

Original Article: Caste and Cinema: A Sociological Analysis of Caste Representation in India Cinema

Singh Amarjit

Amity University, Sector 125, Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201301, India



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ABSTRACT

From historical times Indian society has seen atrocities based on the caste ideology. Caste has been studied from different frames by different intellectuals in academia and sociology as well as anthropology as an important discipline in studying it. Cinema as an art form and seen as a reflection of the society which represents the different aspects of the society through a cinematic lens gives the societal subject a totally different frame to see and observes the society in which the people are living where social problems like Casteism exists. Indian cinema has reflected the concept of caste through different angles and connotations like untouchability, honor killing in the situations of inter-caste marriage, and difference of problems in different locations like rural and urban ones and people dealing with it. Thus, this paper tries to understand the caste hierarchy represented in the cinema and the history and memory of Indian cinema. The study focuses on different decades of cinema generally from the 1980s to the current era and will try to explain how cinema has used the concept of caste in showcasing the practice and discrimination in association with it. Also, the study aims at investigating the changes in the mindset of people while discussing the caste. To do so, a qualitative research method has been used. Films such as Achhut Kanya, Damul, Aakrosh, Sairat, Masaan, Court, Chandidas, Sujata, Ankur, etc from different decades have been studied and analyzed.

Introduction

Indian society has been characterized by the caste system since long time ago. It originates in the Varna hierarchy theory which divides the society into four stratas namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra based on occupation [1]. Caste is a type of social delineation described by endogamy inherited transmission of a style of life which regularly incorporates an occupation, custom status in a chain of command,

and standard social communication and prohibition dependent on social thoughts of purity and pollution. Caste separates Indian culture into unbending social groupings with its underlying foundations in India's antiquated history and continuing in the present time. Oppression, deprivation, and marginalization which castes bring to the lives of lower-caste individuals have been a significant featuring point for conversation over the marvel of caste since a more extended timeframe. Untouchability which is drilled in the public arena

*Corresponding Author: Singh Amarjit(amardagar21@gmail.com)

frequently grandstands the oppression endured by the lower caste individuals in their everyday life by the predominant caste bunches like Brahmins [1-3].

Accordingly, caste has been generally examined and bantered in the thoughts of the scholarly community and additionally in various fine arts like the story, verse, music, road dramatization, and film [2]. The word cinema is largely understood in two senses; first, a theatre where films are showcased for public entertainment, and second, as the production of films as an art or industry. The film, or movie, is the specialty of moving pictures; a visual medium that recounts stories and uncovered reality, and this has carried out 'dramatic changes in the very way we see the world [2-3].

In the words of Nadine Labaki, Lebanese Actress - "Cinema is not only about making people dream. It's about changing things and making people think." [4]. Thus, cinema is an important medium that showcases the reality of society and plays the role of 'mirror' to the society that has widely dealt with the representation of caste through different types of narratives and at different levels. Indian cinema has showcased the caste reality through various characters playing both dominant caste and the marginalized caste and the role of caste in politics and with the fusion of caste as a social problem and in the backdrops of the nation and its memories [2, 5]. The history of caste has been kept in the memories of people through the different types of Indian cinema. Films like *Lagaan*, *Swadesh*, *Article 15*, *Achut Kanya*, *Fandry*, *Sairat*, *NH 10*, *Court* have widely been discussed and have played an integral part in representing caste as a social reality through the lens of Indian cinema.

Literature Review

Representation of caste: a journey of indian cinema

The history of caste has been widely narrated through different mediums. There have been various debates and discussions over caste in the academic field and Indian politics. The various academic studies on caste have successfully represented the integral part which caste plays in our Indian society at different levels and different paradigms. Famous scholars like M.N Srinivas, Andre Beteille and others have written about caste in Indian society and built a narrative about the differences and stratification which caste brings

with it. Leaders, thinkers, social reformers like B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule have written and spoken in depth about caste-based atrocities especially faced by the Dalit community also known as untouchable caste [6-9]. There have been various kinds of caste-based social movements that brought various changes in the social spheres as well as political spheres which has led to a kind of creation of memory of caste as a social phenomenon and the marginalization which brings in the lives of people.

