

**REPRESENTATION OF CASTE IN FILM AND FICTION:
TEXTS AND CONTEXTS**

**THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF
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submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Dr. Nandini Saha, Professor, Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata; and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Introduction

Caste and Film

“A movie is made with the help of so many people, irrespective of caste. I cannot work in a mainstream film industry by selecting Dalits alone. But since I am vocal about Dalit people, every act is interpreted through a caste lens”¹

--Pa Ranjith

The craze and unbridled popularity of the recent films like *Jai Bhim* (2021) directed by T J Gnanavel, *Karnan* (2021), *Pariyeram Perumal* (2018), directed by Mari Selvaraj or *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), *Kaala* (2018), *Kabali* (2016) directed by Pa Ranjith or Nagraj Manjule’s *Fandry* (2014), *Sairat* (2016), *Jhund* (2022) amongst the Dalit populace resurfaces the ever-controversial issue of representation of Dalit life-worlds, narratives, perspectives, and the casting of the caste question in Indian cinema. These films are now being celebrated as the staunch critiques of the right wing Hindutva politics, upper caste male chauvinism and Brahminical mechanisms of portraying issues, characters and weaving narratives in one of the cultural texts known as film by the Dalit intelligentsia, a term which is generally understood to be a coterie the intellectuals, writers, scholars, filmmakers, actors, media persons hailing from a Dalit background. By framing the Dalit voice, assertion and mobilization the camera of these directors who themselves hail from Dalit communities, unravels the underlying bias, selective representation through selective mechanisms, the casteist culture inherent in mainstream Indian cinema. In an earlier film *Madras* (2014) Pa Ranjith sparked the controversy as to the issue of representation of the caste question and Dalit politics as the film was, in his own words,

¹ Cited in Arun Janardhanan, “Kaala director Pa Ranjith: Since I am vocal about Dalit people, every act is interpreted through a caste lens,” (*The Indian Express*, June 10, 2018), <https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/kaala-director-pa-ranjith-5210040/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CA%20movie%20is%20made%20with,caste%20lens%2C%E2%80%9D%20he%20says.&text=Ranjith%20has%20no%20illusions%20about%20the%20degrees%20of%20freedom%20the%20industry%20offers.,-E2%80%9CAs%20a%20popular>

“basically a critique of politics from within the Dalit community.”² Viewing his film as a critique of the systematic maintenance of caste hierarchies in the film industry he comments, “It is not a film which celebrates caste; rather it calls for its annihilation through rational progressive politics. It’s not a ‘Dalit movie’. It is a mainstream film which has documented the vibrant culture of the oppressed”.³ On his deliberate and conscious attempt to construct a narrative that best suits his political ideology he states,

The film is not shy about the politics it is talking about. The signifiers are very overtly placed. For instance, the hero reads a book, *Theendadha Vasantham* [*Untouchable Spring*, a seminal literary work by G. Kalyana Rao in Telugu Dalit Literature], a very important book in Dalit literature. Also, the colour blue — usually associated with Ambedkarite political parties — has been used prominently in many frames. These are hard to miss.”⁴

In short, what can be witnessed through these visual politics is the emergence of ‘Dalit Cinema’, which, according to the renowned Dalit critic Suraj Yengde, is ‘an act of defiance leading to a sustained cinematic struggle. [...] a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, *relating* to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, [...] a universal monument of time and space.’⁵ The aim of this new cinema is to unmask ‘the unconscious of caste’⁶ It is this context of the recent emergence of Dalit voice along with other caste questions and its construction in the two popular domains of culture, viz., literary text and film text that has made me ruminate over the issue of representation of caste question in the Hindi films with special reference to select film adaptations along with their corresponding source texts. I have

² Udhav Naig, “Madras, a critique of Dalit politics,” *The Hindu*, Oct 17, 2014.

³ Udhav Naig, “Madras, a critique of Dalit politics,” *The Hindu*, Oct 17, 2014.

⁴ Udhav Naig, “Madras, a critique of Dalit politics,” *The Hindu*, Oct 17, 2014.

⁵ Suraj Yengde, “Dalit Cinema.” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848>.

⁶ Manju Edacharia, “Anti-Caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema.”

Economic and Political Weekly 55, no. 38 (19 Sept 2020), 1, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2444848435?accountid=14778>.

focused on this aspect in order to explore whether the narratives and perspectives of these cultural texts have transformed the terms of discussion in the discourse of the construction of the Dalit voice and the caste question. I would also like to examine to what extent the films, film adaptations along with their respective source texts undertaken for study here, on the issues of untouchability and caste, have dealt with the nuances of the caste system, ‘Dalit aesthetics’⁷ and the ‘lived experience’⁸ (the experience of living with caste and the trauma of untouchability, briefly describing), ‘*swanubhuti*’, ‘Dalit *chetna*’, a consciousness based on Ambedkar’s political philosophy, and to what extent they have been able to grasp these nuances and the said aesthetics in ‘showing’ caste and untouchability. Through a critical analysis of the texts the thesis attempts to understand the representation of caste questions in films.

As the thesis aims at analyzing the caste questions, it is imperative to examine how such questions have been constructed in the texts undertaken for study. A detailed study of the representation of the ideology, characters, gaze in the texts, the understanding of historiography

⁷ For detailed discussion on the idea and development of Dalit aesthetics or Dalit literary aesthetics, see Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*, Sharatchandra Muktibodh’s “What is Dalit Literature?” Arjun Dangle’s *Poisoned Bread*, Sarah Beth Hunt’s *Hindi Literature and the Politics of Representation*.

⁸ I have borrowed the concept of ‘lived experience’ from Sundar Sarukkai. Sarukkai views lived experience as one which debars an individual from the element of choice or freedom to undergo that very experience. There is no place for the ‘subject’s will’ in undergoing that very experience. It is the predestined experience which the individual cannot escape. Elucidating the nature of ‘lived experience’ Sarukkai argues: “Lived experience is not just about living any experience in the sense that we participate in an experience. If lived experience has to play an ethical and epistemological role, if it has to be the adjudicator of some notion of authenticity, then lived experience should be used only for those experiences that are seen as *necessary*, experiences over which the subject has no choice of whether to experience or not. Even if the experience is unpleasant, there is no choice that allows the subject to leave or even modify it. The experiencer comes to the experience not as a subject who has some control over that experience but as one who *will* have to live with that experience. (This necessary experience may have some notion of choice in its genesis—that is, I may choose to put myself in a situation over which I have no control). All this makes lived experience qualitatively different from mere experience.” (“Experience and Theory: From Habermas to Gopal Guru” in Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai’s *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, 34-5). For detailed discussion on the subject, see the portion ‘Experience and Lived Experience: The Dialectic of Choice and Necessity’ in the chapter “Experience and Theory: From Habermas to Gopal Guru” in Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai’s *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, 33-7.

and perspective on which border the narrative and arguments of the texts is imperative in this context. In the following section I have discussed how the caste question has been conceptualized in the Orientalist, nationalist, Marxist, and Dalit historiographies. The discussion will help in understanding distinct ideologies in perceiving the caste question.

Understanding the Caste Question

Caste question is generally understood an umbrella term encompassing the discourse on the institutional mechanism of the caste system, the representation of Dalits in various socio-political and cultural spaces or domains, the socio-political and cultural assertion of the Dalits, the question of their resistance against the exploitative caste system and so on. To understand how caste question has been constructed and reconstructed in course of time I will attempt to investigate the texts I have undertaken to study here situating them in a larger sociological context. The focal point is to examine how the mechanism of casteism has been represented throughout the narratives of these texts.

When it comes to discussing the caste question it is necessary to understand that since ancient times, the caste system is a core aspect of Indian society. It has its roots in the *Chaturvarna* system of the Vedic era. According to this system, there are four *varnas*, namely, i) the *Brahmin* who are associated with priestly activities and rituals, and who holds the topmost position, and is considered to be the most pious among the four *varnas* in Indian society, ii) the *Kshatriya* whose duty is to engage with the military activities and protect the society from enemies, iii) the *Vaishya* who are associated with trade and business, and iv) the *Shudra* whose job is to serve the other three *varnas*. And there is a section of people who are outside the fold of *varna* system. They come to be known as *achchhut* or untouchable, and later come to be known as Dalit. This system is sanctioned by religious scriptures also. Till date caste has been the

foundational force which determines social structure of the country. Before delving into the historiography of the caste question recorded by different schools of thought in this section I would also like to throw light on the interpretations of the caste system as an institution. As the celebrated anti-caste crusader Dr. Ambedkar elaborates,

In the system of graded inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriyas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vaishya). Below the high are the low (Shudra) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower, lest they should reach his level and be his equal... In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system.⁹

According to Sarah Gandee,

the hierarchical structure of caste was based upon exclusion and inequality which could not function without multiple castes who could be defined against each other in terms of ritual purity. From this perspective, the untouchable became the linchpin of the entire caste system as it was their manifest impurity against which other castes were defined and ranked.¹⁰

Be it a social custom, a religious doctrine, or an economic system, the question of caste is always complex and multidimensional. So are the views, perspectives and interpretations in relation to this. Various schools of thought like colonial historiography, nationalist historiography, Marxist historiography, and Dalit historiography have come up to understand the problem of caste, and have interpreted in their own ways. According to the eminent Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas, 'Caste is an institution of prodigious strength and it will take a lot of beating before it will die.

⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, "Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto," *Dr. Babasaheb*

Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5. Compiled by Vasant Moon. New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014, 101-2.

¹⁰ Sarah Gandee, "Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the Reinterpretation of 'Untouchability': Legislating Against Caste Violence in Rural India, 1930-1975," *Retrospectives* 4, no. 1 (2015), 18. [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/retrospectives/issues/volume4/retrospectives_iv_2015_-_sarah_gandee.pdf]

The first lesson to be learnt here is not to underestimate the strength of your 'enemy'. It is so powerful and pervasive, and its appeals are so strong that the first step in the struggle is to have a precise measure of its strength.¹¹ This statement by Srinivas is tinged with an intellectual orientation what Debjani Ganguly calls 'normative modernity'¹² by which she means an orientation which 'valorizes certain ways of belonging in modernity over others.'¹³ In her *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (2016)¹⁴ D. Ganguly adopts a 'critique of modernity' approach to study and decipher the language of caste. She suggests, in this book, that 'not all aspects of living with the reality of caste are oppressive and that it is the normative modernity of academic social sciences and political activism that makes us brand caste practices as 'relics' of the past, as 'backward', 'feudal' and hence necessarily 'oppressive'.¹⁵ She considers the social scientific representations of caste, based on 'normative modernity', are not adequate to grasp the enigma, paradox or nuances embedded in the caste question. Instead, what she asks for is comprehending the caste practices in terms of 'life-worlds', which is not at all the 'other', as put forward by most of the Orientalist scholars like Louis Dumont, of Indian modernity, but an integral part of it, and in this regard, she calls for a 'non-pedagogical sensibility', which does not view caste just as an 'aberration' of modern India, an orientation concerned with the everyday living phenomenology.¹⁶ Ganguly also highlights the confusion

¹¹ M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay, Calcutta, New Delhi, Madras, London, New York: Asia Publishing House, 1962), 72, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/128285112/Srinivas-Caste-in-modern-India-and-other-essays-pdf#>

¹² Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), vii.

¹³ Debjani Ganguly, vii.

¹⁴ Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016).

¹⁵ Ganguly, viii.

¹⁶ Ganguly, viii.

regarding the very category of caste, as put forward in their joint paper entitled “Towards an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste System” by Inden and Marriott:

The South Asian word *jati*... refers to a great many kinds of things other than those we mean by the word ‘caste’. It refers to all sorts of categories of things—sets of colours and sounds, for example, it includes living creatures generated from seeds, from moisture, from eggs, and from wombs. *Jati* means a whole range of earthly populations that we call families, kin groups, genders, occupational categories, speakers of the same language, regional populations, religious communities, nations, races: it encompasses the categories of gods in their heavens, demons, etc.¹⁷

In the following section I will attempt to understand the various interpretations and perspectives of different schools of thought regarding the caste question.

An Orientalist Understanding of the Caste Question

As modern scholarly discussion on caste is highly influenced and informed by the Orientalist understanding of caste, it is imperative to discuss how the thinkers and scholars like Hegel, Louis Dumont, Nicholas Dirks shaped the idea of caste. Hegel viewed the caste system as ‘the most degrading spiritual serfdom’¹⁸. Furthermore, this state of affairs in India, to be precise, the absence of freedom in any form made Hegel sceptical about the formation of a state-like institution in India. As he elucidates,

In India the primary aspect of subjectivity — viz., that of the imagination — presents a union of the Natural and Spiritual, in which Nature on the one hand, does not present itself as a world embodying Reason, nor the Spiritual on the other hand, as consciousness in contrast with Nature. Here the antithesis in the (above-stated) principle is wanting. Freedom both as *abstract* will and as *subjective* freedom is absent. The proper basis of the State, the principle of freedom is altogether absent: there cannot therefore be any State in the true sense of the term.¹⁹

¹⁷ Cited in Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), 3-4.

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 162.

¹⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 179.

But it had its dissenting voices within this particular Orientalist view of Indian society in the analysis of caste by Arthur Maurice Hocart.²⁰ Hocart put emphasis on the comparative study of caste as existent in different locales. He, unlike Hegel, did not consider that caste as a social institution of hierarchy was present only in India. Rather than holding an essentialist view of caste, Hocart focused on the different local characters of caste system. He states,

Evidently the common European notion that caste is hereditary handicraft does not tally with the facts. We must conclude that it derives from some other principle. We must search for that principle not in our minds, but in the minds of those people who practise the caste system, who have daily experience of it, and are thus most likely to have a feeling for what is essential in it.²¹

In *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* Dumont, marked caste as the essence of India, considered the binary purity/impurity as the core principle of caste hierarchy, the binary which generated the notion of rank or 'status' in particularly Indian context, and pointed out the symbiotic relationship between the 'pure' Brahmins and the 'impure'

Untouchables when he elaborated,

It is clear that the impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman. They must have been established together, or in any case have mutually reinforced each other, and we must get used to thinking of them together. In particular, untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued; this is not always noticed.²²

He also stated, 'Note that so far superiority and superior purity are identical; it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status.'²³ In his work Dumont did not consider the caste system as a malformed social arrangement as he saw in the caste system a commitment to a communitarian ideal, an ideal the West had lost in the process of acquiring the ideal of individualism. He believed hierarchy to be more natural to human society than equality.

²⁰ A. M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study* (Routledge Revivals, 2018).

²¹ A. M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study* (Routledge Revivals, 2018), 3.

²² Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, trans. Mark Sansbury (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 54.

²³ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, 56.

As per his understanding of the hierarchical caste system, the royal authority was subordinated to the Brahmanical spiritual authority. 'Purity' always overtook 'power' in the caste hierarchy. Nicholas Dirks' ethnohistoric study to understand the hierarchy of caste in South India in *The Hollow Crown* contrasts Dumont's understanding of hierarchy of caste.²⁴ In his study he recorded his findings about his study of Pudukkottai, a 'little kingdom' in Tamil Nadu. In this book he argued for the political importance of the 'crown' vis-à-vis caste system in South India particularly, and also argued that rituals, social stratification, structure of caste and political process were all intrinsically associated with power relations and these are constituted historically. His study of Pudukkottai and the region's Kallar kings proposed that 'caste was embedded in a political context of kingship...the prevalent ideology had not to do, at least primarily, with purity and pollution [Dumont argued], but rather with royal authority and honour, and associated notions of power, dominance and order.'²⁵ He further argues,

...the historical case of Pudukkottai strongly suggests that the caste system, and its attendant hierarchical forms, reached a particular stage of development and articulation under a social formation in which the king was supreme. The demise of kingship, in some areas as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, progressively later in southern India, and perhaps last of all in Sri Lanka, led to major changes in the caste system. The demise of kingship was accompanied by the steady ascendancy of the Brahman, as the maintainer of social order and the codes of caste.²⁶

For Dirks, the domain of the 'political' was more influential and dominant than that of the 'religious' in maintaining the caste codes.

²⁴ Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), https://archive.org/details/hollowcrownethnohistoryofanindiankingdomnicholasdirksb.cup_291_u/page/n5/mode/2up

²⁵ Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, 7.

²⁶ Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, 10.

Caste and the Nationalist Discourse

While reviewing the discussion on nationalist discourse on caste, I will limit my review here to the thoughts on the caste question as enunciated by the celebrated nationalist figures like Jawaharlal Nehru and M. K. Gandhi and the social anthropologist G. S. Ghurye who undertook a nationalist perspective in his discussion on caste.

Nehru focused on the inclusive nature inherent in the caste system. He considered caste as

a group system based on services and functions. It was meant to be an all-inclusive order without any common dogma and allowing the fullest latitude to each group. Within its wide fold there was monogamy, polygamy, and celibacy; they were all tolerated, just as other customs, beliefs, and practices were tolerated. Life was to be maintained at all levels.²⁷

Although Nehru was critical of the physical atrocities, discrimination, social exclusion and economic exploitation unleashed on the untouchables meted out of the long-standing caste system, he was sceptic of the complete overhauling of such an age-long powerfully structured social stratification. The complete dismissal of the age-old caste system could lead to a vacuum in Indian social order which could result in anarchy, and therefore, the outright destruction of the caste system should be discouraged until and unless an alternative social order emerged. In his own words,

The breakup of a huge and long standing social organization may well lead to a complete disruption of social life, resulting in absence of cohesion, mass suffering and the development on a vast scale of abnormalities in individual behaviour, unless some other social structure, more suited to the times and to the genius of the people, takes its place. Perhaps disruption is inevitable during the transition period; there is enough of this disruption all over the world to-day. Perhaps it is only through the pain and suffering that accompany such disruption that a people grow and learn the lessons of life and adapt themselves anew to changing conditions.²⁸

²⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 252.

²⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 247.

‘Unless some other social structure...takes its place’, Nehru believed that the issue of caste inequality and caste atrocity could be redressed through the modern institutions like ‘state’, ‘liberal democracy’. Nehru, often considered to be a product of European modernity, had a staunch faith on the notions like ‘development’, ‘democracy’, ‘liberalism’, ‘modernization’, ‘statism’ etc., which were the products of European modernity. That he was an admirer of these merits of Western civilization was evident in his following statement:

The impact of western culture on India was the impact of a dynamic society, of a 'modern' consciousness, on a static society wedded to medieval habits of thought which, however sophisticated and advanced in its own way, could not progress because of its inherent limitations.²⁹

Given these statements and ideas of Nehru, it seemed that he endeavoured to find the answers of the caste question in the transformation of India into a modern democratic liberal nation-state.

The most celebrated nationalist figure Gandhi was found to have developed a dual approach to the caste question as reflected in his writings and speeches from time to time. On the one hand, he was vehemently critical of the practice of untouchability, while on the other, he wholeheartedly endorsed the *Varna* system, the four-fold division of castes. In addressing the problem of untouchability he undertook a sympathetic approach. He considered the practice of untouchability as a blot on the ‘divinely-ordained’ caste system. Once this practice is reformed, the caste system would stand on all its magnanimity and sanctity. As he wrote in support of the caste system in an issue of *Young India* (29.12.1920, p. 3),

The spirit behind caste is not one of arrogant superiority; it is the classification of different systems of self-culture. It is the best possible adjustment of social stability and progress...It is difficult to imagine a better harmonious human adjustment.³⁰

Though Gandhi advocated the caste system as a ‘harmonious human adjustment’, he also clarified that he detested the idea of superiority of one person or group over another inherent in

²⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 291.

³⁰ M.K. Gandhi, “Varna and Caste”, https://www.mkgandhi.org/my_religion/36varna_caste.htm.

the modern connotation of caste. As he argued in his *Young India* (25-03-1933, p. 3), ‘I have frequently said that I do not believe in caste in the modern sense. It is an excrescence and a handicap on progress. Assumption of superiority by any person over any other is a sin against God and man. Thus caste, in so far as it connotes distinctions in status, is an evil.’³¹ The caste system which he viewed as a harmoniously functional division of labour was regarded by him a great contribution to the world civilization from the ‘great’ civilization called Hinduism. He wholeheartedly intended to assimilate the untouchables into the Hindu fold. He believed that Hindu religion and the traditional Hindu society had an inherent capacity to dismantle the evil called untouchability. It is because of this reason that he considered that the task of eradicating untouchability in the performative space should be the soul concern and responsibility of the Hindu community, and the colonial government should not intervene in the territory which may be termed as the moral concern of traditional Indian society. In one of the issues of his periodical *Harijan* he stated:

I have met them [untouchables] in Malabar and Orissa and am convinced that if they are ever to rise, it will not be by reservation of seats but...by the strenuous work of the Hindu reformers in their midst, and it is because I feel that this separation would have killed all prospect of reform that my whole soul has rebelled against it.³²

It is evident that while Nehru endeavoured to find the answers of the caste questions in the institutions of European modernity like ‘liberalism’ ‘democracy’, ‘nation-state’ etc., Gandhi intended the colonial state, the embodiment and advocate of these modern institutions, not to involve in addressing the problem of caste, and thereby ‘reforming’ the morality of the ‘Indian’.

³¹ M.K. Gandhi, “Varna and Caste.”

³² Cited in Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), 76.

The nationalist social anthropologist G.S. Ghurye's discussion on the caste question, in his seminal work *Caste and Class in India*³³ revolves around his upholding of the glorious past of the nation called India, and his critique of the Orientalist assumption of viewing caste as the 'essence' of Indian society. He saw in the project of creating a 'casteless society' lies the dissipation of the nationalist ideal. He argued that a great impediment for the growth of national sentiment was the zeal of caste-patriotism which created hostile atmosphere among the different castes. As he elucidated, 'It is the spirit of caste-patriotism which engenders opposition to other castes, and creates an unhealthy atmosphere for the full growth of national consciousness. It is this caste-patriotism that we have to fight against and totally uproot.'³⁴ In this way, in his critical approach to the question of caste, Ghurye got himself entangled in the rhetoric of 'nation-building', 'modernization' or 'glorious Indian civilization', which reveals nothing but his viewing the caste question through a casteist lens.

A Marxist Reading of the Caste Question

To use the Marxist register, the superstructure of Marxism has been built upon the base of class. Accordingly, the terms like 'class consciousness', 'class conflict', 'class struggle' have formed the basis of the Marxist framework, and as is well known, this class consciousness or class conflict or class struggle revolves around two classes which Marx conceptualized as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Marx developed his ideas of 'dialectical materialism', 'historical materialism', his theory of 'surplus value', theory of labour and capital, to understand the nature of the problem of class in particular and society, which is formed as a result of the industrialization, in general, and ventured to anticipate a classless society what he conceptualized

³³ G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India* (Bombay: Popular Press, 1957).

³⁴ G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India*, 222.

as communism.³⁵ Since its inception Marxism as a political philosophy, as an economic theory, as a historiography, as an ideological perspective to understand political economy, to combat economic exploitation, to interpret the events of history, to interpret literature has a widespread appeal across the globe, and India is no exception to succumb to its influence to a certain extent.

Imported to Indian political and socio-economic context in its classical form, Marxism has never been able to exercise a nationwide influence. The classical Marxist framework with its primary focus on class has failed to adapt to the Indian political, cultural and socio-economic scenario tinged with the multi religious, multilingual, multicultural, and above all, the unique characteristic of caste, a socio-economic, cultural and political phenomenon peculiar to Indian subcontinent. As far as the Marxist approach to the question of caste is concerned, as is the concern of this section, the Indian political leaders and intellectuals who claimed themselves to be Marxists did not bother about or manage to address the question of caste and untouchability, or if they did something at all, they were devoid of substantive or effective engagement, thereby relegating it to a secondary subject of concern. Such was the emphasis on class that, at the core level, it was the be-all and end-all to the Indian Marxist thinkers. It is due to this tendency of the Indian Marxists to understand the socio-economic condition and political culture of the country on the basis of class, (following the classical framework of the Marxist thought) and the denial of greater implications of caste that they failed to capture the popular imagination of the Dalits. The left intellectuals' vision of a secular modernity for India allowed them only to theorize caste system as 'backward and superstitious'.³⁶ The indifference of the Indian Marxists to the question of caste and untouchability gets its most vehement critical treatment from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The indifference to the magnitude of the caste problem and the attitude to the problem of caste as

³⁵ Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

³⁶ Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), 85.

a subject of not paramount importance on the part of the Indian Marxists are vehemently condemned by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in the following statement: ‘If Lenin had been born in Hindustan, he would have first destroyed caste discrimination and untouchability completely; and he would not even have imagined a revolution without this.’³⁷ It was because of the failure of the Left in framing caste as a political question that Ambedkar did not subscribe to Leftist approach to caste. Ambedkar was also critical of the Indian labour leaders as they refrained themselves from condemning Brahmanism and expressed his vehement criticism in the following words: ‘If Communists’ views about god and religion were to be stated openly, they will not find a single follower among workers in today’s situation’.³⁸ In his confrontation with the Indian Marxists, Ambedkar was theoretically not in conformity with them as to the base-superstructure model. Contrary to their view, he reversed the model, in order to assign primacy and more importance to superstructure, in addressing the socio-economic problems. In his own weekly, *Janata*, he wrote in an article:

But the base is not the building. On the basis of the economic relations a building is erected of religious, social and political institutions. This building has just as much truth (reality) as the base. If we want to change the base, then first the building that has been constructed on it has to be knocked down. In the same way, if we want to change the economic relations of society, then first the existing social, political and other institutions will have to be destroyed.³⁹

Marxist historiography in its understanding of the caste question has been critical of the Orientalist assumption of caste as the essence of Indian society. Relegating caste to the domain of the social, the Marxists understood that its ‘existence and efficacy [were] to be social

³⁷ Ambedkar, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, 4 December 1929.

³⁸ Ambedkar, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, 4 December 1929.

³⁹ Cited in Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), 91.

formations that ... made their appearance in Indian history.’⁴⁰ R.S. Sharma in *Shudras in Ancient India*⁴¹ propounded the theory that it was due to the Buddhist philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and Buddha’s injunction to the Buddhist monks to refrain from the act of cultivation (as agricultural work involves killing of some living beings) that the peasants were relegated to the status of Shudra. Another Marxist historian, Irfan Habib, observed that caste structures were not, or if at all there was any change that would amount to next to nothing, undergone transformation in the period of the Muslim rulers because they were arrested by the material benefits from the caste system as the division of labour. The caste labour ‘was of crucial importance in sustaining the self-sufficiency as well as the internal natural economy of the village. Such self-sufficiency not only isolated the village, but enlarged its capacity to deliver a large part of the surplus to the ruling class, since it did not need much extra produce to exchange for its own imports.’⁴² Habib also revealed that “their depressed status and lack of mobility must surely have helped to curtail the powers of resistance of the artisans and so keep the wage costs low.”⁴³ From D.D. Kosambi, who viewed caste as destined to be a ‘negation of history, and herewith the negation of progress’⁴⁴ to Irfan Habib, the Marxist historians have taken a progressivist stance to the question of caste and believed in its eradication through modernization and decisive class struggle.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Cited in D. Ganguly’s *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspectives* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), 93.

⁴¹ Ram Sharan Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India* (Delhi, Varanasi, Patna: Motilal Banarsidass, 1958).

⁴² Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1995), 171.

⁴³ Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, 172.

⁴⁴ D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1975), 128.

⁴⁵ Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspective* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), 95.

Interpreting the Caste Question from Dalit Perspective

Although people are more acquainted with the Dalits as the victims of oppression, humiliation, segregation and other forms of social, cultural and economic discrimination, what they are less familiar with is the rising awareness among the Dalits about their rights to live with human dignity and freedom. This consciousness has been generated among the Dalits through their age-long struggles for discovering the root causes of their lowly and inhuman conditions.

Undoubtedly the great social revolutionaries and radical thinkers among the Dalits, viz., Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, EVR Ramaswamy Periyar et al., have played the most crucial roles in raising and shaping this consciousness of the Dalits. Today the Dalits have been able to understand the nuances of the caste system, a system which they consider the root cause of their living with all forms of discrimination for centuries, and they have developed in course of time a sense of assertion to have their right to equality, to exercise freedom, to live with human dignity. Though a large number of Dalits are living within the fold of Hinduism, they are being radicalized and transformed by the ideas of Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar, and have been able to view the caste question with a new perspective. A number of Dalits subscribe to the ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar vis-à-vis caste question. According to Ambedkar, caste is a religiously sanctioned system, and the religion Hinduism is based on the principle of inequality. Differing from the traditional views regarding the caste system, Ambedkar thought that the annihilation of caste is possible only through the destruction of sanctity conferred on the caste system by the Hindu *shastras* and *smritis*. As he argues in his celebrated polemical text

Annihilation of Caste (1936):

Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from commingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the

destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change...The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras.⁴⁶

Suraj Yengde, a globally acclaimed Dalit scholar, also points out how the element of oppression or subjugation has been institutionalized in the system of castes. As he explains,

Caste as a social construct is a deceptive substance, known for its elemental capacity to digress from its primary motive of existence that governs this oldest system of human oppression, subjugation and degradation. Originated in the Hindu social order, it has infiltrated all faiths on the Indian subcontinent. As old as the order of Indic civilization, the phenomenon of controlling human capacity, creativity and labour has been core to its ideological performance secured by strict legal order. Caste in India is an absolute sanction—of the dominant class over the dominated. Its strict division into five categorical instances organized in horizontal capacities is an archetype of legitimized apartheid. Caste in India is observed according to one's location in one of these five categories. The conversation on caste is navigated by the respective person's investment in the system.⁴⁷

In the Dalit circle, the ideology of Brahmanism is considered to be the most responsible factor in generating and maintaining the caste system along with the practice of untouchability, and it was Periyar who advocated an absolute destruction of Brahmanism. There is another popular trend which views the caste question in racial terms and upholds the view that the Dalits and Adivasis are the 'mulnivasi' (original inhabitant)⁴⁸ of this country and the Brahmins along with other upper castes are none but the Aryan races who invaded the country and subjugated the Dalits and Adivasis politically, economically and culturally.

Keeping such discourses on caste in mind I will attempt to examine how these texts undertaken for study here have negotiated with the caste question, which perspectives predominate in constructing it, what kind of politics is at work when it comes to depicting caste

⁴⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste with a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi," *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. I, Compiled by Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), 68.

⁴⁷ Yengde, *Caste Matters* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2019), 7.

⁴⁸ Jyotiba Phule, the nineteenth-century anti-caste thinker and social reformer, popularized the Aryan-Invasion theory that the present-day higher varnas like the Brahmin, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya are none but the Aryans who invaded India and subjugated the present-day untouchables and the indigenous communities who are the mulnivasis or original inhabitants of the country.

in the select literary and film texts. The films include Nitin Bose's *Chandidas* (1934), Franz Osten's *Achhut Kanya* (1936), Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), Ravindra Dave's *Punarmilan* (1964), Chandrashekhar's *Cha Cha Cha* (1964), Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), T.S. Ranga's *Giddh* (1984), Shyam Benegal's *Samar* (1999), Jag Mundhra's *Bawandar* (2000), Ashutosh Gowariker's *Swadesh: We the People* (2004), Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007), Prakash Jha's *Aarakshan* (2011), Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015), Bikash Ranjan Mishra's *Chauranga* (2016), Rahul Bose's *Poorna* (2017), Siddharth Malhotra's *Hichki* (2018), Vikash Bahl's *Super 30* (2019), Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019), Sarthak Dasgupta and Alok Batra's *200 Halla Ho* (2021), Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), Nagraj Manjule's *Jhund* (2022), Sanjiv Jaiswal's *Quota-The Reservation* (2022). The study also includes select film adaptations, namely, Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* (1981), Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali* (1993), Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020), and Shashank Khaitan's *Dhadak* (2018) and their respective source texts, namely, *Sujata* (1953) by Subodh Ghosh, *Sadgati* (1931) by Munshi Premchand, *Rudali* (1979) by Mahasweta Devi, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (1991) by Mala Sen, *Serious Men* (2010) by Manu Joseph, and Nagraj Manjule's film *Sairat* (2016). Jabbar Patel's *Teesri Aazadi* (2006), an adaptation of the various episodes from the *puranas*, *The Ramayana*, and *The Mahabharata*, has also been studied as a primary text.

Review of Literature

Representation of the caste question has emerged as a major issue in the twenty first century in social, political and cultural arena at large and in literature and film in particular. Historians, sociologists, writers, filmmakers have increasingly concentrated on the marginalization and victimization of subjugated communities. Since the first half of the twentieth century a number

of novelists writing in English and regional languages have prioritised Dalit issues in their works. Much ink has been spilt by the mainstream literary figures like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Mahashweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and others on Dalit life-worlds, their day-to-day struggles for social existence, inhuman atrocities unleashed on Dalits by the upper caste, victimization of Dalits through untouchability, social boycott, and denial of basic human rights, with scarcely any space for Dalit assertion. But the most pervasive manifestation of Dalit assertion in the cultural front comes into existence with the emergence of Dalit Literature as an emerging canon in the broad scenario of Indian Literature. Raj Kumar, an eminent Dalit scholar, in his *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019), quotes Toral Jatin Gajarawala, a noted literary critic, who describes this project of Dalit literature:

Dalit literature might be broadly read as a corrective to a body of work determined to claim nationally representative cultural status. By asserting not only the use of the vernacular, but the deconstruction of class/caste (and gender) and the formal tropes of a broadly conceived modernism, its presence, in addition to its declaration of a certain analytics, serves as a critique of the Indian literary canon as it is generally understood.⁴⁹

Differing from the mainstream literary aesthetics this Literature has been built on its own aesthetics. Reflecting on the nature and aesthetics of Dalit literature, and pointing out its difference from the mainstream literary aesthetics which focuses more on pleasure and beauty, Sharankumar Limbale, one of the living legends of Dalit literature, states:

Dalit literature is a new literary stream of the post-independent period. Not only it is new, its form and purpose too are different from those of savarna Marathi literature. Therefore, it cannot be appraised using traditional aesthetics.⁵⁰

Equality, freedom, justice and love are the basic sentiments of people and society. They are many times more important than pleasure and beauty.

There has never been a revolution in the world for the sake of pleasure and beauty. Many governments have been overturned for equality, freedom and justice. This

⁴⁹ Cited in Raj Kumar, *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (Kolkata: Orient BlackSwan, 2019), 166.

⁵⁰ Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*, trans. Alok Mukherjee (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016), 115.

is history... The literature that promotes equality, freedom and justice is revolutionary, and emphasizes the centrality of the human being and society.⁵¹

Sharatchandra Muktibodh has beautifully explained the nature of Dalit literature when he argues:

Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it... As Dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary... The Dalit sensibility show... an outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point view.⁵²

Using literature as tool, to quote Sarah Beth Hunt,

Dalit writers have argued that the dominant cultural representations of Indian society cloaked in the guise of the universal norm, in fact, reveal a specifically upper-caste perspective which is neither representative nor benign. Using literature as a means of contesting such hegemonic cultural images, they have offered new depictions of Indian life from the perspective of the lower castes. In north India, Hindi Dalit writers argue that all literature is deeply implicated in the power structure of society and thus, 'art for art's sake' or 'pure' literature cannot exist in India. They insist that because the value of any piece of literature and its ability to exist in the public arena is inextricably a function of the social position and power of its creator, all literature in India is caste-ist, and to claim otherwise is a privilege reserved only for those with social power, i.e., the upper castes.⁵³

The author even further argues that 'Dalit literary production has inevitably evolved in direct relation to Dalit institutional politics (i.e., Dalit political parties). This was visually apparent at the Ambedkar Jayanti Festival, as members of many political parties, including the Congress and the BSP, gave speeches amongst the bookstalls to the crowds gathered on Sansad Marg.'⁵⁴

Emphasizing the paramount importance of literature to bring in the Dalit perspective to make sense of society, nation, and the phenomena of the world, Jayprakash Kardam states, as quoted in

Hunt's *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* (2014):

What are the weapons with which we should fight our enemies? Brahmanism is our greatest enemy... and literature is the greatest weapon. For thousands of years, Dalits had

⁵¹ Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*, 119.

⁵² Sharatchandra Muktibodh, 'What is Dalit Literature?' 267.

⁵³ Sarah Beth Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2014), 2.

⁵⁴ Sarah Beth Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 2-3.

no social status and there was discrimination against them. Why? Because all written literature whether Vedas, Upanishads, Ramcharitmanas, Mahabharata or any other holy scripture kept Brahmanism alive. Brahmanism has been clearly identified in all kinds of written literature in India... So if you have the power to write and I don't have the power to write, they will listen to you. They will look at me, clap their hands and go away. This is why Dalit literature has the biggest and most important role in the movement... What we think about our country, our society, our nation, the concepts of nation, equality and fraternity, we learn all these things from childhood in school... Children are taught through stories and history... so if we want to change these conceptions about our society, religion etc. then our literature is the key to do this.⁵⁵

There are various books, theses, and articles which are concerned with the representation of caste questions in literature. This has been reflected and elaborated in Dalit autobiographies, novels, short stories, poetry, literary criticism *etc.* In the political realm there appears various significant scholarly works like the studies on crucial political movements of the Dalits. But few works have been undertaken to study such issues in Bollywood, Tollywood and other regional movies in general, and in particular, in film adaptations and their source texts scripted on such issues especially. The existing literature holds up the picture that the research works on the said topic primarily highlight the issues of submissiveness, victimization, atrocities, voicelessness of the Dalits, appropriation of caste question by the upper-caste writers and filmmakers, and that there has always been an attempt to silence the caste question and the politics of its representation in the cultural texts, instead of constructing it in its most subtle and nuanced form. However, it cannot be denied that serious attention has also been drawn to understand the construction of the modern Dalit subject too. But scarcely any work has been undertaken to substantively study these questions in the texts available both in literary and cinematic versions, and also in cinematic text adapted into another cinematic one. I will study in the following sections few scholarly works to understand how the existing literature on the subject has dealt with the representation of caste in film and fiction and their inter-connectedness.

⁵⁵ Sarah Beth Hunt, 2-3.

Bharati P. Falari's Ph.D. thesis *Literature to Films: A Study of Select Women Protagonists in Hindi Cinema* (2013)⁵⁶ examines the portrayal of women in Hindi films adapted from literary texts to understand the social questions associated with women including the low-caste women. As the representation of low-caste women is a part of my dissertation, this work by Falari bears relevance to my study. Falari's thesis examines a range of Hindi film adaptations like Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), a remake of the film *Aurat* (1940), which in turn is inspired by Pearl Buck's novel *The Mother* (1934), 2) Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), which is based on the eponymous novel *Sujata* by Subodh Ghosh, Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali* (1993), based on the eponymous *Rudali* (1980) by Mahasweta Devi, Sekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), based on *India's Bandit Queen* (1993) by Mala Sen. The study attempts to focus on the representation of the women subjectivities in the post-independent India. The study attempts to understand how cinematic devices such as flashback, voiceover, song, colour, light mould the representation of women questions in films compared to that in their corresponding literary texts. Along with this attempt to comprehend the process of transmutation, the thesis undertakes a comparative study of the perspectives of both the writers and the filmmakers. As part of the discussion, the author has considerably dealt with the representation of an untouchable woman in Bimal Roy's film *Sujata* (1959), based on the eponymous novel of Subodh Ghosh. In the process of discussing the concept of transmutation, the study highlights how the cinematic technique called flashback has been used in the film to show the caste discrimination as experienced by the protagonist Sujata. In the process of discussing the roles assigned to women protagonists in select films, the author examines the role assigned to Sujata in the film. The study highlights to a certain degree how

⁵⁶ Bharati P. Falari, *Literature to Films: A Study of Select Women Protagonists in Hindi Cinema*, Ph.D. Thesis, submitted to Goa University, 2013, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/134658>

caste as an institution conditions the status of women in the private or public domain.⁵⁷ Although Bharati P. Falari's Ph.D. thesis 'Literature to Films: A Study of Select Women Protagonists in Hindi Cinema' touches upon the aspect of caste discrimination experienced by the protagonist Sujata, it is not exclusive in addressing how the caste question has been interwoven in the film narrative. Rather it remains limited in understanding the process of transmutation through decoding the cinematic devices, and throws much light on textual analysis. Also the study does not take into account the representation of caste question in the literary text as well as a comparative analysis between the literary text and the film adaptation.

