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**From Screen to Society: Representations of Poverty and Caste Discrimination  
in *Lagaan*, *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story* and *Peepli Live***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the portrayals of caste inequality and poverty in India in the films *Lagaan*, *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story*, and *Peepli Live*. The film *Lagaan* portrays the colonial exploitation of lower castes, highlighting social and economic marginalisation. *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story* emphasises social barriers and marginalisation while examining caste dynamics in religious contexts. *Peepli Live* exposes the dehumanising impacts of caste and poverty as they are exploited by the media and political power. Collectively, these films demand social contemplation on the effects of caste prejudice on social justice and economic equality in contemporary India and critique systemic inequalities.

**Keywords:** portrayal, inequality, poverty, Society, marginalization.

**Introduction**

Throughout history, cinema has served as more than just a source of entertainment. It has served as a catalyst for social transformation by highlighting concerns such as poverty and caste inequality through appealing storytelling. Through the portrayal of many characters facing challenges and achieving success, films elicit empathy and encourage discussions about structural injustices. Their platform serves to magnify the voices of marginalised individuals and stimulate self-reflection on society's ideals and disparities. Prior to exploring the intricate aspects of poverty and casteism in cinema, it is important to gain a clear understanding of the true nature and implications of poverty and casteism.

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### **Definition of Poverty**

The term “poverty” originates from the ancient Norman French word “poverté” (Modern French: *pauvreté*), and from the Latin word “*paupertās*” which is derived from “*pauper*” meaning poor (Skeat 2005). The World Bank defines poverty as –

Poverty is pronounced deprivation in well-being, and comprises many dimensions. It includes low incomes and the inability to acquire the basic goods and services necessary for survival with dignity. Poverty also encompasses low levels of health and education, poor access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate physical security, lack of voice, and insufficient capacity and opportunity to better one’s life. (“Wayback Machine”)

Thus, we can infer that poverty indicates a condition in which a person fails to maintain a living standard adequate for his physical and mental efficiency. Poverty in India is present in both urban and rural sectors. Rural poverty occurs when lack of irrigational facilities for agriculture leads to crop failure and low agricultural productivity forcing poor farmers in the debt traps. Urban poverty on the other hand occurs when the villagers migrate from villages to towns or cities. In this process, they even lose the open space or habitat they had in villages albeit without food and other basic amenities. In both the cases poverty leads to malnutrition, long term health problems, unhygienic living conditions, injustice to women, children and social ill treatment by certain upper sections of the society.

### **Caste System in India**

Caste System in India is a social custom with its origins (a shrouded belief), at some two thousand years ago. Initially caste of a person was decided on the basis of a person’s work, but gradually it became hereditary. Each person was born into an unalterable caste or social status. The four primary castes are: Brahmin - the priests; Kshatriya - the warriors and nobility; Vaisya -the farmers, traders and artisans; and Shudra - the tenant farmers and servants (Hiltebeitel 2011). Some people were born outside of (and below) the caste system. They were called “untouchables.” The four castes developed out of necessity, for with the evolution of society it was no longer possible for the tiller of the soil to assume the functions of priest, warrior, merchant, and artisan all rolled in one. Swami Vivekananda in the book, *Swami Vivekananda On India and Her Problems*, says:

Caste is a very good thing. Caste is the plan we want to follow. What caste really is, not one in a million understands. There is no country in the world

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without caste. Caste is based throughout on that principle. The plan in India is to make everybody Brahmana, the Brahmana being the ideal of humanity. If you read the history of India you will find that attempts have always been made to raise the lower classes. Many are the classes that have been raised. Many more will follow till the whole will become Brahmana. That is the plan. (p. 76)

But at the same time he is against the injustices committed on the lower caste people due to the caste system. He says:

Caste is good. That is only natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups, and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on the head. If you teach Vedanta to the fisherman, he will say, "I am as good a man as you, I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have the same God in me, as you have in you." And that is what we want, no privilege for anyone, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the Divine is within, and everyone will work out his own salvation. The days of exclusive privileges and exclusive claims are gone, gone for ever from the soil of India. (p. 80)

Swami Vivekananda argues in this excerpt that caste divisions are unavoidable but should not lead to privileges. He promotes equality and universal spiritual understanding, believing that everyone can achieve spiritual realisation. Vivekananda promotes spiritual fulfilment for all and the abolition of discrimination in India.

