The Portrayal of Dalits in Contemporary Indian Cinema with the special reference to Akrosh(2010), and Masaan (2015)

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ABSTRACT

Bollywood is celebrating a hundred successful years of Indian Films, but now is the time for some audit and reflection. Indian cinema has broken free from a range of technological, geographical, thematic and picturisation related taboos, restrictions and limitations but it has yet to free itself from the stranglehold of the Chaturvarna System. That is why, since its initial days, Savarna actors, producers, directors, writers, technicians, distributors, etc. have been dominating the world of Indian films. There have been a very few mainstream Dalit stories and characters that left impression on the masses in more than a hundred years of Indian cinema. A rear view would reveal that Indian cinema’s first decade both before and after Independence did respond quite strongly to the socialist nerves as the issue of caste became a part of the popular film narratives like in Achhut Kanya (1936) and Sujata (1959). In the 60s, however, cinema was narrowing down its concerns to the socio-economic confines of the upper-middle class people. Then, from the 1970s began the Amitabh era which shifted the Indian cinema into a very imaginative space with the ‘angry young man’ trope at its center. It never occurred to any filmmaker to portray a Dalit protagonist fighting against social evils. However, the social questions like of caste-based gender violence and feudal exploitation gathered remarkable momentum through films like Shyam Benegal’s Ankur (1974). In the second part of my paper, I deal mainly with those films belonging to the latter decades of the twentieth century which portrays the change that a Dalit woman’s persona has gone through over the decades. The stereotypes are done away with; the rebelliousness and the fighting spirit among rural Dalit women, which is a novel phenomenon has been explored in these offbeat films, namely, Shekhar Kapur’s Bandit Queen (1994), Jag Mundhra’s Bawandar (2000), Priyadarshan’s Aakrosh (2010) and Neeraj Ghaywan’s Masaan (2015), etc. This paper aims at retelling the role of Indian Cinema in the portrayal of the plights of Dalits in our Society with the reference of two films i.e. Priyadarshan’s Aakrosh (2010) and Neeraj Ghaywan’s Masaan (2015).

“Every man who repeats the dogma of Mill that one country is no fit to rule another country must admit that one class is not fit to rule another class.”

“Men are mortal, so are ideas. An idea needs propagation as much as a plant needs watering. Otherwise, both will wither and die.”

- Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar

What intrigues me as a scholar of Dalit Studies is not just the chasm of social and traditional dos and don’ts that separate the Dalits from the rest of the population, but also a fallacious world that nurtures such a tendency to feed its greed for power. The term Dalit portrays a much wider picture. The term could be elaborated and redefined with a fresh perspective. Therefore, Dalit is not just a victim of any kind of class division, but more like an object of such social stratification, that has been manipulated and exploited since antiquity in the name of tradition, culture, vocation, birth, caste, creed, or even gender. Any oppressed individual, who has been cut off from his social web, kept devoid of his rights, exploited physically or tortured mentally, is a Dalit. A Dalit can be a man or woman or transgender or child, even you or I could be a Dalit. Therefore, generalising the term upon a whole population reflects the poignant fact that each and every individual undergoes some kind of exploitation during his lifetime in one or the other way.

Cinema has truly played a major role in changing our society. Ever since its conception, moving pictures have
proven to be far more than just a simple tool for entertainment. Throughout history, individuals have manipulated this technology, not only to tell stories but also as a unique channel to broadcast opinions — opinions that have gone on to change the perspective of entire generations and achieve real change. Hence, from a Dalit perspective when one inquires about their space during the past one century of the film world, only a handful of non-decrupt, obscure examples are presented. The popular genre does not focus on the problems of caste and casteism, and its main focus is to entertain and the plots, therefore, are light. This cinema is called the mainstream Cinema. Cinema focusing on social issues has become a part of the offbeat cinema. Caste as a peculiar Indian reality is an accepted fact but it is often cast away by the Bollywood filmmakers.

The first Hindi film based on the delicate theme of untouchability is Achhut Kanya (1936) directed by Franz Osten. Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar portrayed the two leads in the film. Caste-prejudices and class-barriers prevent marriage between Kasturi (Devika Rani), a Harijan (Dalit) girl, and Pratap (Ashok Kumar), a Brahmin youth – both are childhood friends and deeply in love with each other. Soon, Kasturi is forced into a loveless alliance with one of her own castes. A chance encounter at the village fair brings the two lovers together. Kasturi’s husband, inflamed by jealousy and suspicion, attacks Pratap at the railway level crossing, where he is a gatekeeper. While the two men are engaged in a fierce fight unmindful of a fast approaching train, Kasturi, in an attempt to save them, runs over and dies. Before this, only two other films had touched upon the caste problem in any significant way – Nitin Bose’s Chandidas (1934) and V. Shantaram’s Dahrmatma (1935).

