



Cinematic Framing of Child Trafficking: Victims and Perpetrators in Netflix's *Bhakshak* and *Sector 36*

Sheetal Kumari

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India

ABSTRACT

*This study examines the media framing of victims and perpetrators in Indian films addressing child trafficking, sexual abuse, and organ trafficking, with particular focus on Netflix's *Bhakshak* and *Sector 36*. These films engage with vulnerable social issues by depicting the experiences of trafficked children and societal responses to such crimes. The paper evaluates narrative choices and cinematic approaches that shape representations of victims and perpetrators, highlighting how framing moves beyond conventional narratives to function as persuasive social commentary. It critically examines ethical representation, the reinforcement or disruption of stereotypes, and the risk of sensationalizing trauma for entertainment. Drawing on framing theory, narratology, and feminist film theory, the study analyzes how narrative structures influence audience perception of child trafficking and sexual abuse. The methodology employs narrative analysis of plot, character construction, camera work, and dialogue to assess identity formation. Addressing a gap in media and literary studies, the paper foregrounds Indian cinematic contexts and their role in shaping public discourse on trafficking and abuse.*

Keywords: child trafficking, cinematic framing, narrative, organ trafficking, perpetrators, sexual abuse, victims

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE ISSUE

Child trafficking remains a pervasive global issue, with 38% of trafficking victims worldwide being children (UNODC, 2024). In India, socio-economic inequalities, systemic corruption, and cultural stigmas exacerbate the vulnerability of children to trafficking for sexual exploitation, labor, and organ harvesting (Seefar & My Choices Foundation, 2021). This heinous crime, involving the exploitation of minors for various purposes, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ trafficking, has become a pressing concern for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and civil society organizations. The International Labour Organization estimates that 5.7 million children are victims of forced labor and human trafficking worldwide, with a substantial portion of these cases occurring in South Asia (ILO, 2015). In India, the issue of child trafficking is particularly acute, exacerbated by factors such as poverty, lack of education, gender discrimination, and social inequality. The trafficking of children for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor in industries such as textile manufacturing and domestic work, and even illegal adoption, continues to be a significant challenge for Indian authorities and society at large. Media representations of such crimes play a vital role in shaping public awareness and policy responses.

Indian cinema, with its immense popularity and cultural influence, has increasingly begun to address the critical issue of sexual exploitation of children. The industry has recognized the power of storytelling through films to raise awareness around societal norms and inspire action against the sexual exploitation of children. The representation of such delicate and sensitive topics in Indian films such as *Mardaani* (2014), *Lakshmi* (2014), *Love Sonia* (2018), and others has evolved and progressed over the years, moving from sporadic, often sensationalized portrayals to more nuanced and research-based narratives that aim to shed light on the complexities of the issue. The cinematic treatment of child trafficking and sexual violence in Indian films has taken various forms, ranging from mainstream productions to independent and regional cinema. Early representations of such crimes often focused on the shock value, sometimes inadvertently perpetuating stereotypes or oversimplifying the issue (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003, p. 331). However, recent years have seen a shift towards more responsible and in-depth portrayals that explore the root causes, the impact on victims and their families, and the challenges faced by those working to combat trafficking (Rodríguez-López, 2018, p. 69).

This study analyses the recent Netflix releases *Bhakshak* (2024) and *Sector 36* (2024). The study points out how these films frame victims and

perpetrators, focusing on the dichotomy between passivity and agency in victims and moral ambiguity in perpetrators. The paper also evaluates the ethical implications of the films in depicting trafficking, sexual violence, trauma and explores how societal settings in Indian cinema shape these portrayals. By analyzing the select films, the study contributes to the fields of media ethics, cultural studies, and cinematic advocacy.

Bhakshak offers a compelling portrayal of investigative journalism's role in exposing sex trafficking and abuse in India. Directed by Pulkit and produced by Gauri Khan (Red Chillies Entertainment), starring Bhumi Pednekar as a journalist (Vaishali), the film draws inspiration from real events to craft a narrative that critically examines the intersection of media, law enforcement, and social justice in addressing exploitation. The film's framing of sex trafficking and abuse is multifaceted, presenting it as a complex issue deeply rooted in societal structures, corruption, and economic disparities. It centers on a female journalist's inquiry into a girls' shelter home and sex racket run there by powerful Bansi Sahu, emphasizing the frequently neglected voices of victims and the challenges faced by those who seek to bring perpetrators to justice.

Sector 36, directed by Aditya Nimbalkar and produced by Dinesh Vijan (Maddock Films and Jio Studios), starring Vikrant Massey as the perpetrator (Prem), offers a grim portrayal of interconnected criminal enterprises involving sexual violence, child exploitation, and organ trafficking. The movie frames these issues through a noir-tinged police procedural following a jaded investigation by SI Pandey of a series of child disappearances and murders. The film employs stark visual imagery and a bleak tone to depict the harsh realities of child exploitation. Focusing on the investigative process offers insight into the systemic nature of these crimes while maintaining some distance from graphic and explicit depictions of abuse. This framing enables the film to address profoundly unsettling and disturbing subject matter without veering into exploitation itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The strata of Indian cinema have portrayed child trafficking through diverse genres, from melodrama to action thrillers. The depiction of trafficking perpetrators has also evolved to become more nuanced throughout. Earlier films often portrayed traffickers as villains, but contemporary productions sought to examine the socio-economic and psychological issues that compel individuals to engage (O'Brien, 2015, p. 210; Wheaton et al., 2010, p. 116). This nuanced approach does not excuse the actions of perpetrators but seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the

