop negative behaviour when a caregiver fails to provide for their basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, medical care, supervision, and emotional support (Keeshin and Corwin 461). This neglect can be in any form physical, emotional, or educational. Neglect from parents may cause a feeling of emptiness in children. Observing the effects of parents' behaviour on children, Jonice Webb writes:



I have found that most emotionally neglected people who come to therapy for anxiety, depression, or family-related problems, for example, eventually express these empty feelings in some way. Typically the emptiness is chronic and has ebbed and flowed over the course of their lives. It may be difficult to imagine what would make a person feel this way. The answer lies in the emotional responses from parents during childhood.

Children who witness domestic violence from caregivers or family members can experience trauma, even if they are not directly harmed. Witnessing violence can lead to feelings of fear, helplessness, and guilt. Loss of a parent or caregiver through death, divorce, abandonment, or separation can be traumatic for children and can lead to feelings of grief, sadness, and insecurity. Exposure to violence in the community, such as gang violence, shootings, or natural disasters, can also be traumatic for children and can lead to feelings of fear, anxiety, and hyper-vigilance (Lawler and Talbot 464).

The effects of childhood trauma can vary widely from person to person and may manifest in a range of symptoms and behaviours, including emotional distress, anxiety, depression, mood swings, irritability, anger, and emotional numbness (Pynoos, et al. 351; Scarpa and Wilson 468). It can also cause behavioural issues; like aggression, impulsivity, self-destructive behavior, substance abuse, and risk-taking behavior. Childhood trauma causes cognitive impairments, difficulty in concentration, memory problems, and impaired decision-making. While going through trauma, children develop physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and other unexplained physical symptoms (Rivi et al.).

Trauma in early childhood causes difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships, social withdrawal, and isolation. Children who suffer from physical abuse at an early age may develop trust issues, thus, affecting future relationships. Ellenara Martinez writes, "Physical abuse breaks down the fundamental trust between the child and the abuser, often leading to trust difficulties in future relationships. Children can become suspicious and reluctant to trust other people" (Childhood Trauma 23). Childhood trauma can have profound and lasting effects on individuals, including impacts on their physical, emotional, and mental health in future. Jonice Webb in her book *Running on Empty: Overcome your Childhood Neglect* talks about the consequences of childhood neglect and trauma on children when they enter into adulthood. She writes:

Adults who grew up emotionally neglected often seem normal on the surface but are frequently unaware of the structural flaw in their foundation. They also have no idea that their childhood played a role. Instead, they tend to blame themselves for whatever difficulties they may be experiencing in life. *Why do other people seem happier than me? Why is it easier to give than to receive? Why do I not feel closer to my loved ones? What is missing within me?*

Therefore, it's important to recognize that childhood trauma can have long-term consequences and may increase the risk of developing mental health disorders such as PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and personality disorders. However, with appropriate support, intervention, and therapy, individuals who have experienced childhood trauma can heal and build resilience over time.

When childhood trauma intersects with disability, the effects can be even more complex and challenging to navigate. Addressing the intersection of childhood trauma and disability requires a comprehensive and holistic approach that considers the unique needs and experiences of each individual. This may involve providing trauma-informed care, access to appropriate mental health services, accommodations and support for disabilities, and creating inclusive environments that promote healing and resilience. Barnes feels that there is a high need for the time to see the issue of disability across genres, films and media as "the cultural product of between the means of production and central societal values" (18).

Throughout history, children have been portrayed in movies in a variety of ways that have reflected the social mores, narrative styles, and cultural views of the times. Children are frequently represented as defenceless, innocent individuals, emphasizing their naivety and need for protection (Chaturvedi and Verma 927). Films like *Stand by Me* (1986), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Udaan* (2010), *Boyhood* (2014), *Dear Zindagi* (2016), etc. explore themes of identity, growth, and self-discovery as they follow characters from childhood to maturity. The world cinema has frequently included children in the framework of family dynamics, examining their interactions with parents, siblings, and other family members in movies like *Masoom* (1983), *The Tree of Life* (2011), *Kahaani* (2012), and *The Florida Project* (2017). Not only this, but cinema has also given room to weighty matters that impact kids, such as destitution, maltreatment, and disease. *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), *Amu* (2005), *Room* (2015), and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) deal with similar subjects.

