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‘Normal’ vs ‘Abnormal’: A Socio-Cultural Perspective of Neurodivergence in *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025)

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Abstract

Moving beyond Bollywood representations of disability with pitiable, dependent, critiqued and humoured characters to empowered beings, the paper examines the representation of neurodivergence and intellectual disability in *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025), focusing on how the film challenges the entrenched binary of ‘normality’ versus ‘abnormality.’ Incorporating the ‘social model of disability,’ the paper interweaves the concepts of ‘enforced normalcy’ by Lennard J. Davis and ‘normate’ by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Through close textual and scene analysis, the paper has a two-fold objective. First, it evaluates the shift in discourse from personal limitation to the structural and attitudinal barriers that produce and induce disability. And second, it explores the idealisation of the ‘normal’ that pathologises cognitive and behavioural variation, reducing neurodivergent individuals to the category of deviant or abnormal other. Thus, using the film and the character Gulshan Arora, the coach, as a microcosm of societal perceptions within the backdrop of sports and the group of para-athletes, the paper offers a socio-cultural critique that underpins exclusion, stigma and imposed binaries advocating a redefinition of ability, success, and professionalism at the individual and institutional level.

Keywords. neurodiversity, binaries, enforced normalcy, social model of disability, *Sitaare Zameen Par*

Introduction

The discourse of Dis(ability) Studies has continuously been compounded within the binaries of normal/abnormal, abled/disabled, independent/dependent, productive/unproductive, order/ disorder, typical/atypical.[1] Neurodivergence refers to variations in neurocognitive functioning, where the possible differences or ‘neurotypical’ conditions include learning disabilities, behavioural disorders and other differences. More than a biological deficit, it is a

[1] Paul L. Leshota and Maximus M. Sefotho, ‘Being differently abled: Disability through the lens of hierarchy of binaries and *Bitso-lebe-ke Seromo*,’ *African Journal of Disability* 9, no. 643 (2020), https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v9i0.643; Jos Boys, ‘Disability Studies, Neurodivergence and Architecture,’ in *Developments in Neuroethics and Bioethics*, ed. Judy Illes and Eric Racine (Elsevier, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.dnb.2022.08.012.

'socially constructed identity' shaped through the hegemonic lens of 'normalcy.'[2] As Emily Brooks and Mariette Bates explain, 'Ableism is the structural discrimination against disabled people,'[3] which sets the tone and modalities of institutions, social attitudes, laws, spaces, language, education, healthcare and cultural narratives. David Brehme et al. assert, disability is not a 'natural, superhistorical phenomenon' but a 'socially negatively valued difference that is socially constructed.'[4] Dan Goodley further emphasises the relational co-construction of 'disablism and ableism,' wherein disability is marked as deviant while ability becomes an idealised form of citizenship.[5]

Benjamin Fraser, in his 'Introduction' of the book *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts,* remarks, 'cinema becomes a reflective mirror, a productive expression or a theoretical ground for the integration of perceptions and concepts that inform our socially negotiated understanding of disability.'[6] Over the decades, Bollywood's picturisation of neurodivergent characters has been tracked through the lens of pity, exaggeration, comedy, and humour[7] depicted through 'moralistic labels, compromised body image and aesthetic undesirability,'[8] that widens the path from simplistic stereotypes, and stigmatisation, to authentic agency-driven narratives. From the physical notions of disability with helpless, agonised and dependent victims in films like *Dosti*, *Jeevan Naiya* and *Aadmi,*[9] Bollywood representations have taken a shift towards empathetic and sensitive storytelling

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[2] Sibonokuhle Ndlovu, 'Humanness and Ableism: Construction and Deconstruction of Disability,' in *Decolonising the Human: Reflections from Africa on Difference and Oppression*, ed. Melissa Steyn and William Mpofu (Wits University Press, 2021), 65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.18772/22021036512.7.

[3] Emily Brooks and Mariette Bates, 'Section 2: Developmental Disability as a Social Construct,' in *Introducing Developmental Disability Through a Disability Studies Perspective* (CUNY Academic Commons, n.d.), https://introducingdevelopmentaldisability.commons.gc.cuny.edu/section-2-developmental-disability-as-a-social-construct/.

[4] David Brehme, Petra Fuchs, Swantje Köbsell and Carla Wesselmann, 'Einleitung: Zwischen Emanzipation und Vereinnahmung,' in *Disability Studies im deutschsprachigen Raum* Zwischen Emanzipation und Vereinnahmung ed. David Brehme, Petra Fuchs, Swantje Köbsell and Carla Wesselmann (Beltz Juventa, 2020), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344025009_Disability_Studies_im_deutschsprachigen_Raum_Zwischen_Emanzipation_und_Vereinnahmung, as quoted in Michael Zander, 'Is disability a social construction? On the critique of social constructivist views in (German-language) disability studies,' *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 18 (2024), 343, https://discourseunit.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/0342_zander.pdf.

[5] Dan Goodley, 'The Dis/Ability Complex,' *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018), 5, https://doi.org/10.11116/digest.5.1.1.

[6] Benjamin Fraser, 'Introduction,' In *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts,* ed. Benjamin Fraser (Columbia University Press, 2016), 7, https://doi.org/10.7312/fras17748.

[7] Dev Vrat Singh and Neha Pandey, 'Framing Disability in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema,' *Communicator LVI* 1 (2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353794229_Framing_Disability_in_Contemporary_Bollywood_Cinema.

[8] Paromita Deb, 'Nuances of the unique and evolving conceptualisation of intellectual disability in India: A study of the changing artistic parlance of representing intellectually disabled people in mainstream Hindi cinema.' *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 50, no. 2 (2022), 166, https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12467.

[9] Satyen Bose, Director, *Dosti* (Rajshri Productions, 1964), 2h 43m; Franz Osten, Director, *Jeevan Naiya* (Bombay Talkies, 1936), 2hr 20 m; A. Bhimsingh, Director, *Aadmi* (S.V. Films, 1968), 2hr 55m.

through *Koshish, Sparsh,* and *Khamoshi: The Musical*.[10] One of the first significant cinematic ventures in showcasing developmental disorder or neurodivergence on screen is through the Tamil-language film *Anjali*,[11] which delves into the familial transformation from rejection to evolving acceptance. Later, mainstream Hindi cinema has also gained ground with the depiction of autism, dyslexia, and quadriplegia with films like *Main Aisa Hi Hoon, Taare Zameen Par, Barfi*! and *Guzaarish.*[12] These cinematic narratives raise the issue of the stigmatisation of characters in society and family, where they require the intervention of a humane benefactor who understands them and acts as a mediator between them and society. Joyojeet Pal notes, 'the temperament of disability in Hindi cinema is either of punishment or dependence.'[13] The purpose of the benefactor is tainted with notions of divine intervention (alien), as in the film *Koi … Mil Gaya.*[14] In other representations like *Yuvvraaj, Paa*, *Laal Singh Chaddha,* and *Tubelight,*[15] the representation of neurodivergence takes place against the backdrop of a larger theme of family dynamics where the protagonists with neurodivergence become the connectors of fragmented families. Even the characters with disability in films like *Sholay*, *Pyare Mohan*, *Tom, Dick and Harry*, *Krazzy 4*, *Golmaal Returns,* and *Housefull 3*[16] are treated as comic relief, or they are infantilised and reduced to childlike archetypes.

As articulated in Hindi cinema with popular movies such as *Lagaan, MS Dhoni: The Untold Story, Mary Kom, Mukkabaaz, Dangal, Sultan, Chak De! India, Jhund,* and *Maidaan*[17]

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[10] Gulzar, Director, *Koshish* (Produced by Romu N. Sippy and Raj N. Sippy, 1972), 2h 5 m; Sai Paranjpye, Director, *Sparsh* (Produced by Basu Bhattacharya, 1980), 2h 25m; Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Director, *Khamoshi: The Musical* (Polygram and Tri Star International, 1996), 2h 40m.

