

‘Breaking Boundaries’: A tale of disability, marginalisation and resilience in the movie *Chandu Champion*

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of the movie *Chandu Champion*, released in Bollywood on June 14, 2024, which tells the inspiring story of Padma Shri Murlikant Rajaram Petkar, India's first Paralympic gold medallist. The film portrays Rajaram's struggle against societal and ableist discrimination, beginning with his quest to file an FIR against the President of India for being overlooked for the Arjuna Award. Through this analysis the paper tries to unearth the stereotypes about disability and highlights the resilience of para-athletes. The paper analyses how *Chandu Champion* positions disability as a form of subaltern identity, advocating for the recognition of disability within the broader context of human rights and societal change. It critiques the ableist mindset and presents disability as a positive, transformative identity capable of challenging societal norms and pushing boundaries in Indian sports.

Keywords: Athlete, disability, discrimination, Paralympic, subaltern

Introduction

Chandu Champion was released in Bollywood on June 14, 2024. It tells the story of Padma Shri Murlikant Rajaram Petkar. He was India’s first Paralympic gold medallist. He set a world record in the fifty-metre freestyle swimming event with a time of 37.33 seconds. People forgot this achievement for forty years, which was a disappointing outcome. Our nation did not support the dreams of disabled athletes. The story begins at a police station in Sangli, Maharashtra. An elderly man named Rajaram waits to file an FIR against the President of India. He has been a great athlete and believes he deserves the Arjuna Award. But he feels forgotten and deprived for the past forty years, and so decides to fight back. His first step is to file a police complaint against the President of India. In the Indian scenario, people use disability as a marker to disparage a person. In a progressive and democratic society, there is no room for discrimination. Petkar's choice to complain about the nation's leader shows the subaltern’s effort to change the mindset of the ableist centre. This paper through an analysis of the movie *Chandu Champion*, a commercialized biopic, tries to theorizes disability as a strong form of subalternity. The film highlights para-athletics and resilience against ableism and the paper shows how this challenges disability stereotypes and enhances subaltern studies.

***Chandu Champion* and its handling of disability**

Disability has always been seen as a matter of medical interference, and it is only in recent times that claims are being made for its incorporation into subaltern studies, where we must go beyond isolated medical challenges of an individual’s deformity and must see disability as a product of an oppressively anapirophobic social environment and its disabling mindset. The movie shows how Rajaram tires of discrimination and embraces his disability as a positive

identity, to break unimaginable boundaries as far as Indian sports is concerned. There is an underlying insistence in the movie that we locate the relevance of disability to the human condition. Ableism is a short-sighted social construct; it is disability that not only adds variety to the human condition, but also if appropriately adopted, the power of disability can provide a critical framework for assessing human identity in general.

Coming back to the movie, the officer feels amused at the sight of a fuming aged cripple making demands to the Arjuna Award, and it is to this response of amusement laced with sympathy, where the incapability of a disabled body is assumed; that the life story of Rajaram gets offered to us. His story is like a counter narrative to the complacency of an ableist mindset, that looks at an imperfect body and pushes it to the periphery as a spare part. Amused, the officer asks, how and why Rajaram makes a claim to the Arjuna Award after settling for a life of oblivion for forty years. The answer is quite simple. Rajaram needs it for his village. He feels that such awards can boost the living standards of the commoners in that part of rural Maharashtra. There is no road, light or toilet in the village, and maybe such awards will bring his village to the forefront. To undermine personal challenges and aim for greater civilizing missions is something commendable. But what strikes me most is on the one hand the audacity of a society that is socially crippled, thinks itself better off to laugh at someone who is physically disabled; and at the same time the vigour of a cripple who comes forward as a saviour to his society, which otherwise undermines his worth. Rajaram's approach directly challenges the association of "compensatory narcissistic self-inflation" to the disabled bodies (qtd. in Siebers 40). Rajaram neither shows heightened self-aggrandizement nor resists reality, and therefore challenges the symptomology of narcissistic injury that psychoanalysis associates with the state of disability.

