

## **DALIT REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN CINEMA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Indian cinema is majorly dependent on its positive reception by the mass audience. The glimpse into the history of Dalits in Hindi cinema will throw up some significant answers. Indian cinema dealing with the Dalits and their marginalization should not come as a surprise. The question however, arrives on whether the films created to cater to the box office value of the film, or whether it aims to reflect a true reflection of marginalization, oppression and trounce.

The first Hindi film based on the delicate theme of untouchability “ Achhut kannya” 1936 Devika rani and Ashok Kumar Portrayed the two leads. The caste prejudice and class barriers prevent marriage between them. Indian film industry is largely in the hands of upper class-upper caste elites. In other words, these artistic spaces, such as the cinema industry, are still “Untouched” by Dalit issues, narratives or stories. Indian Cinema has either been unable to represent Dalit life & concerns on the Big screen or has willingly chosen not to do so. On the one hand, those with a traditional background of continuous Education across generations, the savarnas (Higher Castes) & on the other hand the systematic exclusion Dalits from education, has resulted in a de-facto hegemony of Cinema spaces by the Savarnas.

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This paper widely focuses upon the 1. Introduction 2. Review Literature 3. Objectives 4. Methodology 5. Education and awareness themes representing Dalit in Indian cinema 6. Availability of various opportunities for Dalit artist community in Indian cinema 7. The challenges and setbacks faced by Dalit community in the field of media and entertainment 8. Suggestions and recommendations 9. Conclusions.

Cinema is a very important tool when it comes to building, shaping, reinforcing public opinion and perception. In India, cinema and media has been used until now to perpetuate Brahmanical culture, values and it has thus led to the perpetuation of the caste-system. However, all the signs point towards the fact that the times to come will see Dalit-Bahujan cinema reign the Indian film industry. And then we can certainly hope that Indian cinema, which would now reflect the concerns, ideas, and aspirations and lived realities of a much wider spectrum of Indian society, will receive greater appreciation and recognition from those who set the benchmarks of global cinema.

Indian cinema dealing with Dalit subjects and their marginalization. Indian cinema caste as a part of Indian culture is an acceptable fact, and it's often cast away by the Bollywood film makers. The first decade after independence is worth mentioning in the history of Bollywood. They responded so positively to the modernist social outlook.

Keywords - Indian cinema, Mass audience, Caste elites, Dalits, Brahmanical culture, Marginalization, Modernist social outlook.

## 1. Introduction

India is perhaps the largest and most complex culture in the world, in terms of religion, language, community, caste and tribe. The glimpse into the history of Dalits in Indian cinema will throw up some significant answers. Indian cinema is the single largest medium of communication with the masses, and close to 12.5 million people watch films every week in cinema houses and theatres. Indian cinema dealing with the Dalits and their marginalization should not come as a surprise. Indian cinema is majorly dependent on its positive reception by the mass audience. The question however, arrives on whether the films created to cater to the box office value of the film, or whether it aims to reflect a true reflection of marginalization, oppression and trounce.

The first Hindi film based on the delicate theme of untouchability “ Achhut kannya” 1936 Devika rani and Ashok Kumar Portrayed the two leads. The caste prejudice and class barriers prevent marriage between them. Indian film industry is largely in the hands of upper class-upper caste elites. In other words, these artistic spaces, such as the cinema industry, are still “Untouched” by Dalit issues, narratives or stories. Indian Cinema has either been unable to represent Dalit life & concerns on the Big screen or has willingly chosen not to do so. On the one hand, those with a traditional background of continuous Education across generations, the savarnas (Higher Castes) & on the other hand the systematic exclusion Dalits from education, has resulted in a defector hegemony of Cinema spaces by the Savarnas.

One of the most popular forms of art is Indian drama and cinema. In the 1970s Indian Cinema developed a more socially aware and more politically orientated form of cinema, partly subsidised by public funding, which was known as Parallel Cinema – running alongside but clearly distinguished from mainstream cinema. Dalit Women's image, status and role as a social issue in society are reflected in cinema in India and have been present in even in popular Indian cinema almost right from the start.

