

Film Review: Swarth Se Pare Illimitable Self: Care, Disability and the Ethics of Relational Subjectivity (2024, Sourav Sarkar)

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Abstract

"Swarth Se Pare: Illimitable Self", directed by Sourav Sarkar, is a cinematic exploration of care, resilience, and the ethical dimensions of selfhood in the context of disability and illness. The film foregrounds caregiver narratives, situating them within broader discourses of disability studies, medical humanities, and narrative medicine. Through its aesthetic choices and narrative structure, it interrogates the binary of self and other, proposing instead a model of relational subjectivity that extends "beyond the self" toward collective responsibility and compassion. The review evaluates how the film employs visual metaphor, silence, and testimonial voice to destabilize conventional representations of illness, offering instead an inclusive framework for empathy and shared human vulnerability. By engaging with philosophical notions of interdependence and the politics of representation, the review situates "Swarth Se Pare" as both a cultural text and a pedagogical resource, contributing to ongoing dialogues on the ethics of care, narrative embodiment, and the possibility of an "illimitable self" in contemporary society.

Keywords: autism, autism friendly campus, caregiver narratives, neurodiversity, ethics of care

INTRODUCTION

Swarth Se Pare – Illimitable Self is a 48-minute documentary, directed by Sourav Sarkar, that profiles Autism Ashram, an autism-friendly campus in Bolarum district of Telangana, India and traces the personal and institutional journey of its founder, Dr. AK Kundra. The documentary premiered in Kolkata on April 1, 2024 and explores themes of inclusion, belonging, and the cultivation of spaces that respect neurodiversity. It seeks not simply to document but to humanize: to show how lived experience of persons with autism can be nurtured rather than suppressed. It raises questions about disability, stigma, the meaning of "normalcy," and the selfless (swarth se pare) role of education and community in enabling people to express their "illimitable selves." The movie begins with metaphoric fall of leaves depicting the autistic children facing exclusion.

One of the film's greatest assets is how it centers the voices and experiences of the people it portrays, of the students, caregiver residents on the campus and the founder. This gives authenticity and emotional depth to the movie. The Caregiver's narratives are an important dimension of the movie. Sourav Sarkar not only documents the autism-friendly campus but also foregrounds the lives of those who sustain it—parents, teachers, mentors, and community members. Their voices shape the film into more than a clinical or institutional account; they frame it as a human story of devotion, resilience, and emotional labour.

Autism Ashram as an Autism-Friendly Campus

The film introduces autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in communication, social interaction, and sensory processing. The inclusive Ashram campus recognizes neurodiversity, ensuring that students with autism can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. It foregrounds, its founder, AK Kundra's role in transforming Autism Ashram into an autism-friendly campus aligning with the principles of equity, accessibility, and universal design in education. It provides training and awareness for faculty, staff, and peers. The design of the campus is autism friendly with open spaces, pools, greenery, accessible infrastructure and sensory-friendly pathways. The rooms are also designed for the autistic child and their caregivers with large kitchens which can be locked. The campus tries to promote independence, dignity, and equal opportunities by helping students to navigate life through sensory-friendly classrooms (neutral colors, minimal noise). Quiet rooms or relaxation zones for self-regulation. Clear signage and visual supports across campus. Safe mobility pathways for students with sensory sensitivities. It is vehicle free zone to avoid accidents on campus. The students are taught skills like making paper utensils but a lot more can be done for making the autistic children employable based on their individual abilities

Swarth Se Pare: Caregiving is Transformative Journey from Burden to Belonging

The film *Swarth Se Pare* positions caregiving as more than just an act of duty—it becomes a journey of transcendence. The caregivers in the narrative are not merely helpers or attendants but people who embody empathy, endurance, and quiet strength. Their role reflects the paradox of self-effacement: while caring for another, they discover dimensions of their own self that lie “beyond the self.”

Caregiving here is framed as a deeply relational act. The caregiver bridges the fragile space between illness and dignity, suffering and resilience. In this process, they embody the ethic of *seva* (service), which is central to Indian cultural and spiritual traditions. The sacrifices they make—sometimes invisible, sometimes unacknowledged—mirror the broader human struggle between *swarth* (self-interest) and *paramartha* (selflessness). The movie narrates the sacrifices of caregivers through the story of an IIT, IIM alumni turning a caregiver for her brother. It recounts the story of Adhira's mother leaving her job as computer engineer to dedicate her life to her daughter and similar children. It also tells the story of paid caregivers who take care of individual autistic child. The movie through silences, gestures and pain in the eyes portrays emotional labor of the caregivers. The caregiver becomes a central but often unnoticed figure in the patient's healing journey. Their narratives highlight themes of, unseen sacrifice (emotional, physical, financial), moral responsibility rooted in kinship and compassion. It presents identity transformation, where caregiving becomes a source of meaning and strength. It also presents the tension between duty and desire in moments of silences, as caregivers often suppress their own aspirations for their child.

In *Swarth Se Pare*, caregiving is not romanticized but portrayed with authenticity—the exhaustion, the emotional burden, and the inner conflicts. Yet, it is precisely in these struggles that the caregiver achieves a kind of spiritual expansion, illustrating how the act of caring for another can lead one to transcend personal boundaries and discover the “illimitable self.”

