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Shifting the Lens: From Pity, Thrills, and Stereotypes to an Empowered Portrayal of Blindness

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Abstract: This paper critically evaluates the popular themes used to represent disabilities in contemporary Indian cinema (2015-2024), finding that most stories rely heavily on medical model representations of pity, tragedy, and spectacle rather than tackling social barriers. Using a social model of disability approach, the study conducts a thematic analysis of intentionally selected Indian films which are *Dhanak* (2015), *Kaabil* (2017), *Andhadhun* (2018), *Blind* (2023), and *Srikanth* (2024). The objectives of the paper include highlighting pity and thriller themes used by the film industry, recognizing the research gap in empowerment-based literature, and presenting *Srikanth* as an exceptional movie that focuses on systemic exclusion and empowerment. It is found that most movies use pity stories and suspense thrillers to increase profits and engage viewers. However, they may affect the perception of disabled individuals' capabilities and right to be included among young audiences. In contrast, *Srikanth* uses the social model of disability to highlight systemic barriers and empowerment in story development. The study emphasizes the importance of cinema in shaping young people's attitudes towards disabilities and promotes collaboration between filmmakers and disabled people.

Keywords: *Disability Representation, Social Model of Disability, Blindness Tropes, Empowerment*

Introduction

Indian cinema has never been mere entertainment. From rural to urban settings, generation after generation has grown up learning lessons from movies at the movies, finding reflections of themselves, or sometimes engaging in debates, on matters of love, justice, success, and otherness. One particular movie is enough to color the mind of an adolescent as far as perceptions of normalcy and ability are concerned. Should that movie have a blind protagonist, then the gravity of the issue will be heightened. The portrayal of blindness goes beyond the screen, infiltrating discussions, stereotypes, and sometimes even policies or personal aspirations. In a country like India, where movies reach hundreds of millions and streaming has made cinema even more accessible to the masses, the cinematic depictions acquire added significance as attitude formers, particularly when the viewers have had little interaction with blind people. Within the Indian film industry, the medical model often becomes more pronounced through the use of traditional cultural symbols. The blind person is used as a symbol of suffering due to karma or punishment from God, or of purity. Consequently, the individual is turned into nothing more than a tool to elicit pity from non-disabled people.

However, in recent times, Indian movies revolving around blindness have largely followed the same beaten path: the tragic plight of the ‘helpless’ victim evoking pity tinged with condescension, the crime thriller where blindness becomes the convenient gimmick used to generate either thrills or revenge fantasies, and, from time to time, the supernatural twist for entertainment purposes alone, not necessarily story-driven ones. This is largely because of a tendency in these stories to view disability purely as a personal tragedy to be overcome through personal struggle or retribution and less as a social reality determined by man-made barriers. However, once in a while, an Indian movie manages to break out of the usual mold and portray blind individuals who are dignified, successful, and demanding recognition as a part of humanity. *Srikanth* (2024) emerges as a prime example of such a movie.

The central research problem for this paper lies in the existence of tropes associated with a reductive medical approach towards issues of blindness and its prevalence in recent Indian films, compared to the absence of narratives which conform to the social model of disability. Although individual films may be entertaining and moving, the cumulative impact of such depictions may create harmful ideas regarding capability, inclusion, and societal obligations towards disabled individuals for generations of youth to come. Therefore, it is important to explore the ways in which such narratives are constructed in selected Indian films, identify the common elements by using the social model as an analysis tool, analyze *Srikanth* as an example of an opposite perspective, and outline the reasons for this discrepancy. This research topic goes well beyond academic considerations for several reasons. First of all, movies play a powerful role in shaping opinions rather than simply being reflections of

what already exists. Unfavorable stereotypes may lead to attitudinal barriers and prevent disabled persons from fully participating in their communities, whereas stories that portray them in a dignified manner may help to bring about cultural changes. The focus on post-2015 films helps to engage with a contemporary audience.

Literature Review

The study of disability in films has gained considerable attention; however, scholarship on Indian contexts, especially modern movies that deal with blindness, is relatively sparse compared to Hollywood or European cinema. Early studies conducted by scholars like Paul K. Longmore demonstrate that the depiction of disabled individuals in Western films usually revolves around the portrayal of the characters as villainous, pitiful victims, or individuals who are able to overcome their conditions and become inspirational figures; disability has been portrayed medically, which entails the portrayal of the individual as having a problem that requires either a solution or personal transcendence of said problem (Longmore 65). Mike Oliver's definition of the social model of disability sets up the major theoretical basis for subsequent research, stating that disability emerges mainly because of society's obstacles (1990), which include physical inaccessibility, discriminatory views, exclusionary practices, and the representation of impairment as a source of negative outcomes.