In its study of Kalpana Lajmi's film *Rudaali*, the thesis throws much light on the relationship between Kunwar, the landlord and Sanichari, the low-caste woman. The author discusses how the cinematic devices such as fantasy, dream sequence, songs have been deployed in the film to show the possible romantic affair between the landlord and Sanichari.⁵⁸ The study also mentions the deliberate use of the mirror image in the film to 'indicate the possibility of a bond between Kunwar and Sanichari.'⁵⁹ The study argues that the filmmaker has shifted the focus of the literary text through the inclusion of possible romantic angle in Sanichari's relationship with the landlord.⁶⁰ The author mentions the impact of caste when he states that Sanichari distances herself from the landlord because of her low-caste status,⁶¹ and Sanichari faces sarcastic comments from the upper-caste folks.⁶² The author considers the film to be contradictory to the literary text as the former focuses more on the romantic angle of the

⁵⁷ Bharati P. Falari, *Literature to Films: A Study of Select Women Protagonists in Hindi Cinema*, 87.

⁵⁸ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 66.

⁵⁹ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 72.

⁶⁰ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 78.

⁶¹ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 66.

⁶² Falari, *Literature to Films*, 87.

relationship between Sanichari and the landlord, and in this process, as the author argues, the film ‘undermines the marginalization of the professional mourners.’⁶³ The thesis also studies the act of professional mourning from feminist theoretical perspective. As the author argues:

The price-tags for the act of mourning with varying degree of bodily movements is a shocking revelation of human degradation. The clear-cut dichotomy of body/emotion is expressed through the well-synchronized rhythmic movements of the body...Here the body becomes a site of collective catharsis and a statement of the simmering rebellion of the professional mourners...the text does not make a mention of any physical attributes of Shanichari. But the film creates and uses femininity (with the focus on body) and romance as key elements.⁶⁴

In its comparative study of the literary text and the film text, the study argues that whereas the literary text highlights the questions of class and gender, and the antagonistic relationship between the rich and the poor, the film undermines these important aspects and instead focuses more on the relationship between Sanichari and the landlord.⁶⁵ As the author argues:

The aspect of class-struggle unfortunately lacks the original sting in its transmuted film version. The filmmaker has overlooked the political agenda of the original work in foregrounding the personal ethos and pathos of a Rudaali.⁶⁶

The film text also undermines the Marxist ideology interwoven in the literary text. This is done through undermining the aspect of rebellion of low class women led by Sanichari, which is manifested in her transforming herself into a rudaali, along with turning the prostitutes into a band of rudaalis, which is a symbolic revolt of the victimized women against the oppression as well as sexual exploitation of them by the feudal lords.⁶⁷ Thus, in its comparative study of Kalpana Lajmi’s film *Rudaali* with Mahasweta Devi’s eponymous novella, the thesis remains limited in arguing how the political, i.e., the Marxist dimension of the literary text has been

⁶³ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 109.

⁶⁴ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 113.

⁶⁵ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 129.

⁶⁶ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 129.

⁶⁷ Falari, *Literature to Films*, 129.

undermined and subsumed into the personal in the film text as the latter throws much light on the development of the relationship between Sanichari and the landlord Kunwar. The study does not take into account how the caste question and its interconnectedness with the questions of class and gender shape the life-world of Sanichari as well as the lower caste communities portrayed in both the literary text and its film adaptation. In *The Cinema of Bimal Roy: An 'Outsider' Within* (2017)⁶⁸ Shoma A. Chatterji offers a textual analysis of the film *Sujata*. After providing a biographical sketch of the film's director Bimal Roy, a critical evaluation of Roy as a director and the main concerns of his films, the article delves into a detailed textual analysis of *Sujata* in order to analyze the director's attempt to use 'a woman's silence and submission as voice'. The book makes a brief outline of the films made before *Sujata*, which deal with the issues of caste question and untouchability in a substantive, if not subtle, manner. The book discusses Bimal Roy's reliance on the literary texts as raw materials for his films like *Usne Kaha Tha* which is based on one of the stories by Munshi Premchand, *Kabuliwala* which has been adapted from the eponymous short story by Rabindranath Tagore, *Bandini* which is an adaptation of Jarasandha's novel *Tamasi*, and *Biraj Bahu*, *Devdas* and *Parineeta* based on the novels of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Roy makes this choice of adapting these literary texts into films, as Chatterjee argues, not merely because of the aesthetic qualities and sensibilities of these texts but because of the subject matters of these texts which were the issues of serious social concerns and implications. Chatterji's work does grapple with the portrayal of untouchability from a humanitarian perspective, the reference to Gandhian politics of caste and Buddhist belief of equality, the attitude of the upper caste cultural elites to dowry system, but it does not offer an exclusive study of the critique of the politics of representation of caste. Examining the portrayal

⁶⁸ Shoma A. Chatterji, *The Cinema of Bimal Roy: An 'Outsider' Within* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2017).

of the protagonist Sujata, who belongs to an untouchable community, the author argues that it is the very silence and submissiveness of her character that has been represented by Roy as ‘voice’ in the film. This argument is also problematic since submissiveness of a Dalit character is usually associated with voicelessness, not ‘voice’.

Though there are some newspaper articles, magazine articles and research articles on the issue of representation of caste question in contemporary Bollywood movies, there is a serious scarcity of adequate works on the issue. A newspaper article by Avijit Ghosh, entitled “*Rise of the Dalit hero*”⁶⁹, focuses on the recent trends in the figuration of Dalit heroes in Bollywood movies. The central point of the article is the significant departure of Bollywood movies in the depiction of Dalit characters from its early representation. The article shows that the early movies projected the Dalit characters as voiceless, submissive underdogs who easily submit to the tenets of caste system without any resistance. Contrary to such kind of representation, the recent movies like Vidhu Vinod Chopra’s *Eklavya: the Royal Guard* (2007), Prakash Jha’s *Aarakshan* (2011) portray the assertive, erudite and the historically-aware Dalit figures like Pannalal Chouhar, a police officer, who has the courage to assert his Dalit identity and confronts feudal king with audacity, and Deepak Kumar, a lecturer who goes to Cornell University for doctoral research, who can put forward his voice of resistance when his community gets humiliated. The article mentions the portrayal of Dalit character Jayshankar Paswan in the popular movie *Chachi 420* (1998) which also exemplifies this change in the depiction of Dalit figures. The article “Portrayal of Voiceless in Cinema and Literature” (2014)⁷⁰ by Manoj Kumar has also captured this issue by a comparative study of cinema and literature. In this article he

⁶⁹ Avijit Ghosh, “*Rise of the Dalit Hero*,” *Times of India*, 20 Aug. 2011, <<http://www.timescrest.com/culture/rise-of-the-dalit-hero-6099>>.

⁷⁰ Manoj Kumar, “*Portrayal of Voiceless in Cinema and Literature*,” *Research Scholar 2.I* (Feb, 2014), 219-24, <<http://www.researchscholar.co.in/downloads/32-manoj-kumar.pdf>>.

categorically describes the portrayal of the Dalits in Bollywood movies, the literary texts by upper caste mainstream writers, and the literary texts composed by writers hailing from Dalit backgrounds. He argues that though there are various movies on the social, cultural, political and economic issues like dowry, corruption, poverty, Diasporas, Hindu-Muslim unity, very few films have been made on caste system or Dalit issues. He discusses the journey of the Bollywood movies in relation to representation of Dalit issues, and comes to the argument that there is a transformation in the recent trends in depicting the voice of the voiceless in comparison with the portrayal of the same in the early Bollywood movies. After describing the movies on Dalits, the article proceeds to discuss the representation of Dalits in mainstream literature. The article states that the writers like Prem Chand, Sarat Chandra Chhottopadhyaya, Mulk Raj Anand, Rohinton Mistri, Amitabh Ghosh, Arundhati Roy et al. have significantly put down their thoughts on Dalit issues in their various works. The article specifically discusses Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Rohinton Mistri's *A Fine Balance* (1995) to some extent. Then the article proceeds to discuss the literature produced by the Dalit writers themselves. The article states how the writers like Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Omprakash Valmiki, Narendra Jhadav, Daxa Damodara portray in their writings their mental agony, humiliation, oppression, discrimination arising out of caste and untouchability. Finally, through a comparative study this article shows that it is the literature which has been able to successfully depict the actualities of life which cinema fails to address successfully. Same is the case with the representation of Dalits. The article concludes with stating the limitations, like the non-saleability of the movies being not in the nature of masala movies, absence of Dalit filmmakers and actors who could add dimensions from a Dalit perspective, the risk of grappling with such a sensitive issue like caste Bollywood movies have in the addressing Dalit issues. In

*Premchand in World Languages: Translation, reception and cinematic representations*⁷¹, edited by M. Asaduddin, the various thematic and technical aspects of Premchand's writings and the issues of translation, adaptation and mediation have been meticulously discussed. The book minutely deals with the politics of language, cultural nationalism, cultural representation, 'translation as new aesthetics' in Premchand's writings, and the comparative study of some of Premchand's texts in translation and adaptation. One chapter in the book, entitled "In quest of a comparative poetics: a study of *Sadgati*"⁷², by Nishat Haider, deals exclusively with the theorization of inter-semiotic translation or what can otherwise be termed as adaptation through a comparative study of Premchand's story *Sadgati* (1931) and Satyajit Ray's film adaptation of the same *Sadgati* (1981). Using the literary criticism and film criticism as a method or tool the chapter theoretically discusses the process of transmutation. Through 'studying one medium's translation, transmutation, transformation and appropriation of the other'⁷³ this chapter undertakes the task of enhancing our understanding of both the media and contributes to the theoretical study of comparative poetics and inter-semiotic translation or adaptation studies. This chapter studies the implications of cinema at various levels vis-à-vis the caste question, the casteism of Indian cinema and how it functions in the process of transmutation. The chapter offers a critique of Indian films' alienation from representing the caste question to a large extent, and its limitation up to representing merely the power relation between the 'Brahmin mind' and 'Shudra body'. It argues that Ray's film text of *Sadgati* creates a space for some suggestions which the viewer must offer and construct the narrative by selecting some images and filling in

⁷¹ M. Asaduddin (ed.), *Premchand in World Languages: Translation, reception and cinematic representations* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁷² Nishat Haider, 'In quest of a comparative poetics: a study of *Sadgati*', in M. Asaduddin (ed.), *Premchand in World Languages: Translation, reception and cinematic representations*, 195-211 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁷³ Nishat Haider, 'In quest of a comparative poetics: a study of *Sadgati*,' 195.

some ‘factual information’. Deepti Zutshi, in her book chapter ‘*Sadgati*: Satyajit Ray's Deliverance of Premchand's ‘*Sadgati*’⁷⁴, appeared in *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray*⁷⁵ edited by M. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh, offers a comparative study of Premchand’s short story *Sadgati* and the eponymous TV film by Satyajit Ray. In this chapter she points out how Ray’s adaptation fails to do justice to Premchand’s nuanced treatment of Dalit lives:

Ray's adaptation of ‘*Sadgati*’ suggests that he could not grapple with the subject the way in which Premchand had (perhaps owing to his progressive politics with a socialist bias) although he had dealt with themes relating to poverty, unemployment, as well as rustic life in several of his films commenting on the crisis of the times. While Premchand seems firmly grounded in his understanding of the socio-political matrix that creates innumerable Gordian knots in the death-like existence of dalits (which one is often ignorant of, or even worse, indifferent towards), Ray's treatment of themes in most of his films appears to revolve around the ‘human predicament’ as more of an abstraction. While this approach also corroborates the creation of ‘meaningful cinema’, it fails to realize the authenticity and the complexity of the dalit experience, and instead of raising the consciousness of the viewer, raises questions on Ray's own consciousness with regard to the issue.⁷⁶

As a comparative study of Premchand’s literary text “*Sadgati*” and Satyajit Ray’s eponymous film text is part of my study, these above-discussed book chapters will be immensely useful in analysing how caste as institution operates in multi-dimensional form in both the texts. Sai Thakur, Byasa Moharana and Rimil Bobonga in their very recent study entitled “Caste and the Culture Industry of Hindi Cinema: From Sairat to Jhund via Jai Bhim” (2022)⁷⁷ examine the complex relationship of the culture industry of the Hindi cinema with caste. They particularly point out the ‘cultural censorship’ and ‘silence’ embedded in the film narratives in terms of caste. As they argue,

⁷⁴ Deepti Zutshi, “*Sadgati*: Satyajit Ray's Deliverance of Premchand's ‘*Sadgati*’,” in M. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh (eds.) *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray*, 239-60 (New Delhi: OUP, 2012).

⁷⁵ M. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh (eds.). *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray* (New Delhi: OUP, 2012).

⁷⁶ Deepti Zutshi, “*Sadgati*: Satyajit Ray's Deliverance of Premchand's ‘*Sadgati*,” 240.

⁷⁷ Sai Thakur, Byasa Moharana and Rimil Bobonga, “Caste and the Culture Industry of Hindi Cinema: From Sairat to Jhund via Jai Bhim”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 57/36 (2022).

...mainstream Hindi cinema has only occasionally, and that too superficially, brought in caste. For instance, let us take the mega-blockbuster and iconic *Sholay* as a case in point. The film portrays a vengeful Thakur (a politically powerful and landed Kshatriya caste of North India) who hires two criminals to avenge the massacre of the members of his joint family by the dacoit Gabbar Singh and his men. Except for Thakur, castes of all other characters—the hired criminals, the dacoit and his men, and the villagers—remain invisible. Thus, caste is present in Indian cinema selectively without the power dynamics and complex relationships that underlie the caste system. This “silence” about caste need not indicate that caste is not crucial in Indian life. One may understand it as “cultural censorship,” similar to what Sherriff (2000) describes in the context of racism in Brazil.⁷⁸

I will extend this discussion in my study on how ‘cultural censorship’ or ‘silence’ works when it comes to making films on caste. In his article on the Dalit representation in Hindi films entitled “From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit representation in popular Hindi cinema”⁷⁹ (2019), published in the journal *South Asian Popular Culture*, Vishal Chauhan, a PhD Research scholar in the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies Research at Birmingham City University, has discussed the problematic representation of Dalit characters in Hindi films through his critical textual examination of select Hindi films, namely, Bimal Roy’s *Sujata* (1959), Sawan K Tak’s *Souten* (1983) and Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan* (2001). He argues that the Dalits are represented in popular Hindi films as submissive in keeping with the caste Hindu sensibilities in order to perpetuate the cultural hegemony of the upper castes. As Chauhan elucidates,

The higher castes dominate the industry. Since higher castes hegemonise the process of filmmaking, their ‘version’ of caste question becomes the ‘preferred’ tone of the Hindi film industry. In line with this, Dalit protagonists keenly participate in the caste Hindu imagination where they gleefully accept their social positioning and rarely resist the inhuman discrimination on the screen, which is very unlike history... Hindi film industry acts as an ‘ideological state apparatus’ that performs in tandem with the caste Hindu ideology to establish the cultural hegemony. It stereotypes Dalits in accordance to the caste Hindu imagination where they accept and justify caste discrimination but rarely speak against them.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Sai Thakur, Byasa Moharana and Rimil Bobonga, “Caste and the Culture Industry of Hindi Cinema: From Sairat to Jhund via Jai Bhim,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 36 (2022).

⁷⁹ Vishal Chauhan, “From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit representation in popular Hindi cinema,” *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2019.

⁸⁰ Vishal Chauhan, “From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit representation in popular Hindi cinema,” *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2019, 6-7.

His article further argues that the struggle and resistance of the Dalits against the oppressive caste system has been deliberately ignored by the Hindi film industry to ensure ‘a spurious semblance in the social rubric.’⁸¹ I will further this discussion in my study on the representation of Dalits in Hindi films. Also I will explore how, contrary to the traditional practice of the Hindi film industry to ignore the representation of Dalit resistance and struggle, the recent Hindi films on caste cannot ignore the same after the emergence of Dalit Cinema.

Some interesting articles are coming up in various online forum or magazines in the form of comparative studies on the portrayal of caste discrimination and the deeply entrenched caste prejudices in Nagraj Manjule’s Marathi film *Sairat* (2016), and its adaptation into a Hindi film *Dhadak* (2018) by Shashank Khaitan under the banner of Dharma Production. One such article is Meghnad Bose’s “Compared to *Sairat*, *Dhadak* a Cop-Out That Sidelines Caste Nuances”, published in *The Quint* and updated on 23 July, 2018, which puts questions on the film *Dhadak*, a remake of *Sairat*, as the former removes the nuances of the caste questions by diluting some scenes—like the ‘slap scene’, ‘the caste of water’, a change in the setting of the film from the village of Bittargaon in Maharashtra to the city Udaipur in Rajasthan—which are highly fraught with casteist overtones, the portrayal of which made *Sairat* a masterpiece. Another interesting interpretation has been presented in an article by Dhruvo Jyoti entitled “*Dhadak* differs from *Sairat* in gaze, not caste” (2018), published in *Hindustan Times*, which points out that a fundamental difference between the adapted text *Sairat* and its adaptation *Dhadak* lies in its gaze, not in caste. The author argues:

The difference between the two films, then, is not caste. What sets *Sairat* apart was its Dalit director, who depicted caste for its cold everyday function, and the terrible price it extracts for resistance and assertion. *Dhadak*’s *gaze* [emphasis mine] is upper-caste—the

⁸¹ Vishal Chauhan, “From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit representation in popular Hindi cinema,” 7.

story it tells, therefore, is not about the crushing reality of the everyday but the exalted world of the dominant, where caste is but an aberration.⁸²

Diluting the structure of caste which haunts throughout the movie *Sairat*, and which stands as the single biggest obstacle in the relationship between Archie and Parshya, the director of *Dhadak* fails to understand the difference of ‘questions of honour and community’ between the upper caste and the lower caste, and takes resort to the ‘frame of honour killing’ instead of surfacing caste-based killing. Though serious attention has been drawn in studying the caste question in the Dalit filmmaker Nagraj Manjule’s *Sairat* from Dalit perspective, Bollywood’s handling of the caste question through its film adaptation *Dhadak* has not been adequately addressed. This dissertation intends to fill this void and attempts to find out if there is any space for the framing of the caste questions in new light, the presence or absence of the tropes and aesthetics which are considered to be integral to Dalit consciousness, Dalit perspective, and Dalit gaze, in these literary and film texts through critical analysis and a comparative study of the source texts and their film adaptations. Therefore, this thesis is concerned with the aims and objectives as laid down in the following section.

Aims and Objectives of Study

In the process of understanding how the Dalit voice and the caste question have been constructed in these select adapted texts and their film adaptations, this thesis aims at addressing a number of questions:

- 1) The study highlights how caste has been portrayed in literature and cinema.
- 2) As the texts undertaken for study present diverse gaze and perspectives on the question of caste, it is to be examined that how such gaze or perspectives regarding the caste question

⁸² Dhruvo Jyoti, “*Dhadak* differs from *Sairat* in gaze, not caste,” *Hindustan Times*, Jul 24, 2018.

has been constructed taking cue from understanding the historical role played by caste in shaping such perspectives.

- 3) The dissertation also examines whether the cultural monopoly over a particular medium, so to speak, over the cultural space of literature or film, play a crucial role in shaping such gaze or perspectives.
- 4) The study locates the upper-caste gaze in the film adaptations of the source texts which are composed /directed by authors or filmmakers who hail from upper castes.
- 5) The study aims at understanding how the question of caste has traditionally as well as currently been accommodated and negotiated in the works of the non-Dalits writers and filmmakers.
- 6) This dissertation investigates the politics of representation as far as the caste questions and Dalit characters are concerned.
- 7) The thesis explores the normalized casteism of Indian cinema and how it functions in the process of adaptation.
- 8) The study puts a special emphasis on the question of representation of Dalit women, examining their three-fold subjugation in the register of caste, class and gender.
- 9) The study explores the anti-caste politics as incorporated in the films by Dalit filmmakers.
- 10) The study explores the ideological shift in the representation of caste in Hindi films.

Rationale for Undertaking the Study

For centuries the communities who are in the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy have been subjected to physical atrocities, discrimination, ostracism and other forms of social and economic injustice. And the legacy has been continuing as the caste system has been structured in such a way it has been able survive in the new modern socio-cultural set up in the country. Across the globe humiliation, discrimination, atrocities on the particular sections of society in some way or the other are the well-known phenomena. Equally well-known is the consequent struggles—in the form of protest, movement, or legal battle—of such sections of people to combat these forms of exclusion. When it comes to the discussions and debates on these forms of exclusion, it is the caste system which becomes the centre of such discussions and debates. Scarcely anywhere in the world exists such a consolidated hierarchical form of exclusion. The ideology of Brahmanism which is the principal architect in designing such an institutionalized form of exclusion has still been at constant efforts to perpetuate the system. Along with some occupational ‘ethics’ like the ideal of following the ancestral calling, the system has been endowed with a solid structure on socio-cultural and religious grounds. The system has been consolidated on a particular culture of caste. There is not an iota of doubt that along with the religious texts which provide philosophical justifications for devising such a system, the cultural texts like literature, cinema, theatre, etc., under the cultural monopoly of the upper-caste writers and artists, have also played a crucial role in maintaining and perpetuating the structure of caste. The role of such cultural texts is of paramount importance in shaping the ideology of people. In India the life of people is surrounded by stories and myths produced through literature. *Jatra* (a popular form of entertainment), theatre have also been for a long time integral parts of cultural life of certain sections of people. With the advent of cinema as an art form and a form of entertainment, it has become an obsession and constitutes a part and parcel of socio-cultural life of Indian people.

When a familiar story of literary text or that of a cinematic text gets adapted to a new version of film, it arrests the attention of a large section of people and drives them to have a watch of their 'known' story in some new version. Therefore, the work of adaptation has a capacity to engage a large section of people with some questions and discourses produced through the story of their known source text and the adaptation itself. As source texts and their adaptations as cultural texts are so largely influential in shaping the public mind and behaviour, and constructing a culture, a discourse or a question, I feel it imperative to examine such cultural texts. How these texts engage with the question of caste, what is the gaze in depicting caste in both the adapted texts and their film adaptations, how these texts construct the Dalit voice, the image of a Dalit, which perspectives get prominence in grappling with such issues are some questions which need greater academic and scholarly attention in this troubling time of increasing caste violence, atrocities and discrimination against the Dalit to understand the social, cultural, political and economic equations arising out of the caste system.

Research Methodology

Since the thesis aims at studying the representation of the caste question through a study of depiction of caste in Hindi films with special focus on select source texts and their film adaptations, it requires a multidisciplinary approach that puts various available primary and secondary sources to best use. Methods to be used will be drawn from various disciplines and genres. There is a limitation I should mention in terms of the choice of primary texts for my research. Primary texts to be used will comprise of a range of caste-centric Hindi films from 1930s to present-day films, and film adaptations along with their corresponding source texts. I have made use of the English translations of the literary texts the translation of which is available. The quotations from the literary texts of which no English translation is available are translated by me. I must mention here that the criterion for selecting these particular texts

involves reason that the films including the above-mentioned source texts and their corresponding film adaptations present both the extended and narrowed versions of gaze and perspectives on the caste question within the purview of the same story as they have been composed and filmed out of a different and changing social discourse on caste question. While my focus is mainly on these caste-centric Hindi films, select literary texts and their film adaptations, I will engage occasionally with what is known as ‘regional movies’ dealing with the same issue as reference points as well to find its relevance to my research topic and substantiate my argument. I will situate these cultural texts in the broad discourse of Dalit representation, and caste questions. Apart from these primary sources this project will also depend on secondary sources like scholarly books, documentaries, recorded interviews of the writers and filmmakers on the subject and reviews of those movies published in various sources of multimedia to analyse and interpret the theorizations and developments on the construction of Dalit voice and the caste question, and to set a proper historical background to the study. Along with them I also intend to study contemporary periodicals which include magazines, journals, tabloids etc. that published analytical pieces on this issue. I bring together various commentaries of distinguished critics which have been used as conceptual framework to explore the far-ranging implications of the work undertaken.

Before delving deep specifically into the detailed critical analysis of the complex dynamics of the caste question in the select films, negotiation of the film adaptations and their corresponding source texts in terms of caste question to meet the purpose of this study, the multidimensional trajectory of the treatment of caste question in literary texts and film texts is necessary to address. “Chapter 1”, therefore, will be devoted to trace the trajectory of the representation of caste question in literary texts written by the writers from the upper-caste background, the socio-political and cultural backdrop which give birth to the canon of Dalit

Literature, the portrayal of caste issues and Dalit characters in Hindi cinema since its inception, the rise of Dalit Cinema in the early decades of the twenty-first century accelerated through the arrival of filmmakers from the Dalit background in the Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, Hindi, and other film industries. The next chapter examines the representation of caste in select Hindi films. In so doing the chapter seeks to trace the filmmakers' conventional way of looking at caste and Dalit life. How this conventional approach puts the filmmakers at the limit of viewing caste primarily through certain registers like victimization and discrimination of Dalits, inter-caste love relationship, sexual exploitation of Dalit women, emancipation of the Dalits through the upper caste's act of benevolence and sympathy towards Dalit people etc. The third chapter discusses how this conventional approach prevails in film adaptations also through examining select film adaptations. The chapter also discusses through examining the corresponding literary texts of these film adaptations how the complex relationship of the Dalits with caste as represented in the literary texts takes different shape through the visual politics of film adaptations. The fourth chapter traces the ideological shift in the representation of caste questions in Hindi films. The chapter discusses that the representation of caste recent Hindi films is largely characterized by socio-cultural and political assertion of the Dalits, resistance against the oppressive caste system, empowered Dalit women, and reversal of upper-caste gaze after the rise of anti-caste politics and emergence of Dalit Cinema. The chapter puts special focus on the select contemporary film adaptations vis-à-vis their respective source texts and shows how these recent film adaptations carry forward this ideological shift when it comes to adapting caste questions in films. The chapter substantiates how the recent upsurge of anti-caste politics and Dalit Cinema contextualizes the ideological shift in the representation of caste in Hindi films. The thesis concludes with briefly discussing the Hindi film industry's current tendency to incorporate anti-caste narratives, deciphering the upper-caste gaze. The conclusion also sums up the major findings of the study.

Chapter 1

Situating Literature and Film vis-à-vis Caste, and the Emergence of Dalit

Cinema

Background

Before discussing the framing of caste question in the select films, literary texts and their film adaptations undertaken for study, it is imperative, as I stated in the previous chapter, to understand how such a contentious issue like caste has been treated in literature and cinema. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of how caste has been portrayed in literature and cinema produced by the upper-caste writers and filmmakers, the emergence of Dalit literature, and the emergence of Dalit Cinema with its anti-caste politics and overtly declared project of ‘annihilation of caste’⁸³.

Literature as a tool becomes a site of conflicts and controversies when it grapples with some serious social, political, cultural and religious issues. If there is an issue of the most paramount social, political, religious and cultural significance in the Indian subcontinent in terms of devising a social system, it is the caste system. Till date caste forms the core of Indian society and determines the course of Indian culture, history, and politics. Along with the discussion of caste in religious texts, historical or sociological writings, the question of representation of caste in literary texts also draw academic attention to a considerable extent. What is interesting about the representation of caste in the field of literature is that the outlook of the upper-caste writers in dealing with caste question is largely shaped by caste blindness which they fail to recognize due

⁸³ The phrase ‘annihilation of caste’ has been derived from the title of Ambedkar’s 1936 polemical essay “Annihilation of Caste”, which later comes to be considered as one of the foundational texts of the anti-caste politics.

to their caste privilege. By virtue of the prevalence of the hierarchical caste system, the right to education was available only to the upper castes of the society, viz. the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. The Shudras and the *ashprishyas* (untouchables) had no right to education, as they were assigned to perform only the menial jobs and serve the upper castes. Therefore, the practice of writing literatures also was exclusively monopolized by the upper caste communities, especially the Brahmins. Until the emergence of Dalit literature, knowledge about caste through literary texts could be gained mainly through the works written exclusively by the upper-caste writers. The Shudras, untouchables and the women of all castes including those of higher castes did not hold any power or privilege and were bereft of agency, and therefore, these members of society had no significant place in the literary texts of the upper-caste male members of the society. Even if they were represented, it was bound to be stereotypical. Dalits did not get portrayed as major characters in the literary texts until the end of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century the number of literary texts grappling with the caste question and Dalit lives marks a remarkable visibility in the literary domain in particular and in the cultural sphere in general. In this continued process, it is the recent emergence of the Dalit (formerly called the ‘untouchables’) writers, the emergence of Dalit literature as a literary canon, and that of Dalit criticism as a part of literary criticism, which give birth to the controversy regarding the representation of the caste question and Dalit life-world in literary texts. This emergence and of Dalit literature owes to a number of polemical writings by the anti-caste thinkers like Jyotiba Phule, B. R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar, Dalit movements like Ambedkar’s Mahar Movement of 1927, Kalaram Temple Entry movement, Manusmriti *dahan* (burning the ancient religious text *Manusmriti*), conversion into Buddhism in 1956, the social activism of some radical Dalit organizations like Dalit Panther in 1970s Maharashtra, E.V.R. Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement in South India, Ayyankali’s fight for the landless Dalits in Kerala, Swami

Achutanand's Adi Hindu movement in north India and other similar movements across the country.

The emergence of Dalit cinema in the twenty-first century and its narrative strategies enable portraying Dalit assertion and resistance through using cinema as a political tool. The deployment of non-professional actors, natural lighting is one of the crucial formalistic aspects used by the Dalit filmmakers to render the films a realistic treatment in the line of the Italian neo-realist films of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The ideological moorings of the Dalit filmmakers give birth to Dalit cinema. Franz Osten's *Achhut Kanya* (1936), Chandulal Shah's *Achhut* (1940) are some early films in which negotiations between caste and cinema have been reflected for the first time. Later, the directors like Bimal Roy, Ritwik Ghatak, Mani Kaul use cinema as a tool for social change rather than viewing it just as a commercial enterprise to make profit. Filmmakers like Shyam Benegal, Goutam Ghose, T.S. Ranga, through the domain of parallel cinema developed in the 1970s and 80s, endeavour significantly to address the exploitative nature of the caste system in a feudal set up. To understand the caste question through film narratives, it is imperative to examine the different narratives of the different kinds of cinemas, namely, mainstream popular films, parallel cinema etc. It is crucial to examine how the caste question has been imagined, conceptualised, articulated and archived in the different kinds of films.

Under such circumstances, it is pertinent to engage with questions such as—how is the caste question contested in literature and cinema or what role is played by literature and cinema in constructing the deviating other on the basis of caste? Do the film narratives reinforce the idea of caste society or pose challenges to the very foundation of caste? Do the financial interests of the mainstream commercial films create any obstacle in showing caste prejudice in cinema? Does the formal structure of the film as an art form have more limitations in addressing or

representing a complex social structure like caste compared to literature? With these questions in mind, this dissertation engages with the study of representation of caste question in Hindi films with special reference to select film adaptations. The film texts, film adaptations along with their corresponding source texts provide a cultural space through which the aforesaid questions vis-à-vis caste can be examined adequately.

Both the literary and cinematic narratives help in reimagining the idea of caste in the late colonial as well as postcolonial India. The accommodating nature of caste changes over the period of time in the postcolonial period. The politics of representing caste in literary and film texts in the late colonial as well as post-colonial Nehruvian Socialist era makes the cultural narratives the sites in which the representation of caste is questioned time and again, especially after the cultural and political assertion of the Dalits. Both literature and cinema as cultural artefacts reflect the inherent structure of society, which in turn reproduces that structure and moulds the mindset of the readers or spectators, as well as prescribe clues to challenge that structure. This dialogic relationship makes the cultural texts like literature and cinema a space through which both the writer and filmmaker and society can contest each other.

Considering the literary and film narratives as cultural sites for archiving the caste question, this dissertation attempts to study how caste as a social institution operates in Indian society. The time frames of both the literary texts and the cinematic texts are taken into consideration in historicizing the films. An inclusive understanding of the time frame will enable the understanding of the socio-cultural and political context which informed the writers' and the filmmakers' gaze in producing their respective texts. Through the analysis of the texts, putting them in their historical context, this dissertation will address a number of issues related to caste

questions like representation of Brahmanism, Dalit life-world, the blatant as well as subtle display of casteism.

Situating Caste in Literary Text

Victimization, Reformist Attitude and Discourse of Sympathy in Literary Texts

A minuscule of upper-caste writers attempts to portray the lives of the untouchables in their literary works at the beginning of the twentieth century. They are guided by a feeling of compassion, sympathy and zeal of reform in documenting the life-world of the Dalits. Some of the prominent texts of this kind include Munshi Premchand's *Rangbhumi* (1925) in Hindi, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) in English, Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* (1948) in Odia, U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* (1965) and *Bharathipura* (1973) in Kannada, and Shanta Rameshwar Rao's *Children of God* (1976), Romen Basu's *Outcast* (1986), Bonomali Goswami's *Untouchables: A Novel* (1994), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010) in English. The list can be extended by adding the works like Munshi Premchand's short stories "Sadgati", "Kafan", Mahashweta Devi's writings representing the Lodha and Shabar communities, Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* which offer substantive portrayal of the lower caste characters. Rabindranath Tagore's works also engage with the questions of caste and untouchability to a considerable extent. A considerable amount of literature on Tagore's treatment of the questions of caste and untouchability is found in his works like *Gora* (1910), one of his most celebrated novels in Bengali literature, his plays *Chandalika* or *The Chandal Girl* (1933), *Achalayatan* or *The Stagnant Establishment* (1912). Tagore's essays like "Samaj Samskar o Kusamskar" (Social Reform and Superstition), "Bange Samaj-Biplab" (Social Revolution in Bengal), "Samajbhed" (The Division in Society), "Nutan o Puratan" (New and Ancient), "Nababarsha" (New Year),

“Bharatbarsher Itihaas” (History of India), “Brahman” (The Brahmin), “Shudradharma” (The Religion of the Shudra), “Dharmer Adhikar” (Right to Religion), and “Ek-Chokho Samskar” (One-Eyed Reform) also substantively deal with caste and untouchability.

Raj Kumar, a noted Dalit critic and scholar, in his *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019), discusses the trajectory of the ‘treatment of caste’ in the modern literature of early period. He states that it is at the end of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century that a number of noted upper-caste writers deal with the lives of the untouchables and various factors affecting their lives in their literary writings.⁸⁴ He is critical of sympathetic portrayal of Dalit characters by these renowned upper-caste writers. In his own words,

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the few upper-caste Hindu writers who attempted to portray the lives of the ‘untouchables’ tended to be driven either by zeal for social reform or by sentimental compassion...But the novels produced by these writers can be termed as ‘emotional’ literature because these Dalit characters have mostly been imagined from the upper-caste writers’ point of view. Therefore, these characters look totally absurd. Rarely did these writers take up any ‘untouchable’ characters and treat them realistically like ordinary human beings full of vitality, hope as well as despair.⁸⁵

Whereas the portrayal of caste question and Dalit lives have been considerably handled by the mainstream upper-caste writers, it is challenged by the Dalit writers after the emergence of Dalit literature as the latter puts the sympathetic portrayal of Dalit lives by the mainstream upper-caste writers into question. The discourse of sympathy in constructing Dalit figures have been dismissed by the Dalit writers. As Gajarawala argues,

Sympathy, as a narrative channel helped to produce the literary Dalit, but more importantly a literary type with limited potentiality. Types have socio-cultural longevity as well as political implications that are more clearly real than realism. The radical gesture of the Dalit literary movement is its refusal of a sympathetic discourse that has been central to a progressive realism—and, in fact, to unearth sympathy as the faulty affective architecture via which the old mode of realism was deemed progressive at all.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Raj Kumar, *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (Orient Blackswan, 2019), 49-50.

⁸⁵ Raj Kumar, *Dalit Literature and Criticism*, 49-50.

⁸⁶ Cited in Laura R. Brueck, “Bending Biography: The Creative Intrusions of “Real Lives” in Dalit

Gajarawala's idea of sympathy as 'affective architecture' has been extended by Brueck as the 'aesthetic of detachment'. As she elucidates,

Readerly sympathy is enabled by this detachment, such that a reader can feel *sorry* for an exploited Dalit protagonist rather than feel personally implicated in the social system of exploitation itself. Said another way, a reader can engage emotionally but not politically with the literary object of sympathy. It is the detachment enabled by the sympathetic narratives of progressivist realism that angers Dalit critics and inspires them to construct a new politics of writing and reading the politics of Dalit *chetna*. Central to this new politics of Dalit *chetna* are the lives—as they were lived, as they are written, and they circulate—of prominent historical figures in the politics of caste in India.⁸⁷

Although their writings portray the miserable condition of Dalit lives, their gaze or perspective has always been questioned by the writers and critics from Dalit background. Although the upper-caste writers are sympathetic to the cause of the untouchables, their writings display some serious limitations in grappling with the caste question. Though their description of the untouchables' settlement, the deplorable state of the untouchables' lives, and the psychological angst of the untouchable characters is arresting, they scarcely show any sign of resistance or revolt from the Dalit characters. Their description too much focuses on the victimization, discrimination and destitution of the untouchables. Their way of redressing the problem of untouchability often takes resort to the Gandhian politics. This Gandhian way to wage war against untouchability too much focuses on eradicating merely the practice of untouchability, not its root, the caste system and *varna* system. Following the Gandhian path, they are trapped in the limitation which makes them realize that there is nothing wrong with the religion or the *varnashramadhharma*. And this is contrary to the politics of the anti-caste social reformers like Ambedkar who trace the root of the caste system to the religious tenets of Hinduism.

Fiction," *Biography* 40, no. 1, *Caste and Life Narratives* (Winter 2017), 79.

⁸⁷ Laura R. Brueck, "Bending Biography: The Creative Intrusions of "Real Lives" in Dalit Fiction," *Biography* 40, no. 1, *Caste and Life Narratives* (Winter 2017), 79.

The Emergence of Dalit Literature

The representational shift in the portrayal of caste in literature is noticed with the emergence of Dalit literature as a separate literary canon in the latter half of the twentieth century. Dalit literature as a canon draws attention in the 1970s through the emergence of the Marathi Dalit writings. Writers like Baburao Bagul, Shankarrao Kharat, Bandhu Madhav, Annabhau Sathe, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, who hail from Dalit communities present Dalit lives and the question of caste from an insider's point of view with much more nuances and subtlety. Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* (1963), *Death is Getting Cheaper* (1969), *Ambedkar Bharat* (1981), Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), *Khel* (1983), *Gandu Bagicha* (1986), *Ya Sattet Jeev Ramat Nahi* (1995), Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread* (1992), *A Corpse in the Well* (1992), *Homeless in My Land* (1992), *No Entry for the New Sun* (1992) portray the lived experience of caste oppression, caste discrimination and untouchability. Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992) is considered to be the first anthology of Dalit literature to be translated into English. Dalit literature gain visibility through some of the path breaking anthologies which include Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), Daya Pawar's *Kondwada* (1974), Prahlad Chendwankar's *Audit* (1976), Dr. Yashwant Manohar's *Utthangumphra* (1977), Keshav Meshram's *Utkhanan* (1977). Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* (2009), Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmasi* (1978), Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978), Narendra Jhadav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003), Dadasaheb Malhari More's *Gabala* (1983) are some of the prominent Marathi Dalit autobiographies which accelerated the spread of Dalit literature across the country. It is Ambedkar's theorization of caste and his political philosophy which give immediate reason and impetus to such writings, and necessitates the foundation of as radical an organization as the Dalit Panther in the early 1970s which along with social activism accelerated Dalit writings. Ambedkar's insight into the idea of caste as a notional practice, caste

as a system of ‘graded inequality’, his theory as to the origin of the Shudras as a social group and their fall into the lowest rung of the social ladder, his scathing attack on the religious and philosophical texts of the Hindus, his suggestion to destroy the religious sanction of the caste system as a remedy to the problem of caste, his clarion call to the Dalits to ‘educate, agitate and organize’, and his decision to convert into Buddhism provide the Dalits a consolidated ground to fight for their liberation and emancipation. In a literary conference called Vidarbha Sahitya Sangh in Nagpur, Ambedkar urged the writers to write for the cause of the underprivileged people. As he stated,

I want to explicitly ask writers to bring forth to society, through their literary works, noble values of life and culture. Do not ever narrow and limit your goal. With your illuminating creativity, dissipate the obscurity enshrouding the village life. Do not be oblivious to this fact that there is a huge number of unprivileged and deprived people residing in our country. First, identify with their agony and sufferings, and then make a constant effort to elevate their living conditions by means of your writings. This shall be true humanity.’⁸⁸

This self-awakening of the Dalits become instrumental in helping Dalit literature flourish on a large scale in other parts of the country in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, Oriya, Bengali language also. The writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Suraj Pal Chauhan, Mohandas Naimisharanya, Tulsi Ram, Kanwal Bharti, Jayprakash Kardam make significant contribution to the development of Hindi Dalit Literature. Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (1997) portrays the issues of oppression, discrimination and anger, and is a significant contribution to Hindi Dalit literature. Valmiki tries to introspect into a fundamental question of living through discrimination and humiliation for being a Dalit. As he comments,

‘I have asked many scholars to tell me why Savarnas [caste Hindus] hate Dalits and Shudras so much? The Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits? Today caste remains a pre-eminent factor in social life. As long as people don’t know that you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out

⁸⁸ J.V. Pawar, “The history of Marathi Ambedkarite Literature,” *Forward Press*, April 13, 2019, <https://www.forwardpress.in/2019/04/the-history-of-marathi-ambedkarite-literature/>

your caste, everything changes. The whispers slash your veins like knives. Poverty, illiteracy, broken lives, the pain of standing outside the door, how would the civilized Savarna Hindus know it?'⁸⁹

His *Thakur ka Kua* (1981) is an eye-opening poem which shows how the ownership of almost everything essential for sustenance of life like land, road, and water resources belongs to the Thakurs (the land-owning high-caste community) of the village. Jayprakash Kardam's *Chappar* (1994) narrates the story of a college student Chandan who uses education as a means to Dalit emancipation. It is Hira Dom, as noted by Dalit critic Raj Kumar in his *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019), who penned one of the earliest Dalit poems of the twentieth century entitled *Achhut ki shikayat* (1914) and it is the earliest text of Hindi Dalit literature.⁹⁰ Bangla Dalit literature is also emerging with all its authenticity and specificity. The writers like Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Jatin Bala, Manju Bala, Kapilkrishna Thakur, Shyamal Pramanik document in their writings their lived experiences of caste discrimination and untouchability with profound authenticity. A number of writings like Manoranjan Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jeevan* (Evaluating Chandal Life), Manohar Mouli Biswas' *Amar Bhuvane Ami Beche Thaki* (*Surviving in my Own World*), Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (Why I Write Charal), Jatin Bala's *Shikor Chhera Jibon* (The Rootless Life) are some phenomenal documents of Dalit lives experienced by the lower castes in Bengal in the backdrop of displacement after partition and post-Independence period in a deeply caste-ridden Bengali *bhadrolok* (upper-caste genteel class) dominated society. The Dalit writers in their course of archiving the experience of Dalit life-world in their works develop a new aesthetics, often referred to as 'Dalit aesthetics' or 'Dalit literary aesthetics', which includes in its core, as Limbale argues, a desire to attain self-respect, human dignity, the ideals of liberty,

⁸⁹ Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's life* (Kolkata: Samya, 2009).

