

Performing Different Bodies: Self/Representations of Disability on Reality Television in India

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Abstract

The popularity of reality shows especially competition-based ones continues unabated on Indian television. However, like the rest of the media landscape, persons with disability on these shows find rare representation. Even where they are included, it is to provide a 'diverting spectacle', created to add yet another element to the drama that is reality television. At the same time, these participants themselves are driven by a desire to achieve fame by appearing on these shows. The present paper proposes to take up some case studies from a few popular singing and dance talent based reality shows on Hindi General Entertainment Channels (GECs) in the recent past, and above all, the two-decade old *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the quiz and knowledge based show, hosted by the iconic superstar Amitabh Bachchan. The question we ask is, to what extent has Indian reality television evolved in representing the physically disabled?

Keywords: Reality television, Hindi GECs, representation of disability, self-representation, talent show, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC)

Champions don't do different things; champions do things differently.

–Himani Bundela (*KBC13*, 2021)

History was created on the sets of the immensely popular Hindi reality television show *Kaun Banega Crorepati* or *KBC* (Sony Entertainment Television) on August 31, 2021, when the visually impaired Himani Bundela became the first contestant with any kind of disability to have become a *crorepati* during the course of play. The journey of an ordinary

individual to the temporary stardom accorded by reality television is aspirational, as well as a matter of good fortune. But for a person with manifested physical disability such as Bundela, the journey is a complex one since it is loaded with expectations of a 'different' kind of performance. On the one hand is the stereotypical representation of the disabled body by the makers of the reality show, and on the other is the manner in which the contestant performs the self and the body. This paper examines the complex interplay between these two modes of imaging to understand how the disabled body is placed on the public screen. Firstly, does it encourage social inclusiveness and an honest engagement with the issues of marginalization of people with disability, and secondly, whether their appearance on television is more stigmatizing than empowering.

Ever since competition-based reality shows landed on Indian television (specifically Hindi language television) and opened themselves up to the ordinary citizen, their popularity has remained undiminished. From the times of the home-grown talent hunt singing and dance shows such as *Sa Re Ga Ma* (Zee TV; first season 1995) and *Boogie Woogie* (Sony Entertainment Television; first season 1996) to the sensational launch of the foreign formatted shows such as *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC) in the year 2000, or *Indian Idol* in 2004, innumerable aspirations in India have been fuelled across a broad spectrum of gender, age, physicality, class, creed or location to appear on television and enter the fame cycle, howsoever fleeting.

With regard to the constitution of its genre, reality television can be referred to as a broad cultural category of "unscripted shows with non-professional actors being observed by cameras in preconfigured environments" (Kavka, 2012, p. 5). The sense of role-play is inbuilt into the format of reality television. McKenzie (2001) famously contended that the individual's participation in the contemporary world demands "performance" which has become the preponderant cultural characteristic of everyday life. To this one may add the seepage of another cultural characteristic—the acute desire to 'externalize the self' on to social and psychic spaces. This found its early expression in reality television but has now exploded in the second decade of the new millennium with the ever-expanding digital and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram reels, etc., with attendant technology provided by camcorders, web-cams, mobile phones with flip cameras

and selfie-sticks. Indian cultural commentator Santosh Desai echoes McKenzie when he says that one 'performs' roles on reality television just as one assumes various roles in real life. He says, "Any act of culture involves some form of role play. One way to understand our current fascination with reality television is that it allows us to enact ourselves in the epic story of our lives"(2011, para. 6). The ultimate reward for participation in a reality show is, therefore, not just the prize but also media visibility.

It is the public screen which catapults the ordinary individual to the status of a celebrity. Grindstaff (2012) refers to reality TV as "self-service television" which enables ordinary people to walk in and serve themselves a celebrity status with the format and the performative contexts already laid out for them (p. 26). However, it is not just any ordinary individual who can walk into these shows. The participants are carefully chosen after several rounds of audition for the dramatic potential of their personal narrative. They are categorized as 'ordinary' simply because they are not professional actors or part of the fame cycle as other celebrities. But for the success of their performance on the reality show, drama is generic to the idea of ordinariness. The stories of their background, the conflicts from which they have emerged, and their ability to perform in front of the camera helps in their selection. It is their emotional expressiveness, aided by the creative design of the show and clever camera work from the crew which helps create what is referred to as the "structure of feeling" (Corner, 2009, p. 46) which helps the audience connect with the subject of the documentary or the reality show. Reality television is, therefore, a platform which allows exhibition space to the commonplace individual with the overriding caveat being that of their bringing entertainment for its viewers. Corner (2009) refers to the viewing experience of the audience as "a kind of a para-social encounter where the risks of 'being' and 'seeming' taken by others are part of the pleasure" (p. 51).