systemic issues that contribute to the persistence of child trafficking. Through the portrayal of complex narratives, filmmakers enhance the comprehensive awareness of the root causes of child trafficking and sexual exploitation and the necessity for multi-faceted solutions. The depiction of trafficking and sexual violence is also controversial, as filmmakers must navigate the tension between raising awareness and provoking action while adhering to ethical standards in portraying such critical issues. Questions of consent, the potential for re-traumatization of survivors, and the risk of exploitation through sensationalism are ongoing concerns in the production and reception of these films (Li et al., 2020, p. 863). The Western or Eurocentric cinematic portrayals of child trafficking are often characterized by linear rescue narratives and male savior tropes. Films like *Trade* (2007), *Taken* (2008), and *Eden* (2012) focus on abduction, international trafficking rings, and swift justice, frequently reducing victims to passive figures and emphasizing individual heroism over systemic critique.

The emergence of streaming platforms has provided new avenues for exploring the topic of child trafficking and sexual violence in Indian cinema. Series and films aired on these platforms frequently posit greater creative autonomy to explore the intricacies of the subject, unencumbered by the constraints of traditional theatrical releases (Peraiya & Nandukrishna, 2023, p. 2331). This has allowed for more extended, nuanced storytelling that can explore multiple perspectives and storylines related to child trafficking. *Bhakshak* (2024) and *Sector 36* (2024) extend this trajectory by employing narrative strategies rooted in regional realism (true events), investigative journalism, and procedural stagnation. Their use of localized language, visual motifs, and ambiguous justice systems reflects how Indian cinema uniquely critiques trafficking, validating culturally embedded storytelling modes absent in Western frameworks.

Recent academic contributions analyze *Bhakshak* as a narrative of intrepid journalism that challenges patriarchal structures within media institutions. The film captures the socio-political challenges faced by female journalists, especially in regional and underfunded media outlets, foregrounding the connection between media commercialization, political patronage, and journalistic vulnerability (Sharma & Srivastava, 2024, pp. 2-3). A content analysis of child abuse and trafficking across Bollywood and OTT platforms cautions against the rising tendency toward sensationalism and desensitization in digital storytelling, emphasizing the need for ethical, survivor-centered portrayals. The analysis highlights the importance of using films like *Bhakshak* to promote public awareness and social change, while critiquing existing industry practices that often prioritize shock value over

sensitivity (Gupta & Gupta, 2024, pp. 84-85). A feminist critique of *Bhakshak* as a cinematic intervention into failures of Indian journalism in reporting rape and sexual violence examines the patriarchal language and sensationalism embedded in Indian news narratives. The film illustrates how cinema can model more responsible storytelling than mainstream journalism, and ethical approaches to survivor narratives are particularly emphasized as it avoids graphic depictions, instead centres the voices of victims and the systemic mechanisms that silence them (Raj & Kumar, 2025, p. 3). A comparative analysis of Indian loanwords in Netflix subtitles in the context of *Sector 36* and *Bhakshak* evaluates how AI-driven translation tools like Google Translate and WhatsApp Meta handle culturally embedded terms. The inclusion of terms related to sexual violence and trafficking in global media discourse reflects their significance as culturally and politically charged texts, and specific vocabulary contributes to authentic Indian narratives rooted in regional realism (Ghouri, Tariq & Zahid, 2025).

Despite these contributions, the critical engagement with formal cinematic techniques remains underdeveloped. The existing literature either treats the films as thematic texts or focuses on their journalistic or sociological relevance, with limited attention to how narrative structures and cinematic form shape perception. As filmmakers continue to explore this sensitive topic, the potential for cinema to effectuate societal change and policy reform remains substantial, highlighting the influence of storytelling in addressing critical human rights issues of contemporary times (Pokhariya et al., 2025). Moreover, critical frameworks like framing theory, narratology discourse, and feminist film theory are underused in analyzing Indian representations of trafficking. Discussions of ethical representation, particularly regarding trauma and survivor agency, are often overlooked. This study addresses this scholarly gap and lack of academic discussion on these films by analyzing them through a framing-centered lens. These Netflix releases offer a timely opportunity to evaluate how cinematic techniques and ethical narrative choices mediate the depiction of child trafficking, thus contributing to Indian media ethics, cultural studies, and film theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing theory, narratology, and feminist film theory provide critical frameworks for analyzing the depiction of trafficking and sexual exploitation of children and young girls in Indian cinema. These theories help unpack how narratives are constructed, how gender and power dynamics are portrayed, and how trauma is represented and processed in cinematic storytelling. Framing theory, introduced by Erving Goffman (1974), examines how the

presentation of information shapes audience perception. In cinema, framing extends to visual and thematic elements that guide interpretations of characters and events (Gorp, 2010, p. 85). Studies show that trafficking victims are often depicted as ‘ideal victims’ (Christie, 1986) to evoke sympathy, while perpetrators are reduced to caricatures, ignoring systemic complexities (O’Brien, 2015, p. 208). Narratology and recent evolving discourses provide tools to analyze storytelling, focusing on disruption-resolution patterns and systemic corruption, highlighting tensions between individual agency and structural constraints. Feminist film theory and the concept of ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1975) critique the objectification of women in visual media. While recent scholars argue for broader interpretations of female agency (Guizzo et al., 2017, p. 362), Indian cinema often struggles to balance victim vulnerability with empowerment.