⁹⁰ Raj Kumar, *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (Kolkata: Orient BlackSwan, 2019), 54.

equality and justice.⁹¹ This newly emerging ‘Dalit literary aesthetics’, along with the contemporary Ambedkarite politics, in turn, help the Dalit filmmakers develop in the ‘Dalit Cinema’ (which I have described in a following section of this chapter) what is generally referred to as ‘anti-caste aesthetics’. In their new style of filmmaking, they endeavour to incorporate the message of Ambedkar’s political philosophy.

Caste in Cinema

For the purpose of this study, my discussion in this section will be limited to introducing the Hindi films on caste. My discussion on films other than Hindi will come as reference points to substantiate my arguments.

Caste in Hindi Cinema

When it comes to the representation of any issue of social and cultural importance, the Indian film industries in general and the Hindi film industry in particular have turned a blind eye, to a significant extent, towards the portrayal of caste questions. The upper-caste filmmakers of India have overlooked the gravity of the caste questions owing to their own caste prejudices as well as caste privilege. In her article on caste in Hindi cinema entitled “Exploring Caste in Hindi Cinema” Swati Mehta shows through her analysis of the Hindi films how the upper-caste upper class cultural hegemony are ingrained in the content of the films.⁹² As she argues,

..the majority of the stakes in the film industry is held by higher castes, their films portray a very elitist image and way of life. The culture and traditions shown in the films, for

⁹¹ Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*, trans. Alok Mukherjee (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016), 119.

⁹² Cited in Chatterji, Shoma A. “The Dalit in Indian cinema.” February 2016. Indiatogether.org. <https://indiatogether.org/the-dalit-in-indian-cinema-reviews>

instance are very brahmanical. Or the concept of class has taken over caste in popular cinema.⁹³

The recent emergence of Dalit studies, the growing interest in the study of discriminatory practices, especially caste system in India, persuade the film industries also to take interest in making films on such issues of socio-cultural importance. This is why a number of films on caste questions have been made in recent past. The arrival of Dalit filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule, Pa Ranjith, Jayan Cheriyan, Neeraj Ghaywan becomes the turning point in the making of films on caste questions as these filmmakers provide a new aesthetics, a new vocabulary, and most importantly, a new perspective to the making of films on caste questions. It is their way of approach tinged with ‘Dalit *chetna*’ or Dalit consciousness to the caste question and Dalit issue which persuades me to ponder over the question that how such a contentious issue was handled by the filmmakers, all of whom happen to hail from the upper-caste background, in their films before their (Dalit filmmakers’) arrival on the scene. My discussion in this case will be limited to examining the trajectory of representing the caste question in Hindi films as the films and the film adaptations undertaken for study in this dissertation are Hindi films. Before delving deep into the trajectory of the Hindi films on caste issues, I will discuss the socio-political and cultural context which not merely provides impetus to the filmmakers in making films on the burning issue of caste and untouchability but also ideologically shapes their perspective and determines their cultural politics of the caste question.

Caste has been a social as well as political question for long. But since the beginning of the twentieth century, with the likes of Ambedkar, and Gandhi mobilizing the politics of caste across the country to a significant extent (though their approach to the caste question was entirely different and in most of the cases contradictory), caste question has been articulated with

⁹³ Cited in Chatterji, Shoma A. “The Dalit in Indian cinema.”

much more profundity in the political landscape of the country. It was a challenge to portray such a contentious and sensitive issue on the screen, both technically and politically, during the formative years of cinema as a medium. Although less touched upon an issue due to its politically as well as religiously sensitive nature, the question of caste did find its place as a *leit motif* in a few films in the 1930s and 1940s on the eve of India's independence from the colonial British government. The recent emergence of Dalit Studies as an academic field, growing interest in Ambedkar's rigorous scrutiny of caste, the very recent advent of 'Dalit cinema', the foundation of the Dalit Panther in the early 1970s modelled upon the American Black Panther and many such developments inform about more nuanced, radical and revolutionary approach of Ambedkar. He attempted a more nuanced examination of caste in his *Castes in India* as early as 1925, and *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936, mobilized people through the Mahar Movement of 1927, Kalaram Temple Entry movement, burning the copy of ancient religious text *Manusmriti* (The Law of Manu) which contained pernicious caste and gender codes. But it was the approach adopted by Gandhi, who was his contemporary and more popular across the country for his leadership in the national level anti-colonial movements, in dealing with the caste question which gained more prominence in the political climate of the country, and consequently swayed more influence in the socio-cultural landscape. It determined the course of dealing with the caste question the legacy of which continued for some decades until challenged very recently. Accordingly, the film industry, the directors, producers, prominent actors of which hailed from the upper echelon of society, imbibed the Gandhian way of approaching the caste question, and applied the same in most of the cases in the making of films on caste issue. Apart from being addressed as 'achhut' (untouchable), the untouchables in these films were also addressed as 'Harijan' (people of Lord Krishna), a name coined by Gandhi to refer to the untouchables. These films, which primarily dealt with the issues of untouchability, inter-caste love relationship,

enabling the untouchables to enter into the temples, inter-caste friendship in a rural set-up, benevolent treatment of some upper caste fellows towards their Dalit counterparts, etc., had been inspired by Gandhiji's fight against untouchability and his belief that it was the benevolence and sympathy of the upper castes towards the untouchables that could cure the disease of untouchability. Gandhiji was solely focused on eradicating the practice of untouchability as he considered it to be a blot on Hinduism. He did not advocate the abolishment of caste system altogether as he considered it to be an ideal form of social stratification. Though he did not advocate discrimination on the basis of caste, he defended and upheld the *Chaturvarna* (four-fold division of society in ancient India), which is an earlier interchangeable version of the caste system, on the ground that it constituted a system of allotting hereditary occupation to respective castes, a system which he believed to be essential in sustaining the social balance.

After its initial engagement predominantly with the mythological and religious topics in the 1910s and 1920s, the Bombay film industry substantively engaged with the caste issues in a number of films in the third decade of the twentieth century following this Gandhian model. *Chandidas* (1934)⁹⁴, directed by Nitin Bose and produced by The New Theatres, Calcutta, is probably the first film made in the 1930s to substantively deal with the caste issue. The film based on the life of the fifteenth century saint Chandidas was a remake of Debaki Bose's 1932 Bengali film *Chandidas*. The film features the legendary love affair of a high caste young man Chandidas (K.L. Saigal), a Vaishnavite saint, with a low caste girl named Rami (Uma Sashi) who hailed from Washerman community, a community traditionally associated with washing and ironing clothes. In the very next year the Prabhat Film Company made a bilingual film (Marathi

⁹⁴ *Chandidas*, directed by Nitin Bose (1934; Calcutta: New Theatres Ltd), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcbmz8jhSbc>.

and Hindi) entitled *Dharmatma*⁹⁵, directed by V. Shantaram, which is based on the life of the sixteenth century Marathi saint Sant Eknath. The film features Sant Eknath's (Bal Gandharva) act of benevolence towards the fellow untouchable and low caste communities, his teachings against social inequality in terms of caste system, and untouchability, the consequent challenges faced by him from the orthodox priests who considered themselves the custodians of society and Hindu religion. In 1936 the Bombay Talkies, which later came to be the most prominent studio of the Hindi film industry, made the film *Achhut Kanya*⁹⁶, directed by Franz Osten, which was more nuanced in portraying the caste question. The film revolves around the inter-caste love relationship between a low-caste girl and an upper caste Brahmin boy. Kasturi (Devika Rani), the 'Achhut Kanya' (untouchable daughter) of Dukhia (Kamta Prasad), and Pratap (Ashok Kumar), the upper caste Brahmin boy, who were childhood playmates, involved in a love affair. The affair led to a familial as well as social tension as both Kasturi and Pratap violated the caste norms. The film also features a beautiful friendship between Pratap's father Mohan (P.F. Pithawala) and Dukhia. Subodh Mitra's *Doctor* (1941)⁹⁷ is a story of different perspectives on the idea of caste represented by a father and his son. The film is a remake of the eponymous Bengali film produced by the New Theatres in the previous year. The Bengali film itself was adapted from Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay's story *Teenpurush* (Three Generations). The film revolves around the story of an orthodox Brahmin patriarch who disowns his son as the latter marries a Brahmin widow who is lower in terms of social status. As a film with reformist purpose, it ends with the casteist Brahmin patriarch's realization of his mistake of discriminating

⁹⁵*Dharmatma*, directed by Rajaram Vankudre Shantaram (1935; Pune: Prabhat Film Company), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjN5sWd0s7Q>.

⁹⁶ *Achhut Kanya*, directed by Franz Osten (1936; Bombay: The Bombay Talkies Ltd.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpXvkt9XX0g>.

⁹⁷ *Doctor*, directed by Subodh Mitra (1941; Calcutta: New Theatres), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01tFynlG5IA>.

his daughter-in-law on the basis of caste. Almost a similar story has been taken up by Bimal Roy in his *Sujata* (1959)⁹⁸ to address the caste question. Bimal Roy's *Sujata*, produced under the banner of Bimal Roy Productions, is the first significant film on caste and untouchability in the post-Independence Nehruvian era. The film, which is an adaptation of the popular Bengali writer Subodh Ghosh's eponymous novel, narrates the story of an untouchable girl Sujata (Nutan) raised by a Brahmin couple who constantly tries to get rid of the girl but failed. The film deals with Sujata's trauma in being discriminated within the familial space on the basis of her low-caste origin. The film also portrayed an inter-caste love relationship between Sujata and Adheer (Sunil Dutt), a distant relative of her adoptive father Upen Choudhury (Tarun Bose). The film also highlights how the upper castes, especially the Brahmins take refuge to imaginary, baseless and religiously driven 'scientific' arguments. An important aspect of the film lies in its valorisation of Gandhian ideals in terms of fighting casteism. In Bimal Roy's films, songs are integral part of the narrative. In this film also, song sequences are crafted to communicate the psychological state of the protagonist. These songs 'appealed to the popular tastes and values, yet at the same time were intelligent in substance and representation.'⁹⁹ K.A. Abbas' *Char Dil Char Rahein* (1959)¹⁰⁰ features inter-caste love affair between high-caste Govind and the Harijan girl Chowli, and the resultant upper caste violence on Chowli who somehow manages to escape. The film ends with an optimistic note as the lovers get united. Najam Naqvi's *Punarmilan* (1964)¹⁰¹ is a romantic drama of inter-caste love affairs. The story revolves around Mohan's (Balraj Sahni)

⁹⁸ *Sujata*, directed by Bimal Roy (1959; Mumbai: Bimal Roy Productions), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/sujata/3498586/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

⁹⁹ John W. Hood, *The Essential Mystery*, (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Char Dil Char Rahein*, directed by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1959; Bombay: Naya Sansar), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8fmaKBLcbU>.

¹⁰¹ *Punarmilan*, directed by Ravindra Dave (1964; Bombay: Nagina Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=as9m7ivRPJI>.

upbringing as an upper caste fellow, and the eventual discovery of his low-caste origin, a discovery which led a tension in his otherwise socially accepted love affair with a high caste woman Sobhna (Ameeta). The film depicts another inter-caste love relationship between a Brahmin fellow Sunil (Jagdeep) and a Harijan girl named Sona (Shashikala). Their relationship suffered because of their different caste origin. Through the union of the two pairs at the end after a series of events the film proposed that breaking the caste barrier could be made possible only through love. Chandra Shekhar's 1964 film *Cha Cha Cha*¹⁰² also narrates an inter-caste love relationship between Puran (Chandra Sekhar), who hails from a Harijan community, and the high caste girl Laali (Helen). Though Laali's father Dinanath (Om Prakash) has no objection to Puran as a person, he is afraid of losing his social status because of his daughter's relationship with Puran, the Harijan fellow. That is why he objects to their marriage. The film portrays the limitation of a progressive, educated old man in dealing with the, to use the phrase of Nicholas Dirks, 'caste of mind' through the character of Laali's father. Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974)¹⁰³ features an upper caste landlord's son Surya's affair with a low-caste maid servant Lakshmi. The film attempts to capture the intersections of caste, class and gender. Benegal exposes how an educated upper caste fellow like Surya succumbs to the ills of patriarchy and caste feudalism. The intersections of caste, class and gender once again are explored by Benegal in his next film *Nishant* (1975).¹⁰⁴ Satyajit Ray's 1981 TV film *Sadgati*¹⁰⁵, which is an adaptation of Munshi

¹⁰² *Cha Cha Cha*, directed by Chandrasekhar (1964; Bombay: Bhav Deep Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p11jeGiD5FM>.

¹⁰³ *Ankur*, directed by Shyam Benegal (1974; Bombay; Blaze Film Enterprises Pvt. Ltd.), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/ankur-the-seedling/3491971/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

¹⁰⁴ *Nishant*, directed by Shyam Benegal (1975; Bombay: Blaze Film Entertainment Pvt. Ltd.), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/nishant-nights-end/3490030/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

Premchand's eponymous short story, portrays how a Brahmin priest exploits an untouchable's labour. The film significantly frames the location of the *Chamar basti* (tanner colony) at the outskirts of the village. *Paar* (1984)¹⁰⁶, directed by Goutam Ghose, explores the hardships of a couple Naurangia (Naseeruddin Shah) and Rama (Shabana Azmi) doubly oppressed by caste and class. Based on the Bengali short story *Paari* by Samaresh Bose, the film explores the ills of feudalism, casteism and the hapless victims of these ills, the landless Dalit labourers. Prakash Jha's 1984 art house film *Damul* (Bonded unto death)¹⁰⁷ portrays how the high caste landlords exploits the lower castes under the 'Panha' (shelter) system, a system through which the low caste fellows are bound to be bonded labours to escape police case for the petty crimes they commit. In exchange of bonded labour they are supposed to be protected by the landlords. T.S. Ranga's 1984 film *Giddh*¹⁰⁸ (meaning 'Vulture') portrays the Devdasi system in which the lower caste women are made to get married with God and dedicate their lives to the service of the god, and they get sexually exploited by the temple priests as well as the powerful feudal landlords. The film depicts the struggle of a Devdasi named Hanumaikka (Smita Patil) to rescue a little girl from getting trapped in this exploitative system. Arun Kaul's *Diksha* (1991)¹⁰⁹, based on the celebrated Kannada writer U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Ghatashraddha*, depicts how the Brahmanical rituals like Ghatashraddha excommunicate an individual, how a lower caste Koga learns the

¹⁰⁵ *Sadgati*, directed by Satyajit Ray (1981; New Delhi: Doordarshan), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRpaPV3QayY>.

¹⁰⁶ *Paar*, directed by Goutam Ghose (1984; Calcutta: Orchid Films), https://www.airtelxstream.in/movies/paar/EPICON_MOVIE_26044.

¹⁰⁷ *Damul*, directed by Prakash Jha (1984; Mumbai: Prakash Jha Productions), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mPcRiYVFZc>.

¹⁰⁸ *Giddh*, directed by T. S. Ranga (1984; Mumbai: Shemaroo Entertainment Company), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUJYYgni6C8>.

¹⁰⁹ *Diksha*, directed by Arun Kaul (1991; Mumbai: National Film Development Corporation of India), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/diksha/3501562/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

religious hymns, challenging the stereotypical notion that the lower castes are not intelligent enough to learn religious literature. Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali* (1993)¹¹⁰, produced by the National Film Development Corporation, is a cinematic adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's novella of the same name. Focusing on the life of the lower caste woman Sanichari (Dimple Kapadia) who is Ganju by caste, Lajmi attempts to portray the social and economic exploitation of the lower caste women by the upper caste *malik-mahajans* or feudal lords. The story revolves around how the precarious situation of life enabled by the feudal lords of the village forces Sanichari to transform herself into a *Rudali*, the professional mourner (the low-caste women who are hired by the landlord family for publicly performing the act of lamentation on the death of someone in the family and paid for the act). Shekhar Kapoor's highly controversial *Bandit Queen* (1994)¹¹¹ is a biopic on Phoolan Devi who was a Mallah (boatman) by caste. The film realistically portrays the sexual violence perpetrated on her by some feudal upper-caste men, and how this violence turns her into a bandit or dacoit who takes her vengeance by brutally killing twenty two perpetrators of violence, and later goes on to earn a household name as a bandit of the Chambal area of Central India. K. Bikram Singh's film *Tarpan* (1995)¹¹², produced by the National Film Development Corporation, Doordarshan, interweaves different stories of caste discrimination and caste atrocities perpetrated on the lower castes of Shekavati area of Rajasthan. Through episodic narratives, the film documents the victimization of the lower castes by the upper caste supremacists in a rural setting. The issue of inter-caste marriage resurfaces in Kamal Haasan's

¹¹⁰ *Rudaali*, directed by Kalpana Lajmi (1993; Mumbai: National Films Development Corporation), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/rudaali/3501513/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

¹¹¹ *Bandit Queen*, directed by Shekhar Kapur (1994; Noida: Kaleidoscope Entertainment, Channel Four Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iERIJL3UGvI>.

¹¹² *Tarpan*, directed by Bikram Singh (1995; Mumbai: National Film Development Corporation of India), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/tarpan/3501528/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

1997 film *Chachi 420*¹¹³ as the film features a marriage between a Dushad (a low-caste community) young man and a Brahmin girl against the consent of the girl's father who is a staunch follower of caste norms. Shyam Benegal's *Samar* (1998)¹¹⁴, another Government of India funded film, documents the conflict between the upper caste and lower caste communities on the issue of hand-pump installation, and the consequent physical violence perpetrated upon the lower castes, social excommunication and economic boycott of them. Jag Mohan Mundra's *Bawandar* (2000)¹¹⁵ is based on the real incident of sexual assault upon Bhanwari Devi. The film documents this sexual violence perpetrated upon Bhanwari Devi, who belongs to a potter caste, by some upper caste fellows. Jabbar Patel's *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2000)¹¹⁶ is a biopic of the anti-caste social crusader and thinker Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The film attempts to portray lifelong struggles of Dr. Ambedkar to ensure social justice, political empowerment and human rights for the Dalits and other marginalized social groups. The film portrays his struggle abroad for higher education, his leadership in the Mahad Satyagraha or Mahad Movement of 1927, his negotiation as a leader of the Depressed Classes with the Congress leader Gandhi for the political empowerment and social emancipation of the Dalits, his conversion along with lakhs of Dalit followers to Buddhism as a way out to break away from the shackles of Hinduism which sanctioned the caste system. Rajkumar Santoshi's *Lajja* (2001)¹¹⁷ tells the story of how a low-

¹¹³ *Chachi 420*, directed by Kamal Haasan (1997; Chennai: Raaj Kamal Films International), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m5SmpnCdoE>.

¹¹⁴ *Samar*, directed by Shyam Benegal 1998 (1998; Bombay: National Film Development Corporation of India), DVD.

¹¹⁵ *Bawandar*, directed by Jag Mundhra (2000; Mumbai: Smriti Pictures Pvt. Ltd. Productions), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=am-6CaZ1n0Q&t=1s>.

¹¹⁶ *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*, directed by Jabbar Patel (2000; Mumbai: National Film Development Corporation of India), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keejOOvSIWY>.

¹¹⁷ *Lajja*, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi (2001; Mumbai: Santoshi Productions), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/lajja/3492661/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

caste Ramdulari (Rekha), who works as a midwife, challenges the feudal authority of the Thakurs, a dominant upper-caste community of the North Indian states. Ramdulari is sexually assaulted by the Thakurs as her son falls in love with Sushma, the daughter of Gajendra, the oppressive Thakur who is also the village head. Asutosh Gowariker's 2001 film *Lagaan*¹¹⁸ becomes the centre of controversy in terms of caste as it features a low-caste character named Kachra (Aditya Lakhia). The act of attributing a low-caste character with despicable tags like 'Kachra', which literally means wastage, presupposes a dehumanizing mindset of the upper castes towards the low-caste communities. Mahesh Manjrekar's *Pitaah* (2002)¹¹⁹ depicts the prevalence of caste feudalism in a rural set-up. The film portrays how the low-caste communities, especially the low-caste women remain at the receiving end of caste atrocities perpetrated by the powerful high caste feudal lords, and how the administration becomes participant in this caste-feudalism dominance. Asutosh Gowariker's *Swades: We, the People* (2004)¹²⁰ shows how casteism casually operates in day-to-day life of rural India. A notable portrayal of caste discrimination is shown in the film at the time of public screening of a popular Hindi film. The caste discrimination among the villagers is revealed in their very sitting arrangement in which the upper castes sit in one side of the screen, whereas the lower caste villagers are allowed to watch only the opposite side of the screen. Pankuj Parashar's *Banaras* (2006)¹²¹ features inter-caste love relationship between a high-caste girl Shwetambari and a low-caste boy Shom. Although the girl's parents apparently give their consent to their daughter's

¹¹⁸ *Lagaan*, directed by Asutosh Gowariker (2001; Mumbai: Amir Khan Productions), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/60020906?source=35>.

¹¹⁹ *Pitaah*, directed by Mahesh Manjrekar (2002; Mumbai: Aryaman Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouMXzTGbGkQ>.

¹²⁰ *Swades: We, the People*, directed by Asutosh Gowariker (2004; Mumbai: Ashutosh Gowariker Productions), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70019491?source=35>.

¹²¹ *Banaras*, directed by Pankuj Parashar (2006; Pune: Setu Creations), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Am9jYIcod3Y>.

relationship with a low-caste boy, the real picture appears to be different as Shom is eventually murdered by Shwetambari's mother who actually cannot accept her daughter's relationship with a low-caste boy. Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007)¹²² has portrayed a vocal Dalit figure, Pannalal Chauhar (Sanjay Dutt), the DSP, who is aware of the historical exclusion his community is suffering from for centuries and boldly asserts his Dalit identity. Pannalal Chauhar appears before the Raja with his own personality, not like a subjugated person. When the Raja tries to remind him of his low-caste status, he warns him about the legal action that he could take against him for his casteist remark. Prakash Jha's *Aarakshan* (2011)¹²³ features the debate on the caste-based reservation policy in the aftermath of the Mandal Commission¹²⁴. In one scene of the film, the vice-principal Mithilesh Singh (Manoj Bajpayee) makes an encounter with a young Dalit lecturer Deepak Kumar (Saif Ali Khan) on the controversial issue of caste-based reservation. Mithilesh taunts Deepak by saying that "our children work hard at studies day and night and when the time of admission comes, you walk away with freebies. You are afraid to do hard work, right?" Then the challenging Dalit hero replies boldly: "Well, you are teaching us what hard work is. We tilled your land, reaped your crop, grazed your cattle, stitched your shoes, rowed your boat, and cleaned your dirty drains. Even we have carried your shit on

¹²² *Eklavya: The Royal Guard*, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra (2007; Bombay: Vinod Chopra Productions), https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.66b5f077-16ed-5354-1358-1b5824674d9a?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb.

¹²³ *Aarakshan*, directed by Prakash Jha 2011 (Mumbai: Reliance Entertainment), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tRJK3PiUts>.

¹²⁴ The Mandal Commission was constituted by the Government of India in 1979 in order to categorize the social groups on the basis of their social and educational backwardness. The Commission was headed by B.P. Mandal. The purpose behind forming such commission was to consider the issue of reservation for the socially and educationally backward classes. The Commission identified these classes and categorized them as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The most crucial aspect was that the Commission granted 27% reservation to the OBCs in the Central Government jobs and public sector jobs. Though the Commission submitted its report and recommendation in as early as 1980, the Government of India implemented it in 1990. The implementation of the report of the Mandal Commission resulted in a huge uproar across the country and witnessed organized protest by the upper caste people, especially the students, which turned militant in some parts of the country.

our head. And you will teach us what hard work is!” It would really be hard to find an assertive or challenging Dalit figure like Deepak Kumar in Bollywood movies made by the upper caste filmmakers. The film *Teesri Azadi* (2006)¹²⁵, produced by the Lord Communication Limited, reinterpreted some episodes from the ancient epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* from Dalit perspective. Among various episodes, the film shows how Rama killed the Shudra sage Shambuk as the latter dared to acquire knowledge which was prohibited for the Shudras. It shows how Dronacharya deprived the low-caste born Eklavya of attaining excellence in archery by asking from the latter his right thumb as *gurudakshina*¹²⁶. The film also features the conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism, and how the Brahmins mercilessly killed the Buddhists to ensure their religious supremacy. The film portrays the wretched life of the Shudras and the Untouchables during the Peshwa rule in Maharashtra province. The film also portrays Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, his relentless struggle for securing social justice for the Shudras and the Untouchables, and to establish an anti-caste society. Ajay Sinha’s *Khap* (2011)¹²⁷ documents the honour killing under the Khap Panchayat system in North Indian states. The film features killing a couple as they involve in a love relationship in spite of hailing from the same *gotra* or clan. Neeraj Ghaywan’s 2015 film *Masaan*¹²⁸ (meaning ‘crematorium’) portrays social taboos in terms of sexual relationship between unmarried couple and the obstacle of caste on the way to a love relationship. As far as the caste question is concerned, the film depicts a love affair between a college boy named Deepak (Vicky Kaushal), who hails from *Dom*

¹²⁵ *Teesri Aazadi*, directed by Jabbar Patel (2006; Lord Communication), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wM98m3mkS1w>.

¹²⁶ *Gurudakshina* is the payment a disciple has to make to his guru or teacher after the completion of learning.

¹²⁷ *Khap*, directed by Ajay Sinha (2011; Mumbai: Ananda Film & Telecommunications), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLIv2L-OU3A>.

¹²⁸ *Masaan*, directed by Neeraj Ghaywan (2015; Bombay: Drishyam Films, Phantom Films, Macassar Productions, Sikhya Entertainment, Paris: Pathé and Arte France Cinéma), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6l8Ros5YkV0>.

caste, a lower caste community traditionally associated with the occupation of burning dead bodies at cremation ground, and a college girl named Shalu Gupta (Shweta Tripathi) who belongs to upper caste Baniya (businessman) community. One of Deepak's friends makes Deepak aware of Shalu's high caste identity, and reflects over the uncertainty and imminent danger on the way of their love affair. Both the lovers do not reveal their relationship to their families due to the caste barrier. Though the film deals with some other important issues, it effectively portrays the impossibility of love affair between the lovers belonging to two high and low castes even in the modern urban set-up of the twenty first century, thereby showcasing the failure of the attainment of 'notional change' that Ambedkar considered to be most crucial in annihilating the system of caste. Bikash Ranjan Mishra's 2016 film *Chauranga*¹²⁹ is a beautiful tale of a young Dalit boy's infatuation over an upper caste girl. The boy's mother is also in a secret relationship with the girl's father who happens to be a powerful landlord of the village. The film also features physical atrocities perpetrated on the Dalit characters and their exploitation by the high-caste fellows. Shashank Khaitan's *Dhadak* (2018)¹³⁰, a Hindi film adaptation of Nagraj Manjule's Marathi film *Sairat* (2016)¹³¹, tells the story of inter-caste love affair between a boy from low caste family and a girl from a dominant high caste family. Overcoming a series of obstacles the couple manages to settle in a city. But the story ends on a tragic note as the elder brother of the girl, along with some goons, kills the couple mercilessly.

¹²⁹ *Chauranga*, directed by Bikash Mishra (2016; Mumbai: Anticlock Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUyWz4vG76Y>.

¹³⁰ *Dhadak*, directed by Shashank Khaitan (2018; Mumbai: Zee Studios), https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/dhadak/0-0-19151?utm_source=google_web&utm_medium=watchaction&utm_campaign=google_watch&utm_content=dhadak.

¹³¹ *Sairat*, directed by Nagraj Manjule (2016; Mumbai: Zee Studios), https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/sairat/0-0-movie_1921832123?utm_source=google_web&utm_medium=watchaction&utm_campaign=google_watch&utm_content=sairat.

Sudhir Mishra's film *Serious Men* (2020)¹³², based on Manu Joseph's eponymous novel published in 2010, portrays a young Dalit man's aspiration to raise his socio-economic status at any cost. For this very purpose he uses his little child's falsely made image of a wonder boy, and puts his family in a series of troubles. The film *200 Halla Ho* (2021)¹³³, directed by Sarthak Dasgupta and Alok Batra and produced by the Yoodlee films, is loosely based on a real incident occurred in Nagpur in 2004 in which 200 low-caste women, in an act of vengeance, publicly killed a rapist in an open court. Nagraj Manjule's *Jhund* (2022)¹³⁴ significantly portrays the lives of the slum boys and their aspiration for a dignified social life.

Caste, Cinema and the Dalit Critique

Since its recognition as a largely influential cultural medium to transform society, cinema in India grapples with the issues that plague the socio-cultural fabric. Caste is one such core issue which shapes culture and society at large, and therefore, a powerful medium like cinema cannot shy away from dealing with such a colossal issue which predominantly determines the social actions of Indian subcontinent for thousands of years. Indian film industries, developed in various corners of the countries in various languages, namely, Hindi film industry (popularly known as Bollywood), Tamil film industry, Bengali film industry, Telugu film industry, Malayalam film industry, Kannada film industry, Punjabi film industry *etc.*, have dealt with the caste question to a certain extent. My discussion in this section will be limited mainly to the

¹³² *Serious Men*, directed by Sudhir Mishra (2020; Mumbai: Cine Raas Entertainment), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81086997?source=35>.

¹³³ *200 Halla Ho*, directed by Dasgupta, Sarthak, and Alok Batra (2021; Mumbai: Yoodlee Films), <https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/200-halla-ho/0-0-1z51313>.

¹³⁴ *Jhund*, directed by Nagraj Manjule (2022; Mumbai: Zee Studios), https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/jhund/0-0-1z5133622?utm_source=google_web&utm_medium=watchaction&utm_campaign=google_watch&utm_content=jhund.

critique of Bollywood films on caste from Dalit perspective, and the discussion on films from the other aforesaid film industries will come as reference points.

Although not on a large scale, Bollywood cannot help but making films on all-pervasive casteism. The political movements and social campaigns against the practice of caste and untouchability were highly visibilized during the late 1920s and the 1930s. Whereas the leaders from the low-caste communities like B.R. Ambedkar adopted a radical approach in his mission to eradicate caste altogether, as explicit in his works like *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Who were Shudras* (1946) etc., and his social movements like the Mahad Satyagraha, Kalaram Temple Entry Movement, *Manusmriti* Dahan (publicly burning the ancient religious tract *Manusmriti* which codified the ancient caste system) in the late 1920s, and the leaders from the upper-caste communities like M. K. Gandhi resorted to reformist approach which largely concentrates on eradicating the practice of untouchability, as evident in his anti-untouchability campaigns in various parts of the country, while upholding the principles of caste system. And the filmmakers in the Bombay film industry aka Bollywood also took a caste-neutral, reformist approach to tackle the caste question and untouchability in the films. Bollywood or the Hindi film industry controls the national cultural economy to a great degree. Movies produced in this industry are mostly repository of inherent casteist values.

Because of the contentious relationship that the Indian cinema shares with caste, the issue of caste question has been, though not extensively, examined occasionally in academic writing. Caste operates as lived reality of Indian social psyche. To the upper castes it acts as privilege, whereas to the lower castes it is a definite factor of humiliation, discrimination, and physical atrocity. Caste stereotypes continue to occur even in the twenty-first century, an era believed to

be liberated from all forms of discriminatory social stratification like caste by virtue of the liberal values of Western modernity. Cinema in India, as monopolized by the upper-castes since its inception, can be considered to be an archive, largely reproducing the cultural hegemony of the upper castes in the film through the stereotypical portrayal of Dalit characters. Representation of caste in Hindi films is largely based on the template of reformism, an approach which views the practice of caste and untouchability as aberrant other, which is to be reformed, and majorly fails to offer any template to question the sanctity of the structure of caste. The Hindi film industry has portrayed the low-caste characters and communities as ‘other’ because of their social position. But understanding caste is not merely focusing on the precarious conditions of Dalit life-world or how a Dalit emancipates himself or herself or the entire community, but also decoding the privilege, sense of entitlement, and prejudice of the high-caste groups, through which the system of castes operates in a blatant or nuanced way. Along with the precariousities of Dalit life, these films also substantively showcase these privileges, sense of entitlement or prejudice. Singh and Azeez point out how glorifying the caste name by the dominant castes has become a normative practice:

the mainstream Bollywood movies engage in the conscious efforts of glorifying the dominant castes by bringing the caste conversations tactically. The caste conversations in the movies are designed to reinstate the essential perceived (and misperceived) caste qualities. One can find many such incidents in Bollywood movies where characters were shown to carry caste-based conversations comfortably. For example, in a scene from the movie “Piku,” Bhashkor Banerjee (a Brahmin character) casually inquired about Rana Chaudhary’s (a Kshatriya character) caste, suggesting it is not unacceptable to publicly inquire about someone’s caste in India. In the movie “Bajrangi Bhaijaan”, Pawan Chaturvedi (a Brahmin character) frequently mention his caste and being vegetarian due to his caste affiliation.¹³⁵

Amol Palekar, the veteran actor of the Hindi film industry, who has recently acted in a film based on a real life incidence of caste violence, *200 Halla Ho* (2021) remarks, ‘Hindi cinema still

¹³⁵ Arti Singh and EP Abdul Azeez, “Caste in contemporary Bollywood movies: An analysis of the portrayal of characters,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 49, no. 2 (2021): 93-100.

prefers to maintain a conspicuous silence about caste issues. Our film industry refuses to come out of the Brahminical aesthetics. Themes of the caste divide used to get introduced through a love story. Though oppression was shown, the relief used to appease the majority.’¹³⁶ Neeraj Ghaywan, a prominent Dalit filmmaker of present day Bollywood, points out the politics of obscuring caste with class, and also raises his concern over the absence of Dalit artists in the film industry:

For our generation, caste has masqueraded itself as class. It’s easier to acknowledge a class problem, but it’s difficult to acknowledge – or even understand – a caste problem... The handful of caste-based films made in the history of Hindi cinema have all been made by savarnas. There’s not a single acknowledged Dalit artist that you can name here, even though Dalits make up 25 percent of the population. Whereas in America, you have so many black directors, artists, singers, songwriters – and the Black American population is 13 percent!¹³⁷

According to Harish Wankhede, ‘...the issue of caste became a part of the popular narrative in films like *Ganga Jumna* (1961) and *Sujata* (1959) but only to supplement the popular reformist logic of the ruling classes. Otherwise the poor of the popular Hindi cinema remained with the abstract ‘commoner’ identity away from caste considerations.’¹³⁸ Suraj Yengde points out two major reasons behind the absence of Dalit assertion in the film industry: i) minuscule representation of Dalit characters in the film, and ii) censoring the depiction of caste issue by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) as a sensitive one.¹³⁹ As he elucidates:

¹³⁶ Manisha Mandal, “Amol Palekar Feels Hindi Cinema Distances Itself From Caste Issues as It’s Not Entertaining,” *India Times* (19 August 2021), <https://www.indiatimes.com/entertainment/celebs/amol-palekar-says-hindi-cinema-distances-itself-from-caste-issues-as-its-not-entertaining-547557.html>

¹³⁷ Manisha Mandal, “Amol Palekar Feels Hindi Cinema Distances Itself From Caste Issues as It’s Not Entertaining”.

¹³⁸ Harish S. Wankhede, “Dalit Representation in Bollywood,” *Mainstream* 51, no. 20, May 4, 2013, <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4161.html>.

¹³⁹ Suraj Yengde, “Dalit Cinema,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848>, 10.

By rejecting films that depict Dalit individuality and Dalit views that are not shaped by the hegemonic narrative of the dominant castes, the CBFC continues to manifest the casteist nature of autocratic demagoguery. In *Papilio Buddha*, Cherian was forced to cut dialogue and scenes that depicted Dalit disagreement with the dominant-caste narratives about Dalits because the counter voices from below are seen as a danger and so are suppressed... A 2015 study by The Hindu revealed that Dalits, who number nearly 200 million in India, were non-existent in Indian cinema. Of the 300 Bollywood movies released in 2013 and 2014, only six of the lead characters were backward caste characters, and none were Dalits. The bowdlerising of historical and contemporary reality is indicative of a denial of the nature of the caste system.¹⁴⁰

Caste and the Emergence of Dalit Cinema

The discussion on caste in the cinematic discourse has recently drawn academic attention in the wake of the emergence of what the Dalit intellectuals call ‘Dalit Cinema’. Dalit Cinema developed as a separate category and finds its ideological base in the anti-caste ethos as espoused by the anti-caste thinkers ranging from the medieval saints like Chokhamela, Naamdev to the contemporary social reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Ayyankali, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar, and the most influential among them, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. In the recent times Dalit Cinema emerges as a counter-narrative to the caste-centric films produced by the upper-caste filmmakers and gains visibility across the country and even overseas through the films made by the filmmakers who themselves hail from the untouchable low-caste groups. Nagraj Popatrao Manjule from the Marathi film industry, Pa Ranjith, Rajesh Rajamani from the Tamil film industry, Jayan Cherian from the Malayalam film industry, Neeraj Ghaywan from the Hindi film industry are the filmmakers who have undergone the predicament of Dalit life-world. Their experiences of Dalit life-world and anti-caste ethos make them rethink the question of filmmaking when it comes to making films on caste. They differ from the traditional way of filming caste issues by the caste Hindu filmmakers and give birth to this new corpus of Dalit Cinema. In this regard it is imperative to provide an outline of the Dalit Cinema in order to understand the nature of its

¹⁴⁰ Suraj Yengde, “Dalit Cinema,” 10.

treatment of caste, its anti-caste politics and its influence on the recent penchant of the Indian film industries for caste question which gives impetus to revisiting and rethinking the negotiation of cinema with caste.