The why gets answered, but for the how, we need to follow the story line that gets unravelled in Rajaram's ruminations. From childhood Murlikant nurtured the desire to be an athlete – of going to the Olympics and winning a medal for his country. He is ragged in the school for nurturing such a dream and the label 'Chandu Champion' is slapped on him to make mockery of his dreams. The oxymoronic title where 'Chandu' means a loser in his native language, and 'Champion' an honorific tag, not only shows society's narrow-mindedness; but also, the fate of few whose dreams can push them into a minority identity, even when having an abled body. But Rajaram is indefatigable, and so undergoes rigorous training for years to be a wrestler, with Dara Singh as his idol and the Olympics his vision. To have a perfect wrestler's body, free of any disability, is his ultimate mission. But situations take an unforeseen turn when on winning a village wrestling competition, he irks a local strong man so much so that he is forced to flee, and finally lands up in the Indian army, with the hope of realising his dreams.

At EME Secunderabad his talent as a wrestler is channelized into boxing. Military training, the boxing ring and long hours at the gym, makes his body perfect, and he suffers from the illusion of invulnerability. Outstanding performance in the International Military Games, Tokyo, in 1964, makes him overconfident, and he bungles the finals with settling in for a silver. Body and its assumed imperviousness are illusionary; and with this hard lesson learnt he goes in for his new military posting in Kashmir and in 1965 as the camp is heavily bombed in the Second Kashmir War, Rajaram gets shot in the legs. His body receives nine bullets, and goes into a coma for two years. Finally, when he comes to his senses in 1967 in Udampur Military Hospital, finds himself paralysed below the waist with two bullets still stuck inside his bones. He is shifted to the best military medical facility of that time, INHS Asvini in Bombay, where he undergoes another operation, but to no effect. Rajaram is

thoroughly dejected. He is a sportsman, and for him a life of disability is worse than death. Even his elder brother dissuades him from coming back home, as it is really challenging for a lower income family to provide support services for a cripple; and so is forced to continue in the hospital itself. Manu, the architect behind draconian Hindu laws, have advocated the exclusion of disabled from holy and auspicious events, and places. They are to be indiscriminately thrown aside as broken or faulty. Family can reject a cripple, National boards can turn down their pleas, with echoes of 'you are a liability' relentlessly reverberating in the ears of these helpless victims, in need of care and protection. In the movie the hospital, initially projected as a setup to protect and support such unfortunate victims, assumes a discriminatory label, and a place for segregation, when Murli's family decides to move back to their normal life abandoning him in the unhomely hospital ambience.

Without any form of emotional succour, it becomes too much for him to cope with his disability. A scene that haunts us is how Murlikant celebrates his birthday in the hospital. Bound in his wheelchair, the face with which he cuts the cake shows a state of absolute dejection and defeat on his face. The trauma of disability in Indian society is such that the bunch of crippled soldiers at the military hospital appears to be like lost souls with 'dried voices', and their lives 'quiet and meaningless' (Eliot). That night Murli attempts suicide on whiskey and thirty sleeping pills. But when fates have different design in store for us then thirty sleeping pills also falls short, and Murli vomits out everything. That day he comes to terms with his disability, and decides to live and work hard for his existence. From the ashes of his ableist boxer's body emerges Rajaram Murlikant Petkar, the paraplegic with athletic aspirations. Inspired from fishes who swims without having legs, he starts swimming, and finally dares to aspire for participating in the Paralympics, which is full with stories of disabled athletes who have dared to achieve something in life.

Dreams only stop when we stop dreaming, and Murlikant's dreams were not yet over. Rigorous swimming training starts, only to meet with the first obstacle when the Indian Olympic Association 1972 initially turns down Petkar's wish to participate in the Paralympic games. As the treasury is empty after India-Pakistan war, the Government decides to invest the limited funds and resources in normal Olympic games and able-bodied athletes. Paralympics is a luxury outside the ken of Indian decision makers. To finance a cripple athlete is simply preposterous, vetoing the age-old mindset of social exclusion and underestimation of the potential of a disabled individual. In Indian society disabled people are only for public sympathy not for the governmental coffers. If disabled people start achieving something, then on whom will society showers its fake pity? With whom we will compare ourselves to bask in the glory of superiority?

