

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

The term *Dalit* is of a recent origin. Its etymology comes from the Sanskrit root *dal*, meaning *to divide*, along the social path, the term has undergone drastic changes. The *Dalits* were identified as a cluster of underprivileged people who were socially and physically excluded from the social hierarchy owing to their vocations that dealt with leather-work or butchering, cleansing of animal and human wastes, etc. and thereby, supposedly polluting the surrounding ecology. A renowned Indian economist and social reformer, Shri Bhim Rao Ambedkar revolutionised the term in the early twentieth century and has been a pioneer in uplifting the *Dalits* since then.

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-decrepit, 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 *Dharmatma* (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.

PrakashJha's *Damul* (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 whiplash. 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 *Brahminical* 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 Jhanjhar (Bihar) to take Roshani away with the help of his two friends. Since then, all the three students go missing in the mist of Jhanjhar. 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 bataogav wale baat karme me itana darte kyun hai?* (Tell me why these villagers are so afraid of talking?)

Pratap: *Ye bahut purana darr hai par ab in ki zindagi ka hissa ban chukka 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 Shabrampur, vanha*

ek gareeb Dalit pariwar rehta tha.....payi payi jod unhone ek khet khareeda, phasal huyi or thode pese aane lage. Ek din vanha se us gaav ka zamidaar gujari or bola, Ei Dalit bhot tarakki kar liye ho, kanhi ham jese zamidaar to nahi banana chahte? Dalit bhi majaak main bola ham kitani bhi mehanat kar len, Dalit se Thakur nahin ban saqte, lekin han gar bhagwan ne chaha to hamare bachche bade hokar thakur se achchi zindagi gujar karenge, Thakur ko ye majaq, majaq kam thappad se thoda jyada laga, raat janmashthami ka mela tha, jab poora parivar wapas louta or dekha to ghar, khet, gai sab jala diye gaye. Jab subah hui to baap apne poore parivar ke liye mithai lekar aaya or bola, fikar mat karo, sab theek ho jayega! Or theek ho bhi gaya, mithai mai zahar tha. Sab mar gaye lekin jese tese wo sala ladka bach gaya. Khair point being, esi kahaniyan yanha roz sunane ko miti hai. Kouf inki ragon me basa hua hai.

(Let me narrate you an interesting story. There is a village called *Shabrampur*, 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 *Janmashthami 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.)

Siddhant: *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 Jhanjhar; 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:(Vicky Kaushal as Deepak in a scene from *Masaan*)

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 *Dom* 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 ghaat pe rehte hain, paida bhi wanhi huye the, lakadi jalana, murda jalana ye kaam karte hain ham. Ham kya hamare bhai, baap, chacha sab yahi kaam karte hai. Kabhi 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 koi jal jata hai na, chamda nikal ke sirf kankal bach jata hai, kankaal ko baans se todana padta hai, uski raakh ko ganga ji me dhulana padta hai. Kya ye sab dekh paogi tum? Dekhna hai tum ko? Kya hua, abhi dost ka bahana karke nahi aa saqti tum?*

(You wanted to know (where do I live?)..... I live at *Harishchandra Ghat*, was borne 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.

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