

Reflection of the Deprived and Exploited in Indian Cinema

Dr. Abul Hasib F. A. Siddiqui

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, JSPM's Mahila Kala Mahavidyalaya,
Aurangabad, (M.S.) India

Abstract

Indian cinema, as a vital cultural product, has played a dual role: entertaining the masses and reflecting societal issues. This paper critically examines the portrayal of the deprived and exploited in Indian cinema, focusing on their representation through the lens of social realism, narrative strategies, and cultural critiques. By analyzing films across different eras—spanning post-independence, the emergency period, and contemporary times—the study highlights the nuanced portrayal of marginalized communities, their struggles, and their resilience. The research further explores the social impact of such portrayals and identifies gaps in representation, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of cinema's role in shaping societal consciousness.

Keywords: deprived, exploited, Indian Cinema

Introduction

Cinema in India holds a unique position as the most popular art form, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers. While Bollywood is often synonymous with glamour and escapism, a significant portion of Indian cinema has consistently engaged with pressing social issues. The deprivation and exploitation of marginalized communities—whether rooted in caste, class, gender, or geography—have been recurring themes in Indian films.

The depiction of such realities not only informs audiences but also inspires critical thinking and activism. For instance, the portrayal of the zamindari system in 'Do Bigha Zamin' (1953) or caste-based violence in 'Article 15' (2019) reflects cinema's ability to document societal injustices.

This paper explores how Indian cinema has portrayed the marginalized over the decades, from its post-independence

beginnings to its contemporary narratives. It also examines how these depictions resonate with audiences, challenge societal norms, and inspire policy-level changes.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the historical evolution of marginalized representations in Indian cinema.
2. To analyze how cinematic techniques enhance the narratives of the deprived and exploited.
3. To evaluate the societal impact of such portrayals in raising awareness and sparking change.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this paper is guided by theoretical frameworks rooted in cultural studies and social realism. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is central to understanding how mainstream cinema often perpetuates dominant ideologies, while parallel cinema challenges these narratives by amplifying subaltern voices.

Subaltern studies, as posited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, are crucial in exploring the representation of those on the margins of society. Cinema becomes a medium through which the subaltern can "speak," albeit often mediated by elite perspectives.

Stuart Hall's theories of representation provide a lens to analyze how language, imagery, and narratives shape the portrayal of marginalized groups. Hall emphasizes that "representation is an act of meaning-making," making it imperative to critique how films construct and communicate the realities of deprivation and exploitation.

Depiction of the Deprived in Early Indian Cinema

Social Realism in Post-Independence Cinema

The post-independence era of Indian cinema was marked by a strong inclination towards social realism. Filmmakers like Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, and Ritwik Ghatak drew inspiration from the Italian neorealist movement, crafting narratives that reflected the socio-economic struggles of newly independent India.

'Do Bigha Zamin' (1953) by Bimal Roy is a landmark film that vividly captures the plight of the rural poor under the zamindari system. The story follows Shambhu, a farmer who struggles to save his two-acre land from a landlord. The film's raw depiction of poverty, forced migration, and exploitation resonated with audiences, offering a critique of feudal structures.

Similarly, Satyajit Ray's 'Pather Panchali' (1955) is an evocative portrayal of rural Bengal's economic hardships. The film's visual storytelling—through

dilapidated huts, parched landscapes, and the everyday struggles of the protagonist's family—immerses viewers in the harsh realities of rural life.

The Emergency Era and Its Impact

The 1970s saw the rise of politically charged cinema as a response to the socio-political turmoil of the time, including the imposition of Emergency (1975–1977). Filmmakers like Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani emerged as torchbearers of parallel cinema, addressing systemic oppression through stark and unflinching narratives.

In 'Manthan' (1976), Benegal narrates the story of a rural dairy cooperative, highlighting how collective action empowers marginalized farmers. Funded by dairy farmers themselves, the film blurs the lines between art and activism, demonstrating cinema's potential as a tool for social change.

On the other hand, Nihalani's 'Aakrosh' (1980) exposes caste-based violence and systemic apathy. The silent scream of the protagonist, symbolizing voiceless oppression, remains one of the most haunting moments in Indian cinema.

Marginalization in Contemporary Indian Cinema

The Caste Question

In recent decades, caste discrimination has remained a central theme in socially conscious Indian cinema. Films like 'Article 15' (2019) and 'Court' (2014) delve into the entrenched caste hierarchies that perpetuate systemic exploitation.

Anubhav Sinha's 'Article 15' follows the journey of a privileged police officer who confronts caste atrocities during an investigation. The film's stark

cinematography—featuring dimly lit police stations, murky swamps, and blood-stained fields—amplifies the gravity of caste violence. Its tagline, “Farq laate hain, farq banate hain” (We bring change; we make a difference), underscores the transformative potential of awareness and action.

In ‘Court’, directed by Chaitanya Tamhane, the legal system becomes a metaphor for institutionalized oppression. The story of a folk singer accused of inciting suicide through his songs critiques the systemic silencing of dissenting voices.

Gender and Exploitation

The intersectionality of gender and exploitation is explored in films like ‘Pink’ (2016) and ‘Thappad’ (2020). Both films challenge patriarchal norms and address gender-based violence.

In ‘Pink’, the courtroom drama scrutinizes societal prejudices that stigmatize survivors of sexual violence. Its famous dialogue, “No means no,” became a rallying cry for consent awareness. Similarly, ‘Thappad’ dismantles the normalization of domestic violence, emphasizing that even a single act of violence is unacceptable.

Visual and Narrative Strategies

Use of Realism

Authenticity is a hallmark of films depicting deprivation and exploitation. Directors often use real locations, non-professional actors, and minimalistic dialogues to create an immersive experience. For example, Satyajit Ray’s decision to film ‘Pather Panchali’ in real villages lends the narrative an unparalleled authenticity.

Symbolism

Symbolism plays a significant role in evoking empathy and understanding. In ‘Do Bigha Zamin’, the barren land becomes a metaphor for despair, while in ‘Aakrosh’, the protagonist’s silence symbolizes systemic voicelessness.

Subversion of Stereotypes

Contemporary filmmakers have increasingly subverted traditional stereotypes to offer nuanced representations of marginalized characters. In ‘Article 15’, the urban police officer learns from grassroots activists, challenging the savior complex often associated with such narratives.

Social Impact of Indian Cinema

The depiction of marginalized communities in Indian cinema has had a profound impact on societal consciousness. Films like ‘Bandit Queen’ (1994) and ‘Water’ (2005) have sparked national debates and influenced policy changes.

‘Bandit Queen’, based on the life of Phoolan Devi, exposed caste and gender violence, while ‘Water’ critiqued regressive widowhood practices. Both films faced censorship and controversy, underscoring the resistance faced by narratives that challenge societal norms.

Additionally, films like ‘Chhapaak’ (2020), based on an acid attack survivor, have inspired movements for gender justice and victim rehabilitation.

Criticism and Limitations

Despite its achievements, Indian cinema often succumbs to commercial pressures. Films like ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ (2008) have been criticized for sensationalizing poverty to cater to Western audiences. Moreover, the

underrepresentation of certain marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ communities, reveals cinema's selective activism.

Conclusion

Indian cinema has been a potent medium for documenting and critiquing the exploitation of the deprived. By amplifying marginalized voices, filmmakers have

fostered societal introspection and inspired change. However, there remains a need for more inclusive and authentic representations.

As cinema continues to evolve, its ability to reflect and challenge societal inequities will determine its relevance as an agent of change.

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