Dalit Cinema as a genre of filmmaking is a new phenomenon in the history of Indian cinema. The filmmakers who themselves hail from Dalit communities and who are highly influenced by the Ambedkarite anti-caste politics use cinema as an artistic and political tool to confront the cultural hegemony of the Indian cinema exclusively monopolized by the high castes. In conceptualizing ‘Dalit Cinema’ Suraj Yengde sees it as

an emergence of an alter-imaginaire—an explicitly ‘Dalit Cinema’—an act of defiance leading to a sustained cinematic struggle. Compared to similar liberation or resistance movements since the 1960s, Dalit Cinema can be understood as a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, relating to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, and as a universal monument of time and space.¹⁴¹

The Marathi film director Nagraj Manjule, the Tamil film director Pa Ranjith, the Malayalam filmmaker Jayan Cherian, the Hindi filmmaker Neeraj Ghaywan and so on come from low-caste communities, and venture to make films on caste questions which draw attention and gain visibility in the first decade of the twenty first century. These films appear as antithesis to the Hindu majoritarian upper-caste upper class male chauvinistic cultural sensibilities endorsed by the film industries in India. The films like *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016) in Marathi by Nagraj Manjule, *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018) in Tamil by Pa Ranjith, *Papilio Buddha* (2013) in Malayalam by Jayan K. Cherian are some primarily major films which have come to define and determine the course of what is now generally understood to be Dalit Cinema. Mari Selvaraj’s *Pariyeram Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), Vinod Kamble’s *Kastoori* (2019), Neeraj Ghaywan’s *Geeli Puchhi* (2021), which is a part of the anthology *Ajeb Dastaans*, Pa Ranjith’s

¹⁴¹ Suraj Yengde, “Dalit Cinema,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848>, 1.

Sarpatta Parambarai (2021), *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* (2022), T.J. Gnanavel's *Jai Bhim* (2021) are latest addition to this. The film *Jai Bhim* went on to become the highest-ranked movie on IMDB surpassing the Hollywood masterpieces like Frank Darabont's *Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972). Very recently, Manjule makes a Hindi film also entitled *Jhund* which substantively incorporates anti-caste politics and Dalit assertion. The film has been released in 2022 starring the megastar of the Hindi film industry Amitabh Bachchan. In 2021, the Telugu film industry extends the canvas of Dalit Cinema through making films with anti-caste sensibilities like *Love Story*, *Uppena*, and *Sridevi Soda Center*.¹⁴² An important addition to this list is Shailesh Baliram Narwade's Marathi film *Jayanti* released at the end of 2021.¹⁴³ Now I will go on to discuss some of these films in order to understand the anti-caste politics in Dalit Cinema.

***Fandry* (2013)**

Nagraj Manjule, who hails from a Dalit background, changed the face of Marathi cinema when it comes to representing the caste question with all its nuances and layered complexity. Nagraj Manjule attempts to portray the dehumanization of the Dalits in his film *Fandry* (2014)¹⁴⁴, through filming the social forms of discrimination which induce in the lower caste members of society a sense of inferiority complex, low self-esteem and overall degradation of human personality which they carry generation after generation. But there are also cases of resistance by the Dalits to dismantle such forms of discrimination. Through examining the images, dialogues,

¹⁴² Ravi Shinde, "2021 was the year of anti-caste cinema — from *Jai Bhim* to *Karnan*," *The Print*, Dec 21, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/2021-anti-caste-cinema-jai-bhim-karnan/784452/>

¹⁴³ Ravi Shinde, "2021 was the year of anti-caste cinema — from *Jai Bhim* to *Karnan*".

¹⁴⁴ *Fandry*, directed by Nagraj Manjule (2014; Mumbai: Reliance Media Works, Zee Entertainment), https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/fandry/0-0-2558?utm_source=google_web&utm_medium=watchaction&utm_campaign=google_watch&utm_content=fandry.

negotiations between the characters, this section attempts to decode these processes of dehumanization through caste and resistance against it.

The story of the film *Fandry* (literally meaning ‘pig’) is set in a rural area of Maharashtra named Akonade. The film portrays the practice of caste and untouchability through a love story which revolves around the teenage Dalit boy Jabya’s (played by Somnath Avaghade) unreciprocated love for Shalu (played by Rajeshwari Kharat), who hails from a high caste background in the same village, his continuous attempts to hide his lowly status and the low self-esteem which is the result of age-old system of social stratifications called caste. The film is a tale of such a social structure which dehumanizes a particular section of people, here, the Dalits (the erstwhile ‘untouchables’ in the *varna* system). Manjule beautifully portrays the humiliating effects of the pernicious caste system by showing the story from the point of view of a schoolboy named Jabya who hails from a Dalit community named *Kaikadi* traditionally associated with the menial job of catching pigs. It is the story of Jabya who is predestined to follow the caste codes, which chase him since his childhood and reminds him of his lowly social status time and again, inducing in him a sense of being ‘unacceptable’ and a sense of low self-esteem, shattering his desire of being in a love affair with Shalu, his high caste schoolmate. There are a number of scenes which show that Jabya does not want his low caste identity to be revealed to his heartthrob Shalu. Therefore, while engaged in his lowly menial job, he tries to hide from Shalu’s glance. He is torn between his duty and desire. As a member of his poor Kaikadi family he has to do his menial jobs, but at the same time he wants to attain his love, which is otherwise ‘unattainable’. He does not intend to be witnessed by Shalu while selling baskets in the market or catching pigs in front of the school. That Jabya does not want to accept his lowly status is evident in the incident of his encounter with a high caste fellow Mr. Patil who orders Jabya to take a piglet out of a ditch in front of his house. In response, Jabya refuses to follow his order,

and this refusal by Jabya makes him interpret the act as the Dalit boy's disobedient attitude against the age-old 'sacred' caste norms. Later he warns Jabya's father Kachru Mane, about his son's 'misconduct' of expressing disobedient attitude to follow the caste norms.

The deeply entrenched caste inequality is visualized in the film when it is found that Jabya is even forbidden to touch the bird Black Sparrow because if the bird, as an old woman of the village informs him, gets touched by Jabya, the 'untouchable' lower caste fellow, the bird will be 'ostracized' from its flock, its 'community'. The casteism is so deeply entrenched that 'caste of mind', to use the phrase of the celebrated anthropologist Nicholas Dirks, does not spare even the birds to be viewed through the lens of caste. Manjule here beautifully makes a symbolic use of the Black Sparrow which stands for, according to the local belief system, high caste, and Jabya's constant attempt and running after the bird to catch it symbolically represents his desire to be in love with the high caste girl Shalu. In fact, 'I must have the Black Sparrow'—this determination of Jabya is indeed his desire to have Shalu in his life by transgressing the caste barrier, as later revealed in the film that if, according to a local legend, the ash arising out of the burning of the black sparrow is sprinkled on a person, it has the power to hypnotize him or her to fall in love with the person who sprinkles it. And this idea Jabya might have learned from Chankya, a young man of the village with whom Jabya has a friendly relationship, as is seen in a scene in which a book on the art of hypnotism is found in Chankya's shop. Manjule here has equated Shalu with the Black Sparrow through the belief system that, as informed by the old woman to Jabya in the film, the Black Sparrow is a high-caste Brahmin.

Catching pig is the precise thing which Jabya does not like to do, especially in front of his dream girl Shalu, but his attempt to hide to get away from the job results in his facing more humiliation as his father beats him up in front of his schoolmates, especially Shalu. While

carrying a pig with his family members, his sense of humiliation and inferiority complex is aggravated by the local upper caste fellows' calling him by the name 'fandry', meaning 'pig'. Manjule makes symbolic use of the portraits of anti-caste crusaders like B.R. Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, or Sant Gadge Maharaj to showcase rigidity of caste-ridden society which still sanctions inhuman treatment upon the Dalits even after the lifelong struggles of the anti-caste social reformers to eradicate the caste system. Each and every stone thrown at those upper caste fellows by enraged Jabya in retaliation for their act of teasing Jabya is symbolic of his urge of resistance, rage, revenge and revolt against the caste system.



Fig 1: The last scene featuring the angry Jabya throwing stone at the upper-caste fellows who repeatedly humiliate him and his community for their act of catching pigs. This is symbolic of his rage against the caste system which has been dehumanizing the Dalits for centuries.

The last stone thrown by him towards the camera is symbolic of his anger and revolt towards a society which maintains this evil practice for centuries, thereby shattering the dreams of Jabyas and compelling them to live a life which does not guarantee them self-respect, and throwing the stone in anger is also revolutionary message to annihilate caste. If we attempt to understand the fate of the Dalit character Jabya within the discourse of 'lived experience' it could be understood that he as a member of a Dalit community was doomed to undergo the humiliation and discrimination since his childhood. That to fall in love with a dominant caste girl is impermissible is the 'lived experience' of a Dalit boy like Jabya.

***Sairat* (2016)**

Manjule makes his second feature film *Sairat*¹⁴⁵ (literally meaning ‘wild’) on the theme of romance between a boy from a fisherfolk community and a girl from a dominant land-owning caste in a caste-ridden feudal set up. Manjule himself produced the film along with Nittin Keni and Nikhil Sane under the banner of Aatpat Production. The screenplay and the dialogue of the film are composed by Manjule and his brother Bharat Manjule respectively. Manjule shoots the film in a natural setting, namely, the village named Jeur, located in the district of Solapur in Maharashtra, a village wherein he was born and brought up. The film, released in 2016, goes on to become one of the most successful commercial as well as critically acclaimed films of the Marathi film industry. In fact, the film went on to become the all-time highest-grossing film of the Marathi film industry.

The story revolves around the love relationship between Parshya Kale, a fisherfolk fellow, and Archie who hails from a high-caste Patil family and whose father Taty Patil is a powerful political leader, who is no less than a traditional feudal lord. Although Archie and Parshya manage to transgress the boundary of caste, their love life takes a tragic turn when their relationship is revealed to Archie’s family which can no way allow the girl of their home to make a relationship with a low-caste fellow. Archie’s brother violently beats Parshya and his friends for daring to love an upper-caste girl. Eventually, Archie and Parshya manage to escape to the city of Hyderabad where they undergo serious logistical problems and struggle hard to survive. They cut the connection from their family. However, after a series of setbacks, Archie and Parshya manage to get married and get settled in a newly bought house. But eventually Archie’s family comes to know about the couple’s whereabouts. Archie’s brother visits her

¹⁴⁵ *Sairat*, directed by Nagraj Manjule (2016; Mumbai: Zee Studios), https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/sairat/0-0-movie_1921832123?utm_source=google_web&utm_medium=watchaction&utm_campaign=google_watch&utm_content=sairat.

house along with some men and pretends to accept the couple's relationship. But in a twist, Archie's brother along with his accompanying men mercilessly kills Archie and Parshya.

The film vividly portrays the caste-feudal diktats, which govern the social life of India, from anti-caste perspective. Through the development of an inter-caste love affair, the film explores the complex dynamics of caste and feudalism. The film showcases the liaison of the dominant caste group members with the administrative system, how the law and order of the land is controlled by the upper-caste feudal lords. The portrayal of the upper-caste girl taking the gun in her hand to save her low-caste lover as well as the relationship or the frame of Archie entering the college riding a Royal Enfield is also unconventional as it simultaneously defies the caste and gender norms.

Madras (2014)

Madras is a 2014 Tamil political action thriller, written and directed by one of the most promising Dalit filmmakers of the present era Pa Ranjith, which portrays the local politics characterized by feud among different political factions in Northern Chennai.¹⁴⁶ The film has a natural setting as it has been shot in various localities like Vyasarpadi, Kanchipuram of Northern Chennai. In contrast to the traditional depiction of the slums and its people of these area characterized by rowdism, political violence, Ranjith films the aspirations of the youth of the slums and attempts to humanize their image who are otherwise labelled as the goons by the mainstream society. As Ranjith argues,

For many years now, all the facets of life of people in north Madras have been heavily misrepresented in popular culture. While Bob Marley, hip-hop and football are the in thing among the youth there today, Tamil cinema still has them speaking the good old 'Madras Bashai' and depicts them as rowdies. The Tamil slang has evolved.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ *Madras*, directed by Pa Ranjith (2014; Chennai: Studio Green), https://www.hotstar.com/in/movies/madras/1000058493/watch?utm_source=gwa.

¹⁴⁷ Udhav Naig, "Madras, a critique of Dalit politics," *The Hindu*, Oct 17, 2014, www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/madras-a-critique-of-dalit-politics/article6507818.ece

In the process, Ranjith, who is highly influenced by the rising Ambedkarite politics, subtly incorporates his anti-caste politics. For example, the scene which shows the hero reading a book entitled *Theendadha Vasantham* is a deliberate ploy on the part of Ranjith to engage the spectators with the anti-caste discourse as the book is a major piece of work in Dalit Literature. It is a 2017 book by G. Kalyana Rao and A.G. Ethirajalu on the oppression of the Dalits by the high castes in Andhra. Another important aspect of Ranjith's anti-caste politics is use of the colour blue throughout the movie as a symbol of Dalit assertion. The colour blue is associated with major political parties of the Dalits like the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) whose ideological base is Ambedkarism. That the film is explicit about its anti-caste politics is attested by Ranjith himself. As he states,

It's basically a critique of politics from within the Dalit community. It is not a film which celebrates caste; rather it calls for its annihilation through rational progressive politics. It's not a 'Dalit movie'. It is a mainstream film which has documented the vibrant culture of the oppressed.¹⁴⁸

***Kaala* (2018)**

Kaala is another masterpiece by Pa Ranjith in terms of incorporating anti-caste politics in a mainstream Tamil film. The film is a major development in the realm of Dalit Cinema.¹⁴⁹ The film selects Dharavi, the largest slum of Asia located in the state of Maharashtra populated predominantly by the low-caste communities, as the centre of the actions of the drama. Pa Ranjith takes Dalit Cinema to a greater height in the film as the film efficiently employs the symbols of anti-caste politics in its narrative. The naming of *basti* (slum) or local area like Bhim Wada, Periyar Chawk is consciously chosen to remind the struggles of the anti-caste thinkers Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and EVR Ramaswamy Periyar respectively. The naming of Gautam Buddha

¹⁴⁸ Udhav Naig, "Madras, a critique of Dalit politics."

¹⁴⁹ *Kaala*, directed by Pa Ranjith (2018; Chennai: Wunderbar Films), https://www.hotstar.com/in/movies/kaala/1000217977/watch?utm_source=gwa.

Nagar is a direct reference to the Dalits' inclination towards Buddhism, especially after the mass conversion of the Untouchables led by Ambedkar to Buddhism in 1956. The song 'Nikkal nikkal' mentions Kumbhar Wada and Koli Wada, localities named after two low-caste communities Kumbhar, associated with the craft of pottery and the Koli, the fishermen caste residing predominantly at the coastal area respectively. The Kolis were deemed to be criminal tribes in British India. Apart from the suggestive place names, the film is fraught with frames showing the paintings and portraits of the celebrated anti-caste social crusaders like Buddha, Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar, Iyothee Thasar. The film also shows the portraits of Karl Marx and Lenin, the celebrated Communist thinkers, to give a hint regarding a possible alliance of the anti-caste politics with the Leftist ideology. The statue of King Bali near Kaala's house symbolically represents the Dalits' claim to king Bali as a Shudra king. The Ashok Chakra in the flags of the Oppressed Republican Party symbolizes the allegiance of the Dalits to King Ashoka who was a great preacher and promoter of Buddhism in ancient India. The Dalits of the Dharavi launch an organized protest, reminding of Ambedkar's clarion call to the Dalits 'Educate, agitate and organize', against the illegal encroachment of their lands by the corrupt and corporate Brahmin-Banias. The film is a telling reminder of how the corporate mafia grabs the lands of the Dalits and Adivasis to flourish their business. The brand name of the builders 'Manu Reality' is of utmost significance as the name is a reminder to the Dalits of Manu and his historical significance in building and propagating the caste system. As per the Hindu religious scriptures, Manu was a lawgiver who codified stringent caste system in *Manusmriti* (laws of Manu). Manu's codification of caste denied the Shudras, the untouchables and the women their basic human rights like education, wealth, land etc. It dehumanized them and authorized the high castes to treat them as their slaves. Kaala, the assertive Dalit voice, refuses to touch the feet of the powerful local politician Hari dada, who embodies the cultural values of the high-caste Hindus through his dress code, appearance and activities. Another reference to Dalit history is

captured in the frame showing a book entitled ‘Asura’ on Kaala’s table. The word ‘Asura’ is significant as it refers to the Aryan Invasion narrative which claims that the *Asura* or *Rakshasa* or Demon was a label given to the Shudras and adivasis of ancient India who were the *mulnivasi* or original inhabitants of the country. This Aryan Invasion theory is especially advanced by the nineteenth century anti-caste thinker Jyotiba Phule. Kaala’s jeep license plate which bears the number ‘BR 1956’ is a reference to B. R. Ambedkar’s historical decision to renounce Hindu religion and embrace Buddhism along with millions of his followers in the year 1956. Thus, the entire film records the cultural sensibilities of the Dalit life-world.

***Papilio Buddha* (2013)**

Papilio Buddha is a 2013 Malayalam film directed by Jayan K. Cherian which focuses on the displaced Dalits of the Western Ghats and the struggles of the Dalits for their land rights.¹⁵⁰

Regarding the backdrop of the film, Cherian states:

Papilio Buddha was inspired by several events that happened in various Dalit communities in Kerala, including their struggle for land in places such as Chengara, Meppadi, and Muthanga, and its effect on the Dalit population and the environment. The Dalit colonies in Kerala are the best examples of social segregation. These colonies have historically served as the primary sources of muscle power for traditional parties including the Communists; naturally, they see Dalit activism as a threat to their existence. The oppressions inflicted upon the DHRM [Dalit Human Rights Movement] activists between 2007 and 2010 by the police and the political parties are unimaginable, and it was getting out of control. The mainstream media and middle-class intellectuals turned a blind eye towards it because Dalit movements like the DHRM were framed as terrorist organizations then. This was the political situation when I started to write the film.¹⁵¹

The displaced Dalits of the Western Ghats take resort to Buddhism to save themselves from the historical oppression of casteism which has become a part even of the Christians and the Muslims. In spite of being educated in an elite university of the country Sankaran cannot escape

¹⁵⁰ *Papilio Buddha*, Jayan K. Cherian (2013; Bombay: Silicon Media, Kayal Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHm1v0vrOWU&t=8s>.

¹⁵¹ Judith-Misrahi Barak and Nicole Thiara, “Interview with director Jayan K. Cherian,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no. 1 (June 20, 2017): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417710303>

the caste discrimination and humiliation as he is reminded time and again of his pulaya¹⁵² identity by his acquaintances: ‘*A pulaya is always a pulaya.*’ Even taking resort to Christianity cannot save the Dalits from being discriminated and humiliated by the caste Hindus. Cherian has talked about using colour as an important tool to portray the predicament of the Dalits: ‘The colour is an important storytelling tool in *Papilio Buddha*; we graded it in a black-yellowish colour to achieve a beige look, and to capture the bleak reality of the plight of the displaced.’¹⁵³ Cherian consciously interweaves the interconnectedness of caste and gender through the character of Manjusree. Manjusree, an assertive female Dalit auto driver got raped by some other auto drivers. An assertive Dalit woman like Manjusree was a threat to the majoritarian caste Hindu male chauvinistic society. Cherian also reveals his anti-caste politics in incorporating the sex scene of Sankaran and Manjusree:

“Manjusri”, the name of the character in the film, is not accidental. Manjusri is a Buddhist deity, who is often depicted as a Buddha holding a sword in one hand and a book, *Prajnaparamita*, in the other hand. In the film Shankara and Manjusri are depicted sitting in Yab-Yum position; Yab-Yum is a common symbol in the tantric tradition of Buddhist art of India, Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet. It represents the primordial union of wisdom and compassion, depicted as a male deity in sexual union with his female consort. The male figure represents compassion and skilful “means” while the female partner represents insight. In tantric tradition sexual intercourse becomes a prayer, an initiation, and a spiritual act. In Kerala, we had a long tradition of Buddhism before the brahminical religion now known as “Hinduism” conquered us and captured the temples; several Hindu temples and deities in Kerala were originally Buddhist, then were turned into Hindu temples. By designing this scene in the film I was trying to evoke our long forgotten tantric tradition, and its remembrance is in itself a political act, in the current prudish cultural situation of Kerala.¹⁵⁴

A major focus of the film is the land rights movement of the Dalits. Cherian’s purpose in the film is to capture the land rights movements of Kallen Pokkudan¹⁵⁵ who is a prominent face

¹⁵² Pulaya is a low-caste community of South India.

¹⁵³ Judith-Misrahi Barak and Nicole Thiara, “Interview with director Jayan K. Cherian,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no.1 (June 20, 2017): 101-2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417710303>

¹⁵⁴ Judith-Misrahi Barak and Nicole Thiara, “Interview with director Jayan K. Cherian,” 101-2.

¹⁵⁵ As informed by Cherian, ‘Born in 1937 as a member of a Dalit family, who were traditional agrarian slaves owned by upper-caste landlords, Pokkudan went to school up to the second grade and was forced

of Dalit rights and environmentalist activism in Kerala. The film categorically rejects the Gandhian form of resistance when it comes to protesting against the state machinery to protect their land rights. The landless Dalits refuse Gandhi's patronizing appropriation of them as 'Harijan' (people of Lord Krishna). Cherian's dismissal of Gandhian model of reformism in relation to caste system is aptly elucidated by Venkatesan and James

the film [Papilio Buddha] appropriates as well as exposes the Gandhian affinity with mainstream Hinduism which treats Dalits as the "other" and, in so doing, *Papilio Buddha* illustrates how the discourse of Gandhism facilitated and promoted a culture of segregation based on caste. Cherian not only dismisses but also contests the idealised and normative image of Gandhi to unmask the racial/caste foundations of Gandhism itself. This viewpoint is dramatised towards the end of the film when the Dalit rights activists station a Buddha idol and conclude the meeting by stating that they are not anybody's Harijans.¹⁵⁶

Cherian informs how the film faced censorship trial before managing an 'A' certificate (adults only) from the Film Certification Tribunal (FCAT), a film censor board which issued 'A' certificate in favour of the film only after several cuts, mutes and blurring of the film including a significant quote of Ambedkar criticizing Gandhi's fast unto death in Yeravada jail against the demand of the Untouchables for the separate electorate. (Barak and Thiara 2017) Cherian mentions Ambedkar's critique on Gandhi's action of fast unto death. As recorded in

Ambedkar's 1945 polemical text *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*:

to work in paddy fields to survive. In his teens, he ran away from the fields and became an activist in the Communist Party of India; he participated in the early peasant revolts in Kannur district. He was accused of killing a rogue landlord and was jailed for some time. Later, he left the Communist Party, due to some ideological conflict with the party and the caste discrimination he suffered as a "Dalit comrade" within the party. After his split with the party, Pokkudan spent his time in environmental protection activities, focusing on the protection of the mangrove forests of Kerala. He embarked on a mission to plant mangroves across the coastal waters of Kerala, and is reported to have planted over one lakh of mangrove plants in the state. He founded the Mangrove School and conducted over 500 classes in various parts of the state in an attempt to educate the masses about the ecological importance of mangroves. Pokkudan wrote a few books, including *Kandal Inangal* (2015; Mangrove Varieties), as well as two autobiographies, *Kandalkkadukalil Ente Jeevitham* (2002; My Life in the Mangrove Forests), and *Ente Rashtreeya Jeevitham* (2010; My Political Life).⁷ Judith-Misrahi Barak and Nicole Thiara, "Interview with director Jayan K. Cherian", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54(1), June 20, 2017, 100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417710303>

¹⁵⁶ Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Rajesh James, "Casting Caste: Dalit Identity, Papilio Buddha, and Malayalam Cinema," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 49 (2017): 48-52.

‘There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act. The fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up the constitutional safeguards.’¹⁵⁷ In this context it is imperative to mention Ambedkar’s statement in some greater detail in his *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*:

There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act. The Fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up the constitutional safeguards of which they had become possessed under the Prime Minister’s Award and agree to live on the mercy of the Hindus. It was a vile and wicked act. How can the Untouchables regard such a man as honest and sincere?¹⁵⁸

The recurrent use of the frames showing the portraits of Ayyankali, Ambedkar and Buddha symbolizes Dalit assertion. In the Dalit imagination of the nation they are the heroes of the land.

This dissertation is an attempt to study how this anti-caste narrative based on the template of the Ambedkarite anti-caste political philosophy has contextualized the ideological shift in the representation of caste in Hindi films and film adaptations. Before substantiating this contextualization of ideological shift in Hindi films with special reference to adaptations I will attempt a critical analysis of the conventional representation of caste questions in Hindi films through examining select Hindi films and film adaptations in the next two chapters.

¹⁵⁷ Judith-Misrahi Barak and Nicole Thiara, “Interview with director Jayan K. Cherian,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no.1 (June 20, 2017): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417710303>

¹⁵⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, “What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* 9, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 259.

Chapter 2

Hindi Films and the Representation of Caste

Away from the realistic optimism shown in the earlier decades of the Bollywood cinema, the 1960s narrowed down its concerns to the emotional ghettos of the upper-middle class people... The bourgeois hero was a romantic lover, good hearted and indulged mainly to satisfy the burning emotional quench. In the times of Shammi Kapoor and Rajesh Khanna as the spokespersons of Bollywood, it was difficult to assume that popular cinema could notice the other wretched world. Caste was completely blacked out as if the socialist dreams were already fulfilled within the first decade itself. However the upper caste names, brahmanical cultural rituals and Hindu aesthetics were portrayed as the natural assets of the entire nation.¹⁵⁹

This observation of Harish Wankhede summarizes Hindi film industry's shift towards exploring the emotional life-world of the upper-caste, upper middle class in the 1960s from its critical engagement with the socio-political issues in the earlier decades. From 1960s onwards Hindi films starts occupying a major place in the social life of the country. The decades of 1960s, 1970s, 1980s are the times when Hindi films reach the zenith of its popularity. The trope of high class lovers, grand party of the wealthy businessmen, lovers playing piano as status symbol, visuals of foreign landscapes were the staple food of the popular cinema. Most of the Hindi films of this time scarcely provided any space for critical engagements with important social issues. Even when the Hindi films dealt with serious social issues, they engaged with the questions of robbery, unemployment, corruption, smuggling, human trafficking, dowry, quarrelling over property rights and so on. Popular cinema hardly dealt with caste question in a substantive way in this period. Even when the caste issues featured in the film, it never became the focal point of the narrative. The question of caste was reduced almost to a non-issue. However, there are a number of films to which the Hindi film industry's substantive engagement with caste question can be traced. In dealing with the caste questions these films primarily focused on the issues of

¹⁵⁹ Harish S. Wankhede, "Dalit Representation in Bollywood," *Mainstream* 51, no. 20 (May 4, 2013), <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4161.html>.

inter-caste love relationship, sexual exploitation of Dalit women by upper-caste men, benevolence of upper-caste protagonist, reservation, struggles of the Dalits to be treated equally and so on. In the following section I will discuss how these caste questions have been represented in these films.

***Chandidas* (1934)**

Chandidas is a 1934 Hindi film directed by Nitin Bose.¹⁶⁰ Produced by The New Theatres, Calcutta, *Chandidas* is most probably the earliest film of the Hindi film industry which substantively engages with the questions of caste and untouchability. The film is based on the life and times of saint Chandidas who lived in the fifteenth-century Bengal. The young Brahmin priest Chandidas fell in love with a girl named Rami who belonged to washerman community, a low-caste community. The film focuses on their love story and their struggle against caste-ridden society. The legend of Chandidas is a familiar one in Bengal as well as across the country. Chandidas was a medieval saint who was vocal against the discrimination on the basis of caste or creed and taught the lesson of humanity. In the film Chandidas (K.L. Saigal) falls in love with Rami (Uma Sashi), a washerwoman, and fights the conventional Hindu social order. The film portrays their romantic affair, and how the custodians of social order ostracize them. Bijoynarayan, an upper-caste businessman, tries to molest Rami. When he fails to molest her, he provokes the main priest of the temple to punish Chandidas as the latter involves in an affair with Rami. When these custodians of society abuse Rami, Chandidas decides to leave the village along with Rami. He also decides not to follow the tenets of orthodox Hindu religion, and instead, embraces Vaishnavite religion, a more liberal form of the religion which prioritizes humanity over anything else.

¹⁶⁰ *Chandidas*, directed by Nitin Bose (1934; Calcutta: New Theatres Ltd), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcbmz8jhSbc>.

The film is a vivid portrayal of caste discrimination, Brahminical patriarchy, and the practice of untouchability. It is noteworthy that the character of Rami, the Dalit girl, has been portrayed as an assertive girl who stand firm against the caste-ridden Hindu social order. She bravely fights against the upper-caste businessman Bijoynarayan when the latter attempts to sexually assault her. The film portrays the Brahmin apprentice priest as a saviour of a low caste washerwoman whom he loves and his fight against caste-ridden society to ensure the low caste communities' right to temple entry. Through this, *Chandidas* interweaves into its narrative the issue of contemporary temple entry movement which was very much rampant in the 1920s and 1930s. The Vaikom Satyagraha of 1925, Ambedkar's Kalaram temple entry movement in 1927, Kelappan's fast unto death in the Satyagraha movement in Guruvayur in 1931-32 to ensure temple entry of the lower castes might have significantly influenced the inclusion of the temple entry movement issue into the film. It is noteworthy that Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaign in the early 1930s highly shaped the approach of the Hindi film industry to the question of untouchability. Along with the film *Chandidas*, this is evident in the films like *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Sujata* (1959) and so on.

Early Hindi Films as Repository of Inter-Caste Love Affair

Inter-caste love affair or marriage is not a new social phenomenon. From time immemorial it exists in our society. It is the element of 'caste' which is the most important and crucial aspect in such relationships, and therefore, draws our attention. As it involves crossing the parameter of caste, the hardest parameter to cross in the caste-ridden Indian society, the inter-caste love or marriage paradoxically leads to some possibilities and questions regarding the annihilation of caste, like how far has the caste-ridden Indian society progressed to accept the inter-caste love and marriage as a purely human affair, not viewing it from the perspective of caste? Or if it is accepted, is it nothing but a negotiation, without eliminating the mental slavery of caste? Or is

the inter-caste love affair or marriage a real remedy to the problem of caste? This section examines these questions through exploring the inter-caste love affair and marriage as represented in some early Bollywood movies, namely, *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Sujata* (1959), *Punarmilan* (1964) and *Cha Cha Cha* (1964).

Amongst the various caste issues, this section is exclusively concerned with the representation of the particular issue of inter-caste love and marriage, in the sense of an affair involving a lower caste person and an upper caste one, in some early Bollywood movies. There are very few films which put a predominant focus on the inter-caste love and marriage. Franz Osten directed *Achhut Kanya* (1936)¹⁶¹ was one of the earliest Bollywood movies predominantly representing the inter-caste love affair between a lower caste girl and an upper caste Brahmin boy. Kasturi, the ‘Achhut Kanya’ (untouchable girl), and Pratap, the upper caste Brahmin boy fall in love, as a result of long time intimacy since their very childhood, with each other. Though Pratap’s father does not find anything wrong in this love relationship between Pratap and Kasturi, Pratap’s mother wholly opposes this relationship just because Kasturi belongs to an ‘achhut’ (untouchable) community. Conforming to the societal norms, Pratap and Kasturi cannot cross the boundary of caste to turn their love affair into marriage.

Bimal Roy’s 1959 film *Sujata* is a landmark in the realm of Bollywood cinema in dealing with the caste problem. The film visualizes the socially imposed trauma of untouchability through the ‘untouchable’ female figure Sujata, the protagonist of the film. The film draws our special attention to the love story between Sujata and Adheer, an upper caste Brahmin young man, from Sujata’s point of view. Mentally traumatized by the social practice of untouchability, she once made up her mind to sacrifice her love, though ultimately everything is settled as Sujata

¹⁶¹ *Achhut Kanya*, directed by Franz Osten (1936; Bombay: The Bombay Talkies Ltd.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpXvkt9XX0g>.

is married to Adheer at the end of the film. *Punarmilan* (1964) is a Balraj Sahni movie exposing the seamy side of casteism.¹⁶² The story revolves around Mohan, a doctor raised in an upper caste family but who is actually a Harijan¹⁶³ by birth. His love affair with an upper caste young woman Sovna was running comfortably until his caste identity was discovered. The film features another love story between an untouchable girl Sona and a Brahmin young man Sunil. Their affair also faces obstacles because of the caste discrimination. The film draws the curtain with a happy note as the love pairs get their loved ones and their families come close to each other, after a series of melodramatic events, crossing the boundary of caste. Chandra Shekhar's *Cha Cha Cha* (1964) also features an inter-caste love affair between Puran, a Harijan by birth, and the upper caste young woman Lali.¹⁶⁴ Though Lali's father personally likes Puran, he opposes to turn Puran and Lali's love relationship into marriage just because of his fear of losing honour and status in the society. Though he thinks himself as a highly educated, progressive person, in reality he fails to come out of his caste prejudice.

Achhut Kanya does not draw much critical attention, conforming to the very realistic portrayal of inter-caste love affair in the caste-ridden society of colonial India in which the love relationship or marriage between an upper caste person and lower caste one cannot be accepted. In fact, how deeply casteism is entrenched in the society is evident in the incident in which Dukhia, Kasturi's father, apologizes to Mohanlal, Pratap's father as Dukhia touches Mohanlal in order to save the latter's life. Dukhia had to touch Mohanlal to extract venom from his body. In the films *Sujata*, *Punarmilan* and *Cha Cha Cha*, some of the upper caste family members are

¹⁶² *Punarmilan*, directed by Ravindra Dave (1964; Bombay: Nagina Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=as9m7ivRPJL>.

¹⁶³ The term 'Harijan' was popularized by M.K. Gandhi. Literally meaning 'people of Hari or Lord Krishna', the term 'Harijan' referred to the people of low-caste and untouchable communities.

¹⁶⁴ *Cha Cha Cha*, directed by Chandrasekhar (1964; Bombay: Bhav Deep Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p11jeGiD5FM>.

projected as progressive, liberal-minded persons, but they cannot come out of their caste bias. The best example of this is the 'progressive' father Dinanath in the film *Cha Cha Cha*. So, the presentation of their acceptance of inter-caste love and marriage, as shown at the end of these films, after having come out of the caste bias, can be questioned from Ambedkar's point of view. Franz Osten's *Achhut Kanya* ends tragically with Kasturi's death. The love pair fails to cross the bridge of caste to turn their love relationship into marriage, and it brings out the realistic picture of caste as a hindrance in every sphere of life. But the films *Sujata*, *Punarmilan*, and *Cha Cha Cha* need to be viewed more critically as in these movies the love relationships are turned into marriage, thereby bringing the families from both castes close to each other. It shows that inter-caste love turned into marriage is, as if, a solution to the problem of caste. But the question is, is it a practical solution to the problem of caste? Can the inter-caste love or marriage bring the caste system or the social disease of caste to an end? In this regard Ambedkar argues,

Inter-dining and inter-marriage are repugnant to the beliefs and dogmas which the Hindus regard as sacred...Criticising and ridiculing people for not inter-dining or inter-marrying, or occasionally holding inter-caste dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages, is a futile method of achieving the desired end.¹⁶⁵

So, according to Ambedkar, inter-caste marriage as a solution or remedy to the caste problem, as proposed by these early Bollywood movies *Sujata*, *Punarmilan*, and *Cha Cha Cha*, is not an actual solution, although he, to some extent, supports this initiative as it helps break the physical barrier. That Ambedkar is right in his observation is evident from the fact that even after the completion of fifty years of these above-mentioned films, we still find the institution of caste as a major obstacle in the inter-caste love relationships. Had it been that inter-caste marriage is a remedy to break the caste system, there would not have been any case of caste violence. It, therefore, once again establishes Ambedkar's view on caste:

¹⁶⁵ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 68.

Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change...The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras.¹⁶⁶

Narratives of Exploitation of Dalit Women

***Ankur* (1974)**

Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* is one of the earliest films in the parallel film movements dealing with core social issues like caste, class or gender exploitation.¹⁶⁷ The story of the film revolves around the relationship between Surya (Anant Nag) and Lakshmi (Sabana Azmi). Surya, an educated upper-caste fellow, returns to his village to look after their agricultural works. Eventually Surya who is already married to Saru (Priya Tendulkar) gets involved in an illegitimate relationship with the housemaid Lakshmi who belongs to potter caste, a low-caste community traditionally engaged with the profession of pottery. Although Surya promises Lakshmi to take care of her, he fails to keep his promise when the latter gets pregnant. The situation gets complicated as Saru, Surya's wife, comes to Surya's village to stay with him. Surya forces Lakshmi to abort the child but Lakshmi refuses to do so.

The film's profound engagement with the caste issues is evident in the film narrative. It has been reflected in the Surya's extra-marital relationship with Lakshmi. An economically and socially vulnerable Lakshmi succumbs to Surya's sexual interest. Although Surya tries to project himself as an educated liberal fellow, his conduct towards and treatment of Lakshmi is fraught with upper-caste patriarchal mindset. Although he does not mind to eat food cooked by the low-caste woman Lakshmi, a practice which is not usual in a caste-ridden society, his exploitative

¹⁶⁶ Ambedkar, 68.

¹⁶⁷ *Ankur*, directed by Shyam Benegal (1974; Bombay; Blaze Film Enterprises Pvt. Ltd.), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/ankur-the-seedling/3491971/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=Watc hAction.

and dominating behaviour towards Lakshmi bears testimony to his being a representative of the upper-caste patriarchy. Apart from Surya's relationship with Lakshmi, Surya's appearance as a landlord to the villagers and the approach of the villagers in greeting him clearly showcases his social status as a high caste fellow. The film also shows how the members of the potter caste enjoy their own festival. The film also frames the temple of a local god worshipped by the low-caste people of the village.

***Giddh* (1984)**

Giddh (The Vulture) is a 1984 Hindi film directed by T.S. Ranga starring Smita Patil, Om Puri and Nana Patekar among others.¹⁶⁸ The film depicts the helplessness of the Harijan people struggling against the Devdasi tradition, in which women from the untouchable and low-caste community get married to gods of the temple and sexually exploited by the temple priests in the name of service to gods. The story of the film is multi-layered, talking of oppression from within the community as well as from external factors. For the women of this community, it is a bleak reality without a ray of hope. In a remote village at Karnataka-Maharashtra border area in India, the socially and economically backward Harijans follow the Devdasi tradition according to which young girls are given up in the service of Goddess Yellamma. The landlords, priests, and other men take advantage of these young girls, and the pimps like Veerappan take them to brothels in Bombay. Bhashya, a labourer and Hanumi lead an attempt to awaken the people against the practice by deciding to save Lakshmi from becoming a Devdasi with the help of Masterji, going against the powerful feudal lord Desai.

¹⁶⁸ *Giddh*, directed by T. S. Ranga (1984; Mumbai: Shemaroo Entertainment Company), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUJYYgni6C8>.

The story deals with a young woman named Hanumi and Bhashya. Bhashya is a labourer who earns a daily wage, drinks alcohol with part of it, and gives the rest to his wife for their livelihood. On some days he fails to make money, and as a result, acts as a pimp for his wife, so that they can feed themselves. These are the two who are attempting to spearhead an awakening amongst this town which encourages young girls not to marry, but give themselves up to be devdasis, forever made to appease and satisfy males. These girls cannot marry locally and the only way they can lead a normal life is by escaping to Bombay via a daily bus service. But even on the bus there is a pimp named Veerappan, who lures the girls on the pretext of a better life, but sells them in brothels in Bombay's red-light areas. There is no other route for these girls as the local police are apathetic, and corrupt, and the people of the town are all afraid to speak out of fear of reprisals and superstition.

Bawandar (2000)

Jagmohan Mundra's *Bawandar (Storm)*¹⁶⁹ is a 2000 Hindi film indirectly based on the Bhanvari Devi case. The story revolves around the gang rape of Saanvari, who belongs to the Kumhaar community, a low-caste community traditionally associated with the works of pottery. Saanvari incurs the wrath of the upper-caste men of Gujjar community as she takes part in the awareness campaign against child marriage. As a consequence, she is gang raped by these male members of the upper-caste Gujjar community. When she approaches the police station for filing her complaint, the police officer refuses to register her case as the victim fails to produce any medical report. The medical officer also asks for a court order from Saanvari before conducting the medical test. Therefore, she approaches the Jaipur Court to manage a court order so that she

¹⁶⁹ *Bawandar*, directed by Jag Mundhra (2000; Mumbai: Smriti Pictures Pvt. Ltd. Productions), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=am-6CaZ1n0Q&t=1s>.

can undergo the medical test. But not a magistrate is found to sign the order. At last, she manages to get a court order with the assistance of Shobha Devi.

