

A concept set to enrich cinematic experience for visually challenged

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A scene from “Deiva Thirumagal”, which was shown with audio description for the visually challenged.

A Chennai-based NGO working with the differently-abled seeks to sensitise Tamil filmmakers to adding a descriptive audio component to their films in order to provide a more wholesome cinematic experience for the visually challenged.

Ability Foundation, which has been featuring audio-description for films screened at successive biennial AbilityFest events since 2007, has seen a response from the visually challenged that has been both overwhelming and heart-warming.

The NGO believes that interlaying audio narratives with the regular dialogue sections should be integral to every film at the time of release. In countries such as the U.S. and U.K., audio description is mandatory.

“It is a long road to the day when films are released with audio description, but we have started informal discussions with key figures in the film industry to at least have descriptive audio incorporated as a post-release enhancement,” said Janaki Pillai, Director (Operations), Ability Foundation.

Audio description is a dynamic medium, bridging that gap in accessibility for blind and partially sighted people when watching films or television programmes. The technique makes the visual images of media accessible to people who are visually impaired — the visual is made verbal.

Like a narrator telling a story, audio description is an additional commentary describing body language, expressions and movements. Describers use words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative to convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to blind and visually impaired.

It was during the AbilityFest 2007 that Ability Foundation piloted possibly the first ever public screening in India of an audio described film, “Liz Crow’s Nectar”. In the 2009 edition of the festival, Bollywood star Aamir Khan gave the NGO permission to screen “Taare Zameen Par” with audio description.

A few weeks ago, AbilityFest2011 marked the first ever screening of a Tamil film with audio description, A.L.Vijay’s hit “Deiva Thirumagal” starring Vikram.

For the visually challenged who attended the special screening at Sathyam Cinemas, audio-description served two purposes — it filled the gaps in dialogue to explain the plot unfolding on screen and also animated the imagination of the audience as the scenes focussed on the stunningly beautiful countryside.

Actor Rohini says it was an eye-opener to see how much adding descriptive audio could go towards uplifting the overall cinematic experience for the visually challenged.

She suggested that descriptive audio could be introduced into a theatre setting by streaming the additional layer of narrative on to headsets for the visually challenged so that it did not interfere with the cinematic experience of the regular viewers.

According to Ms. Pillai, in an ideal situation every single film, at the time of release, would have captioning and audio description options automatically available to those who need it.

She points out that on both occasions that “Deiva Thirumagal” was screened during AbilityFest, the movie was enthusiastically received by the visually challenged who felt that audio description made for a better cinematic experience. “They felt that it would be great if all movies could be audio described this way,” she said.

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