### **Portrayal of Caste and Social Injustice in Indian Cinema**

Cinema is the reflection of popular trends and times. Indian cinema is a steady reminder of one's status and place in the hierarchy of India's caste system. Films remind the viewers of the dangers associated with opposing the established authority and viewers tend to take it as a warning against conflicting with them. The first hindi film on caste system was *Achhut Kanya* (1936). The film deals with the unhappy love affair between Kasturi (Devika Rani), a Harijan and Pratap (Ashok Kumar), a Brahmin. As rumour about their love spreads, people of both the castes engage in mob violence to maintain a traditional oppressive morality. When both the protagonists are about to marry spouses selected by their parents, rumour and maliciousness again intervenes their marriages and causes their deaths under the wheels of an onrushing train of fate. Therefore, it is evident that cinema serves as a

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mirror for both the inequities inherent in the caste system and the repercussions of defying it. In the 1950s, as neorealism became a trend, with Satyajit Ray as the spearhead, films such as *Do Bigha Zamin* (directed by Bimal Roy, 1953) and *Pather Panchali* (directed by Satyajit Ray, 1955) were released. In the 1960s films of Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak created a stir among the audience. The decades that followed after this period, have quite a number of films showcasing the rigid Indian caste system and the poverty and injustices associated with the lower and deprived castes. Following are some case studies of the unprivileged classes.

### **Lagaan (2001)**

*Lagaan* tells the story of a small village of Champaner in Northern India during the Victorian period of the India's colonial British Raj and its struggle with the British over the lagaan, an annual land tax that is paid to the British consisting of a portion of the village crops. The poor villagers try to persuade Captain Russell, the British army captain in charge of Champaner to reduce the taxes due to poor agricultural produce. The Captain instead offers a wager to the villagers that if they can beat the British officers in a game of cricket, then no taxes would be levied on them for three consecutive years. But if the British officers win the game then the villagers must pay triple the amount of the lagaan at the end of the season. Now the villagers under the leadership of Bhuvan (Aamir Khan) try to learn the alien game. But their efforts are properly channelized only under the guidance of Captain Russell's sister, Catherine who has a soft corner for Bhuvan and also sympathizes with the villagers' miserable condition. Catherine teaches the rules of the game to Bhuvan and his teammates and the team gets ready for the final game.

Initially the Britishers take the lead in the match and the morale of Bhuvan's teammates and the whole village goes down. But in the end due to Bhuvan's brilliant performance and a stroke of good luck, Bhuvan's team wins by default. At the same time a sudden rainstorm erupts and ends the drought in that province. Bhuvan's defeat of the British team leads to the disbanding of the cantonment stationed there. Russell pays the taxes of the whole province and is transferred to Central Africa. The caste angle in the film can be seen when the character of Kachra (an untouchable) is introduced in the film. While practising the game one day, the ball goes away from the reach of the players and rolls before Kachra, a sweeper. Bhuvan asks Kachra to throw the ball back. A petrified Kachra, with a small broom in his right hand, his left hand handicapped, is sweating. When Bhuvan insists, then Kachra throws the ball with his disabled left hand. The ball spins wildly. Bhuvan considers Kachra ideal for

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being the eleventh man they have been looking for. But as expected, the entire village from mukhiya (chief) to vaid (doctor) to jyotish (astrologer) opposes the move to induct an achhut (untouchable). They say that Bhuvan can play the cricket game with the British to get tax relaxation, but he and his team shouldn't commit dharam-bhrasht (sacrilege) by introducing an untouchable in their team.