Caste has also been used in stories and poetry writing, street plays, and cinema. Cinema, poetry, painting, dance, and other artistic forms of expression have been present in India since long time ago in various forms and formats. These art forms have always borrowed from the society of the time or even ahead of its time and have made people think through their art forms. There have been various kinds of storybooks and poetry that have represented caste in a manner which deals with discrimination of people belonging to lower caste community and has contributed towards the theorization of their deprivation and marginalization. In contrast, cinema is an art form and one of the key mediums which have appealed to and impacted society at different levels due to its audio-visual presentation [5].

There has been substantial literature that has addressed cinema and its role in society. Deshpandey in his article 'Indian, Cinema and Bourgeois Nation-State' contends that the writing on the film started to multiply in India very early in spite of the fact that the academic exploration on films started after 1947 and by then film investigation was drawn by the western researchers, for example, Franklin Fearing. Anyway, many are of the conclusion that writing on Indian film is academically under-analyzed. Deshpandey argues that most of the literature on Indian cinema was accumulated in the 1920s, present only a chronological account of the Indian Film industry [10-12]. Thus, the fusion of cinema and social issues has contributed to the representation of different social problems in society. As cinema collects stories from different localities where different social issues have emerged and represented it so that it can build a kind of history and memory for the people dealing with social problems. Caste has also been represented through different mediums and cinema as a medium with

audio-visual that has also played important role in the representation of caste.

Understanding of the representation of caste in indian cinema

Indian cinema has always been seen as a representative of a commercial entertainer targeting the mass audience with the huge amount of box office collection satisfying the producer's economic stability especially Bollywood masala movies which focus on larger than life cinema based on the stories of romance, friendship, action, tragedy, and comedy. Indian cinema also consists of regional cinema in different languages spoken all over the nation and also represents the social issues of society through various kinds of stories and are more contextualized. Thus, withinside the ambiance of hate politics traced again to Casteism and its historical dictates, Indian cinema deal with caste and in particular the testimonies of marginalization of Dalits, which is of no surprise now. The inquiry, in any case, tries to explore whether the movies are made to oblige the movie's estimation of the film, or whether it expects to mirror a genuine impression of underestimation, mistreatment, and torment [13].

Vijayalakshmy et al in their paper named 'Dalit Representation in Indian Cinema' has discussed the portrayal of Dalits in Indian films. A brief look into the historical backdrop of Dalits in Indian film will hurl some noteworthy answers. Indian film is the single biggest mechanism of correspondence with the majority, and near 12.5 million individuals watch films each week in film houses and theatres [14].

It is significantly subject to its positive gathering by the mass crowd. First, Hindi film depends on the subject of untouchability "Achhut Kanya" delivered in 1936 where Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar played the two leads demonstrated the avoidance of marriage because of rank bias and class obstructions between them. The Indian entertainment world is generally in the possession of high society upper-rank elites. The film manages the social situation of Dalit and is viewed as a reformist period-piece. The film is set during the 1900s. Pratap (Ashok Kumar) and Kasturi (Devika Rani) are beloved companions, profoundly infatuated with one another. Tragically, Pratap is a Brahmin and Kasturi is an untouchable (achhut).

Social shows of the time block any chance of the two ever joining together.

