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Beyond the Brain Matrix: Mapping Ableism, Neurological Divergence, and the Poetics of Cognitive Difference in the Movie *Hichki*

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Abstract: Contemporary disability studies increasingly advocate a shift from viewing bodily and neurological differences as deficits toward recognizing them as diverse forms of human embodiment. This paper examines Siddharth P. Malhotra's 2018 Hindi film *Hichki* through the interdisciplinary framework of Health Humanities, drawing on ableism, embodiment, neurological difference, and humanistic approaches to care and education. The film follows Naina Mathur, an aspiring teacher with Tourette syndrome, whose involuntary motor and vocal tics lead to social ridicule and institutional discrimination. By placing a woman with a neurological condition at the centre of its narrative, *Hichki* challenges representations of disability that reduce disabled individuals to passive recipients of care.

Naina's repeated rejection by educational institutions exposes ableist assumptions and demonstrates how neurological difference is shaped by social responses to visible and audible bodily differences. From a Health Humanities perspective, the film foregrounds the lived, emotional, relational, and social dimensions of Tourette syndrome while also inviting a neuroscientific understanding of the condition. Naina's transformation of her perceived weakness into a pedagogical strength further challenges conventional notions of normalcy. Her adaptive teaching practices, particularly with marginalized students in class 9F, create an inclusive classroom that accommodates diverse bodies, minds, and learning modes. This paper argues that *Hichki* locates exclusion not simply in neurological difference but in the social meanings attached to it. By integrating disability, neuroscience, narrative experience, and humanistic care, the film reimagines neurological difference as embodied diversity and advocates movement from normalization toward empathy, accommodation, and inclusive education.

Keywords: *Health Humanities, Disability, Tourette Syndrome, Neuroscience, Ableism, Embodiment, Neurological Difference, Inclusive Education*

Films play a significant role in contemporary society by offering both entertainment and insight into complex personal, social, cultural, and ethical issues. Unlike purely theoretical discussions, cinema can make abstract questions about illness, disability, identity, and social exclusion visible through embodied characters and lived situations. By bringing individual experiences to the screen, films can encourage audiences to reconsider assumptions that are often taken for granted in everyday life. In narratives concerning disability, this function becomes particularly significant because cinema has historically participated both in reproducing stereotypes and in challenging them. A film can either present disability as tragedy, dependency, abnormality, or deficiency, or it can represent disabled individuals as complex human beings whose identities extend beyond their conditions. *Hichki* occupies an important position within the latter possibility because it places neurological differences at the centre of a narrative about education, dignity, professional identity, family, and social acceptance.

The movie under study, *Hichki*, is a 2018 Indian Hindi-language drama directed and co-written by Siddharth P. Malhotra. The film stars Rani Mukerji as Naina Mathur, an aspiring teacher who lives with Tourette syndrome, a neurological condition associated with involuntary motor and vocal tics. The narrative follows Naina's persistent attempts to become a teacher despite being repeatedly rejected by educational institutions because of her condition. Eventually, she receives an opportunity to teach at St. Notker's School, her former school, where she is assigned to Class 9F. The class consists of fourteen students who occupy a marginalized position within the institution because of their socioeconomic circumstances, academic performance, and reputation for disruptive behaviour. Initially, the students rejected Naina and mocked her because of her tics. Rather than allowing their behaviour to reinforce the distance between teachers and students, Naina gradually attempts to understand their individual lives, abilities, interests, and aspirations. Through this process, she transforms the classroom into a space of trust, recognition, and inclusion.

The casting of Rani Mukerji is particularly significant to the representation of disability in the film. A woman actor takes on the role of a woman living with a neurological condition and carries the narrative through her bodily performance, speech, involuntary movements, emotional responses, and professional interactions. Mukerji performs Naina's Tourette syndrome with considerable sensitivity and conviction, allowing the character to be represented as a person whose neurological condition is visible without becoming the entirety of her identity. Her performance is important because Naina is not presented simply as a disabled character whose story revolves around suffering. She is an aspiring professional, a daughter, a teacher, a mentor, and an individual seeking autonomy and recognition. The portrayal consequently allows disability to remain visible while refusing to make it the sole defining feature of the character. Through Naina, the film demonstrates that a woman living with a neurological

condition can occupy the centre of a narrative not merely as an object of sympathy but as an active subject who influences others and transforms the social environment around her.

