

# Disability is not a defining feature

Characters with disabilities in Hindi cinema have come a long way from subjects to be pitied or laughed at



NIPUN MALHOTRA

I loved the trailer of the movie *Zero*. It's a Shah Rukh Khan movie that also features Anushka Sharma and Katrina Kaif. Mr. Khan plays a dwarf. Ms. Sharma plays a woman with cerebral palsy using a wheelchair. But it doesn't seem to be a movie about disability in the traditional Indian sense. More on that later.

## Disability that's in your face

The first known movie to feature disability in a meaningful way in Hindi cinema was *Jeevan Naiya* (1936). In this movie, the lead character abandons his wife on learning that she belongs to a family of dancers. Later, he is blinded in an accident and is nursed by a woman who he eventually falls in love with. Of course that woman is his wife. Karma comes a full circle.

And that's what continued in subsequent films: either karma and its lessons or pity. In *Sholay* (1975), Thakur, the police officer (Sanjeev Kumar) has his arms amputated by the infamous Gabbar (Amjad Khan). Thakur hires two mercenaries to avenge Gabbar and his gang. This leads to a final duel between Gabbar and Thakur. And what does Thakur do? He crushes Gabbar's arms with spikes. Thakur probably thought that living with a disability is worse than dying.

*Khamoshi* (1996) was about deaf parents, their daughter and their inability to allow her to move on. *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) and *Black* (2005) focused on the schooling challenges of the dyslexic, and the deaf and blind, respectively. Two other big-ticket movies with disabled characters in the recent past have been *Margarita With a Straw* (2015), which explored the sexuality of a woman with cerebral palsy, and *Guzzaarish* (2010), which was the story of a paralysed magician-turned-radio jockey and his legal battle to end his life. What's common in all these movies is that disability is in your face. It's the overarching theme of the movie. I loved the storytelling in these films. However, disability is what defined them. And let's admit it: disability



"The first challenge is to get people to the theatre to watch movies related to disability." Kalki Koechlin in 'Margarita With a Straw'. \*SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

is not the sexiest theme to bring in people to the theatres.

Of course there is another category too, where disabled characters provide comic respite at the cost of their disability. However, I shall refrain from commenting on it to not give these highly offensive movies any undue attention.

So why am I so excited about *Zero*? Going by the trailer, Mr. Khan, who plays a dwarf, is shown the photo of a girl played by Ms. Sharma. He's immediately smitten and decides to attend an event where she's speaking. Only on seeing her in person does he realise that she has cerebral palsy and, as a result, is on a wheelchair. He's sad but nevertheless continues to pursue her and eventually succeeds.

He confesses to having a safe, stable life if he marries her. The trailer up to this point looks like the quintessential Bollywood movie. Dwarf meets wheelchair, they fall in love and live happily ever after. Except we live in the 21st century. This isn't the Raju (Raj Kapoor) from *Mera Naam Joker* being a circus clown collecting a bunch of heartbreaks in the process. Mr. Khan doesn't want to just live life. He wants to live it king size. He wants adventure. Maybe he even wants to be a moron. Not satisfied with cerebral palsy-stricken Ms. Sharma, he pursues Ms. Kaif who

seems to be playing a silver screen actor with millions of fans. They meet and they kiss (perhaps the Indian Censor Board didn't let them take things further). And when things go wrong, she calls him "Zero" and he presumably runs back to Ms. Sharma – but she is no helpless, egotistical wheelchair-user waiting to have him back in her life. She seems angry and wants her revenge. "The relationship is now on an equal footing," she says, glaring into the camera.

The characters are no 'divine' individuals seeking sympathy. The government might have called the disabled "divyang" (divine individuals), but Mr. Khan might truly be playing a divyang moron in the movie. The characters here are human beings with hopes and aspirations, shades of black and white, and happen to have disabilities. It doesn't seem to be a movie on disability. It seems to be a love triangle with characters with disabilities.