[11] Mani Ratnam, Director, *Anjali* (Sujatha Productions, 1990), 2h 30m.

[12] Harry Baweja, Director, *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* (Baweja Movies, 2005), 1h 22m; Aamir Khan, Director, *Taare Zameen Par* (Aamir Khan Productions and PVR Pictures, 2007), 2h 44m; Anurag Basu, Director, *Barfi!* (Ishana Movies and UTV Motion Pictures, 2012), 2h 31m; Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Director, *Guzaarish* (UTV Motion Pictures and Sanjay Leela Bhansali Films, 2010), 2h 6m.

[13] Joyojeet Pal, 'Will Barfi Change the Way Bollywood Treats Disability?' *First Post,* 13 September 2012, https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/will-barfi-change-the-way-bollywood-treats-disability-453938.html, as quoted in Swagata Chatterjee, 'Aesthetics of Disability: The Growing Interest in Disability in Popular Hindi Cinema,' *postscriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies* 1 (2016), http://www.postscriptum.co.in.

[14] Rakesh Roshan, Director, *Koi … Mil Gaya* (Filmkraft Productions, 2003), 2h 51m.

[15] Subhash Ghai, Director, *Yuvvraaj* (Mukta Arts, 2008), 2h 42m; R. Balki, Director, *Paa* (Reliance Big Pictures, Amitabh Bachchan Corporation and MAD Entertainment, 2009), 2h 13m; Advait Chandan, Director, *Laal Singh Chaddha* (Paramount Pictures, Viacom 18 Studios and Aamir Khan Productions, 2022), 2h 39m; Kabir Khan, Director, *Tubelight* (Salman Khan Films and Kabir Khan Films, 2017), 2h 16m.

[16] Ramesh Sippy, Director, *Sholay* (United Producers and Sippy Films, 1975), 3h 24m; Indra Kumar, Director, *Pyare Mohan* (Produced by Indra Kumar and Ashok Thakeria, 2006), 2h 5m; Deepak Tijori, Director, *Tom, Dick and Harry* (Oracle Entertainment, 2006), 2h 20m; Jaideep Sen, Director, *Krazzy 4* (FilmKraft Productions, 2008), 1h 52m; Rohit Shetty, Director, *Golmaal Returns* (Shree Ashtivinayak Cine Vision, 2008), 2h 15m; Sajid Samji and Farhad Samji, Director, *Housefull 3* (Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, 2016), 2h 20m.

[17] Ashutosh Gowariker, Director, *Lagaan* (Aamir Khan Productions, 2001), 3h 44m; Neeraj Pandey, Director, *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (Fox Star Studios, Inspired Entertainment and Friday FilmWorks, 2016), 3h 10m; Omung Kumar, Director, *Mary Kom* (Bhansali Productions and Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2014), 2h 2m; Anurag Kashyap, Director, *Mukkabaaz* (Phantom Films and Colour Yellow Productions, 2017), 2h 34m; Nitesh Tiwari, Director, *Dangal* (Aamir Khan Productions and Walt Disney Pictures India, 2016), 2h 41m; Ali Abbas Zafar, Director, *Sultan* (Yash Raj Films, 2016), 2h 50m; Shimit Amin, Director, *Chak De! India* (Yash Raj Films, 2007), 2h 33m; Nagraj Manjule, Director, *Jhund* (T-Series, Tandav Films Entertainment Pvt, Aatpaat Films and

sports settings function as arenas of personal growth, emotional negotiation, and social redefinition for the players as well as the coaches. The films mentioned above record the multifaceted expressions of socio-cultural terrain in realms of nationalism, gender empowerment, caste and class resistance, social equality, personal redemption and emotional healing. Even in the films dwelling on the notions of sports and disability—*Iqbal, Ghoomer,* and *Chandu Champion*[18] sports operate as ideologically charged spaces which allow the dramatisation of social contestations, identity politics and individual inspirations, additionally pressed with 'social issues like poverty, healthcare and education.'[19] Sport becomes a gateway for the protagonists with disability to prove their self-worth, competing with the able-bodied hegemony. Disability becomes a 'cultural trope'[20] that is being 'objectified' under the 'cultural representation—theatre, literature, paintings, films and media.'[21]

Picturisation and audience reception in Bollywood have taken a drastic turn from *Taare Zameen Par* in 2007 to its thematic sequel *Sitaare Zameen Par* in 2025,[22] directed by R.S. Prasanna. Casting of people with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome and fragile X syndrome in leading roles acts as a revolutionary and radical alteration in the Hindi Cinema industry. *Sitaare Zameen Par* marks a departure from performative inclusion toward embodied representation, where sports do not become a motif of conquest, but rather an agent of celebration, inclusion, dialogue, and redefinition of human potential. The director opts for a different mode of representation of disability on screen. The film places disabled characters as round characters and central protagonists, rather than employing the theme of disability as 'narrative prosthetics' where the theme of disability is employed as a 'supplement'[23] or a symbolic device to the plot, just as 'prosthetics' are used to complete or support a body. In the film, the neurodivergent players are self-aware about themselves as one of the players (Sunil Gupta) speaks, 'we are normal, but our normal is a little different,'[24] and about his condition, he states, 'I would never want to have a child like me either … I completely know, no one should have to raise a child like me. Everyone should have healthy

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Cloud 9 Pictures, 2022), 2h 55m; Amit Sharma, Director, *Maidaan* (Zee Studios, Bayview Projects and Fresh Lime Films, 2024), 3h 1m.

[18] Nagesh Kukunoor, Director, *Iqbaal* (Mukta Searchlight Films, 2005), 2h 12m; R. Balki, Director, *Ghoomer* (Hope Film Makers, Saraswati Entertainment and Amitabh Bachchan Corporation, 2023), 2h 14m; Kabir Khan, Director, *Chandu Champion* (Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment and Kabir Khan Films, 2024), 2h 22m.

[19] Akshay Trilokinath Maurya, 'Disability Sports and the Quest for True Inclusivity: A Critical Analysis,' *Economic and Political Weekly* (Engage) 59, no. 2 (2024), 2.

[20] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,' *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002), 2, https://doi.org/10.1353/nwsa.2003.0005.

[21] Anne Waldschmidt, 'Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool,' in *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies* ed. Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen (Verlag, 2017), 2022, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839425336.

[22] Khan, *Taare Zameen Par;* R.S. Prasanna, Director, *Sitaare Zameen Par* (Aamir Khan Productions, 2025), 2h 35m.

[23] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthetics: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (University of Michigan Press, 2000), 2, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11523.

[24] Prasanna, Director, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 01:21:45–01:21:48.

children.'[25] This self-awareness and self-consciousness drive their lives with full optimism, resilience and confidence.

Thus, the film challenges the notion of narrative prosthetics and drives its discourse through agency, interiority and meaning beyond difference. These characters are neither sidekicks nor symbolic figures; they are central to the narrative, positioned as empowered beings with authenticity, inclusivity and narrative agency. Unlike other portrayals of disability and neurodivergence, *Sitaare Zameen Par* stands apart in terms of its characters, who bear the narrative control, exhibit distinct personalities and pursue individual dreams without being reduced to pitiable, sympathetic figures who are at the mercy of their caregivers, close benefactors, friends, family and relatives. Thus, the film reframes the difference not as tragedy but as a part of the human spectrum worthy of representation on its own terms, decentralising the gaze of the neurotypical saviour viewpoint. The film leads to the celebration of 'neurodiversity,' which endorses societal reform, making 'environments more supportive,' lowering the tags of 'normalisation' and using 'adaptive skills intervention.'[26]

While *Sitaare Zameen Par* draws its narrative inspiration and adaptation from Javier Fesser's Spanish comedy-drama film *Campeones,*[27] the two films show subtle differences in cultural framing, thematic focus and representational strategies in the contexts of Spain and India. *Campeones* (2018) critiques Spain's sporting culture and social stereotypes, but its scope remains person-centred, aligned towards the moral transformation of the coach. Alternatively, *Sitaare Zameen Par* interrogates India's systemic terrain, within the entrenched binaries of 'normal vs abnormal' and the invisibility of para-athletes. It connects disability with broader discourses of inclusion and social justice. On a broader purview, *Campeones* reinforces values of tolerance, co-existence and empathy through individual transformation, but *Sitaare Zameen Par* aims at a more profound cultural shift which celebrates difference as collective strength, critiques systems of exclusion and urges audiences to reconceptualise disability not as a deficit but as diversity.