The representation of Dalit Indian in cinema has been a major issue of debate amongst feminist film theorists in India. The complex and fascinating relationship between women and cinema has a substantial literature and some interesting work on third world feminism, which illuminates aspects of the representation of women in Indian films.

## 2. Review Literature

Mayne (1981) Here, we would like to discuss the writings specifically in the context of the Hindi film industry popularly known as Bollywood. analyzed women's cinema as having two definitions. The first would be those films made by women and the second refers to female audience in Hollywood products. She focused on the issue of the relationship between the inauthentic and the authentic portrayals of female experience as also on women's relationship traditionally and historically as filmmakers and as film consumers.

Ishtar (1987) and Lawrence of Arabia, oriental women characters are under the power of western men. Similarly, colonized women are under the protection of the colonial patriarchal figure and they are an object of spectacle for the western voyeuristic gaze. The sexual hierarchy shown in these films additionally indicates a western racial view, which occupies the centre of the narrative by white women and men. The white woman is desired by the male protagonist and the darker marginalized women appear as sexually subordinated. It should be noted that in these oriental films the traditional sexual role and gender hierarchies are marked by the domination of the western men.

Datta (2000) examined the concept of cultural identity and personalized nationality with implications on gender through media and film. The main question in her study was about how larger ideological forces and market forces impact process of gender presentation in Indian cinema.

Uberoi (1990) analyzed representation of women in Indian popular art. She has mentioned in her study that women's representation has two processes. The first is the commoditization of women and second is the tropising of the feminine within an overall cultural context that is both homogenizing and hegemonic. She noted that in many genres of presentation in social and cultural activities, women are prominent objects of male desire and potential possessions. She analyzed two main reasons for their invisibility both in society and in media.

Anu Celly (cited in Jain and Rai, 2002) has analyzed aspects of women's representation in "Indian popular cinema". Using semiotic and psychoanalytical approaches she pointed that the

image of women is not the reality in their life. On the contrary, women's functions are factors of myth, custom and ritual. She also believes that the victimization syndrome is a component of women's image and life history and usually gazes of the male protagonist control and limit women's subjectivity and sexuality in to an object. For instance even a film like Satyajit Ray's "Devi" which is seen as a kind of revolutionary and pioneering attempt to show women's image as a protagonist, there is a use of myth as a normative paradigm for the ideal construct of womanhood.

### **3. Objectives**

1. To identify the contribution of Dalit community towards Indian cinema
2. To know about the struggle and challenges faced by Dalit artist in Indian cinema

### **4. Methodology**

The data is drawn by adopting the Secondary data, is collected through the various films Observation techniques and also from various different news papers, journals, and websites and research papers and also through informal method.

### **5. Education and awareness themes representing Dalit in Indian cinema**

The Indian film industry has helped create an untrue perception of an entire community. But the social responsibility is to ensure Dalit port rail with integrity to help shift the public consciousness.

With the origin of Dalit theatre and Dalit literature which had inspired Dalit community awareness towards learning knowledge and accruing skills related activities in many states like Madhya Pradesh, U.P. Delhi, Bihar, Karnataka, and Kerala etc.

Educational awareness had influence upon many Dalit artist to move forward in their career and achievements in their personal and cinema careers and improvements. By empowering them to take up very active role in the movies questioning on racial, caste and gender discrimination which has been successfully depicted in Indian cinema.

The example the main female lead role portrayed by Dimple Kapadia in 'Rudali' is an indication the contribution to public awareness. The movies made up on Dr. Ambedkar and other celebrities and social reformers had educated the public regarding the struggle, wisdom, character, liberty, equality and justice and that through theatre shows like M.B.Chitnis 'Yugyatra' is one such play which set an best example for creating educational awareness on Dalit presentation on our society.