Ravi Chaturvedi and Ashish Verma study that the film "Salaam Bombay drew high attention to the themes of marginalization, poverty, class, gender, and how children and childhood seem to communicate these concerns" (931). *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Donny Boyle, is a highly popular movie all over the world. The film brings back the forgotten aspect of childhood. The story of this film, which is set in the city slums, has a happy conclusion in which a



poor youngster grows up, wins a very lucrative quiz show, and meets his dream girl again, altering his course in life (Chaturvedi and Verma 931).

Filmmakers explore a broad range of issues of children portraying them from fragility and innocence to maturity and perseverance, creating a lasting impression on viewers throughout the globe (Chaturvedi and Verma 932). The variety and complexity of how children are portrayed in movies reflect both the diversity of childhood experiences and the larger social circumstances in which they live. Both Western and Indian films have portrayed the terrible reality that children who experience illness, abuse, destitution, and mistreatment must encounter. They frequently provide a moving depiction of resiliency, optimism, and the human spirit in the face of hardship, inspiring viewers to consider and participate in these important social concerns (Holcomb).

The relationship between disability, cinema, and childhood trauma is intricate and diverse, and it is frequently examined in a variety of ways throughout different films. The film industry has been instrumental in raising awareness of people with disabilities who have endured trauma throughout their early years. Documentaries such as *Lesser Humans* (1997), *Children of the Pyre* (2008), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), *Born Behind Bars* (2017), etc. Chronicle the lives of children with trauma and disability. Films frequently examine how childhood trauma affects people with disabilities on an emotional and psychological level.

The 2007 Julian Schnabel film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is based on the autobiography of Jean-Dominique Bauby, who experienced a major stroke that left him nearly immobile due to locked-in syndrome. The movie shows Bauby's inner world and his battle to talk to others and find purpose in his life after the horrific incident. A young autistic man named Owen Suskind and his family are the subject of the 2016 Roger Ross Williams film *Life, Animated*. The movie looks at how Owen communicates with his impairment and deals with the trauma of growing up autistic by using his strong love of Disney animated films.

In his 2015 film *Room*, Lenny Abrahamson narrates the tale of a little child named Jack and his mother, who are imprisoned in a tiny shed for an extended period. Jack was born into captivity after his mother was abducted while he was a teenager. The movie looks at how trauma affected Jack's mother and how they rebuilt their lives after escaping. Arthur Penn's 1962 film *The Miracle Worker* is based on the real tale of Helen Keller, a little child who had a birth ailment that left her blind and deaf. The narrative centres on Keller's friendship with her teacher, Anne Sullivan, who supports her in overcoming obstacles related to her impairments and developing her communication skills. The movie emphasizes Keller and Sullivan's fortitude in the face of hardship. The historical drama *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), helmed by Ron Howard, narrates the tale of John Nash, a gifted mathematician who battles insanity. The movie follows Nash as he works to combat the stigma attached to mental illness and manages his symptoms, which include delusions and hallucinations.

The Indian Cinema explored various complex and sensitive subjects, but the issue of childhood trauma has not found sufficient space. Ranjitha Dawn in her paper "Role of Culture and Media in Disability Studies: A Medium of Social Construction of Disability" writes, "Most Indian films fail to do this and more so when it comes to movies showcasing people with disabilities" (5). Despite their limited representation in cinema, there are still several Indian films that touch upon this theme, shedding light on the psychological and emotional impact of traumatic experiences during childhood (Chaturvedi and Verma 930).

When it comes to exploring childhood trauma and disability, Indian cinema has also explored the themes of childhood trauma and disability, although perhaps not as extensively as in Western cinema. Indian cinema often portrays characters with disabilities in a manner that humanizes their experiences and challenges societal stigmas. By showcasing characters with disabilities as fully realized individuals with dreams, desires, and agency, films contribute to normalizing disability within society. Indian cinema frequently highlights the resilience and inner strength of individuals living with disabilities. Characters overcome obstacles, including childhood trauma, to assert their independence, pursue their goals, and challenge societal limitations. This portrayal emphasizes the importance of empowerment and self-advocacy for individuals with disabilities. Indian cinema explores the intersectionality of disability with other identities and experiences, such as gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Characters with disabilities navigate multiple layers of marginalization and discrimination, shedding light on the complexities of their lived experiences (Praveen et al. 7744).