This critique has been localized by some contemporary disability scholars based in India such as Someshwar Sati, Shilpaa Anand, and Shilpa Das. They state that structures in space, culture, and institutions in the Global South add to the dis-enabling spaces (Anand 5-7). In the case of India, the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks state that the films used by society tend to have a melodramatic genre where pity was created for the blind protagonists due to having to face family issues or economic problems. Moreover, blind people in commercial Hindi cinema have been found used in thrillers or revenge films where blindness of individuals provided irony and suspense with no relation to visual impairment and societal structures.

This paper suggests that the commercial film industry neglects socio-spatial dimensions stated by Shilpa Das and Someshwar Sati (Das 123; Sati) and tends to commodify disabilities for normal able bodied audiences. In terms of commercialization of films, attention has been paid to the commercial dimension of these kinds of movies as films with pity themes generate sympathy, involvement, and awards while thrillers provide novelty to conventional themes. However, this has not solved all problems as the following gap in the literature is evident. Little has been done towards analyzing post-2015 Indian films focusing on blindness from the perspective of the social model of disability as an integral analytical tool. Although there are some reviews and scholarly considerations dealing with particular movies, there has not been any in-depth comparative analysis of the films that highlights the

difference between the medical and the social models in terms of the themes they promote. What is more, the distinct position of biographies like *Srikanth*, which emphasize real-life activism against exclusion, has not been addressed in academic work to date as an example of more empowering representation.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach through the thematic content analysis of selected movies. Using a purposive sampling technique, selected Indian films released from 2015 to 2024, in which blindness is central to the plot or where the main character(s) is/are visually impaired, have been selected. Such movies include *Dhanak* (2015), *Kaabil* (2017), *Andhadhun* (2018), *Blind* (2023), and *Srikanth* (2024). They were selected because they are publicly recognized, relatively recent, diverse in genre including emotional road movie, revenge thriller, dark comedy thriller, and biography and capable of demonstrating varying modes of representation.

The data was collected through careful analysis of the films, aided by plot synopses available in the public domain, as well as by the commentary provided by directors and actors in the films wherever possible, and by the critical response to these films by reputable sources. The methodology employed here utilized codes generated from the thematic structure based on the deductive model, focusing on such elements as distinguishing between personal tragedy or “cure” and institutional oppression; exclusion and inclusion; and pity and agency; then further refined using the inductive approach. The coding process included codes such as personal vs. environmental obstacles; mode of resolutions including evenge, divine, social or mundane; visual and auditory representation of blindness and complex vs. simple character.

The methodology combined narrative analysis, focusing on characters’ evolution, plot progression, and thematic closure, with analysis of visual/auditory devices used to create the concept of blindness mainly for viewers who can see. The secondary literature helped establish background about historical themes and market trends. Triangulation was achieved by comparing films and consistently applying social model criteria. Weaknesses in this methodology are its focus on popular Hindi movies and its interpretive aspect; future expansion can benefit from including regional-language films and reception studies from young people.

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis revealed three principal clusters across the examined films, with *Srikanth* emerging as a clear and consequential outlier. The first grouping revolves around themes of pity and sympathy grounded in stories of personal inadequacy and tragedy. In the Indian film *Dhanak*, written and

directed by Nagesh Kukunoor, Pari and Chotu, aged ten and eight respectively, live in rural Rajasthan with an ungenerous aunt, whose thrifty behavior had unintentionally led to Chotu becoming blind. The hope that Chotu will recover his vision by the time he is nine years old spurs the children into a strenuous and perilous journey through vast expanses of barren desert land in search of Shah Rukh Khan, who supposedly has connections to secure the operation. The vulnerability of the blind boy, his reliance on his sister, and the limitations of his family constitute the key elements. Even though the movie portrays in an endearing manner the bond between the siblings and the acts of kindness performed towards them throughout their travel, the driving force behind the entire story line becomes sympathy for Chotu's fate and circumstances. The final solution consists of the elements of hope, luck, and the purity of youth.