The rise of feminist ideas has led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in recent times. Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women, the greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society. Access to education has been one of the most pressing demands of these women's rights movements. Education enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world outside of her hearth and home but helps her to get status, positive self-esteem, and self-confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life that social structure throws at her. The important point is how cinema reflects those mentioned facts and shows woman as a victim or as an agent. The subjects of empowerment, decision making, education, rebellion, participation are the themes related to agency.

## **6. Availability of various opportunities for Dalit artist community in Indian cinema**

There have been very few mainstream Dalit stories and characters in the more than 100 years of Indian cinema. Young marathi filmmakers Nagraj manjule is one such filmmaker who had made it possible to use an opportunities to represent Dalit identity fearlessly on his sleeve through his explorations in poetry writing or cinema.

Another film maker 'Sadanand Menon' in his popular Tamil movies have lead characters from backward caste representing Dalit culture in Tamil cinema. Prakash Jha'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 popular Dalit artist's of Indian cinema like sonu nigam, late Divya Bharti, Tamil actress Archana madhavi, Brahmaadham Telugu comedian artist, Illayaraja popular music composer,

Jahny lever comedy artist in Hindi, Shilp shinde popular Kannada actor sudeap etc. Had proven their extraordinary talents through their contribution to cultural field and acting in the Indian cinema in different carious languages.

## **7. The challenges and setbacks faced by Dalit community in the field of media and entertainment**

According to national crime record bureau “ Dalit is assaulted every two hours in India. The media actually need to address atrocities against dalits. The rigid caste hierarchies needs to be questioned in the media. The responsible journalist would play effective role in representing the realities in society and would come cross with possible solutions and public awareness.

Due to dominance of upper caste in media and entertainment field dalit journalists invariably end up in the vernacular media. This is what Dalit face in media the oppression to certain extent, they have only few options to shrink themselves to fit the space media offers them or to leave the profession altogether for example dalit murasu over a span of 15 years have been published and have been wel received. The journalist organisations should make just representation as one of their demands along with other rights.

## **8. Suggestions and recommendations**

The caste system in India, which was created as a massive project over 3,000 years ago in the Hindu Varna system, is surviving and thriving even now. The system denies basic human rights to a large section of the society - one of the most important among these rights is the right to knowledge and education. Art, culture, education and cinema fall right into that knowledge category. All thanks to the social movements undertaken by the likes of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Dr.B. R. Ambedkar, and Periyar E. V Ramasamy - a section of the Indian society such as Dalits, tribals, Shudras and Ati Shudras, who were historically kept away from the bank of knowledge, experienced empowerment through education and employment through reservations and quotas. Now while this historically marginalised section experienced some empowerment and representation in government sectors, where the quota system was in place, there exists no such similar system in the arts or cinema sector. In other words, these artistic spaces, such as the cinema industry, are still “untouched” by Dalit issues, narratives or stories. Indian cinema has

either been unable to represent Dalit life and concerns on the big screen or has willingly chosen not to do so.

On the one hand, there are the savarnas (Higher Castes), those with a traditional background of continuous education across generations, and on the other hand, the systematic exclusion of Dalits from education has resulted in a de-facto hegemony of cinema spaces by the savarnas. That has naturally led to Indian Cinema being 'casteist' at its worst and 'caste-blind' at the least. The Indian Cinema industry has now completed 100 Years - creating lakhs of films. But in this 100-year-history, on how many instances can you recount where the lead actor/ actress has been portrayed as a Dalit character? It must be admitted that some movies, in the 'Parallel Cinema Movement', which was largely inspired by the Left-Marxist thought, do portray Dalit characters as central figures in their films, on some occasions.

But these Dalit characters are based on Harijan understanding of scheduled castes, coming from a Gandhian framework, instead of 'Dalit' understanding, coming from a Phule-Ambedkarite perspective. An example of this kind of film is 'Achyut Kanya'. An overwhelming number of Indian films, at their core, portray urban and savarna sensibilities, which then leads to the glorification of Brahmanical culture and values through the medium of films. The same attempt is made in Marathi films - the perfect examples are the films made by Umesh Kulkarni and Subodh Bhave. The upper class and upper caste Indian film-makers have been unsuccessful to expand their cinematic imagination beyond their own privileged social realities. That is one major reason why Indian Cinema is not considered amongst the world's best.

