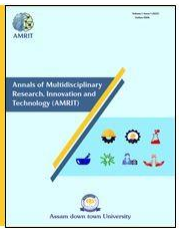
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COMMENTARY

MASS COMMUNICATION

When 'Vision' Makes Up for the Lack of Sight: Review of the Biopic "*Srikanth*"

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(***Note**: "Srikanth" is a 2024 Hindi-language biopic about the life of Srikanth Bolla, an Indian who is the first visually impaired student at MIT (The Massachusetts Institute of Technology), USA, and the Founder and CEO of Bollant Industries Pvt. Ltd, and Co-founder at Samanvai Center for Children with Multiple Disabilities, an angel investor, an Adviser to social impact enterprises, and an author.* – Prof. Dharmeswar Das, *Editor-in-Chief,* AMRIT)

Abstract

Srikanth, the film (Biopic), attempts to glimpse Srikanth's state of mind when success blurs the line between right and wrong. Srikanth shuns cloying melodrama to tell an inspirational story that is witty and winsome in parts and probes the mental architecture of a visually impaired person in some measure. And, along the way, the film slips in an important message to not treat a person with a disability as helpless – but engage with him or her as an equal. However, after a point, the biopic becomes a lesson that the makers want to teach to the people of an ableist world, with a smirk. Based on the dictum that every idea is blind as long as it is not put into practice, writers Jagdeep Siddhu and Sumit Purohit delineate the difference between sight and vision with a blunt knife as they take us into the heartwarming struggle of Srikanth with social stereotypes to become a role model for every Indian. Srikanth turned his disability into strength, defying all odds, he started his own company Bollant Industries which churns out employment opportunities for especially abled persons. He inspires the world with his entrepreneurial story and often says, "Disability is when you have sight, but do not have vision." Srikanth's conviction does not need eyes, his vision becomes his identity. His never-dying spirit makes him an inspiration for the people who have lost hope in their lives the story of Srikanth becomes a hug of hope for people.

Keywords: *Biopic, Srikanth, Bollant Industries, Vision*

1 Introduction

The term "biopic" is coined by combining two words 'biography' and 'picture', and it touches upon the real life of a famous personality. This genre has gained a lot of popularity recently. It has become a noteworthy medium of storytelling and cultural representation [1]. Biopic films can be informative and entertaining, shedding light on the trials and tribulations of real-life personalities. The biopic focuses on real-life heroes and shows how an underdog fights the adverse situations of his life and is overcome with resilience and determination. Indian Hindi Cinema Industry started its journey with the film *Raja Harischandra* in 1913, although it was considered more as a historical re-enactment [2]. In the past few decades, sporadically many biopic-based movies have wended their way to Indian Film Industry. Films such as *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* [3], *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* [4], *Paan Singh Tomar* [5], *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* [6], *Neerja* [7], *Dangal* [8], *Shershaah* [9] have successfully showcased the story of real-life heroes who have proved their mettle and substance successfully overcoming all the hurdles life threw at them. Biopic have always been based on real-life individuals whose amazing accomplishments under difficult and frequently hostile circumstances are the topic of the

film. The main characteristic of the biopic in India is that as it is based on true events, viewers are frequently aware of how the protagonists' lives transpired and came to an end after their on-screen personas were depicted. The biopic is an already circulating life story [10]. Another common trend that encourages people to learn more about famous people is the production of biopic-based movies. It is easy for people to follow that person's life in a movie, which fosters connection while adding entertainment value. The public embraced this trend of biopics with great enthusiasm. And because it provides a fresh approach, new substance, and a new form of pleasure that is considerably superior to Bollywood's traditional drama [11]. The primary concern of directors and filmmakers in this dynamic trend is audience taste. Recently Bollywood has witnessed an influx in sports biopics like *Mary Kom* (12), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* [13], *M.S.Dhoni: The Untold Story* [14], *Dangal* [8], Srikanth [15], *Soorma* [16], *Maidaan* [17] and many more. A lot of these recent Indian biopic films are based on the lives of notable figures of sport and national importance. These portrayals, often hagiographic, become vehicles to promote the person, the actor, and the bigger framework of the national ideals. The main driving force of a biopic is the actor who portrays the life story of the real person. As Belén Vidal puts it, "His/Her performance is the emotional hook for the spectator's investment in the biographical narrative." Continuing the trend of biopics the most recent release is *Srikanth* [18] which made its theatrical release followed by an OTT release. *Srikanth* is a cinematic gem that beautifully encapsulates the life and struggles of Srikanth Bolla, a visually challenged industrialist who defied the odds to achieve monumental success. This film is not just a biopic but a celebration of human resilience and determination. This movie is a hug of hope for people who have lost hope in life. Rajkummar Rao's portrayal of Srikanth Bolla is nothing short of extraordinary. His performance is powerful and nuanced, capturing the essence of Srikanth's spirit and perseverance. Rao's ability to convey deep emotion and strength through his character is commendable, making this role one of his finest. The direction and screenplay are adeptly handled, presenting Srikanth's life story in a manner that is both engaging and thought-provoking. The film's approach to inclusivity and its message of self-respect and excellence resonates deeply with the audience. Under the T-Series banner, Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar, and Nidhi Parmar Hiranandani produced the movie. Tushar Hiranandani directed the biopic and the script was written by Jagdeep Siddhu and Sumit Purohit. Srikanth's success story, from a modest upbringing to the owner of Bollant Industries, is shaped not just by his fortitude but also by people who have empathy for him and faith in his talent.