When contextualized within these theoretical frameworks, the cinematic portrayal of child trafficking and sexual violence in India reveals both progress and ongoing challenges. Framing theory shows how films can shape public understanding and influence societal responses. Narratology uncovers the mechanics of storytelling that either illuminate or obscure the lived realities of trafficking victims. Feminist film theory critiques the gendered dynamics of representation, advocating for narratives that empower rather than exploit. The amalgamation of these frameworks further emphasizes the ethical responsibility of filmmakers to represent trauma in ways that honor the survivor’s experience without commodifying their pain. *Bhakshak* and *Sector 36* exemplify the evolving landscape of Indian cinema’s engagement with child trafficking, blending journalistic inquiry, procedural drama, and accounts to offer complex narratives. Scenes were selected based on their focus on victimization, trauma representation, and perpetrator complexity. The research will contextualize these cinematic representations within broader discussions of child trafficking in India, evaluating their potential impact on public understanding and societal responses to this critical issue.

CINEMATIC FRAMING: REPRESENTATION OF VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS

Framing Theory, as developed by Erving Goffman, posits that the way information is presented or framed significantly influences audience perception (Sullivan, 2023, p. 2). In the context of films on child sex trafficking and violence, framing determines whether the issue is seen as a criminal justice problem, a human rights violation, or a socio-economic crisis (Vance, 2012). *Bhakshak* frames the narrative through the lens of

investigative journalism, focusing on the protagonist's quest to expose a child trafficking ring. This frame positions the viewer to see the issue as one requiring public accountability and systemic reform. The film's use of a female journalist as the central figure also shifts the frame from victimhood to agency, emphasizing the role of civil society in combating trafficking. *Sector 36*, on the other hand, employs a crime-thriller frame, focusing on the procedural aspects of law enforcement. This framing can both illuminate and obscure. While it highlights the challenges faced by police in dismantling trafficking networks, it may also risk reducing the issue to a matter of criminality, potentially neglecting the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of trafficking. In both films, framing operates at multiple levels—visual, narrative, and thematic—to shape how trafficking victims and perpetrators are perceived, ultimately constructing different approaches to addressing systemic corruption and justice. While *Bhakshak* adopts a more emotionally driven, human-centered frame, *Sector 36* critiques institutional dysfunction through a procedural and investigative lens. The following discussion examines how both films employ framing strategies to depict victims, perpetrators, and systemic structures, analyzing their impact on audience perception and socio-cultural discourse.

The notion of the 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986, p. 18) plays a crucial role in how trafficking survivors are framed in media and cinema (Wilson & O'Brien, 2016, p. 33). Christie illustrates the concept of ideal victim through the example of a young, innocent (virgin) girl returning from caring for an ill relative, who is violently attacked before being assaulted (1986, p. 19), providing an image that speaks to societal expectations of who qualifies as an ideal victim. The media representations of victims often rely on binary constructions—helpless, innocent figures in need of rescue versus those whose victimhood is questioned due to perceived moral ambiguity (McEvoy & McConnachie, 2012, p. 528). In *Bhakshak*, the central victims of trafficking are framed through an emotive and sometimes personalized lens that emphasizes their suffering and innocence. The film employs close-up shots of the bruised faces of girls at the Shelter home, the dim lighting of the big room, and moments of silent despair while showing the girls (victims) to heighten emotional engagement, reinforcing their status as ideal victims deserving of sympathy and intervention. Gudiya, one of the girls at the Shelter home, shows Sudha the bruises and scars from the cigarettes she had on her body, perceived as perfectly depicting the ideal victim of sexual violence and physical abuse. This reflects framing as a selective process that shapes how audiences interpret events while highlighting certain elements of reality while omitting others.

Conversely, *Sector 36* challenges the simplistic construction of the victims (missing children) by framing them within a broader structural and legal context. It only shows the faces of children speaking their names before Prem kills them. Rather than relying on an emotional appeal, the film employs a detached, documentary-style aesthetic, incorporating cold, bureaucratic settings between sub-inspector and DSP and dialogue-heavy sequences that highlight systemic failures rather than individual suffering. By doing so, the film shifts the focus from individual victimhood to institutional neglect, framing the survivors not as passive recipients of aid but as individuals caught in an inescapable cycle of systemic violence. It argues against the sentimentalization of victimhood, instead advocating for representations that acknowledge complexity and resilience. The contrast in victim framing between the two films reflects a broader ideological divergence: *Bhakshak* reinforces the urgency of intervention through emotional proximity, while *Sector 36* critiques the ineffectiveness of institutions in addressing human trafficking.

Perpetrators in trafficking narratives are often framed as clear-cut antagonists, embodying evil in a way that simplifies complex socio-economic and political conditions (Gilson, 2016, p. 85). In *Bhakshak*, the traffickers and enablers, Bansi Sahu, Sonu, Baby Rani, and the head of the Child Welfare Commission, Mithilesh, are framed as monstrous figures, often filmed from low angles and laughing at sensitive topics to emphasize their dominance and cruelty. Bansi Sahu is shot with low-angle framing during his interviews with Vaishali and others, surrounded by symbols of political power, suggesting invulnerability. Mithilesh is often shown in bureaucratic settings with cluttered desks and indifferent expressions, framed in mid-shots that emphasize his passivity. The muted color palette and ambient noise of shuffling papers and muffled voices frame him as emblematic of systemic apathy. The dialogues between the doctor and pimp while treating a girl whose face is abused through burning cigarettes by Baby Rani are exaggeratedly menacing, reinforcing their role as morally irredeemable villains. The doctor says:

This master has made things tough for me. The injury is pretty serious. Please tell that Baby, girls are for satisfying your desires, not for putting out cigarettes. She could have bought an ashtray instead. Why waste something that's worth millions? (Pulkit, 2024, 00:54:07 – 00:55:00)

It depicts the traditional crime narratives where perpetrators are individualized, removing focus from the broader structures that enable their crimes. Also, in the scene where Baby Rani disciplines the girls, the camera remains static as she looms over them, reinforcing her physical and

psychological dominance. The *mise-en-scène*, flickering tube lights, cramped dormitories, and drug-laced food trays intensify the environment of control and submission. Her casual cruelty, delivered in a flat tone, contrasts with the victims' silence, heightening the emotional violence. Collectively, these visual and auditory cues portray the perpetrators not just as individuals, but as nodes in a corrupt institutional network. Goffman's (1974) notion of framing as a tool for structuring meaning (Sullivan, 2023, p. 8) is evident here, as the film prioritizes personal villainy over systemic complicity, making the resolution seem like an adequate form of justice.

Sector 36, however, disrupts this conventional framing by presenting perpetrators not as easily identifiable villains but as part of an interwoven network of houseworkers, medical helpers, politicians, and powerful businessmen. The film's framing choices—long takes in the police station, SI Pandey and Constables dealing with files, and an emphasis on procedural failure while DCP Rastogi rejects SI Pandey's plea for investigation—depict corruption as diffused and embedded in everyday bureaucratic interactions. Here, Goffman's (1974) framework of repetitive structures or 'frames' individuals use to understand and organize experiences and events in life is employed to reveal how crime is framed not as an individual transgression but as a systemic inevitability. By refusing to present a singular villain, such as Prem, Balbir, Chote Lal, and even DCP Rastogi, it compels the audience to confront the uncomfortable reality that perpetrators are often indistinguishable from those entrusted with law enforcement, which argues that focusing solely on individual perpetrators obscures the societal structures that sustain violence. Rather than neutrally presenting events, both films construct interpretive frames that shape the viewers' moral alignment, attention, and emotional investment. The analysis reveals how the films' narrative and visual structures actively mediate public understanding of trafficking and state complicity, moving beyond plot summary to interrogate how meaning itself is produced.

Both films interrogate the role of media in framing justice, reflecting Goffman's (1974) insight that the way events are framed influences public responses. The character of the journalist serves as a lens through which the audience can critically examine the role of media in framing and addressing social issues, and sensational coverage of the sex racket at the Shelter home. This portrayal challenges viewers to consider the responsibilities of media professionals in handling sensitive topics and the impact of their work on both victims and society at large. The film foregrounds the media as an active participant in shaping justice, with journalists depicted as truth-seekers who expose hidden crimes. The movie's frequent depiction of the journalist's

point of view, always seeking evidence against Bansi Sahu and Sonu, reinforces an investigative, exposé-style frame, drawing the audience into the urgency of revelation and resolution. This strengthens the notion that media intervention is crucial for justice, echoing real-world cases where journalistic exposés have led to policy changes.

Sector 36 adopts a more cynical perspective, framing media as complicit in selective narratives that reinforce state power. News reports in the film are staged in highly orchestrated press conferences, where officials dictate the narrative. The DCP ignoring Chumki's disappearing case, as it was associated with Balbir Bassi, and focusing on the high-profile kidnapping of Vivaan Trehan, showcases how information is strategically framed to absolve institutions of accountability:

Chumki Ghosh is a prostitute. Where are you going with this? ... Balbir kidnapped this girl, is it? ... You are talking about a migrant community. The children from those slums don't really disappear. These people sell their children. It is their family business. I also explained everything I just told you to your predecessor. Drop these missing children cases right now. You can't win. It's a dead-end. Focus on more productive cases. (Nimbalkar, 2024, 00:50:45 – 00:51:40)

Also, the suspension of SI Pandey and the release of Balbir from the sexually abusing girls and organ trafficking case show how truth and evidence are manipulated by the perpetrators and bureaucracy. This also highlights how state-controlled narratives often overshadow grassroots justice movements. By critiquing the media's role in shaping justice discourse, *Sector 36* challenges the audience to question the authenticity of legal victories portrayed in mainstream narratives.

Beyond thematic and narrative framing, both films employ distinct cinematic techniques to reinforce their ideological perspectives. *Bhakshak* sometimes utilizes handheld camera movements with reporters and rapid cuts during moments of tension while showing the girls' condition at the Shelter home, immersing the audience in the urgency of rescue and justice. The stylistic choice, with its framing of trafficking and violence, emerges as an immediate crisis requiring intervention. Additionally, warm lighting and intimate framing during scenes of survivor solidarity emphasize hope and resilience, reinforcing an emotionally driven narrative. *Sector 36* adopts a detached, observational style (Nichols, 1991; Goffman, 1974) of SI Pandey and the Constable trying to catch the Rickshaw driver and Compounder to know the truth with long takes and static compositions that emphasize inertia and stagnation. The use of cold tones of Prem revealing his crimes mirrors the film's critique of institutional apathy, framing justice not as a triumphant

conclusion but as an ongoing struggle against systemic inertia. This cinematographic approach reflects how framing can be manipulated to elicit specific emotional and ideological responses from audiences. The framing of justice is not neutral but is structured to direct audience interpretation. The application of theories reveals how both films construct distinct moral grammars of justice, reinforcing the idea that what is recognized as justice is a product of how events are framed, visually, narratively, and ideologically.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: CHARACTERIZATION AND PORTRAYAL OF VIOLENCE

