

Cecity as Spectacle: Festive, Metaphorical, and Stereotypical Constructions of Special Ability in Indian Mythology, Literature, and Culture

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Abstract

Indian mythology, literature, and cultural production have persistently transformed cecity from a lived bodily condition into a dense symbolic, moral, and aesthetic spectacle. Rather than engaging sightlessness as a socially mediated form of special ability, Indian narrative traditions—spanning Sanskrit epics, Purāṇic literature, classical drama, Bhakti poetry, Buddhist and Jain narratives, and modern Indian cinema—have repeatedly moralised, allegorised, and over-signified it. This paper argues that cecity in Indian culture functions as a festive spectacle: a narrative device marked by repetition, symbolic excess, and ethical coding, while remaining detached from ordinary lived experience. Through a character-based and text-specific analysis of the VālmīkiRāmāyaṇa, non-canonical Rāmāyaṇa traditions, selected episodes from the Purāṇas (including narratives involving Śukrācārya and Guru Vasiṣṭha), and the Mahābhārata, this study demonstrates how sightlessness is systematically aligned with dependence, villainy, ethical failure, and political incapacity. Drawing upon underprivileged class studies and cultural theory, the paper contends that such

representational practices sustain ableist epistemologies, denying ordinariness, agency, and social complexity to subjects marked by special ability.

Keywords: Cecity, Sightlessness, Special Ability, Indian Epics, Purāṇic Literature, Ableism, Representation, Spectacle

1. Introduction: Cecity and Cultural Over-Signification

In Indian literary and cultural traditions, bodily difference has rarely been permitted to exist without symbolic excess. Cecity, in particular, is persistently mobilised as a metaphor for ignorance, moral deviation, karmic consequence, spiritual trial, or ethical incapacity. Across historical periods and genres, Indian narratives privilege allegory over experience, symbolism over embodiment, and moral coding over social reality.

As Lennard J. Davis argues, bodily norms are not biological givens but narrative constructions enforced through cultural representation. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson similarly observes that literature trains societies to “read” bodies, often transforming difference into spectacle rather than acknowledging it as ordinary variation. Indian traditions constitute a vast archive of such readings, where sightlessness becomes a privileged site for inscribing morality, sovereignty, gender hierarchy, and power relations.

This paper proposes that Indian culture sustains a festive economy of cecity—a regime of representation in which sightlessness is endlessly narrated, ritualised, aestheticised, and moralised. “Festivity” here does not denote celebration but excess and repetition: the continual symbolic mobilisation of cecity across texts, traditions, and epochs. By examining epic and Purāṇic narratives, this study demonstrates how special ability is denied ordinariness and instead transformed into narrative burden, ethical explanation, and political disqualification.

2. Cecity, Dependence, and Tragedy in the VālmīkiRāmāyaṇa

One of the earliest and most influential representations of sightlessness in Sanskrit literature appears in the AyodhyāKāṇḍa of the VālmīkiRāmāyaṇa through the episode of ŚravaṇaKumāra's parents. The aged ascetics are described as completely sightless and entirely dependent upon their son for mobility, sustenance, and ritual practice. Their cecity is inseparable from immobility: they cannot travel, gather food, or perform religious duties independently.

The accidental killing of Śravaṇa by King Daśaratha becomes catastrophic precisely because of this sightlessness. The parents' grief is intensified by their bodily vulnerability, culminating in their deaths and the curse that ultimately precipitates Rāma's exile. Cecity thus operates as the narrative trigger of dynastic tragedy. Crucially, the epic offers no model of adaptation, accommodation, or autonomy; sightlessness is presented as total dependence and inevitable suffering, reinforcing a deeply ableist narrative logic.

3. Mantharā and Non-VālmīkiRāmāyaṇa Traditions: Cecity and Villainy

While Vālmīki does not explicitly describe Mantharā as sightless, several later Rāmāyaṇa traditions associate her bodily deformity—and, in certain retellings, impaired vision—with moral corruption. In texts such as the Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Kṛttivāsī Rāmāyaṇa, and Rāmcaritmānas, Mantharā is repeatedly described as kubjā (crooked), deformed, and ethically perverse.

Mantharā's narrative function is decisive. She poisons Kaikeyī's mind against Rāma, recalls the two boons granted by Daśaratha, instils fear of political marginalisation, and strategically engineers Rāma's exile. Her bodily difference becomes a visible signifier of moral deviation. In many retellings, her inability to "see clearly" operates metaphorically as an inability to judge ethically. Cecity—literal or symbolic—thus functions as a narrative justification for villainy.

By locating political catastrophe in a marginal, bodily marked woman, these traditions deflect responsibility from royal patriarchy and institutional power, reinforcing an ableist logic in which physical difference becomes ethical explanation.

4. Cecity, Kingship, and Political Exclusion in the Mahābhārata

The Mahābhārata offers the most sustained and structurally embedded treatment of cecity through King Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Unlike earlier figures, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sightlessness is institutionalised as a basis for political exclusion. He is denied the throne solely on the grounds of cecity, establishing visual capacity as a prerequisite for sovereignty.