Murli's response is outstanding. He says that the defect lies with society that fails to consider disabled people as 'regular' individuals. But they are also regular – expectation is regular, spirit is regular. One thing that is not regular is the assumptions of supposedly non-disabled individuals who enacts the role of destiny in the lives of disabled people. People in power have historically manipulated social structures, dependant upon prejudicial representations, for the exclusion of different groups, and the initial decision of the board was no exception. Though at a later point the board fortunately reconsiders its decision, and Murli gets the necessary governmental nod and funding to participate in the Paralympic games.

Disabled identities are assumed to be defective and so even before any test disabled people are considered zero-achievers, whereas such considerations play no role in case of the

majority identifications. Even rehabilitation efforts revolve around concepts of charity, further reinforcing the already century-old negative societal attitudes.

Childhood dream is about to come true as Murli finds himself in the Paralympics of Munich 1972. But due to a terrorist attack and a hostage situation the games are suspended initially and later shifted to Heidelberg, West-Germany. Here Murli injures himself in the second round of swimming pre-finals but refuses to go to a doctor as participation in the finale is more important than bodily injuries. For Petkar, real victory is not in defeating another athlete, but in defeating those voices that tell you from the very beginning that you are lost. Petkar swims hard to drown those voices, those mindsets that subaltern-ize a crippled body from the very outset. He wins and creates a new world record of resilience and fortitude; but then sinks into oblivion for forty years. It is only through his coming out to file a police complaint against the Head of the State, and then through further journalistic investigations that Petkar's story comes to light and is finally awarded Padma Shri, the highest civilian award in India in 2018.

Disabled identities and discrimination

Disability makes our bodies/minds unique, and instead of celebrating that uniqueness these deviations from the construct of the 'abled' body/mind leads to worse form of discrimination. To protect individuals from such aggressive mentality, various Disability Discrimination Acts have been floated by nations and governments worldwide. However, despite acts and activisms, prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices are still prevalent, and societies have failed to ensure equality to the members of disabled community.

Discrimination is manifest within every walk of life that involves interaction with supposedly abled bodied individuals – and games and sports no exception. This paper tries to unearth the deep-rooted discrimination and its operation in the arena of sports, and how it affects the life of athletes, through an analysis of the movie *Chandu Champion* (2024).

'Chandu' meaning underachiever, sits all the more firmly on Petkar after his disability. But the movie shows that this label or his disability is neither a liability nor a state of being for Rajaram. For him, his athlete's identity fused into his disabled body becomes an epistemological construction that shows a broad array about how to navigate social environments. According to Charles Taylor, "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (27). The movie in showing Rajaram's fluid identity from being an abled bodied boxer to a paralympic gold medallist swimmer and his experiences based on disability, claims the status of theory because the way these experiences and depictions signify sites and systems of embodiment from which the overriding ideologies of society become perceptible and exposed to criticism. Alcoff elucidates that "identity is not merely that which is given to an individual or group, but is also a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, on objective social location and group history"; and what is most important in the movie is how Petkar negotiates his social identity like a fish.

For Feagin and O'Brien (in Kilvington 2), the recurring rituals of discrimination unfold through a vast array of potential actors, each contributing to the perpetuation of inequality in their own distinct way. Foremost among them are the 'officiants'—the architects and decision-makers whose pivotal and profound choices actively shape and sustain the machinery of discrimination. These figures, often nestled within the institutions of power or holding sway in influential organizations, wield their authority to enforce or perpetuate discriminatory practices, such as crafting legislation that isolates, marginalizes, and

systematically excludes entire segments of the population. In *Chandu Champion* this role is performed by the officials at the Indian Paralympics board who initially turn down Chandu's plea.