## Responding to criticism

And that is why I was so saddened to read criticism about this movie from some pockets of the disabled community. The movie was questioned for not having actors with disabilities play these roles. I do believe that the first challenge is to get people to the theatres to watch movies related to disability. Having stars of course

helps. Secondly, and more importantly, these stars inadvertently become brand ambassadors of the cause. These are important issues considering that I come across middle-aged government engineers, police officers and bureaucrats who claim to have never come across a person with a disability even today. If big stars will get them to the theatres, so be it.

Besides, I do find the idea that only actors with disabilities can portray characters with disabilities bizarre. We didn't complain that *Dangal* didn't have wrestlers playing wrestlers, or that *Sanju* didn't have Sanjay Dutt playing Sanjay Dutt, or that an alien didn't star in *PK*. What we need is for actors to be properly sensitised to the role they're signing up for. Daniel Day-Lewis got into the skin of his character, Christy Brown, who had cerebral palsy in *My Left Foot*. He did this not just by interacting with people with the disability but by actually refusing to leave his wheelchair through the shoot of the film. He had to be carried around by crew members and insisted on being spoon-fed. The movie was critically acclaimed and he won an Oscar for it.

## Breaking barriers

Persons with disabilities in India are breaking barriers. The next generation wants no sympathy. Varun Khullar was paralysed waist down after an accident in Manali in 2014. The accident forced him to start using a wheelchair but didn't stop him from accomplishing his dreams. He studied music and started deejaying at parties. He is the resident DJ at a club in New Delhi. Divyanshu Ganatra was just 19 when glaucoma claimed his eyesight. He runs an adventure sport company. Nidhi Goyal was diagnosed with a degenerative eye disorder at the age of 15. She converted her subsequent dating misadventures into an internationally acclaimed stand-up comedy sketch.

I am glad that Hindi cinema is learning from society and going beyond looking at characters with disabilities as either subjects to be pitied or laughed at.

Nipun Malhotra is a wheelchair user. He's founder, Wheels For Life ([www.wheelsforlife.in](http://www.wheelsforlife.in)) and CEO, Nipman Foundation. Twitter: @nipunmalhotra. Email: nipun@nipunmalhotra.com

## FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

# Discussing an editorial

There were problems with the fundamental assumptions of a recent editorial on the new GDP back series



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

I generally refrain from commenting on editorials and opinion pieces. I recognise that there are points of convergence as much as there are points of divergence between the newspaper and its myriad readers, and even within the newspaper itself. These conversations lend plurality to the newspaper and they should not be viewed from any narrow ideological prism. However, I have to break from this norm to discuss the editorial "Number theory" (Nov. 30), which generated some sharp and divergent reactions.

## Independence of the editorial

The arguments against the editorial were varied. Some took an ideological standpoint, while others interpreted the events that led to the release of the GDP back series. I would like to reiterate that my role as the Readers' Editor is not that of a pre-publication censor, but of a post-publication evaluator. I do get complaints about *The Hindu's* editorial policy, which is defined by the editor and his editorial team. I can explain the policy but I cannot interfere with it. It is vital to support the independence of the editorial. The acid test for the Readers' Editor is how he conducts himself when his own opinion is at variance with that of the paper. Can he be an effective advocate for free speech, tolerance and plurality if he lacks these democratic traits? Hence, the issue I am discussing is not about the ideological thrust of the editorial but its fundamental assumptions.

The assertion of the editorial that "robust, updated data are, in fact, insurance against politicians hijacking what is essentially an economic exercise" seems like a statement yearning for an ideal reality rather than one that is based on reality. The sequence of events since the creation of Niti Aayog seems to point at a complete politicisation of numbers. Some facts lend credence to the criticism of the numbers put out by Niti Aayog. One, the government had failed to appoint a Chief Statistician for nearly eight months after the retirement of T.C.A. Anant in January. Two, it has had a tense relationship with the Reserve Bank of India. Three, a set of data presented by the committee set up by the

National Statistical Commission was withdrawn. Four, the Agriculture Ministry backtracked on a report showing the adverse effects of demonetisation on farmers. Five, there's the timing of the new data, which many see as a desperate ploy to distract people's attention from the trenchant criticism of demonetisation by the former Chief Economic Adviser. The line between the Central Statistics Office and Niti Aayog is blurred, thereby lending a political colour to an essential economic exercise.