Through storytelling and character-driven narratives, Indian cinema often serves as a platform for social commentary and advocacy on issues related to disability rights, accessibility, and inclusion. Films raise awareness about systemic barriers and discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities, advocating for greater social change and policy reform (Singh and Pandey 1). Indian cinema celebrates the power of human connection and empathy in bridging divides and breaking down barriers between individuals with and without disabilities. Characters forge meaningful



relationships based on understanding, compassion, and mutual respect, challenging stereotypes and fostering greater acceptance within society.

The Aamir Khan-directed film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) is a beloved film among young audiences. The film sensitively and deeply explores the subjects of childhood trauma and disability. It tells the tale of eight-year-old Ishaan, a child with dyslexia, a learning disorder that interferes with his ability to write and read. Ishaan receives frequent criticism and feelings of inadequacy as a result of his painful school experiences, which cause him to undergo inner upheaval and seclusion. The movie emphasizes how critical it is to recognize and attend to children's emotional needs, particularly those who struggle in traditional educational environments. Ishaan experiences dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem as a result of his academic struggles, but with the support of a kind art instructor, he learns how to overcome these setbacks and uncovers his special abilities. Ishaan's school experiences are characterized by embarrassment, frustration, and loneliness since he is unable to achieve the academic standards set by his peers and teachers. Among his painful experiences are being called stupid and lazy, receiving repeated reprimands, and feeling misinterpreted by his family. His emotional health and feeling of self-worth are negatively impacted by these events, which causes behavioural problems and a growing sense of hopelessness.

The film chronicles Ishaan's emotional journey as he struggles with his impairment and the obstacles it brings about in his life. He is shown to be extremely frustrated and ashamed of his reading and writing difficulties, which are made worse by the people around him who don't seem to care or understand him. Furthermore, the pressure to meet social expectations about academic performance and accomplishment exacerbates his emotions of worthlessness and inadequacy.

Throughout the movie, Ishaan's relationship with his art teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh, becomes a catalyst for his healing and transformation. Nikumbh recognizes Ishaan's artistic talent and unique way of seeing the world, providing him with the encouragement, patience, and guidance he needs to flourish. Through art, Ishaan finds a means of expression and validation that empowers him to overcome his dyslexia and reclaim his sense of self-worth.

*Taare Zameen Par* sensitively portrays the intersection of childhood trauma and disability, highlighting the profound impact that negative experiences can have on a child's emotional and psychological well-being (Gawande and Kashyap 55). The film underscores the importance of empathy, acceptance, and individualized support in nurturing the potential of children with learning differences and helping them thrive. Ultimately, it delivers a powerful message of hope, resilience, and the transformative power of compassion in overcoming adversity.

Another well-known movie is Vikramaditya Motwane's 2010 production *Udaan*. The movie tells the tale of Rohan, a young kid expelled from boarding school and forced to return home to live with his violent father. The severe physical and psychological mistreatment Rohan endured at the hands of his father shaped his rebellious disposition and his quest for autonomy. The movie shows how resilient people can be when faced with hardship and choose their route to liberation and self-discovery.

Amole Gupte's directed film *Stanley Ka Dabba* (2011) revolves around a young schoolboy named Stanley who is frequently bullied by his classmates and ostracized by his teacher because he is unable to bring a lunchbox (dabba) to school. Stanley's traumatic experiences of exclusion and humiliation shed light on the prevalence of bullying and peer pressure in school environments and the impact it can have on a child's self-esteem and sense of belonging. *Lion* (2016), while not an Indian production, tells the true story of Saroo Brierley, an Indian boy who becomes separated from his family and ends up living on the streets of Kolkata. The film depicts Saroo's traumatic experiences of homelessness, hunger, and exploitation as a lost child, as well as his journey to reclaim his identity and reunite with his birth family. The film highlights the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring bonds of love and family.

*Black* (2005), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, is a poignant drama that explores the relationship between a deaf and blind girl named Michelle McNally and her teacher, Debraj Sahai. The film depicts Michelle's childhood trauma of losing her sight and hearing at a young age due to meningitis and her struggle to communicate and navigate the world around her (Gawande and Kashyap 56). Through Debraj's unconventional teaching methods, Michelle learns to overcome her disabilities and achieve academic success.