Saanvari lives a happy conjugal life. She works as a daily wage labour, whereas her husband remains out of the village most of the times for his work. Saanvari is an assertive woman who raises her voice against the manager of the factory where she works. When the manager tries to deceive her in paying her wage, she asserts her right for her proper wage. Shobha Devi proposes her to be a part of the Saathin (friend) programme, which has been launched to promote women education and campaign against child marriage. Shobha Devi convinces her that child marriage snatches away from the little girl her childhood, how child marriage is a great impediment for the overall mental and physical development of the girl child. Shobha Devi also assures her that the latter will get paid Rs. 250 for this work. “Hum nari ka hai adhikar, mile maan, samman aur pyaar” (We the women have the right to get respect, honour and love)—it is the motto of the women rights activist group. The participants are mainly Dalit women. Saanvari leads a rally of the women protecting against the molestation of a woman by Bhuriya Meena. The upper-caste ideologues of the village do not consider the women to be fit for independence. They are against the Rule of Law. They revere the traditional customs. The delegitimization of customs like child marriage by the modern legal system is not a matter of concern. What they practice is their ‘parampara’ (roughly translating, tradition). When a complaint is lodged in the police station against a child marriage, the upper-caste male members of the village get enraged. They attack Saanvari’s house and socially boycott them. The assertive Saanvari becomes a threat to the upper-caste male dominance in the village.

When Saanvari and her husband approach the police station to lodge a complaint against the rapists the police officer asks their caste identity. He suggests them not to challenge the

powerful caste Hindu Gujjar people, and reminds them of their low-caste status. The police officer's act of hurling slurs at them reveals his own caste prejudice. When Saanvari stays under the protection of lady police constables, the latter humiliate her for her caste identity. They make fun of her gang rape. The observations of the high class women rights activists from Delhi after their arrival in Dabri village that the village is a scene, beautiful place compared to a polluted city Delhi indicate the ignorance of the city-bred high class people about the brutal reality of casteism practised in the village. The local MLA rebukes the rapists for their acts as it can land his political career in trouble. In response, one of the rapists justified their act arguing that even after being a low caste, that 'slut' was not submissive. But even the MLA's rebuke was not serious and sincere. He also asked them how they enjoyed the act of rape and ensured that he would manage everything.

Chauranga (2016)

Bikash Ranjan Mishra's debut feature film *Chauranga* (2016)¹⁷⁰ is another story of overarching presence of casteism in the social life of the Dalits. Mishra admits that although he does not face caste discrimination due to his privileged position in the caste-ridden society, he has an empathetic approach to the low-caste fellows as the victims of caste system. As he states, 'I may not have lived that life but my film comes from a deep empathy and association with the issue...I went to his [a Dalit friend] house, shared meals. My parents were liberal but the extended family often raised a finger... Things have to be destroyed and demolished for a new world to emerge.'¹⁷¹ The film portrays a teenage Dalit boy Santu who dares to fall in love with an upper-

¹⁷⁰ *Chauranga*, directed by Bikash Mishra (2016; Mumbai: Anticlock Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUyWz4vG76Y>.

¹⁷¹ Namrata Joshi, "New Voices But Not Enough Noise," *The Hindu*, 23 Sep, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/New-voices-but-not-enough-noise/article14015881.ece>

caste girl in a caste-feudal social set up. The film is also a story of a Dalit woman Dhaniya who goes to the extent of getting sexually exploited by an upper-caste landlord Dhaval as the latter bears the financial expense of her son's education, and financially helps her manage her family. This particular case of oppression of Dalit women and children has been discussed by Shoma A. Chatterji in her article 'The Dalit in Indian Cinema'. As she argues,

The Dalits are not the sole subjects of oppression among the caste-ridden masses of India, never mind that this oppression cuts across the rural and the urban, language, education and social status. The women, who may or may not be Dalit, are equally or perhaps more oppressed and so are the children from the Dalit community.¹⁷²

Chauranga vividly depicts this vulnerability of Dalit women and children throughout the narrative. The film depicts that poverty and feudal power dynamics compels the Dalit woman Dhaniya fall prey to the lust of the dominant caste landlord Dhaval by becoming their mistress or mere sex object. Her two sons also face humiliation and are badly beaten by the upper-caste fellows on several occasions. Dhaniya and her two sons eventually face tragic end by virtue of the exploitative and discriminatory treatment done to them by the upper-caste fellows. Whereas the Dalits have to face oppression, humiliation or discrimination as a community, the same particularly for the Dalit women and children are multi-dimensional, as is the case with Dhaniya and her sons.

Humiliation and Resistance in *Samar*

Shyam Benegal's 1999 Hindi film *Samar* (conflict)¹⁷³ is based on former civil service officer Harsh Mander's non-fiction *Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten Lives* which itself is based on a real-life incident from a village in the state of Madhya Pradesh. A farmer from Ahir caste

¹⁷² Shoma A. Chatterji, "The Dalit in Indian cinema," February 2016, Indiatogether.org. <https://indiatogether.org/the-dalit-in-indian-cinema-reviews>

¹⁷³ *Samar*, directed by Shyam Benegal 1998 (1998; Bombay: National Film Development Corporation of India), DVD.

enters a temple to convey his gratitude to god. But this act of a low-caste farmer entering a temple is considered by the village priest and the dominant caste groups to be, as per the social convention based on caste codes, an act violation of caste norms. As a consequence, he is punished with the village priest urinating on his head. In the film Benegal uses the film-within-film technique to make a twist in the story and critique the caste dynamics of the rural India. As he elaborates,

In the film, a unit from Mumbai is making a film with a city-bred actor enacting the role. When it comes to filming the crucial scene, he refuses to go through it. For the actor, it is only 'victimisation' and 'humiliation.' However, the guy who was actually subjected to the situation, rebels against it and rises above his station.¹⁷⁴

The purpose behind this degrading act of urinating on the victim's head is to humiliate him. But if one goes as per Bhikhu Parekh's conceptualization of humiliation, this purpose of the victimizer fails as the victim, though degraded, does not subscribe to the feeling of humiliation when the act is enacted in the film-within-film, and instead, rebels against this vested purpose of humiliation. As Bhikhu Parekh argues in his "Logic of Humiliation", 'Humiliation consists of disrespecting and demeaning others, damaging their self-respect, bringing them down in their eyes, and causing them hurt and pain.'¹⁷⁵

The act of ostracizing the entire low-caste communities of the village for the incident of pump installation as a form of punishment can be considered to be a case of what Bhikhu Parekh calls 'institutionalized humiliation'. How an unequal society performs this practice is elaborated by Parekh in the following words:

¹⁷⁴ Ratnottama Sengupta, "Casteism through Benegal's Eyes," *The Times of India*, 12 Nov., 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20121018234243/http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-11-12/kolkata/27953051_1_shyam-benegal-forgotten-hero-film

¹⁷⁵ Bhikhu Parekh, "Logic of Humiliation," *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, ed. Gopal Guru (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29.

a society based on humiliation requires an informal and diffused system of coercion administered routinely by the dominant group. The clear boundary that such a society draws between the dominant and subordinated groups needs to be diligently guarded and enforced by punishing the smallest real or imagined transgressions. No central agency can do this because of its obvious administrative and other limitations. The society therefore relies on the individual members of the dominant group to act as the guardians of the system, and authorizes them to administer chastisement, dismiss from jobs, ostracize, insult, and use such sanctions and coercive measures as they think appropriate to keep the subordinated groups in their place.¹⁷⁶

Framing the Dalit Life-world through Upper-Caste Gaze

***Ashirwaad* (1968)**

Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Ashirwaad* is a 1968 Hindi film which deals with the problem of caste and untouchability.¹⁷⁷ The film revolves around a liberal-minded high caste landlord Shivnath Chaudhury who dares to cross his caste boundary in order to associate with the low caste fellows. His wife, an arrogant landlady, objects to his mingling with the low-caste people. She does not want Shivnath, who is fondly called Jogi Thakur by the local people, to degrade their social status. Out of his passion for music he learns to play *mridanga* or drum from a low-caste fellow named Baiju. Although Baiju is afraid of interacting with Jogi Thakur because of the former's low caste identity, the latter ensures him that he does not believe in caste division. In an attempt to rescue Baiju's abducted daughter Rukmani he commits a murder, which lands him in prison. Returning to the village after a long period of time, he remains a lifelong friend of the low-caste fellows and eventually dies in the low-caste neighbourhood.

The film is a vivid portrayal of an upper-caste man's benevolence towards the untouchables. The film primarily focuses on the protagonist's sympathetic approach towards them. It does not delve into the larger cultural world of the untouchables like Baiju. It does not

¹⁷⁶ Bhikhu Parekh, "Logic of Humiliation."

¹⁷⁷ *Aashirwaad*, directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee (1968; Mumbai: Film Enterprises), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdyoISiFq3Y&t=5s>.

portray the assertion of the untouchables. Rather the film typically portrays the untouchables as victims and submissive underdogs who do not dare to rebel against the feudal norms. They cannot raise their voice against the feudal landlady who economically exploits them. They are repeatedly tortured by their landlady if they fail to follow any order. Through the portrayal of the character of Jogi Thakur, the film attempts to convey the message that the condition of the untouchables can be reformed through the sympathetic approach of the upper-caste fellows like Jogi Thakur.

Swades: We the People (2004)

The story of Ashutosh Gowariker's 2004 film *Swades* (Homeland) revolves around an America based NRI (Non-Resident Indian) scientist Mohan Bhargava who works as an Indian Project Manager (of Global Precipitation Measurement project) at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).¹⁷⁸ Left orphan by his parents who died in a car crash, he is all alone in his life except Kaveri amma who was the only caretaker of Mohan before his departure to America. The film is all about Mohan's return to India in search of his aged granny Kaveri amma and his final decision to stay in his motherland sacrificing his career ambition. The film is a well-crafted text dealing with the typical NRI dilemma between fulfilling the long-cherished American dream and a yearning for return to homeland.

The film features some sequences tinged with significant caste implications. For instance, a Hindi film is brought in to the remote village of Charanpur through an old truck to meet the villagers' craze for movie. A makeshift film screen is made in a large open space of the village so that all the villagers can watch the movies together. But as is the case with Indian social reality, the villagers cannot forget to maintain the caste division in this venture of togetherness.

¹⁷⁸ *Swades: We, the People*, directed by Asutosh Gowariker (2004; Mumbai: Ashutosh Gowariker Productions), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70019491?source=35>.

Whereas the upper-caste members of the village enjoy watching the movie from the side from which the film is projected, the low-caste members are bound to watch the movie from the opposite side of the film projection and have to experience watching the movie as mirror image. Mohan, who does not believe in any discriminatory practice, notices this practice of caste discrimination among the villagers in their sitting arrangement. So, when the power cut occurs during the film screening and everyone waits for continuing with the film with generator service, Mohan seizes the opportunity to convince them the meaninglessness of maintaining such caste division. Through performing song “*ye tara, woh tara, har tara/dekho jise bhi lage pyaraa*” (This star, that star, all stars/look, each one is loveable”) and dancing in a playful manner, he tries to convey the message that there is no difference among the stars and that each star is loveable, implying that every human being irrespective of caste is loveable and beautiful like the star. Using the analogy of rainbow, he emphasizes on the strength and beauty of unity: Mohan is joined by the upper-caste children in his performance. Though the children from the low-caste backgrounds hesitate to join initially, they also participate in the performance driven by Mohan’s loving approach. In another sequence, Mohan witnesses a low-caste family refusing to send their children to school simply because the latter is well-aware of the exclusionary caste system which will discriminate their children because of their low-caste identity. Bisra, head of the family, whom Mohan meets, informs the latter about the ground reality regarding his decision of not sending his children to school: “how a village which doesn’t allow us to work within its boundary to feed our empty stomach be accepting of educating our children?” The scene informs the viewers about the wretched condition of the habitation of the Dalits at the periphery of the village. So, the social ostracization of the low-caste people creates a setback in the enrolment of the children from low-caste communities who live predominantly at the outskirts of the village. In a meeting of the Village Council, on a heated debate over the caste issue an old man who is a

representative of the defenders of the traditional caste system refutes Mohan's liberal approach to caste system, and considers caste to be an eternal part of social life: "*Jo kabhi nai jaati, usi ko jati kehte hain*" (What cannot be cast aside is called caste). The upper-caste Village Council members also object to Mohan's intermingling with Mela Ram, the low-caste village fellow with whom Mohan visits the low-caste households to persuade the family members to send their children to school. The Village Council members also advise Mohan who is a Brahmin by caste to behave like a typical Brahmin. The film portrays Mohan as a representative of modern progressive Indian who dismisses the exclusionary caste system as backward, does not delve into the nuances of the system, and finds in the developmental activities a scope for uniting the villagers. An NRI who spent a major part of his life as a grown up young man in the urban milieu of a developed country like America, Mohan envisages the rural caste dynamics as an outsider who is completely unaware of the modus operandi of caste in rural India. Khushee Chaudhary in her article "Dalit Marginalisation in Swades" (2022) has pointed out the limitations of the film in terms of the film's engagement with caste question:

The stumbling block factor of the film if viewed from a caste lens is twofold. The total running time of the film is three hours fourteen minutes, and the driving force of the film does appear to be caste-annihilation within what can be seen as 'real India' initially, but after several caste-based discourses in the first forty-five minutes of the film... the focus of the narrative shifts entirely from sociological progress to technological progress with Mohan busying himself in the building of a Hydroelectric plant to light a bulb in the village and make it self-sufficient in terms of electricity. By changing the narrative stance of the film midway, Swades runs the risk of being read as an escapist Bollywood film. And secondly, the film is being told through an upper-caste gaze with an NRI belonging to the Brahmin caste petitioning against caste discrimination while the Dalit (be it Mela Ram or Bisra) are shown as complacent to their societal position. The victimization of Dalits, therefore, is not only taking place in reality but also, on the cinema screen; where no thought is invested into portraying Dalit assertion.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Khushee Chaudhary, "Dalit Marginalisation in Swades," *IIS Univ. J.A.* 11, no. 1, (2022): 242-3, <http://iisjoa.org/sites/default/files/iisjoa/July%202022/21.pdf>

Poorna: Courage Has No Limit (2017)

Rahul Bose's 2017 Hindi film *Poorna: Courage Has No Limit* is a tale of a teenage tribal girl Poorna Malavath who aspires to scale Mount Everest, the highest peak of the world.¹⁸⁰ The film alludes to real life Poorna Malavath, a 13-year-old tribal girl who goes on to become the youngest girl ever to scale the Mount Everest.

The film narrates the struggles of Poorna along with her elder sister Priya, and her adventurous journey to scale the Mount Everest under the mentorship of Praveen Kumar Sharma. Before her journey to become a mountaineer, Poorna along with her sister Priya has to fight the caste and gender norms of society. Priya, Poorna's elder sister, is dictated to sweep the school floor where she is entitled to learning. She is made to do this menial job as her father fails to pay fees. This is typical casteist attitude of the upper-caste echelon to humiliate the Dalits and the message here is that these Dalits are eligible only to do the menial jobs, not the sacred act of learning to which only the upper castes are entitled. Had she been an upper-caste girl, she would simply have been asked just to pay the fees to continue her studies. She would never have been dictated to do the menial jobs like sweeping or cleaning. The caste-ridden society has never been adequately civilized to socially sanction education as a basic human right for the Dalits. Although she cannot confront the teacher who asks her to do so, the teenage girl Priya expresses her rage for the humiliation she has undergone, and picking up a stone, intends to throw it at him. She is not like Sujata, the Dalit girl in Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), who submits to all the sufferings and humiliation in a Brahmin household in which she has been brought up as she was left orphan by her low-caste parents, who died of an epidemic disease spread in the area. Contrary to submissive Sujata, Priya wants to assert herself. While at home, a Dalit patriarch is fuming over his daughter's intention to go to school for study as it will be difficult to financially

¹⁸⁰ *Poorna: Courage Has No Limit*, directed by Rahul Bose (2017; Bombay: PVR pictures, Rahul Bose Production), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=am8fpw5krPI>.

manage the family for them. As the family's earning depends upon the collective labour of all the family members, professional difficulties will arise if one family member joins school instead of continuing with professional duties. Priya advises her younger sister Poorna not to pay heed to these talks. Instead, she informs her what they can have in school: free education, healthy and nutritious food like dosa, idli, upma, egg, milk, the foods which they can never imagine to afford in their financially handicapped household. Poorna's elder sister plans to escape from the house as she knows that her family will prevent her from availing this opportunity which can help them in their upliftment. As the two sisters try to escape in the early morning, they get caught red-handed by her father and Priya is badly beaten for her attempt to escape. The verbal silence and background score in the scene in which the two sisters get caught red-handed and Priya is beaten amply captures the mood of the situation. The next scene shows how Priya is forcibly married off. Thus an assertive Priya succumbs to the family's demand with much reluctance.

The film now shifts its focus on Poorna, the protagonist of the film. In spite of familial setbacks Poorna's father has her daughter admitted to a school. Poorna's friend shares her goal of becoming an officer with her. When her friend tells her that by the time she will be an officer, Poorna will get married. The very thought of marriage embarrasses her as it will be an impediment for her to come out of the clutches of caste and patriarchy.

Praveen Kumar Sharma, an IPS officer, intends to get transferred to the Social Welfare Department in order to transform the wretched condition of the government schools which are attended mostly by the underprivileged social groups. When he approaches the Chief Minister's office with grievances against the late arrival of the teachers in the school and mismanagement of the Mid-day Meal Scheme, a senior government official of the Office of the Chief Minister dismisses him, considering these grievances as minor loopholes of government schools. To this,

the IPS officer responds by arguing that the teachers in the government schools arrive late because of their approach that these children of the underprivileged social groups cannot be taught and that they do not see any future of the latter. And maximum quantity of water is poured in cooking daal (pulse) because the underprivileged are believed to deserve low-quality foods. When an official sarcastically comments, the children of foreign countries are physically and psychologically stronger than those of our country, implying that children of our country are not fit for the activities like mountaineering, Praveen Kumar, the IPS officer-turned- officer of the Social Welfare Department, dismisses it to be a generalization. Kumar is mocked for his soft corner for the underprivileged. As the official sarcastically remarks, ‘Are you trying to make slum dog mountaineer like slum dog millionaire?’, referring to the title of the film *Slum dog millionaire* (2008), directed by Danny Boyle, which depicts the journey of a slum boy from being an ordinary poor slum fellow to becoming a millionaire through a popular quiz competition show.

The character of IPS officer Praveen Kumar has an indirect reference to the ex-IPS officer RS Praveen Kumar, who voluntarily retired from the Indian Police Service in order to dedicate to the cause of emancipation of Dalit children. He is well-known for his contribution in transforming the wretched condition of the social welfare residential schools into standard institutions for education. He worked as the Secretary to the Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSWREIS). He considered the term ‘Dalit’, which is used to identify the marginalised lower caste, to be a marker of humiliation. He, therefore, uses a new word ‘SWAERO’ to refer to the people of Dalit communities, suggesting that ‘SW’ stands for Social Welfare, whereas ‘AERO’ stands for sky, implying that sky can be the limit for the Dalits. He now refers to himself as Doctor R.S. Praveen Kumar Swaero. An icon for the Dalits with millions of followers both in the virtual world and the real world, he dedicates himself for

the cause of social, economic and political emancipation of the Dalit communities, following the paths of the anti-caste thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar and Kanshiram. He states, after voluntarily retiring from the Government service, that “I shall use the rest of my life to fulfil the unfinished dreams of doyens of social justice—Mahatma Phule couple, Baba Saheb Doctor Ambedkar, Kanshiram and many more torchbearers of our country.”¹⁸¹

The Harvard University pass out IPS Officer Praveen Kumar has proposed ten commandments to the Dalits to follow for their emancipation. It was he who was the mentor of the thirteen year old girl Poorna Malavath, the youngest girl in the world to scale the Mt. Everest. He groomed this adivasi girl to come out of the precarious conditions and chase her dream. The film is limited to only his role in grooming and mentoring Poorna to be an achiever. The film does not engage with his socio-political life as a Dalit leader who firmly believes in the philosophy of anti-caste thinkers like Ambedkar, Phule and Kanshiram. A portrait of Ambedkar in his office room, as shown in the film, is an indicator of his commitment to the cause of social justice, but the film stays far away from depicting or informing his political and social activities in the footsteps of the above mentioned anti-caste crusaders. The film is limited to showing that the Government intervention is instrumental in rescuing the Dalit communities, that the proper management of Government machineries can liberate the Dalits. It keeps itself away from substantively questioning the privilege or the discriminatory attitude of the upper-caste echelon, and portrays the Dalits lacking agency. Although the film’s engagement with the Dalit characters like Priya and Poorna indicates that it cannot refrain from depicting the Dalit characters as assertive, confident, with a sense of self respect and dignity, and not submissive to the

¹⁸¹ A Srinivasa Rao, “Praveen Kumar, an IPS officer who gave a new identity to Dalits,” *The Siyasat daily*, 30th August 2021, <https://www.siasat.com/praveen-kumar-an-ips-officer-who-gave-a-new-identity-to-dalits-2166930/>

humiliation and wretched conditions of life, the film does not delimit itself from the reformist zeal of the upper castes.

Representing a ‘Balanced View’ on Reservation Policy in *Aarakshan*

Prakash Jha’s *Aarakshan* (reservation)¹⁸² is a 2011 Hindi film on the controversial issue of caste-based reservation policy in India, and also on the increasing dominance of the private coaching institutes in the education sector. The reservation for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in public sector jobs and admission in institutes of higher education has been guaranteed by the Constitution of India since its implementation in 1950. But the Mandal Commission, formed in 1980, recommends 27% reservation to the socially and educationally backward classes, categorized as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The implementation of the recommendation of the Mandal Commission by the Government of India in 1990 creates a huge controversy over the issue of reservation which culminates in the militant organized protests by the students mainly from the upper-caste background. The film is set in the backdrop of this controversy in the educational institutes over the issue of caste. In the very first scene of the film Deepak Kumar, an M. Sc. topper in mathematics and a brilliant student taught by the renowned professor of mathematics Dr. Prabhakar Anand, the Principal of the STM College, faces caste discrimination in a job interview due to his low-caste identity. But he does not remain submissive. Rather, he assertively responds to his upper-caste interviewers. He reminds his interviewers, who are sceptical about his merit, of the historical fact that once a low-caste man was given a chance and the man ended up in writing a Constitution for the country, alluding to Dr. Ambedkar’s drafting of the Constitution after the Independence. Through this allusion Deepak Kumar upholds the merit and scholarship of a low-caste student which is often

¹⁸² *Aarakshan*, directed by Prakash Jha 2011 (Mumbai: Reliance Entertainment), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tRJK3PiUts>.

questioned by the upper castes. In a sequence the vice-principal of STM College Mithilesh Singh makes an encounter with the young Dalit lecturer Deepak Kumar on the controversial issue of caste-based reservation. Mithilesh taunts Deepak by saying that ‘our children work hard at studies day and night and when the time of admission comes, you walk away with freebies. You are afraid to do hard work, right?’ Then the challenging Dalit hero replies boldly: ‘So, you are teaching us what hard work is. We tilled your land, reaped your crop, grazed your cattle, stitched your shoes, rowed your boat, cleaned your dirty drains. Even we have carried your shit on our head. And you will teach us what hard work is!’ It would really be difficult to find a more challenging, more assertive Dalit figure in mainstream Hindi films than Deepak Kumar in *Aarakshan*. ‘*Aarakshan*’s Dalit hero indicates a change in Bollywood perceptions. After the onset of liberalization in 1990, India began changing faster than ever before. Hindi cinema too can’t resist desegregation for long,’ says Dalit columnist Chandrabhan Prasad. To the Dalit scholars, the argument put forward by Mithilesh can be considered to be a clichéd argument frequently used by the caste Hindus to oppose the Reservation policy using the idea of merit as an excuse. As elaborated by Yengde,

Those who enjoy the privileges of caste never want to attack an abhorrent system as that would threaten their position of power. They are unwilling to face challenges to the caste privileges that were granted to them without any work. Many in this category offer ‘merit’ as a justification for this attitude without paying attention to their privileges that add up to the creation of ‘merit’, which is then considered ‘impartial’. Their cultural and social capital becomes ‘merit’... In a competitive, unjust world, merit becomes an excuse for the historically privileged and dominant groups to rally against welfare measures that are oriented towards addressing inbred social inequalities.¹⁸³

It is a bleak reality that Dalits have been suppressed, tortured, neglected and denied their rights in Indian society for thousands of years. So it is natural that they have been portrayed as victims in Bollywood movies. But in recent times, things have been changed. There has been a change in the figuration of Dalits. Dalit figures like Deepak Kumar are now more challenging, confident

¹⁸³ Yengde, *Caste Matters*, 9.

and historically aware. They are no longer submissive underdog. They have their own voice. But whereas the film dares to portray a Dalit character with his agency and a sense to claim power and position, the film remains dubious regarding its politics on the controversial question of reservation policy. Although the film empathizes with the cause of reservation or any form of affirmative action, it does not unequivocally support the cause of reservation system which is considered to be a constitutionally sanctioned emancipatory politics of the Dalits. The film puts forward the arguments both for and against the reservation, thus presenting the issue for an open debate. As stated by Prakash Jha, the director of the film, 'It's a balanced view... It speaks about the pain on both sides. People should feel the pain of every section of society. It's a cathartic scene that lets out all the pain boiling inside. Indians are mature enough to deal with it.'¹⁸⁴

Subsuming Caste under Class in *Super 30*

*Super 30*¹⁸⁵ is a 2019 Hindi biopic, directed by Vikas Bahl, which is based on the life a mathematics teacher from Bihar named Anand Kumar. The entire film rests upon the premise that 'from now onwards, the king's son will no longer be the king anymore. He who deserves will be the king.' Although the film does not categorically engage with the institution of caste and confuses the class-caste stereotypes, it certainly questions through this aforesaid dictum the age old dictate of the caste system to strictly follow or observe the ancestral calling. Based on the real life of a Mathematics teacher named Anand Kumar who initiated free coaching service for the underprivileged students in Bihar, mostly comprising of low caste communities, who aspire

¹⁸⁴ Nirpal Dhaliwal, "Grit in the masala: Aarakshan and Bollywood's social conscience," *The Guardian*, 25 Aug, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/aug/25/aarakshan-bollywood-social-issues>

¹⁸⁵ *Super 30*, directed by Vikas Bahl (2019; Mumbai: Phantom Films, Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, Reliance Entertainment, HRX Films), https://www.hotstar.com/in/movies/super-30/1260009172/watch?utm_source=gwa.

to crack the entrance examination for Indian Institute of Technology (IITs), the film celebrates occupational mobility in a caste ridden society. Although the focus of the film lies in identifying poverty as the root cause of the main hurdle for the students of the under-privileged social groups, the film scarcely escapes showcasing the interconnectedness of this poverty with caste, and other handicaps emanating from their position in the lower rung of social ladder. The film bears Bollywood's typically characteristic reservation about overtly showing the caste identity of the characters. The Hindi film industry has always done so in order to conceal its caste prejudice rampant within the industry, and it is also well aware of the discomfort of the viewers of the privileged social groups in confronting the caste issues. Therefore, Bollywood in most of the cases or generally drops hints regarding the characters' caste status and identity, and does not reveal it overtly. In *Super 30*, the marginalised students who have come to avail coaching of Anand Kumar are identified and labelled as 'poor', implying their economic backwardness. But one needs no microscopic analysis to understand the caste identity of them if one takes a glance at their professions and living conditions. The students themselves and their parents are associated with the professions like driving trucks that carry garbage, working as a labourer in salt factory or cement factory, working as watchman—the professions with which mostly the lower castes are engaged.

When Lallan Singh, the coaching mafia who intends to use Anand for making profit in his coaching business, fails to prevent Anand from providing free coaching services to the underprivileged students, he comes to his place, where the latter runs his free coaching classes, just to manipulate him to leave this free service and join, instead, his coaching institute as an employed teacher. Lallan attempts to legitimise the supremacy of the upper caste through quoting religious texts like *Raj Purana* or *The Mahabharata* and argues that these underprivileged lots are doomed to continue the menial jobs they are associated with. But he fails

to manipulate Anand into joining his coaching institute even after proposing double salary to him. Anand sticks to his new found belief that the king's son will no longer be the king, he who deserves will become one. This belief strikes Anand's mind when one night Anand notices a boy studying on the road side. That night he takes a rickshaw van to return home as his motor bike was not functioning. The rickshaw puller reminds Anand, referring to the boy, of the harsh reality that since the time of The Mahabharata these boys meet the fate of Eklavya, as the Dronacharyas always train the Arjunas to become the best, and they will always cut the fingers of the Eklavyas, alluding to the Dronacharya-Eklavya episode in the celebrated Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. According to the story, Eklavya who hails from the low caste Nishad community intends to learn archery from the guru of the Pandavas, Dronacharya. But the guru refuses to teach him since as a low caste fellow he is not entitled to learning this skill. Eklavya then made a statue of Dronacharya in the forest and considering him as his guru, starts practicing archery. Through his devotion to learning, he acquired such a level of skill in archery which was unmatched by anyone. Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, was the greatest archer of that time. Noticing Eklavya's skill surpassing that of Arjuna, Dronacharya claims Eklavya's right thumb as his *guru dakshina*, so that Eklavya loses his skill and Arjuna remains the greatest archer. Eklavya sacrifices his right thumb as he must pay his *guru dakshina* according to the norms. According to the rickshaw puller it is this pattern of depriving the low caste fellows which keep repeating till date. It is this story that strikes Anand and inspires him to alter the age old practice which helps in systematically maintaining the supremacy of the upper caste and depriving the lower caste of what they deserve.

Inequality as the Ground of Solidarity in *Hichki*

Hichki is a 2018 Hindi film directed by Siddharth Malhotra and produced under the banner of Yash Raj Films.¹⁸⁶ The film talks about marginalization on the grounds of disability and caste. The film unravels how the feeling of marginalization makes a teacher empathetic towards her students who face marginalization on different ground. The portrayal of the marginalized students differs from the traditional representation of the socially ostracized groups in the film. The boys and girls who are just teenagers are well-aware of the discriminatory practices in the school, how they are made to feel isolated and humiliated by their own classmates and the teachers. And they are not submissive. They can raise their voice before their class teacher Naina Mathur who holds an empathetic approach for them. Even Naina Mathur recalls her school days when she had to ask for being treated equally, though on a different ground. When Mr. Khan asked the little girl Naina, ‘How can we help you?’ She replied, she wanted just to be treated equally in the school. The students from low-caste background know that the teachers never consider them eligible for the prefectship. Prefectship has come to be the privilege for the urban upper-caste upper middle class students. The teachers are not interested in educating them. ‘They don’t belong here.’—This is the attitude of the upper-caste upper-class teachers of the school towards the students from the socially disadvantaged groups. It brings out the prejudice of the upper-caste, upper-class section of society. It is the exclusionary caste system which induces in them a sense of entitlement that only they have the right to avail all the good opportunities and resources of society. These students have been able to be enrolled in this elite educational institute by virtue of the Right to Education Act. And the school authority did not enrol them in a benevolent manner. They had their own economic interest. The plot where the school playground is situated right now earlier belonged to the local slum-dwellers. The school authority enrolled

¹⁸⁶ *Hichki*, directed by Siddharth P. Malhotra (2018; Mumbai: Yash Raj Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnEFvGszc>.

these children in the school in exchange of that plot which they needed for the playground. These boys and girls have already understood that they are not meant to be valued, respected or treated equally. Even the division of the sections in the class is very discriminatory and humiliating for the Dalit students. Whereas their upper class upper-caste counterparts are allotted the 9A section, these boys and girls from the marginalized background are not allotted the same section, and they are marked with 9F. The section division itself is reflective, in this way, of the caste division and the class division in society.

The film is an attempt to question the privilege and the idea of normalcy, or how privilege and the toxicity around normalcy come in the way in accepting the 'different'. Although the title of the film draws the attention to the Tourette Syndrome as the main concern of the film, the film also showcases the inequality existing in the society in terms of caste and class. As the film informs, the Tourette Syndrome is a neurological disorder in which one reluctantly produces frequent sounds and hits the chin by hand to stop that sound so as to continue the effective verbal communication. Having a well-functioning body becomes a privilege in the context of a human body having some kind of disorder. The message that the film conveys is that a person with some disability or disorder is as normal as a person who has a well-functioning human body. A society which is obsessed with some standard form of normalcy tends to label any form which does not subscribe to that standard form of normalcy abnormal. Thus, it constantly marginalizes the person who possesses that 'abnormality'. One must acknowledge that it is a biological privilege to have a full-grown well-functioning healthy body in respect to a human body with some disability or disorder. In a similar vein, it is a social privilege to have access to and avail all the opportunities, capital, and resources in their highest possible forms. The section of society, namely, the upper-caste or upper class section, which possesses this social privilege for centuries discriminates the marginalized low-caste section of

society. The former considers it to be normal that it is only they who should enjoy and amass the opportunities and resources. They do not intend to question their own privilege constructed through age-old discriminatory caste system. But whereas the different treatment to a person having a particular disorder or syndrome might be meted out of lack of information or awareness about that particular disorder or syndrome, and in certain cases, therefore, might be an involuntary collective treatment, the otherization of the low-caste social groups is practised not through misinformation or lack of knowledge or awareness. It is a deliberate act on the part of the upper-caste section to otherize the lower caste communities to maintain dominance in all the fields of society. The film, I argue, is an attempt to draw attention to the collective treatment, be it voluntary or involuntary, which originates through privileges, towards the biologically handicapped or the socially 'disable'.

Caste as the Defining Factor in *Masaan: Fly away Solo* and Article 15

Neeraj Ghaywan's critically acclaimed 2015 Hindi film *Masaan* (a colloquial word for 'smashaan', meaning crematorium) depicts a love affair between a college student Deepak, belonging to *Dom*, a lower caste community, and an upper caste college girl Shalu.¹⁸⁷ Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* draws critical acclamation and earns several prestigious prizes in film festivals. It deserves critical attention and is placed in the same parallel of the early Bollywood films like *Achhut Kanya*, *Sujata*, *Punarmilan* and *Cha Cha Cha* as it involves the traditional barrier of caste and raises some questions on the presentation of inter-caste love and marriage.

Masaan: Fly away Solo prompts us to reflect twice on the present situation and status of inter-caste love affair when it comes to the matter of love affair involving a lower caste person

¹⁸⁷ *Masaan*, directed by Neeraj Ghaywan (2015; Bombay: Drishyam Films, Phantom Films, Macassar Productions, Sikhya Entertainment, Paris: Pathé and Arte France Cinéma), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6l8Ros5YkV0>.

with an upper caste one. In relation to the representation of inter-caste love affair *Masaan* bears the same legacy of the early Bollywood movies like *Achhut Kanya*, *Sujata*, *Punarmilan*, and *Cha Cha Cha* in the sense that the film represents a love relationship which faces the problem of caste, though on a different note. It, therefore, inevitably puts a question mark on the progress of Indian society in the matter of accepting inter-caste love or marriage. In one scene of the movie *Masaan*, Shalu, the upper caste girl, while conversing with Deepak, her lover, who belongs to a *Dom* (a lower caste community) community, expresses her concern for the future of their relationship and states that her parents would never accept Deepak. That her family is caste-biased is also understood when one of her family members, while eating at a hotel on their way to a pilgrimage, remarks that the food of that hotel is delicious as the hotel belongs to some person of their own Gupta community. That caste is an obstacle in the love relationship between Deepak and Shalu is first understood when one of Deepak's friends informs him that Shalu is an upper caste girl and expresses his doubt about the possibility of their being in a love relationship.

The fact that a film like *Masaan* (2015), which having been made even after half a century of the making of the films like *Punarmilan* (1964) or *Cha Cha Cha* (1964), still bears the same legacy, i.e., the love pair is concerned about their relationship just because of 'caste', clearly points to the fact that the Indian society is, on a large scale, still caste ridden in the sense that it has not yet come out of the stigma of caste bias. The Indian society—to see the larger picture—has not yet progressed to accept the inter-caste love and marriage as a purely human affair. It views this affair from the perspective of caste. Even though some families accept the inter-caste love or marriage, it is nothing but a negotiation, retaining the casteist mentality, as evident in these words of Shalu in *Masaan*: 'I have heard that everything is settled up later.' 'Settled up' is negotiation, not acceptance. Anwer and Arora find in Shalu's decision to see a

future with Deepak in spite of knowing the caste-sensitivity of her family a defiant act of transgressing the caste order:

Her decision to reject “safety-first love” and choose “risky love” (Badiou) in her crosscaste desire for a subaltern man is a political and radical act that possesses the promise of personal transformation, and carries the potential to unleash transgressive possibilities as it destabilizes the status quo of caste regimes built on the control of women’s sexuality.¹⁸⁸

Shalu and Deepak’s assumption that a financially secured job can enable their relationship to be acceptable to Shalu’s upper caste family exposes their ignorance about the all-pervasive nature of caste in Indian social life. They assume that caste is a thing of past in the modern capitalist world. They are unaware that the caste status of a person can override the class status. Anwer and Arora also question this very naivety and ignorance of both Shalu and Deepak as to how caste can be a defining factor in their relationship:

Lest we imagine that love has the power to evacuate caste, the language of her commitment to him remains very much embedded in the workings of caste. The very words that confirm the non-contingency of her desire – she loves him, no matter what his caste, and in fact, goes a step further to commit to marrying him – nevertheless reveal the naivety of even well-intentioned upper-caste people. Simultaneously, they give an account of the desperate routes Dalits search for, and devise, in their attempts to escape the clutches of caste. Shalu’s naïveté in imagining that “things get better later” (once the couple is married) is a symptom of the extent to which her caste has cocooned her from the reality of upper-caste violence, of families murdering young couples who dare commit the blasphemy of an inter-caste marriage. Her hope, which Deepak echoes, that a “good job” will eventually make him palatable to her family, is another instance of this naivety. They both assume that an aspirational middle-class-ness, achieved through professional means, will give him more leverage into “acceptability” in an upper-caste family.¹⁸⁹

Anubhav Sinha’s 2019 Hindi film *Article 15* (I have discussed the film in detail in next chapter 4) primarily focuses on the rape and murder of two minor Dalit girls by some upper-caste

¹⁸⁸ Megha Anwer & Anupama Arora, “Love, Interrupted: Caste and Couple-Formation in New Bollywood,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 9 (2021), DOI:10.1080/10509208.2020.1867476

¹⁸⁹ Megha Anwer & Anupama Arora, “Love, Interrupted: Caste and Couple-Formation in New Bollywood,” 10.

fellows of Thakur community.¹⁹⁰ The film features two love relationships which are, though not inter-caste, not caste-neutral either. Ayan and Aditi, the upper-caste couple, try to ensure justice to the murdered Dalit girls. In the process their broken relationship gets strengthened by their saviour complex which arises out of their location in the privileged position both in terms of class and caste. Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, in their article “Love, Interrupted: Caste and Couple-Formation in New Bollywood”, attempt a comparative study of the films *Masaan* and *Article 15* in terms of how caste shapes the traditional heterosexual relationship in modern post-liberalization India. They argue,

while both films present a non-normative (that is, non-conjugal) heterosexual modality, and contend with caste as a disruptor of romantic love, they do not offer equally compelling or definitive critiques of caste inequality. While *Masaan* uses its romantic “couplings” to mutually reinforce a seamless censure of caste and patriarchal hypocrisy and prejudice, *Article 15* opts to center its upper caste couple, whose apparent non-normativity masks gender and caste conformity.¹⁹¹

Anwer and Arora argue that it is the modern bourgeoisie nature of relationship of Ayan and Aditi which allows the couple to redress the caste question of a feudal set up with the Savarna saviour complex:

...their metronomic interruptions in the film’s narrative flow determine how the film, and its protagonist, make/arrive at their argument about caste, marking both the progressive contours and the myopic limits of that argument. To put it another way, the film’s liberal politics – its acknowledgment of caste as an ongoing oppressive force – as well as its problematic caste-politics – that the resolution to the caste-question is framed within an overwhelmingly Brahmanical savior complex – are borne out of, in large part, the bourgeois romantic relationship between Ayan and Aditi. (Anwer and Arora 14)

Anwer and Arora make a crucial point when they argue that it is the bourgeois nature of their love relationship which plays a pivotal role in neutralizing the anti-caste politics of the film. As they argue,

¹⁹⁰ *Article 15*, directed by Anubhav Sinha (2019; Mumbai: Zee Studios), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81154455?source=35>.

¹⁹¹ Megha Anwer & Anupama Arora, “Love, Interrupted: Caste and Couple-Formation in New Bollywood,” 3.

It is true that the film does validate Aditi's version of reality over Ayan's, in which caste-violence stands indicted and punished. Nevertheless, in offering the audience a more liberal, self-aware upper-caste character (who draws the protagonist over to her version of politics), the film neutralizes an Ambedkarite politics of caste-annihilation, in favor of a navel-gazing reformism. Even more crucially, it is upper-caste-bourgeois love that powers and sanctifies the dilution of the film's anti-caste politics.¹⁹²

In contrast to the love relationship of Ayan and Aditi which finds a communion in the end, the film *Article 15* deploys another love story which is between Nishad and Gaura both of whom belong to Dalit communities. Both of them are associated with anti-caste politics and activism at grass root level. Their aim is not merely to ensure justice to the murdered Dalit girls. They have a larger mission—completely getting rid of caste inequality. Their anti-caste ethos brings them close to each other. Their love relationship borders on the perpetual anxiety of hope and impossibility. They are bound to experience, unlike the upper-caste lovers in the film, this anxiety because they as committed anti-caste activists have to fight a greater evil. This evil comes in the form of all-encompassing casteism, in the first place, and only after that they have the option of thinking about their love relationship. This anxiety in their relationship is characteristic of what Yengde conceptualizes as 'Dalit Love'. As Yengde elaborates his idea,

Dalit Love is a juxtacondition of possibilities and deep pain. It is not a negation of unlove, but a movement of possibilities. It is a belief that comes from a singular conviction of loving the unloved. The unloved belong to an under-appreciated and unrecognized segment that determines the suffering of humanity. Dalit Love creates and recreates the belief in their ancestral inheritance of the resilience to survive. It is, in fact, an example of the model of life. It teaches how to breathe life into a moribund kind of love. It thrives on the struggle between life and hope. Dalit Love is the only way to avoid nihilistic tendencies. A community whose agency is snatched, dreams shattered and bodies massacred still finds reason to love. Dalit Love is tender and soft, and light in weight. It is conditionally rooted in pain and simultaneously desires real escape.¹⁹³

Thus the chapter has explored how Hindi films conventionally have focused in representing the practice of untouchability, victimization, economic exploitation, physical

¹⁹² Megha Anwer & Anupama Arora, "Love, Interrupted: Caste and Couple-Formation in New Bollywood," 18.

¹⁹³ Yengde, *Caste Matters*, 49.

atrocities and sexual exploitation of the Dalits by the upper castes. The films primarily portray the Dalit characters as submissive and docile. Although the Dalit characters have been endowed with an assertive voice in some cases, this assertion has usually been accompanied by some upper-caste character's act of benevolence. The films are fraught with the trope of Dalit emancipation through the upper-castes' generosity. The films are predominantly driven by reformist zeal. Caste has been seen as an aberration. Therefore, in the project of nation-building in the late colonial and post-colonial period, the caste system and the practice of untouchability have to be discouraged. These Hindi films are replete with these stereotypes when it comes to representing caste in films.

Chapter 3

Visual Politics of Victimization in Film Adaptations

Adaptation and the Visual Imagination of Caste

Adaptation has the potential to offer visual politics of an aspect it represents. Adaptation can offer the trope of visuality through which one can easily relate to the aspect visualized. The power of visuality in constructing social reality is immense. As argued by Eschholz et al.

Understanding the power of the media in the social construction of reality is important, particularly when we have such a wealth of evidence describing how films, television, and other media sources continue to somewhat rigidly define roles and expectations for less powerful groups in society.¹⁹⁴

The renowned Dalit filmmaker Jayan K. Cherian from the Malayalam film industry has also emphasized the importance of the trope of visuality when he argues, ‘Literature is a powerful medium, but I think a film can communicate with more people simultaneously, the experience of watching a movie in a theatre or an auditorium is a collective act, and it is unique. I don’t think it is doing anything with the Dalit struggle in particular, but activists around the world have used visual narratives widely as an organizing tool.’¹⁹⁵ In his essay “Representation, Reality, and Emotions Across Media” (2006) Jonathan Frome, taking resort to Noel Carroll's “thought theory”, explains the effect of media on human emotions: ‘Emotions can be generated just by the thought of things...If we actually visualize this scenario, we can be genuinely scared by it even if we believe that we are firmly on the safe ground.’¹⁹⁶ Therefore, an adaptation of the source texts serves to reinforce, extend or erase the politics of caste through the trope of visuality. It may also be argued that the adaptations may recognize or deny the visibility of caste. Adaptation

¹⁹⁴ Sarah Eschholz, et al, “Symbolic Reality Bites: Women and Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Modern Film,” *Sociological Spectrum*, vol. 22, 326, DOI:10.1080/02732170290062658

¹⁹⁵ Judith-Misrahi Barak and Nicole Thiara, “Interview with director Jayan K. Cherian.”

¹⁹⁶ Jonathan Frome, “Representation, Reality, and Emotions across Media,” *Film Studies* 6 (2006),13.

presupposes a critical approach as well as a creative one as it helps recreate the source text or adapted text in completely or partially new socio-cultural context and shapes the way of re-interpreting the source text. Adaptation has the potential to communicate the message of the writer of the source text or inform the core issues which form the centrality of the source text or inform just the subtext to a larger audience who have not gone through the text. The film adaptation has the capacity to transcend the limits of language, literacy or culture, and supply different visual version of the known text. Therefore, a film adaptation of the caste question can offer an entirely different visual imagination of caste. Given the magnitude of impact of visuality, this dissertation has examined substantively the film adaptations. In the following sections I will explore the visual imagination of the caste question as experimented in the film adaptations vis-à-vis its representation in the source texts.

In this chapter I attempt to investigate the film adaptations of Subodh Ghosh' *Sujata*, Munshi Premchand's *Sadgati*, Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*, and Mala Sen's *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* vis-à-vis their source texts, and show how the visual politics of caste reshapes the understanding of caste question both by extending and contracting the representation of precarity of the Dalits and the institutionalized discrimination against them on the ground of caste.

Caste as a Notion in Subodh Ghosh's *Sujata*

Published in 1953 *Sujata* by Subodh Ghosh is one of the earliest literary texts in the post-independent period which deal substantively with a social ill which plagues the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years.¹⁹⁷ A popular storyteller in Bengali literature, Subodh Ghosh pens his thoughts on varied social issues. Beginning his literary career with the novel *Ekti*

¹⁹⁷ Subodh Ghosh, *Dashti Upanyas* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2012).

Nomoshkare, he ventures to include myriad issues in his literary writings like *Bharat Premkatha* (The Love Stories of Bharat), *Kingbodontir Desh* (The Country of the Legends) *Kinu Goyalar Goli* (The Lane Called Kinu Goyala) etc. His novel *Sujata* bears testimony to the genius of Subodh Ghosh in foregrounding the intricacies of social evil called caste system and its most inhuman practice in the form of untouchability. Through his fictional narrative, Ghosh attempts to bring out the social reality that how caste as a notion resides in the cognitive realm of Indian society, and approaches the issue of caste and untouchability with a progressive outlook, keeping with the dominant narrative of the Nehruvian era in the first decade after the independence of India from the British Empire.

The novel narrates the story of discrimination an untouchable girl faces during her upbringing in an upper-caste family. A baby girl is born to an untouchable family. Left orphaned by her parents, the baby is adopted and brought up in a Brahmin family consisting of a couple Upen and Charu. Although Upen's liberal approach to the social customs like caste system makes a space for the baby, whom he later names 'Ambalika', in the family and fills Ambalika's mind with a sense of acceptance, his wife Charu is afraid of accepting Ambi (Ambalika is fondly called 'Ambi' by Upen and Charu) as there is the compulsion to break the tenets of religion and the caste system particularly in even 'touching', let alone the intent or act of accepting, an untouchable. Upen's paternal aunt, too, who is a staunch believer in the sanctity of religion in general and the caste system in particular, can never accept Ambi in the family wholeheartedly just because of Ambi's lower caste origin. They remind Ambi time and again of her caste identity in their treatment and attitude to her. Towards the end of the story Upen's wife Charu accidentally falls down the staircase and gets severely injured. The doctor suggests the family to arrange the blood which matches Charu's in order to save her life. After checking the blood of the family members, the doctor finds only Ambi's blood group similar to that of Charu. Ambi

feels herself fortunate enough to donate blood to save Charu's life. Back to her consciousness, when Charu learns that she has been able to survive because of none other than the 'untouchable' Ambi, she realizes her folly of humiliating and discriminating Ambi because of her caste identity, and finally accepts her as her daughter. Thus the story draws the curtain on a happy note.

From the initial part of the novel, the narrative introduces the readers with the conscious attempt of the upper-caste characters to discriminate Ambi to ensure that the latter is not raised to the equal status of an upper caste from her subhuman status determined by caste. As is evident from the incident wherein Charu notices that the bottle of milk slips from the mouth of the sleeping untouchable baby girl, she, out of her motherly affection, feels an urge to put the bottle in the right place. But along with considering this to be an act of too much affection, she does not think it necessary to touch a baby of low-caste origin. As she thinks, 'Besides, it is not necessary to touch the baby of a lower caste.'¹⁹⁸ Hence, she wakes up the sleeping *ayaa* or maid servant who is entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the baby to place the bottle near the baby's mouth. Charu's motherly affection fails to overcome her religious urge to preserve her caste purity. On another occasion, Professor Pandit Bhavani Shankar Sharma (Asit Sen), Upen's aunt's close acquaintance, who arrives at Upen's house for staying at least for fifteen days, decides suddenly to leave the house as he witnesses that Upen's family has given shelter to an untouchable baby. When Upen confronts the professor asking him what is wrong with giving shelter to an untouchable child in the house, the professor puts forward a religious theory to defend his standpoint. He argues:

¹⁹⁸ Subodh Ghosh, *Dashti Upanyas* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2012), 16, Translation mine.

As per religious code, not merely the untouchable's touch, but even his proximity is flawed. Not only those objects must not be touched, but also must not be kept around. You are an educated, wise man. You know for sure that there is a mention of such apprehension even in science... a kind of gas emits from an untouchable's body, which damages the body, mind and soul of the people of high-caste lineage.¹⁹⁹

Thus the professor considers it to be a religious duty for the upper castes to keep themselves away from 'those objects', i.e., the untouchables as the presence of an untouchable can pollute the upper castes in all the possible ways. Upen's aunt also expresses her displeasure when she comes to know that an untouchable baby is getting reared at Upen's home. She writes letter to Upen remind him of his high-caste lineage. She writes:

I am very upset hearing all the fuss. You know, you belong to a high-caste lineage. Not a single person among your forefathers did make any relationship with any low-caste family but *kulin* lineage. I can't imagine how you can provide shelter in your house to an untouchable girl, being oblivious about the rank and sacredness of your caste.²⁰⁰

Even in her frequently written letters to Upen, the aunt questions Upen's decision to keep the untouchable girl giving shelter in her house. She does not forget to remind him time and again through her letters how the presence of an untouchable girl in his house can hamper the possibility their own daughter Rama's marriage in some family of high-caste lineage. As she warns:

I understand, you keep providing shelter in your house to that untouchable girl. As is the case now, you are residing in the hills and forest area. But one day you will have to live within the social circle, returning to the mainland from that area. I think you cannot understand that the presence of an outcaste or ill-caste girl in your house will earn you so much pejoration in the society that it will render it impossible for you to find for Rama a suitable match from high-caste lineage.²⁰¹

The case of caste taking precedence over human affection is witnessed once again when the aunt is seen to candidly acknowledge that she loves Upen most among all her kith and kin just because Upen belongs to the topmost high-caste lineage among them. As she writes, 'you belong

¹⁹⁹ Subodh Ghosh, *Dashti Upanyas*, 18, Translation mine.

²⁰⁰ Subodh Ghosh, 20, Translation mine.

²⁰¹ Subodh Ghosh, 26, Translation mine.

to the topmost high-caste lineage among all my relatives. That is why I am mostly affectionate to you.’²⁰²Upen and Charu try to find people of Ambi’s caste so that they can hand over the baby to the people of her own caste. Only through this way they can get rid of the untouchable baby. Having failed at this attempt, they manage to find an orphanage where Ambi can receive a good upbringing. Even this time their plan fails as the child Ambi refuses to leave Upen and Charu. When they understand that there is no way to shake off the responsibility of bringing up Ambi, they plan to rear Ambi in such a way that the latter cannot elevate herself to the status of their own daughter Rama. Thus, whereas Rama’s birthday is celebrated with all its magnanimity, Ambi is deprived of such kind of celebration. Whereas Rama is privileged enough to receive education, learn cultural activities, participate in sports for her all-round development, Ambi is deliberately deprived of acquiring all these things to be raised as a woman of low worth. She is only allowed to manage the household chores like a servant. They try to ensure in every possible way Ambi’s inferiority to Rama in every sphere. As they express their concern:

The problem will be more complicated if Ambi develops a mindset like that of a gentleman’s daughter through acquiring education... It is a matter of apprehension, if Ambi develops a mind and desire like that of Rama? The kind of bridegroom deserved by Rama cannot be available for Ambi. Ambi has a caste-ridden identity. And that identity is not advantageous.²⁰³

This concern of Upen and Charu suggests that Ambi, being an untouchable, is not entitled like Rama to develop a cultured, refined mind which can be acquired through education. A caste-ridden society will not accept the fact that an untouchable should receive the same upbringing as an upper-caste fellow does. An effort is always made on the part of Upen and Charu to restrict Ambi within her caste status. She is time and again reminded of her caste status and never allowed to transgress the boundary as determined by caste system. It is also notable that they

²⁰² Subodh Ghosh, 20, Translation mine.

²⁰³ Subodh Ghosh, 30, Translation mine.

think that it is only Ambi who has a caste connection. They do not consider that they are well associated with caste. They locate caste in Ambi's origin, not in their own belief system. Furthermore, when they discuss Ambi's marriage, they decide that Ambi has to be ensured that she has no right to object to any marriage proposal deemed suitable as per Upen and Charu's knowledge. As they decide,

Ambi is to be made understood that she is not entitled to object or disagree. What suits Rama does not suit her. Rama is the girl of this house and Ambi is not. So, Ambi is to be made clear that she must make up her mind to leave after marriage, learning and accepting her fate.²⁰⁴

Ambi is denied the basic human right to choose a suitable match for her just because of her low-caste origin. As a low-caste woman she is not entitled to object or reject any marriage proposal even if she finds it not suitable for her. Caste also deprives her of her freedom to disagree with Upen and Charu's decision regarding her marriage. On another occasion wherein Charu gets to know that Ambi has learnt the art of embroidery and lace, she apprehends that Ambi is trying to be equal with Rama in every sphere. Therefore, she reminds Ambi that the latter is not entitled to do all the things which Rama is entitled to do, and she must not establish herself on equal terms with Rama. As Charu warns Ambi, 'those works (the making of embroidery and lace) do not suit you. It is not even required. It is not necessary that you have to do all the things which Rama does.'²⁰⁵ Upen and Charu remain intolerant to Ambi's talent of developing cultural skill. It is exemplified once again when they consider Ambi's beautiful singing voice to be a defeat for them.²⁰⁶ They never intend that Ambi acquires the cultural refinement which is supposed to be acquired by their own daughter Rama. They bring up Ambi in such a way that she keeps herself confined only to doing household chores. This is how they

²⁰⁴ Subodh Ghosh, 32, Translation mine.

²⁰⁵ Subodh Ghosh, 35. Translation mine.

²⁰⁶ Subodh Ghosh, 61.

try to elevate Rama's status from Ambi's. When Rama asks why Ambi would not attend Adheer's birthday ceremony while all of them get ready for the occasion, Charu convinces Rama that Ambi should not go to the house of a traditional high-caste family as she has no right to do so.²⁰⁷ Charu is also afraid that the possibility of Rama's marriage with Adheer might get disrupted if Adheer comes to know that the family members of this house have given shelter to an untouchable girl denying the caste ethics. She thinks it to be natural for Adheer to nurture great culture, i.e., preserve the culture of caste.²⁰⁸

When Upen's aunt takes the responsibility of finding a match for Ambi as she assumes that Ambi might become an obstacle on Rama's way to getting all the property of Upen, which will later be handed over to Adheer after his marriage with Rama, she does not care for the whereabouts of the groom. By hook or crook she tries to manage a match for Ambi. Whether the match is suitable or not is not a matter of concern for her. Her purpose is to remove Ambi from the path at any cost. She does not care for Ambi's future. The old gentleman who appears in Upen's house to find a suitable match for his son after noticing the advertisement in the matrimonial section of a newspaper given by Upen for the purpose of finding a suitable match for Ambi apparently displays his progressive outlook to life and society in his conversation with Upen. He expresses his displeasure over the obsession of society with casteism, glorification of family clan or lineage, and argues that gentleness is greater than family lineage, that education is greater than money.²⁰⁹ But his double standard immediately gets exposed when Upen reveals that Ambi is not his own daughter, and that the latter hails from a low-caste community. The old gentleman gets enraged learning Ambi's caste identity, and rebukes Upen stating that he has

²⁰⁷ Subodh Ghosh, 65.

²⁰⁸ Subodh Ghosh, 41.

²⁰⁹ Subodh Ghosh, 43.

been deceived by Upen. He admits that he would have agreed to marry his son off to Ambi, had she been without legs, implying that compared to a physically disabled woman, a low-caste woman is less desirable as a match for his son. When Upen's aunt comes to know about the affair between Adheer and Ambi, she considers this inter-caste affair to be 'strange misrule of the world'²¹⁰ and curses this 'strange misrule'. Charu considers the case of Adheer's falling in love with Ambi to be nothing but Ambi's wicked design in which Adheer gets entrapped. According to her, it is such kind of evil act which differentiates a low-born from a high-born. She curses Ambi saying that the latter carries venom in her blood.²¹¹ This discriminatory treatment on the basis of caste breaks Ambi's morale to such an extent that she perceives herself as a subhuman. She gets shattered the day Charu reveals her true identity. When Ambi notices that Charu refuses to serve tea made by Ambi to the guests, she asks Charu why the tea made by her cannot be served to the guest. In reply to her query, Charu informs her that 'you are low caste. The gentlefolks do not eat anything touched by that caste. The gentlefolks do not tread the door of that caste.'²¹² Ambi gets so convinced about her subhuman status that she is afraid to reciprocate Adheer's love for her. She is made to believe throughout her upbringing that she has no right to come literally close to an upper-caste fellow, let alone the right to love. She now believes that 'she is of low blood.'²¹³ The very human touch of Adheer which could be a cause of happiness for Ambi turns out to be an offence for her. The practice of untouchability deprives an untouchable woman even of the loving touch from her lover if the latter hails from a high-caste community. As the author describes, 'Ambi has no right to touch that man [Adheer]. Ambi does

²¹⁰ Subodh Ghosh, 70, Translation mine.

²¹¹ Subodh Ghosh, 71.

²¹² Subodh Ghosh, 42, Translation mine.

²¹³ Subodh Ghosh, 53, Translation mine.

believe herself to be an untouchable.’²¹⁴ Ambi realizes, as she reveals about herself to Adheer, ‘I am a low caste. I am low-born untouchable. There is vice in my blood. I am wastage in your sacred world.’²¹⁵

Whereas Ambi gets discriminatory treatment from her infancy to adulthood in the house, she is for the first time recognized as a human being by Upen’s aunt’s grandson Adheer whom the writer portrays as a progressive liberal who values Ambi’s innate goodness rather than her caste identity. Adheer is a product of post-Independent Nehruvian era the dominant narrative of which is shaped by the idea of liberal democracy, secularism, and socialism. The newly decolonized Indian state as its part of nation-building project attempts to give birth to progressive, liberal citizens who are not supposed to discriminate people on the basis of religion, caste, race, language or gender. Adheer is representative of this ethos borne out in the aftermath of the Independence. Apart from his humane treatment to Ambi, Adheer’s research topic ‘everyman is born equal’ is also suggestive of this ethos. In his research Adheer attempts to argue that everyman is

not only free but also equal. There is nothing called culture acquired through birth. Heredity is a flawed theory. Caste is a great lie. Blood is not the determiner of any culture. Even the intimate relations, kinship, these all are the consequences of situation. The bond of blood, attraction of soul—all these are flawed.²¹⁶

He attempts to get Ambi out of her inferiority complex by referring to Gandhi who, according to Adheer, gave shelter to an untouchable girl as a daughter and gave her the name ‘Lakshmi’, and by referring to Buddha who, according to him, opposed the division between the high caste and the low caste, and gave respect to several untouchable women. Apart from the portrayal of Adheer, the writer incorporates a song, which bears the message of humanity over

²¹⁴ Subodh Ghosh, 54, Translation mine.

²¹⁵ Subodh Ghosh, 67, Translation mine.

²¹⁶ Subodh Ghosh, 38, Translation mine.

everything else, to remind Upen of his failure to refrain from caste discrimination. Thus go the lines of the song: ‘Why do you boast of your caste, man?/ No one is high or low to God.’²¹⁷ The lines of the song disturb Upen as it sarcastically reminds him the system of caste inequality practised by his own family in respect to Ambi. Whereas the song soothes Ambi’s mind, Upen finds it difficult to bear the words which mock at his failure.

Framing Caste as a Notion in the Film Adaptation *Sujata*

Sujata (1959), directed by Bimal Roy, is one of the few Hindi films grappling with the contentious issue of caste and untouchability.²¹⁸ Adapted from the Bengali novel *Sujata* by Subodh Ghosh, one of the celebrated writers of the twentieth century Bengali literature, the film focuses on the psychological handicaps or trauma of the protagonist Sujata facing the experience of untouchability, a social and cultural evil which is interconnected with socially, culturally and religiously sanctioned practice of caste system. The story is about how Sujata, an untouchable (‘asprishya’ or ‘achhut’) by birth and accidentally adopted in a Brahmin family, has been marginalized and undergone a feeling of isolation within the family she has been brought up because of her caste identity, and finally get accepted in the family after the eventual change of heart of the upper-caste couple of the Choudhury family.

When the literary texts are adapted into cinematic texts, the meaning appears to be transformed to a significant extent as the ‘frame includes a potentially infinite amount of visual information, as does the soundtrack that accompanies it.’²¹⁹ The narration of *Sujata* in the literary text and the imaging of that very phenomenon in the cinematic text bear different connotations

²¹⁷ Subodh Ghosh, 55, Translation mine.

²¹⁸ *Sujata*, directed by Bimal Roy (1959; Mumbai: Bimal Roy Productions), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/sujata/3498586/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

²¹⁹ Monaco, *How to Read a Film*, 2009.

and thereby construct the question of caste and untouchability in dissimilar ways. Bimal Roy's *Sujata* is one of the early films of post-Independence India that substantively engages with the social evil of caste and untouchability. Nabendu Ghosh pens the screenplay of the movie, while the dialogues are composed by Paul Mahendra. In the very first scene, the film informs that there is an outbreak of cholera in the form of an epidemic in No. 2 *Kuli basti* (the settlement of the porter caste), and thus informs about a separate settlement²²⁰ of a particular lower caste community, the *Kuli*. The scene also bears the image of the *Kulis* who come to inform Upen, the government engineer, about the outbreak of cholera in their vicinity. While Upen was busy in his work, the *Kulis* were waiting for him. Their submissive way of sitting while waiting for Upen indicates their low social status. And it is the 'chowkidar' (watchman) of Upen, who speaks on behalf of the silent *Kulis*, which is also indication of their lack of agency. When the *chowkidar* along with two other persons brings a baby girl of a low caste origin to Upen's house for taking care of her as the baby's parents died of cholera, Upen refuses to take the baby in his custody. As the baby is the daughter of his trolley *Kuli* Budhan, Upen, out of his sense of responsibility, offers some money for making some arrangements for the child. But they (the *chowkidar* and other two persons) beg some time for making some arrangements for the baby and request him to take the baby in his custody until some arrangement is made. Although Upen is not prepared to keep his request, Charu, Upen's wife, out of her kindness and motherly affection, asks the *aaya*, the female servant of the house, to take custody of the baby for some days to which she readily assents considering it as her duty as a servant. At that time, Upen orders the *chowkidar* to find out someone of the baby's caste. Upen had to abide by the societal norms which forbid him to take custody of a baby who belongs to a lower caste.

²²⁰ It is a typical characteristic of the caste-ridden society to have a separate settlement for the low-caste groups away from the mainland of any town or village, inhabited by the high-caste groups, usually at the outskirts of the village or town.

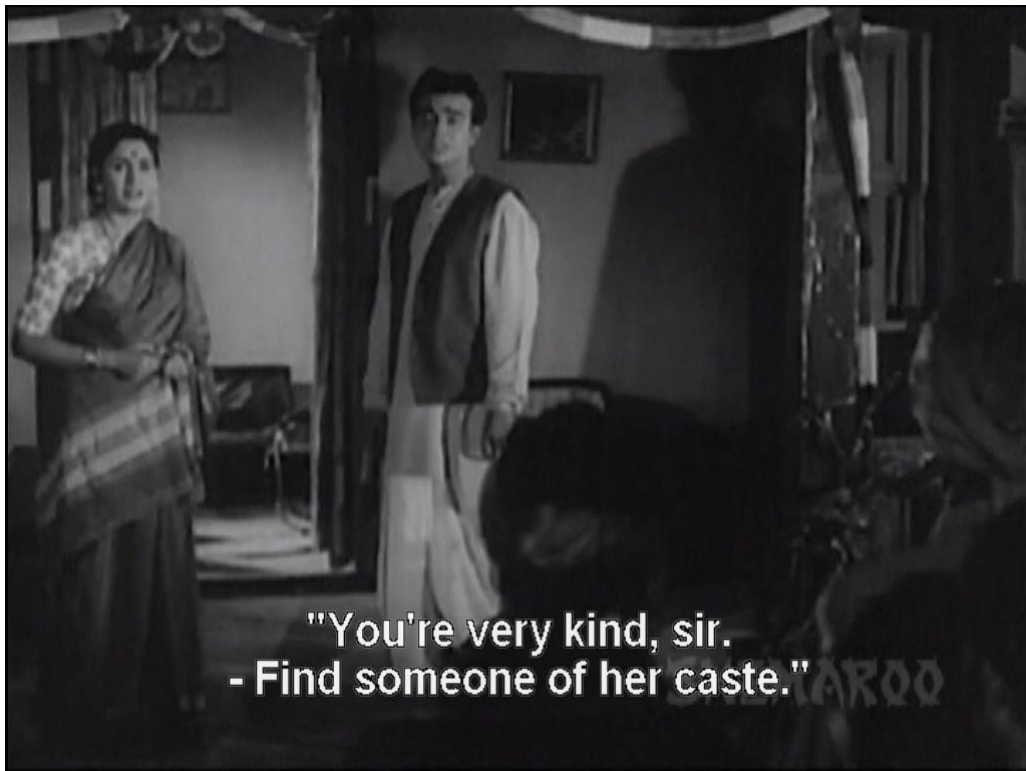


Figure 2: The frame in which Upen is seen to reject the request of adopting the newborn baby Sujata as the latter hails from low-caste parents, and after consenting to give shelter to the baby for few days on request of his wife Charu, he orders the Kulis to ‘find someone of her caste’ as early as possible.

Image courtesy: rosiesmovielist.blogspot.com

The tone of the conversation between Upen and the *chowkidar* along with other two persons also indicates their superior and inferior social status respectively.

When Upen unconsciously calls the baby by the name Sujata, Charu replies that ‘she is from a lower caste and you give her the name Sujata’. She points out that calling an untouchable girl by that name is as if “aankh ke andhe aur naam nayansukh” (someone who is blind gets the name of a possessor of beautiful eyes [Translation mine]). On an explanatory note, the word ‘sujata’ literally means someone who has a high birth, which in Indian social context means someone who is born in a high caste. Therefore, the baby girl, who belongs to an untouchable caste, being named as ‘Sujata’ is both inappropriate and ironic. It brings out a crude reality of the caste system which does not allow a person of low caste origin even to bear a ‘good name’. He

or she must bear a name which carries a sense of inferiority, humiliation or slavery. This changing of name of the protagonist from Ambalika in the adapted text to Sujata in the film is to constantly remind the audience the irony of fate of Sujata's life. The moment Sujata enters Upen's house, she is handed over to the 'aaya', the female servant and caretaker of his house, because it is the servant's class to which Sujata the untouchable baby properly belongs. When Upen's *Buaji*²²¹ arrives at Upen's house, she, unaware of Sujata's caste identity, hold Sujata in her lap. But when she comes to know that it is Rama who is the daughter of Upen and Charu, and not Sujata, and is also informed that Sujata is an untouchable, she instantly throws Sujata from her lap to the aaya's hands out of deep abhorrence, and ridicules Upen for giving an untouchable baby girl shelter in his house. In her own words, "Upen, I did not expect this from you. You are from a high caste... Had I known that you have given shelter in your house to an untouchable, I would not have come here." The panditji (priest) who came along with Upen's Buaji to Upen's house as a guest decides to leave his house when he comes to know that Upen is bringing up an untouchable child in his house. The panditji whom Buaji introduced to Upen as a religious person makes his mind to leave Upen's house because it is his religion which directs him to do so. As he informs Upen, "according to religion, not only an untouchable's touch is impure, but even staying with an untouchable is also impure. It is something which even science has proved." When Upen encounters him asking what exactly science has proved, he replies, "from the untouchable's body, one kind of gas is emitted, and it keeps polluting the body, mind and soul of the *kulins* (the kulin Brahmin, one of the most revered sects among the Brahmins). When he leaves Upen's house, Charu requests Buaji to prevent him from leaving the house. But Buaji replies that he will no longer stay in the house as he is a 'nisthaban Brahmin' (a Brahmin who strictly adheres to the tenets of his religion). Buaji also informs Charu that she can tolerate her

²²¹ In Indian family culture, paternal aunts are fondly addressed as Buaji.

‘anachar’ (culturally unsanctioned behavior), i.e., the act of bringing up an untouchable child in her house, but Panditji will never forgive her (Charu). Buaji also suggests Charu to get rid of this ‘paap’, sin, as early as possible. When Upen touches Sujata, Charu objects. Though she is tolerant enough to give Sujata a space in her house out of her motherly affection, she cannot get rid of her casteism. Charu also objects when Upen is about to eat with the same spoon by which he feeds Sujata, an objection to which Upen reacts with anger and disappointment.

While modern liberal education of Upen allows him to accept Sujata as a fellow human being, Charu remains orthodox and can tolerate Sujata in the house only as a second class or subhuman being. The scene displaying the unequal heights of two adjacent trees symbolizes the unequal upbringing of the two girls Rama and Sujata within the same house. Rama’s addressing her parents as ‘pitaji’ and ‘maa’ starkly contrasts with Sujata’s addressing them as ‘bapu’ and ‘ammi’, which is usually the language of the servant class, and in fact, this has been probably taught to Sujata, as evident from a conversation between Upen and Charu, by the *aaya*, the caretaker of Sujata. Although Sujata is allowed to physically share the domestic space of Upen and Charu, she is psychologically excommunicated within the family, lest she claims equal status in the family. Though they go to the extent of recognizing an untouchable girl, their religious culture does not allow them to treat her on equal terms along with their own daughter Rama. This is why Sujata is deprived of acquiring education while Rama has been given every opportunity to acquire education as well as for her all round development. Sujata is only taught to do the menial jobs and other household chores to serve them. The logic of caste does not get affected even after the Chowdhury family’s adoption of an untouchable girl as they allot the untouchable girl her caste-assigned role, i.e., the duty to serve the upper-caste members of the family through various menial jobs and household chores, and allow Rama to continue her study, enjoy her life, refraining her from doing such household chores and menial services. When Sujata gradually

realizes the unequal treatment meted out to her and therefore, demands equal right with her childlike innocence, the adoptive parents plan to send her to an orphanage to get rid of Sujata. The unequal treatment meted out of casteism is also evident in Rama and Sujata's different self-fashioning. The way they dress up, the way they speak clearly indicate their different social standings. In order to show the differential treatment to the two girls of the house, the film also makes use of the visual tropes like portraying Sujata as a dark-skinned girl as marker of a typical untouchable, contrary to the fair complexion of her upper-caste counterpart Rama, singing lullabies only to Rama, and not to Sujata, to make her sleep, Charu's act of forbidding Upen to eat with the same spoon which he uses to feed Sujata and to eat her leftovers, the celebration of Rama's birthday, while denying the same to Sujata.

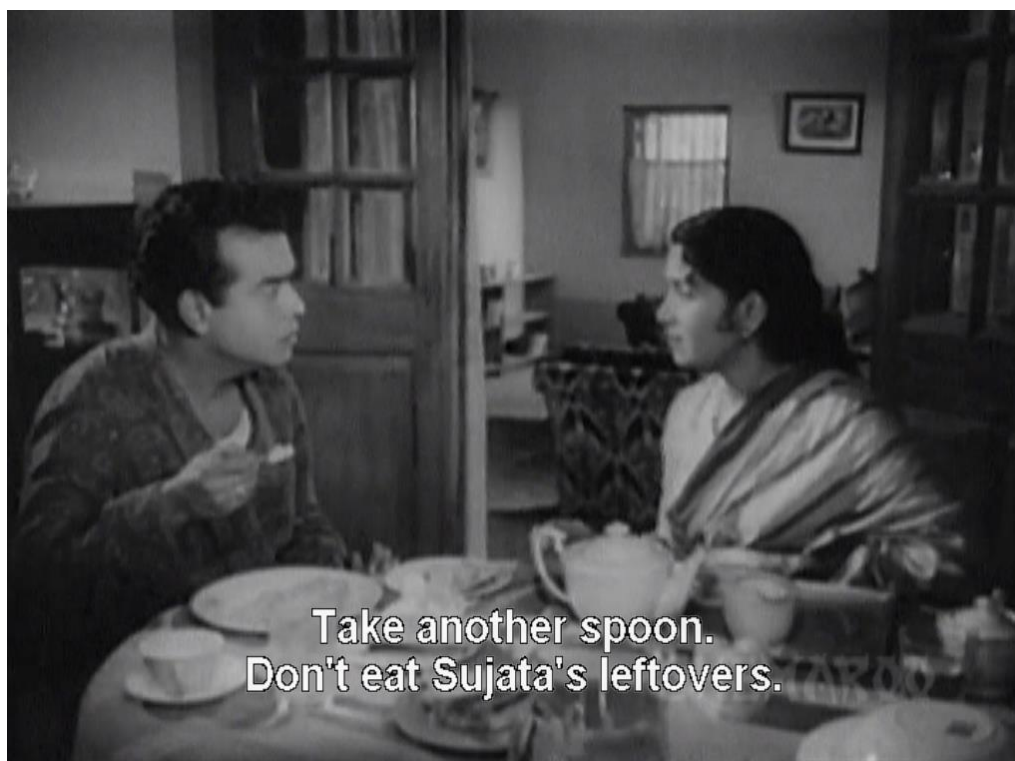


Figure 3: The frame in which Charu is seen to forbid Upen to eat little Sujata's leftover and also forbid him to use the same spoon with which Upen has just feeded Sujata.

Image courtesy: rosiesmovielist.blogspot.com

When Upen tries to arrange a suitable partner for Sujata through matrimonial advertisement, the old man who responds to Upen's matrimonial advertisement accepts Upen's proposal to get his son married off to Sujata in the first place. But the moment the old man is informed about Sujata's low-caste identity, he gets enraged and rebukes Upen. He states that had the girl been blind or limp, he would think of the proposal positively. But in no way an untouchable girl can be accepted as a daughter-in-law in an upper-caste family.

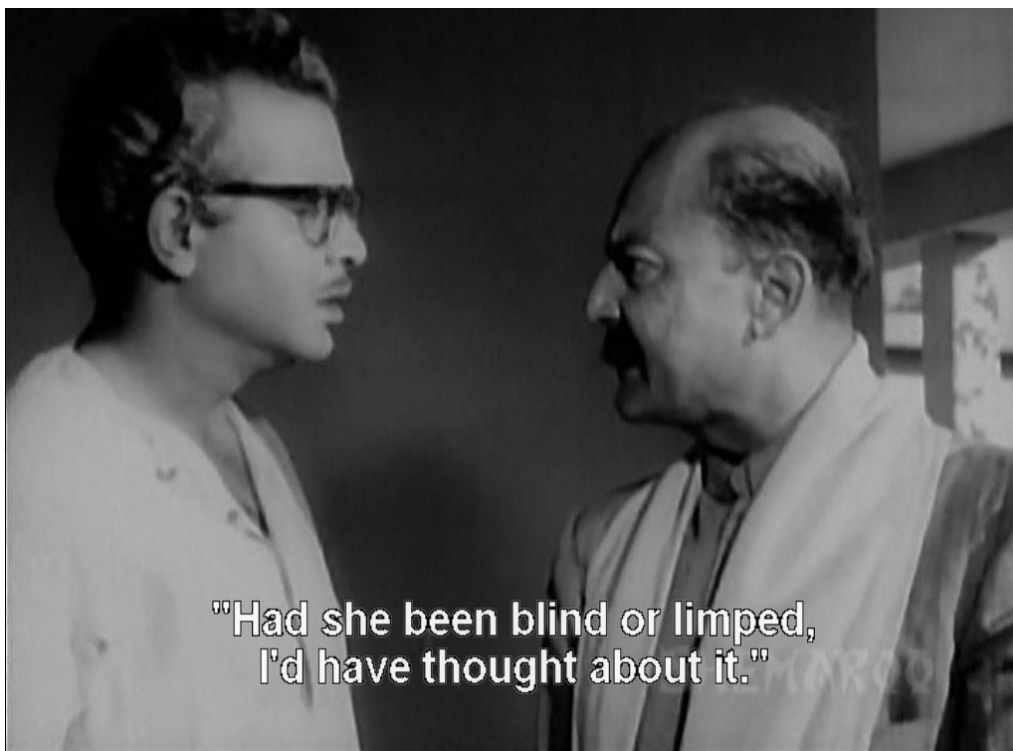


Figure 4: The frame which features conversation between Upen and the old man regarding Sujata's marriage. The old man states that even a blind or limped woman can be desirable for his son's marriage but not an untouchable girl.

Image courtesy: rosiesmovielist.blogspot.com

The grown-up Sujata feels severely humiliated whenever Charu introduces her to someone as not her own daughter but as someone 'like a daughter'. That Buaji can take tea made by the servant Mahadev but not that made by Sujata strikes her and she wants to know from Charu about her real identity. As Charu tries to avoid the question, she insists Charu to answer her query. And as

Charu informs her that she is an untouchable and people do not want to come in contact even with an untouchable's shadow, let alone his or her touch. This revelation appears to her as a bolt from the blue. She is also informed that she is a liability for the family.

There is a deliberate portrayal of the theatrical performance of Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama *Chandalika* in the film in order to spread Buddha's message of equality. The play is inspired from a Buddhist legend that revolves around the story in which a Buddhist monk named Ananda asks for water from an untouchable girl named Prakriti to quench his thirst. The untouchable girl refuses to keep his request as she knows that it is a sin for her to give water to a person of high caste. She will be damned if she commits this sin. But the Buddhist monk assures her that all human beings are equal. That she will do a great service to humanity if she offers him water to quench his thirst. She refuses to offer water just because she knows that she has a low birth. The Buddhist monk forbids her to suffer from inferiority complex and nurture such a low self-esteem about herself. In his own words, "atmaninda atmahatya se bhi bara paap hai" (self-pejoration is greater sin than suicide [Translation mine]). Having listened to such counsels from the Buddhist monk, the untouchable girl consents to give her water. Upen and Charu along with Buaji and her grandson Adheer were present to watch the show as Rama was to perform the role of the untouchable girl in the play. Sujata was not allowed to come to watch the show as Buaji would be enraged at her presence. When the scene in which the Buddhist monk kept convincing the untouchable girl about the principle of equality, i.e., no one is high or low just because of one's birth in a particular caste, was running, Buaji and Charu from the audience seats express a welcome gesture indicating their agreement with the Buddhist monk's argument. But in real life they cannot treat an untouchable girl as a fellow human being. In real life they do not intend to shake off their immense power and social privilege which they gain from the traditional caste system. Therefore, this gesture on the part of Buaji and Charu is a clear case of hypocrisy.

