

“Inclusion Is Not Charity, It Is a Right”: Cinema Urged to Lead India’s Accessibility Movement at SIFFCY 2026

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“Inclusion is not a matter of charity or compassion; it is a matter of rights.” With this powerful assertion, Smt Manmeet Kaur Nanda, Additional Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), set the tone in inaugural function of the 12th edition of the Smile International Film Festival for Children & Youth (SIFFCY) held today at PHD Chamber of Commerce, New Delhi, calling for a deeper, more humane understanding of inclusion that goes beyond infrastructure and compliance to the transformation of attitudes and hearts.



Addressing a distinguished gathering of policymakers, diplomats, filmmakers, educators, and young audiences, Smt Nanda reflected on the lived realities of persons with disabilities in India.

Citing that India is home to 2.68 crore persons with disabilities as per the 2011 Census—figures widely believed to be a significant underestimation—she highlighted that nearly 80 lakh children with disabilities remain among the most excluded, often denied access to education, public spaces, and even the simple joy of watching a film in a cinema hall. Drawing on landmark jurisprudence, including the Supreme Court’s

2021 judgment in *Vikash Kumar vs UPSC*, she emphasized that reasonable accommodation is a constitutional obligation, requiring positive measures to ensure equal participation, whether in classrooms or cultural spaces. She cautioned that denial of accommodations, such as extra time for children with dyslexia or admission to children with autism, amounts not to practicality but to discrimination.



In a deeply personal and compelling address, Smt. Nanda underscored that true inclusion cannot be achieved through government orders alone. Recalling her experiences as a District Magistrate—of ramps leading to storage rooms and accessible toilets locked away—she stressed that inclusion demands a shift from tolerance to acceptance, and from acceptance to celebration. She described cinema as a uniquely powerful medium to build empathy and dismantle prejudice, particularly when children see protagonists with disabilities portrayed not as objects of pity or inspiration, but as fully realized human beings. Highlighting the film *Little Big Dreams*, created by children with special needs from Ladakh, she noted that inclusion is truly realized when children become creators of their own narratives, asserting their full humanity and creative agency.

Echoing the festival's global spirit, Mr Kimmo Lähdevirta, Ambassador of Finland, spoke of cinema's ability to bridge distances between countries and cultures. Reaffirming Finland's long-standing partnership with SIFFCY, he introduced a selection of Finnish short films and a children's fantasy feature being showcased at the festival. Delighting young audiences, he announced the special inclusion of the iconic Moomins on the big screen for the first time at SIFFCY, sharing a cherished element of Finnish cultural heritage as part of their 80th anniversary celebrations.



Ms Marje Luup, Ambassador of Estonia, described the Smile Festival as a significant milestone in India's children's cinema landscape and a vital international platform for nurturing creativity and cultural exchange. Emphasizing this year's focus on inclusion, diversity, accessibility, and equity, she shared that Estonia is participating with six short films made by children, including works by Ukrainian refugee children currently living in Estonia. She highlighted Estonia's rich cinematic and animation legacy, from early 20th-century filmmaking to the globally renowned Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, noting that festivals like SIFFCY foster people-to-people connections and deepen cross-cultural understanding.



Reinforcing the festival's philosophy, Santanu Mishra, Chairman, SIFFCY, and Co-founder, Smile Foundation, said that childhood is a decisive phase where empathy and social awareness take root, and cinema serves as a gentle yet powerful medium to shape more compassionate worldviews. Jitendra Mishra, Festival Director, SIFFCY, and President, CIFEJ UNICEF (2025–27), added that SIFFCY creates a shared cultural space where young audiences engage with diverse stories reflecting global realities and aspirations.

The 12th edition of the Smile International Film Festival for Children & Youth (SIFFCY), an initiative of Smile Foundation, is being held from 28 January to 3 February 2026, celebrating Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility through cinema for young audiences. The festival is organised in partnership with the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, and the Delegation of the European Union to India. Conducted in a hybrid format, SIFFCY features film screenings, workshops, panel discussions, and award ceremonies at PHD House, Siri Institutional Area, New Delhi, alongside outreach screenings across more than 100 locations nationwide, including schools and community spaces. A curated selection of films is also available on the festival's secure, geo-blocked virtual platform, ensuring nationwide access.

Remaining non-profit, non-ticketed, and fully accessible, SIFFCY 2026 showcases over 150 films from more than 35 countries, with a special focus on Poland and The Netherlands, and presents prestigious honours including the ECFA Award, CIFEJ Award, and the Film Critics Circle of India (FCCI) Award.

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