## The practice of data torture

If the editorial is read along with the explainer "What's with the back series GDP data?" (December 1), it is clear that the editorial jumped the gun to grant the benefit of doubt to the latest exercise and suspended essential journalistic curiosity. The explainer deals with the problem of finding matching data for the older series to the present MCA-21, which is available only since 2011-2012. As a journalist, my entry points for understanding a range of subjects have been science and literature. About pure qualitative methods and number crunching, one of the finest historians of science, Thomas Kuhn, observed that "nature undoubtedly responds to the

theoretical predispositions with which she is approached by the measuring scientist." The Anglo-American economist, Ronald Coase, gave an interesting economic reading of this statement: "If you torture the data long enough, it will confess to anything." It is true that governments and institutions do indulge in data torture, a practice of repeatedly interpreting source data until it reveals a desired result.

The editorial seems to be oblivious to this caution from the Nobel laureate. Its statement that "during earlier instances of back-casting of GDP data, the political environment was not as deeply polarised as it is now, and so the exercise remained more academic" fails to capture the full picture. In all the earlier changes, the methodology was not only robust but also transparent, and incomparable parameters were hardly used to deduct a number to understand macroeconomic reality. This was an editorial of forking paths, for how do we reconcile the assertion that "the release of the back series by the Niti Aayog goes against convention and is bad in optics" with the conclusion that "this should not be reason to contest the integrity of the new numbers"?

readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

## SINGLE FILE

# Sharing outbreak data

Publishing epidemic data on open access platforms can help countries tackle outbreaks better

PRIYANKA PULLA



The recent Zika outbreaks in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh are a reminder of how poor Indian authorities are at sharing health data. Neither Rajasthan, which saw 154 cases, nor M.P., which saw 127, published the day-wise numbers of confirmed infections. Meanwhile, even though the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has genetically sequenced Zika viruses from five patients in Rajasthan, it hasn't published these sequences in any open access databases such as GenBank.

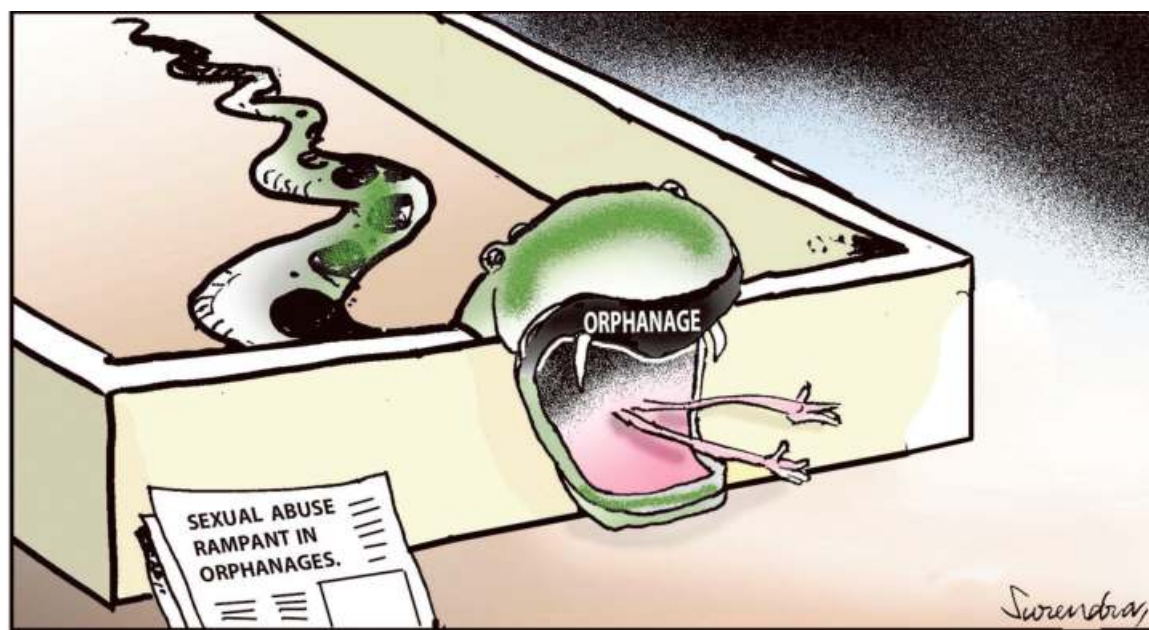
Both daily case counts and genetic sequences of the viruses circulating in India can be extremely useful to epidemiologists studying Zika. Daily case counts can show how quickly the virus is spreading. Genetic sequences can help us understand from where the virus came to India and for how long it had been circulating in Rajasthan and M.P. before it was detected. Using data from previous epidemics, scientists have been able to estimate the rate at which the Zika virus mutates. So, by comparing genome sequences from multiple patients, they can estimate when these viruses diverged from their most recent common ancestor, giving an idea of when the virus entered India. If this date is much earlier than the date of the first detected case (September in Rajasthan), that would mean a larger number of patients were infected, which in turn could help customise our outbreak response.