*Black* sensitively and deeply explores the topics of childhood trauma and handicap. The film chronicles the connection between Michelle McNally, a deaf and blind child, and her teacher, Debraj Sahai. Michelle lost her sight and hearing at an early age due to a childhood ailment called meningitis, which is the reason for her disability. Her life is shaped by this horrific experience, which isolates her from the outside world and causes serious problems with her communication and environmental awareness. The film portrays Michelle's early years as marked by frustration, confusion, and a sense of isolation as she struggles to make sense of her disabilities and navigate her surroundings. Her inability to communicate effectively with others leads to feelings of loneliness and helplessness, compounded by the lack of understanding and support from her family. Debraj Sahai, a dedicated and unconventional teacher, takes on the



daunting task of educating Michelle. Despite initial scepticism and resistance from Michelle's family, Debraj's persistence, patience, and unorthodox teaching methods gradually break through Michelle's barriers and unlock her potential. Through Debraj's guidance and mentorship, Michelle learns to communicate using tactile sign language and Braille, gradually gaining independence and confidence in her abilities. Their relationship evolves from one of teacher and student to a deep bond of mutual respect, trust, and love.

*Black* sensitively portrays the intersection of childhood trauma and disability, highlighting the resilience and inner strength of individuals facing profound challenges. The film underscores the trans-formative power of education, empathy, and human connection in overcoming adversity and realizing one's full potential. Overall, *Black* is a poignant and uplifting story that celebrates the triumph of the human spirit in the face of hardship, offering a powerful message of hope, resilience, and the transformative power of love and compassion.

In *Paa* (2009), directed by R. Balki, a 12-year-old kid named Auro experiences rapid ageing due to a rare genetic disease called progeria. Auro is an intelligent, lively youngster who develops a strong relationship with his single mother despite his physical impairment and limited lifetime. Despite his illness, Auro persevered throughout the film, overcoming obstacles in his path to a happy and meaningful life. *Paa* is a peculiar Indian film that addresses childhood trauma and handicap in a novel way. Progeria is a rare genetic illness that causes rapid ageing, and it affects 12-year-old Auro in the film.

Even though Auro's progeria is the main subject of the movie, aspects of his handicap and childhood trauma are woven into the story. Progeria, Auro's ailment, is shown as a major obstacle that affects him from an early age. The movie shows Auro's physical and psychological suffering as he struggles to live up to the restrictions placed on him by progeria and learns that his life expectancy has been drastically reduced. Auro has a rare and crippling condition, and his perseverance and will to live life to the fullest despite his challenges are clear indicators of the trauma he has experienced. One of the main themes of the movie is the bond between Auro and his single mother, Vidya. While Vidya's steadfast love and care for Auro are clear throughout the novel, there are times when she feels emotionally drained by the difficulties of raising a kid with a handicap. The video highlights the sacrifices, anxieties, and hopes that come with raising a kid with special needs while deftly examining the emotional nuances of this journey.

Along with Auro navigating school, friendships, and public opinions of his condition, *Paa* also explores cultural attitudes regarding disability and uniqueness. In the movie, there are depictions of bigotry and ignorance, but there are also situations of acceptance, empathy, and understanding as Auro's classmates and community come together to support and honour his special spirit. Thus, *Paa* skillfully and deeply depicts childhood trauma and handicap while entwining themes of love, resiliency, and the need for human connection. The movie conveys a strong message of accepting diversity, overcoming hardship, and appreciating each moment of life, no matter what obstacles we encounter, via Auro's journey.

In *Barfi!* (2012), directed by Anurag Basu, two ladies, Shruti and Jhilmil, are the focal points of the romantic comedy-drama. Barfi is a deaf and silent guy, yet cheerful and lively nature despite his impairments. It also shows the difficulties he has expressing his love and interacting with others. The film is centred around a disabled main character and tackles themes of love, friendship, and perseverance. As a young man living in Darjeeling, Murphy Barfi Johnson is shown as deaf and silent. While *Barfi!* is not explicitly focused on childhood trauma, it does touch upon the challenges and stigma associated with disability, which can sometimes stem from traumatic experiences (Deo 48). Barfi's experiences as a person with disabilities are intertwined with his journey of self-discovery, love, and relationships.

Throughout the film, Barfi is depicted as a playful and mischievous character who navigates the world using his unique ways of communication, including gestures and expressions. His disability is portrayed with sensitivity and authenticity, highlighting both the barriers he faces and the strengths he possesses. The character of Barfi forms close relationships with two women, Shruti and Jhilmil, each of whom plays a significant role in his life. His interactions with Shruti, a hearing and speaking woman, explore the complexities of love and friendship across differences in ability. Additionally, Barfi's relationship with Jhilmil, a woman with autism, further expands the film's exploration of disability and neurodiversity.