Even after Pāṇḍu's death, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's rule remains provisional and morally compromised. Throughout the epic, his sightlessness is repeatedly invoked to explain his excessive attachment to Duryodhana, his dependence on Śakuni, his ethical paralysis during injustice, and his failure to uphold dharma. His reliance on Sañjaya's supernatural vision reinforces the notion that a sightless king requires prosthetic sight to access truth and authority.

Gāndhārī's voluntary sightlessfolding—often interpreted as moral protest or wifely devotion—paradoxically intensifies the epic's fixation on sight as ethical legitimacy. In the Mahābhārata, cecity becomes the terrain upon which kingship, masculinity, and moral authority are negotiated—and ultimately denied.

6. Sightlessness in Sanskrit Drama: Stage, Spectacle, and Symbolic Impairment

While Sanskrit drama does not always foreground sightless protagonists, it repeatedly deploys sightlessness (cecity) and impaired vision as symbolic dramaturgical tools, especially to signify moral failure, epistemic limitation, or divine retribution. Classical dramaturgy, as codified in the Nāṭyaśāstra, privileges vision (darśana) as central to aesthetic experience and rasa production. This foundational emphasis implicitly marginalises bodies that deviate from sensory normativity, rendering sightlessness incompatible with aesthetic centrality.

In *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* by Kālidāsa, although no principal character is physically sightless, the drama is structured around a powerful trope ...

7. Sightlessness in Buddhist Literature: Poverty, Begging, and Moral Didacticism

Buddhist literature frequently includes sightless figures, yet they are rarely individualised or granted narrative interiority. In the *Jātaka* tales, sightless men often appear as beggars, mendicants, or figures requiring compassion, most notably in the *AndhaJātaka*, where sightlessness functions primarily as a narrative trigger for almsgiving rather than as an experiential subjectivity.

These figures are typically unnamed, voiceless, and interchangeable. They exist less as characters than as ethical instruments, enabling sighted protagonists to cultivate *karuṇā* (compassion). The sightless body thus becomes a pedagogical device—highly visible yet stripped of agency, interiority, an...

8. Jain Narrative Literature and Ascetic Sightlessness: Bodily Deprivation and Ethical Exemplarity

Jain narrative literature provides another set of concrete representations of sightlessness, particularly within ascetic traditions where bodily deprivation is valorised as a pathway to liberation. Unlike metaphorical sightlessness, Jain texts frequently depict the actual loss of vision resulting from extreme austerities (*tapas*), prolonged fasting, and sustained neglect of bodily care.

In several Jain narrative collections, including didactic stories preserved in the *Kathākośa* tradition, monks are described as becoming sightless due to the rigours of ascetic practice. This sightlessness is neither accidental nor metaphorical; it is presented as the direct corporeal consequence of ethical discipline. The sightless ascetic is revered not because sightlessness itself is meaningful, but because it testifies to the monk's triumph over bodily attachment and sensory desire (Dundas 112).

Yet, as with Bhakti literature, Jain narratives do not grant sightlessness narrative autonomy. The sightless monk's condition is never explored phenomenologically; there is no sustained engagement with how sightlessness reshapes perception, mobility, spatial orientation, or social interaction. Instead, sightlessness functions primarily as ethical evidence, reinforcing Jain ideals of renunciation and self-denial. The sightless body becomes morally visible but experientially invisible.

Thus, Jain literature participates in a broader cultural pattern in which sightlessness is acknowledged materially but only as a by-product of virtue, not as a valid or ordinary mode of being. Special ability acquires meaning only when subordinated to moral teleology, leaving lived experience unarticulated and untheorised.

9. Bhakti Literature and the Sacralisation of Sightlessness: Surdas and the Theology of Inner Vision

Among Indian Bhakti traditions, Surdas represents the most influential and complex figure associated with sightlessness. Unlike epic or Purāṇic representations where sightlessness often signifies punishment or incapacity, Surdas's sightlessness is explicit, embodied, and central to his literary reception. Traditional hagiographies consistently describe Surdas as sightless from birth, a condition that becomes inseparable from his poetic authority and devotional legitimacy.

Surdas's primary work, the *Sūrsāgar*, is composed almost entirely of highly visual descriptions of Kṛṣṇa's form (*rūpa*), movements, ornaments, and childhood play (*bāla-līlā*). The poet's sightlessness is thus framed paradoxically: although deprived of physical vision, Surdas is believed to possess a superior inner vision (*antar-dṛṣṭi*) that allows him to "see" Kṛṣṇa more fully than sighted devotees. This construction elevates sightlessness into a spiritual credential, transforming bodily difference into theological privilege (Hawley 143).

However, this sacralisation of sightlessness comes at a critical cost. Surdas's sightlessness is not represented as a lived sensory condition involving navigation, dependency, or social interaction. Instead, it is aestheticised and spiritualised, stripped of material specificity. Sightlessness functions less as an embodied reality and more as a symbolic guarantee of devotion. The sightless poet becomes acceptable—and even exemplary—only because his special ability is redeemed through divine proximity.