Naina's relationship with disability was rooted in her childhood. Her involuntary tics make her different from the children around her, and this difference becomes a source of ridicule and insecurity. The film presents the emotional consequences of this experience rather than merely explaining Tourette syndrome through medical terminology. One of the important childhood scenes shows Naina hearing her parents quarrelling about her condition. She is unable to understand why she is different from other children and why her body attracts such negative attention. The source material describing the film identifies this moment as an important expression of Naina's sadness, helplessness, and confusion. From a Health Humanities perspective, the significance of the scene lies in its movement from the clinical description of Tourette syndrome toward the subjective experience of living with it. The audience is encouraged to understand what the condition means to Naina emotionally and socially rather than simply observing its symptoms.

This childhood experience becomes especially important because Naina does not allow the attitudes of others to determine the boundaries of her future. Her teacher Mr. Khan has become an important influence in this process (15:50-16:36). Unlike those who interpret her tics as evidence of incapacity, he recognizes her intellectual abilities and treats her as he treats other students. His acceptance gives Naina an alternative understanding of herself. She begins to understand that a teacher can do more than impart knowledge. A teacher can also enable a student to see possibilities that society has denied. Mr. Khan's treatment of Naina eventually contributes to her decision to become a teacher herself. The film therefore establishes a significant connection between recognition and vocation. The person who refuses to define Naina through her disability becomes one of the reasons she chooses a profession through which she can offer the same recognition to others.

This becomes one of the central principles through which *Hichki* can be understood within Health Humanities. Health Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that brings the study of health, illness, disability, and healing into conversation with literature, philosophy, history, anthropology, the arts, and other humanistic disciplines (Health Humanities Consortium). It expands the boundaries of conventional biomedical approaches by concentrating on lived experience, narrative, emotion, identity, relationships, culture, and social context. A biomedical understanding can explain the neurological characteristics of Tourette syndrome, including involuntary motor and vocal tics, but it cannot by itself explain what it feels like for a child to be mocked because of those tics, what it means for a father to become overprotective, how institutional rejection affects professional identity, or how an individual learns to develop confidence in spite of social prejudice. These dimensions require an approach that recognizes the person behind the condition.

A Health Humanities reading of *Hichki* therefore shifts the central question from how Naina's Tourette syndrome can be corrected to how Naina can live, participate, work, and form relationships without being reduced to her diagnosis. The film does not deny the neurological reality of her condition. Her tics remain involuntary, and they continue throughout the narrative. What changes is the social meaning attached to them? At the beginning of the film, her tics are interpreted as signs of abnormality and incompetence. As the narrative progresses, the audience sees that the same woman whom institutions initially consider unsuitable for teaching becomes an effective educator capable of recognizing and developing the potential of students whom the school itself has marginalized.

This distinction between neurological differences and social disability can be understood through disability studies. Disability is widely distinguished from impairment, with impairment referring to a physical, cognitive, or neurological difference and disability emerging through the social and institutional barriers imposed upon people with such differences. As Lennard J. Davis observes, “the process of disabling arrived with industrialization and with the set of practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and so on” (Davis 3). Davis's argument emphasizes that disability is not simply a biological fact but is also produced through social practices and cultural ideas concerning normalcy. Tom Shakespeare similarly emphasizes the interaction between bodily impairment and the social barriers imposed by society (Shakespeare 13). *Hichki* illustrates this interaction through Naina's experiences because the neurological condition itself does not prevent her from becoming a teacher. The barriers emerge when institutions and individuals interpret the condition as evidence that she is incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities associated with teaching.

Davis further explains the historical tendency to stigmatize disability by observing that people with disabilities have been represented as “creatures of disorder, monsters, monstrous” (Davis, *Constructing Normalcy* 142). *Hichki* contests such historical constructions by presenting Naina as intellectually capable, professionally ambitious, emotionally complex, and socially influential. She is not represented as an individual who must simply be protected by others. Instead, she repeatedly demands the right to make decisions for herself. Her story consequently challenges the tendency to transform an observable difference into a complete definition of the individual.