An even more commercially driven adaptation can be found in the film *Kaabil*, directed by Sanjay Gupta. In this film, Hrithik Roshan plays Rohan Bhatnagar, a blind voice-over artist, while Yami Gautam is his wife, Supriya, who is also blind. They live happily in harmony, until one day when Supriya faces violence by goons associated with powerful individuals. Supriya's plight is further compounded by institutional injustice, as she falls prey to yet another form of victimization that finally leads to her demise. This leads to Rohan seeking vengeance through deliberate measures, which provides a driving force behind the narrative in the movie. Supriya's struggle and death are shown in an emotional light, where her suicide note and earlier happiness make her fate all the more tragic, while Rohan goes on to take the mantle of a cold-blooded killer, taking advantage of society's underestimation of blind individuals. While this production may elicit an emotional response and win praise for its performances, it still focuses more on blindness being an inherent factor of sorrow, victimization, and lone redemption. The blind individuals become sympathetic victims whose redemption is sought not through equality in society but through revengeful, individual actions.

These stories based on pity have the power to generate empathy and bring to light real struggles. Nevertheless, such prominence carries with it the potential of teaching young viewers that blindness must necessarily be associated with tragedy, dependency, and being limited. Under the social model of disability, it is clear that the various difficulties shown come about because of the inadequacies of society and not because of blindness itself; however, works of art that culminate in generating pure pity do not motivate the audience to visualize and work towards addressing those environmental or structural inadequacies.

The continued use of pity and tragedy in films like *Dhanak* (2015) and *Kaabil* (2017) indicates a fundamental anchoring in the medical-tragedy model defined by current disability studies. By treating blindness as essentially a personal disaster, a bodily flaw, or a universal tragedy, often

reiterated in the South Asian context through cultural concepts of karma or debt to ancestors, the cinematic apparatus performs an epistemic violence upon the disabled body. It relocates the source of the problem from the environment to the biological flaw. Oliver (1990) states that not only does the medical paradigm pathologize the body but also ideologically produces the condition of dependency in which the disabled subject is politically de-empowered and turned into an object of charitable concern. This dependency takes a sentimental form in the innocence of childhood in *Dhanak*. Chotu's blindness becomes the driving force of the heroic journey undertaken by his sister Pari, making blindness a tool of emotional enlightenment. The desert scenery of Rajasthan becomes the symbol of isolation, not due to the absence of education facilities in the region or lack of healthcare but simply because the body of the child is considered broken by nature. The solution to the problem comes through sheer luck and the generosity of a Bollywood star, thus implying that the integration of blind children in society should be based on miracles of philanthropy, not basic human rights.

As one progresses into the world of adulthood in *Kaabil*, this sentimentality turns out to be nothing more than a tragic fate. The domestic environment functions as an idyllic, enclosed sanctuary segregated from a world that functions on sight, exposing the fundamental vulnerability of a blind couple against predatory elements. Institutionalized neglect by law enforcement is demonstrated, but it is depicted not as a failure of the system regarding civil rights, but rather as a narrative baseline for a hypermasculine revenge scenario. The tragic suicide of Supriya falls right into the description of the “better dead than disabled” trope outlined by Longmore (1987), resulting in the ultimate victimization of the disabled female body. Thus, the capitalist film economy turns pain into a commodity. Pity creates a cathartic reaction for non-disabled spectators because it allows them to feel empathy without having to accept structural responsibility. The visual rhetoric of these films, relying on weeping close-ups, melodramatic music, and an obsession with the white cane as a signifier of pain, deepening the distance between the ‘normal’ spectator and the deficient’ subject. As a result, children learn that people who are disabled will always remain victims that have to be helped or killed, completely overlooking the socio-spatial and economic rights of disabled people discussed by *Anand* (2017) and *Das* (2021).

The second group applies blindness to the structure of crime thrillers in terms of suspense, diversion, and profitability. In the crime thriller *Andhadhun*, director Sriram Raghavan casts Ayushmann Khurrana in the role of Akash, a professional musician who adopts blindness as a means to enhance his ability to hear. A sequence of events leads him into the crime of concealing a murder, after he happens to be at the scene of the crime. There is an adept manipulation of the ambiguity that comes from perceptual confusion regarding blindness and vision, whether literal, moral, fake, or real. Further plot developments reveal that Akash’s real blindness allows him to survive and overcome dangerous

situations with the aid of his auditory senses. Appreciation came for the skillfully employed thriller structure, cynical humor, and ethical dilemma. However, blindness serves as an instrument of the plot and a source of suspense rather than an aspect of life subject to close examination. Obstacles of everyday life and exclusion do not find consideration; blindness merely provides an opportunity for a twist and a show of superior senses on the part of the character.