However, media visibility for the physically challenged participant is concomitant with an additional set of issues. Such a participant is not just any ordinary person but comes with what Rosemary Garland Thomson (1997) refers to as an "extraordinary body" and its attendant baggage. The disabled figure is the archetype of what culture assumes to be deviant and inferior, and hence denied full participation in public and economic life. The disabled body is thus opposed to what is considered 'normate',

and is positioned as 'the other'. For the show producers, the disabled body offers a 'diverting spectacle' which adds yet another element to the drama that is reality television. They are cleverly placed on reality TV as part of strategy so as to elicit emotional response from the audience, and thus improve television rating points. Behind the inclusion of the disabled on reality shows is also the idea of 'inspiration porn' where primarily the physical disability of the participant is portrayed as an obstacle that has been overcome to enable them to be part of an exclusive club of individuals who were found worthy of appearing on television. In their case, the elements of emotion, mental strength, struggle, etc. hold the potential to be effectively narrated and used as a crutch to generate either pity or awe in the viewers. The life-story of the disabled participant thus becomes a 'narrative prosthesis' for the show. While on the one hand disability has always been under-represented on these shows, on the other, if represented, it is normally as the following stereotypes: Pitied Characters (the charitable model), Inspiration Porn (here disability is an obstacle to be overcome) and Supercrips (who have stretched the limits of their body to achieve marvellous feats).

Competition/talent based reality television becomes a problematic space also because of the levels of spectatorship inbuilt into the format. At one level, the contestants are judged by the judges who are a part of the show; then there is a studio audience which at times is also given the power to vote; and lastly, the larger unseen audience beyond the television studio which is observing and scrutinizing with its gaze. For a quiz show such as *KBC*, there are no judges, but nevertheless there is a studio audience, and the immense pressure of sitting on the hot seat and performing in front of an iconic superstar, that is Amitabh Bachchan. Whatever be the format, for differently-abled participants appearance on reality shows is mostly a triple challenge: first, overcoming any inhibition about their body; second, negotiating with stigma and prejudice; and third, the fact that they are expected to compete with able-bodied participants, with the camera ruthlessly and unrelentingly scanning their each and every movement as well as emotion.

According to Thomson (2000), when the visibly disabled performance artists present themselves in front of viewers, it "generates the dynamic of staring" which in turn prompts the story (p. 335). As in other social encounters, even on the reality show, the first said or unsaid question that the disabled contestant or performer encounters is, "What happened

to you?" As Thomson (2000) puts it, "The disabled body demands a narrative, requires an apologia that accounts for its difference from unexceptional bodies" (p. 334). Such a contestant has to be prepared to manage social relations on the show and create a valued representation of the self. Thomson (2000) observes that, "Disability performance art is a genre of self-representation, a form of autobiography, which merges the visual with the narrative" (p. 334). Biressi (2016) holds that reality TV plays a critical role since it provides an opportunity to "para-communities and disabled individuals to actively participate in their self-representation" (p. 5).

Case Studies from Indian Reality Television: An Analysis

Over two decades of the new millennium, Hindi language reality TV in India has attracted the disabled participant too. But their appearance has been few and far between, and when it has happened, mostly milked for its dramatic potential. The tone is often patronizing, and the focus is more on their back story rather than their talent or ability. They are mostly set up as showpieces of diversity and inclusivity for the channel concerned. One of the earliest cases has been that of the visually impaired Diwakar Sharma, who became a singing sensation when he appeared on Zee TV's *Sa Re Ga Ma Li'l Champs* in 2006 at the age of 13. The blind singer, mostly male, begging for alms, has been part of the Indian popular imaginary thanks to Hindi cinema such as *Dosti* (1964) and *Koshish* (1972). The idea of charity has found natural extension on to the television space. Diwakar was eliminated in the middle of the show, but came back with popular public vote. Abhijeet, one of the judges expressed his displeasure as he felt that Diwakar's comeback was on account of sympathy votes. This could have been diversionary drama for the sake of television, but it raises an important debate with regard to the criteria for judgement. Should the criteria be different for the disabled when judging their talent? Diwakar has continued his journey on reality TV, and in 2019 he was one of the finalists on *Rising Star 3* on Colors TV. Undoubtedly a talented singer, but doubters might question if he would have achieved as much fame had he not been vision impaired. Conversely, his talent gets overshadowed by the fact of his disability.