Pratap gets hitched to Meera (Manorama), while Kasturi weds Manu (Anwar). The two cannot overlook their first love; however, they make a decent attempt to make their individual relationships work. Lamentably, the circumstance becomes exacerbated by the way that Manu has a first spouse, Kajri, with whom he is repelled because of exorbitant obstruction from his parents in law. Now priggish Kajri unexpectedly feels compromised by the appearance of a renewed person in her significant other's life. Meera is surrendered to predetermination until Kajri poisons her mind. Both of them incubate a malicious scheme to dishonor Kasturi according to Manu. They take Kasturi along to a mela in the neighboring town and afterward desert her there. In solitude in the obscure spot, Kasturi must choose the option to hitch a ride with Pratap, who has a food stall there. Meera and Kajari then disclose to Manu that Kasturi is with Pratap. The chafed Manu assaults Pratap when they show up at the railroad crossing where he is working as the attendant. There follow fisticuffs between the two, even as a train surge towards them. Frantic to spare them, Kasturi surges towards the train begging the driver to stop, and, in the process, gets herself killed. That demonstration of magnanimity makes her a saint according to the residents, despite her coming from a low position.

There has been a characterization of a brahmin caste in the Indian cinema which has in a way represented the caste in the dominant paradigm. Various characters have played the role of Brahmins but the debate over the characterization of Dalit and representation of the lower caste in Indian cinema still exists [14]. An article published in an online news blog named "India Resists" talks about the missing of Dalits from Indian cinema and media. The film being one of the utmost significant devices of media for proliferating certain belief systems and considerations among the majority, holds a significant portrayal of different segments, networks, or even a person among the majority. In the battleground of the caste system, Dalits are the most abused characters in the position chain of command that is caste hierarchy [14-15].

In Indian films, the issue of caste oppression has only here and there persuaded any chances to be

represented. The entertainment media comprising of films and promotion which pulls in the significant populace of the state has regularly stayed immaculate by Dalits [5]. Then again, the Savarna or Brahmanic display of the force structure has authority over the Indian media. Since the beginning of Indian film businesses of 100 years, the quantity of films where Dalit being depicted as the focal character is less compared with Savarna as the main character. Although during the parallel film development, there have been scarcely any motion pictures made based on Dalit portrayal propelled by Left-Marxist belief systems, they stay infrequent. Indeed, the depiction of the body of a Dalit-male or female has consistently been a generalized differentiation to the body of a Savarna [15].

A Dalit male has consistently got portrayed with a pitiful flimsy body, genuinely messy, sincerely powerless, and mentally empty appearance while a female accomplished some explicitly alluring and attractive body to be externalized and enslaved by the Brahmin-patriarchs. As it were, these artistic spaces, for example, the film business, are still unexplored and untouched by Dalit issues, accounts, or stories [16].

Indian Cinema has moreover been not able to speak to Dalit life and worries on the larger screen and has decided not to do as such by the only choice. From one viewpoint, those with a customary foundation of education training across ages, the savarnas (higher ranks), and then again, the precise prohibition of Dalits from education, have brought about turncoat authority of Cinema industry by the savarnas [17].

Through this correlation of portrayal of Dalits in Indian film with the number of characters spoken to by the upper position features a significant inquiry of representative depiction of a non-Savarna in Indian motion pictures which mirrors their battle for freedom. As indicated by the 2011 census, 25% Dalit populace are in India. Yet the portrayal of Dalit characters is exceptionally less when contrasted with the Savarna class [18].

Trends and patterns in representation of caste in indian cinema

Indian cinema has represented caste by making layers of difference in the characters showcasing

the caste hierarchy. Patel in his article 'Unconventional Bollywood: Constructing cinema of caste pride' talks about Caste in Indian cinema and how it has been reflected at the backdrop of caste being in the paradigm of problem, pride, and identity assertion [19]. He states that caste is a significant body of the Indian social system that deals with stratification and exploitation [19].

As we observe the trends of Indian cinema dealing with caste, we can see that Bollywood filmmakers have made a small number of movies reflecting caste as a problematic and upper-caste character as social reformer or representative of social revolution that bring exertions to change the caste-based discrimination and hatred which reflects the depiction of caste-based inequalities, films like Chandidas (1934), Achhut Kanya (1936,) Achhut (1940), Doosri Shadi (1947), Sujata (1959) [19]. Parakh (1960) Bobby (1973), Ankur (1974), Ganga ki Saugandh (1978), Sadgati (1981) have showcased the inequalities that caste brings in society.