While *Barfi!* primarily celebrates the joy and resilience of its characters, it also touches upon the challenges and prejudices they face due to their disabilities. Barfi's interactions with society often highlight the lack of understanding and accommodations for people with disabilities, as well as the need for greater empathy and inclusion. Overall, *Barfi!* offers a heartwarming and nuanced portrayal of disability, showcasing the humanity and dignity of individuals living with disabilities while challenging stereotypes and misconceptions. While the film may not explicitly address childhood trauma, it contributes to a broader conversation about disability rights, representation, and the importance of embracing diversity in society.



Shonali Bose's film *Margarita with a Straw* is one of the best films that shows handicaps without pitying, sympathizing with, or any cure (Gawande and Kashyap 54; Shukla 84). The film chronicles the experience of Laila, a young cerebral palsy sufferer, as she discovers her sexuality and independence while pursuing an exchange program in New York City. Laila's experiences of living with a disability, including her difficulties with speech and movement as well as her yearning for love, intimacy, and self-discovery, are delicately portrayed in the movie. This moving and avant-garde Indian film examines issues of sexuality, identity, and disability, as well as the relationship between early trauma and handicap (Shukla 85). Laila, a young lady with cerebral palsy, is followed throughout the film as she makes her way through life, love, and self-discovery. Throughout the whole movie, Laila's experiences as a person with a handicap are sensitively and authentically shown. She has struggled with speech and physical mobility since she was a little child, but she does not let that define who she is. Despite the constraints placed on her by her illness, Laila is shown to be a bright, driven, fiercely independent woman with her own goals in life.

Through flashbacks that highlight Laila's difficulties with self-acceptance and her connections with her family, the movie delicately examines the effects of childhood trauma on her life. Laila's emotional landscape and her journey towards self-discovery are shaped by traumatic events from her past, such as the loss of her mother and her father's subsequent remarriage. Laila struggles with issues of sexuality, identity, and belonging as she sets out on a path of self-discovery and acceptance (Deo 46). Her intimate experiences including her interactions with men and women challenge social norms and expectations, which further muddies her self-perception.

Laila highlights her right to live life on her terms, despite the challenges she encounters, via her experiences studying abroad in New York City, following her love of writing, and fighting for disability rights. The movie shows Laila's transition to New York for her studies, and how handicapped-accessible the city is." There, Jared—who has been tasked with assisting Laila—and Khanum, a young activist who is blind, meet. She chooses a different path in her sexual excursion. With both, she becomes very close friends. Laila shares her dating experiences in a bar with Khanum. She says, "This is what I have experienced in the past, so why would anybody date me?" about her condition. Both begin dancing after this exchange of words. Together, they had a wonderful time. The two then have some private time together when Laila arrives at Khanum's house at night. After falling in love, Laila moves in with Khanum. She feels bad about having sex with Jared shortly after because she had her relationship with Khanum (Shukla 85).

Thus, *Margarita with a Straw* offers a rare and powerful portrayal of disability and sexuality in Indian cinema, challenging stereotypes and celebrating the diversity of human experience. Through Laila's journey of self-discovery and resilience, the film delivers a poignant and empowering message about the importance of embracing one's true self, regardless of societal expectations or limitations.

These films offer powerful portrayals of individuals grappling with the intersection of childhood trauma and disability, highlighting their resilience, strength, and capacity for growth and healing. Through storytelling, Indian cinema can raise awareness, foster empathy, and promote understanding of the complex experiences faced by individuals living with trauma and disability (Shukla 19; Deo 46). Popular Indian cinema presents compelling stories that examine the nuances of childhood trauma and its long-term impact on people. Indian film makes a significant contribution to increasing awareness and cultivating empathy for those who have endured trauma during their formative years using captivating storytelling and complex character depictions (Deo 46). These Indian movies include complex and poignant depictions of people with disabilities and the difficulties they encounter, including the aftereffects of traumatic experiences as children. Thus, the films studied in this paper challenge preconceived notions about disability in Indian society and foster empathy and awareness via their gripping narratives and endearing characters. Hence, the way that childhood trauma and disabilities are portrayed in Indian popular cinema speaks to a larger cultural movement in favour of more inclusion, representation, and social consciousness.

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