Naina's assertion that her speech is affected by Tourette syndrome while her intellect is not becoming particularly powerful within this framework. During her interview, she firmly states, “My speech has Tourette's, not my intellect” (*Hichki* 17:01-1705). The statement separates the neurological manifestation of her condition from her cognitive capacity. Her tics may affect the manner in which she speaks, but they do not determine her ability to understand, teach, reason, empathize, or make decisions. The film thus challenges the tendency to assume that a person whose body or speech appears

different must also possess a diminished intellectual ability. Naina's professional journey becomes a direct challenge to this assumption because her effectiveness as a teacher repeatedly contradicts the expectations imposed upon her. Even when she is mocked and bullied by her students and repeatedly rejected by schools, Naina remains confident in her own capabilities. Her self-assurance challenges the minimal expectations that society often places upon persons with disabilities.

The film further challenges the idea that disability is something that must be corrected or concealed. Naina has accepted Tourette syndrome as part of her identity and rejects the assumption that she needs to be fixed. Her statement, "This is normal for me as my syndrome is now a part of me and I don't need to be fixed" (*Hichki* 1:16:08-1:16:25), directly challenges the ideology of normalcy. Her understanding of normal differs from the socially imposed definition that equates normality with the absence of visible differences. Naina does not deny her condition; instead, she incorporates it into her understanding of herself. Even her ability to make light-hearted references to her tics demonstrates that she does not allow the condition to completely determine her identity. From a Health Humanities perspective, this shift is significant because it moves the discussion from treating a condition as an abnormality to understanding it as part of a person's lived experience.

The film also explores the distinction between care and autonomy through Naina's relationship with her father. His concern for her is initially expressed through doubt and excessive protection. He worries about the difficulties she may encounter and frequently attempts to intervene on her behalf, whether in relation to her career or even her choices in everyday situations. Although such behaviour emerges from affection, it restricts Naina's autonomy because it assumes that her neurological condition makes her incapable of handling ordinary situations independently. His embarrassment about her Tourette syndrome and his frustration when he asks her to "speak normally" (*Hichki* 1:15:03-1:15:07) further reveals how care can become entangled with social expectations of normalcy. His desire to have her condition fixed reflects a deficit-oriented understanding of disability. The film therefore raises an important Health Humanities question about the meaning of care: genuine care cannot simply mean protecting or doing things for another person; it must also involve respecting that person's capacity to speak, decide, participate, and act.

The hotel scene illustrates this conflict particularly well. When Naina attempts to place her own order, her tics interfere with the interaction, and her father immediately speaks for her. Naina resists this intervention because she does not want another person to speak on her behalf. Her reaction is important because she is not asking to be treated as someone without difficulties. Instead, she is asking to retain the autonomy that people without disabilities are often allowed to exercise without question. Her desire to place her own order becomes a small but significant expression of her larger struggle for

independence. The scene demonstrates how apparently protective behaviour can become restrictive when it is based on the assumption that disability automatically means incapacity.

Naina's professional rejection provides another significant representation of ableism. Educational institutions, which are expected to cultivate equality and moral development, repeatedly reject her because of her Tourette syndrome. These rejections expose the contradiction between the values institutions claim to teach and the exclusion they themselves reproduce. Naina's experience demonstrates that institutional discrimination does not necessarily depend upon explicit hostility; it can operate through assumptions about who is considered professionally suitable. Her tics become a reason to question her competence even though they have no necessary connection with her intellectual or pedagogical abilities.

Her exclusion is particularly significant because she eventually enters an institution that claims to promote inclusion. The principal of St. Noker's High School sarcastically refers to the admission of children from nearby slums as "Thanks to Right to Education" (*Hichki* 18:09–18:13), revealing his discomfort with inclusive educational structures. Fourteen students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are placed together in Class 9F, where they are already marked as socially and academically inferior. Mr. Wadia reinforces this perception when he declares, "They did not belong here; they never did, they never will" (*Hichki* 36:55–37:5). His statement demonstrates how institutional attitudes can transform socioeconomic disadvantage into an assumption of permanent incapacity.

