

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES RELATED TO THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED
THROUGH THE STUDY OF *SRIKANTH*

Dr. Rakesh Kumar^{1*}, Mridu Sharma²

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Jammu, Email id: rakeshbcju@gmail.com, Contact no. – 7006597225

²PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, Email id: mridusharma416@gmail.com, Contact no. – 9622200963

***Corresponding Author:** Mridu Sharma
*Email id: mridusharma416@gmail.com

Abstract: *The present paper is an attempt to study Tushar Hiranandani's film Srikanth (2024), which is inspired by the real-life events of Srikanth Bolla, an industrialist and the chairman of Bollant Industries from the perspective of critical Disability Studies. It highlights the plight of the specially abled in India, the problem of access and equal rights and the stereotypes in the representation of the visually impaired in a medium as powerful as film. The paper seeks to explore how the Indian society ostracises the specially abled persons, especially, the visually impaired. It also analyses how Srikanth battles these stereotypes around the visually impaired and becomes a successful entrepreneur with the help of his teacher, Devika. It also seeks to explain that though he is visually impaired but his disability is the result of the societal and infrastructural barriers and how the filmic representation of his real life story plays a pivotal role in sensitising the masses about the stereotypes related to the visually impaired.*

Key Words: *Visually Impaired, Access, Disability, Stereotypes, Film.*

Paper: Film is a powerful medium that can be used to create awareness about the specially abled persons, disability rights, disability movement but it is an established fact that most disability scholars such as Martin F. Norden, Nicole Markotic, Lennard J. Davis and others are disillusioned with the filmic representation of disability because most of films use disability as a trope to incite fear, pity, repulsion, at times even humour amongst the viewers. In this context, Martin F. Norden argues in the introduction to his famous book *The Cinema of Isolation* that most films tend to isolate disabled characters from the ‘able-bodied’ peers and enhance the stigmatisation and otherness of the person with disabilities by objectifying them and reducing their personhood to just their disability and inducing pity, fear, scorn, even worse laughter by using the disabled characters. He writes, “Moviemakers’ general tendency to isolate disabled characters is consistent with the way mainstream society has treated its disabled population for centuries” (1).

The popularity and potency of cinema as an audio-visual medium of communication cannot be undermined. It has a profound social influence on the public and it plays a significant role as a medium of enlightenment, information, education and a harbinger of social change. Advocating the wider appeal of Cinema with regard to connecting with the masses, Linda Hutcheon writes in her book titled *A Theory of Adaptation*, “A best-selling book may reach a million reader; a successful Broadway play will be seen by 1 to 8 million people; but a movie or television adaptation will find an audience of many million more” (5). This is especially true of the developing nations like India where mass media and films tend to have a humongous influence as compared to the books or literary texts in sensitising the masses towards issues of race, class, gender and impairment. But it is unfortunate that usually the mainstream film industry is known for poor depiction of persons with disabilities and other racial and ethnic minorities such as women, specially abled persons, LGBTQA+. These films show distorted images of the specially abled and generally the portrayals are highly insensitive towards these repressed social groups. Martin F. Norden writes in the introduction to his book *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disabilities in the Movies*, “As powerful cultural tools, the movies have played a major role in perpetuating mainstream society’s regard for people with disabilities, and more often than not the images borne in those movies have differed sharply from the realities of the physically disabled experience” (1).

However, *Srikanth* is a film directed by Tushar Hiranandani released in the year 2024 that is very different from the earlier depictions of the specially abled in Indian cinema and challenges the stereotypes related to the visually impaired and addresses issues of access, equity and inclusion of the specially abled into the mainstream. The film is based on the real-life events of the talented entrepreneur Srikanth Bolla, born on 13th July 1992, in the village Machilipatnam, Andhra Pradesh. The character of Srikanth is played by Rajkumar Rao in the film. It is an inspiring story of how a visually impaired boy from a small village manages to fight all the stereotypes related to disability and the barriers to educational access and equity and becomes the first visually impaired student to study in Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston and then becomes the chairman of Bollant Industries where he provides job opportunities to the specially abled persons.