Therefore, it is evident that when the British perpetrate acts of injustice against the Indians, deeming them to be of a lower race and social status, the Indians are prepared to engage in combat against the British. But when the higher caste Indians commit injustices on the dalits and untouchables, it is considered as justified and in accordance with the rules of religion. Surprisingly, while Kachra poses a problem, being coached in the game by a white woman (Elizabeth), who belongs to a different religion, is not problematic. Bhuvan then assumes the reformer's role and says even Bhagwan Ram had eaten the fore-bitten fruit of Sabari and that he had condemned untouchability. According to Tamil filmmaker Rajiv Menon and cricket historian Majumdar (EPW), *Lagaan* is supposed to herald the arrival of the Dalit in Hindi cinema ("Cricket, Lagaan, and Caste"). Kachra is a dalit portrayed in a good light though with a physical and social disability and Bhuvan, a Hindu is portrayed as a person with good physique and having a social acceptance because of his high caste. Both the characters symbolize the status of the two castes they represent. Kachra is representative of how mainstream society, histories, and nationalisms have dealt with Dalits. Before he is included in the cricket team, he is not asked whether he really wants to play or not. Here we can see that the subaltern cannot speak. Kachra has to just follow Bhuvan, a high caste Hindu's wishes which reflects the condition of the dalits and other subalterns in our country.

### ***Banaras, A Mystic Love Story (2006)***

In this film, Urmila Matondkar plays Shwetambari, a rich brahmin's daughter who falls in love with an orphan, Sohan (Ashmit Patel) who is also her music teacher. Her caste conscious parents initially are reluctant to agree for the proposal. But when they learn that Sohan had no blood relation with Dadi, a sweeper with whom he stayed, they agree to the marriage of their daughter, with Sohan. Shortly before the marriage takes place, Shwetambri's life is turned upside down when she is informed Soham has been killed. In her grief, she loses her mind and becomes a loner. She then leaves for Boston for psychiatric treatment. After she gets well, she becomes a philosopher and religious preacher. Seventeen years later, Shwetambari is informed that her father, Mahendrenath (Raj Babbar) is in his deathbed and wishing to see her.

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Shwetambari at first is in a dilemma whether or not she should meet her ailing father because a return to Banaras would remind her of the unpleasant inter-caste liaison she had in the past. But later on she decides to meet her father and returns to Banaras. Back at home she comes face to face with the bitter truth of Sohan's death. Sohan was murdered by Gayatri Devi (Dimple Kapadia) in order to prevent her daughter from marrying a lower caste boy. Gayatri believed in caste discrimination and rigidly practiced the customs of her caste. She felt that Soham being a lower caste boy, could not be allowed to be in love with Shwetambari. Soham could not be allowed to live. He had to die. Here Gayatri Devi's actions symbolize the honor killings which take place in many parts of India. An honor killing is the homicide of a member of a family or social group by other members, due to the belief of the perpetrators that the victim has brought dishonor upon the family or community. Honor killings are directed mostly against women and girls, but have been extended to men. Since Sohan had committed the crime of falling in love with a higher caste girl, Shwetambari, Gayatri Devi felt he had brought dishonor to her family so he deserved to die. But at the end of the film, we find how Gayatri Devi realizes her wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness from her daughter who had decided to lead a solitary life throughout her life.

***Peepli Live* (2010)**

The story of *Peepli Live* revolves around two poor farmers, Natha and Budhia, who face losing their agricultural land over an unpaid bank loan. Natha (Omkar Das Manikpuri) and Budhia (Raghuvir Yadav) are two poor brothers who live in the village named Peepli. Other members of the family are Budhia's wife, Dhaniya (Shalini Vatsa) and his ailing mother, Amma (Farookh Zafar), who spends most of her time lying down and screaming at Natha and Dhaniya. Being helpless and frustrated, they seek help from an indifferent local politician, who scornfully suggests they commit suicide to benefit from a government program that provides a compensation of one lakh to the families of indebted deceased farmers. As a means of survival Budhia convinces Natha to commit suicide and their conversation is overheard by Rakesh, a local reporter. This news is then passed on to the newspapers and a big English news channel reporter, Nandita Malik (Malaika Shenoy) by Rakesh. With by-elections round the corner, the news creates a panic among the ruling party (Samman Party) local political leaders and the Chief Minister of Mukhya Pradesh, Ram Babu Yadav (Vishal O. Sharma) who, along with Federal Agriculture Minister, Saleem Kidwai (Naseeruddin Shah), believes in the industrialization of rural areas.