2 Review

This review aims to highlight the aspects of the movie that make it different from other biopic movies.

2.1 Exposes the Education System

The narratives of the movie avoid the usual larger-than-life hero portrayal, opting for a subtler approach that emphasizes human dignity and equal opportunities for all. Srikanth's frustration with the Indian educational system and professional opportunities are effectively showcased, challenging societal beliefs about persons with disabilities. The movie also highlights the contrast in approaches between the Indian education system's rigidity and the Western approach. In India, Srikanth was rejected by most of the universities despite their academic excellence, which contrasts sharply with his acceptance by four international universities purely on merit. Srikanth wanted to apply for IIT, however, to prepare for that all coaching institutes denied him admission. Taking all odds in his stride, Srikanth secured himself a seat at MIT, where he became the first visually impaired student, opening the avenues for many more like him.

2.2 Four Pillars of Strength for Srikanth

Amidst all the clouds of despair in life, Srikanth had some rays of hope. These were the four pillars of strength he had in life. Inspired by former President of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam (Jameel Khan), pushed by his mentor & teacher Divya (Jyothika), trusted by an entrepreneur Ravi (Sharad Kelkar), and embraced by Swathi (Alaya F). All these four people contributed to Srikanth's success. His success is shaped not just by his fortitude but also by his empathy for people and faith in his talent.

2.3 Portrayal of Disability on Screen

As per the definition of the word 'Disability', it is defined as a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions. Filmmakers portray the characters to gain sympathy rather than genuine compassion. Many mainstream Bollywood movies have depicted the experiences of specially-abled people, either as a part of the plot or as the main subject of the story [18]. Movies like Aankhen [19], Pyare Mohan [20], and Kaabil [21] show the plight of the visually impaired and the challenges they face. Filmmakers have been using stereotypes to showcase disabilities but very rarely do they portray it correctly. Film Ankh Micholi [22] raised eyebrows about the derogatory portrayal of persons with disabilities. The movie reinforces stereotypes with the misguided portrayal of the characters. Derogatory references are given to the characters (i) a person with Alzheimer's as "bhullakad baap" (forgetful father) Hiranandani (ii) a hearing-impaired person as "soundproof system" (iii) a character with speech impairment as "attki hui cassette" (stranded cassette). All these physical and sensory disabilities are used to generate humour in the movie. But Srikanth is the first movie where the protagonist fights for his rights to education, and equal opportunities at work. In the courtroom scene, Srikanth delivers a mic drop dialogue of 'kannon' (Law) being 'andha' (blind). The movie Srikanth underlines the importance that there is no need to treat the especially abled with sympathy or commiseration. They should be treated as equals and there should be proper consideration for them in policy making and its execution. The message of the film is crystal clear - equal opportunities in education and work for the disabled. Srikanth, in the last scene of the movie, rejects the award he is given because he doesn't want that award under the category of especially abled but wants to be treated normally.

3 Conclusion

The film Srikanth attempts to glimpse Srikanth's state of mind when success blurs the line between right and wrong. When prejudices against those who pushed him down threaten to turn the hero's feet into clay. It documents the period when he starts using his handicap to get over the obstacles, the time when taking the straight path starts looking tiresome to him. That none is bereft of bias adds a little nuance to the inspirational tale. Raj Kumar Rao has registered the character in his muscle memory. With eyes half-shut, he opens the door to the soul of Srikanth for us. Srikanth shuns cloying melodrama to tell an inspirational story that is witty and winsome in parts but also probes the mental architecture of a visually impaired person in some measure. And, along the way, the film slips in an important message to not treat a person with a disability as helpless – but engage with him or her as an equal. However, after a point, the biopic becomes a lesson that the makers want to teach to the people of an ableist world, with a smirk. Based on the dictum that every idea is blind as long as it is not put into practice, writers Jagdeep Siddhu and Sumit Purohit delineate the difference between sight and vision with a blunt knife as they take us into the heartwarming struggle of Srikanth (Rajkummar Rao) with social stereotypes to become a role model for every Indian. Srikanth turned his disability into strength, defying all odds, he started his own company Bollant Industries which churns out employment opportunities for especially abled persons. His extraordinary achievements also got him a slot in Asia Forbes 30 under 30 (2017). His journey embodies resilience and determination. His company encourages equal opportunity for all who are differently abled. He inspires the world with his entrepreneurial story and often says, "Disability is when you have sight, but do not have vision." Srikanth's conviction does not need eyes, his vision becomes his identity. His never-dying spirit makes him an inspiration for the people who have lost hope in their lives the story of Srikanth becomes a hug of hope for people.

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