Blind (2023), a Hindi-language movie produced by Shome Makhija with Sonam Kapoor as the character Gia Singh, conforms to similar commercial thriller tropes. Gia is a formerly serving police officer who lost her sight during an incident that took away one of her associates. She gets involved in investigations into a case of a serial killer, working alongside the detective Prithvi, played by Vinay Pathak, using her heightened senses in her investigative process. The film begins on a note of loss followed by that of a miserable struggle for piecing things together before turning to chase-and-hide scenes (Sharmaa). Closure ensures restoration of a sense of justice for both the person and her profession; however, the structure focuses more on suspense building than interrogating issues of disability.

These suspense thrillers succeed because they provide familiar pleasures such as plot twists, chase scenes, and moral ambiguity, supplemented by the freshness of a blind protagonist. They rarely force audiences to question their assumptions about ability. Under the social model, preference would be given to stories of blind people struggling against a world made needlessly hostile by poor design and prejudice, whose solutions lie in tearing down those obstacles. Turning blindness into a mere storytelling technique in thrillers like *Andhadhun* (2018) and *Blind* (2023) constitutes yet another variant of the medical model approach, divorcing disability from its material, lived realities. Instead of investigating how environmental and social restrictions marginalize individuals, these movies employ the fact that blindness creates epistemological uncertainty to titillate the able-bodied viewer. Disability is used for shock effects, making the real-life challenges of the visually impaired invisible to viewers.

The film *Andhadhun* challenges the common stereotype of the ‘helpless blind man’ by presenting Akash, who consciously decides to fake blindness in order to achieve economic benefits, concentration in his art, and more freedom in social situations. Even though such a cynical form of humor provides a critical outlook on the greedy nature of humans, it perpetuates the harmful stereotype of the ‘trickster with a disability’ or ‘fake disability’. Once he gets permanently blinded later in the movie, his impairment is shown as an ironic twist of fate, his karma, and a sort of sensory substitution. Enhanced auditory skills enable him to survive in life-threatening situations, turning his disability into a superpower-like feature. It is common in the commercial thriller genre to replace social integration with the idea of ‘heightened remaining senses’. According to Sati (2023), by depicting a blind person

with superhuman radar-like hearing and sensing abilities, the movie industry saves society from having to provide adequate infrastructure. If the blind person can hear the incoming danger of a vehicle and can track down a killer solely based on hearing abilities, there is no immediate need for an accessible environment.

This trope is rehashed in a more serious manner within Shome Makhija's *Blind*, where the protagonist, Gia Singh, employs her expertise in forensics as well as her auditory and tactile sensitivity to track a serial killer (Sharmaa). In this film, Gia's disability is presented as an individual condition arising out of an individual incident, a car crash that she needs to move beyond psychologically and physically to restore her professional value. The focus is placed heavily on the personal experience of the individual in adapting to the threat. Dark and claustrophobic lighting as well as unexpected sound changes are used to evoke a sense of disorientation and horror that the blind experience in order to gratify the viewer who is able to see. The surrounding environment is presented as a naturally inhospitable one rather than socially constructed to exclude. Through its emphasis on an individualized and violent encounter with the killer, *Blind* conforms to a neoliberal discourse, whereby the disabled individual must overcome individual barriers as well as external dangers through sheer willpower and talent.

In sharp contrast, the movie *Srikanth*, under the direction of Tushar Hiranandani, with Rajkummar Rao playing the part of Srikanth Bolla, emerges as a genuine deviation. The film is a biopic which traces the true story of Srikanth Bolla, a visually challenged businessman hailing from an impoverished Andhra Pradesh village who earned fame as the first blind individual to gain admission into MIT; he founded Bollant Industries, a company providing jobs for a large number of differently abled people and producing environmentally-friendly products, while constantly fighting institutional challenges along the way. The film does not shun away from showcasing the pathetic aspects of Srikanth's early life, such as a poverty-stricken family, early family worries, and general societal belief about him having little chances of success in life (Lookhar). However, very soon, the movie switches into the mode of struggle. Young Srikanth successfully fights a legal case for the right to study science at the higher secondary level, a moment that stands as a perfect embodiment of social model principles, earns his MIT scholarship, and sets up a company after coming back, employing differently-abled people. Institutional barriers continue to play key roles: a difficult curriculum, low expectations, bureaucratic resistance, and deeply entrenched prejudiced attitudes.

