



## **Disability and Dialogues: An Analysis of ‘*Srikanth*’**

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### **Abstract:**

Cinema serves a seemingly basic but significant part in our lives, cutting across the boundaries of class, caste, region, culture and space. The functions of Cinema have evolved and today, we as consumers, have multiple options available to us. From huge cinema halls to TVs, our current spaces have shrunk to laptops and smartphones but our choices have increased manifold with several OTT platforms like Netflix, Hotstar, Amazon Prime, etc. The focus of this paper will be to look at the representation of disability in one of the recent Bollywood films titled *Srikanth*, which was released on Netflix, on 5 July, 2024. It is based on the life of a visually-impaired industrialist, Srikanth Bolla. This paper will also attempt to analyse the dialogues from the movie, explore the concepts of masculinity and disability, stigmatisation of the disabled and also the politicisation of a minority group in the Indian context.

**Keywords: Disability, Masculinity, Categorisation, Stigma.**

## Introduction

Disability Studies focuses on the lives and experiences of persons with disabilities. Currently, we have a vague idea of what disability is. Despite the definition provided in Article 1 of the UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) and also by some other organisations like the UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation), the answer to who is disabled remains unresolved and debatable. However, for the current study, disability is understood as a result of impairment, similar to the social model of disability, with an emphasis on physical disability, as the movie under discussion revolves around visual-impairment.

Historically, disability was often associated with evil and was considered to be a personal tragedy. Some deformed infants were abandoned by their families or left to die of exposure in the Graeco-Roman periods (Karna 76). Scholars like Dineshan and Geetha also note: “Martin Luther similarly associated disabilities with the Devil, and he even promoted the idea that individuals with disabilities should be put to death if they managed to survive, reflecting the harmful superstitions of the time” (175). However, the ways of looking at disability shifted from superstition to charity and to the current human rights-based approach, which subsequently affected the written and the media narratives about people with disabilities. Since Literature and Cinema are interconnected, changes in the literature of the disabled and by the disabled (especially in the Contemporary era) have simultaneously impacted the film industry. Thus, the depiction of disability has moved from one of ridicule, burden, and shame to that of an identity worthy of pride.

The portraiture of disability in Bollywood has evolved from mere entertainment to a somewhat serious, sensitive and thoughtful issue. The developments of the past few decades in the disability movement and the emerging academic field have had their ramifications, of which

Indian films present a very good example. The Hollywood film industry has been proactive towards bringing people with disabilities, like Peter Dinklage (an American actor with Dwarfism), to the screen. As the Disability Rights Movement and Disability Studies as an academic discipline originated in the West (esp. USA and UK), so, it is a matter of no surprise that the Western filmic portrayal of the persons with disabilities has been more realistic while the Indian film industry still needs to create more space for persons with disabilities in their respective roles.

### **Literature Review**

Several papers and articles have been written on the depiction of disability in films and its wider societal impact. Many papers extensively discussed the movie *Black* (2005). Some of them are listed below:

1. “The Representation of Women with Disability in the Movie Black” by Maryam Afzal traces the journey of a visually impaired girl, from a world of darkness to a world of light, with the aid of her teacher.
2. “Rendering of Differently-Abled in Bollywood” by Umang Gupta discusses the movie *Black*, along with several others like *Ghajini* (2008), *Paa* (2009), *My Name Is Khan* (2010), *Barfi* (2012), etc. The author appreciates the shift in Hindi Cinema from presenting the disabled as a source of entertainment to carefully utilising the stage to raise awareness among the masses.
3. Aakash Sharma’s “Performing (Dis)ability: Explorations in Literature, Theatre and Cinema” deals with disability in a short story by Raymond Carver. The author discusses two movies, *Black* (2005) and *Andhadhun* (2018). The paper strongly argues for an institutionalised support for the disabled community and an active on-screen participation of persons with disabilities.

4. “Portrayal of Disability in Hindi Cinema” by Sachitra Mishra briefly discusses many Indian movies on disability, such as *Black* (2005), *Mai Aisa Hi Hoon* (2005), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Hichki* (2018), *Ghoomar* (2023), etc. The paper discusses the movies in terms of the “Supercrip” and the “Tragic but Inspirational” trope and argues for the need to move beyond them.
5. “The Shifting Terrains of Disability and Gender: Investigating the Delineation of Women with Disabilities in Hindi Films” by Shibu Gorai and Shri Krishan Rai studies the intersection of gender and disability in many films, including *Black*. The dominance of patriarchy in the cure/recovery of a disabled woman is critically assessed in the paper.

