

Filming the 'Gap': Cinema and Disability Narratives

Disability prejudice functions as a powerful mechanism of marginalization that intersects with other forms of erasure such as gender, sexuality, class, caste, religion, and race. Yet, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that ableism-sponsored discriminatory practices have only recently begun to be meaningfully challenged within academic, cultural, and representational discourses. For centuries, physically and mentally different-abled individuals have been subjected to systematic erasure at social, cultural, and ideological levels. Within dominant narratives, disability has often been framed either as deviance or as a source of spectacle and ridicule. As Mitchell and Snyder argue in their seminal work on disability studies, disability has historically functioned as a "master trope of disqualification," operating to negate identity and deny subjectivity. Cinema, as a powerful cultural form, has played a significant role in reinforcing as well as occasionally contesting these narratives, frequently reproducing normative assumptions about bodily integrity, productivity, and worth that are rooted in ableist ideology.

The articulation of trauma becomes even more complex when disability intersects with childhood. Scholars in Childhood Studies emphasize that children's capacity to express traumatic experiences differs significantly from that of adults, largely due to limited linguistic resources and evolving emotional and cognitive frameworks. Trauma, therefore, often remains unspoken or inadequately represented when the subject is a child. For a disabled child, this difficulty is further intensified by the pressures of normative constructions of ability that define what constitutes a "normal" body and mind. The lived experience of navigating a world structured around able-bodied assumptions renders trauma more profound, as the child is simultaneously negotiating social exclusion, stigma, and the inability to fully articulate suffering. In such contexts, disability is not merely a physical or cognitive condition but a socially produced experience of marginalization that deeply affects the formation of identity during childhood.

This paper examines the ways in which childhood and disability have been represented within the Indian cinematic tradition, focusing on films such as *Dosti* (1962), *Sparsh* (1980), *The Elephant Man* (1980), and *Paromitar Ekdin* (2000). These films offer varied narrative and aesthetic strategies through which disability prejudice is depicted, often revealing how ableist attitudes become especially troubling when viewed through the lens of childhood. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Disability Studies, Trauma Studies, and Childhood Studies, the paper seeks to analyze the politics of representation embedded in these cinematic texts. By situating these films within a broader cultural matrix shaped by ableist narratives, the study aims to interrogate how cinema both reflects and shapes social perceptions of disability, vulnerability, and childhood, while also exploring the possibilities for more ethical and inclusive modes of representation.