

Depictions of Dalits in Indian Hindi Cinema: A Study

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Abstract: India is an underprivileged country mushroomed by people who are deprived of even the basic necessities of life. Their miserable lifestyle seldom gets narrated in cinema simply because depiction of pitiable people never ensue box office collection. In India they are popularly called Dalits. The condition of Dalits is rather pitiable in the interiors of the country. Cinema is regarded as the mirror of the society but it has failed to produce tangible movies on deplorable life of Dalits. Particularly mainstream Hindi cinema has rarely turned its eyes towards the Dalits and the poor. It is equally true that a discursive Dalit film has a solid argument to make. Caste oppression is at galore in India. But it seems its argument gets lost and unnoticed in the glitter and glamour of mainstream cinema. There is an urgent need to address the long standing issues of the oppressed minority. This paper endeavours to study Hindi films depicting the issues related to Dalits. The study underlines the fact that cinema has the capacity to serve as a catalyst for social change. Just integrated and meaningful efforts are required.

Key Words: Dalits, underprivileged, miserable, oppression, cinema, catalyst.

Introduction

Indian cinema largely uncodify and negates the presence of Dalits, as they are either ignored or stereotyped in the narratives while being largely absent in film production. Here, Indian cinema defies the argument of Siegfried Kracauer (1960: 304), for whom films virtually make the world our home. In India, cinema reproduces the “upper” caste/class gaze as a metonymy for the whole nation. When B R Ambedkar told M K Gandhi that he does not have a homeland it indicates the oppression that Dalits in India experience. Caste oppression continuously reminds them of their non-belonging or their “longing-to-be”. On the one hand, one could state that the cinemas of India never offered a virtual home for Dalits in India as their presence is either negated or blurred. On the other hand, there could be a spectatorial identification, where large majorities are trapped by an image. Both cases only show how cinema affects Dalits, and not the other way round, that is, how Dalits affect cinema. Their films, at once, offer an oppositional gaze as well as a “look” which cares—as an affective gaze. Hence, anti-caste aesthetics not only resists, but also invites one to be part of its becoming. To put it differently, anti-caste aesthetics is an aspect of “becoming” in India. A becoming which is inevitable in the case of Dalits, where being itself is violated.

Dalits, at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy in India, were not only the earlier untouchables but also unbearable and unseeable. These impositions on human senses demonstrate that caste is embedded in the sensorial regime. Recent works on caste take a “sensorial turn” to understand the embodiment of caste and how it affects society. Caste as a sensorial regime is intrinsically linked with aesthetics, and it affects the sensory experience. Thus, anti-caste aesthetics has the potential to significantly rupture the sensorial regime of caste. Though cinema is perceived as an audio-visual medium, studies on it have generally privileged the study of sight over other senses; particularly on gaze. To foreground the question of caste in cinema, it is significant to discuss the concept of gaze, especially from other oppressed locations.

Indian Cinema’s relationship with Caste

Nation-building endeavours dominated Indian life in the decades following independence. As a part of this dynamic, the film industry has reflected on the formation of a society that is appreciative of agriculture and has endorsed the portrayal of national loyalty embodied in the military services. This, in turn, reaffirmed the desire for a nationalist conservatism that was infused with religious elements. Because of this, every film began with a tribute to the gods and had numerous references to the divine. To honour the gods, they expected to be depicted on the screen, people would remove their shoes in the theatre.

The majority of mainstream Indian cinema is notably escapism-oriented, and as a result, many people go to see movies as a way to pass the time and escape the realities of their lives. There is only a limited amount of escape for those who are marginalised by the dominant caste/dominant Hindu society depicted in films; Brahmans and other related caste groups have used cinema to assert their hegemony over the mainstream medium of cultural expression. Celebrating a Brahman wedding or revelling in Savarna traditions, for example, has no relation to Dalit-Bahujan discourse or culture in everyday cinema. When the mass of the populace is not included in these films, they suggest an imagined utopia that doesn’t resonate with them. As a result, Dalit-Bahujan are further isolated from mainstream culture because they are unable to participate in the utopia depicted on TV. According to the anti-caste philosopher B. R. Ambedkar, a structure with many floors without an elevator or an entrance is like this disgusting system. Those born in the lower floors cannot ascend to the upper floors, no matter how deserving they are. When one was born, he or she was destined to die there.