Being aligned with the social model comes through in the film in the manner in which external constraints are emphasized, rather than internal deficits. The impairment that the character has does not come out to be an individual weakness, but an aspect of his being as part of an otherwise competent

and enterprising person. The law, corporate frameworks, and the state education system are clearly exposed as the true creators of disability, while simultaneously showing themselves to be structures that can be challenged and dismantled. Srikanth emerges as a dynamic figure whose particular way of negotiating the world around him becomes an asset for creating an inclusive business venture.

Nevertheless, a questioning of Srikanth through the use of a more socially constructed approach reveals that the combination of the social model and the genre of the commercial biopic gives rise to serious ideological conflicts. By positioning this narrative within an archetypal, individualistic 'rags to riches' framework, the film risks perpetuating what disability media scholars define as the 'Supercrip' narrative. In media studies, the term 'Supercrip' is applied to a person with a disability who accomplishes an extraordinary feat of heroism, academic genius, or extreme athletic prowess that ends up inspiring non-disabled spectators. The structural problem with this narrative type lies in its exceptionalism. By highlighting the success of Srikanth Bolla in entering a prestigious elite institution like MIT and building a highly profitable enterprise, the movie establishes a dangerous prerequisite for validating the existence of disabled people, implying they must possess extraordinary academic or productive economic capital to demand respect and social inclusion.

This focus carries an unintended, negative effect on the broader disability rights movement. The vast majority of visually impaired individuals in India find themselves trapped at the intersection of structural poverty, physical isolation, and limited institutional access that prevents them from achieving international accolades or corporate power. By framing inclusion as a prize reserved for exceptional individual accomplishment, the narrative shifts the burden of change away from state accountability and places it back onto the shoulders of the individual. It becomes easy for the non-disabled audience to interpret this message to mean that if Srikanth managed to triumph over his struggles through sheer determination and genius, then any other marginalized person with disabilities simply lacks the individual drive to succeed.

Srikanth's structural limitations are further amplified by the framework of the neoliberal biopic, which excels at converting systemic oppression into a clean story of personal empowerment. The systemic failures of the government and cultural prejudices present in Indian society become mere plot obstacles to be overcome by the protagonist. With the founding of Bollant Industries, the film portrays corporate entrepreneurship as the ultimate form of liberation. Liberation is gained not through systemic legal reforms, robust state welfare, or the structural enforcement of civil rights, but through creating a successful, environmentally sustainable company.

This affinity with neoliberal capitalism effectively re-frames the concept of inclusion as a beneficial business strategy. The film highlights that hiring people who are differently abled is socially responsible and financially viable, moving the rhetoric from the realm of fundamental constitutional rights to that of market value. Although job provision is an essential step toward financial independence, it side-steps the state's structural responsibility to make the world fully accessible to its marginalized citizens. This ideological shift is closely mirrored in the film's visual representations: the grim, realistic images of poverty and courtroom struggles in the first half give way to sleek, well-lit, technologically advanced corporate settings in the latter half. This implies that true empowerment can only fully occur within spaces of corporate success. Consequently, the film accepts the language of the social model's rights paradigm only as long as it supports a narrative of corporate victory, leaving little opportunity to show the unglamorous, mundane reality of average disabled individuals who must navigate an inaccessible world without corporate resources and achievements.

Conclusion

This research makes clear that the continued interest in blindness in contemporary Indian cinema is still predominantly influenced by medical-model constructions of pity, tragic individualism, and entertainment rather than incorporating much social-model concerns about societal barriers and empowerment. An examination of selected movies revealed the formation of patterns that favored emotion and suspense over discussion of inclusiveness and respect. The movie Srikanth stands out as an important exception in that it offers an empowering depiction of a socially challenging situation reflective of disability-advocacy discourse today. However, it is important to note that the paper argues against accepting biographical tales of success that place emphasis on personal achievements rather than changes in structure. Although Srikanth moves away from the prevailing trends of victimization and thrillers, it is essential that subsequent films attempt to portray the disabilities of their characters independent of the mandate of extraordinary business success.

The results have significant ramifications for practice, pedagogy, and advocacy. Greater intentionality in production practices, starting from consultations with blind communities, can help reduce the gap found. Future research can build on this study to explore regional-language cinemas, incorporate audience reception research in youth contexts, and examine the growing role of streaming media in supporting diverse disability storytelling. Indian cinema has the unique capacity to penetrate culture and engage its creative resources to move beyond charity and objectification and portray the totality of blindness as an integral part of fully human subjects that contribute positively to society.

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