

Reflection of Societal Issues in Nagraj Manjule's Film *Sairat*

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Abstract

Cinema has long been a powerful medium for portraying the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly in India, where caste oppression and economic disparity remain significant societal challenges. Class conflict has been a recurring theme in Indian cinema, from early socialist-inspired films to contemporary neo-realist dramas. Marathi cinema, deeply influenced by reformist movements and the works of Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, has consistently addressed caste oppression. Nagraj Manjule, an Indian film director and producer, has tackled these issues through films like 'Fandry, Sairat,' and 'Pistulya'. His debut feature film, 'Fandry' (2014), addressed caste discrimination, while 'Sairat' (2016) premiered at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival and explored themes of caste discrimination and honor killings. 'Sairat' highlights the role of women in society through the character of Archi, the female protagonist. The film also depicts class conflict and the struggles of its protagonists, Parshya and Archi. This research paper examines how 'Sairat' reflects societal issues, particularly caste hierarchy, class discrimination, and poverty, which remain prevalent in rural Maharashtra. The film's narrative follows an inter-caste couple who, despite their love, face severe social rejection and eventually become victims of honor killing. 'Sairat' not only achieved commercial success (grossing ₹114 crores at the box office) but also sparked conversations about inter-caste marriages and the realities of caste conflict in contemporary India.

Keywords: Cinema, Caste, Film, 'Sairat', Maharashtra, Social Issues, Politics

Introduction

Indian cinema has long depicted the struggles of marginalized communities. Globally, filmmakers have used cinema as a tool to highlight oppression, resilience, and social inequalities. In India, early socialist and neo-realist influences shaped the narratives of directors like Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, and Raj Kapoor, who depicted class disparity and exploitation. Meanwhile, filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Shyam Benegal adopted a raw, realistic approach to portraying poverty, rural deprivation, and social injustices.

Similarly, Marathi cinema has a rich tradition of portraying the struggles of the underprivileged, often through a socially conscious and realistic lens. Nagraj Manjule

is one of the most influential filmmakers in contemporary Marathi cinema, addressing caste-based discrimination and social inequality through deeply personal and powerful storytelling. His films provide an unfiltered glimpse into the harsh realities of caste oppression in rural Maharashtra.

Recurring Themes in Manjule's Films:

'Fandry' (2013) – Caste Discrimination & Untouchability: it is a semi-autobiographical film that follows Jabya, a Dalit boy aspiring for a better life while facing caste oppression. It highlights deep-rooted discrimination that affects personal identity and ambitions. The powerful climax, where Jabya throws a stone in frustration, serves as a strong statement against caste injustice.

‘Sairat’ (2016) – Caste-Based Honor Killings: It is a love story between a lower-caste boy, Parshya, and an upper-caste girl, Archi, that exposes the brutal realities of caste-based violence.

- Unlike typical Bollywood love stories, ‘Sairat’ does not romanticize inter-caste love but instead presents its tragic consequences. The film’s tragic ending is a chilling commentary on real-life honor killings in India.

‘Pistulya’ (2009) – Education & Social Mobility: This film follows a young Dalit boy who dreams of going to school but is forced to beg due to poverty. It highlights the barriers caste and socio-economic conditions impose on education. It won the National Award for Best Debut Film of a Director.

‘Jhund’ (2022) – Slum Life, Sports & Social Change : this film is based on the true story of Vijay Barse, a social worker who used football to uplift slum children. It focuses on systemic discrimination and the lack of opportunities for underprivileged youth. Unlike conventional sports dramas, ‘Jhund’ does not glorify the underdog but instead highlights structural barriers to success.

About Sairat

This paper aims to shed light on the protests and discussions that arose following the success of the Marathi film Sairat, which premiered at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival and was released on April 29, 2016. The film’s box office success sparked debates about regional cinema, particularly the rise of new-wave Marathi films. Sairat received greater acclaim than many other films released in the same year.

At its core, Sairat addresses caste-based discrimination. The film portrays the stark inequalities in institutional structures and highlights the deep divide between the upper and lower caste communities in Maharashtra. Nagraj Manjule effectively presents themes of class, caste, and gender through cinematic storytelling. Despite working with a minimal budget, he successfully brings attention to critical social issues. This article examines how such simple yet impactful filmmaking techniques continue to be a vital part of contemporary cinema. Sairat, a Marathi blockbuster, stands out not only for its commercial success but also for its powerful narrative and exceptional filmmaking by Nagraj Manjule.

Storyline

‘Sairat’ follows the story of Archi and Parshya, two young lovers from different castes who face extreme societal resistance. Archi, an upper-caste girl from a powerful political family, and Parshya, a lower-caste fisherman’s son, fall deeply in love. Their relationship, though filled with joy and youthful romance, soon turns into a tragic struggle against caste oppression. When their families discover their affair, violence erupts, culminating in their brutal murder in an honor killing.

Key Themes:

1. Caste Prejudice:

The central conflict of ‘Sairat’ stems from the rigid caste hierarchy that dictates personal and social relationships. Unlike mainstream romantic films that celebrate love triumphing over all, ‘Sairat’ presents a stark, realistic portrayal of caste-based oppression and the consequences of defying societal norms.

2. Honor Killings

The film does not merely suggest caste-based violence—it directly confronts it. Archi's family resorts to threats, intimidation, and ultimately murder when they learn about her relationship with Parshya. This reflects the harsh reality of honor killings that still plague many parts of India.

3. Gender Dynamics

Archi is one of the most striking female protagonists in Indian cinema. She is bold, assertive, and defies traditional gender roles by taking charge in her relationship. However, once she elopes, her agency diminishes, reflecting how societal structures confine women, even when they attempt to break free.

4. Social Mobility & Inequality

The film reflects Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's idea of equal opportunities by showcasing how caste remains a barrier to social mobility. While Parshya and his friends aspire to

improve their lives, caste discrimination prevents them from achieving upward mobility, in contrast to Archi's privileged background.

Reception & Impact

'Sairat' was a massive commercial success and sparked intense debates about caste and gender discrimination in Indian society. It challenged dominant narratives and forced audiences to confront uncomfortable realities. However, the film also faced criticism, with some accusing it of being anti-Maratha.

Conclusion

Cinema has the power to challenge societal norms and drive social change. 'Sairat' is not just a love story—it is a bold commentary on caste oppression, honor killings, and gender dynamics in rural India. By bringing these issues into mainstream cinema, Nagraj Manjule continues to give voice to the marginalized and provoke meaningful dialogue about social inequalities.

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