The caste-capital relationship can be disrupted by Dalit cinema, which has the ability to offer performative resistance. Dalit cinema could foreshadow a coordinated fight against hegemonic caste supremacy by criticising caste, gender, class, and other forms of oppression. Thereafter one may argue against the prevalence of oppressor castes in Indian cinema as a whole. To be among the pioneers of modern artistic resistance, Dalit film as a resistance movement has to break away from traditional forms of art. It was the modern art genres of realism, impressionism, and post-impressionism that rejected the bourgeois romantic interpretations of the world. The mass resistance movements of the 1960s in Latin America were reflected by Latin America's emergence of the 'Third

Cinema', which criticised the profiteering merchants of elite film-making and attacked the American and European cinematic portrayal of white people as indomitable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Yengde, S. (2018) A brief overview of the Dalit experience in Indian cinema is presented in this piece. There is no moral concern for Dalit inclusion in India's rapidly growing film industry because of its inherent caste-based bias and mechanised production methods, which are a by-product of India's rapid technical industrialization. As a result of the mainstream Indian film industry's steadfast rejection of a Dalit framework, a new expressly Dalit cinema has emerged to fill this void. Criticizing 'Dalit Cinema', I examine two films by Nagraj Manjule, both of which were written and directed by the Dalit filmmaker. With the help of Manjule, a film-maker who is building a new discourse of Dalit-centred socio-culturalism, I explain how caste themes are absent from the India's film industry.

Chauhan, V. (2019) Indian culture and rituals have always had a strong caste system. Indian society is largely split along caste lines, and this can be seen in people's daily lives on a regular basis. In addition to being a major source of amusement in India, Hindi film serves as a window into a variety of cultural practises, discourses, and perspectives. Post-independence Indian films' depictions of the caste system and the plight of Dalits are the subject of this essay. It makes the case that Dalits have been portrayed in a way that conforms to dominant cultural stereotypes. They've been portrayed as submissive, grubby, and lacking in self-confidence. The caste Hindu sensibilities of popular Hindi movies are used to create, spread, and naturalise the stereotypes. Contrarily, in film tales the ongoing struggle of Dalits against caste injustice is typically neglected. In terms of cultural politics and power discourses, these representations have a lot in common. Selected films have been subjected to critical textual and historical examination.

Oza, P. (2018) There are many interesting aspects of Indian history and culture to be found in popular Hindi films. For more than a century, Hindi cinema has served as a window into Indian society, reflecting both its virtues and its flaws in vivid colour. Sometimes, however, an examination of the history of Indian cinema reveals an incredibly interesting but accurate portrait of contemporary society, complete with all of its virtues and flaws in vivid colour. Discussing difficulties relating to the portrayal of a single caste in Indian cinema, this dissertation focuses on the Dalits.

Edachira, M. (2020) Dalit film-makers in India, such as Nagraj Manjule and Pa Ranjith (among others), use unique techniques in visuals, sound, music and cinematography to reject the aesthetic regime of stereotypical depiction adopted by Dalits. An anti-caste aesthetics defined through an embodied sensibility in films will be examined in this study. An explicit anti-caste aesthetic and the creation of emotional, expressive archives are cited in the study as evidence that these film-makers disrupt "the unconscious of caste." In other words, the process of denunciation (of Casteist images) and innovation brings into being what was previously inconceivable (of anti-caste aesthetics).

Singh, A. (2021) The caste system has been used as a means of oppression in Indian society for centuries. Various academics in the fields of sociology and anthropology have used a variety of approaches to investigating caste. Cinema, as an art form and as a reflection of society, gives the societal subject a completely different frame to examine and observe the society in which people live with social problems like Casteism. In Indian cinema, caste has been depicted in a variety of ways, including untouchability, honour killing in inter-caste marriages, and the disparity of problems faced by people in rural and urban areas. Consequently, the caste system in cinema and the history and memory of Indian cinema are examined in this study, as is the history and legacy of Indian cinema.