Slowly and mutely but with a good intention and plan a significant number of films having North Indian upper-caste titles has been increasing in the last 20 years. In these films, caste is not seen as a problem but it is seen as a pride matter but simply for traditional dominant upper castes. Bitty Mishra and Chirag Dubey of 'Bareli Ki Burfi', Arti Shukla and Satyendra Mishra of 'Shadi Me Jaroor Aana', Pawan Chaturvedi of 'Bajrangi Bhaijan', Chulbul Pandey of 'Dabbang', Keshav Sharma and Jaya Joshi of 'Toilet: Ek Prem Katha' are just a few to name where male and female protagonists belong to a particular caste (category or Varna) i.e. Brahmin. All these films are hits and successful films.

Caste in Indian film has been spoken to as an issue of the portrayal of the character and the distinction in the personality of upper and lower caste individuals and how their character is viewed as a subject of underestimation simultaneously additionally observed as an issue of pride [14-15, 20]. This relationship can likewise be seen from the film made by Anurag Kashyap wherein his film called "Gulal" attempts to reestablish the lost edge of an upper caste (Thakur) zamindar family. In his new film Mukkabaz, he returns to similar caste-based segregation where Sanjay Kumar a Dalit mentor is assaulted and paralyzed, while Krishnakant Yadav a railroad official was beaten

and left in the film. The film exhibits a great representation of Inter-caste struggle being proceeded among Brahman and Kshatriya and the film finds itself from modest community urban areas like Bareilly and Banaras [19].

I believe that the root of problems can be only understood by digging a bit into the history and finding out what led to this debate today. Karl Marx talks about the historical materialism and class struggle at the hands of those who own the means of production [21]. In that context, if we look at the backdrop of the Indian society, we will find that caste and class both play an important role here. The ones who are at the top automatically hold the means (resources) and call the shots. Govindraj Ghundi Phalke (Dada Saheb Phalke), a Brahmin, was the pioneer of Indian cinema. In 1913 he produced India's first feature film 'Raja Harishchandra'. During the early years, Indian cinema was subjugated by the upper-caste in terms of directors, producers, actors, music directors. Gradually there was a shift in the late 1940s and artists from the Dalit community started knocking on the door of India Cinema such as singer and comedian Tuntun (Dard, 1947), a hero of the film *Albela* (1951) Bhagwan Dada [22-24].

With time the people from the Dalit community did not make their way to the top in terms of being the leading actors but were rather subjected to side roles, comedy roles, and later as antagonists. In Indian cinema, the image of a hero (lead actor) is of a savior who fights against all odds and saves the family, women, and society from the evil forces. He is seen as a model character and often we have seen him being worshipped by the common masses. In a caste-based society where traditionally the people from upper caste have maintained a distance from lower caste people, it does not come as a surprise in terms of Bollywood not being open and acceptable to lower caste people up to today. The regional Indian film industry such as Tollywood, Kollywood, Bhojiwood, to name a few, portrays a different picture in contrast to Bollywood.

Cinema reflects the reality of society as a common notion but in doing so does it show the ground reality or just what is required to sustain? There is still a long way to go in this direction as long as the actual discrimination in the real-world will not end it will not be reflected on the reel. Cinema is changing with the times and with the

coming of the Over-The-Top (OTT) platform the equation has been changed completely. Now the filmmakers are not dependent on the screens to release their content. In today's time when the Internet is accessed by more and more people, it becomes easy for the filmmakers to reach a wider audience which was not the case earlier where only the big banner backed films used to get screens for releasing a movie [25].