Apart from these papers, “Desire, Defiance, Disability: A Critical Study of *Margarita with a Straw*” by Saurabh K Chaudhary & Dr Neha Arora extensively covers the issue of disability and sexuality in the light of the movie and how it challenges the heteronormative ideals of the society. The following two papers are noteworthy for their thorough examination of the movie *Srikanth*:

1. Sakshi Kaushik and Pankaj Garg’s paper “When ‘Vision’ Makes Up for the Lack of Sight: Review of the Biopic *Srikanth*” explores the issue of the flawed Indian education system. It refers to the process of disability, turning into an inspiration, with the acceptance and support of one’s family and friend circle.
2. “Normalisation of Disabled Bodies: A Transcendental Study of *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* and *Srikanth*” by Aditi Ghosh and Tanmoyee Sarkar presents a comparative study of a Hollywood documentary and a Bollywood movie. It brings forward the challenges of Srikanth Bolla in the biopic *Srikanth*, in India and America. Further, the paper mentions several Assistive Technologies that aid Srikanth and can be helpful for other people in similar situations.

After the review of the related literature, it was found that the dialogues from the movie, *Srikanth* were not analysed comprehensively. Therefore, this paper tries to study the issue of disability through an examination of the dialogues of a person with disability and of others around him (male protagonist).

## Discussion

*Srikanth* (2024) is a biopic, directed by Tushar Hiranandini, based on the life of an industrialist with a visual disability, Srikanth Bolla (Rajkumar Rao). The movie opens in Machilipatnam, Andhra Pradesh (13 July, 1992), where a boy, later named Sri, is born. A man informs Damodar (Srikanth's father)- *Ladka hua hai* (3:07) (A boy is born). After this, Srikanth's father, happily moves around, reiterating the words, on his way home. His excitement soon comes to an end, when he comes to know of his son's blindness. Srikanth's mother and father are advised by their neighbours/relatives to get rid of their son, but ultimately, they decide to raise him. One of the men present at his birth says- *Duniya kachra samjhegi ise* (4:50) (He will be considered useless by the world).

Later, Srikanth's voice is heard in a flashback, uttering the following words:

*Mai hu Srikanth, apne nana ki aankhon ka tara,*

*par meri kismet mein aankhein hi nahi hain* (11:07)

I am Srikanth, an apple of my father's eyes,

however, there are no eyes in my fate. (my trans.)

This simple phrase *aankhon ka tara* is used in our daily conversations and it underlines the importance given to our senses, especially the sight. This very phrase appears in a very famous Hindi song by a legendary Indian singer, Late Lata Mangeshkar ji- *Chanda hai tu, mera suraj hai tu, O meri aankhon ka taara hai tu*. These words and phrases are used by us both

intentionally and unintentionally, to heighten the importance of our senses and also derogatorily to mock both the disabled and the non-disabled. In the movie, Srikanth is mocked, by being labelled as *Andha Bhikhari* (blind beggar) and as *Surdas* by one of his classmates, named Mahesh. When Srikanth is expelled by the authorities from a special school in Hyderabad, the Principal warns the guards by saying: *Agar ye campus mein fir se dikha, toh tum dono ki taang todh dunga.* (17:24) (If I see him on campus again, then I will break a leg of both of you). Clearly, disability is used here as a threat/punishment.

Further, in the movie, when Srikanth, aimlessly wanders in the streets after his expulsion, he accidentally collides with a car, and the driver shouts: *Abey andha hai kya?* (19:30) (Are you blind?). At this point, the driver is unaware of Srikanth's blindness and the word *andha* is used in an abusive sense, as we often do and observe being done, without realising its implications for a person with disability. Then, the fellow passenger says: *Arey vo sach mein andha hai* (He is really blind) and gives Srikanth some money as a charity, with the following words: *Bhaiyya, ye rakh lijiye, kuchh kha lena* (19:32) (Please keep this, have something). These words evoke pity and charity in this scene, which are often associated with the disabled community. A well-known disability studies scholar, Renu Addlakha, also states, "Persons with disabilities in India have largely seen a 'culture of charity and welfare' along with pity, segregation, discrimination and stigmatisation" (cited in Sukhramani and Verma 111). All these socio-cultural attitudes are also present in the movie, under discussion.

Fortunately, Devika (Srikanth's teacher) finds him and Srikanth's words to her: *Mujhe bheekh nahi maangni hai teacher* (20:56) (I do not want to beg, teacher), are evidence of his desire to move beyond the set roles and a pre-imagined fallen state for a person with disability. The movie also criticises the Indian education system. When Srikanth is denied the option of Science only because he is visually-impaired, he addresses his teacher as follows:

Toh unko bolo na ki rule bana de,  
 Bina aankh vaalo k liye Science nahi,  
 Bina kaan vaalo k liye Commerce nahi,  
 Bina taang vaalo k liye Law nahi (24:07).  
 Then ask them to make a rule,  
 No Science for people who are blind,  
 No Commerce for people who are deaf,  
 No Law for people without legs. (my trans.)