The film begins with a disclaimer that the film is inspired by the real life of Srikanth Bolla and some creative liberties are taken for cinematic appeal. Through the film, one gets a peep into the stereotypes related to disability prevalent in the Indian society and how Srikanth fights these stereotypes at each step of his life so that his impairment does not impede his progress. The film opens with the birth of Srikanth and from the moment he is born as a visually impaired child, the stereotyping and stigmatisation begins. Most neighbours and relatives suggest that he is not a healthy and ‘normal’ child so it is better that he should be returned back to God. One of the female relatives present there says to Srikanth’s mother, “It’s better to return him to God and tell him that I don’t need this, give me a fit and healthy child”. Other relatives and friends tell his father that his life will become hell and they are saying this because the child is blind and will have a life without any purpose. The world will treat him like a trash. This is a reflection of how sensitive Indian society is to differentness of bodily function and the specially abled persons are seen as purposeless beings and their very existence is questioned from the moment of their birth. Convinced by the arguments given by the relatives, his father takes him to a field to bury him but his mother stops him and says that she will manage and they will have another child. In fact, since the time immemorial it is believed that the persons with disabilities have no right to live. Aristotle writes in *The Politics*, “As for the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live” (qtd. by Davis). This shows how historically and culturally persons with disabilities have always been denied the right to live and this discrimination is still prevalent in the twenty first century. Arguing that as a society we tend to associate stigma with the person with disabilities, Goffman writes:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on differences, such as those of social class.(5)



Fig. 1: Srikanth's father trying to bury him because he is visually impaired. (6:50-7:15)

Most of the stigma and stereotyping related to the persons with disabilities stems from the hegemony of normalcy. The concept of hegemony of normalcy is given by Lennard J. Davis in his seminal text *Enforcing Normalcy* where he elucidates that how the concept of 'norm', 'normative', 'normate' individual came into being in 1840 when the statistical concept of averages was applied to human beings so that a 'normative' concept of average worker is created and any deviation from the norm such as persons with disabilities are thought as deviants. Therefore, Davis argues that the concept of 'normal' is constructed to create and label the specially abled as 'abnormal'. This brings into "society the concept of a norm, particularly a normal body, and thus in effect create the concept of the disabled body" (30). Due to the hegemony of normalcy, the concept of 'normal' individual originated and that in effect led to the othering and stereotyping of the specially abled which was legitimised because the physical wholeness and perfection of body was considered to be the prerequisite for 'normal' human being. This resonates with Davis as he writes how the concept of statistical norm created the concept of average man- "The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be" (35).

Srikanth also faces the stigma and stereotyping throughout his life because of the hegemony of normalcy that does not allow the specially abled persons to be considered worthy of dignified life, access and inclusion. The discrimination and stereotyping is also evident when at the age of eight years, he attends the local government school and is an exceptional child but is bullied by other children because of his impairment. An important incident is when one day while playing cricket a classmate named Mahesh deliberately bowls a Yorker at his face and as he falls he picks him up, places a coin in his hand and tells him that he should learn to beg as he will need it in the future and they pick up a quarrel. Interestingly, when Srikanth's father tells him that he should have run in order to evade the fight, he says "I'm blind. I can't run. I can just fight." His urge to fight his disability is stressed in more than one incident in the film as it is a very common recent trend in disability portrayal where it is shown that through sheer will power and strength a specially abled person can easily assimilate with the society and the societal barriers are not emphasised. "This means that the disabled persons must learn to adjust physically, emotionally, and psychologically to their own unique situations. But the successfully disabled person of popular imagination is simply the flip-side of the unsuccessfully adjusted one. They are born of the same paradigm" (Thrower 209). This gives a message to the masses that disability is an issue of emotional coping and not of social stigma and discrimination. In fact, the film glorifies this as he says that he can fight, he knows how to fight etc. and in a sense disability is shown as a personal tragedy that one needs to battle at all costs. "But by narrativizing an impairment, one tends to sentimentalize it and link it to the bourgeoisie sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story, as we have seen in so many films treating the subject of disability" (Davis 3-4). Despite showing the theme of disability as an overcoming narrative, the film also reflects the major issues of discrimination and stereotyping that he faces. After eight years of age he goes to Asha School for the Blind, in Hyderabad where he meets his teacher Devika. His teacher has been a formative influence on him who teaches him even when his name is struck off from the school due to a turn of events. She takes him home and continues to teach him through recorded audio lectures and even provides him brailled books. He says, "My mother gave birth to me but teacher Devika taught me how to live."