Next, we encounter the 'acolytes'—a group that offers varying degrees of support to the officiants. Simply put, these individuals labour in concert with, and often at the behest of, the officiants, fortifying the very structures that uphold discriminatory processes. Their role, though perhaps less conspicuous, is nonetheless crucial in perpetuating the status quo. Again in the movie, though not directly connected to the officiants, yet subtly upholding the notion that a cripple is a burden on the family, the role of the acolyte is performed by Petkar's elder brother, who under the pretext of financial constraints dissuade Rajaram from coming back home.

Finally, there exist the 'passive supporters,' whose failure to act allows the discriminatory practices to unfold unchecked. Feagin and O'Brien argue that these 'bystanders'—whose indifference or inaction speaks volumes—represent the most influential group in many contemporary contexts, their quiet acquiescence serving to embolden and prolong the cycle of discrimination. Here I feel that this role is performed by Petkar's parents, who endorse the elder brother's decision and fade from Petkar's life, leaving him behind at the military hospital.

The movie very effectively portrays multiple forms of discrimination and shows how it affects and transforms the athlete's self within a disabled Petkar. Discrimination, at times overt, most of the time subtle, overlaps to portray very effectively the intolerance of society towards disabled individuals: the greatest of all is how Rajaram gets forgotten for forty years; and then to compensate for its fault to award him with a Padma Shri Award, the highest civilian award, instead of Arjuna Award, the highest honour given to an athlete. In awarding the Padma Shri, society does two things, first it very cleverly absolves itself of the sin of forgetting a disabled athlete for forty years; and at the same time denies Rajaram the status of an athlete by awarding him the highest civilian award.

Disability and its tryst with Indian Sports

As far as sports and discrimination is concerned, India has a long way to go. The Paralympic Committee of India (PCI), the cornerstone of support for the nation's thousands of para-athletes, is entrusted with the lofty task of ensuring their inclusion and success on the global stage. However, despite the remarkable potential of India's disabled athletes, the committee's persistent mismanagement and neglect have led to an ongoing crisis that severely hampers their progress. Over the years, the PCI has endured several suspensions by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC)—three times between 2011 and 2015—each suspension serving as a testament to the committee's failure to address the basic needs of its athletes and its inability to create an environment conducive to the development of para-sports.

The conditions surrounding the 15th National Para-athletic Championships, a key qualifying event for the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, illuminated the grave shortcomings of the PCI. Despite its significance, the event was marred by a host of inadequacies. There were no essential ramps or handrails, unpalatable drinking water, accommodations in unfinished buildings, and the absence of disabled-accessible toilets. The athletes were also forced to use outdoor water tankers as makeshift bathing facilities. Such conditions reflect not just a failure of infrastructure, but a deeper, systemic neglect that mirrors how Indian society at large often pays scant attention to the needs of people with disabilities. The reality is that disabled athletes in India, often relegated to the margins of society, must battle both societal indifference and institutional inefficiency as they strive for recognition and success.

This indifference is further exemplified by the funding allocated to the PCI. In the 2014-15 fiscal year, the committee received a meagre budget of just under 2 lakh pounds from the Indian government—far below the threshold required to provide even basic facilities for para-athletes. For comparison, the Great Britain Wheelchair Basketball Association received a National Lottery grant of £624,000 in 2012-13 alone, a sum over 300 times larger than the entire annual budget of the PCI. This vast disparity in funding highlights the relative lack of priority given to para-sports in India, further contributing to the marginalization of disabled athletes.

Such financial constraints, combined with inadequate infrastructure and poor leadership, have stunted the growth of para-sports in the country, exacerbating the existing societal biases and misconceptions surrounding disability. In a society where the disabled are still largely viewed through a lens of pity or charity, rather than as individuals with the potential to excel, the importance of sports for the disabled remains woefully underappreciated. This lack of societal recognition trickles down into the administrative sphere, where the needs of para-athletes are often relegated to the background in favour of more mainstream sports. As a result, para-athletes are left to train in substandard conditions, deprived of the resources and support that are critical to their success on the world stage.