Narrative structure and characterization, particularly the narrative perspective and temporal sequencing on how the organization of time and point of view affect audience alignment and moral interpretation (Bordwell, 1985; Chatman, 1978), are instrumental in dissecting how stories about child trafficking and sexual violence are told. This includes analyzing plot development, character arcs, and narrative voice. In *Bhakshak*, the narrative unfolds through a linear timeline, with the journalist Vaishali uncovering layers of corruption and abuse. The film employs a realist mode of storytelling, grounded in actual events, which lends authenticity and emotional weight to the narrative. The use of investigative tropes and gradual revelation affiliates with classical narrative structures that build tension and resolution, thereby engaging the audience emotionally and intellectually (Schmälzle & Grall, 2020, p. 189). *Sector 36* utilizes a more fragmented narrative, incorporating flashbacks and multiple perspectives of victims, perpetrators, and the bureaucratic system. This allows for a more complex portrayal of the trafficking ecosystem, including the complicity of various societal actors. Narratology reveals how these structural choices affect audience empathy and understanding. Seymour Chatman's (1978) distinction between story and discourse of what happens and how it is told to show narrative sequencing and the audience's emotional alignment. For instance, a narrative that centers on the survivor's perspective can foster deeper emotional engagement and awareness (Fernandez-Quintanilla, 2020, p. 125; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008, p. 343), whereas one that prioritizes the investigator's journey may highlight institutional challenges but risk marginalizing the victim's voice. This section explores how these films utilize narrative structures and character archetypes to engage with social realities and frame their central conflicts.

The theory of narrative equilibrium describes five key stages: equilibrium (a stable world), disruption (an event that disturbs this balance), recognition (realization of the problem), resolution (attempts to restore order),

and a new equilibrium (a transformed world) (Ananta& Andini, 2024, p. 32; Todorov, 1971, p. 39). *Bhakshak* follows this structure closely, reinforcing a sense of moral clarity and resolution. The opening scenes establish a seemingly normal world where trafficking is hidden from public view. The sound of a girl crying in the Shelter home is heard as the customer puts chili powder in her vagina. Later, Sonu, with the help of the customer, killed the girl and made Dom Babu cremate her. All this happens at night, hidden from the world. The disruption occurs when Guptaji discovers the crime and gives the evidence to the journalist, setting the plot into motion. As Vaishali and her colleague Bhaskar start an investigation, their journey follows the recognition and confrontation phases, leading to a climactic resolution where justice is seemingly difficult but achieved. This linear structure ensures emotional satisfaction, reinforcing the idea that individual agency can triumph over systemic corruption. Though at the end, the journalist's statement illustrates how contemporary media works, prioritizing commercialization over sentimental and grave issues:

Why should we even care? Today, it happened in Munawwarpur. Tomorrow, somewhere else. ... Twitter and Facebook will be filled with posts of sympathy, and that too with a hashtag. ... No matter what, things don't change much. Because you know the thing is, in our special media world, our emotions have dropped down to zero. ... These newspapers might write about these girls. ... The media will show you the content that can earn them their TRPs. ... But the complete truth? We won't know it. (Pulkit, 2024, 02:06:39-02:07:43)

Sector 36 deliberately disrupts this conventional structure. Instead of a clear equilibrium-disruption-resolution model, the film presents a world where injustice is the norm, and any attempts to challenge it are met with systemic resistance. The initial and vague promise of bureaucratic order is disrupted by the revelation of deep-rooted systemic corruption, and no clear resolution is offered. The SI Pandey's journey for seeking justice for children and girls who were sexually abused by Prem and Balbir also does not lead to a definitive resolution; instead, the film lingers on unresolved tensions, reflecting the inescapability of institutional failures. In a quest for evidence against Balbir, SI Pandey visits Prem's wife to get the recordings (a CD titled Sada Bahar Tarane, which is an MMS of Balbir sexually abusing girls) where he is brutally assassinated, and the CD is destroyed. After six months, the assassins are finally apprehended. A mysterious box arrives at Constable Bishnoi's home, where he discovers a CD labeled Aur Bhi Sada Bahar Tarane. Such endings depict postmodern narrative structures that reject closure, emphasizing the fragmented and cyclical nature of corruption and

violence. Through this subversion, *Sector 36* challenges the audience's expectations, urging them to engage critically rather than passively consuming a neat conclusion. This narrative stasis or unresolved equilibrium frames the structure as perpetually deferred and inaccessible, emphasizing the futility of institutional intervention. The contrast illustrates how narrative structure itself becomes a commentary on the nature of storytelling, where one affirms conventional resolution and the other destabilizes it to reflect systemic disarray and narrative fragmentation.

The structuralist theory identifies recurring character archetypes in narratives, including the hero, the villain, the helper, and the victim (Laurent et al., 2021, p. 2; Youngs & Canter, 2011, p. 241). It forms part of narratology's broader concern with how stories are structured, particularly through plot progression and character roles. These archetypes serve as functional roles rather than complex psychological identities, driving the plot toward resolution (Youngs & Canter, 2011, p. 247). *Bhakshak* structures these traditional archetypes, constructing a protagonist who embodies heroism and moral clarity. The journalist, with her colleague and SSP, functions as a figure who embarks on a quest to expose Bansi Sahu and his sex racket. Their journey is marked by encounters with the traffickers, Bansi Sahu, Sonu, the doctor, Baby Rani, some corrupt officials, Mithilesh, and politicians, such as Rajni Singh. The journey for justice is aided by an informant, Guptaji, and a survivor, Sudha, who works as a cook at Munawwarpur Shelter home, whose testimony culminates in a victory that reaffirms moral order. The victims in *Bhakshak* fit the archetypal 'damsel in distress,' reinforcing their need for rescue and emphasizing their suffering to justify the quest.

