

**Reflection of the Deprived and Exploited in Indian Cinema**  
**Prof. Dr. Vaishali Bhanudas Aher**

*Dept. of English, Babuji Avhad Mahavidyalaya, Pathardi, (M.S.) India*

**Abstract**

Indian cinema has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting the struggles of the deprived and exploited. From the early days of parallel cinema to contemporary mainstream films, the portrayal of marginalized communities has evolved, highlighting economic disparity, caste discrimination, gender inequality, and labor exploitation. This paper analyses the representation of the underprivileged in Indian films, examining how cinema has influenced public perception, shaped narratives of resistance, and contributed to social discourse. Through an exploration of key films and their impact, this research investigates the extent to which Indian cinema has served as a tool for awareness and change.

**Keywords:** Indian cinema, marginalized communities, exploitation, social inequality, caste, labor, gender discrimination, realism, Bollywood, parallel cinema

**Introduction:**

Indian cinema has played a crucial role in portraying the social realities of the country, including the discrimination, oppression, and economic disparities faced by marginalized communities. Since its inception, Indian films have mirrored the rigid caste system, class divides, gender inequalities, and labour exploitation that have plagued society. While some films have exposed these harsh truths and challenged societal norms, others have reinforced stereotypes, often portraying marginalized characters in a negative or submissive light.

One of the earliest ways caste discriminations was depicted in cinema was through the portrayal of Dalits and lower-caste characters as victims of systemic oppression. In many films, these characters were either shown as helpless individuals struggling for dignity (*Sadgati*, *Achhut Kanya*) or as rebels rising against injustice (*Bandit Queen*, *Pa Ranjith's Kaala*). However, mainstream Bollywood often perpetuated caste biases by sidelining lower-caste characters or reducing them to

comic relief, servants, or villains. Even in films that addressed social issues, the protagonists were frequently upper-caste saviours, reinforcing the power hierarchy rather than challenging it (*Article 15*).

Economic disparities have also been a central theme in Indian cinema, especially in the works of filmmakers like Bimal Roy and Satyajit Ray. Films such as *Do Bigha Zamin* and *Pather Panchali* depicted the struggles of landless farmers and poverty-stricken families trying to survive in an unforgiving socio-economic system. These movies highlighted the harsh realities of feudalism, industrialization, and rural-to-urban migration, showcasing how the poor were often exploited by landlords, moneylenders, and employers.

Labor exploitation has been another recurring issue, particularly in films dealing with industrialization and urban poverty. Movies like *Gaman* (1978) and *Mazdoor* (1983) focused on the lives of migrant labourer who left their villages in search of work, only to be subjected to brutal working conditions and social alienation. In more recent years, films like *Jai Bhim*

(2021) have brought attention to police brutality against marginalized communities, further exposing the systemic injustice they face.

Women, especially those from lower castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have been depicted as the most vulnerable to exploitation in Indian cinema. Films like *Bandit Queen* and *Mandi* showcased the oppression of women who suffered both caste and gender-based discrimination, often at the hands of powerful men in society. On the other hand, mainstream Bollywood has frequently romanticized or ignored these struggles, presenting an unrealistic picture of women's empowerment while continuing to objectify and stereotype them.

Despite these portrayals, Indian cinema has often struggled with genuine representation. While parallel and independent cinema has been instrumental in highlighting the plight of the deprived and exploited, mainstream Bollywood has frequently capitalized on these themes without fully addressing the root causes of oppression. This research paper aims to analyse how Indian films have depicted discrimination, caste abuse, and economic disparities, examining whether cinema has contributed to social awareness or simply commodified the struggles of marginalized communities.

### Aims and Objective:

The primary objective of this study is to:

- Examine the representation of the deprived and exploited in Indian cinema.
- Analyse the evolution of these portrayals over time.
- Assess the impact of such films on public consciousness and policy changes.

- Identify the role of filmmakers in shaping narratives around social issues.
- Explore whether mainstream cinema effectively represents marginalized voices or merely capitalizes on their struggles.