Till the day, Bimal Roy’s Sujata (1959) enjoys the status of a classic both at national and international retrospectives. This is a film that tugs at our heartstrings with its portrayal of the pain and dilemmas of an untouchable girl growing up in a Brahmin family. Its mechanisms of pleasure blend of realism and idealism, and the humanitarian vision that it embodies a powerful impact albeit fading in the symbolic universe of the 1950s.

Shyam Benegal’s Ankur (1974) and Nishant (1975) dealt with the oppression of minority people by the high castes. The trauma of a Dalit woman is reflected by the character of Lakshmi, portrayed effectively by Shabana Azmi in Ankur. The film provides a deeper insight into the ugliness of Indian caste system, particularly visible in the rural areas. Manthan (1976) also portrayed the caste divide in the rural pockets of the country. All three films, without glamorising or celebrating the caste issue focused mainly on how caste plays havoc with the lives of the lower caste who are also crippled by poverty and illiteracy. These films bring Benegal’s interest in power relations to the fore. The four cornered struggle among —the untouchables, the traditional middle-class, the rising rural capitalists and the new cooperatives led by middle-class agents of change — all this is evidently traced with a political consciousness in the later films like Aarohan (1982) and Mandi (1983).

Govind Nihalani’s Aakrosh (1980) is movie that won National Film Award in 1980 for Best Feature Film in Hindi and several Filmfare Awards. In this, Lahanya Bhiku a low-caste, poor and illiterate tribal, is falsely accused of having murdered his wife Nagi. The woman had been gang-raped and murdered by the bigwigs of the village. Lahanya refuses to speak, even to his empathetic lawyer, who has risen from a poor background. While on death row, he is brought in for performing the last rites of his dead father, his hands and feet are shackled. As he circles the burning pyre, he lets out a final cry of anguish (Aakrosh) and slays his younger sister when he sees that the foreman is shamelessly staring at his prepubescent sister with lustful eyes.

Prakash Jha’s Damal (1985) is one of the boldest films that seamlessly explored the casteist and capitalist politics in some pockets of rural India like Bihar. The onslaughts on the oppressed come like a whirlpool. An entire Dalit Basti is held to ransom; the Basti is gheraoed to stop the residents from casting their votes, subjecting them to the mandatory repayment of debts they had never taken, forcing them to steal cattle for the landlord who leaves them to die if and when caught but not at his doorstep. The final blow comes when Sanjeevana, an innocent Harijan from the Dalit Basti is sentenced to be hanged to death because he turned wise to the landlord’s wicked ways. Many years later, Prakash Jha made Aarakshan (2011), starring big actors like Amitabh Bachchan, Saif Ali Khan, Manoj Bajpayee and Deepika Padukone. The film purported to be a socio-political drama based on the controversies revolving around caste-based reservations in Indian government jobs and educational institutions.

Swati Mehta in her article ‘Exploring Caste in Hindi Cinema’ (Meri News, April 04, 2009) points out that, “...the majority of the stakes in the film industry is held by higher castes, their films portray a very elitist image and way of life. The culture and traditions shown in the films, for instance, are very Brahmanical. Or the concept of class has taken over caste in popular cinema. For instance, in Karan Johar’s films or in films made by Yash Chopra, one comes across titles like Raichand, Mehra, Malhotra etc, mainly high caste Punjabis who are rich businessmen. Their marriage ceremony is based on the Brahmanical tradition where the priest is given supreme importance. Lavish weddings and related ceremonies are another features, which reflects the feudal nature of the Indian society. The rich and flamboyance can be attributed to the same.” (Swati Mehta, 2009)

Chetan Kapoor’s Bandit Queen (1994) based on the life of Phoolan Devi has very poignantly portrayed the intersection of caste and gender in the everyday life of rural north India. Through a representation of caste-based segregation in villages, the movie shows Phoolan’s child marriage and the endless torture by her paedophilic husband. Her exploitation at the hands of upper caste Thakurs and subsequent humiliation; when she is paraded naked in front of the entire village in the presence of villagers as passive spectators, attempts to show an indictment of the gender and the caste hierarchies existed in the rural areas of India.
Vidhu Vinod Chopra’s Eklavya (2007) is an example in which 800 camels were reportedly used in an action sequence. This spells out the film’s true agenda – glamour and chutzpah. Eklavya presented the radical and new Dalit in the shape and form of a bold police officer Pannalal Chauhan who not only asserts his Dalit identity but also bristles against the caste-based feudal oppression that still pervades in the rural parts of Rajasthan. Another film Court (2014) directed by Chaitanya Tamhane won the best film award at the 62nd National Film Awards (2015). The film is not about the Dalit identity at all, yet it subtly pulls us to read into the tragedy of the life of a sewer cleaner who not only has to live within desperate poverty but also has to earn through an occupation – cleaning dirty sewer that carries a perpetual life risk.