Naina challenges this exclusionary logic: "They will, sir, shayad humne koshish hi nahi ki that they do belong" (*Hichki* 37:15–37:25). Her statement suggests that perhaps the institution has not genuinely attempted to make the students feel that they belong. This statement captures the broader meaning of inclusion in the film. Inclusion is not merely the physical presence of marginalized individuals within an institution. It requires a transformation in attitudes, relationships, and structures that determine whether individuals genuinely feel that they belong. Naina's own experience of disability enables her to recognize the parallel between her marginalization and that of the students.

The connection between disability and institutional exclusion therefore becomes central to the film. Naina is marginalized because her neurological difference is interpreted as a deficiency, while the students of Class 9F are marginalized because their socioeconomic circumstances and academic records are interpreted as evidence of limited potential. In both situations, individuals are reduced to categories before being understood as people. The film consequently links disability stigma with class-based marginalization, demonstrating how different forms of social difference can produce similar experiences of exclusion.

This becomes the foundation of Naina's teaching practice. She does not simply attempt to discipline the students into conformity. Instead, she identifies the abilities concealed beneath their disruptive behaviour. Their intelligence, creativity, energy, and ingenuity, which initially appear as disciplinary problems, become educational resources. Rather than asking what is wrong with the students, Naina asks what abilities have remained unrecognized. This shift from a deficit model to an ability-oriented approach reflects the central humanistic principle of understanding before intervening.

Naina's classroom consequently becomes a space in which education is related. She learns from her students while teaching them, adapting her methods according to their individual circumstances and abilities. Education becomes a form of humanistic care in which the teacher does not merely transmit information but listens, observes, understands, and creates conditions through which students can recognize their own potential. The transformation of Class 9F consequently challenges deficit-based thinking. Students who were initially dismissed as incapable eventually demonstrate academic and scientific abilities and gain recognition within the school.

The parallel between Naina and Class 9F becomes particularly powerful here. Naina's Tourette syndrome and the students' socioeconomic marginalization appear very different, yet both are used by society to make judgments about their abilities. Naina's experience enables her to understand that being different does not mean being deficient. Her disability consequently becomes a source of empathy rather than a limitation to empathy. She uses her own experience of exclusion to create opportunities for students who have also been excluded from recognition.

Her influence eventually extends to Mr. Wadia, who initially regards Class 9F as imperfect. Naina challenges the idea that the students themselves constitute the problem. Her response redirects attention from individual deficiency toward the educational environment and the methods through which students are taught. This represents a movement away from the deficit model toward a relational understanding of ability. Mr. Wadia's eventual change in attitude demonstrates that transformation must also occur among those who have constructed marginalized individuals as failures.

The film's final movement toward inclusion is symbolized by Class 9F's participation in the National Science Fair. Naina reflects that "Equations in books and syllabi remain the same. Equations among the students changed a little and some new equations were formed" (*Hichki* 1:50:51-1:50:55). She further asks, "Sometimes I think what is Tourettes? Is it the presence of strange sounds and hiccups or just our hesitation or unwillingness?" (*Hichki* 1:57:20-1:57:30). This reflection expands the meaning of Tourette syndrome beyond its neurological symptoms and turns attention toward perception. The film suggests that what separates people is not always the condition itself but the social hesitation, prejudice, and unwillingness to understand difference.

However, the film's resolution, in which the students ultimately succeed and Naina achieves professional recognition, risks simplifying the complexities of educational reform and social inclusion. The inspirational trajectory provides an emotionally satisfying conclusion, but real institutional transformation is considerably more difficult and prolonged. Nevertheless, the film's humanistic value lies in its attempt to shift the viewer's attention from "What is wrong with this person?" to "What conditions prevent this person from being recognized?"

Through Naina Mathur, *Hichki* therefore challenges stereotypes surrounding Tourette syndrome while connecting disability with broader structures of social and institutional exclusion. Its emphasis on autonomy, acceptance, relational care, and inclusive education aligns closely with the concerns of Health Humanities. Naina does not overcome disability by becoming normal rather; she challenges the very definition of normalcy. Her journey demonstrates that meaningful inclusion begins when individuals are recognized not primarily through their conditions or social categories but as autonomous human beings with capacities, aspirations, and stories of their own.