Being a recent release on one of the much awaited and anticipated issues, the film gained huge popularity and became a big commercial success. *The Times of India* projected it as a 'wholesome' film with a message of 'inclusivity,' 'conveying that people with ID (intellectual disability) are employable, independent, full of life, and deeply empathetic.'[28] More than being a promotional tagline, 'wholesome' becomes a critical assessment of how Hindi cinema merges emotional warmth, social pedagogy and narrative entertainment, making the viewer smile, weep and reflect, restraining the narrative from collapsing into didacticism. By giving space to the characters with ID, audiences are invited to laugh 'with' the characters, not 'at' them. *India Today* further captured it as the film that 'makes you believe

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[25] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 01:40:30–01:40:53.

[26] Patrick Dwyer, Ava N. Gurba, Steven K. Kapp, Elizabeth Kilgallon, Lynnette H. Hersh, David S. Chang, Susan M. Rivera, and Kristen Gillespie-Lynch, 'Community Views of Neurodiversity, Models of Disability and Autism Intervention: Mixed Methods Reveal Shared Goals and Key Tensions,' *Autism* 29, no. 9 (2024), 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241273029.

[27] Javier Fresser, Director, *Campeones* (Películas Pendelton, Rey de Babia AIE, Morena Films and Telefónica Studios, 2018), 2h 4m.

[28] Dhaval Roy, 'Sitaare Zameen Par Movie Review: A Wholesome and Feel-Good Slam Dunk for Inclusion,' *Times of India,* 20 June 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/movie-reviews/sitaare-zameen-par/movie-review/121968627.cms.

in the inherent goodness of the world.'[29] It can be validated through the film's visual language, by contrasting hostile, rigid spaces (such as competitive classrooms or a judgmental society) with open, hopeful ones—playgrounds, courts, inclusive sporting events, where collaboration, care and recognition dominate. *News 18* points out that the film crushes 'the lopsided and ill-informed perspective of the mainstream Bollywood portrayals' of neurodivergence and disability.[30] The neurodivergent protagonists are neither reduced to caricatures nor glorified as extraordinary geniuses. Instead, *Sitaare Zameen Par* carefully traces their struggles with learning, communication and acceptance, showing how enforced academic and social normalcy suffocates individuality. Their athletic achievements are not presented as extraordinary exceptions, but as natural expressions of human capability once institutional support and recognition are provided. *Times Now* appreciated the film for presenting how every character's fears are turned into a 'celebration' and achievement of one and all.[31] The narrative carefully builds the struggles of neurodivergent para-athletes—not with melodrama but with authenticity, converting one's fears into achievements on sporting fields. Their victories are not portrayed as individual 'overcoming' stories but as communal celebrations with teammates, families and society at large sharing in the recognition of their worth. Therefore, *Sitaare Zameen Par* advances a counter-discourse to Bollywood's pathologising/ exceptionalist treatments of neurodivergence and disability by foregrounding dignity, collective achievement, and institutional reform through the medium of sports.

Academic intervention on the issue of representation of neurodivergence in Indian films and media remains nascent. This intersection of neurodivergence and film studies needs a discussion that not only underlines the binaries of disability with labels but also focuses upon the socio-cultural operations that are articulated when the discourse of the disabled as 'abject'[32] changes to empower individuals. Thus, in this paper, we use the film *Sitaare Zameen Par* as a cultural text, on which the methods of close textual analysis and scene analysis are applied. Under the framework of the 'social model of disability', we explore and witness the notions of 'enforced normalcy' by Lennard J. Davis and 'normate' by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. The objective of the paper is to underline how neurodivergence or intellectual disability is constructed and perceived socially and culturally in close, rigid, and fixed compartments of binaries. The article also evaluates how normalcy or structures of 'normate' are imposed on deviant groups.

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[29] Vineeta Kumar, 'The feminist soul of Sitaare Zameen Par: Can a mother still be a woman?' *India Today,* 23 June 2025, https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/standpoint/story/the-feminist-soul-of-sitaare-zameen-par-can-a-mother-still-be-a-woman-2744979-2025-06-23.

[30] Titas Chowdhury,' Sitaare Zameen Par Review: Aamir Khan-Starrer is a Well-Intentioned Film, But Drags in Second Half,' *News 18*, 20 June 2025, https://www.news18.com/movies/bollywood/sitaare-zameen-par-review-aamir-khan-starrer-is-a-well-intentioned-film-but-drags-in-second-half-9394531.html.

[31] Tanmayi Savadi, 'Sitaare Zameen Par Movie Review: Aamir Khan and His Stars Hit a Swashbuckling, Flawless Shot,' *Times Now*, 20 June 2025, https://www.timesnownews.com/entertainment-news/reviews/sitaare-zameen-par-movie-review-aamir-khan-and-his-stars-hit-a-swashbuckling-flawless-shot-review-152112770.

[32] Josh Dohmen, 'Disability as Abject: Kristeva, Disability, and Resistance,' *Hypatia* 31, no. 4 (2016), 767, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44076536.

Fractured paradigms: Socio-cultural critique of *Sitaare Zameen Par*

In the film *Sitaare Zameen Par*, Gulshan (Aamir Khan) is featured as an assistant basketball coach who trains a team of intellectually disabled or neurodivergent players in response to a court-mandated order for his reckless actions. The players in the team suffer from different neurodevelopmental disorders like autism, Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome and invisible autism, which had either developed before birth, that is, 'during the time of pregnancy' or 'due to … complications at the time of their birth.'[33] Gulshan is a brilliant coach, but lacks the sensitivity to perceive others' differences concerning their behaviour, actions, ideologies, thoughts and decisions. Due to his past anxieties and the additional trauma of being abandoned by his father, he experiences a fear of abandonment and flees into an escapism. As he confesses, 'I feel like everyone will leave me, so before anyone can leave me, I do something crazy and move away.'[34] He is afraid of accepting things that are different from the normal prototype or situations in which he must take a leap into the unknown for him. This may be seen in his indecisiveness about entering fatherhood or in his prolonged decision-making to take the responsibility of training the neurotypical players for the basketball championship.

With the 'social model of disability,' Mike Oliver distinguishes between 'impairment' and 'disability.'[35] According to him, impairment refers to a person's physical, sensory, or cognitive differences, such as blindness, paralysis, or neurodivergence. In contrast, disability is the social exclusion and disadvantage experienced because of social barriers. Anne Waldschmidt remarks, disability takes the 'form of alterity—re(produced) in history, society and culture.'[36] 'Alterity' refers to otherness; the dichotomy is constructed when disabled people are positioned as 'the Other' opposite the imagined normal. This situation can be traced through Gulshan's initial definition of intellectual disability as 'mad' or his early resistance to train the team of basketball para-athletes, where he places neurodivergent athletes in contrast to normal athletes. He questions and comments, 'How do I make a team? You need normal people for that.'[37] Building an ideology against the norm becomes the example of enforced normalcy, as decoded from the film when Guddu is being ridiculed by Gulshan for his intense phobia of water. Cleanliness and bodily discipline are tied to cultural norms of decency and fitness, but by not meeting the expectations of the norm, Guddu is perceived as abnormal. Though the film turns around when Gulshan helps Guddu overcome the fear, the initial stigma marks the pressure of enforced normalcy on disabled people. Lorella Terzi explains that disability is not a direct consequence of impairment, but it is socially embedded through 'institutional forms of exclusion and cultural attitudes.'[38] This is exhibited through the early training sessions, which display Gulshan's frustration and momentary

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[33] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:51:27–00:51:31.