Moreover, these neglectful conditions at the PCI not only hamper the athletes' chances of success but also perpetuate harmful stereotypes about disability. When disabled athletes are forced to compete under such deplorable conditions, it sends a message to society that they are somehow less deserving of the same quality of care, attention, and respect as able-bodied athletes. This stigma, compounded by a lack of proper resources and support, reinforces the marginalization of the disabled community and discourages future generations from pursuing sports as a viable avenue for achievement.

Recent developments, including the PCI's election of Paralympic medallist Devendra Jhajharia as president, offer a glimmer of hope for the future. However, unless the deep-rooted issues of underfunding, infrastructure failure, and societal neglect are addressed, the committee will continue to struggle in its mission to uplift disabled athletes. In a nation that often overlooks its disabled citizens, the need for a cultural and institutional shift towards greater inclusivity and recognition has never been more urgent. The PCI's path forward must be one that not only fosters excellence in para-sports but also challenges and changes the societal mindset that views disability as a limitation rather than a different but equally valid way of participating in the world.

Until these changes occur, India's para-athletes will continue to face an uphill battle—striving not only against their physical challenges but also against an apathetic system and a society that has yet to fully recognize their worth. It is only through genuine reform and a societal shift in perception that India can hope to truly empower its disabled athletes and offer them the opportunities, respect, and resources they deserve.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Chandu Champion* serves as a powerful cinematic discourse on the intersection of disability, identity, and resilience, offering not only a biographical narrative but also an incisive critique of a society that persistently marginalizes those who do not conform to its narrowly defined ideals of ability. Through the life of Murlikant Rajaram Petkar, the film unearths the deeply ingrained ableism that permeates every aspect of social, cultural, and institutional frameworks. Rajaram's journey, from being the object of ridicule in his youth to becoming an embodiment of defiance and triumph at the Paralympics, reveals the complexities of negotiating identity within a world that tends to classify human beings

into rigid categories of "abled" and "disabled." His story is emblematic of the larger struggles faced by those whose bodies and minds deviate from societal norms, and it challenges us to reconsider the assumptions we place upon the disabled body.

By embracing his disability and transforming it into a catalyst for achievement, Rajaram disrupts the myth of the abled body as the only vehicle of success, offering a new lens through which we can view human potential. In doing so, the film makes a profound theoretical contribution to the field of subaltern studies, repositioning disability not as a medical or charitable issue but as a form of subjugated identity that demands recognition, respect, and empowerment. Rajaram's refusal to be confined to the margins of society mirrors a broader call for the recognition of disability as an integral facet of the human condition, not as a deviation or defect.

Yet, the tragic irony remains that his extraordinary achievements went unrecognized for forty years, a poignant commentary on the failure of both society and the state to value the contributions of disabled individuals. The eventual recognition of Petkar's accomplishments through the Padma Shri, while a much-needed acknowledgment, also exposes the systemic failures of a society that, despite legislative acts and advancements in disability rights, continues to perpetuate a culture of exclusion and indifference. The structural neglect faced by para-athletes in India, highlighted in the film, is a stark reminder of the long road ahead for social transformation—one that must transcend token gestures and embrace a deep, systemic rethinking of how disability is perceived and valued in all spheres of life, particularly in sports.

Ultimately, *Chandu Champion* is not just a biopic but a clarion call for an inclusive, empathetic society—one that does not merely tolerate difference but actively celebrates it. It implores us to shift from a place of pity and charity towards a framework of respect, recognition, and equity. As we reflect upon Rajaram's story, we are invited to challenge the entrenched prejudices that still govern our perceptions of disability, and in doing so, to unlock the untapped potential that resides in every human being, regardless of physical or mental limitations. Only through such a paradigm shift can we begin to build a truly inclusive world—one where every individual is allowed to dream, to achieve, and to be celebrated for who they are, not despite who they are.

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