The final integration of Class 9A and Class 9F reinforces this movement toward inclusion. The boundaries separating the two groups gradually weaken as the students begin to participate together. The significance of this transformation is not simply that the 9F students achieve academic success. More importantly, they gain recognition and belonging. Inclusion becomes meaningful when marginalized individuals are not merely allowed to occupy the same institutional space but are recognized as equal participants within it. The film therefore moves beyond the idea of access and toward a broader understanding of social belonging.

This aspect of the film is especially important within Health Humanities because the field asks how individuals experience institutions and relationships rather than examining health and disability solely as isolated medical conditions. Class 9F demonstrates that social well-being is closely connected to recognition, belonging, trust, and opportunity. The students' transformation occurs not because their socioeconomic backgrounds disappear but because their abilities are finally recognized. Similarly, Naina's professional success does not require the disappearance of Tourette syndrome. Both narratives demonstrate that human flourishing can occur without the erasure of difference.

The representation of Naina can also be placed alongside the experience of Elizabeth S. Mathew, a singer from Kerala living with Tourette syndrome (Abraham). Her public account provides a contemporary real-life parallel to Naina because it demonstrates the possibility of pursuing creative and professional aspirations while living with neurological differences. Her engagement with singing can be understood as a form of self-expression and participation. However, her experience should not be interpreted as evidence that singing eliminates Tourette syndrome. Rather, it demonstrates how creative practice can become part of an individual's way of negotiating life with a neurological

condition. This parallel strengthens a Health Humanities approach because it moves attention away from the narrow question of symptom elimination and toward questions of identity, agency, creativity, and meaningful participation.

The comparison between Naina and Mathew therefore encourages movement away from the language of overcoming disability. Naina does not become successful because her Tourette syndrome disappears. Mathew's experience similarly demonstrates that a person can pursue a creative identity without first having to erase neurological differences. Their experiences suggest that the more meaningful question is not whether disability has been conquered but whether the individual has been given the autonomy and opportunity to construct a meaningful life. This perspective is consistent with Health Humanities because it recognizes the individual beyond the diagnosis and places lived experience at the centre of interpretation.

Ultimately, *Hichki* challenges the assumption that neurological difference is an individual deficiency requiring correction. Naina Mathur's Tourette syndrome remains a neurological reality throughout the film, but the social meaning attached to it changes. At first, her tics become grounds for ridicule, family anxiety, institutional rejection, and professional doubt. Gradually, however, Naina develops the confidence to refuse the assumptions attached to her condition. Her statement distinguishing her speech from her intellect becomes an assertion of autonomy and a rejection of the belief that bodily or neurological differences determine intellectual worth.

The transformation extends beyond Naina herself. Her experience of being misunderstood becomes the foundation of her ability to understand others. The teacher who was once mocked because of her speech becomes the teacher who recognizes intelligence in students with whom the institution has already dismissed. The students of Class 9F demonstrate that marginalization does not erase ability. Their eventual achievements become possible because Naina provides them with trust, opportunity, recognition, and a pedagogical environment adapted to their circumstances.

Thus, *Hichki* ultimately suggests that the real transformation does not lie in fixing the impaired but in transforming the gaze through which difference is perceived. Naina does not need to become neurologically typical in order to become an effective teacher, just as the students of Class 9F do not need to become socially identical to Class 9A in order to deserve recognition. What changes is the environment around them? The film consequently shifts the emphasis from correction to accommodation, from deficit to ability, from stigma to recognition, and from exclusion to belonging. By bringing disability, neuroscience, lived experience, family relationships, education, and humanistic care into dialogue, *Hichki* presents disability as a form of embodied difference rather than a tragedy that must be erased.

Naina's journey ultimately demonstrates that what society initially identifies as weakness can become a source of strength when it is met with empathy, autonomy, opportunity, and recognition. Her Tourette syndrome becomes part of the experiential knowledge through which she develops her distinctive pedagogical identity. Her students' marginalized position becomes the context within which their abilities eventually emerge. The transformation is therefore not a transformation of their bodies or backgrounds into some imagined state of normalcy. It is a transformation of the social conditions that determine whose abilities are visible and whose voices are heard. In this sense, *Hichki* offers a powerful Health Humanities narrative in which neurological difference becomes a site of empathy, disability becomes a source of agency, and education becomes a means of transforming the structures and perceptions that produce exclusion.

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