

## **The Representation of Dalit Prejudice in Indian Cinema – A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

Caste is deeply ingrained in Indian social structure, religious beliefs, and philosophy. Even in the post-colonial period, Dalits could not escape caste-based discrimination. Indian movies have also played a significant role in perpetuating Brahminic culture, values, and ideologies, prolonging the caste system. This study uses a case-based approach from a horizontal perspective to examine the portrayal of Dalit life and discrimination in selected Indian movies by establishing the relationship between castes and their impact on Indian cinema. The study found that the cinematic experience is significantly influenced by caste in multiple ways and at various stages, and caste-based movies psychologically impact audiences.

**Keywords:** Dalit Life, Discrimination, Indian Cinema, Caste-based Cinema.

### **Introduction**

Since ancient times, the social structure of India has been divided according to the caste-based hierarchy system. Hindu ideology insists on a birth-based caste system. It divides people according to a quadruple caste system which follows the hierarchy of the Brahmin (the priests), Kshyitriya (the warriors), Vashya (the trading caste), and Sudra (the servants). Dalits are the marginalized people of society and are not even integrated into the traditional social structure (Viduthalai et al., 2017). Dalits are considered below all other castes in the caste hierarchy. The caste system is deeply rooted in religious beliefs and keeps the system alive. People have been subjected to caste-based discrimination for almost 20 centuries, and even now, in the post-colonial period, Indian society could not escape it. The post-colonial period perpetuated the caste system and slowly infiltrated Indian cinema.

Cinema is a powerful tool for establishing, shaping, and strengthening public opinions and perceptions (Greenwood & Long, 2014). In India, movies and media have always been used to perpetuate Brahminic culture, values,

and ideologies, prolonging the caste system (Vijayalakshmi & Narayanaswamy, 2019). However, very few Indian films have been released in the last decade, with a particular focus on raising the issue of Dalit discrimination by portraying the lives of Dalits; it is certainly hoped that the Indian film industry will take more steps in the future to reflect people's concerns, ideas, values, aspirations, and the realities of life in wider Indian society. This will receive greater appreciation and recognition from global film benchmarks.

This study examines the portrayal of Dalit life and discrimination in Indian movies, specifically *Jai Bhim Comrade*, *Bawandar*, *Masaan*, *Article 15*, and *Jhund*. Even after seventy-five years of Indian cinema, the relationship between caste and cinema remains mysterious and needs to be decoded. Moreover, the relationship between castes and their impact on various stages of moviemaking also needs an investigation.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Influence of Cinema**

Dalit cinema can be traced back to an extension of Dalit literature. As Greenwood & Long (2014) observed, cinema plays a vital role in the social and emotional development of adolescents and young adults. The life lessons, social relationships, and character relationships in the movie are the things that impress the audience the most. Movies can have not only a positive impact but also a negative impact on self-expression.

Generally, what a movie offers depends significantly on the audience's attitude.

The influence of cinema is so enormous that most countries see mass media as a tool for destroying society (Liu, 1966). Meanwhile, the psychological impact of movies must be noticed. People who watch more romantic movies are found to spend more time fantasizing about marriages and romantic relationships (Galloway et al., 2015). Movies play an unavoidable role in creating expectations of reality, as they have the potential to set standards for what people expect from real life (Galloway et al., 2015). Movies create an emotionally anchored critique and utopian view of the world and life (Axelson, 2017).

When it comes to Dalit movies, due to the various socioeconomic issues of Dalits, these must be handled with extra caution. The degrading treatment of black people in the US may be related to the treatment of Dalits in the Indian context. The study by Teahan & Podany (1974) shows that movies that portray black people as successful have different effects on black youth of higher and lower socioeconomic status. Black people with higher socioeconomic standards responded more positively to white people (compared to higher castes in India), while black people with lower socioeconomic standards did the opposite. If pride in caste/ race increases, it can often lead to negative attitudes towards white people (upper class). Anti-white attitudes may be temporary and

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may be the first step toward improving black people's positive self-concept.