[34] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 01:43:05–01:43:14.

[35] Mike Oliver, 'Defining Impairment and Disability: issues at stake,' in *Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability*, ed. Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer (The Disability Press, 1996), 41.

[36] Waldschmidt, 'Disability Goes Cultural,' 20.

[37] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:25:32–00:25:35.

[38] Lorella Terzi, 'The Social Model of Disability: A Philosophical Critique,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2004), 142, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0264-3758.2004.00269.

alienation, where he tries to impose rigid drills and loud instructions on neurotypical athletes, as he says, 'Who cares if these mad people win or lose?'[39] It is a visual example of enforced normalcy—the insistence that inclusion can only occur if they can meet the pre-set norms of mainstream performance, instead of reshaping the rules to fit diverse bodies. Even scepticism attached to the phrase 'good for nothing'[40] has also been pointed out, which questions their independence, employability and contribution to society, undermining their skills, creative potential and emotional endurance.

Figure 1. 'The Shoe Scene' where Sunil (Ashish Pendse) has trouble putting his shoes on the correct feet. Source. Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:44:26–00:44:51.

Unlike the 'medical model,' which views disability as a problem located within the individual that needs to be cured or fixed,[41] the social model argues that society fails to accommodate differences and disabilities. This inaccessibility is created by infrastructure, discriminatory policies, limited representation, and social stigma, and hence needs systemic and perspectival change, which brings in universal design, inclusive education, and dismantles ableist attitudes. The scene from the movie, which reconceptualises and reflects the above discussion and is symbolic of the social construction of disability, is where Sunil (Ashish Pendse) was troubled with his shoes, which he had put on the wrong feet. As the scene follows, on Gulshan's advice, he matched the shoes with the right feet, but on the bigger picture, the scene substantiates that shoes are the 'external container' that needs to be adjusted to fit the foot, not vice versa. The 'shoe scene' reiterates the instance of enforced normalcy; it is not a natural category but a statistical and industrial mode of social and cultural construction (Figure 1).

The shoe is a product of mass production that imposes 'normalcy' in accordance with its mass consumption, imposing the binaries of proper/improper placement. The external containers are the manufacturing companies, industrialists, and marketing agencies that work with the average statistical mean, which they consider to be the benchmark of normalcy. Hence, they produce the ideal product (shoe) for an abstract average person. Davis pinpoints this binary through the Gaussian (bell curve) distribution, where the average equals normal

[39] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:38:56–00:38:59.

[40] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:46:33–00:46:34.

[41] Zosia Zaks, 'Changing the Medical Model of Disability to the Normalization Model of Disability: Clarifying the Past to Create a New Future Direction,' *Disability and Society* 39, no.12 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2255926; Andrew J. Hogan, 'Social and medical models of disability and mental health: evolution and renewal,' *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal* 191, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.181008; Whitney A Thurman, Tracie C Harrison, Alexandra A Garcia, and William M Sage, 'The social construction of disability and the capabilities approach: Implications for nursing, *Nursing Forum* 54, no 4 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12389.

and the deviation equals abnormal. This neutral math is present as a working principle in medicine, schooling, industry, labour and it charts the proposition of 'enforced normalcy,' making it a social compulsion to fit bodies and minds to the average. Thus, society (institutions, practices, material environments) is an external container that needs to adjust its ideology, structure, and perceptions for neurodivergent individuals. People with intellectual disabilities are biologically born with certain inherent features that cannot be 'corrected' or 'modulated,' so they need flexible external containers that make room for them. The scene allegorises a universal-design inversion: it is the shoe (society) that must flex to the foot (person), not vice versa. The social construction of disability, therefore, calls for a radical epistemic shift—from disability as deficit to disability as a site of knowledge, resistance, and relational ethics. Mike Oliver notes that, with the social model of disability and disabled people's movement, there has been a significant 'change in media representations,' strengthening their existence by making an 'accessible system' while reducing discrimination.[42]

Further, the film casts a commentary on different socio-cultural aspects, the way in which neurodivergence or intellectual disability is treated and perceived by people, the community, professionals, and institutional setups. The legal court emphasises the notion of 'punishment' in the disguise of community service, where training a team of intellectually disabled players would be treated as a penalty for Gulshan. The film depicts Gulshan as a 'professional' sports coach who is goal-driven and competitive but exhibits discomfort, hesitation, and prejudice against para-athletes. His reluctance is not rooted in malice, but in a deeply internalised notion of 'normalcy' and performance that excludes alternative expressions of ability. Thus, the film uses Gulshan's resistance to expose entrenched ableism within professional sports and society at large, which celebrates sportspeople who exhibit attributes of physical excellence, discipline, and victory, aligning with ideals of success and perfection. The movie also notes that despite growing in visibility with upcoming mass media and social platforms, para-sports still face systemic neglect pertaining to infrastructure, administration, representation, and public perception that equates sports values with performance rather than participation.

In addition, the film amplifies aspects of stigmatisation and stereotyping that are faced by team players. During a bus trip returning from a competition, the players were humiliated and abused by co-passengers and the driver. They exclaim, 'These people should have a different bus. This bus is for normal people, not for the crazy people.'[43] Erving Goffman conceptualises this 'disablement' as a process rooted in 'societal anticipations' where individuals are categorised based on perceived conformity to dominant norms, termed as 'virtual social identity,' reducing a person from being seen as 'whole' to 'tainted' or undesirable.[44] Virtual social disability is the ascriptive category projected onto neurodivergent people by societal anticipations that are produced in interaction and policed in public space. This scene in the movie encapsulates Erving Goffman's claim that stigma is relational; the

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[42] Mike Oliver, 'The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years On,' *Disability and Society* 28, no. 7 (2013), 1025, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.818773.

[43] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 01:21:37–01:21:41.

[44] Erving Goffman, *Stigma Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Simon and Schuster, 1963) as quoted in Raghava C. Reddy, 'From Impairment to Disability and Beyond: Critical Explorations in Disability Studies.' *Sociological Bulletin* 60, no. 2 (2011), 289, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920110205.

abuse that the players faced is not a spontaneous reaction but the enactment of a cultural script that equates intellectual disability with madness and danger. The players are pushed from the category of bus travellers to 'tainted' figures whose access to everyday commons must be denied. Like bus co-travellers, Gulshan disparages the disabilities of the team members by referring to them as ill-fated for their families, 'Having a child like this, what's so good or beautiful about it?'[45] Further, Gulshan was under the impression that the families and friends of the para athletes would consider them to be 'a burden' and would hardly be interested in their life achievements; consequently, just before the beginning of the match, he asks, 'You've got so many chairs here, who's going to come on a Monday morning?'[46] Gulshan's condemnation persists to a later stage of the film, where he expressed that he was afraid of having children of his own because, 'What if our own kid has Down syndrome or autism? Our kids could be like them!'[47]

Another facet of stigmatisation comes into focus with the scene of reconceptualisation of Hargovind's past. It showcases the instance of 'reverse integration.'[48] Rebecca Ramsden and her colleagues define reverse integration as 'the inclusion of able-bodied people into disability sports.'[49] The film skilfully blends the aspects of fiction and reality by referring to Hargovind's past as a true account of the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, where Spanish able-bodied basketball players disguised themselves as intellectually disabled.[50] The scene reflects upon the mistrust that the coach and the national organisations have of their neurodivergent players with regard to their ability and performativity. This puts players in a vulnerable position with a fear of abandonment. As expressed by Hargovind, 'Our coach wanted to win at any cost. He didn't have faith in us. Since then, I've never really trusted a coach.'[51]

Our discussion on sports and disability representation stretches our analysis from the 'social model of disability' to the 'cultural model of disability' as studied and graphed by Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell. Their discussion in the book, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, questions how disability is represented, narrated, and understood within cultural texts, practices, and symbols.[52] Traditionally, sports as a cultural narrative space are inherently associated with physical prowess, strategic thinking, discipline, and teamwork, measured along the normative standardisations of ability. In the film, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* with neurotypical peers, coaches, and society reassessing ingrained prejudices, the sports

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[45] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:59:21–00:59:26.