Sector 36 deconstructs these archetypes, refusing to conform to simplistic narrative functions. The justice seekers, such as SI Pandey, Constables, and even Chumki's father, do not embody clear heroism; instead, they are flawed, complicit in taking bribes at the police station and being the pimp of his own daughter Chumki for selling her to Balbir, and unable to enact meaningful change. The culprits are not singular villains but dispersed, such as Prem, Chote Lal, and Balbir Bassi, and the bureaucratic power of DSP Rastogi, making the conflict systemic rather than personal. Victims, too, are not passive figures waiting for rescue but individual children kidnapped by Prem struggling within an uncaring system (unattended by their parents) in a basti at Rajiv Camp and Sector 36. This disruption of archetypal roles challenges dominant storytelling conventions, reflecting a more complex and realistic portrayal of crime and corruption.

The key distinction in storytelling between the two films is their approach, as per the above analysis. *Bhakshak* employs a linear narrative,

emphasizing cause-and-effect progression. Events unfold in a clear, chronological order, reinforcing the idea that justice is a process with a beginning, middle, and end. This structure enhances the audience's emotional engagement, allowing them to experience the journey in real-time. Flashbacks are used very few and selectively when Sudha tells the truth and dark secrets of the Munawarpur shelter home, how girls are treated there by Baby Rani, and how they frequently kill girls according to their convenience. This is to provide background information, but does not disrupt the overall flow of the story. *Sector 36*, however, utilizes a fragmented, nonlinear structure, often shifting between different timelines of crime by Prem and investigation by SI Pandey. This disjointed storytelling reflects the chaos and complexity of real-world systemic corruption. By withholding crucial information on how children go missing almost every day or revealing the truth about what he does to kids (sexually abuses them, chops their bodies, eats human meat, and does organ trafficking) out of sequence, the film forces the audience to actively piece together the narrative, mirroring the investigative process itself. Such contemporary cinematic trends challenge linear storytelling to create a sense of uncertainty and realism. The refusal to adhere to a clear, linear resolution further reinforces the film's thematic focus on the perpetuity of injustice.

While *Bhakshak* presents the characters of the journalist and traffickers with clear distinctions, *Sector 36* embraces the ambiguity of levels of crime, further complicating traditional hero-villain dynamics. The journalist and her colleague in *Bhakshak* are driven by a sense of justice, their motivations largely untainted by personal ambition, where individuals can dismantle corruption through perseverance. It depicts clear-cut conventional cinematic storytelling, where heroes are rewarded for their righteousness and villains are punished for their crimes. *Sector 36* presents characters of the SI and constables whose motivations are not entirely pure. They may be complicit in the system they are investigating or struggle with ethical compromises, making their journey more complex and less predictable. The audience is not given a singular moral perspective but is instead forced to navigate the characters' conflicting choices. Similarly, perpetrators are not portrayed as purely evil but as products of a corrupt environment, blurring the lines between victims and oppressors.

Both films employ recurring motifs to reinforce their thematic concerns. *Bhakshak* uses symbolic imagery—such as locked doors of the rooms at the shelter home, small rooms as caged spaces, and the goofy front of the shelter home—to emphasize victim entrapment and the desire for freedom. These visual motifs are closely tied to the film's narrative

progression, mirroring Vaishali's journey from uncovering hidden truths to liberating survivors. *Sector 36*, however, relies on motifs of repetition and circularity to depict the futility of resistance. Recurring shots of the press conference, bureaucratic office between DSP and SI, and police files gathering dust at the police station highlight the stagnation of justice. The SI Pandey's repeated encounters with dead-end leads to Chumki's disappearance, and procedural loopholes in collecting evidence against Balbir reinforce the film's central theme: that systemic corruption is self-sustaining and resistant to change. This cyclical narrative construction challenges the conventional idea of narrative progression, instead suggesting that stories of institutional failure are doomed to repeat themselves.

VICTIMIZATION AND TRAUMA: FRAMING AGENCY AND ETHICAL REPRESENTATION

Victimization and trauma representation are central to how *Bhakshak* and *Sector 36* construct their narratives and engage audiences. The portrayal of victims in cinema is often shaped by cultural and ideological discourses, influencing public perception of crime, justice, and systemic oppression (Mishra, 2002, p. 256; Stevenson, 2000, p. 344). Framing Theory provides a lens to examine how these films position victims within larger socio-political contexts, while interrogating the intersection of victimhood and agency. While *Bhakshak* frames victims within an emotionally charged, personalized narrative, emphasizing suffering and redemption, *Sector 36* takes a systemic approach, highlighting institutional failures and the enduring, cyclical nature of trauma. This section explores how these films navigate the complexities of victimization and trauma, assessing whether they reinforce conventional tropes or challenge dominant narratives.

As discussed above, in media and cinema, the concept of the ideal victim (Christie, 1986) plays a significant role in shaping audience empathy and response. This framework suggests that victims are often portrayed as innocent, passive, and deserving of sympathy, reinforcing simplistic binaries. *Bhakshak* adheres to this trope by presenting its victims as young, helpless, and in dire need of rescue. This framing ensures an emotional connection with the audience but risks reducing victims to mere symbols of suffering rather than fully realized individuals with agency (Schwöbel-Patel, 2018, p. 713), such as not showing Gudiya's or any other girl's individual agony. *Sector 36* challenges the ideal victim framework by depicting kids' and young girls' faces or dead bodies. Some victims exhibit resistance, but Prem kills them. This refusal to conform to conventional victim narratives disrupts audience expectations, encouraging a more nuanced engagement with the realities of

exploitation. In doing so, *Sector 36* advocates for more complex, multi-dimensional representations of victimhood.