However, ICMR has only announced that the Rajasthan Zika strain is genetically close to the Brazilian strain (suggesting that the virus came from Latin America), and that it does not have certain mutations. "Genetically close" is a broad term, and without the sequence information, other researchers cannot independently interpret and validate ICMR's claims. ICMR says it has submitted the data to a peer-reviewed journal for publication, but publication in journals takes longer than publication in an open access database.

Given how important such data are during epidemics, the World Health Organisation (WHO) released a policy statement in 2016 saying "pathogen genome sequences be made publicly available as rapidly as possible through relevant databases." West Africa's 2013 Ebola virus outbreak and Latin America's 2015 Zika outbreak showed how useful such proactive sharing can be – during the Ebola epidemic, around 80% of the epidemiological modelling studies used only open data, according to a 2016 *PLOS Medicine* paper.

There are reasons why researchers are often reluctant to share genome sequences. During the Ebola outbreak, some scientists were worried that they may not be credited for their work if someone else published an analysis based on their sequences, and waited for months before publishing. Such concerns are valid, and the WHO says it is important to address this. But given the benefits to public health from data-sharing, Indian authorities should do their part too.

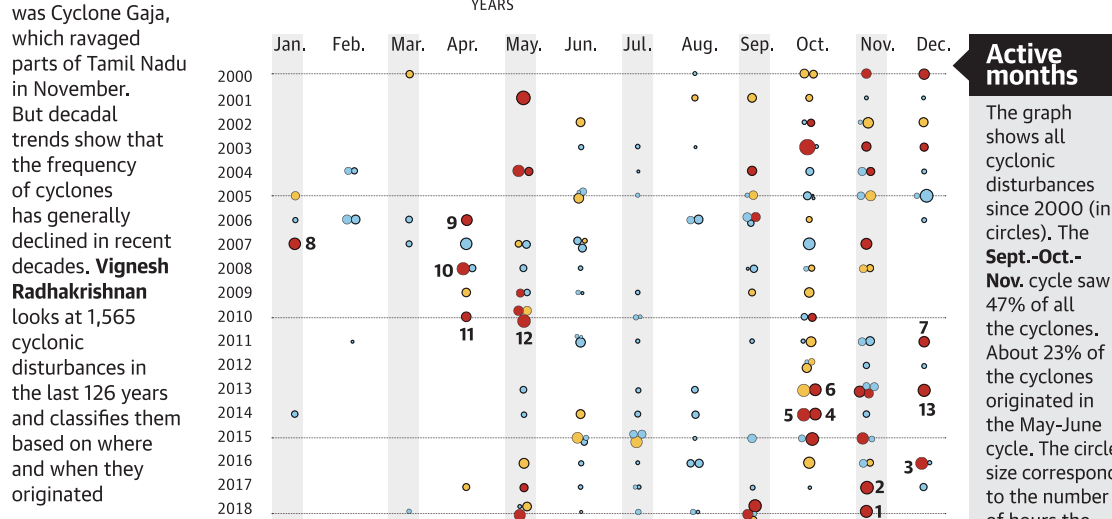
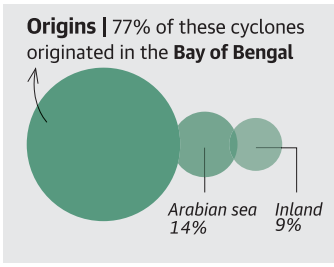
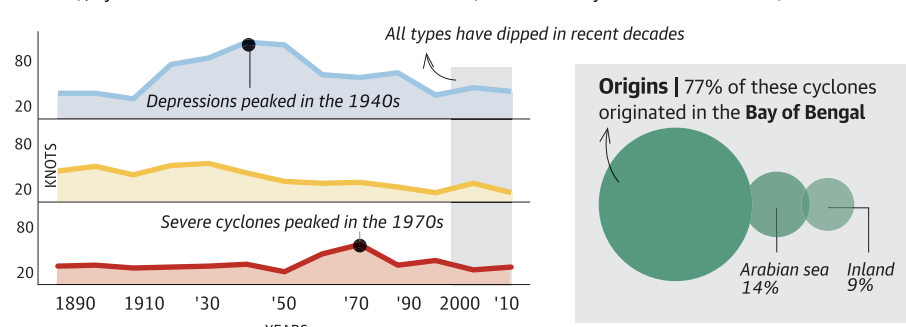
The writer is Senior Assistant Editor with *The Hindu* in Bengaluru