**Aakrosh:**

(Ajay Devgan as Pratap Kumar and Bipasha Basu as Geeta in a scene from Aakrosh)

**Aakrosh** (2010) is a movie inspired from an article of Times of India during 1995. The movie is directed by Priyadarshan and touches many sensitive issues like casteism, honor-killing, feudalism, domestic violence, etc. The story is set in a pocket of Uttar Pradesh where the law and the police create mayhem instead of implementing order and peace. The story begins as, a lower-caste guy (Deenu) wants to marry an upper-caste girl (Roshani), therefore, on the day of Dussehra celebration, he goes to his native place Janjhar (Bihar) to take Roshani away with the help of his two friends. Since then, all the three students go missing in the mist of Janjhar. Media and student-movement in Delhi plays a pivotal role increasing the pressure to find out the leads in this case, it is then two investigating officers, namely Pratap Kumar (Ajay Devgan) and Siddhant Chaturvedi (Akshaya Khanna) are brought in to investigate the mystery of missing three young students. The movie starts with an emotional and nerve-racking scene that shows the real picture of miserable Dalits which reminds me one of Premchand’s famous stories Thakur ka Kuan. When these officers enter the village for the investigation they see two wells there; Kala Kuan (Black Well) and Doodh Kua (White Well), for the use of Dalits and the Upper-class subsequently.

In a conversation with Siddhant, Pratap Kumar describes the real terrifying and gruesome picture of casteism through his own story. Siddhant asks:

Siddhant: Ye bataogay walatua haat karmye itana darte kyun hai? (Tell me why these villagers are so afraid of talking?)
Pratap: Ye bhat aurana darr hai par ab in ki zindagi ka hissa ban chhuka hai. (This is quite a primeval fear, now has become an integral part of their life)
Siddhant: Matlab (means)
Pratap: Ek interesting kahani sonata hun. Yanha se 80 km door ek chota sa gaav hai Shahbumpur, vanha ek gareeb Dalit pariwar rehta tha....payi payi jod unhone ek khet khareeda, phasal huiy or thode pese aane lage. Ek din vanha se us gaav ka zamidera gujara or bala, Ei Dalit bhot tarakki kar liye ho, kanhi ham jese zamideaar to nahi banana chahte? Dalit bhi makaaj main bala ham kite, bhi mehanat kar len, Dalit se Thakur nahin ban saqte, lekin han gar bhagwan ne chahaa to hamare bachche bade hokar thakur se achchi zindagi gujar karenge, Thakur ko ye makaaj, makaaj kam thappad se thoda jyada laga, raat jannashthami ka mela tha, jab poora parivar wapas louta or dekha to ghar, khet, gai sab jala diye gaye. Jab subah hui to baap aapne poore parivar ke liye mithai lekar aaya or bala, fikar mat karo, sab theek ho jayega! Or theek ho bhi gaya, mithai mai gharha tha. Sab mar gaye lekin jese tese wo sala ladka bach gaya. Khair point being, esi kahaniyan vanha roz suane ko milti hai. Kouf inki ragon me basa hua hai. (Let me narrate you an interesting story. There is a village called Shahbumpur, 80 kms far from here. There used to live a poor Dalit family....after a huge hard-work and painstaking efforts they bought a farm, harvested and finally started making some money. One day a Zamindar of the village passed by and asked, Hey Dalit! You progressed too much; do you want to be a Zamindar like us? Dalit too joked and said, “no matter how hard we work, we can’t become Thakurs from Dalits. But yes, if the almighty wants then one day our children would grow up and live a life far better than the Thakurs.” For Thakur this was not like a joke but little more than a tight slap. That was the night of Janmasthmi fair, when the whole family returned, they saw; the house, the farm, and the cows all were set on fire. The dawn appears, the farmer brought sweets for the whole family and said, “Don’t worry! Everything will be alright”, and it turned out alright, there was poison in the sweets. Everyone died but that bloody boy survived somehow. Anyway the point being, such stories are so common and heard every day. The terror lies in their veins.)
Shidhdhant: Shocking. Wese aaj kal wo ladka karta kya hai? (Shocking, by the way what that boy is doing these days?)
Pratap: Philhal apni shirt press kar raha hai.(Currently ironing his shirt)