Drawing on the earlier discussion on framing child sexual abuse and narrative positioning, Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' (1975, p. 11) provides a critique of how women's bodies are often objectified in visual media, reducing them to passive subjects of voyeuristic pleasure. In films about victimization, this objectification can manifest through an excessive focus on physical suffering, positioning the female body as a site of spectacle (Alcock & Robson, 1990, p. 43; Manlove, 2007, p. 97; Guizzo et al., 2017, p. 352). *Bhakshak* partially falls into this pattern by visually emphasizing victim vulnerability through prolonged shots of distress, fear, and entrapment. Even Sudha's testimony exemplifies such gaze and victimization:

The Munawwarpur girls' shelter home belongs to Banshi Sahu. The girls living there are being abused. Banshi Sahu himself abuses them and makes others do so too. The warden, Baby Rani, doses the girls with sedatives. And then different people rape the girls when they are asleep. Baby Rani tells the girls to sleep naked and lies down naked next to them. The staff, Sonu, Baccha Babu, Mithilesh Sinha, the doctor, and several other men make the girls dance to vulgar songs and show them porn films too. The girls staying there said that a few girls got pregnant and were killed. (Pulkit, 2024, 01:57:34 – 01:58:26)

While the film intends to generate sympathy, it risks aestheticizing suffering, reinforcing the notion that victimhood is primarily a visual experience rather than a lived reality. However, *Bhakshak* also attempts to counteract this objectification by granting its victims moments of narrative agency, such as Sudha and Gudiya, despite their suffering, taking active roles in seeking justice, resisting their oppressors, or forming solidarity with other survivors. This dual approach reflects a tension in feminist discourse: while representations of female suffering can evoke empathy, they can also reinforce passive victimhood if not balanced with agency (Chew & Asl, 2023, p. 88; Leisenring, 2006, p. 314).

Sector 36 avoids overt victim-objectification by shifting the narrative focus from individual suffering to systemic oppression. The film presents victimization as an institutional issue rather than a personal tragedy, portraying victims not just as individuals but as part of a broader network of exploitation. When Prem reveals his crimes, it looks like it is not only intentional but also organized through a system:

I had to chop it up. What else? Uncle was a butcher, so I learned the trade at a young age. ... You chop the body into pieces.... To solve the problem of smell ... tie it tightly... How could I sell her organs? I sold the

organs of others. ... The children whose missing posters have been put up all over the city. I don't know the exact count. ... That's 18 and 4, so 22. Should be around 22 to 24. (Nimbalkar, 2024, 01:24:04 – 01:28:15)

This interrogation scene between SI Pandey and Prem utilizes high-contrast lighting and static framing to convey moral ambiguity. Prem's calm confessions, juxtaposed with a minimalist score, avoid sensationalism and instead evoke dread through stillness and implications. This sequence exemplifies how the film critiques systemic failure through its formal composition, reinforcing the idea that justice is not heroically achieved but procedurally obstructed. Scholars argue that music plays a critical role in mediating trauma and tension by either heightening emotional intensity or creating narrative distance (Smith, 1999, p. 116). Adding music in between the details during Prem's confession and not emphasizing structural conditions of sexual abuse and organ trafficking, *Sector 36* calls for a move away from voyeuristic portrayals toward systemic analysis, and a refusal to dwell on graphic suffering represents an ethical cinematic strategy.

Trauma often resists conventional narrative articulation, manifesting instead through fragmented storytelling, silence, or repetition (Plantinga & Smith, 1999; Rai, 2009, p. 209). *Bhakshak* attempts to represent trauma and suffering by showing a big hall full of depressed and hopeless girls (see Figure 1).

Figure1

A scene from the movie depicts how a lot of victims of sex trafficking were living in despair



(*Bhakshak*, Red Chillies Entertainment, 2024)

In the end, when the girls are rescued, the police cover their faces with clothes. While this approach makes trauma recognizable, it risks simplifying its psychological complexity, offering catharsis rather than an authentic engagement with trauma's long-term effects. *Sector 36* employs a more subdued approach, using silence, ambiguity, and disjointed narrative techniques to evoke trauma's elusive nature. The movie does not show any victims struggling to articulate their experiences; rather, some scenes at different places in the city and police station with a lot of posters of missing children (See Figure 2). These scenes of quiet dissociation from the narrative, repetitively showing posters and rotten body parts of these children, entail emotional outbursts that reflect trauma's nonlinear impact, resisting neat resolutions. The approach argues that trauma is often best conveyed through absence and fragmentation rather than explicit dramatization (Tan & Frijda, 1999, p. 50). By not giving justice to sexually abused girls and bail to Balbir, the film refuses to offer closure and immerses the audience in the persistent, unresolved nature of trauma.