Examples of films that represented caste in different decades:

- *Chandidas* is a 1934 Hindi social drama film directed by Nitin Bose. The story spins around the fifteenth-century holy, poet-saint person Chandidas who carries on against the profound established extremism against caste, untouchability, and the deception of society, and a washer lady with whom he falls in love.
- *Achhut (The Untouchable)* is a 1940 film dependent on untouchability. The film was made to advance Gandhi's development against untouchability. At the point when Lakshmi (Gohar Mamajiwala), the girl of a Harijan brings water from a temple and an angered Pujari (priest) breaks the pot on her head. This episode, in addition to a few different treacheries that he has confronted, powers the father to accept Christianity into which he brings Lakshmi. The mother will not become one and stays a Hindu alongside her other child. A rich businessman, Seth Haridas, adopts her and she turns into a companion to his little girl, Savitri. Lakshmi receives decent education and the two young ladies grow up to become hopelessly enamored with the same man, Madhukar. As Madhukar originates in a high caste family, Seth illuminates Madhukar's family regarding Lakshmi's background to make to his girl wedded to him. Lakshmi comes back to her mom in the village, where she meets Ramu (Motilal, actor), the kid to whom she has been married as a kid. The two come together and turn radical against the atrocities against the untouchables (Harijans). The message, at last, gets through and they are permitted to enter the temple.
- *Sujata* (1959) appreciates the status of a classic both at national and international levels. Films narrative rotates around Sujata being conceived in a Dalit family whose parents die in the cholera epidemic. She is raised by a Brahmin however when she understands her genuine caste character she begins acting as a rebellion [26].

- Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1972) and Nishant (1975) portrayed the mistreatment by upper castes. The suffering of Dalit women is reflected by the character of Lakshmi played by Shabana Azmi in *Ankur*.
- Govind Nilhani's *Aakrosh* (1980) revolves around the character named Lahanya Bhiku a lower caste who gets into a murder case and faces different issues during the film [27].
- Prakash Jha's *Damul* (1985) is probably the boldest film that flawlessly investigated the casteist and capitalist political issues in certain pockets of rustic India like Bihar. Many years later, Prakash Jha also made socio-political drama *Aarakshan* (2011) which dealt with the controversy over the implementation of reservation policy after the Mandal movement.
- Priyadarshan's *Aakrosh* (2010) also dealt with the theme of 'honor killing' in Uttar Pradesh in the name of caste-based violence and created a situation of conflict between the upper and lower caste in the backdrop of caste politics. Also, some movies have represented the caste in a very realistic manner where the problems faced by the lower caste people in their daily life have been showcased. What follows are the examples of these kinds of films:
 - Chaitanya Tamhane's "*Court* (2014)" which was awarded as the best feature film at the 62nd National Film grant exhibits the awfulness of the life of a sewer cleaner who lives in severe poverty.
 - Neeraj Ghewan's "*Masaan* (2015)" shows the hardcore caste realities around the ghats of Varanasi and with the theme of love and sentiment between a lower caste boy and girl from a small-town setup.
 - Article 15(2019) directed by Anubhav Sinha portrays the caste-based atrocities and gender-based segregation mirroring the status of women in the circles of caste-based separation. The film was examined and discussed widely and succeeded at the box office. It simultaneously was criticized for the Brahmin character adopting the job of a savior.

Conclusion

This study contemplates the historical backdrop of caste and Indian film and attempts to depict the utilization of caste in various characters and attempts to contend in what way caste as a social issue has been managed and how it makes separation through restricted viewpoint towards the backward castes. Cinema reflects the reality of

society which is deeply rooted in the caste-based hierarchy regarding the language and behavior towards a certain section, so cinema cannot be just blamed for depicting the characters in a certain manner. It can therefore be said that the depiction of caste in Indian films has been in a hierarchical portrayal of various caste-based characters which also denote the idea of 'contrasts' and 'others' in Indian films. Although film can be said as a methodological instrument to recall the history and recollections of caste, still there is a long way to arrive for the portrayal of caste in various ways which exhibit the ground truth of caste in Indian society than simply depicting contrasts among dominant and marginalized caste simply through hierarchical characterization in cinema.

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