### Hypothesis:

Indian cinema has played a dual role in representing the deprived and exploited sections of society. While some films have genuinely highlighted issues of caste oppression, economic disparity, labor exploitation, and gender-based discrimination, others have either misrepresented or commodified these struggles for commercial gain.

This research hypothesizes that:

**1. Parallel and Independent Cinema vs. Mainstream Bollywood** – Parallel and independent cinema has been more effective in realistically portraying the lives of marginalized communities, whereas mainstream Bollywood has often diluted or sensationalized these issues to appeal to mass audiences.

**2. Caste and Social Hierarchy Representation** – Indian films have historically been biased in their depiction of caste struggles, often portraying Dalits and lower-caste individuals through the lens of upper-caste filmmakers, leading to an incomplete or skewed narrative.

**3. Economic Disparities in Cinema** – While early Indian cinema realistically depicted poverty (*Do Bigha Zamin*, *Pathar Panchali*), contemporary mainstream cinema often romanticizes the rags-to-riches trope rather than critically examining economic inequality.

**4. Labor and Migrant Exploitation** – Films addressing labor issues have primarily been limited to niche audiences,

and mainstream cinema has rarely focused on worker exploitation beyond sensationalized storytelling.

**5. Impact of Cinema on Society** – Films have influenced public consciousness and, in some cases, even policy changes (*Article 15* leading to caste discussions, *Jai Bhim* sparking conversations on police brutality). However, most commercial films fail to inspire real social transformation beyond temporary awareness.

Thus, while Indian cinema has been instrumental in showcasing the struggles of the deprived, its effectiveness in bringing tangible change remains debatable.

### Exploration of Themes in Indian Cinema:

#### 1. Caste Discrimination and Its Representation in Indian Cinema

Caste-based discrimination has been a persistent issue in Indian society, and cinema has both reflected and reinforced caste hierarchies. Early films such as *Achhut Kanya* (1936) attempted to address untouchability but were limited by a simplistic, romanticized approach. Later, more realistic depictions emerged in *Sadgati* (1981), directed by Satyajit Ray, which exposed the inhumane treatment of Dalits.

In modern cinema, films like *Article 15* (2019) and *Jai Bhim* (2021) have directly tackled caste atrocities, police brutality, and systemic discrimination. However, criticism arises when these films use upper-caste protagonists as saviours, reducing the agency of the oppressed. Filmmakers like Pa Ranjith (*Kaala*, *Kabali*) have countered this trend by offering narratives from a Dalit perspective, portraying resistance rather than victimhood.

#### Examples:

- *Sadgati* (1981) – Dalit oppression and upper-caste dominance.
- *Article 15* (2019) – Caste violence and police inaction.
- *Jai Bhim* (2021) – Legal struggles of marginalized communities.
- *Kaala* (2018) – Dalit resistance and land rights.

#### 2. Economic Disparity and Poverty in Cinema

Indian films have often depicted the struggles of the poor, but the approach has changed over time. Early films like *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) and *Pather Panchali* (1955) provided a raw, unfiltered look at poverty, portraying landless farmers and struggling families. These films emphasized economic inequality and the impact of industrialization on rural communities.

In contrast, contemporary Bollywood often presents an unrealistic portrayal of poverty, with rags-to-riches stories that rarely address systemic problems. Films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Gully Boy* (2019) focus on individual success rather than structural inequality, shifting the narrative from collective struggle to personal triumph.

#### Examples:

- *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) – Farmers' displacement due to industrialization.
- *Pather Panchali* (1955) – A poetic yet harsh portrayal of rural poverty.
- *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) – A commercialized depiction of slum life.
- *Gully Boy* (2019) – A focus on talent rather than economic struggle.

### 3. Labor Exploitation and Migrant Workers

Labor exploitation has been a recurring theme in Indian cinema, with films showcasing the struggles of factory workers, daily wage earners, and migrant laborers. Films like *Gaman* (1978) and *Mazdoor* (1983) highlighted the economic hardships and alienation faced by workers in cities.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to migrant labor issues, reflected in films like *Bheed* (2023), which depicted the crisis of stranded workers. However, mainstream Bollywood has largely ignored these struggles in favour of commercial storytelling.