These words may sound humorous to us, but they carry a lot of weight in the sense that they are an expression of rage, not only of a person with disability but of a minority that is unrightfully deprived of a basic human right. Srikanth's argument to the Principal (of the school, where he seeks admission in the Science stream) in the courtroom, hinted at the importance of 'who wields power'. He said: *Zara sochiye sir, agar ye education system hamne banaya hota, toh kisi bhi book ka padhna apke liye mushkil hi nahi, namumkin ho jata* (32:09) (Just think sir, had we made this education system, then the reading of any book by you, would not only have been difficult, but also impossible). Prior to this statement, the Principal asks Srikanth to read a book, despite knowing that he is blind and cannot read a book meant for other students. As a witty response, Srikanth hands over a book, written in Braille, to the Principal and requests him to read it. The scene highlights the power dynamics at the root of centralisation or marginalisation of a group or a system. It also points to the instability of the categories that are carved around us.

Despite all his hardships, Srikanth's gender seems to be a blessing in the movie. This statement does not intend to undermine his struggles, but just suggests that he was

comparatively in a better position. Also, as a man with disability, he was accepted by a non-disabled woman (Swati). The movie also leaves us to ponder whether it would have been the same had the situation been otherwise, because even today, the acceptance of a disabled woman from a non-disabled man does not come easily. In this light, Sukhramani and Verma write: “An analysis of Hindi films by Bhambani (2003) reflects how abilities of disabled women are rarely projected and how impairment is generally either ridiculed, or seen with pity or patronised and persons with impairments are often shown vulnerable and undesirable” (115). Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that for a woman with disability, individual and collective acceptance becomes an uphill task, considering the skewed notions of gender.

Another very vital issue that the movie displays is the politicisation of a minority group. Srikanth becomes a vote bank for a political party. The words of the politician- *iss andhepan ko leke poora campaign banayenge* (1:56:53) (We will turn this blindness into a campaign), serve as a witness to this. Also, the slogans are worth noting:

1. *Ye hai andha, nahi hai ganda* (He is blind, he is not bad)
2. *Maana mai andha hoon, par apka kandha hoon* (1:54:42) (I admit that I am blind, but I am your support) (my trans.)

Here, the candidature of a blind man is an attempt to gather votes under the garb of sympathy. So, all the above-mentioned dialogues from the movie *Srikanth* mainly bring about the following themes in the film:

- (i) Disability as threat
- (ii) Disability as charity
- (iii) Politicisation of Disability

## Conclusion

The film not only depicts the categorisation of disability but also defies it through a disabled character. Srikanth questions his 'special category' status. The movie supports the idea of assimilation rather than specialisation of persons with disabilities. Many Indian disability activists-cum-scholars, like Abha Khetarpal have also argued against the use of terms like *Divyang*, for persons with disabilities because according to her, such terms present the disabled in an extraordinary light and promote their segregation (4).

The statement of the movie's protagonist (i.e., Srikanth): *Aap log hamein dekhe, becharki ki nazar se nahi, barabari ki nazar se* (2:07:50) (Please see us, through the eyes of equality, not pity), says it all, and also reinforces the fact that categorisation can never truly lead to equalisation.

Though the movie blatantly presents the voices of the disabled community, and Rajkumar Rao has performed very well as the lead role, however, the trend of non-disabled actors performing the role of disabled actors does not seem to break, and this movie ends up becoming a part of the chain of Bollywood movies where disabled actors were absent from the performances where they should have been. Therefore, this paper strongly argues for the inclusion of the disabled actors in such movies that would not only make them experiential but also add authenticity through the very own dialogues and performances of persons with disabilities. Then only, the film industry would become a space that the disabled community could assert as their own.

However, with the appearance of actors like Gopal Krishnan Varma (a person with Down Syndrome) in a recently released Bollywood movie *Sitaare Zameen Par* (2025), the prospects for persons with disabilities seem to be promising. Also, the appearance of figures like Jyoti Amge (an Indian actress with Primordial Dwarfism) on various television shows, are

a reflection of the acceptance of diversity. It would be parochial to say that the disabled actors should be exclusively portrayed by the film-makers in the role of the disabled. However, the domination of the non-disabled actors should not become the norm. A fair number of persons with disabilities should be incorporated for a more inclusive filmic representation, where expertise and experience co-exist harmoniously.

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