Sometime back, the 'The Hindu' had published a report on 'Hindi Cinema and Dalit Representation'. According to this report, in the Bollywood so-called progressive secular film industry, between the years 2013 to 2015, 300 films were made, but only 5 of them had Dalit heroes or heroines in them. Another report published by 'Birmingham City University United Kingdom' in 2017 raised important questions regarding the representation of backward classes in the Indian film industry by pointing out that the share of Dalit and Bahujan ( SC,ST,OBC) population in India is 85%, but their representation in the film is only 0.1%.



On the whole, Indian film industry is largely in the hands of upper caste, upper class elites from big cities. But having said that, today there are certain films/filmmakers who not only portray Dalit character prominently in their films, but also portray Dalit concerns through the Phule-Ambedkarite-Periyar's ideological perspective, and not through Gandhian-Harijan lenses. Three most prominent filmmakers on this list would have to be Nagraj Manjule of Marathi film industry, Pa.Ranjith of Tamil film industry and Neeraj Ghaywan of Hindi film industry (Bollywood). These three have almost single-handedly created a space for the articulation of Dalit concerns in India's elite film industry.

Cinema is a very important tool when it comes to building, shaping, reinforcing public opinion and perception. In India, cinema and media has been used until now to perpetuate Brahmanical culture, values and it has thus led to the perpetuation of the caste-system. However, all the signs point towards the fact that the times to come will see Dalit-Bahujan cinema reign the Indian film industry. And then we can certainly hope that Indian cinema, which would now reflect the concerns, ideas, and aspirations and lived realities of a much wider spectrum of Indian society, will receive greater appreciation and recognition from those who set the benchmarks of global cinema.

## **9. Conclusions**

The Dalit Panther movement drew inspiration from the Black Panther movement in the USA, and promised a great change in not just Marathi literature and arts, but Indian literature and arts as well. This change indirectly affected the Indian cinema, a change which in order to be understood, must be related with the idea of the subaltern.

After India's independence in 1947, the filmmakers decided to take a bold step and bring about a so-called modernist outlook into their films. The main theme of movies such as 'Awara', released in 1981, was that of rich versus poor. The wealthy and affluent were shown to be indifferent to the pains of the less fortunate, whereas the people stricken with poverty and hunger were depicted to have a heart of gold. Although many might not consider this as a strict portrayal of casteist behaviour, many of the poor personnel were shown to belong to a lower caste. Other films following this line of thought were 'Ganga Jamuna' (1961) and 'Kala Bazar' (1960).

As Bollywood proceeded to understand and educate their audiences through the medium of their films, regional cinema had also begun to imbibe such ideas from their larger counterpart. Malayalam cinema had cast the first Dalit woman as the lead, whose name was Rosy, and the movie 'Neelakkuyil' dealt with the conditions of the lower castes. Films such as 'Kammattippadam' and 'Kismath' illustrated the dilemmas faced by the Pulaya community and inter-religion marriage respectively, the latter of which outlined the problems faced by a Muslim boy and his love for a Dalit woman.

The social questions of feudal exploitation, caste violence and Dalit repression gathered remarkable momentum. In this realm, however, even the 'realistic cinema', which is celebrated for its actual narratives and commitment towards presenting a naked truth to the audience, contented mainly in showcasing the superficial populist stereo-types of the marginalised lives and hardly entered into the core debate of social realities.

In the postmodern context, the public discourses and social ideas were remained to provide meaning and substance to the obscure peripheral subjects. The qualitative participation of people from the margins into the mainstream discourses significantly transformed the conventional values of the collective life and also helped in building a more secular and tolerant milieu. Hence, in contemporary times, especially in the Hollywood cinema, women, coloured men, queer subjects, physically challenged individuals have gathered prime locations and capacity to emerge as distinct and independent characters of film narratives and thus have helped in the democratisation of cinema in a considerably positive way. However, such democratic credentials are not visibly present in the Indian cinema.

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