As the investigation advances, it causes mayhem in Janjhar; riots, burning of the houses and killing of innocent peasants, everything happens in the broad daylight but no one wants to speak up and be the witness. Finally, the case is resolved with the help of Geeta (wife of one of the killers) who acts as a final key to the investigation. This is a quintessential Hindi movie based on Dalit issues but ironically known as commercial failure.
Masaan (2015) shifts our vision from the glamorous chutzpah of cities like Bombay, Delhi, Bangalore, and Kolkata where most Hindi films are located to a relatively subordinated smaller city like Varanasi. One of the two intertwined stories of Neeraj Ghaywan’s Masaan, is a love story between a low-caste boy named Deepak (Vicky Kaushal) from the Doms community, which oversees the burning of corpses, and an upper-caste girl named Shaalu (Shweta Tripathi). The Harish Chandra Ghat is the place where dead bodies lit up to the raging flames of the funeral pyres by the Doms (Chandals). Their work is to stoke the fires with sticks and beating up the bones and the skulls, so that the bodies can burn quickly.

In the movie, Deepak shirks to tell his girlfriend the address of his home in the beginning, because that would reveal his real identity as he belongs to a low-caste Dom community. Finally, after Shaalu’s persistent asking Deepak tells his harsh reality: and the dialogue is the voice of whole Dalits, it tells how lower-caste people feel about their caste and the menial work they do. Throughout their lives they have to face this humiliation.

Deepak: Janana chahti thi na tum...Ham Harishchandra ghat pe rehte hain, paida bhi wahi huye the, lakadi jalan, murda jalan ye kaam karte hain ham, Ham kya hamare bhai, baap, chacha sab yahi kaam karte hai. Kahhi kisi ko jalta hua dekhi ho kya tum? Ham sala roz yahi karte hain. Subah se lekar sham tk yahi karte hain. Pata hai jab koj jala hain na, chmanda nikal ke sirf kankanach jata hai, kankaal ko baans se todana padta hai, uski raakh ko gunga jti me dhulana podta hai. Kya ve sab dekh paogi tum? Dekhna hai tum ko? Kya hua, ahhi dost ka bahana karke nahi aa saqti tum? (You wanted to know (where do I live?) …… I live at Harishchandra Ghat, was born there, burning of the woods and dead bodies is my livelihood. Not only me, my brother, father, uncle everyone does the same. Have you ever seen someone burning? We do this every day from morning till evening. Do you know when someone is burned, only the skeleton remains out of leather and it is to be broken with the bamboo stick, and ashes are to be washed in Ganga. Will you be able to see all these? Do you want to see? What happened, can’t you now come taking an excuse to meet a friend?)

Their blossoming relationship is spoiled by the revelation that the girl belongs to an upper-caste orthodox family that would vehemently oppose this marriage. Mystery of Shaalu death remains unsolved that whether this death is natural one or an honor-killing? Shaalu dies leaving a question behind for us to answer that for how long will we have to face this caste-based discrimination in our society and how many innocent lovers like Deepak and Shaalu would have to face the lethal consequences of their innocent love-affair?

In my opinion, the Dalits are not the only subject of oppression and subjugation among the caste-ridden masses of India but it cuts across the people of every region; rural as well as urban, different languages, education and social status. These are very few key films with low budgets that made on the Dalit or Marginalised issues that neither have romance nor the action, nor suspense nor song-and-dance numbers, etc. as these big budget films do have. In these movies everything is raw, straightforward and simple inspired by real incidents. These understated events, characters and their interaction against an authentic backdrop have too much dramatic potential but the directors refuse to dramatise them because of low box-office collection, no wonder how mesmerized and fascinated we are by these honest films. Caste was once a part of mainstream cinema as seen in the 40’s and majorly in the 50’s, but it gave way to class consciousness which became an integral feature of the modern Indian society with the entries of the industries. A class is more dominant in the popular cinema today as the cinema goers in the city can identify them with it.

One of the objectives of cinema as a potential medium of communication and a propagandist tool is to construct social realities. But, one can say that since the major stakes in the film industry are held by upper castes, therefore, their films often portray a very supercilious image of a hero having a sophisticated and luxurious way of life. Never the less, cinematic representations can indeed function as a medium of deconstructing caste binaries if they are allowed to grow without any restrictions. Therefore, I feel that there is a need to expand the horizon of Indian cinema in terms of content and subject matter so that an appropriate and real picture can be placed in front of the mass audience. There is an essential need in the popular cinema to create a space for the marginalized groups, and more so for marginalized women, who have remained in a vacuum by virtue of their marginality since time immemorial.

References:


