

Portrayal of Caste Evils in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Since many centuries, “Caste” has been a debatable issue in the pluralist Indian society. Initially, Varna division based on professions in pre-Vedic period - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras - underwent a complete change as society developed and made it strict and negative. The brutal realities of this social evil are devastating even in the contemporary society. These marginalized groups have been pushed far out of the margin of the mainstream society that even after a long period of Indian Government along with various other organizations, its space in society especially in rural areas is still not guaranteed. These marginal groups include women, downtrodden people, lower caste people and subalterns etc. They become victim from all the way by the dominating forces within and outside their circle. Cinema has ventured to highlight important issues for the masses, comprising various social responsibilities, from child marriage, degrading status of women to untouchability from its beginning. Indian Constitution gives focus on there must be no discrimination on the basis of race, caste, creed, gender and so on. Everyone is equal before the law of the land. Indian films have been canvassing the message of awareness about the evils of casteism, not only through their work but also leading by example in their real life. Films like *Acchut Kanya*, *Sujata* and the more recent *Aarakhan* and *Jai Bheem* etc. have analysed various aspects of problems like untouchability and caste based reservation. The present study aims to examine the array of the problem and its representation in cinema. The present research paper tries to throw light on the Indian Cinema in context to Social Representation including Caste at its core. In it, specimens from the beginning to the current cinema, the focus has been given. Recently, *Jai Bhim* has shown the audience to think it again about the social justice in the modern era which has also been the thrust for the equality. Special focus is given on this movie in this context.

Keywords: Caste, evil, Indian cinema

It is true that a caste is an integral part of the Indian social system which has extensively influenced all walks of life. Along with all types of presentations, the cinema is also not an exception for the persuasion of caste. The portrayal of caste as a social reality is central to Indian cinema since its early years.

The caste system is one of the most continual forms of social hierarchy, deeply entrenched in India's cultural and

social basics. Even though constitutional values guarantee equality, caste continues to dictate access to education, economic opportunities, and social mobility, perpetuating systemic violence and segregation. At its core, caste discrimination in India underlines a brutal logic of purity and impurity which denies the humanity of millions based on an accident of birth. For those seeking to dismantle this structure, confronting its role in religious, social, and cultural

norms is crucial. In this consideration, it is the need to find out the way that directly challenges the caste system's dehumanizing impact. The focus on harmony with caste-oppressed communities reflects a vision for a society where dignity and equality rise above traditional social hierarchies. From the beginning, the Indian society has the most rigid system of social stratification which is known as "*varna vyavastha*" or "caste system".

Bollywood which is an integral part of Indian Cinema came a long way and made numerous movies on various themes India, including poverty, economic inequality, India-Pakistan partition, caste system, labor union, child marriages, dowry system and many more. Like other forms of art, the cinema also has ties with its society, which affects each other equally. One such social issue that has perennially affected Indian society is the caste system.

The field of cinema is also not an exception for the affiliation of caste in India. The caste depiction as a social reality is central to Indian cinema from its early years of development. *Acchut Kanya* (1936) was the first movie based on the conditions of the caste system. *Achhut Kanya* presented the caste system with its realities under British India. The film is about problems of inter-caste relationships and marriage. It portrays the friendship between a young boy (Brahmin) and a girl (Dalit) having different caste identities. It deals with the hero and heroine's inability to cross their caste boundaries and get married. This movie became a milestone in the history of caste conversations in Indian cinema.

After this movie, many other movies attempted to depict the darker side of the caste system through the portrayal of Dalits-most oppressed section of the Indian caste system. Such films always focused on the dynamics of dominant and oppressed caste relations, and how the Dalit community is facing discrimination.

There are many ways to analyze and express the contemporary conversation on caste. But it is through cinema, where stories can both reflect and challenge societal norms vividly and most impactfully. Mostly, Indians have increasingly used film as a medium to tackle with many social evils as well as problems like the injustice on the basis of caste. It makes use of these stories into mainstream discourse even as caste as a topic becomes more salient in the global conversation. There are many examples of this kind of movies.

Representation of Caste System and Social Justice in Hindi Cinema

Cinema since its beginning 1896 has been in the front position in emphasizing and representing many issues concerning society and the nation. From the silent age to the modern multiplex cinema, Indian films have applied their convincing power over its viewers to see and listen to its messages about social concern. India which is the largest film producing country in the world has used this medium not just for entertainment but also as a means for social upliftment. The industry has a multi-ethnic approach and nature with artists from different castes and religions working together. Marriages and relationships among people from different castes and religions is not uncommon in Bollywood which has

been prompting the same among the audience. This foretells well for the society and is a significant contribution of the film industry in forging national integration and harmony. The same message is put across through films.

Similarly, 1943's film *Panghat* draws out the caste differences through the concept of community well and spreads love through mistaken identity. Bimal Roy's film *Sujata* in 1959 gets the story forward. In the two decades that had passed, a few changes had, indeed taken place. It is presented through the characters Upen and Haru and brings up the untouchable orphan girl, Sujata, who is later tempted by Adheer, a Brahmin boy. Due to family emergency and personal gratitude, the progressive ideas of these male characters bring the situation to happy ending. Here humanity triumphs over age old restricts of untouchability. The heroine comes to know about the bitter truth about her birth much later.

Bandit Queen by Shekhar Kapoor's (1994) depicts the exploitation of a woman, on account of both her gender and her caste. In it, the highbrow Thakurs target low caste Mallahs. Thakurs have a hold on the police as well as the legal system and commit crimes. It shows the lives through the barren and hostile narrow valleys of Chambal which expose the inhuman behavior high class society towards Phoolan, who ultimately has to take arms. She doesn't get assistance from anywhere, even from police or the legal system. Here, Caste again is the important factor that decides the fate of a human beings, and his very existence. The rebellion of Phoolan is against the entire system which leads to the bloodshed and revenge against the responsible people.

Prakash Jha's film *Aarakshan* (2011) presents different outlook towards the Mandal agitation and the reservation issue in the context of the education system in India. In it Deepak as a Dalit student – professor is at the centre of his respect for Principal Anand and loves for his daughter and has bonding with his community members who then clash. Prakash Jha handles the theme boldly and puts light open on the subject of caste.

Film *Shudra – The Uprising* (2012) provides a historical perspective to the caste system. It presents the rebellion of the lower castes because of their continuous and horrible humiliation at the hands of brutal feudal lords belonging to upper caste. This film tries to go to the roots of the problem.

Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* was another tale of gender and caste exploitation. In this story, finally how the oppressed rose to protest against the landlords. The landlord's 'legitimate' son Suraj, who comes to supervise the land. Here, a Dalit couple, Lakshmi and her alcoholic husband, Kishtayya, work for him. In the absence of Kishtayya, he develops physical relations with Lakshmi. But he does not own it and tries revenge. So he publically whips the husband. Then outraged Lakshmi curses him. In the last scene in the film, a child throws a stone at the window of Suraj against this exploitation.

Besides, films like *Mahananda* (1987) talks about the condition of Devdasis. Religious fear and sanctions are used to suppress them, physically, sexually and psychologically.

Jai Bhim: A vivid presentation of Caste Evils in India

Jai Bhim (2021) is a recent film which has brought this discussion to the forefront. This movie centers on caste oppression and state violence. It is set in Tamil Nadu and uses the legal drama format to explore the harsh realities of the caste system and the systemic caste discrimination in India. It became a powerful cultural reference point in discussions about the caste system in India. T.J. Gnanavel is the director of the film. The film is inspired by true events. It follows the story of a marginalized tribal woman, Sengeni, who seeks justice for her husband, Rajakannu, after he is wrongfully detained and brutally tortured by the police. Rajakannu's character as a member of a Scheduled Tribe becomes central to his victimization. It also highlights the intersection of caste-based injustice and violence by police. *Jai Bhim* spreads a light on the ways in which the caste system can be used as a weapon by those in power and turn caste discrimination in India into a legal and bureaucratic test that slips away basic human rights.

The protagonist of the film, Chandru who is a lawyer modeled after the real-life Justice K. Chandru, represents a symbol of hope as he takes up Sengeni's case. Lijomol Jose portrayed Sengeni, a woman from a marginalized tribal community. Her character embodies resilience and strength when she refuses to give up in the face of systemic injustice and fights for the dignity of her missing husband, Rajakannu. Lijomol's performance brings depth and humanity to Sengeni's struggle, capturing the grief, frustration,

and determination of someone whose voice is repeatedly unheard in the broader discourse. Through his fight in the courtroom, the movie exposes the institutional barriers that marginalized communities face and assesses critically the systemic casteism rooted in the legal and police systems. The film's graphic depiction of police brutality and its focus on the caste-based injustices endured by tribal and Dalit communities have sparked a broader discussion about the ongoing struggle against caste discrimination in India.

Jai Bhim is a subject for social commentary. This approach reflects a growing maturity in Indian cinema's handling of social issues, where the caste system in India is not merely a backdrop but an active part of the narrative that shapes the characters' choices and fates. In this way, the film has reignited debates about caste and privilege, especially among younger viewers.

The disputes around *Jai Bhim* emphasized how the caste system influences characters' social mobility, interactions with law enforcement, and their moral choices. Audiences have also taken to social media to discuss how the film exposes the subtle ways like caste can determine access to resources and opportunities which reveals how these structures are deeply embedded in contemporary society. This commitment has helped to keep the film and the topic in the public eye, making it a drifting topic and a crucial part of ongoing conversations about social justice in India.

Such films offer important opportunities for engagement for those engaged in social justice work. They are not only pieces of art but also cultural artifacts that can shape public perception and spark crucial conversations about the ongoing relevance of the caste system in Indian society. By supporting discussions about films like *Jai Bhim*, activists can connect the cultural representation of caste with the real-world struggles for equality and justice.

Finally, films like *Jai Bhim* remind us that cinema can be a powerful tool for change, offering a mirror to society's inequities while also imagining a world where such hierarchies might be dismantled. Through support and engage with these cultural expressions, it can be hoped to construct a space where art and activism meet by pushing the boundaries between Indian cinema and Indian society.

Conclusion:

Portrayals of caste evils are few and far between. Now days, the multiplex cinema has gradually taken over and the Indian cinema has become globalised in nature. As a result, the subject matters have also changed to become more urban and world centric, of class rather than caste, leaving the topic of downtrodden people somewhere on the margins. Even in urban

areas the pathetic condition of the caste system need to be explored. The situation of backwards in India must be taken into account. In this digital age, where geographical boundaries have deemed, such divisions really have no place and are not relevant at all.

In this context, this study contemplates the background of caste and Indian film and tries to depict the utilization of caste in various characters and attempts to contend in what way caste as a social issue has been managed and how it makes separation through restricted viewpoint towards the backward castes. Cinema reflects the reality of society which is deeply rooted in the caste-based hierarchy regarding the language and behavior towards a certain section, so cinema cannot be just blamed for depicting the characters in a certain manner. Although film can be said as a methodological instrument to recall the history and recollections of caste, still there is a long way to arrive for the portrayal of caste in various ways which exhibit the ground truth of cast in Indian society than simply depicting contrasts among dominant and marginalized caste simply through hierarchical characterization in cinema. Yet, films like *Jai Bhim* try to keep the work of making aware the minds of many people towards the social injustice and enlighten to work for many who have been marginalized.

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