Vijayalakshmi, N., & Swamy, A. M. (2019) The success of Indian films is heavily reliant on how well they are received by the general people. When you examine the history of Dalits in Hindi films, you will discover some significant answers. It should come as no surprise that there are numerous Indian films about Dalits and how they are mistreated. The debate is whether the films are designed to make money at the box office or to demonstrate how marginalisation, persecution, and defeat actually occur. Indian films about Dalits and how they are mistreated. Caste is an accepted component of Indian culture, yet Bollywood producers frequently leave it out of their films. It is significant to discuss the first ten years after India's freedom in the history of Bollywood. They were enamoured with the modernist way of thinking about society.

Kumar, M. (2014) "Dalit" is a Sanskrit word that means "oppressed," "suppressed," or "broken into pieces." This term was coined by Mahatma Jayaprakash Rao Phule to describe people who could not be touched. The term "Harijan," which means "Children of God," was coined by Mahatma Gandhi. These previous "untouchables" and tribes are now referred to as "scheduled cast" or "scheduled tribe" by the government. These people identify as "Dalit" because the word implies that they are aware of their oppression and seek dignity and the right to choose for themselves.

Atwal, J. (2018) Feudal relations and caste-based gender exploitation were still prevalent in post-1947 India, despite the country's freedom and democracy. In India, I contend, the subaltern is not a fixed category. Three different sorts of genres/representations of "low caste" women in Indian cinema are examined in this article to highlight the importance of developing new techniques to comprehend Black feminism in India. *Acchyut Kanya* represents the ambitious liberal reformist state that culminated in the constitution of India, where inclusion and equality were promised to everyone. The failure of the state to deliver on the postcolonial promise of equality and progress for all is exemplified in the film *Ankur*. *Bandit Queen*, the third film, depicts the feminised rage of a rural Indian woman whose body has been violated because she is from a "low" caste. As a thief, Phoolan becomes a constitutionalist who advocates for social justice. According to this, Ambedkar's India and legal rights are more important than armed uprisings. When writing about "poor" caste women's histories, the Indian feminist discourse tends to focus on rescuing the grief rather than on exploring and researching the rage of the women themselves.

Representation of caste: a journey of Indian Cinema

There have been many various ways to tell the story of caste. Caste has been the subject of many discussions and controversies, both in academia and in the political arena in India. Our Indian society has been well-represented in academic research on caste at

many levels and in numerous paradigms. The disparities and stratification that caste brings to Indian society has been the subject of studies by eminent scholars like M.N. Srinivas and Andre Beteille, among others. Atrocities perpetrated against the Dalit, commonly known as the "untouchable caste," have been the subject of extensive research and writing by social reformers like B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule. As a result of a variety of caste-based social movements, people's lives have been marginalised and their memories of caste have been created, leading to a form of memory of caste as a social phenomenon.

Stories and poems, street plays, and movies have also used caste. In India, art has been around for a long time in numerous forms and formats, including cinema, poetry, painting, and dance. Through their art, these forms of expression have always drawn inspiration from current events or even from societies far in the future. There have been a variety of stories and poems that have dealt with caste in a way that has contributed to the theory of the deprivation and marginalisation of people from lower castes. As a result of its audio-visual presentation, cinema, on the other hand, is an art form that has appealed to and had a significant impact on society on a variety of levels.

Understanding of the representation of Caste in Indian Cinema

The huge amount of box office revenue that ensures the financial stability of producers in Bollywood masala movies, which focus on larger-than-life cinema based on stories of romance, friendship, action, tragedy, and comedy, has always been seen as a representative of Indian cinema as a commercial entertainer aimed at the mass market. Indian cinema also includes regional cinema in a variety of languages spoken throughout the country, which depicts societal issues through a variety of stories and is thus more contextualised than national cinema alone. Indian cinema has long dealt with issues of caste and in particular the stories of Dalit marginalisation, even in the midst of a climate of hate politics traceable back to Casteism and its historical demands. In any way, the investigation aims to find out if the films are made to satisfy the film's estimation of the film or if it intends to reflect a true sensation of underestimation, abuse, and anguish.

It is highly dependent on the general public's good response. When it comes to untouchability in Bollywood films, the 1936 film "*Achhut Kanya*," which starred Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar as the primary characters, is a classic example of how caste and rank prejudice prevent couples from being married. The Indian entertainment industry is dominated by the top echelons of Indian society. To some, the film is considered a reformist period piece for its depiction of Dalit life. The story takes place in the early 1900s. Infatuated with one another, Pratap (Ashok Kumar) and Kasturi (Devika Rani) make up a loving couple. Brahmin Pratap and Kasturi are both untouchables (*Achhut*). Social shows of the period prevent any possible union of the two.

In Indian cinema, there has been a depiction of a Brahmin caste that has reflected the dominant paradigm of caste. Brahmins have been played by a variety of actors, but the issue of how Dalits and other lower-caste Indians are portrayed in film continues to be debated. absence of Dalits in Indian movies and media When it comes to propagating particular beliefs and thoughts among the majority, the film holds a substantial depiction of segments, networks, or even a person in the general population. Dalits are the most abused members of the caste hierarchy on the battleground of social stratification.

Women have achieved certain expressly seductive and attractive bodies to be externalised and subjugated by the Brahmin-patriarchs while Dalit men have repeatedly been depicted as sad fragile bodies, truly messy appearances, truly powerless appearances, and mental emptiness. There are still a lot of unexplored and untold stories about Dalit people in these artistic settings, such as in the film industry.

As a result, Indian cinema has decided that it has no alternative but to avoid portraying Dalit life on the big screen. From one point of view, the savarnas (upper ranks) who have a long tradition of education and training, as well as the explicit prohibition of Dalit education, have brought about the savarnas' turncoat authority in the film business.

Dalit representation in Indian films is examined in connection to the number of characters addressed by the upper echelons of the caste system, which represents their struggle for independence. There are 25 percent Dalits in India, according to the 2011 census. However, when compared to the Savarna class, the number of Dalit characters is remarkably low.

Trends and patterns in representation of caste in Indian cinema

In Indian cinema, caste has been depicted through the use of multiple layers in the characters depicting caste hierarchy. "Unconventional Bollywood: Constructing Cinema of Caste Pride" by Patel focuses on Indian cinema's depiction of caste as an issue, pride, and assertion of one's identity in the context of caste. Indian social stratification and exploitation are handled by castes, according to him.

Bollywood filmmakers have made a small number of films depicting caste as a problem and upper-caste characters as social reformers or representatives of societal revolution that bring efforts to change caste-based discrimination and hatred, such as Chandidas (1934), *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Achhut* (1940), *Doosri Shadi* (1947), *Sujata* (1948), and *Doosri* (1950). Caste has been discussed in Indian films in terms of how characters are presented and how the personalities of upper and lower caste people differ, as well as how their personalities are considered as both something to be embarrassed of and something to be proud of. This relationship is also depicted in Anurag Kashyap's film "*Gulal*," which attempts to restore a higher caste (Thakur) zamindar family's lost edge. *Mukkabaz*(2017), another film, depicts the same type of caste-based injustice. A Dalit mentor, Sanjay Kumar, is tortured and paralysed, while a railroad official, Krishnakant Yadav, is beaten and left. The film does an excellent job of depicting how Brahman and Kshatriya are at odds beyond caste lines, and it begins in little towns like Bareilly and Banaras.

Conclusion

While caste as a social issue has been dealt with in numerous ways, this study aims to show how caste is used in various characters and how it creates a sense of isolation by restricting one's perspective to those from lower castes. It's impossible to fault cinema for portraying characters in a specific way because it mirrors society as a whole, which is steeped in a caste-based hierarchy when it comes to language and behaviour toward particular groups. There is no doubt that Indian films have been depicting caste hierarchy in a hierarchical manner, which also denotes the idea that "contrasts" and "others" exist in Indian cinema. As much as film can be

seen as a methodological tool for recalling the history and memories of caste, there is still a long way to go for the portrayal of caste in various ways that show the ground truth of caste in Indian society than simply depicting contrasts between dominant and marginalised caste through hierarchical characterization in cinema.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Over 3,000 years after its inception, India's caste system, which was part of the Hindu Varna system, is still going strong. Many people in the society are denied basic human rights, one of which is the right to education and knowledge. Cinema, art, and education all lie under the umbrella of "knowledge." Thanks to the social campaigns done by people like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B. R Ambedkar, a portion of Indian society that had been traditionally excluded from access to knowledge has been able to experience empowerment via education and employment through reservations.

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