Aging and Autism: A Condition, not a Disease

In the context of *Swarth Se Pare (Illimitable Self)*, autism is presented not as an ailment to be cured but as a distinct mode of being—a condition that shapes perception, interaction, and emotional experience. As individuals on the spectrum age, their lived realities are often filtered through layers of societal

misunderstanding. The film subtly resists this medicalized gaze, highlighting autonomy, identity, and interdependence rather than deficit or pathology. It affirms that neurodiversity, like aging, is a natural aspect of human existence—not a deviation from it.

Caring for an older autistic person brings a unique set of emotional, physical, and social challenges. Unlike childhood autism, where structured educational and therapeutic systems may be available, support for autistic adults—especially the elderly—is often fragmented. Back in 1985, there were hardly any residential campus for autistic children in India and there are very few centers even today. Autistic individuals may face increasing sensory sensitivities, medical comorbidities, and communication barriers with age. For aging parent an adult autistic child will be difficult to care for and parents often fear that who will take care of their child after their death. Families and caregivers may struggle with:

Lack of institutional support and long-term care infrastructure, communication gaps, particularly if the person is nonverbal or has limited language, behavioral changes linked to aging—such as increased anxiety, rigidity, or memory issues, social isolation, which can deepen when peers or parents age or pass away and emotional fatigue and burnout of caregivers, especially when support systems are weak. In the context of Swarth Se Pare, this theme is quietly underscored: autism is not something that “goes away” with time. Instead, it grows and evolves with the individual, demanding compassionate, sustained, and adaptive care rather than curative interventions.

Future for Autistic Individuals

The documentary helps in sensitization for autistic individuals, it can be used in workshops for teachers, non-teaching staff, and students. It highlights the need for peer mentoring programs for promoting social inclusion. It can be used for counseling in neurodiversity. It aims at an improved academic performance and retention of autistic students. Greater awareness and empathy among the student community and recognition of Autism Ashram as a model inclusive and autism-friendly campus. The autism-friendly campus not only empowers autistic students but also foster a culture of diversity and inclusivity, benefitting the entire academic community. The Ashram also provides stay to children of weaker communities at subsidized rate and taking higher donations from families who can afford it.

Awareness about Autism

Awareness is the first step toward inclusion. Autism is not a disease but a neurodevelopmental condition that shapes how a person perceives, communicates, and interacts with the world. Many individuals on the spectrum possess unique abilities—such as heightened attention to detail, deep focus, creativity, and honesty. Yet, lack of understanding often leads to stigma, delayed diagnosis, and limited opportunities. Raising public and institutional awareness encourages early intervention, acceptance, and dignity-driven support systems.

Employability of Autistic Children (and Adults)

Autistic individuals can thrive in structured, supportive, and inclusive workplaces. Challenges in social communication or sensory processing should not overshadow their strengths—like pattern recognition, accuracy, and specialized skills.

Key strategies to enhance employability include: Early vocational training and life skills development, Inclusive education and workplace accommodations, Sensitization of employers and co-workers, Supported employment programs and mentorship. The Founder of autism ashram felt that a lot more can

be done to make autistic individuals employable

In the spirit of Swarth Se Pare, the goal is not to “fix” the individual but to adapt society—so that every person, regardless of neurotype, can live with purpose, independence, and dignity.

The Power of Realism

The documentary doesn't try to overwhelm the viewer with flashy effects. The pace is measured, giving space to daily life, subtle moments, and personal stories. Viewers are allowed to absorb without the feelings rushed. The story of the founder is not just backdrop but a driving force: the film shows the challenges in establishing the campus, the ideals, obstacles, and the dreams. This human dimension adds tension, aspiration, and credibility. In the Indian context, where awareness and acceptance of autism are growing but still uneven, the film offers an inspiring model. It helps broaden understanding, encouraging respect for difference rather than fear or marginalization.

While the film does well to show personal narratives, in places it glosses over broader structural hardships—such as funding constraints and societal prejudice. More context about these might have strengthened the documentary's impact. Some segments drag a little; certain scenes, especially everyday routines, are repeated in ways that may seem redundant for some viewers. A leaner edit might have maintained engagement more tightly. The cinematography is adequate, and the framing often captures meaningful moments. But there are moments where lighting or sound could have been better, especially in indoor or crowded settings. The documentary hints at contrasts — between traditional schooling vs this autism-friendly campus, or societal expectations vs individual reality — but these contrasts are sometimes underdeveloped. The film might have been enriched by engaging more with divergent viewpoints (critics, specialists, families outside the campus) to sharpen its exploration. This documentary will resonate especially with educators, autism-advocates, social workers, policy planners, and families affected by neurodiversity. For general audiences, it serves as both an eye-opener and a call for empathy. It also holds potential as a tool in advocacy: by documenting a successful model, Swarth Se Pare may inspire replication or policy support. Overall, Swarth Se Pare – Illimitable Self is a thoughtful, humane documentary that succeeds in bringing forward voices that are often marginalized. Though it could have been tighter in its editing and deeper in its contextual framing, it delivers an important message with compassion and clarity. It stands as an encouraging example of socially conscious cinema that both informs and moves.

The movie ends on a powerful note summarizing in the words of Tagore:

आनन्दधारा बहे रे जग में

दिवस-रजनी कैसे अमृत रस

उथलि जाए अनंत नभ में ॥ (translation by Jalaj Bhaduri)

Which can be translated as “the stream of joy flows in the world, The elixir of life , flows day and night And reaches towards the illimitable sky”

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