[46] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:58:58–00:59:02.

[47] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 2025, 01:40:11–01:40:17.

[48] Rebecca Ramsden, Rick Hayman, Paul Potrac, and Florentina Johanna Hettinga, 'Sport Participation for People with Disabilities: Exploring the Potential of Reverse Integration and Inclusion through Wheelchair Basketball,' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 2491 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20032491.

[49] Ramsden et al. 'Sport Participation for People with Disabilities,' 1.

[50] Matt Bramford, Sydney Paralympians relive Spanish Basketball Cheating Scandal,' *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio Sydney*, 27 October 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-27/sydney-2000-paralympics-spanish-basketball-cheating-scandal/12749156.

[51] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 01:42:31–01:42:41.

[52] Sharon L. Synder and David T. Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

backdrop transcends the discourse of marginalisation, stigmatisation, and limitation into potential, resilience, and social inclusion. It brings in the intricacies of 'destigmatisation' through 'social sharing of emotions,' 'social contact' and 'social support,'[53] which refine the interpersonal experiences among themselves and with Gulshan, Kartaar Paaji and Sunita Arora.

Even the basketball court in the film emerges as a potent liminal space, an in-between zone that is bounded yet fluid, governed by rules, rhythm, and teamwork, yet open to spontaneity, movement, and improvisation. In the movie, the sport of basketball serves as a structure of physical articulation and 'zone of transition' for all the neurodivergent players and the coach who are trying to strike a balance between inner thoughts, frustrations, emotional complexities, and ambitions. The act of coaching and articulating with Down syndrome athletes along the lines of communication, action, behaviour, and response helped Gulshan confront his escapist tendencies, particularly the impulse to detach from pain, failure, and emotional intimacy, moving from scepticism to empathy and purpose. Each pass, dribble, and basket becomes a metaphor of personal recalibration, adjustment and improvement, which steps towards self-realisation and communal belonging (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Basketball Court, acting as liminal and heterotopic space for neurodivergent players.
Source. Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:55:30 (left) and 00:55:51 (right).

Further, the basketball court also becomes a heterotopic space for the neurodivergent players who perceive it as a real physical space that exists outside normative social structures, often juxtaposed with contradiction, resistance, and reimagination. It is a site of 'otherness' or 'counter-space' that reflects and disrupts the dominant ideologies of capability or incapability. In his essay 'Of Other Spaces,' Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as real material spaces that function as 'counter-sites.'[54] These sites are present within the society in tension with it,

[53] Sheila Matson-Barkat, Petya Puncheva-Michelotti, Clara Koetz, and Sophie Hennekam, 'Destigmatisation through social sharing of emotions and empowerment: The case of disabled athletes and consumers of disability sports,' *Journal of Business Research* 149 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.05.027; Jocelyn S. Wikle and Carrie L. Shandra, 'Social Contact and Family Contact for Youth with Disabilities,' *Youth and Society* 55, no. 6 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X221074717; Verena Hofmann and Christoph M. Müller, 'Language skills and social contact among students with intellectual disabilities in special needs schools,' *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 30 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2021.100534; Leila Dehghankar, Saman Valinezhad, Mohammad Amerzadeh, Farnoosh Zarabadi Poor, Zahra Hosseinkhani, and Seyedeh Ameneh Motalebi, 'Relationship between perceived social support and disability with the mediating role of perceived stress among older adults,' *BMC Geriatrics* 24, no. 276 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-024-04871-z.

[54] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,' *Architecture/ Movement/ Continuité*,' trans. Jay Miskowiec (1984), 3, https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf.

connected but different from normative spaces. When occupied by the neurotypical players, the basketball court functions as a heterotopia of deviation, where the ones marked as 'abnormal' find legitimacy and expression. The film also showcases this with the contrasting initial and climax scenes of the film. In the first scene, the basketball court is scripted as a site of meritocracy, discipline, physical power and form, with an inclination of victory, but in the climax scene, the basketball court functions as a site of participation, unanimity, and inclusivity. The juxtaposition exemplifies the basketball court as a single site holding two contradictory logics—ableist norms versus inclusivity of deviation. Hence, the film notes the underpinning of participation over pity and process over perfection, foregrounding the theme of identity and collective solidarity as a site of resistance against ableist representations.

Different, not defective: Enforced normalcy as a tool of social disablement

Lennard J. Davis, in his book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, introduces the concept of 'enforced normalcy' that entails the idea that 'normalcy' is a historically constructed and socially enforced 'ideal' shaped by external mechanisms such as education, employment, media, architecture, and medical practices. Davis explains how the 'bell curve' is used as a statistical and ideological tool in manufacturing and in enforcing normative ideals, where the average (mean) becomes the 'ideal,' and any deviation from it is marked as deficient or excessive.[55] Michael Oliver proposes that disability is a 'social product' of capitalist structures that produces 'the category of disability,' creating the ideology of 'normalization.'[56] The systematic hegemonic social processes have created a structure of 'norm' that perpetuates the binaries of abled and disabled, fit and unfit, rational and irrational, or productive and unproductive. These binaries further produce exclusion by stigmatising the bodies and minds that deviate from the arbitrary norms. This hegemonic discourse along with entrenched binaries reveal how power, language, and hierarchy work together to maintain ableist norms and exclude those who do not conform. One such deviant entity from the ruled normalcy domain is neurodivergence or intellectual disabilities, where 'normal brain'[57] or normal behaviour is the standard. Neurodivergent individuals are labelled as deviant with deficit-based language— 'retarded,' 'low functioning,' or 'slow,' that reduces them into the category of the 'other' based on performance-based hierarchies. Goodley critiques 'ableism' as the 'pervasive cultural logic' that privileges 'autonomy, self-sufficiency, productivity and independence,' where the 'dis/ability' complex becomes a dualistic system of celebration, normalcy and ability necessitating the marginalisation of disability.[58]

Tobin Siebers comments, 'people with disabilities … appear as a speck of reality uncontrolled by the ideological forces of society'[59] where 'realism' casts 'fragmentations,'

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[55] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (Verso, 1995).

[56] Michael J. Oliver, 'Capitalism, Disability and Ideology: A Materialist Critique of the Normalization Principle,' in *A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and Impact*, ed. Robert J. Flynn and Raymond A. Lemay (University of Ottawa Press,1999), 164, http://www.independentliving.org/docs3/oliver99.pdf.

[57] Thomas Armstrong, 'The Myth of the Normal Brain: Embracing Neurodiversity,' *AMA Journal of Ethics* 17, no. 4 (2015), 350, https://doi.org/10.1001/journalofethics.2015.17.4.msoc1-1504.

[58] Goodley, 'The Dis/Ability Complex,' 6.

[59] Tobin Siebers, 'Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body,' *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (2001), 739, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/13.4.737.