Figure 2

A scene from the movie showing how the police station's board is filled with missing kids



(*Sector 36*, Maddock Films and Jio Studios, 2024)

A critical concern in representing victimization and trauma is the ethical responsibility of filmmakers. Sensationalized portrayals—overly graphic depictions of abuse, and excessive suffering—can retraumatize and reinforce harmful stereotypes. *Bhakshak* walks a fine line between raising awareness and veering into melodrama. While the film's intentions are noble, certain scenes risk aestheticizing pain, making suffering a spectacle by showing only cigarette scars and bruises, and sometimes half-naked, with customers rather than a lived experience. This raises ethical questions about

whether such portrayals empower victims or merely reinforce voyeuristic tendencies in audiences. *Sector 36* actively resists sensationalism by adopting a restrained, documentary-like approach. The film minimizes overt dramatization by only showing the sound of chopping dead bodies and blood, focusing instead on systemic mechanisms of oppression at the level of bureaucracy and politics. By shifting attention from individual suffering to institutional complicity, the film ensures that trauma is not exploited for dramatic effect but rather examined as a structural issue.

Both films engage with the question of justice but in fundamentally different ways. *Bhakshak* offers a more conventional resolution: perpetrators are exposed, survivors find support, and justice is symbolically restored. This resolution depicts the classic cinematic tendency to provide closure, offering audiences a sense of moral satisfaction. However, trauma research suggests that justice is not always a linear process and that legal victories do not necessarily equate to psychological healing. *Sector 36* presents a world where justice remains elusive. The legal system is depicted as indifferent, and survivors must navigate a world where their suffering is not acknowledged. This lack of resolution reflects real-world struggles, where systemic injustices often persist despite legal interventions. By refusing to provide narrative closure, *Sector 36* mirrors the complexities of trauma, which does not follow a straightforward path but is instead marked by uncertainty, recurrence, and resistance.

RESULT

This study examined the cinematic framing of child trafficking and sexual violence victims and perpetrators in Netflix's *Bhakshak* and *Sector 36*, revealing contrasting approaches to narrative structure, characterization, and the portrayal of trauma. The analysis demonstrates how these films employ distinct framing strategies to shape audience perceptions and engage with complex social issues. *Bhakshak* employs a traditional narrative technique, including linear storytelling and sharp moral delineations between protagonists and antagonists. The portrayal of the ideal victim underscores susceptibility and the necessity for rescue and justice. This technique fosters emotional connection but risks oversimplifying the intricacies of trafficking and victimhood. The conclusion delivers a sense of justice, granting viewers moral pleasure while potentially oversimplifying the enduring effects of trauma. *Sector 36* employs a fragmented narrative structure and ambiguous characterizations that challenge traditional storytelling conventions. By avoiding definitive solutions and heroic characters, the film depicts child trafficking as a systemic problem intricately rooted in institutional failings. The depiction of victims and criminals obscures traditional distinctions,

requiring audiences to grapple with the intricacies of corruption and exploitation.

The research demonstrates how cinematic methods enhance specific framings. *Bhakshak* employs expressive close-ups and dramatic lighting to intensify emotional involvement, whereas *Sector 36* adopts a detached, observational approach that underscores structural immobility. These choices reflect broader ideological perspectives on addressing child trafficking and sexual violence as individual heroism versus institutional critique. Both films grapple with the ethical challenges of representing trauma and victimization. *Bhakshak* risks aestheticizing misery with its explicit portrayals, whereas *Sector 36* employs a restrained approach that eschews sensationalism. This discrepancy underscores persistent discussions regarding the ethics of representation and the risk of re-traumatization via media portrayals. The analysis demonstrates how these films contribute to shaping public discourse on child trafficking and sexual violence in India. By transcending basic representations, they provide intricate storylines that integrate journalistic investigation, procedural drama, and accounts. Nonetheless, obstacles persist in reconciling the necessity for knowledge with the imperative of ethical storytelling that honors the dignity of survivors and deceased.

The study highlights the evolving landscape of Indian cinema's engagement with critical social issues, reflecting filmmakers' growing awareness of the need for responsible storytelling. Future research may investigate audience reception of these divergent narrative methodologies and their influence on public comprehension of child trafficking. In summation, *Bhakshak* and *Sector 36* represent significant contributions to the cinematic discourse on child trafficking and sexual violence in India. Their divergent approaches to framing, narrative structure, and ethical representation offer valuable insights into the challenges and possibilities of using film as a medium for social commentary and advocacy. As Indian cinema progresses in addressing delicate subjects, these films exemplify the continual interplay between artistic expression, social responsibility, and the influence of visual narrative on public consciousness.

CONCLUSION

While the films differ in aesthetic and narrative choices, one emphasizes emotional and journalistic engagement, the other favors detachment and systemic critique; both underscore the urgent need to confront institutional failures and cultural silence around child trafficking and sexual exploitation. To meaningfully address and minimize these crimes, a multipronged approach is necessary. There should be comprehensive

regulatory reform and enhanced transparency within child welfare institutions. Public awareness must be cultivated through sustained efforts in education, ethical journalism, and responsible storytelling that challenge prevailing stigmas associated with survivors of trafficking and abuse. As a culturally influential medium, cinema possesses the capacity to interrogate dominant narratives and catalyze systemic critique. When films shift their focus from isolated acts of violence to broader institutional complicity, they create avenues for public engagement, critical discourse, and collective reflection, which are essential components in addressing and ultimately preventing crimes against children.

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SHEETAL KUMARI is a PhD Scholar of English Literature and Cultural Studies in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of

Technology Roorkee, India. She is an Andrew W. Mellon Visiting Researcher at the University of Oklahoma. Her research areas are Children's and Young Adult Fiction, Trauma Studies, Memory Studies, Film Studies, Digital Humanities and Medical/Health Humanities. She has published research articles in reputed peer-reviewed journals. She is a recipient of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) Award. Email: sheetal_k@hs.iitr.ac.in ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8080-2913>

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