Fig. 2: The close-up shot of Srikanth and his teacher Devika. (14:00:21)

The figure 2 shows the influence and contribution of Srikanth's teacher, Devika, in his journey through a close-up shot in their very first meeting. The figures shown below, that is, 3, 4, 5 and 6 represent the role of his teacher and how she ensures that access and equality of opportunity does not become an impediment in Srikanth's journey. These also show how the role of a dedicated care giver does wonders in the lives of the specially abled persons who are otherwise considered as non- human entities in a society where the physical perfection of human body is the expected norm. These figures also show how Srikanth pursues his education in India. It is pertinent to mention that not everyone is fortunate to have a teacher like Devika who keeps him at her home and teaches him like her own child. He even says in the film "To others, she's just a teacher. She's like Yashoda mother to me."

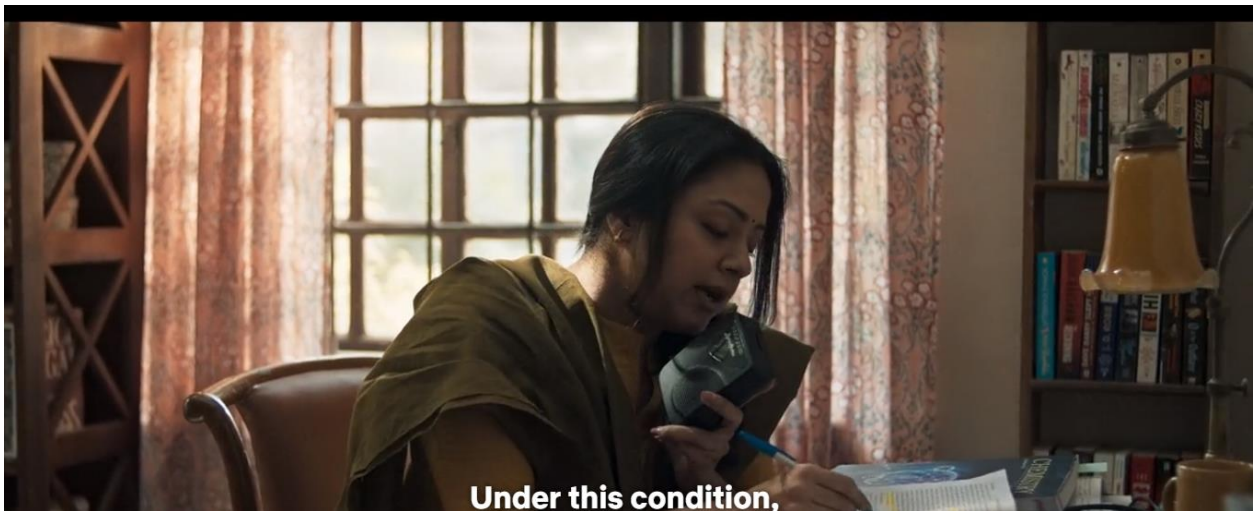


Fig. 3: Devika recording science lectures for Srikanth. (22:08)



Fig. 4: The cassettes on which Devika records specific lectures for Srikanth's study. (23:09:06)