Raj et al. (2016) observed that despite the good intentions of non-Dalit filmmakers, Dalit representation in films could become a more serious issue. This raises the suspicion of the correct and authentic perspective. Dalits are often portrayed as victims or helpless people who allow the protagonist to display heroism. The Dalit narrative condemns such victimization of Dalits.

### **Review of Research Studies**

Singh & Azeez (2021) conducted a critical study of Indian cinema to find specific answers to the following research questions: (i) how is the caste system portrayed? (ii) What are mainstream movies' explicit or default caste indicators? Moreover, (iii) how can caste-based assumptions be supported or validated? Based on an analysis of the 22 identified movies, the protagonists' surnames in most movies were found to be symbolic of the dominant caste. In contrast, the portrayals of characters were based on traditional caste jobs. Furthermore, this depiction reinforces and upholds the ideal of the dominant caste. Mainstream movies rarely depict the stories of Dalits and marginalized groups. Subalterns attached to them are deliberately disguised and treated in a way that is not worthy of a movie depiction.

In the research paper "From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit Representations in Popular Hindi Cinema," Vishal Chauhan (2019) argues

that Dalit stereotypes and regressive representations align with mainstream culture. Popular Hindi movies portray Dalits as marginalized, meek, neglected, submissive, and under-confident. However, Dalits' ongoing struggle with caste oppression is often overlooked in Indian movie narratives. The study argues that such representations are related to cultural politics and discourses of power.

Suraj Yengde analyzes the relationship between caste and caste narrative that leads to apparent caste sensitivity in his research paper titled "Dalit Cinema (2018)" and in his book "Caste Matters (2019)". His research examines how social interactions in films reflect mainstream community attitudes to issues debated in Indian society and argues that Dalit representation is limited to victims. As a Dalit scholar, he opens up about what it means to be a "Dalit" and how the upper castes continue to maintain and benefit from this caste-based hierarchy but rarely admit it.

Rakesh Patel (2018), in his paper titled "Unconventional Bollywood: Constructing Cinema of Caste Pride," claims that the role of Dalits in Indian society is still marginalized. They are treated pitifully because they are considered undervalued. Patel (2018) observes that South Indian movies have initiated screening voice stories from the bottom of society to combat a system based on discrimination, brutality, suffering, and deprivation. The protagonists of these films do not need any upper caste to free society from

thousands of years of discrimination and caste dynamics. Moreover, Hindi movies portray caste issues in an idealistic form and rely on changing mindsets to eliminate caste hatred. The author also points out that Hindi movies are gradually moving towards life experience screening, which is bound to provide a perspective to those often silenced in mainstream Hindi movies.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study is entirely based on secondary data collected through various movies, observational techniques, and informally from various newspaper articles, journals, research papers, and websites. Ana (2021) recommends the use of the case study methodology in studies related to the investigation of the "why" and "how" of social issues, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are ambiguous. In this study, the theme focuses on a distinct caste phenomenon that is difficult to trace and define. Furthermore, caste is a complex, inherent, and highly delicate social issue. Therefore, the case study methodology is evident in the current study.

Furthermore, the case study methodology can be used from two different perspectives, horizontally and vertically. The horizontal perspective analyzes multiple events based on a single theme, while the vertical perspective analyzes multiple themes from a single event. The study opts to take a horizontal perspective, using a few movies as case examples to illustrate the

phenomenon of portraying the lives of Dalits in Indian society.

### **Outlook of Selected Movies**

#### ***Jai Bhim Comrade***

Directed by Anand Patwardhan, "Jai Bhim Comrade" dissects the seemingly endless nationwide struggle of Dalits and documents the perpetual caste violence endured by Dalits. The documentary begins with introspection on Vilas Ghogre (a Dalit activist who committed suicide following the horrific massacre of ten Dalits by Mumbai police while peacefully protesting the desecration of the Ambedkar statue in Mumbai) and his poetry and music, which he used as tools of resistance. The movie depicts the entrenched caste system in India and the discriminatory notions embedded in the fabric of this independent nation, arguing that egalitarianism and social mobility are words that have no real meaning today.