I would here specifically like to point out the mental trauma that Sujata undergoes due to untouchability in particular, and the religiously and socially sanctioned caste system in general. Although brought up in the same family, Rama, Upen and Charu's own daughter, can get access to education, comfort and other luxury and resources, whereas Sujata has no right of having access to such things just because of the belief, as enshrined in the caste system, that a lower caste person or 'achhut' or 'untouchable' should have no right to education, wealth, comfort, luxury and various resources. An untouchable is only entitled to menial jobs, and it is his or her duty to serve the upper caste fellows. But Sujata is much more traumatized by the realization that she is not accepted in the family wholeheartedly, especially by Charu whom she considers to be her mother. Though Charu gives shelter to the orphaned child Sujata out of her motherly affection, she does not want Sujata to get equal share in everything with her daughter Rama. Whenever asked about the identity of Sujata, she replies with the words that "ye humari beti jaisi hai" ("she is like our daughter"), the words which haunt Sujata throughout her life as the trigger of the bitter truth that she is not accepted, not recognized as the daughter of Upen and Charu. Thus Charu maintains the division and hierarchy of caste by institutionalizing the discrimination and marginalization of Sujata within the family. Sujata's feeling of psychological excommunication originates in this hierarchical caste division, which made her realize that she would not be accorded with the same status and dignity that Rama enjoys. Though the writer's sympathetic approach to the socially ostracized, excommunicated untouchables made the character of Charu finally capable to negate the social and cultural barrier, overcome the purity/pollution binary imposed and sanctified by the casteism, by embracing Sujata and giving her the status of daughter in the family, it is highly questionable that whether Charu has finally managed to obliterate caste from her mind. As Ambedkar argues:

Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a *notional* change.²²²

This anagnorisis of Charu about Sujata may lead to the resolution of the story, but the question that how much and whether such anagnorisis will lead the Charus shake off their sense of feeling socially and culturally superior to Sujata the untouchable woman, their casteism as ‘a state of the mind’ or reconstruct their upper-caste gaze remains unresolved and therefore, requires further investigations to a considerable extent. Jyoti Nisha rightly relates the position of Sujata in Upen’s house to that of a marginalized woman in the caste-ridden nation when she observes:

My experience of watching *Sujata* has been that of a “distance” as well as “trauma.” As a woman from a marginalised background, the “distance” denotes a stereotype of the conventional upper-caste gaze for the projected Bahujan character in the film, and the “trauma” relates to the second-hand citizenship existence of a marginalised woman in a casteist nation. The position of an untouchable character in the film is that of a victim, and that has been the imagination in the popular discourse. Such representations have been accepted both in real life and on-screen, where casteism is justified under the garb of Brahmin dharma. So, Althusser is correct in recognising religion and family as one of the ideological state apparatuses of private domain, which dictate the state’s popular discourse and imagination of the nation.²²³

Decoding Gandhian Approach to Caste in Bimal Roy’s *Sujata*

The film takes resort to Gandhian approach in addressing the problem of caste and untouchability. The film makes several references to Gandhian approach in addressing such issues. For instance, when Sujata attempts to commit suicide after coming to know about her real identity, her saree gets stuck to a Gandhi statue which symbolically suggests the attempt of the Gandhian moral philosophy to prevent one from dying just because of one’s experiences of untouchability. In another occasion Adheer informs Sujata how Gandhiji has sacrificed his life

²²² B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 68.

²²³ Jyoti Nisha, “Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship,” *EPW engage* 55, no. 20 (16 May, 2020), <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/indian-cinema-and-bahujan-spectatorship>

for the cause of the untouchables, how he spent all his life to fight against the caste system. While the recent scholarship prefers and validates the Ambedkarite approach more in addressing the question of caste and untouchability to the Gandhian one, and that Gandhi rather upheld the *Varna* system, let alone the narrative of his fight against it, the film glorifies his contribution to the cause of the untouchables and represents him as the saviour, the messiah of the untouchables. In so doing, the film blatantly propagates the misinformation that Gandhiji has fought against the caste system throughout his life. There are ample literatures available to support the claim that Gandhi is a staunch follower of caste system and the Chaturvarnya system. In 1933 Gandhi writes in *Harijan* that ‘the caste system, in my opinion, has a scientific basis. Reason does not revolt against it... To abolish caste is to demolish Hinduism. There is nothing to fight against the Varnashrama. I do not believe the caste system to be odious and vicious dogma. It has its limitations and defects, but there is nothing sinful about it.’²²⁴ He also argues:

I am inclined to think that the law of heredity is an eternal law and any attempt to alter that law must lead us, as it has before led, to utter confusion. I can see very great use in considering a Brahmin to be always a Brahmin throughout his life. If he does not behave himself like a Brahmin, he will naturally cease to command the respect that is due to the real Brahmin... If Hindus believe, as they must believe, in reincarnation, transmigration, they must know that nature will, without any possibility of mistake, adjust the balance by degrading a Brahmin, if he misbehaves himself, by reincarnating him in a lower division, and translating one who lives the life of a Brahmin in his present incarnation to Brahminhood in his next.²²⁵

Not only did Gandhi defend the caste system, he argued for the essentialization of caste in Hindu society. As he states:

I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration. But like every other institution it has suffered from excrescences. I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural, and essential. The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better... Social pressure

²²⁴ Cited in Aakash Singh Rathore, *Indian Political Theory: Laying the Groundwork for Svava* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 182.

²²⁵ Cited in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1999), Vol. 22, 68.

and public opinion can be trusted to deal with the problem. But I am certainly against any attempt at destroying the fundamental divisions. The caste system is not based on inequality, there is no question of inferiority...²²⁶

Even though Gandhi resorts to activism in eradicating untouchability, and leads anti-untouchability campaign for this purpose, his very political philosophy and decisions hinders the political empowerment of the Dalits. Gandhi's political decision to undergo a fast unto death in the Yeravada jail to oppose the separate electorate declared by the British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald to safeguard the interests of the untouchables, and thereby, forcing Ambedkar to sign the Poona Pact in 1932 go against the political emancipation of the untouchables. He intended to leave the untouchables at the mercy of the upper-castes, as he firmly believed that the upper-castes would change their hearts and accept the untouchables as their brethren. For him, this was the only solution to the problem of caste. This Gandhian political philosophy is exactly what has been glorified in the film. The film demonstrates it by showing the transformation of Charu as well as other family members from a reluctant adoptive mother of an untouchable child to accepting Sujata in the family with all her human dignity at the end of the film. Amit Upadhyaya, in his article 'How Bimal Roy's Sujata and Pa Ranjith's Kaala show changing Dalit politics in 60 years'(2018), points out the focal point of the film when he comments, 'Even as it revolves around an 'untouchable' woman, the story is not about her caste. It's about the caste of her adoptive family. The transformation is not in her, but in the acceptance that the upper-caste family eventually extends to her—in keeping with the political philosophy of the first decade of the republic.'²²⁷ The political discourse of the newly decolonized India was largely dominated by Gandhian thought, along with the Nehruvian

²²⁶ Cited in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 67.

²²⁷ Amit Upadhyaya, 'How Bimal Roy's Sujata and Pa Ranjith's Kaala show changing Dalit politics in 60 years,' in *The Print*, 17 June, 2018, <https://theprint.in/opinion/how-bimal-roys-sujata-and-pa-ranjiths-kaala-show-changing-dalit-politics-in-60-years/71333/>

socialism. As pointed out by Jyoti Nisha, the famed director of the documentary film *B.R.*

Ambedkar—Now and Then,

The film-makers of post-independence India have been attempting to portray caste and identity from the ideology of the state. In such a portrayal, cinema serves nothing more than the role of an ideological state apparatus, bringing to the fore at times a Gandhian or a Brahminical view of the nation, in accordance with Hindu dogma.²²⁸

The influence of Gandhian approach to caste question in the film has also been pointed out by the noted Hindi Dalit critic Jayprakash Kardam. As he argues:

Is mein ek or gandhivad ke achhut-uddhar se prerit daliton ke prati karuna ka bhav hai to doosri or shreshtha ka dambh bhi (It projects Gandhian ideology of compassion and emancipation of the dalits on one hand and promotes the notion of superiority of the upper caste male on the other).²²⁹

Both the writer and the filmmaker of the text *Sujata* were convinced with and influenced by the Gandhian project of anti-untouchability and his faith in the hypothesis that the upper-castes would change their hearts to accept the untouchables as their fellow members of Hindu religion. In weaving the story of *Sujata* they took refuge in this approach of Gandhi. Even the filmmaker makes a point when he symbolically uses a location for a particular scene named after Gandhi, i.e., Barrackpore's Gandhi Ghat. In this scene, Adheer informs the uneducated *Sujata* how Gandhiji stood for the cause of an untouchable girl, even when he knew that by doing so he was leaving his *Ashram* into danger, thereby again glorifying the Gandhian approach.

Debjani Ganguly has made an important intervention when she points out the inadequacy and limitations of such text like *Sujata* in representing the issue of caste in the following words:

Such narratives could barely grapple with the complex issue of representation in the cultural politics of caste in independent India. The Gandhian stance on untouchability constituted for the social realist filmmaker Bimal Roy the nodal point of social reconstruction in a nation trying to pull itself together. He could not begin to

²²⁸ Jyoti Nisha, "Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship."

²²⁹ Jayprakash Kardam, "Cinema Ke Sau Baras" (Hundred Years of Cinema), cited in Bharati P. Falari, *Literature to Films: A Study of Select Women Protagonists in Hindi Cinema*, Ph.D. Thesis, submitted to Goa University, 2013. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/134658>

accommodate in his narrative a politics of difference and antagonism which is what Ambedkar and the dalit movement subsequently represented. In contrast, the Gandhian agenda seemed much less threatening to the ideal of national integration.²³⁰

Ganguly is also critical of the absence of Dalit agency and voice, and the absence of Ambedkar's role in the film's 'liberal-nationalist portrayal of the story of caste inequality'.²³¹ She argues that in the film 'the adopted untouchable daughter of an upper-caste Hindu family awakens to her full humanity only after she is told by her upper-caste 'liberal' admirer that men of the stature of Buddha and Gandhi had dedicated their whole lives to the uplift of untouchables like her and that her despair ought not to 'shame' their legacy. There is not a hint of Ambedkar's role in this liberal-nationalist portrayal of the story of caste inequality in modern India.'²³² Viewing the film from Dalit-Bahujan perspective, Jyoti Nisha also argues:

As per Bahujan spectatorship, the film is made from a Gandhian gaze that romanticises and normalises the problem of caste as it exists in the Indian society. It follows Gandhian ideology, presented as an ideal cultural identity of India, which is narrow, casteist, and only resonates with the ideological state apparatuses... The Brahmin family—the ideological positioning of the film-maker, who resolves the caste conflict through a tragedy and blood transfusion—and the idea of a modern nation are all ideological state apparatuses operating through the film.²³³

Thus, the film like *Sujata* serves as an ideological state apparatus of the nation-state called India in perpetuating the existing discourse and imagination of caste of the newly formed nation-state.

Understanding the Brahmanical Social Order in Premchand's 'Sadgati'

Published in 1931, Munshi Premchand's short story "Sadgati" is a profoundly crucial text when it comes to the question of representation of caste in Hindi literature.²³⁴ Premchand is among

²³⁰ Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspectives*, 79.

²³¹ Debjani Ganguly, 79.

²³² Debjani Ganguly, 78.

²³³ Jyoti Nisha, "Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship."

²³⁴ ²³⁴ Munshi Premchand, "Salvation", in *Stories on Caste*, trans. and Ed. M. Asaduddin (Gurgaon:

such writers who portray the sensitive social issues with much profundity. His works like *Godaan*, *Rangbhumi*, *Karmbhumi*, *Kafan*, *Push ki Raat* bear testimony to his literary genius in representing serious social questions. In his short story “Sadgati” he documents the plight of Dukhi *chamar* (tanner) and his family, and their helplessness to exploitation in a caste-ridden society. The story narrates how a Brahmin priest’s inhuman exploitation of Dukhi leads the latter to death. As the story unfolds, Dukhi goes to Brahmin priest Ghasiram’s house to request him to fix an auspicious date for his daughter’s marriage. Ghasiram utilizes this opportunity and orders Dukhi to chop off a large chunk of wood. If he completes this work, only then Ghasiram will go to Dukhi’s house to fix the auspicious date. The helpless Dukhi has no other option but to do the task. Exhausted Dukhi ultimately dies in the process of doing the mammoth task. As Dukhi is an untouchable, no one tries to remove the dead body. Forced to remove Dukhi’s dead body, Ghasiram takes Dukhi’s dead body out of the village with the help of a rope. He damps the dead body there with much scorn.

Dukhi’s story is representative of a Dalit’s life in a caste-ridden society. The Hindu social order dictates that the low-castes and the untouchables must live submissively. They are born to serve the people of high castes. In Premchand’s story, this submissiveness of the Dalit has been reflected throughout the narrative. For instance, when Dukhi enters the Brahmin priest’s house to approach the latter, the priest appears to him as a godlike personality. ‘Seeing Panditji’s resplendent face, his heart was filled with respect. What a divine figure! A short, rotund man with a bald head, puffy cheeks and a divine glow in his eyes! The red powder and sandalwood paste him with a godlike aura.’²³⁵ It is the Brahmanical social order which shapes the Dalits’ way

Penguin Random House, 2018).

²³⁵ Munshi Premchand, “Salvation”, in *Stories on Caste*, trans. and Ed. M. Asaduddin (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2018), 8.

of seeing the members of the other castes as well their entire outlook to society. Dalits are well-aware of their lowly position in the caste-ridden societal hierarchy. And this position compels them to pay unconditional respect to the high-caste fellows. Dukhi's act of prostrating before the priest, his bowed head, his consent to follow the Brahmin pandit's order are indicative of the unconditional subordination of a Dalit to a Brahmin. He believes that the act of smoking tobacco is an act done by the lower caste folks. The Brahmins do not subscribe to the act of smoking. To the wife of the Brahmin pandit, Dukhi's asking for fire appears to be an audacious act. She believes that in allowing her to give fire to the untouchable Dukhi, the pandit is violating the tenets of religion. A Dalit is so low-born that he does not qualify for a Brahmin's fellowship. Dukhi's humble acceptance of a Brahmin's high position and a Dalit's lowly position has been expressed when he realizes:

She's right—how could a cobbler come into a pandit's house? These people are very pure, that's why the world respects them. They aren't mere untouchables like us. I've grown up in this village, yet I didn't understand this?²³⁶

Dukhi is conscious of the purity-pollution dichotomy in the caste structure in which the high-castes are considered to be 'pure', whereas the low-castes are considered to be 'polluted' or 'impure'. When he, after getting struck by the live fire thrown at him by the Brahmin pandit's wife, says 'This is the punishment for polluting a holy Brahmin's sacred house'²³⁷ he is considering his Dalit body to be a 'polluted' one. That Dukhi believes that it is because of their 'stupidity' that they, the untouchables, are doomed to suffer so much, and not because of the oppressive caste system, is explicit when he receives fire from the Brahmin pandit's wife and apologetically admits to her:

²³⁶ Munshi Premchand, "Salvation", 10.

²³⁷ Munshi Premchand, "Salvation", 11.

Mother, I've made a big mistake by entering the house. But it is a cobbler's sense! Had we not been so stupid, we wouldn't have been kicked around.²³⁸

The caste status determines even what kind of food and of what quality a person is entitled to have. This is explicit when the Brahmin pandit says: 'Fine bread doesn't quench the hunger of these low-born people. They need coarse bread.'²³⁹ Dukhi believes that an untouchable has no right to consume the Brahmin's sacred food: 'Can we digest a Brahmin's food?'²⁴⁰

Chikhuri, another untouchable from the Gond community, is raged at the Brahmin pandit as the latter does not provide any food to Dukhi who is getting his (the Brahmin pandit's) works done, and he considers this pandit who proclaims himself to be a holy man to be worse than even a landlord or a ruler. Here, the Gond is putting question on the supposedly unquestioned holiness of a Brahmin whose claim to holiness has been accorded with religious sanction. To the Gond, a Brahmin is nothing but a hypocrite, and worse than a landlord or a ruler in his treatment to Dalits. When the Brahmin pandit rebukes Dukhi for his act of sleeping in the middle of chopping the wood, and indicates that he might not fix any auspicious date for the latter's daughter's marriage, Dukhi cannot raise his voice against him. Rather he realizes:

He's a pandit; if he doesn't think of an auspicious moment, then all will be ruined. That's why he is held in such esteem. Everything depends on the auspicious moment. It can make or break anyone's life.²⁴¹

The Brahmin pandit's wife's calm response and indifferent attitude to the news of Dukhi's death reveals the insignificance of a Dalit's life in the Brahmanical social order. As she utters when the Brahmin pandit expresses his apprehension about the consequent societal pressure, 'what will

²³⁸ Munshi Premchand, 10-11.

²³⁹ Munshi Premchand, 11.

²⁴⁰ Munshi Premchand, 12.

²⁴¹ Munshi Premchand, 13.

happen? Send word to the cobblers. Ask them to take the body away'.²⁴² Even the act of howling of Dukhi's wife and daughter, and other low-caste women seems to be annoying to the pandit's wife. As she reacts: 'These witches are giving me a headache. Aren't they tired of howling?'²⁴³

The Gonds' reactions, on the other hand, to the incident and their act of warning the Chamars about the legal importance of the case smacks of their civic sense. They even question the authority of the Brahmin pandit as they consider that being a pandit, one does not qualify to do whatever one wishes.

Premchand sarcastically criticizes the reluctance of the Brahmin priest to touch Dukhi's dead body when he writes, 'how could a high-caste holy man pick up an untouchable's dead body? That's not written in any religious text. Has anyone seen such a thing happen?'²⁴⁴ The most appalling fact is that a Brahmin has no sense of guilt even after he or she commits the most heinous crime of leading a man to death if the man belongs to an untouchable caste. This is evident in the reactions of both the Brahmin pandit and his wife. Although the priest expresses his concern over Dukhi's death to some extent, it comes out of the supposedly legal pressure, not out of moral accountability. The howling of Dukhi's dear and near ones seems to them 'inauspicious'. They believe that the stench is coming out of Dukhi's dead body because he belongs to the Chamar community, and the Chamar folks consume everything 'without discrimination', and that these folks are 'rotten—one and all'.

²⁴² Munshi Premchand, 14.

²⁴³ Munshi Premchand, 15.

²⁴⁴ Munshi Premchand, 15.

Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* and the Humanization of the Oppressive Brahmin²⁴⁵

The film *Sadgati* (1981)²⁴⁶ recounts the story of Premchand's *Sadgati*. This cinematic version is the faithful adaptation of the original text. The film is both an extension and dilution as far as the representation of caste questions is concerned. It extends the representation of Dukhi's plight by creating some visuals which add more intensity to the plight of the Dalits. The film informs that the Chamars like Dukhi live at the outskirts of the village. The film shows some visuals of Dukhi's hut which is disconnected from the main village which is inhabited by the upper castes. The Brahmin pandit is found to have mentioned certain 'Chamar basti' (literally, a colony inhabited by the people of tanner community) where he goes to inform the Chamars about Dukhi's death and ask them to take the dead body away, and this clearly indicates the existence of a separate tanner colony outside the village. It is the characteristic of the Brahmanical casteist society to have separate colonies for the high-castes and the low-castes or the untouchables. The film shows some images which inform how deplorable, pathetic a Dalit body is. When Dukhi is on his way to the Brahmin's house with a large bundle of grass on his head, the images of some Dalit folks, which include both the children and grown-up men, inform about the precarity of a Dalit body. The visuals of the Chamars in the Chamar *basti* also inform about their precarious conditions. In fact, the very scene in which the Brahmin pandit comes to the Chamar *basti* to inform the Chamars about Dukhi's death and ask them to take the corpse away presents a stark contrast between a Brahmin body represented by the Brahmin pandit and a Dalit body represented by the Chamars of the Chamar *basti*.

²⁴⁵ In one of my previously published articles related to this thesis I have studied how "Sadgati" has become the battleground of conflict on the issue of Dalit *Chetna* or consciousness. See Sumit Rajak, "Problematizing Dalit *Chetna*: Sadgati as the Battleground of Conflict between the 'Progressive Casteless Consciousness' and the Anti-Caste Dalit Consciousness," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 12, no. 4 (2020): 1-13. DOI: 10.21659/rupkatha.v12n4.10

²⁴⁶ *Sadgati*, directed by Satyajit Ray (1981; New Delhi: Doordarshan), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRpaPV3QayY>.

The film is again an extension in portraying Dukhi's suffering in which the visuals of Dukhi suffering from hunger, crying for his unbearable, precarious, helpless conditions inform about the intensity of an untouchable's suffering. By virtue of its medium-specific characteristic, the image of Dukhi hitting the piece of wood with all his strength becomes more suggestive as it seems to suggest Dukhi's anger at the Brahmanical caste system, the very institution which is solely responsible for his exploitation and death. In its suggestion, the image of Dukhi chopping the piece of wood with fiery eyes resembles to some extent the image of the Dalit boy Jabya's act of throwing stones at the upper-caste fellows who move towards him to attack as well as at the casteist mindset of Indian society in the recent iconic Marathi film *Fandry* (2014) directed by Nagraj Manjule. But in the process of its inter-semiotic translation or adaptation in which it attempts to translate Dukhi's painful innermost thoughts through the visual of sobbing Dukhi, the film omits some powerful observations on the hegemonic nature of the religiously sanctioned caste system, represented in the original short story, which become instrumental in shaping the understanding of the readers about how an untouchable evaluates himself, how he reacts to the social behaviour of the upper-caste folks in a caste-ridden society, and consents to the casteist social contract. Dukhi's regret of visiting the pandit's house is a case in point. Dukhi's attempt to convince himself after the pandit has ordered him to finish the job he had been asked to do earlier is another case in point.

Thus, whereas the cinematic language adds some intensity in representing the pain of Dukhi Chamar, it represents a narrower version of casteism when it fails to *show* or omits Dukhi's powerful indictment on the hegemony of caste. The film also erases the casteist approach to food which has been represented in the source text. The Brahmin pandit's remark

‘Fine bread doesn’t quench the hunger of these low-born people. They need coarse bread’,²⁴⁷, implying that the lower castes do not deserve fresh, healthy food items other than the leftovers of the other castes, does not figure in the film. Even Dukhi’s realization that as an untouchable he cannot have any claim to the food prepared by a Brahmin (in his own words, ‘Can we digest a Brahmin’s food?’) does not find any mention in the film. In the source text Premchand describes how the Brahmins abhor the Dalit body as they stereotype it to be a storehouse of filth. Rather than being saddened at the death of Dukhi, they are more concerned with the filthy smell of his dead body. This annoyance of the Brahmins arising out of the smell of Dukhi’s corpse does not figure in the film adaptation. Considering Satyajit Ray’s *Sadgati* as less effective in disturbing the audience over the plight of Dukhi’s life compared to Premchand’s ‘Sadgati’, Deepti Zutshi observes:

The visual appeal of the film does not generate the disturbing effect that characterizes the story. In the story, the gnawing of Dukhi’s corpse by the scavengers follows Ghasiram’s purification of his house, which the death of a chamar had made impure. It is this detail that brings out the irony of the title, while validating its relevance. While Dukhi does get ‘deliverance’ (in terms of tragic irony) from his life of endless misery and suppression, the way in which he dies and the way in which scavengers bite into his corpse lead one to question his ‘deliverance’. The film, however, ends with the brahmin cleaning his house with holy water. While Premchand presents his dalit and brahmin characters at subhuman and superhuman levels in order to bring out and critique the contrast between the two, both have been humanized to a certain degree by Ray. This is one of the reasons why the sharpness of the contrast and the critique in Premchand’s ‘Sadgati’ seems to be missing in Ray’s *Sadgati*.²⁴⁸

The visual politics of the film in humanizing the caste supremacists is further elaborated by

Zutshi in her analysis of the film in the following terms:

In the film, there is even a remote expression in Ghasiram and his wife of their being responsible for Dukhiya’s death, even though it seems largely from fear of the police. In the story, however, when Ghasiram informs his wife about Dukhi’s death, she calmly replies, ‘Hoga kya, chamaraune mein kehla bhejo, murda utha le jaayein [Nothing would

²⁴⁷ Munshi Premchand, 11.

²⁴⁸ Deepti Zutshi, “Satyajit Ray’s Deliverance of Premchand’s “Sadgati,”” in *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray*, eds. M. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh (New Delhi: OUP, 2012), 247.

happen. Send a message to his peers to get his body removed]'. Although these lines are spoken by the brahmin's wife in the film as well, she starts showing signs of guilt and fear towards the end, while in the story she maintains the same attitude till the end. This can be seen as a transmutation rendering a kind of humanity to the brahmin family while in the source text there is none, since in Premchand's story, no character, adult or child, belonging to the upper caste, has any sympathy for the plight of the untouchables.²⁴⁹

Although Satyajit Ray's film portrays the Dalit character Chikhuri with some civic sense which enables him to caution the Chamars about the gravity of the crime committed by the Brahmin pandit, it does not upgrade him to the level of a strong Dalit voice who, with having been aware of the oppressive nature of the Brahmanical social order, can rebel against the casteist social order. Although the film suggests Dalit anger to some extent with the image of Dukhi hitting the piece of wood hard with fiery eyes, it fails to construct the Dalit rage which could be resistant and transformative in nature. In the film, Dukhi's rage is more of a self-destructor than of a social crusader.

Adapting Exploitation of Dalit Women

In the discourse of Dalit studies, the category of 'Dalit Woman' always deserves special attention on account of all-pervasive presence of Brahminical patriarchy which has perpetrated sexual violence on the Dalit women for centuries as it considers the body of the Dalit woman to be a territory to be conquered in order to maintain its supremacy over the Dalits. Therefore, it considers the barbaric violence on them as—to use the phrase of the celebrated critic of postcolonial studies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—'metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition'²⁵⁰. The recent autobiographical narratives of Dalit women writers like Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2003), Meena Kandasamy's autobiographical novel *When I Hit*

²⁴⁹ Deepti Zutshi, "Satyajit Ray's Deliverance of Premchand's 'Sadgati,'" 248.

²⁵⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, 303.

You: Or, The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife (2017) bear testimony to the sexual violence Dalit women face on a regular basis. Sharmila Rege, a renowned feminist critic, in her article “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position” (1998), also observes,

An analysis of the practices of violence against women by caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are frequent among the dominant upper castes — dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the work place and in public.²⁵¹

Along with sexual violence, the Brahminical patriarchy repeatedly excommunicates the Dalit woman through gaze, verbal communication, humiliating gesture and treating them as objects to be pitied. Also, it is the labour of the Dalit women which is used and manipulated mostly by the dominant caste groups when the latter thinks of using manual labour of the Dalits in general to meet their comfort. With literature, cinema has also documented such precarity of Dalit women in various forms through its visual politics of representation. In the following sections I discuss the interrelationship of Dalit women with caste in Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali* and Mala Sen’s *India’s Bandit Queen/The True Story of Phoolan Devi*, and how the politics of situating Dalit women vis-à-vis caste has been altered in the visual representation in their corresponding film adaptations.

Caste Feudalism and the Making of a Rudaali in Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali*

Published in 1979, Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali* revolves around Sanichari, who is a ganju (a low-caste community) by caste.²⁵² She regularly faces slurs from her ailing mother-in-law just because she was born on the ominous day of Saturday, to which she replies, ‘Huh! Because I was

²⁵¹ Sharmila Rege, “Dalit women talk differently: A critique of 'difference' and towards a Dalit feminist standpoint position,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 44(1998): WS 43.

²⁵² Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, trans. Anjum Katyal (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015).

born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law?! You were born on a Monday—was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongri, Bishri—do any of them have happier lives?’²⁵³, thus denying the superstition that the birth day has any role to play in determining the course of one’s life. Her mother-in-law believes that it is Sanichari, who is born on the ‘inauspicious’ Saturday, who brings in extreme suffering in the family. Eventually, her mother-in-law dies on a rainy day. Sanichari has no time to mourn as she has to make arrangement shortly for her funeral by herself. If she fails to do the same in a short time, she has to pay the cost for delaying the funeral rites and keeping the dead body in the house. She is left with no male member in the family as her husband and his brother are currently behind the bar on a trivial issue, and they are sent to jail by Ramavatar Singh, the local feudal lord, who sways enormous influence over the police administration. Sanichari runs from door to door to make arrangement of the old woman’s funeral. It is due to these logistical reasons that Sanichari has no time or option to shed tears on the death of her mother-in-law. Even if Sanichari thinks of crying, she does not ultimately succumb to crying because the enormous torments and taunts which she is subjected to by the old woman hinder her to do so. Eventually her husband also dies. Therefore, she works hard and takes up various menial jobs to bring up her only son, Budhua. Sanichari earns notoriety in the village as she does not shed tears on the death of her dear and near ones. Subsequently, Sanichari is left with no option other than borrowing Rs. 20 from the landlord as well as the moneylender Ramavatar Singh, and in return she is bound to pay Rs. 50 through serving as bonded labour on his fields for the next 5 years. Later she gets her debt waived off for her service at a time when Ramavtar Singh’s uncle is approaching his death. Subsequently she loses her only son, Budhua who is survived by his child Haroa who is left only to be taken care of and brought up by Sanichari with all the adversities of her life. Although

²⁵³ Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, 71.

Sanichari manages a job for 14-year old Haroa in Lachhman Singh's shop, Haroa leaves the job and flees. Hereafter, the turning point comes in her life as she meets her childhood friend, Bhikni. They share their stories of extreme suffering and struggle for survival with each other, and start living together. Eventually Bhairab Singh gets murdered in the local landlord family. Therefore, it is time for the landlord family to offer a decent funeral to Bhairab Singh for which they start preparation. It is considered to be an honourable act on the part of the landlord families to hire the rudalies to perform the act of mourning for their dear and near ones. Dulan sees an opportunity in this for Sanichari and Bhikni. Dulan explains to them how this is a big opportunity for them to receive a decent earning from the landlord family by performing the role of rudali. As he states,

Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears. Our malik has ordered a fancy funeral. The funeral procession will be tomorrow afternoon. They need rudalis to wail over the corpse. They've got hold of two whores. In the households of the masters, whores weep for the dead. These two were probably Bhairab Singh's whores at one time, now they're wizened crows. They'll be no good. The two of you go, wail, cry, accompany the corpse. You'll get Money, rice. On the day of *kriya* ceremony you'll get clothes and food.²⁵⁴

Although Sanichari initially hesitates to take up this new job of *rudali* or professional mourner, she has to accept it as a means of survival. Henceforth, Sanichari reaches the landlord's house to mourn on the death of Bhairab Singh. Thus, by commoditizing her tears, which Sanichari fails to shed over the death of her dear and near ones, Sanichari successfully transforms herself into a *rudali*.

Mahasweta Devi's short fiction *Rudali* narrates the story of a low-caste woman Sanichari, a ganju by caste, who, tormented by feudal exploitation in a deeply entrenched casteist rural set up, transforms herself into a Rudali as a last remaining means of survival. In certain rural parts of

²⁵⁴ Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, 90.

Western India, there is a culture in which some lower-caste women are hired for performing the act of mourning on the death of a family member of the upper-caste feudal communities. They perform this act of lamentation by ‘rolling on the ground and beating one’s head...and one’s breast.’²⁵⁵ These women are known as ‘Rudali’, a cultural expression which can roughly be translated as ‘professional mourners’. Though primarily received as a powerful feminist text, the primacy or centrality of Dalit life in a caste-ridden rural set up in the text can scarcely be overlooked. Even Usha Ganguly, the renowned theatre artist, who adapted *Rudali* into a widely acclaimed play, attempts to liberate the text from the label ‘feminist’ when she argues:

I feel that I differ from the way people tend to use the term feminism. This term has nowadays become a fashionable one, and I don’t believe in a particular brand of feminism. Therefore, I don’t want the play [*Rudali*] to be labelled as feminist. On the other hand, I believe in the liberation of women and their freedom, and I’m trying my best as a person, as a teacher and as a theatreworker to work towards that.²⁵⁶

Sanichari’s life story does not merely inform feudal oppression or economic exploitation on the basis of gender, but also ‘familiarize us with the life of a [low-caste] community [known as Rudali or professional mourners].’²⁵⁷ In order to process the historicization of the ‘lived experience’ (Sarukkai) of the rudalis, Devi effectively experiments with the form of her novella, which Katyal labels as ‘anti-fiction’. As she elaborates:

Yet another important aspect of the work is the mode of presentation. In several ways, this work is anti-fiction: the author either subverts or ignores the conventions of a ‘story’ (although she uses certain elements of fictional narrative to realize her agenda), thus disrupting the easy receptivity to fiction (‘it’s just a story, after all’), and forcing her work onto the uneasy no-man’s land between journalism and fiction that is most challenging for a bourgeois readership to negotiate.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Mahasweta Devi, 75.

²⁵⁶ Anjum Katyal, “The Metamorphosis of Rudali,” in *Rudali*, trans. Anjum Katyal (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015), 2.

²⁵⁷ Anjum Katyal, “The Metamorphosis of Rudali”, 3.

²⁵⁸ Anjum Katyal, 3-4.

Devi makes a clever use of the name of her protagonist Sanichari to make a point that the destiny or fate has nothing to do with the precarious existence of the ‘ganjus’ and the ‘dushads’. She was named so because she was born in a Sanichchar, meaning Saturday. Saturday is considered to be an ominous day of the week in the Hindu-worldview-dominated cultural life of India. That they are victimized by a socio-economic system sanctioned by religious scriptures is indicated in the very denial of Sanichari of the assumption that she suffers so much just because she was born in the inauspicious day of the week, Saturday. The nexus of patriarchy, caste and feudalism shatters the life of Sanichari, who is the representative of the low-caste rural women who face three-fold subjugation on the register of caste, gender, and class. And the Tahad village, where Sanichari lives, represents a village community which can be described as, to use Ambedkar’s phraseology, ‘ditch of regionalism and the den of ignorance and parochialism’. These village communities are ruled by caste, patriarchy and feudalism. As Ajay Sekhar argues, ‘...it should be read in the context of the caste feudalism of the Indian village. The ‘maliks’, ‘mahajans’ and ‘maharajas’ of the hamlets are caste lords and are anointed as such by brahmanic patriarchy.’²⁵⁹

At the very outset of the novella, Devi introduces the life-world of the village community of Tahad. As she describes,

In Tahad village, Ganjus and Dushads were in the majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty. Her mother-in-law used to say it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering. At that time, Sanichari was a young daughter-in-law; she wasn’t free to speak up. Her mother-in-law died when Sanichari was still young. She was never able to answer back. Sometimes, the old woman’s words came back to Sanichari. To herself she would say, Huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law?! You were born on a Monday—was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongri, Bishri—do any of them have happier lives?²⁶⁰

Dr. Mahua Bhaumik argues,

²⁵⁹ Ajay Sekhar, “Gender, Caste and Fiction: A Bahujan Reading of Mahasweta Devi’s Rudali,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 42 (2006). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418829>

²⁶⁰ Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, trans. Anjum Katyal (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015), 71.

Mahasweta Devi's primary focus is the portrayal of the community life of 'ganjus and dushads' (Devi, Ganguli 54) who form the majority in Tahad village. But ironically this majority is pushed to the margin by the malik mahajans who have 'elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land' (Devi, Ganguli 73). This is in sharp opposition to the lives of the lower castes who inhabit 'decrepit mud huts roofed with battered earthen tiles' (Devi, Ganguli 73). Exploitation goes to such an extent that a child Budhua is turned into a 'bonded labour' (Devi, Ganguli 57) for five years since his mother, Sanichari, takes a loan of fifty rupees from Mahajan Ramavatar.²⁶¹

The manner in which Sanichari's mother-in-law dies, and the subsequent situation immediately following her death aptly reveals the nature of hardship in the lives of Sanicharis. Devi vividly portrays this nature of hardship when she describes,

Her mother-in-law died in great pain, of dropsy, lying in her own excrement, crying out, over and over, Food, give me food! It was pouring that night. Sanichari and her sister-in-law together lowered the old woman on to the ground. If the rites weren't carried out before the night was over, they would have to bear the cost of the repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. And there wasn't even a cupful of grain in the house! So Sanichari was forced to go from neighbor to neighbor in the pouring rain. Dragging the neighbours home with her, and handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry. So, what if there wasn't? the old woman had given her so much trouble that even if Sanichari had tried to cry she wouldn't have been able to wring out many tears.²⁶²

The dushads and ganjus are so vulnerable that even on a trivial issue like losing a little quantity of wheat puts them behind the bar by the malik-mahajans. As informed by the author, 'Enraged at the loss of some wheat, he (Ramavatar Singh) had all the young dushads and ganju males of the village locked up.'²⁶³ They can even be charged penalty fees if they delay in finishing the funeral rites of the corpse—'If the rites weren't carried out before the night was over, they would have to bear the cost of the repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight.'²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Cited in Shoma A. Chatterji, "Rudali 25 Years: Manufacturing Grief by Proxy," in *The Citizen*, 30 June, 2018, <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/9/14247/Rudali-25-Years-Manufacturing-Grief-by-Proxy>

²⁶² Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, trans. Anjum Katyal (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015), 71-2.

²⁶³ Mahasweta Devi, 71.

²⁶⁴ Mahasweta Devi, 72.

Their social location made them too vulnerable to weep on the death of dear and near ones. So, when Sanichari's brother-in-law and his wife died, she was not in a situation to cry because 'At that time Ramavatar Singh had started a hue and cry about throwing the dushads and ganjus out of the village.'²⁶⁵ And also, she had to make arrangements of their funeral rites. Because delaying in this can lead to paying penalty charges. Such a systemic violence was imposed upon them that even the act of mourning had become expensive for them. The following statement sums up the situation to which they were degraded: 'In this village everyone is unhappy. They understand suffering. So they are content with being fed just sour curd, sugar and coarse parched rice.'²⁶⁶

Sanichari got trapped in the Brahmanical tantrums of *pinda-daan* after the death of her husband. She is trapped as the two priests order to perform the *pinda-daan* in dissimilar ways. As her husband died in Tohri, the local priest of the Shiva temple at Tohri ordered that they must perform the *pinda-daan* right there by making some ritual offerings, and hereafter she had to spend 'a rupee and a quarter on a spartan offering of sand and *sattu* which Budhua offered as 'pinda-daan'.²⁶⁷ But the problem started when they returned their village. They got rebuked by the family priest of Ramavatar Singh, Mohanlal, who did not accept the offering of sand in the river water as a proper way of performing pinda-daan, and sarcastically compared Budhua to the mythical Lord Rama, who performed a similar act in order to offer *pinda* for his father, King Dasharath. The priest utters, 'Can a Tohri brahman know how a Tahad villager's kriya is done? By obeying him, you've insulted your local priest.'²⁶⁸ Therefore, Sanichari was forced to be trapped into a bond of debt according to which she got Rs. 20, and would have to repay Rs. 50

²⁶⁵ Mahasweta Devi, 72.

²⁶⁶ Mahasweta Devi, 72.

²⁶⁷ Mahasweta Devi, 74.

²⁶⁸ Mahasweta Devi, 74.

through serving as a bonded labour in his fields for the next five years. Again, the systemic violence on Sanichari did not allow her a spare time to mourn the death of her husband.