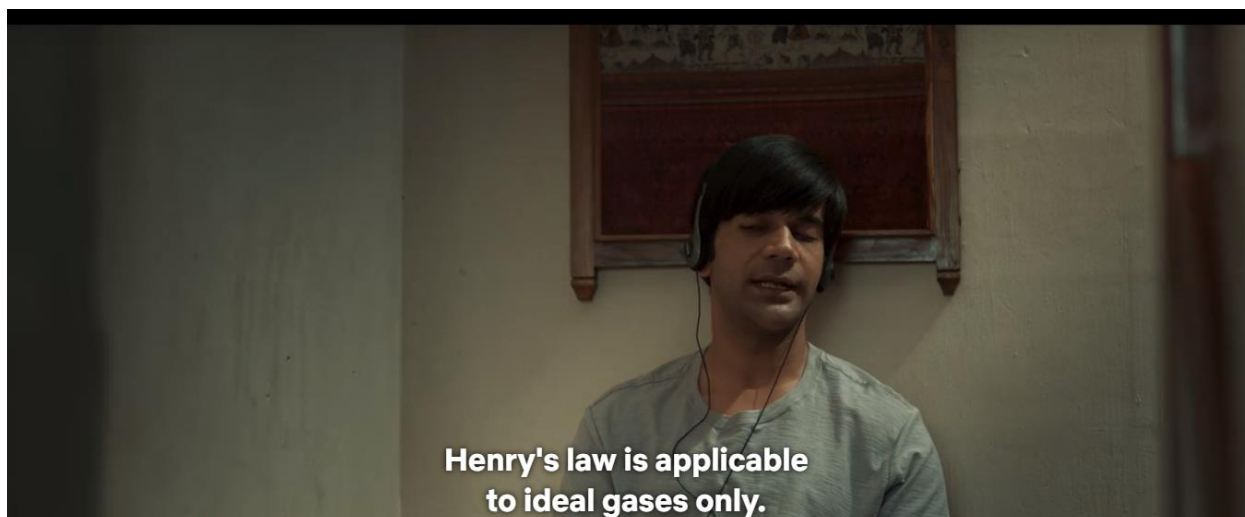


Fig. 5: Srikanth listening to the audio lectures recorded by his teacher Devika. (23:09:16)



Fig.6: Srikanth appearing for his matriculation examination with a scribe who is transcribing his answers. (23:09: 42)

The problem of equal access and opportunity for the specially abled is highlighted when Srikanth scores 96% marks in his matriculation but is denied admission in science stream because of his impairment despite the fact that the cutoff for science stream is 86%. It is a sad state of affairs that such a meritorious student does not get admission in any college because the India education system does not allow visually impaired students to study science. He is very dismayed and frustrated to learn this as he says "No science for the blind. No commerce for the Deaf. No law for the handicapped. I'll only study science, come what may." He along with the support of his teacher files a case against Indian education system and argues in the district court of Hyderabad that the admission depends on marks not sight and it is a matter of choice. Finally, he wins the case and is allowed to opt science. He uses typewriter to take down notes while others write on their notebooks in the class. Meanwhile, in between the case proceedings Devika records audio lectures for him for the first three units of science of eleventh standard as she tells him that whether he gets admission or not, the quest for knowledge should go on. This shows that the specially abled persons have been denied equal opportunities for education in India. "Direct Discrimination and lack of suitable educational and training opportunities have been and continue to be a barrier" (Abberley 130). He faces similar discriminatory practices while he wants to get admission in Indian Institute of Technology after securing 98% marks in his twelfth class. He says "If IIT does not need me, I don't need IIT" and then applies in international universities in America and England and gets scholarship from four international universities and he selects Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Boston. His flight, stay and all the expenditure is sponsored. This incident reveals how Indian education system especially higher education is not amenable to the needs of the specially abled students while the foreign universities have adapted to the needs of diverse categories of students including the persons with disabilities. The problem of access again arises when he is not allowed to board a flight alone because of airline policy which prohibits visually impaired and specially abled persons to travel alone in an airplane.

While in Boston, he feels he has the best time of his life and that is because he is treated equally by his peers, he plays baseball with them and studies and finally feels that he belongs. He falls in love with a girl named Swathi who is a doctor pursuing her Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree from the University of California. It is Swathi who convinces her

to go back to India as he feels that America treats him better and there is lesser social stigma attached to the specially abled there. After coming back to India, he wants to generate employment for the persons with disabilities in India and make them a part of the mainstream workforce. He starts a start up business of packaging and recycling paper by the name of Bollant Industries. But he faces stigma here also when he wants an investor and many people treat his idea by the charity model and do not even consider listening to his vision as they feel that visually impaired will only make candles for Diwali with other specially abled persons. The discrimination in favour of the able-bodied that treats specially abled persons as inferior to nondisabled people is known as ableism. The film reflects that the policies of Indian education system, airline system, business culture are all ableist in nature. Explaining the concept of ableism, Fiona Kumari Campbell writes:

There is little consensus as to what practices and behaviours constitute ableism. We can, nevertheless, say that a chief feature of an ableist viewpoint is a belief that impairment or disability (irrespective of 'type') is inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed eliminated. Ableism refers to: A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human. (5)

After a lot of struggle he finds an investor and succeeds in his business plan and also trains other persons with disabilities and offers them job opportunities at Bollant industries. Paul Abberley writes in the article "Work, Disability, Disabled People and European Social Theory":

Just as importantly, the structure of employment has implications for disabled people. Jobs designed around the capacity, stamina and resources of the average worker, nine-to-five, five day a week employment, which have been termed 'job-shaped jobs', are incompatible with the needs of a wide variety of citizens. This first became apparent in relation to women, but is equally relevant to women, but is equally relevant to disabled people, whatever their gender. (130)

He becomes renowned and at one point a well-known party convinces him to contest elections. However, the party wants to use his disability to get sympathy votes as they make banners of ableist slogans reading "Andha hu, par sabka kandha hu" (I am blind but I am everyone's support) and "Ye hai andha, nhi hai ganda" (He is blind but not wicked). He refuses to contest elections as he realizes that the entire campaign is centered around his blindness and not his contribution to the society and asks the party chief if he is given the party ticket for his work or his limitation.

His contribution in training and guiding the specially abled persons into job opportunity at Bollant Industries is a revolutionary step in India a country where disability is seen as a condition that is worse than death. This notion of disability is perpetuated by films and even by culture and scriptures. In his essay "Physical Disability and Indian Cinema," Joyojeet Pal makes a detailed study of the representation of disability in Indian film as he evaluates more than 200 Indian films beginning from 1936 to 2013 and argues that Indian cinema contributes in perpetrating the stereotypes associated with disability. His essay is regarded as a companion work to Martin F. Norden's survey of physical disability in Western film, *The Cinema of Isolation*. He, further, argues that many of these filmic representations are a result of the cultural practices deeply rooted in Indian sacred texts, such as the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Upanishads. He identifies four patterns of disability representation in Indian Cinema - disability as punitive, disability as dependence, disability as disequilibrium, and disability as maladjustment and also traces how these representations of disability are rooted in Indian literature and culture. In the films like *Sholay*, *Dosti*, *Arzoo*, *Suhaag* and many others the notion of disability as punishment or as a state of dependence is shown. There are many films where a physical disability is faked for comic or other reasons such as *Badshah*, *Andhadhun*, *Aankhein*, *Chup Chupke*. Disability is seen as a tool for mockery, comedy and entertainment as in the *Golmaal* series the humour is centered around Tushar Kapoor's inability to communicate. The impact of mass media on the audience cannot be undermined and films like these play a negative role as they promote ableism and ableist ideology in the society. In this context, Joyojeet Pal writes:

Disability on Indian screen is not nuanced with mixed messages. From the occasional supercrip portrayal (Hartnett) of Deaf lip-readers and blind people with near sonar ability to sense objects to discourses of dependency around the pathos of disabled life, Indian cinema seemingly encompasses the range of canonical globally prevalent disability stereotypes. (109)

It is true that the film is a story of overcoming of one individual Srikanth but the way it discusses the issues of stigma, stereotyping, access and equity for the specially abled in India is a remarkable contribution. It is only when commercial films will address such sensitive issues like impairment and the stigma attached to it then only the rights of persons with disabilities and the contribution of society and its members in making their lives easier or harsher will be realized.

In fact, the end of the film is a call for inclusion of the specially abled into the mainstream unlike previous films where in the end either disability is eliminated or miraculously cured. In the final scene, Srikanth Bolla gets the award of the businessman of the year in Business Excellence Awards in the special category of the differently abled. Though he recognizes and thanks his caregivers like Devika, his co founder Ravi and Swathi and tells about how he has challenged stereotypes all his life in his speech but he refuses to accept the award and questions the idea of special category. He says that he will get the award in the normal category because a business idea is something that no one can see but the mind envisions. "Look at us with equality not empathy" – this sums up the message the filmmaker wants to convey. We, as a society, need to shun stereotypes and divisive practices for the specially abled and rather contribute to their mainstreaming and inclusion into the society. The film is a perfect balance of an individual's battle against disability and the societal barriers, stereotypes and challenges that he faces and overcomes.

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