'imperfect bodies,' 'human difference' and defect.'[60] He draws attention to the central tension in disability theory and representation by pointing out the paradox, to which the disability resists being completely absorbed into disciplinary power, but cultural and artistic depictions frequently reframe it into deficit terms, reinforcing stigma rather than challenging it. This entails the ideology of normalcy, which acts as a disciplinary regime—defining, categorising and controlling the norms of being functional, productive or intelligent, and those who could regularise these functions in accordance with the specificities are often pathologised, institutionalised or treated to approximate normal behaviour rather than being supported for their difference. According to Linda Alcoff, 'perception emerges as a discursive effect,' which becomes a 'learned process' where 'seeing and knowing are intimately interwoven in historically and culturally specific ways,' and made 'habitual and embodied' in our consciousness.[61] She explains that what we see is never neutral or sensory, rather it is shaped by cultural narratives, historical texts and social discourses that align with dominant systems of knowledge and power. Over time, such modes of perception become embodied in the consciousness that produces 'normalcy,' making discriminatory ways of seeing—whether in race, gender or disability through its politics of vision. As Kartar Paaji in the film advocates, 'everyone is stuck to their own normal, you have your own normal, they have theirs.'[62] In medical and psychological fields, neurodivergence is framed with 'deficit models,'[63] where the diagnosis of autism, ADHD, Down syndrome, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia or other intellectual differences are not treated as variations of human cognition impairment, but rather as 'disabilities' which need to be masked, managed and cured. Cultural representations, such as in media, cinema and literature, further reinforce the idea of (dis)ability through the picturisation of characters as tragic victims, comic relief players or inspirational savants.

In the film, Gulshan, basing his comments the team members' abilities to play basketball, derides players as 'mad,' 'useless,' 'good for nothing,'[64] enforcing the binaries of normal and abnormal upon them. Sibonokuhle Ndlovu notes, 'disability is a by-product of the process of categorisation and labelling.'[65] By marking certain bodies as 'normal' and others as 'abnormal,' societies generate categories that assign value, capability and legitimacy. As highlighted earlier, modern societies institutionalise the 'average' body and mind through statistics, schooling, medicine and law, thereby enforcing conformity to a norm. This could be further substantiated through the conversations between Kartar Paaji and Gulshan. Kartar Paaji (Gurpal Singh), in charge of the sports complex at Sarvodaya Centre, adds perspective to Gulshan's reductionist approach by introducing Gulshan's team of intellectually disabled

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[60] Siebers, 'Disability in Theory,' 749.

[61] Linda Martin Alcoff, 'Towards a phenomenology of racial embodiment,' *Radical Philosophy* 95 (1999), https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp95_article2_towardsaphenomenologyofracialembodiment_alcoff.pdf, as quoted in Samantha Murray, 'Corporeal Knowledges and Deviant Bodies: Perceiving the Fat Body,' *Social Semiotics* 17, no. 3 (2007), 362, https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330701448694.

[62] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:26:42–00:26:48.

[63] Boys, 'Disability Studies, Neurodivergence and Architecture,' 41.

[64] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:46:34–00:46:36.

[65] Ndlovu, 'Humanness and Ableism: Construction and Deconstruction of Disability,' 65.

players through his eyes by standing apart from the dichotomies of normal and abnormal and tracing the players' position in the spectrum of 'differently abled.' Every athlete is competent and worthy of their existence. Raju (Rishabh Jain) and Guddu (Gopal Krishnan Verma) possess special abilities that allow them to connect with nature and animals simultaneously. Karim Qhureshi (Samvit Desai) holds family responsibilities by working in a restaurant. Satbir (Aroush Datta) is an expert mechanic teaching mechanical engineering students about cars. Sharmaji (Rishi Shahani) works in a café. To turn his speech defect into his empowerment and maintain interpersonal relationships, he gives discount to his customers who can understand his language. Lotus (Aayush Bhansali) works in a dye factory, and Hargovind (Naman Misra) is good at basketball. Kartar Paaji enumerates the skills of every neurodivergent team player, which Gulshan also accepts, but he still remains sceptical of Sunil's fondness for tracking the time of the flights, considering it to be 'abnormal behaviour.'[66] Again, Kartar reasons that if the hobby of tracking birds can be professionalised as 'birdwatchers' or the hobby of collecting stamps can be professionalised as 'stamp collectors,' without stereotyping them as 'mental' or 'abnormal,' then why can a person not have a different hobby from the mainstream? He remarks, 'we all have our own hobbies, we all have our own normal.'[67] As Preeti and Nagendra Kumar assert, 'the fight against the title 'disability' is an aspect of identity,' which makes an individual 'unworthy and inferior to the rest of the world.'[68] The label 'disability' is not a neutral descriptor but a discursive marker that carries connotations of lack, deficiency and inferiority, and hence the identity is socially imposed rather than self-chosen, reducing a complex personhood to a deficit category.

Figure 3. The dynamics between Gulshan and Kartar Paaji. Kartar Paaji's expressions while trying to bring a perspectival change in Gulshan about the binaries of 'normal vs abnormal.'
Source: Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:49:01 (left) and 00:59:32 (right).

[66] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:50: 52–00:50:54.

[67] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:51:18–00:51:21.

[68] Preeti and Nagendra Kumar, 'Disability and Fashion Identity: A Critical Study of Margarita with a Straw (2014),' *Literary Voice* (2023), 275, https://literaryvoice.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/LV-December-2023.-Special-Edition.pdf.

Figure 4. The dynamics between Gulshan and Kartar Paaji. Gulshan's expressions of scepticism and smirk on knowing the abilities of neurotypical athletes and the love and acceptance of their families towards them. Source: Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:49:05 (left) and 00:59:20 (right).

Furthermore, the dynamics between Gulshan and Kartar Paaji, as discussed above, can also be understood with their grammatically patterned scenes through camera angles and dialogue pacing. A mixed play of two-shot setups and over-the-shoulder shots have been used to deliver sentiment and structure (Figure 4). The director craftily uses medium close-ups and two shots with a deliberate eye-level framing to avoid any hierarchical coding. Instead, the film has been encoded to highlight perspectival differences in Gulshan and Kartar Paaji in the ways they view the concept of 'normal' with an effort towards perspectival reframing. The camera embodies dialogic reciprocity but is not divided into superior versus subordinate tangents. The gradation of Gulshan's perspectival difference is also recorded through over-the-shoulder (OTS) shots alternating between Gulshan and Kartar when framed through the other's silhouette. This could be recorded in his initial confrontational and resistant exchanges when he was being sceptical, defensive, and impatient with neurotypical athletes delivering a remark upon enforced normative standardisation. The shifts and transitions between OTS shots and two shots become a visual shorthand for Gulshan's transformation. The dialogues and facial expressions are scripted through OTS shots, representing differences in opinion, distance and hierarchy. However, the mentoring scenes from Kartar's angle are filmed in two-shots representing closeness, parity and a shared perspective of plural normalcies. Moreover, dialogue pacing also contributes to dismantling enforced normatives, especially when Kartar's pacing becomes pedagogical. His lines punctuate the montage with low-frequency cues—'give them some time,' or 'take a look first' to Gulshan's staccato imperatives. Even the narrative framing is so strategised and structured that the philosophical and reflective discussions between Kartar Paaji and Gulshan are viewed as a counternarrative to one's ideology, not a pedestalised verdict. Gulshan's attitude of inclusivity and acceptance is grounded in his empirical observations, where Kartar's voice only acts as an added perspective. Thus, Kartar mediates and Gulshan motivates, building an alternative perspective of differential normalities.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson expands this concept and ideology of 'normate' in her influential work, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. She describes 'normate' as a culturally constructed identity that is not based on biology but emerges through dominant societal norms tied to ability, race, gender, class, and sexuality. She underlines that 'normate' is a 'constructed identity' of set 'bodily configurations and cultural capital' that enables an individual to 'step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them.'[69] In the film, this could be validated through Gulshan's ego; he positions himself as an authority figure who can mock others who are different from him in any way, which he later addresses as his 'biggest shortcoming.'[70] He expresses, 'They understand emotions so well, whereas I can't even understand what people are saying most of the time; always thinking about myself, not caring about anyone else.'[71] Normate is a

[69] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Preface,' in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, (Columbia University Press, 1997), xii.

[70] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 02:18:23–02:18:26.