Dance shows have been a popular genre for dancers with disability to showcase the obstacles that they have overcome. Kamlesh Patel on *Dance India Dance* (Zee TV, 2010), Vinod Thakur with wife Raksha on *Nach*

Baliye 6 (Star Plus, 2013-14) and *Jahid on Roadies X* (MTV 2013) were staged as inspirations on their respective shows. On the sets of *Boogie Woogie* (Zee TV, 2014), Aryan Patra, an able bodied dancer, tied up one leg and danced to show his solidarity with disability. Two case studies of physically challenged dancers, Sudha Chandran and Shubhreet Kaur Ghumman, seven years apart, reveal different attitudes towards representation as well as self-representation of disability. Chandran, a classical dancer and an actress, lost one of her legs in a tragic accident at the age of 16. She was thereafter fitted with the Jaipur foot which assisted her in overcoming her disability to continue with her passion for dance. Chandran is known for her semi-autobiographical film, *Naache Mayuri* (1986) which kick-started her career in cinema. She is best known for her iconic negative roles in the Balaji Telefilms brand of Hindi soap opera of the early 2000s, where her disability is invisible, and not brought into contention in any way. Chandran thereafter participated in the celebrity dance show *Jhalak Dikhla Jaa 2* (Sony TV, 2007) as any other celebrity, where her disability is treated as incidental. Even her costumes were designed such that they invisibilized her disability. Chandran has been one of the rare artistes who succeeded in having her talent take pre-eminence over her disability.

Seven years later, a contrasting attitude is seen in the self-representation strategy of Shubhreet Kaur Ghumman, who describes herself in her Facebook profile as the “world’s first one-legged dancer”. Appearing on dance shows such as *India’s Got Talent* (Sony TV, 2014) and *Jhalak Dikhla Jaa* (Colors TV, 2015), Shubhreet prominently displayed her disability by wearing short dresses which showed her dancing on one leg without any crutches. Ironically, although Shubhreet uses her disability to get on board these talent shows, she has little patience with the expressions of pity coming from the judges. The manner in which Shubhreet owns her disability, is comfortable with it, and reflects an infectious ebullient attitude towards life, makes a strong case for para-social normalization of disability.

In a personal telephonic interview (2020) to this writer, Husnain, a wheelchair-bound classical dancer and founder of Delhi-based ‘We Are One’ charitable organization for empowering disabled people, lamented the struggles and prejudices that disabled performers face when seeking to appear on reality television shows. His troupe was invited on the stage of *Dance India Dance* (2019) as special contestants. They also participated

on *India's Big Salute*, a talent show exclusively for the differently-abled on a Telugu entertainment channel. Several members of his troupe have been auditioning individually as well for dance reality shows. The motto as declared on their website is, "We choose not to put 'dis' in our ability" (<http://weareone.org.in/#>). Husnain champions equal opportunities for the abled and the disabled in all areas of life, including appearance on television. Visibility on television is of special significance since it is a powerful social statement, and according to Husnain, it provides them with an opportunity to make a mark and establish their identity in the society. It helps them earn respect, find inclusivity, and in the process, seek empowerment for themselves.

Case Studies from *Kaun Banega Crorepati*

With its ultimate cash prize of 1 crore Indian rupees, then 5 crores, 7 crores and finally 7.5 crores³, the quiz and knowledge-based game show *KBC* (on Sony TV since 2010) remains a big draw for participants from across the country, and the contestants spend years trying to get a chance to appear on it. No special talent is required to appear on *KBC* since it only tests the knowledge of the participant on the hot-seat. Nevertheless, it took nineteen years and eleven seasons for a person with disability to appear on the show. Noopur Chauhan, suffering from partial paralysis (a case of mixed cerebral palsy in medical terminology), became the first person to do so, on *KBC 11* (2019). As she took the hot-seat, the visuals of a weeping Noopur narrating the story of her struggles and that of medical negligence which led to her condition were deeply impactful and touched the viewers. Her rendering of how she had overcome her challenges to first be educated, and then become a tuition-teacher got her a standing ovation from Amitabh Bachchan and the studio audience. As she too says on the show, she was driven by the desire to earn respect in society for her capabilities rather than simply the cash reward. But it may also be noted that no special concessions in the procedure of the game were made for Noopur, and she practised hard to match the speed of the able-bodied contestants for the 'fastest fingers first' round, the winner of which alone gets the chance to reach the hot-seat.