## DATA POINT

# Storm chasing

**Trends** | The graph plots depressions and deep depressions (maximum wind speed between 17 and 33 knots ○), cyclonic storms (between 34 and 47 knots ●) and severe cyclones (> 47 knots ●)



Source: <http://www.rsmcnwdelhi.imd.gov.in>

## FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 3, 1968

### Naxalite leader's wife arrested in jungle

Mandakini, wife of Mr. Kunnikkal Narayanan, Naxalite leader, was arrested in the Kumthala forest in Cannanore district this evening [December 2]. The Police denied that Ajitha, daughter of Mandakini, had been arrested. Earlier reports had said that khaki-clad Ajitha who was alleged to have played a prominent role in the "Pulpali operations" of the extremists was the only woman member of the team. Two other young women, who were seen in the company of Mrs. Narayanan, were also taken into custody by the police. A top official said to-night that the police were still combing the forest. He hoped that Ajitha and other members of the gang would be rounded up before long. Mr. Mohamed Kunhi, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Cannanore, led the combing operations to-day.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 3, 1918.

### Alleged Forgery.

Mr. T.J. Tasker, I.C.S., as Justice of the Peace to-day [December 2, in Bangalore] framed charges against Lieutenant Malcolm Macdonald of the 10th Jats under Sections 467, 468 and 420 I.P.C., for alleged forgery for purposes of cheating and directed him to take his trial by the High Court of Madras. It was alleged for the prosecution that the accused on the 8th October last went to Krishniah Chetty & Sons., jewellers in Commercial Street and purchased a diamond emerald ring and toilet set for Rs. 360 and gave a cheque signed as Lieutenant Gilbert for the amount. The cheque was returned uncashed and a complaint was lodged with the police. It is alleged that the cheque was one found missing from a cheque book of Lieutenant A.R. Kent supplied to him by Cox & Co., of Bombay. The accused in the course of the statement filed in the court admitted having passed the cheque and said he had no intention whatever to commit fraud or dishonesty. He had since paid the amount in full to Krishniah Chetty.

## CONCEPTUAL

### Animistic bias

PSYCHOLOGY

Also known as the animistic fallacy, this refers to a cognitive bias that causes people to believe that even naturally occurring phenomena are the result of a conscious force. Psychologists believe that the animistic bias is what causes many people across different cultures to believe that the universe must be the creation of a supernatural god. Some have even argued that evolutionary pressures may have shaped the human brain in such a way that it attaches conscious intentions to many things that simply occur in nature. While this causes unnecessary paranoia, it may have also increased the chances of survival of human ancestors.

## MORE ON THE WEB

Video: Check out Chennai's largest 'thali' meal!

<http://bit.ly/ThaliVideo>