[71] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 02:18:15–02:18:22.

position of privilege that serves as the benchmark against all the 'other' bodies, which is associated with assumed competence, visibility in public and professional spheres, and control over representation. It disciplines individuals into internalising norms and marginalises those who resist and cannot conform. Foucault emphasises, 'normalization works through the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life.'[72] This could be witnessed through the exemplary scenes from the film, where one could observe that Gulshan was the only 'normal' person among ten neurodivergent 'abnormal' players. This reverses the whole criterion of normalcy because Gulshan is now unable to understand their language, actions, and behaviour, making him a deviant individual among normal para-athletes, as he is captivated by the gaze of the neurodivergent athletes. Hargovind, who is comparatively 'better than the others,' and bears a condition of 'invisible autism,' understands that Gulshan is also impaired in the hands of his own ego and emotional vulnerability. This is being reflected in his words, 'we are coaching him, we know he's lacking up here (touching the heart) … that's unavoidable. But eventually he'll learn to live with it.'[73]

During the initial scenes of training, which display the mirror image of Gulshan's resistance and pertinences, Gulshan and the neurodivergent players are cinematised face to face, re-emphasising the binaries of 'normal' versus 'abnormal' (Figure 3) The visual depiction entails the 'normative position'—the unmarked, invisible centre against which the difference is measured. Through positioning Gulshan opposite the ten neurotypical players the gaze and composition of normalcy is reversed. On meeting with the players for the first time and during his subsequent interactions, Gulshan feels alienated, disturbed, and destabilised, requiring the support and guidance of the players for better comprehension and communication. This reverses the 'isolating gaze,' where the stereotyped 'abnormals' observe, categorise and discipline the 'normal.' Fast-paced montages are used as a technique in the film, which stitches together the point-of-view shots from the players' perspective with their contemplated actions with the ball in their hand, concentrated faces while basketing or when trying to figure out their next consequent action alongside Gulshan's surprised, amazed and sceptical reactions. Sometimes, viewers are made to see through the players' eyes, forcing Gulshan to become the object of their gaze—a Foucauldian reversal of surveillance (Figure 5).[74]

[72] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *Volume 1: An Introduction* (Pantheon Books, 1976), 140, https://qmplus.qmul.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/2553455/mod_resource/content/1/The%20History%20of%20Sexuality%2C%20Volume%201%20An%20Introduction%20by%20Michel%20Foucault%20%28z-lib.org%29.pdf, as quoted in Paige Lau, 'Mental Illness, Normalization, and the Construction of the Abnormal Subject,' *Furman Humanities Review* 34, no. 5 (2023), 64, https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/fhr/vol34/iss1/5.

[73] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 01:35:53–01:36:07.

[74] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (Routledge, [1963] 1989), https://monoskop.org/images/9/92/Foucault_Michel_The_Birth_of_the_Clinic_1976.pdf.

Figure 5. Subsequent frames recording the expressions of neurodivergent athletes and Gulshan reflecting a reversal of surveillance, where Gulshan (normal) becomes the object of gaze to the neurodivergent athletes (abnormal).
Source: Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:20:47.

But in the later scenes and in the film's climax, Gulshan gets absorbed into the group frame, cheering, motivating and encouraging alongside them. The mise-en-scène enacts a reversal where the players are no longer othered; instead, Gulshan's claim to normativity is destabilised, shifting the knots from assimilation to recognition and equity. This is also addressed through the tonality and colour schemes used in the film. On the whole, the majority of shots are shot with warm and diffused natural light mixed with gentle humour, family-friendly dialogues and empathetic performances. Yellow is culturally encoded with auspiciousness, renewal and social festivity in the Indian context. The tournament scene or the climax scene borrows this vernacular code to showcase it as a moment of civic celebration, unfolding disability into the everyday symbolic fabric and hence rendering inclusion as an aesthetic and emotional experience rather than a mandate or structural obligation.

Tobin Siebers, through his foundational works, *Disability Theory* and *Disability Aesthetics*, reenvisions the cultural obsession with bodily perfection, coherence, and independence that highlights the normative definitions of beauty, value, and competence. He argues, 'disability is not mere unwanted content … but a mode of appearance that grows increasingly identifiable over time as aesthetic itself.'[75] More than an expectation, uniformity has become an aesthetic and moral judgement that polices the visibility of non-normative bodies in public and artistic spaces. Enforced normalcy is sustained by an aesthetic regime that erases and corrects visible disability to preserve the illusion of flawlessness, orienting it to the 'neutral' body. Thus, with the mediated representation, the film appeals to neurodiversity, which is a 'rich variation of cognitive, sensory and communication experiences' that requires 'social acceptance and inclusion.'[76]

'Normal' vs 'abnormal': Manufactured binaries and their discontents

The film as a genre develops into a 'cultural narrative,'[77] when 'based on different socio-cultural issues' exerting a 'profound influence on individuals by providing guidance on acceptable behaviour, norms, and values.'[78] Films in popular culture not only decentralise the boundaries of normal and abnormal, or ability and disability, but also highlight other socio-cultural binaries segmented upon the individuals that question their identity, performativity and functionality. In the film, *Sitaare Zameen Par*, Gulshan becomes the microcosm of societal perspectives and belief systems, demarcating the binaries stemming from the realms of 'normal' and 'abnormal.' Providing a commentary on societal and cultural performativity, the

[75] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 43, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.1134097.

[76] Hagar Goldberg, 'Unravelling Neurodiversity: Insights from Neuroscientific Perspectives,' *Encyclopedia* 3, no. 3 (2023), 977, https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia3030070.

[77] Robert Scholes, 'Narration and Narrativity in Film,' *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1, no.3 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1080/10509207609360956.

[78] Kishan Kumar Mishra, 'Bollywood Comedy Films as Catalysts for Body Positivity and Self-Acceptance,' *University of Bucharest Review* 13, no. 2 (2023), 38, https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.2.4.

film casts its shadow upon other rooted binaries, where not only neurodivergent players but also the pre-conceived and stigmatised notions of height, motherhood, and defeat are being treated through the lens of divergence and abnormalities.

The binary of height in basketball distinguishes 'tall players' as ideal or 'normal' and 'shorter' players as exceptions or 'abnormal.' Height is frequently observed as a natural advantage where tall players can easily dominate rebounding, shot-blocking and close-range scoring, small forwards and shooting guards.[79] This criterion is even favoured while scouting, and during team selection and training systems, considering it to be the fit physical profile. This height binary, used while deciding the eligibility criteria for team selection, reinforces structural biases where shorter or average-height players need to constantly prove their worth through extraordinary skill, speed or game intelligence. These binary rules limit one's opportunities and sideline creativity, agility, and tactical versatility in favour of physical dominance. This binary has also been underlined in the film through the coach Gulshan, who is brilliant in his game, but due to his 'short' height, he has to face stigmatisation, rejection and scepticism. As his mother substantiates, his coach has 'refused to take his trials for such a short player.'[80] He has even been witnessed to be triggered and agitated by the association of 'shorty'[81] with him. Thus, this encapsulates how physical stature becomes an exclusionary filter for legitimacy in sport, reinforcing ableist and meritocratic myths. This analogy resonates with broader discourse on disability studies, just as basketball constructs tallness as a benchmark of normalcy, education systems construct rigid cognitive standards valuing neurotypical productivity models.

Another instance of a stratified binary which the film showcases is of motherhood. This aspect is well embedded through the debates on a mother's performativity— a 'good mother' as normal versus an abnormal 'bad mother'[82] where society idealises the mother as a selfless, nurturing, emotionally available commodity who is wholly devoted to her children, often at the cost of her own identity, ambition and well-being. Gulshan's said, after knowing his mother's love relationship, 'mothers don't have a life of their own,'[83] which pins down the binary of a good, dutiful, committed mother and a mother who has a life of her own. This idea pathologises normal maternal ambivalence, exhaustion or boundaries that fail to meet societal standards of maternal perfection, creating guilt and stigma. This dichotomy is not

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[79] Ivan Zari´c, Filip Kuki´c, Nemanja Jovi´cevi´c, Milan Zari´, Milan Markovi´c, Lazar Toski´c, and Milivoj Dopsaj, 'Body Height of Elite Basketball Players: Do Taller Basketball Teams Rank Better at the FIBA World Cup?' *Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 3141 (2020), https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17093141; Sergej M. Ostojic, Sanja Mazic and Nenad Dikic, 'Profiling in Basketball: Physical and Physiological Characteristics off Elite Players,' *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* 20, no. 4 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1519/R-15944.1; Masaru Teramoto and Chad L Cross, 'Importance of team height to winning games in the National Basketball Association,' *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching* 13, no. 4 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954117730953.