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On the other hand, the opposition party, Apna Dal, finds the news as a great opportunity to attack the ruling party on the grounds that it is blind towards the desperate poverty which surrounds the entire state and forces farmers to commit suicides. As the news is leaked to the media, Bhai Thakur, the local politician has the police involved, and even has his goons beat up Natha and Budhia, while the District Collector and the Chief Minister present Nathadas with a water pump and a Colour TV respectively and hope that the Ministry of Agriculture comes with a solution. These gifts turn up to be useless to the Manikpuri family and the hand pump with no provisions of its set up, lies useless in their compound with only the children to play with it. Even the government officials go through the various garibi-hatao (remove poverty) schemes to find out ways of preventing Natha from committing suicide. But they discover that there is not a single scheme which will ensure complete eradication of poverty. As time passes Natha is reluctant to die but is helpless because of the media frenzy around his expected suicide.

Nandita asks Rakesh to arrange an interview of her with Natha, but Rakesh is compassionate towards Natha. Then Nandita tells him that their job is to bring sensational news to the people first, so that their TRPs can rise. One TV journalist, in a desperate search for a new angle, tries to examine Natha's faeces to determine his emotional state. But nobody seems to care how Natha really feels. Meanwhile the Sammaan Party realize that if Natha commits suicide, they will lose the elections. The rural headmen secretly abduct Natha and hold to ransom for money from the opposition. But Rakesh finds out that Natha is held captive in Peepli barn and tries to help him. A chaotic situation prevails as the villagers, the politicians and the media reporters madly search for Natha. Then a spillage from a Petromax lamp sets fire to the barn which explodes and kills Rakesh. The government officials think that the charred body is of Natha and refuse to pay the compensation by declaring the death to be accidental. Consequently, the Manikpuri family loses their land to the bank. In the end we find Natha is alive and working as a daily laborer at a construction factory in Gurgaon. He does not dare to go back to his village for fear of being pressurized to commit suicide.

Thus, we can see that the film is a black comedy which satirizes the vote-hungry politicians and the TRP thirsty channel heads and their reporters who don't think twice before stooping to the lowest levels to grab audience's attention. The film showcases how the true worth of a life is always ignored amidst the media circus. The film also takes us straight into the heart of rural India, into the lives of BPL (Below

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Poverty Line) people and their problems. The film is a social comment on the high rate of farmers' suicides in India occurring due to low agricultural produce in the event of poor rainfall. The failure of the monsoons leads to series of droughts, lack of better prices, exploitation by Middlemen and thus a series of suicides are committed by farmers across India. According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau, there were 296,438 cases of farmer suicides recorded between 1995 and 2014. However, in the period between 2014 and 2022, the number decreased to 100,474. In the year 2022, a combined total of 11,290 individuals engaged in the agriculture industry in India, consisting of 5,207 farmers and 6,083 agricultural labourers, tragically took their own lives. These suicides accounted for 6.6% of the overall number of people who died by suicide in the country ("One Farmer/Farm Labourer Dies by Suicide Every Hour in India: NCRB Data"). The government tries to underplay the cases of farmer deaths and intellectual supporters of the farmers prefer to inflate them. *Peepli Live* is an attempt to create an awareness about the plight of such poor farmers, their struggle and the total insensitivity of the political class towards real people, real problems, real solutions for a real India. Film critic Nikhat Kazmi said, "By and large, *Peepli (Live)* is a lively and living document on the 'other' India, that lives beyond the neon lights and the cruising metros. Another ace up Aamir Khan's sleeve!" (HT Correspondent)

### Conclusion

Thus, we can see that the films *Lagaan*, *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story*, and *Peepli Live* act as potent reflections of the widespread problems of poverty and caste inequality in Indian society. These films portray the difficult experiences of marginalised populations and also analyse the systemic inequities that sustain economic inequalities and social exclusion based on caste. The film *Lagaan* depicts the historical injustices and economic exploitation that occurred during colonial rule, emphasising the persistent disparities that are based on the caste structure. *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story* explores caste biases within religious settings, exposing the obstacles that hinder social advancement and economic prospects for individuals belonging to lower castes. *Peepli Live* is a satirical critique of how poverty and caste identities are turned into commodities in the media and politics. It reveals the dehumanising consequences of sensationalism and political manipulation. These films highlight the pressing need for deep self-reflection in society and collective actions to dismantle caste-based prejudice in order to achieve true social justice and economic fairness in present-day India.



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