Appearance on television, in whichever format of the reality show, caters to the innermost fantasies of an individual. It offers an escape from the mundane reality of everyday existence, and helps the self to create a narrative for itself. In a visual media dominated world-scape,

each of the participants seeks television as a therapy for the self. Being seen on television is the first step in identity formation. It also points to the intensification of the relationship between commodification and personal identity. This brings in the idea of 'therapeutic ethos' which, in the era of market economy and heavy advertising is constructed on the idea of consuming as a path to personal betterment in the midst of a life which is tough and overwhelming. Pankaj Kumar, a disabled contestant appearing on *KBC 13* (2019), suffers from the debilitating effects of a rare spine condition called juvenile ankylosing spondylitis, but he reveals that it was his urge to appear on *KBC* that has kept him going since several years. Other than earning money on the show so as to invest in a small business which would help ease the financial burden on his father, he also wishes to transform his identity through the show.

Reality television, as Morreale (2005) puts it, "refigures the therapeutic ethos by promising fulfilment through becoming a commodity rather than having one" (p. 2). Other than being seen, the process of this 'becoming' is therefore another important aspect of identity formation. For the disabled contestants as well, reality TV can be viewed as a mirror reflecting the fulfilment of aspiration. He points out how "in Lacanian theory the mirror marks the moment of mis (recognition)", when the participants "see themselves as whole and complete, as the actualization of potential" (p. 3). As Shohini Ghosh (2013) rightly posits with regard to Indian television, "Clearly, reality television is as much about old fashioned voyeurism and surveillance as about the pleasure of self-display" (p. 87).

Himani Bundela (*KBC 13*, Week 2, 2021), a vision impaired contestant defied all stereotypes of disability, and eventually became the first disabled person to have won one crore rupees on the show. A maths teacher in a regular school, she impressed with her confidence, cheerfulness and a defiance of her disability. While Bachchan does attempt to invoke pity around her, Himani brushes it aside as she has no sense of self-pity. A similar absence of self-pity can be seen in the case of Rahul Kumar Nema (*KBC15*, 2023, August 17) who suffers from a rare genetic disorder (called osteogenesis imperfecta) because of which he has already suffered 360 fractures since his childhood. The visual of Rahul Nema being carried to the hot-seat firmly establishes his disability. However, instead of being introduced as a disabled participant, Nema is introduced by Bachchan as "a bank manager from Bhopal", and he

interacts with him as any other normate contestant. It is much later in the show that Nema shares the story of his disability. Nema's father, seated amongst the studio audience as a companion on the show, conducts himself with poise and expects no pity. He has taken his son's disability in his stride, and philosophises that everyone faces challenges in their lives. Nema too does not desire pity; instead he wants to acquire fame by appearing on *KBC*.

Likewise, the story of polio-impacted Varsha Saraogi (*KBC15*, October 3, 2023), who is introduced by Bachchan as an assistant bank manager from Jabalpur, has many highlights. Varsha has overcome her own inhibitions to become an anchor, seeking identity for her personal self through her voice and not her disabled body. Her background video shows her leading a normal family life with her loving husband Shiv with whom she has a son. Shiv is 'whole' and 'normate', yet he has chosen a person with disability as his life partner. When Varsha prompts the question on the show, he states that he has chosen to marry Varsha because for him she is complete, and they both love each other. However, Varsha also speaks of men who would befriend her earlier but wouldn't think of marrying her. Varsha's story underscores the significance of family and social acceptance of disability. Rahul Nema and Varsha Saraogi's case studies, hence, mark a noticeable evolution in the representation strategy of disability on *KBC* by its producers and even the star host who has learnt to manifest empathy rather than pity.

Conclusion

By striving to put themselves up for scrutiny on Indian reality television, persons with disability have not just sought identity formation for their own selves, but have also sought space for discourse around the acceptance of disability in the public sphere. They are out to prove that disability is simply a construct, and it is the society which disables them with its prejudices and impairments. Television helps provide an intimate entry point into the lives of people who are otherwise misunderstood or underestimated. Horton and Wohl (1956) refer to the theory of "para-social interaction" (PSI) where the participant on television establishes a relationship of intimacy with the viewers from a distance (p. 215). The 'para-social contact theory' builds further on the idea of PSI and holds that mass-mediated para-social interaction has beneficial effects in reducing prejudices against minority out-groups (Schiappa et al., 2005). However, reality television has also been critiqued for indulging in

‘inspiration porn’ which distracts from the genuine difficulties faced by persons of disability regarding their mobility and access. Noopur Chauhan proudly claiming on *KBC* that she had rejected her crutches stigmatises those who choose to use aids and prosthetic devices (Priamvada, 2019). The appearance of para-athletes and other disabled high achievers on *KBC*, in their Karmaveer section is also a case in the point. A fine balance between representation and self-representation of disability on Indian reality television is imperative and desirable, and not impossible, as has been demonstrated in the case studies of Rahul Kumar Nema and Varsha Tara Saraogi.

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