#### Examples:

- *Gaman* (1978) – Alienation of migrant workers in urban India.
- *Mazdoor* (1983) – Factory workers and labor rights.
- *Bheed* (2023) – The plight of migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown.

### 4. Gender and Intersectionality in Exploitation

Women from marginalized communities face dual oppression—both economic and social. Indian cinema has depicted this through films like *Bandit Queen* (1994), which chronicled the real-life struggles of Phoolan Devi, a Dalit woman who faced caste and gender violence.

While some films have addressed women's exploitation (*Mandi*, *Pink*), others have reinforced patriarchal stereotypes. Bollywood often portrays women's struggles through an upper-caste, upper-class lens, neglecting the experiences of lower-caste women.

#### Examples:

- *Bandit Queen* (1994) – Caste and gender-based violence.
- *Mandi* (1983) – The exploitation of women in brothels.
- *Pink* (2016) – A focus on consent but with an upper-class perspective.

### 5. The Role of Cinema in Social Change

Films have played a role in raising awareness about social injustices, sometimes even influencing policies and public discourse. Movies like *Article 15* led to renewed debates on caste-based discrimination, while *Jai Bhim* sparked discussions on police violence against Dalits.

However, the impact of cinema is often limited by commercial interests. Many Bollywood films dilute social issues to fit mainstream narratives, reducing their effectiveness in promoting real change.

#### Observation and Conclusion:

Indian cinema has been instrumental in shedding light on the struggles of the deprived and exploited. While certain films have contributed to social awareness and discourse, many have failed to create real change beyond the screen. The dominance of commercial interests and the need to appeal to a mass audience often dilute the depth of these issues. However, independent cinema and digital platforms have provided new avenues for authentic storytelling, offering a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of marginalized communities.

#### Learning and Future Scope

- **Need for More Inclusive Storytelling** – Filmmakers from marginalized backgrounds should be encouraged to tell their own stories rather

than relying on upper-caste or privileged narratives.

- **Balanced Representation in Mainstream Cinema** – Instead of treating social issues as mere backdrops, mainstream films should engage deeply with these themes to bring about meaningful discourse.
- **Role of Digital Platforms** – With the rise of OTT platforms, independent filmmakers have greater opportunities to present raw, unfiltered realities without commercial constraints.

- **Cinema as a Catalyst for Policy Change** – Future research can explore how films can actively contribute to legal and policy reforms addressing caste oppression, labor rights, and gender justice.

Indian cinema holds immense potential to act as a powerful medium for social change. Moving forward, a conscious effort to tell authentic stories and challenge existing power structures will be crucial in ensuring that films do more than just entertain—they must inspire action and transformation.

### References:

1. Chatterji, S. (2012). *Cinema Obscura: The Representation of Subalternity in Indian Cinema*. Tulika Books.
2. Misrahi-Barak, J., & Abraham, J. (2022). *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India*. Routledge.
3. Ghosh, S. (2024). *Indian Cinema and Human Rights: An Intersectional Tale*. Springer.
4. Deshpande, A. (2011). *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.
5. Singh, R. (2024). "Looking Back at Indian Cinema in 2024 Through an Anti-Caste Lens." *Forward Press*.
5. Kapadia, P. (2024). *All We Imagine as Light* (Film Review from *Time*).

### YouTube Videos:

6. **"How does Indian Cinema address the crucial issue of caste?"**  
This panel discussion features senior film analysts and critics exploring how Indian cinema has addressed the subject of caste. The conversation delves into the pivotal role of caste in Indian society and politics, and how cinema reflects these dynamics.
7. **"Deprived Social Groups and Indian Cinema: Why They are Invisible in Indian Society"**  
Hosted by the Association for Social and Economic Equality (ASEE), this webinar discusses the invisibility of deprived social groups in Indian cinema. It explores reasons behind their lack of representation and the societal implications of this invisibility.
8. **"Panel Debate: Representation of Marginalized in Cinema - SSCAFF Film Festival 2018"**  
This panel debate from the Satrangi 7 Colors Arts & Film Festival features discussions on the representation of marginalized communities in cinema. Panelists share insights on indigenous, Indian, and cross-cultural perspectives in film.