Moreover, later Bhakti traditions intensify this trope by emphasising Surdas's sightlessness as proof of renunciation and humility. Such narrative strategies contribute to what may be described as the festive glorification of special ability, where bodily difference is celebrated only insofar as it confirms spiritual transcendence. Consequently, Bhakti literature, while appearing inclusive, ultimately reinforces an ableist logic: sightlessness gains value only when it is overcome metaphysically, not when it is lived ordinarily.

10. Modern Indian Cinema and Popular Culture: City, Sightlessness, and the Cinematic Politics of Spectacle

In modern Indian cinema and popular culture, city and sightlessness emerge as deeply entangled representational categories. While contemporary realism promises a departure from mythological or devotional abstractions, cinematic narratives continue to frame both the city and the sightless subject through excess, distortion, and emotional amplification. Rather than presenting city as a lived spatial ecology accessible through multiple sensory registers, popular cinema repeatedly imagines it as a visual domain from which the sightless body remains structurally excluded. As a result, sightlessness—and by extension, alternative modes of inhabiting the city—is transformed into spectacle.

This representational tendency is most clearly visible in the Hindi film *Black*, one of the most influential cinematic texts dealing with sightlessness within an implicitly urban setting. Ostensibly inspired by the life of Helen Keller, the film situates its protagonist,

Michelle McNally, within elite urban institutions—schools, homes, and universities—yet consistently denies her meaningful access to the city as a navigable, social, and intellectual space. The narrative thus stages the city as a hostile visual order, accessible only through sighted mediation.

One of the film's most problematic narrative strategies is the extreme temporal exaggeration attached to Michelle's education. The suggestion that she requires nearly two decades to complete her graduation implicitly equates city-based education with visual competence and frames sightlessness as a fundamental obstacle to urban intellectual life. Educational delay is not attributed to inaccessible city infrastructures or exclusionary pedagogies but is naturalized as an inherent limitation of sightlessness itself. Consequently, participation in the city's knowledge economy becomes an extraordinary achievement rather than a civic right.

Michelle's characterization further intensifies this logic. In the early stages of the film, she is portrayed as violent, undisciplined, and cognitively deficient, reinforcing the cultural assumption that sightlessness entails an inability to decode the city's sensory and social signals. Her progress becomes possible only through the intervention of a sighted male teacher who functions as an urban savior—disciplining her body, regulating her movement, and translating the city for her. Agency, rationality, and spatial authority are thus firmly located in the sighted figure, while the sightless subject remains dependent and perpetually mediated (Chaudhuri 124).

Despite being celebrated as progressive, *Black* ultimately reproduces an ableist urban imaginary. City life is not reimagined through alternative sensory pathways such as sound, touch, rhythm, or memory. Instead, sightlessness is amplified to provoke pity and admiration, transforming the city into an emotional theatre where the sightless subject exists primarily for

narrative consumption. Special ability is not normalized as a legitimate mode of urban being but aestheticized as exceptional suffering.

More broadly, Indian popular culture continues to reward such representations precisely because they dramatize city access through emotional excess. Sightlessness gains narrative legitimacy only when it is overcome through extraordinary struggle, disciplined by a sighted guide, or redeemed through prolonged hardship. Ordinary sightless engagements with the city—working, commuting, teaching, navigating institutions, and forming social networks—remain conspicuously absent.

The distortion of Helen Keller's actual educational and urban experience, which was marked by early academic achievement and institutional participation, underscores how cinematic sentiment overrides ethical representation. Under the guise of inspiration, modern Indian cinema perpetuates a deeply exclusionary logic: the city belongs to those who see, while sightlessness must earn conditional entry through suffering.

Thus, even within contemporary realism, Indian cinema fails to reconceptualize the city as a multisensory space. Sightlessness remains spectacularized rather than integrated, framed as emotional excess rather than lived urban reality. The sightless subject is visible on screen yet denied full citizenship within the cinematic city—present, narrated, and celebrated, but never allowed to belong ordinarily.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that within Indian civilization and cultural imagination, sightlessness (cecity) is rarely represented as an ordinary mode of embodiment. Across genres, historical periods, and media forms, it is persistently overdetermined—converted into moral allegory, karmic consequence, spiritual excess, or emotional spectacle. Rather than being approached as a socially situated form of special ability, sightlessness is repeatedly burdened with symbolic, ethical, and aesthetic expectations.

The cumulative outcome of this survey reveals a deeply sight-normative cultural logic, wherein social authority, ethical clarity, and cognitive legitimacy are tacitly aligned with visual capacity. Even when sightlessness appears to be valorized, such recognition remains conditional: it is accepted only when compensated by moral suffering, spiritual transcendence, or sentimental appeal. Ordinary, autonomous, and socially integrated sightless subjectivity remains largely absent.

This paper therefore argues that Indian cultural traditions, despite their diversity, participate in a shared representational economy that marginalizes sightlessness by refusing it neutrality. A critical re-reading informed by underprivileged studies is essential to expose these entrenched assumptions and to open interpretive space for more inclusive, non-symbolic understandings of special ability—understandings grounded not in spectacle or redemption, but in lived social reality.

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