#### ***Bawandar***

Directed by Jag Mundhra, "Bawandar" is based on the true story of a woman who defied all odds and triumphed. Saanvri Devi is an untouchable who has been repeatedly beaten and gang-raped by upper cast members for her involvement in a campaign to eradicate the custom of child marriage. This is a unique portrayal that several family members raping a lower-caste woman. In handing down the judgment, the court mentioned that such crimes could not be committed in the presence of the family and acquitted them. It shows the mindsets and biases

that are ingrained in our system. The movie portrayed the plight of the rape victim and the procedural issues of justice for them experiencing various physical, psychological, and social issues.

### ***Masaan***

Directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, *Masaan* recounts the experiences of two individuals whose desires and aspirations transcended the barriers imposed on them by caste-based traditions. The movie begins with the story of the protagonist Devi (a Brahmin girl) and her lover Piyush (a Bania boy). Fearing the consequences that would have to be faced, Piyush committed suicide. Subsequently, the story turns to Deepak, a Dalit who helped his father cremate the dead body in the Varanasi Ghats. Deepak fell in love with a high caste girl who had returned from a religious trip dead. Tracing the intersection of identity and social barriers inexplicably, *Masaan* successfully charts the grieving process both Devi and Deepak are forced to go through. The emotional turmoil and unavoidable expectations imposed on the pair are evocatively represented in the film as it highlights real life and the ongoing fear of prosecution and lack of freedom.

### ***Article 15***

Article 15 of the Indian Constitution is a fundamental right that prohibits discrimination on many grounds, including caste. Despite constitutional guarantees, caste-based crime has risen by 5%, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (2018),

which shows the grim reality of the situation of Dalits in the country. Directed by Anubhav Sinha, this mainstream Hindi movie, *Article 15*, confronts that horror head-on, exposing the disturbing reality of the caste system with admirable ambition. Inspired by the 2014 Badaun gang rape and murder of two minor girls, both Dalits, the movie features Ayushmann Khurrana as an upright IPS officer investigating the case. He can be seen working hard to address the village's widespread caste discrimination and social inequality.

### ***Jhund***

*Directed by Nagraj Popatrao Manjule, the movie Jhund depicts a revolutionary and traditionally subservient narrative of the historically oppressed social class. The movie confronts caste hierarchies and other forms of social inequality and persistent discrimination with an anti-caste lens and aesthetic. It depicts the unbearable grief of a young man from an oppressed caste who is denied opportunities because of a hierarchy designed to deprive marginalized people of the treatment of humanity. It depicts the story of the protagonist, Vijay, who tries to change the lives of young people in the oppressed communities of the slums in Nagpur by giving them hope through sports. The sport slowly changed their lives, freeing them from violence, crime, and drugs, giving them the hope of becoming better people and creating a better future.*

## Conclusion

Caste is a deeply ingrained concept in the context of Indian social philosophy, and it is almost inextricably linked to everyday behavior subtly. In addition to being a source of commerce and entertainment, the Indian film industry is also an ideological factory, so understanding the relationship between caste and cinema is crucial. The cinematic experience is heavily influenced by caste. Caste is a way of life whose impact is profound and challenging to quantify. Because caste is deeply ingrained in an individual's psyche and experiences vary from individual to individual, broad descriptions of caste and its influence on individuals are erroneous for larger groups.

As can be seen from the current case study, caste also significantly affects movies in multiple ways and at multiple stages, from the plot idea's development to the protagonist's choice and even how the movie is marketed and appreciated by audiences. However, there is no denying that caste has external and internal influences on decision-making. Such decisions are sometimes made consciously and in more subtle and unconscious ways. Thus, caste-based movies have a psychological impact on the way people watch and create movies.

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