[80] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:39:35–00:39:37.

[81] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 00:39:21–00:39:22.

[82] Shivalika Agarwal and Nagendra Kumar, 'Mothers Born or Produced? An Analysis of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Well-Behaved Indian Women,' *Journal of International Women's Studies* 25, no. 5 (2023), https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss5/7; Rebecca Powell, 'Good Mothers, Bad Mothers and Mommy Bloggers: Rhetorical Resistance and Fluid Subjectivities,' *MP: An Online Feminist Journal* (2010), https://academinist.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/03_Powell_Bloggers.pdf.

[83] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 02:03:46–02:03:48.

natural rather socially constructed, which disciplines women into self-erasure for their children's sake. The notion of the 'ideal mother' functions as the maternal normate—a socially invisible yet powerful archetype against which all mothers' performativity is measured. The disabling element here is not the mother's actual practices but the societal refusal to recognise diverse maternal identities outside the normative ideal.

Identically, the binary of 'win' as normal and 'lose' as abnormal is deeply ingrained in the structure and essence of sports, where outcomes are encapsulated within absolute terms—victory signifies success while defeat is equated with failure. This dualism often operates on a performance-centric mindset that values achievement over process, often overshadowing growth, efforts and personal development.[84] This binary has been questioned and challenged in the film, when the team 'Sitaare,' who has won multiple matches back-to-back, but lost the final, laud their failure with celebration rather than being dejected and despondent about it. Departing from the nuances of winning and losing, the team cherishes its resilience, teamwork, and self-awareness, defining the journey not by its outcome but by the transformation, confidence and sense of belonging of team members, as Golu (Simran Mangeshkar) affirms, 'we have won in second place.'[85] The film reclaims that meaning of sports as a space for empowerment rather than just conquest, as Golu noted, 'we are here to win, not to humiliate anyone.'[86] It proposes that the essence of true victory lies in participation, connection and self-acceptance that offer a humane and inclusive interpretation of what it means to play. The normate athlete reinforces the myth of meritocracy, reflecting innate superiority and talent. Winning is naturalised as the default aspiration, while losing is condemned as a deviation where one outcome is privileged over the other, making one aspect of life desirable while relegating the other to the margins.

Another binary to which the film sets its undertone is of 'I' as superior or normal and 'they' as the 'other' or inferior or abnormal. Edward W. Said's concept of Orientalism that critiques the 'other' as irrational, backward and subjugated while positioning oneself as rational, progressive and superior is not limited to the East vs West dichotomy; rather, it functions an ideological tool to maintain hierarchies that define one group (the Self) as normative and superior and the other as deviant or lacking.[87] Initially, Gulshan tries to occupy a civilising stance, claiming his epistemic authority over the team's bodies, capacities and temporality, presuming a lack in the other and a remedy in himself. The OTS shots frame the players through Gulshan's body glance with the object of his gaze. In his early drill sequences, he often cuts off the players' speech and tries to replace it with his sharp imperative tone, denying the players' narrative authority. This is an example of Orientalist silencing, where the 'other' knowledge is invalidated and replaced by the authoritative voice of the 'civiliser.' Moreover, his initial body language, with stopwatch clutched, held chest high, chin lifted, feet apart, Gulshan plants himself as the fixed axis around which the others have to align. Such visual cues create a Foucauldian spectacle of the body that sees its subjects with a disciplinary

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[84] Heidi Muller, 'Win, Lose, Or Engage: Exploring the Perspective of Creative Engagement in Team Sports,' *The International Journal of Sport and Society* 4, no. 1 (2014), https://doi.org/10.18848/2152-7857/CGP/v04i01/53964.

[85] Prasanna, Sitaare Zameen Par, 02:16:23–02:16:25.

[86] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 01:32:06–01:32:09.

[87] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1978).

gaze.[88] Gulshan places neurodivergent players as 'other', perceiving them as unpredictable, emotionally excessive and incapable of serious competition. His initial reluctance to coach them echoes the Orientalist gaze—one that reduces the 'other' to a stereotype, erasing one's peculiarity and distinctiveness. This could also be evaluated as he confesses to his wife, 'I am not their coach. They are mine. I always thought they were lacking in some way. But now I realise it was I who was lacking.'[89] He even makes his successor coach cautious, 'Just don't make the mistake of thinking you're more intelligent than them. They're a lot smarter than you and me. You'll end up learning a lot more than you can actually teach them.'[90]

Through the cinematic representation like those in *Sitaare Zameen Par*, binaries are depicted as reductive frameworks—short/tall height of basketball players, good/bad motherhood, win/lose in sports, and I/they, meta-grounded in the constructive compartments of 'normal' and 'abnormal.' Envisioning these fixed social norms along the lines of contrast and comparison, one fails to capture the fluid, graded and complex realities of human experience. Thus, rather than resolving the binaries through inversion (making inferior the superior), the narrative altogether dissolves them, embracing multiplicity and mutual recognition.

Conclusion

Sitaare Zameen Par offers a layered socio-cultural critique of how neurodivergence and issts dis(ability) is constructed, perceived and regulated within contemporary society. The film occupies an ambivalent position between progressive disruption and sentimental containment. On the one hand, the film becomes a landmark in Bollywood cinema for its authentic casting of neurodivergent actors and its refusal to present disability through a tragic or comic lens. On the other hand, the narrative dominates the transformation arc of Gulshan, where the players' development is filtered through his growth, which positions the film as a saviour narrative. Thus, while it unsettles the binary of ability/disability, it simultaneously reinscribes normative frameworks of dependency by centring the story around an able-bodied mediator. This also risks the film sliding into sentimentality, where the narrative leans towards the idealisation of disabled characters as morally pure or inherently good. Even after critiquing systemic barriers, like institutional support, employment discrimination and societal exclusion, the plot revolves around 'heartwarming' outcomes and strengthened individualities, distancing the core from reality. Another factor that the film undermines is presenting intellectual disability as a single collective, playful, kind, and empathetic, converting a group of para-athletes into a single homogenised identity. This restricts exploring their diverse abilities, challenges and aspirations.

Therefore, drawing upon the 'social model of disability' incorporated through the concepts of 'normalcy' by Lennard J Davis and 'normate' by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, the paper has explored social and structural barriers such as stigma, exclusion, mistrust, and inaccessible practices. The transformative journey of Gulshan from his self-emotional complexity and reductionist approach of labelling an individual into fixities, 'normal' and 'abnormal,' to an approach of acceptance and appreciation unwinds the discourse of inclusivity, neurodiversity and social justice. These aspects have been well interpreted and

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[88] Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*.

[89] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 02:17:57–02:18:13.

[90] Prasanna, *Sitaare Zameen Par,* 02:24:11–02:24:26.

analysed through the dialogues and reflective conversations from characters like Gulshan, Kartar Paaji, Sunita Arora and Preeto (Gulshan's mother), as incorporated within the movie scenes, such as the shoe scene, bus scene, and players' training scenes. A formulation has been grounded in the acceptance of multiplicity, and not in assimilation. With the backdrop of sports and para-athletes, the film comments upon how institutions are tied to professional inclusivity, but systemic biases are measured along the normative standardisations. Thus, the film contributes to disability discourse by shifting the cultural imagination from pity and assimilation to recognition and equity. It reinstates that inclusion and acceptance are not the acts of charity but a matter of justice and recognition, which allows equal participation, respect and opportunity without any preconceived biases or an enforced normative gaze.

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