The *jotedars* and *mahajans* (big businessmen and moneylenders) feel dissatisfied at Ramavatar Singh's decision of wiping out the debt of Sanichari. What is interesting to note is that they are not concerned with the loss of money associated with the debt, but because of the fact that getting rid of the burden of debt makes the untouchables so free that they feel themselves positioned in higher status than their actual one. It is the burden of debt that keep them pressurized, thereby making them 'labouring like cattle'. Therefore, lifting the burden of debt is equivalent to allowing them to be free. It is evident from this that getting the untouchables into the trap of debt is instrumental in keeping them lowered, underprivileged. The *jotedars* and *mahajans* use it as tool to suppress the untouchables both socially and economically. This is how caste feudalism operates in the village communities. This caste feudalism strengthens the Hindu social order. It is because of the prevalence of such caste feudalism that Ambedkar critiqued the Indian village communities. As Ambedkar argues, 'The Hindu village is the working plant of the Hindu social order. One can see there the Hindu social order in operation in full swing.'²⁶⁹ According to Jodhka, that the social organization of the village is preoccupied with caste since time immemorial is pointed out by Gandhi in his reference to Sir Henry Maine's works in his 'petition to the Natal Assembly' in 1894. Gandhi quotes Maine who elaborated that '...most clearly pointed out that the Indian races have been familiar with representative institutions almost from the time immemorial... The word panchayat is a household word throughout the length and breadth of India, and it means... a council of five elected by the class of the people whom the five belong, for the purpose of managing and controlling the social affairs of the

²⁶⁹ Surinder S Jodhka, "Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar," in *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 32 (August 10, 2002), <https://www.epw.in/journal/2002/32/special-articles/nation-and-village.html?destination=node/113646>

particular caste.²⁷⁰ The expression ‘the social affairs of the particular caste’ attests to the centrality of caste in the formation of governance system in the Indian villages. The structural organization of the Indian village was, for Ambedkar, divisive on caste lines. He reflected,

The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables. The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the untouchables and will not allow the untouchables to live inside the Hindu quarters... It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside the barbed wire into a sort of cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto.²⁷¹

In Tahad village, the ganjus and dushads were mutually co-operative. This unity among the oppressed or underprivileged emerges out of a necessity. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for them to survive. As the author describes, ‘In order to survive, the poor and oppressed need the support of the other poor and oppressed. Without that support, it is impossible to live in the village even on milk and ghee provided by the malik.’²⁷² This mutual cooperation is also reflected in Dhatua’s mother’s act of informing Sanichari about the job of rail line repairing announced by the ‘gormen’ (the colloquial expression of the word ‘government’). Dulan ganju, her husband, told her to inform Sanichari regarding the job of rail line repairing. In Sanichari’s struggling life, the ganju family offered their helping hands so that Sanichari could survive with her grandson Haroa. Apart from informing her about the newly available job, Dhatua’s wife breastfeeds Haroa, thereby keeping him alive in the absence of his mother. Also Dulan’s wife helped Sanichari by cooking meals for her while she is engaged in her job. She would send her ‘meals of roti and achar’, while sending the same for the working Dulan. Sanichari gave some wheat flour in exchange. ‘But there are some debts’, as the author writes, ‘that can never be

²⁷⁰ Surinder S Jodhka, “Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar.”

²⁷¹ Surinder S Jodhka, “Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar.”

²⁷² Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, trans. Anjum Katyal (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015), 82.

repaid.²⁷³ Even Prabhu ganju offered Sanichari to shift her hut into his own yard. Natua dushad extended his help to Sanichari by selling vegetables in the market for her.

Lachhman Singh, the son of Ramavatar Singh, has become stricter after becoming the new *malik-mahajan* (landowner-moneylender) by distancing himself from the lower castes labourers and peasants of the village. The occasional friendliness of the *malik-mahajans* with the lower castes has gone by now. Even Lachhman Singh deploys some musclemen in order to keep the lower caste labourers and peasants under his control. This is a way caste feudalism functions in the village republic like Tahad in which the caste feudal lords adopt punitive measures to keep the lower castes checked. The musclemen have been employed to play this role of punishing the lower castes if the latter tries to raise their voice or status by any means. Bhairab Singh was instrumental in keeping the ganjus and dushads of the village under control, either through intimidation or through punitive measures. This is revealed when Lachhman Singh laments his death especially for this impending loss of domination or control of the upper-caste lords over the lower castes of the village. Lachhman Singh is now sceptical of this control of the upper-caste feudal lords over the lower-caste communities. As he laments, ‘Hai, chacha (uncle)! As long as you were alive, the lower castes never dared raise their heads. For fear of you, the sons of dushads and ganjus never dared attend government schools! Now, who will take care of all these things?’²⁷⁴

The work opportunities for the lower-castes and the upper-castes are different. The good jobs are available only for the *malik-mahajans*. The lower-castes can only avail some temporary menial jobs like rail line repairing, selling vegetables in the market etc. They never get

²⁷³ Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, 81.

²⁷⁴ Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, 88.

established in any particular job. This concern for the unavailability of ‘readymade’ jobs for the lower-castes has been expressed by Dulan ganju in the following words: ‘Budhua’s mother! Do readymade ways of earning exist? They may exist for *malik-mahajans*, but do they exist for dushads and ganjus? We have to make our own opportunities.’²⁷⁵

The hypocrisy of religious worshipping is a reality of their everyday life in that area. Deceiving people in the name of religion and earning money is not unusual in the area. Dulan ganju sees the profitable side of this Brahmanical scheme when he says to Sanichari that he would have applied this scheme, had he had lump sum amount of money as 20 rupees. As he says, ‘Before my money ran out, I’d pick up a nice stone from the banks of Kuruda river. Anoint it with oil and *sindoor* (vermilion) and proclaim that Mahavirji had come to me in my dreams.’²⁷⁶

Dulan ganju narrated the story of the usurpation of the land of Tahad village by the Rajputs from the clutches of the tribals. He informed that the Rajputs infiltrated this area usually inhabited by the tribals. From being the zamindars or landlords of the area they upgrade themselves to the social position of jotedars, establishing caste feudalism in the area. These Rajputs were appointed as the ‘warriors in the army of the Raja of Chhotanagpur.’²⁷⁷ It was during the Kol revolt that the Raja sent his army to take control of the rebellion. And although the rebellion was taken under control, the atrocities of the Rajput warriors on the Kol tribals did not take a back seat. They kept oppressing the tribals through rampage, killing them and burning down the villages. In response to their atrocities, Harda and Donka Munda started preparation for another uprising. At that time the Raja sent his Rajput *sardars* to the Tahad region. He allowed

²⁷⁵ Mahasweta Devi, 88.

²⁷⁶ Mahasweta Devi, 89.

²⁷⁷ Mahasweta Devi, 94.

them a free hand to capture that area where they had the permission to grab as much land as ‘is covered by throwing your swords in the air.’²⁷⁸ They had the permission to continue this business throughout the day. And all the seven *sardars* were allowed to grab as much land as possible and live through this. This was the history of the Rajputs becoming the master of this area. From that time onwards their wealth, land, possessions, power all increased. Whereas earlier they grabbed land by swords, now they usurp the lands by shooting bullets. On the other hand, the settlements of the lower-castes were the ‘settlements of decrepit mud huts roofed with battered earthen tiles.’²⁷⁹ The tribal settlements were no exception. The architectural design of the village looked quite oxymoronic since the ‘mud huts’ were accompanied by the big buildings of the *malik-mahajans*, which clearly indicate the caste inequality present in the village republic of Tahad. The *malik-mahajans* enjoyed so many privileges in the village that they did not require to buy anything except salt, kerosene and postcards.

Dulan also gave one example from his childhood memories of how the lower castes were treated by these caste feudal lords. He told the story of Nathuni Singh. Nathuni Singh’s maternal grandfather was the notorious oppressor Parakram Singh who once inflicted a cruel, inhuman disciplinary punishment on one Hathiram Mahato. He tied the old Hathiram Mahato to a horse and set the horse to gallop freely. Dulan also talked about the hypocrisy of caste practice when he informed Sanichari about how Nathuni Singh left his mother to the care of Moti, a dushad woman. Moti cleaned his mother, and this time they were not concerned with the loss of caste. They had even employed a maid to sleep with his mother without caring about the loss of caste. The conversation between Nathuni’s middle wife and Sanichari reveals that even a disease like small pox is considered to be associated with a particular caste in the caste-ridden village. When

²⁷⁸ Mahasweta Devi, 94

²⁷⁹ Mahasweta Devi, 95.

Nathuni's middle wife informs Sanichari that her father is infected with small pox, Sanichari replies sarcastically, 'But I heard that the upper castes never got small pox? That it was a disease of the poor and lower castes?'²⁸⁰

Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali*

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* is adapted into a Hindi film *Rudaali* by Kalpana Lajmi in 1993.²⁸¹ The renowned actress Dimple Kapadia plays the lead role for which she earned the National Film Award for Best Actress, Filmfare Awards Best Performance Critics Award, and the Best Actress Award at the 8th Damascus International Film Festival, and the film was an official entry of India to the 66th Academy Awards for the category of the Best Foreign Language Film.²⁸² The film is set in a remote village of Rajasthan. The film begins with the feudal lord Ramavatar Singh (Amjad Khan) groaning on his death bed. He is seen to undergo the ritual of *godaan*, the custom of offering cow to a Brahmin in order to secure a safe journey through the mythical Vaitarani river, the crossing of which, according to the Hindu belief, guarantees one the way to heaven. He rebukes the Brahmin priest as the latter asks him to feed eleven Brahmins as part of the ritual, and puts a rhetorical question to him asking whether feeding five Brahmins will earn him less *punya* (reward). Sensing his imminent death, he orders his subordinate to manage a rudaali or professional mourner who will lament his death. Hiring a *rudali* was a custom among the Rajput feudal lords to show off their status. The more expensive a rudaali they would hire, the more respect they would earn from their community members.

²⁸⁰ Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, 101.

²⁸¹ *Rudaali*, directed by Kalpana Lajmi (1993; Mumbai: National Films Development Corporation), https://www.jiocinema.com/movies/rudaali/3501513/watch?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=MovieWatchAction&utm_campaign=WatchAction.

²⁸² *Rudaali*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudaali>



Figure 5: The frame which acquaints the viewers with the culture of hiring rudali (professional mourner) prevailed among the dominant Rajput feudal families to lament on the death of their family members as a mark of higher social status.

Image courtesy: bollywoodfoodclub.wordpress.com

A well-known rudaali by the name Bhikni is summoned to lament on the imminent death of Ramavatar Singh. In the course of waiting for her client's death, Bhikni takes shelter at the hut of Shanichari, who has already lost most of her dear and near ones. Shanichari requests Bhikni to stay with her as a companion in her struggling life. They start staying together. In a series of flashbacks Shanichari shares with Bhikni the misfortunes of her life, how she comes to be called Shanichari after her birth on the ominous Shanichar, i.e., Saturday, how she is blamed for her father's death because of her birth on the evil Saturday, how she is later left alone by her mother who eloped with a local *nautanki* or theatre group. Shanichari is married to the drunkard Ganju who succumbs to death due to the outbreak of epidemic. She tries to manage a modest, happy life with her son Budhua. Her employment at the landlord's mansion as an attendant to

Lachhman Singh (Raj Babbar)'s wife provides her some stability. Although it is not evident whether there grows a romantic affair between Lachhman Singh and Shanichari, the former, out of his liking for the latter, gifts Shanichari a house and two acres of land as she pleases him with her singing performance on the auspicious occasion of *annaprashan*²⁸³ of Lachhman Singh's son. But tragedy appears in her life once again as Budhua creates great nuisance in the family as well as in the village by marrying a prostitute, who, after a family brawl, leaves Budha and Shanichari, and aborts her child. Eventually, Budhua ultimately runs off, leaving Shanichari alone. In sharing this tale of suffering with Bhikni, Shanichari informs her that she has never shed tears at the unfortunate incidents throughout her life. Sanichari's life takes another turn just when her partnership with Bhikni gradually blooms. One night, Bhikni leaves Shanichari suddenly to attend her near one in some distant village. After Bhikni's departure, Ramavatar Singh, for whom Bhikni had come to this village as a rudaali, dies. At the very night of Ramavatar Singh's death, Shanichari gets the news of Bhikni's death and learns a secret which Bhikni hides from her. Utterly devastated, Shanichari transforms herself into a rudaali, and at last tears appear in her eyes.

Understanding Caste in Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali*

Kalpana Lajmi's film adaptation *Rudaali* (1993), in the process of focusing on the making of a rudali, treats the caste question in a different light. It twists the representation of caste question, especially caste feudalism by portraying the caste lord Lachhman Singh as liberal, progressive feudal lord who does not intend to view human relationships through the lens of caste. Even Lachhman Singh's wife is seen to have engaged in a friendly conversation with the newly appointed maid Sanichari. She is introduced to Sanichari by the old housemaid Moti as a kind

²⁸³ *Annaprashan* is a cultural practice among the Hindus in which a child is given rice to eat for the first time.

mistress of the house. As Moti informs Sanichari, the Thakurs can be generous enough to give anything one wants from them, but if not asked, they will not give anything. This is the 'riwaz', the norms of the Thakurs. In her words, 'there's nothing to be afraid of. Malkin [mistress] is very kind. That's the way it is with high born landed Thakurs. If you ask, you get everything. But if you don't ask, she'll not let you touch even the twig of a tree.' This is informed by Moti when Sanichari expresses her nervousness as she enters the Thakurs' mansion as a maid for the first time. But she does not forget to warn Sanichari about the caste sensitivity of the Thakurs regarding the preservation of sanctity of the temple by not letting the lower castes touch the same. As she utters, 'And don't you even dare go near the temple. It'll be a calamity if you touch the image of any god.' It is evident in this case that although Moti talks about the generosity of the Thakurs in terms of donating something to the needy, they are equally conscious about preserving their caste purity. In portraying the character of the feudal lord Lachhman Singh, the film deviates from the adapted text by presenting him as someone with a progressive outlook. His attitude towards caste is revealed through his conversations with Sanichari. When Lachhman Singh expresses his liking for Sanichari, the latter gets afraid as she knows that involving in an affair with an upper-caste feudal lord amounts to violating the caste codes. As she utters, 'But you're a zamidar (feudal lord). I'm a low-caste. Hukum (Your Highness), it'll be a sin even if my shadow falls on you! I'll go to hell!' Addressing her fear, Lachhman Singh convinces her that there is nothing to be afraid of, and her conception of morality is misleading. As he states: 'Sin...hell...Do you know what sin is? They're but false myths created by Brahmin logic. If one were to strictly follow their teaching...There wouldn't be a bigger sinner than I. If this life that I'm living is one of sin...Well, what's wrong in that? It's much cleaner than your virtuous life, Shanichari! Hungry, naked and diseased...You keep rotting in that filth...And assume you're accumulating virtue? [what virtue, for whom?] Have you ever thought of it? Your hell is...where

you are! On another occasion, when Lachhman Singh asks Sanichari to sing on the auspicious occasion of his son's *annaprashan*, a ritual to celebrate a child's consumption of rice for the first time, she replies, 'How can I, Hukum (Your Highness)?...If my shadow falls on the little Thakur...on such an auspicious occasion!' Lachhman Singh again convinces her not to think in such way. He says, 'Don't you bother about that, Sanichari. The celebration'll be at night. And so, no shadows! (in a light mood) Look, all this matter of high and low caste...of pollution through shadows...I neither know about it nor believe in it.'

The film also shows the ills of Brahmanism through the character of pandit (priest) Mohanlal. He rebukes Shanichari for not performing the 'pindadaan', a ritual performed by a dead man's relatives to liberate the former's soul from worldly attachments, after the death of her mother-in-law and husband. Sanichari tries to convince him that she had made the ritual offer of sand and water. But Mohanlal curses her by saying, 'You made offerings of sand and water!? Your seven generation'll rot in hell...if you don't have me perform the rites! You'll be cursed! Ganju [Sanichari's husband]'ll be damned to hell.' Sanichari gets frightened and implores the priest to revoke his curse: 'No, Panditji! No! Please, revoke your curse. What peace did my man find in this world. At least, may his soul rest in peace. Take back your curse!' The priest pays no heed to her appeal and rebukes her again: 'Get lost...witch. Putting on a chaste act, are you! It's all your doing. Nothing happened when he drank everyday, you wretch. The one day he has the temple prasad with you, he dies! All because of you. You accursed wretch.' The terrified Shanichari asks for the priest's order to compensate her sin. The priest replies, 'My orders? Well then, listen. I'll take 30 rupees to perform the proper rituals. Not a paisa less! I'll take 50 for both if you add your Ma-in-law's rites.' When Shanichari expresses her incapability to manage this huge amount, the priest rebukes her, remaining indifferent to her destitute: 'From wherever,

Borrow it...steal it...commit a dacoity...or beg. And listen! Those two might yet be saved. But your soul will not find place even in hell!’

It is the arrival of Bhikni which brings in a few moments of happiness in Sanichari’s life. They share their wretched state of life and become each other’s support system. Bhikni informs Sanichari about the profitable profession of rudali, and how they perform the act of mourning on the death of the high-caste feudal lords. Eventually, Bhikni’s death due to plague, and the revelation to Sanichari after Bhikni’s death that Bhikni was none but her mother Peewli render Sanichari collapsed. It is through the anguish of her wretched personal life that Sanichari ultimately transforms herself into a rudali.



Figure 6: The frame which shows Sanichai’s transformation into a rudali as the culmination of her precarious life-world.

Image courtesy: bollywoodfoodclub.wordpress.com

De-casting Caste in the Film Adaptation *Rudaali*

According to Shoma A. Chatterji, ‘The three representations of *Rudali* – the story by Mahasweta Devi, the play in Hindi by Usha Ganguli and the film in Hindi by Kalpana Lajmi, have one common strand running along them – they are all authored by women. Each version – fiction, play and film – is mediated by the differing purpose and agenda of its respective auteurs, resulting in strikingly different texts which have one feature in common – they and are widely perceived as woman-intensive projects and received as feminist texts.’²⁸⁴ But whereas Devi deals with the oppressive feudal structure and caste system of the village to a considerable extent in the process of documenting Sanichari’s transformation into a rudali, Lajmi puts more focus on the gender exploitation. Her film has been turned into a tale of Shanichari and Bhikni. Along with Shanichari and Bhikni, she also allows a considerable screen time to the other women characters like Moti, Budhua’s wife, and Lachhman Singh’s wife, thereby keeping her film women-centric. As argued by Reetamoni Das and Dr Debarshi Prasad Nath in their article “Rudaali in Film Narrative: Looking Through the Feminist Lens”,

Kalpana Lajmi keeps the primary theme of death and poverty intact in the film but wraps it in the cloak of feminism. Amidst all struggle and poverty it is the women trying to hold her ground. She uses the language of tears not only to mock back at her oppressors but also at the same time use it to tell her individual tale. Lajmi narrates the particular experiences of women amidst the harsh conditions.²⁸⁵

Lajmi’s film text is not preoccupied with showing the *modus operandi* of caste, and its intersectionality with gender in a feudal village, as is the case with Mahasweta Devi’s literary text. To put more focus on the gender exploitation, Lajmi trivializes the role of caste in the socio-cultural and economic life of the lower castes to which Shanichari, Bhikni, Parbatia, and Moti belong. Thus, Lachhman Singh, Ramavatar Singh’s son, who embodies caste feudalism in Devi’s

²⁸⁴ Shoma A. Chatterji, “25 Years of Kalpana Lajmi’s *Rudaali*,” in *Indian Cultural Forum*, 26 Dec 2018, <https://indianculturalforum.in/2018/12/26/25-years-of-kalpana-lajmis-rudaali/>

²⁸⁵ Reetamoni Das and Dr Debarshi Prasad Nath, “Rudaali in Film Narrative: Looking Through the Feminist Lens,” in *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 3(2): 120, Oct 2014, 126, DOI: 10.5195/cinej.2014.99

literary text is turned in the film narrative into a sympathetic and progressive feudal lord who lectures Shanichari on the irrelevance and baselessness of caste system.



Figure 7: The frame featuring Sanichari and Lachhman Singh in which the latter persuades the former to have an affair with him and ignore the age-old caste codes which prevent her from getting involved in the affair.

Image courtesy: bollywoodfoodclub.wordpress.com

In fact, the inclusion of the apparently romantic tension between Lachhman Singh and Shanichari, which does not figure in the literary text, is questioned by Shoma A. Chatterji—as it trivializes the materiality of caste—in the following terms:

In a flashback scene, we see a brief romantic liaison between Shanichari and the landlord's son which pushes the young man to hire her services as his wife's special maid. This does not exist in the story. In hindsight, one may even call it a blasphemy on the original because Shanichari's life is so preoccupied with how and where the next meal will come from that romanticism does not exist in the lexicon of her life. The caste-ridden values of the community and the patriarchal attitudes of the affluent represented by the landlord's young son (Raj Babbar), would never deign to even talk to a low caste woman ever, much less to ask her to raise her head and look into his eyes [Shanichari is asked by Lachhman Singh time and again to look into his eyes]²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ See Footnote 110.

In a similar vein, in the cinematic text Lajmi does not show the character of Dulan who has been instrumental in Devi's text in unmasking the historical factor of caste for the current dilapidated status of the ganjus and the dushads by narrating how the Rajput landlords unscrupulously usurp the land of the village from the tribals and become the masters of the village, how Nathuni Singh's oppressive grandfather Parakram Singh inflicts inhuman atrocity on Hathiram Mahato by tying him to a horse and after that setting the horse gallop freely. The erasure of these important introspections into the practice of caste makes the film text less sensitive to the caste question.

Body of Dalit Woman as Site of Everyday Humiliation and Violence and the Birth of Dalit Woman's Assertion in *India's Bandit Queen/The True Story of Phoolan Devi*

India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi (1991) is a biographical fiction by Mala Sen on the life of the rape survivor turned dacoit Phoolan Devi.²⁸⁷ In this work, Sen documents Devi's strenuous journey of life which is fraught with hardship, humiliation, brutal sexual assault and her eventual incarnation as a dacoit to take vengeance. Mala Sen, through her authorial intrusion, lays importance to the immediacy and inevitability of constructing a discourse particularly by the Dalit women around the sexual assault the latter are subject to by the male members of the dominant caste groups:

It is not unusual for women and especially the Dalit women all over the world, and particularly in India, to resist discussing the sexual abuse they have been subjected to, surrounded as they are by a society that holds them responsible for the acts of violence against them and taints them with self-images of weakness and impurity.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (Harper Collins, 1991)

²⁸⁸ Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen*, 8.

Phoolan Devi's act of killing 22 Thakurs²⁸⁹ is historical in the sense that she is the first low-caste woman in the recorded history to undertake such a daring and radical step against the atrocities perpetrated upon them by the high-caste oppressors. Her act is a blow to the powerful upper-caste men's traditional 'metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition'²⁹⁰ which they cherish after perpetrating violent sexual assault on Dalit women.

The banditry in the Chambal Valley region is said to have begun with Raja Anangpal Tomar taking shelter in the ravines, located at the south of Agra, in the twelfth century, and made counter attacks to his cousin Prithviraj Chauhan who made him leave Delhi. From this time the region is known as 'baghi' or rebel territory. Since the very inception of banditry in Chambal Valley, the region has become synonymous with the act of resistance, although the 'baghis' or the rebels are portrayed in the nationalist discourse as evil elements which need to be wiped out to maintain the law and order of society. They are considered to be threat to society, and portrayed as so in mainstream literature, cinema and other art forms.

The Chambal Valley is named after the Chambal river, which, according to the local belief, is considered to be the 'River of Revenge'. The Chambal has its mythical origin. It is believed by the villagers that Draupadi, the common wife of the Pandavas in the ancient epic *The Mahabharata* once cursed the river after the Pandavas had lost her to the Kauravas in a game of dice. She cursed the river just to remind the later generations again and again of her revenge. It is firmly believed that once one drinks the water of the river, one imbibes the spirit of revenge.

²⁸⁹ Thakur belongs to *Kshatriya varna* (warrior group) in the fourfold *varna* system. It is a dominant land-owning high-caste group residing majorly in the states of North and Central India, namely Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Bihar, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh.

²⁹⁰ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 303.

Before the days of her surrender, she used to hurl harsh words at the police officer who was entrusted with the task of negotiation, pointing her fingers at mainstream society at large. For her, it is bastards' society which continuously or perpetually oppresses them economically, socially, culturally and politically. The custodians of civil society are also no exception to it. She intended to make a point that it is the society formed by high caste, high class people who put them at such a vulnerable position. That these people remain indifferent to the oppression, humiliation and violence inflicted upon them by the high caste Thakurs in the villages, and this indifferent approach of the mainstream society makes them a participant along with the oppressor Thakurs in this larger conspiracy to suppress the low-caste section of society. As she expresses her rage, 'what do people like you care? What's it to you anyway—whether you *have* me dead or alive? You have me! Trapped like a rat! Don't you? You're all the same. Bastards! All of you. The paperwallahs outside, the photowallahs—all of you.'²⁹¹

Devi's experience as a child bride was not a healthy one. She was treated like an animal by her perverted husband. As she informs through her diaries,

I did not understand the meaning of 'husband' and when he made passes at me I would scream and shout, not knowing the meaning of these gestures. My fear angered him and he would hit me. He treated me like an animal. He would touch my breasts and say that I was like a baby teetar—a partridge—and asked when I would mature. He was a pervert, in my eyes, and I soon learned that his first wife had died in childbirth at the age of fourteen. The child had also died. When he took me to his home I was eleven.²⁹²

When Devi's father comes to take her home, he is insulted by her husband and asked to pay 10,000 rupees to protect the marital relationship because her husband felt deceived or 'misled' about Devi. Even after coming home, she is accused of bringing disgrace to her family. It is a conventional social belief that if a married woman is abandoned or rejected by her husband, she

²⁹¹ Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*, 2-3.

²⁹² Mala Sen, 45.

becomes a 'burden' for her family and the social milieu she was brought up in. the precarity reaches to an extent that even the bride's mother prays for her daughter's death in such a vulnerable situation they are put into by the in-laws family of the daughter and the attitudes of the local fellow people and Devi's mother is no exception to this. To address such a situation, the bride's family uses some traditional way out to ease the situation. Devi's mother decided to send her to a distant relative until the situation is under control. Suresh Chand's attempt to sexually abuse her and his act of publicly humiliating her makes a lasting imprint on her mind. Suresh Chand's dehumanizing words have an implication that a low-caste woman has no right to reject an upper-caste fellow like him. That a low-caste woman should reciprocate with him without any objection. In case of the other way around, it is fair enough for the upper-caste man to make the low-caste woman a subject of public humiliation.

Another incident that added to her humiliation is the neem tree incident. Her cousin Maiyadin and his gang cut the *neem*²⁹³ tree which, planted by her grandfather, was a symbol of Phoolan's family pride. When Phoolan tries to resist this attempt of Maiyadin and his gang to cut the tree, she is badly thrashed by them and arrested by police on false charges. In Kalpi police station, she was insulted by a police officer of that police station in these derogatory language: 'You have brought disgrace to your family,... You've made enough trouble already. I'm told your husband deserted you because of it. Have you no shame? Have you no respect for others?'²⁹⁴ Such kind of humiliation and shaming is part and parcel of Dalit women's life to which Phoolan is no exception. As observed by Charu Gupta, in her article "Writing Sex and Sexuality Archives of Colonial North India", 'Sexual exploitation of Dalit women was an

²⁹³ Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) is a plant grown in the tropical and semi-tropical regions like Indian subcontinent and Africa. It is popularly known as Indian lilac. It is commonly used as a medicinal plant.

²⁹⁴ Mala Sen, 61.

everyday fact, which was often expressed in terms of the alleged “loose” character of Dalit women themselves.²⁹⁵ It is noteworthy that not merely the upper-caste male members of society as general public, in general, humiliate the vulnerable Dalit women, they keep up their derogatory attitude to them even when they become the part of the administrative and legal system which is supposed to protect them from such humiliation.

Shekhar Kapur’s Film *Bandit Queen* as a Visual Documentation of Rape

Shekhar Kapur’s 1994 film *Bandit Queen*,²⁹⁶ adapted from Mala Sen’s biography *India’s Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*, narrates the life of Phoolan Devi who is victimized through a series of violent sexual assaults in the form of rape and gang rape by her husband, Babu Gujjar’s gang, Thakur Sri Ram’s clans and some policemen in the police custody, and her subsequent incarnation as the leader of a dacoit gang. The film drew immediate global attention as it premiered in the 1994 Cannes Film Festival, and screened in the Edinburgh Film Festival. Consequently, Kapur’s film immediately leaps into controversy and becomes subject to the critics’ wrath as the film is arguably reduced almost exclusively to visual documentation of rape. Phoolan Devi, on whose life the film is based, herself vehemently criticizes her portrayal in the film. For its sole focus on rape, the film has been severely criticized by the award-winning author and columnist Arundhati Roy. Roy, in her polemical essay “The Great Indian Rape Trick”, vehemently criticizes the politics of representing rape, and how Kapur’s perspective to making a film on Phoolan Devi’s life has been driven and disfigured by his middle-class sentiment:

Bandit Queen -the film, does not make a case against Rape. It makes its case against the Rape of nice (read moral), women. (Never mind the rest of us that aren't "nice").

²⁹⁵ Charu Gupta, “Writing Sex and Sexuality Archives of Colonial North India,” 25.

²⁹⁶ *Bandit Queen*, directed by Shekhar Kapur (1994; Noida: Kaleidoscope Entertainment, Channel Four Films), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iERIJL3UGvI>.

Every time the Director has been faced with something that could disrupt the simple, pre-fabricated calculations of his cloying morality play, it has been tampered with and forced to fit. I'm not accusing him of having planned this.

I believe that it comes from a vision that has been distorted by his own middle-class outrage, which he has then turned on his audience like a fire-fighter's hose.²⁹⁷

Pal, Bhattacharjee and Tripathi, in their article “Gendered and Casteist Body: Cast(e)ing and Castigating the Female Body in Select Bollywood Films” (2021), question the problematic intervention of the upper-caste patriarchy in making of this film along with another recent film on rape and murder of Dalit girls by upper-caste folk *Article 15* (2019): ‘although the films revolve around issues of Dalit lives and communities, the marginalized remain marginalized...both films are directed by men who belong to the upper caste belts. Hence, the presence of *Savarna* patriarchy behind the lenses cannot be taken in abeyance’.²⁹⁸ In its review of the film, *Los Angeles Times* states:

“Bandit Queen” is an astonishing, overpowering piece of rabble-rousing, consciousness-raising, epic-scale filmmaking that unquestionably breaks ground in the Indian cinema in brutal candor if not theme.²⁹⁹

It also heaps praise on the director of the film Shekhar Kapur:

Sekhar Kapur is a terrific storyteller, a highly visceral powerhouse filmmaker who can depict terrible brutality with an unflinching yet not exploitative gaze. The systematic, repetitive degradation of a woman that we witness is altogether convincing, as is Devi’s endurance.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ Arundhati Roy, “The Great Indian Rape Trick,” 1994, <https://womens.theharvardadvocate.com/the-great-indian-rape-trick>

²⁹⁸ Bidisha Pal, Partha Bhattacharjee, and Priyanka Tripathi, “Gendered and Casteist Body: Cast(e)ing and Castigating the Female Body in Select Bollywood Films,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 22, no.10 (2021): 63-4.

²⁹⁹ Kevin Thomas, “MOVIE REVIEW: ‘Bandit Queen’ an Explosive Epic Tale,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 June, 1995, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-06-30-ca-18732-story.html>

³⁰⁰ Kevin Thomas, “MOVIE REVIEW: ‘Bandit Queen’ an Explosive Epic Tale”, 1995.

On the politics of caste and gender of the film, Kevin Thomas comments, ‘Kapur and Sen place Devi at the worst possible conjunction of caste and gender.’³⁰¹ In his review of the film, Berardinelli argues, ‘...regardless of its historical veracity, *Bandit Queen* is an excellent examination of caste discrimination, human suffering, and the role of women in India’s changing culture.’³⁰² He sums up the film in two phrases which, according to him, ‘encapsulate the backdrop against which the story unfolds. The first is a quote shown onscreen at the film’s start: “Animals, drums, illiterates, low castes and women are worthy of being beaten.” The second is a statement by Phoolan Devi’s father: “A daughter is always a burden...’,³⁰³ pointing out the violence of caste and gender.

Jonathan Rosenbaum praises the film for its radical element in terms of portraying men’s inhuman treatment to women. As he states, ‘At its best, this [the film] recalls radical third-world “westerns” like Glauber Rocha’s *Antonio das mortes* as well as Kenji Mizoguchi’s films about men’s inhumanity to women.’³⁰⁴ Although Rosenbaum lauds the film for portraying certain radical element, he is critical of ‘the film’s tendency to desensitize us with a surfeit of details.’³⁰⁵ As he elaborates,

Yet despite its ambition, bracing anger, and visual panache, it remains many notches below such reference points because of its sensationalistic and fairly indiscriminate piling on of horrors and violence, which ultimately becomes pornographic.³⁰⁶

³⁰¹ Kevin Thomas, 1995.

³⁰² James Berardinelli, “Bandit Queen (India, 1995): A movie review by James Berardinelli,” *Reel Views* (Jan 1, 2000), <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/bandit-queen>

³⁰³ James Berardinelli, “Bandit Queen (India, 1995): A movie review by James Berardinelli,” 2000.

³⁰⁴ Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Bandit Queen,” *Chicago Reader* (March 18, 2010), <https://chicagoreader.com/film/bandit-queen/>

³⁰⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Bandit Queen”, 2010.

³⁰⁶ Jonathan Rosenbaum, 2010.

Desson Howe, a Washington Post staff writer, attributes the reason for the exaggerated details in the movie to Mala Sen's biography, the source text, and the accounts of the Indian press:

If the details in “Bandit Queen” seem hyperbolic and mythicized, it's because they reflect the text of Sen's biography, as well as Indian press accounts of the real Devi, which raised her to mythic status.³⁰⁷

Robert Roten, a film critic, in his review of the film, mentions the portrayal of a human personality with a fighting spirit. As he states, ‘Although the “Bandit Queen” is a film loaded with violence and hatred, it is also an affirmation of the durability of the human spirit.’³⁰⁸ In her review, Rita Kempley, a Washington Post staff writer, points out the cultural corruption driven by the age-old caste system and male chauvinism.³⁰⁹ As she states, ‘Based on Devi's diaries, this powerful but gruelling Indian film is not only a tribute to her spirit, but also a searing indictment of a culture corrupted by the caste system and degraded by chauvinism.’³¹⁰

The portrayal of a “heroic” village woman³¹¹ was made in a manner, as Shandilya notes, that it gets recognition and warm acceptance by the Western critics.

³⁰⁷ Desson Howe, “India's Avenging Bandit,” *Washington Post* (June 30, 1995), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1995/06/30/indias-avenging-bandit/43b480bf-e06b-482d-9e5a-35f765da8feb/>

³⁰⁸ Robert Roten, “Bandit Queen—A tale of tragedy and triumph from India.” *Laramie Movie Scope*, Sep 14, 1996.

³⁰⁹ Rita Kempley, *Washington Post*, June 28, 1995. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/banditqueenrkmale_c01ed1.htm

³¹⁰ Rita Kempley, *Washington Post*, June 28, 1995.

³¹¹ Shandilya, Shanaita. “Bandit Queen: Depicting Rape and The “Third World Heroic Woman.” In *Feminism In India* (Jan 20, 2020), <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/01/20/bandit-queen-rape-world-heroic-woman/>



Figure 8: The frame featuring the cult figure of Phoolan Devi as a rebel during her surrender to the state.

As Shandilya records,

Even though *Bandit Queen* got a lot of critical acclaim and a clean chit from the supreme court, it produced narratives of hegemony when it came to representing the third world subaltern woman. The idea of a “heroic” village woman in the film, her helplessness and victimization is portrayed in a way to please and sell to the “first world” eye.³¹²

In spite of its rather warm acceptance by the critics in the West, the film cannot escape its failure in portraying the multi-faceted life of rape victim-turned- rebel Phoolan Devi driven by the complexities of structural caste codes. As Arundhati Roy, in her essay “The Great Indian Rape-Trick” written on 22nd August, 1994, points out the absence of the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of Phoolan Devi’s life trajectory in Shekhar Kapur’s film which Mala Sen’s biography has captured to a great extent:

Shekhar Kapur says that the film is based on Mala Sen's book - *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*. The book reconstructs the story, using interviews,

³¹² Shanaita Shandilya, “Bandit Queen: Depicting Rape and The “Third World Heroic Woman.”

newspaper reports, meetings with Phoolan Devi and extracts from Phoolan's written account, smuggled out of prison by her visitors, a few pages at a time.

Sometimes various versions of the same event - versions that totally conflict with each other i.e: Phoolan's version, a journalist's version, or an eye-witnesses version - are all presented to the reader in the book. What emerges is a complex, intelligent and human book. Full of ambiguity, full of concern, full curiosity about who this woman called Phoolan Devi really is. Shekhar Kapur wasn't curious.³¹³

Even, contrary to Phoolan's claim of having affairs with more than one man (Shandilya 2020), the film resorts to project Phoolan as a woman of good moral character in the sense that, as shown in the film to appease the sentiment and values of the middle class and upper-middle audience, she had a love affair only with Vikram Mallah. Thus, with its major focus on the brutal sexual assault of Phoolan Devi by male members of the dominant caste group, the film can be said to be limited in terms of archiving the complex, multi-dynamic caste questions as compared to Mala Sen's biography.

³¹³ Arundhati Roy, "The Great Indian Rape Trick", 22 April, 1994, <https://womens.theharvardadvocate.com/the-great-indian-rape-trick>

Chapter 4

Anti-caste Politics, Dalit Cinema, and the Ideological Shift in Hindi Films with Special Reference to Adaptations

Anti-caste Politics, Dalit Cinema, and the Transformation of the Hindi Films

This chapter attempts a critical analysis of select contemporary caste-centric Hindi films with special reference to select film adaptations. In so doing, it argues that anti-caste politics, Dalit uprising, and the influence of Dalit Cinema have contextualized the ideological shift of the Hindi films when it comes to representing the caste question. The purpose of this chapter is to substantiate this argument through examining the treatment of the recent incidents of Dalit uprising, which majorly contribute to the development of anti-caste politics, in the films, and the recurrent use of narrative elements central to the Dalit Cinema.

***Eklavya: The Royal Guard*: Representing the Constitutional Provision as Safeguard against Caste Humiliation**

Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007)³¹⁴ has portrayed a radical Dalit figure, Pannalal Chauhar (Sanjay Dutt), the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), who reminds the historical exploitation faced by the Dalits for centuries, and boldly asserts his Dalit identity. The DSP outbursts his rage over the historical exploitation and humiliation of the untouchables by the dominant castes: 'the manner in which you break a coconut on the occasion of inauguration, these fellows [the dominant castes] used to break our head to avoid the curse of ominous eyes.'

Furthermore, Pannalal Chauhar appears before the dominant caste Raja with his own personality,

³¹⁴ *Eklavya: The Royal Guard*, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra (2007; Bombay: Vinod Chopra Productions), https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.66b5f077-16ed-5354-1358-1b5824674d9a?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb.

not like a subjugated person. When the Raja is about to insult him by taking the name of his caste 'Chauhar', Pannalal Chauhar warns him by saying that in democracy it is a crime to insult a person by taking his or her caste name: 'Don't dare to call me Chauhar, Mr. Rana. In democracy, it is a crime to call a Chauhar Chauhar.' When the king Ranapratap attempts to threaten him with his feudal arrogance saying 'it is we who have been declaring the final verdict for generations on what is false and what is true...do you know, the Mr. Rana to whom you are talking to is carrying forward this legacy of authority for two thousand years.' In reply to this feudal attitude, the high rank Dalit police officer Pannalal challengingly asserts, 'And the age of my [exploitation] is five thousand years and I hail from those untouchables whose hands used to get chopped off just because they would touch the *Vedas*.' Even when his fellow subordinate police officer was afraid of taking entry to the mansion of king Ranapratap, Pannalal Chauhar says, 'Don't get nervous. It's a democracy. Now their kingship is restricted only within the territory of their mansion. This stick of ours [indicating the stick carried by the police] is stronger than their swords.' In this entire sequence, he upholds the rule of law, and does not care for the feudal power dynamics, and expresses his trust on the power of democracy over monarchy, and reminds of the violence historically perpetrated on the untouchables as basic a human act as touching a book. The assertive tone, baritone voice and defiant attitude of a Dalit police officer is something new to the Hindi film industry. The portrayal of a Dalit who is well-aware of the historical exclusion of the Dalits, well-versed in the law of the land, and who can assert his identity indicates a crucial shift in the representation of Dalits in Hindi films. Pannalal Chauhar is a representative of the angry young Dalits who fight for securing self-respect, dignity and basic human rights of the Dalits, and put question on the culture of caste-feudalism which exists in society on a large scale.

Caste Politics in *Article 15*

*Article 15*³¹⁵ film opens with a local song which talks about the dilapidated, helpless condition of the Dalits and the differences they have with the affluent upper castes. Along with the song, the visuals in the beginning of the film introduce the audience with the rural setting and social status of the people. The use of celebrated singer Bob Dylan's song 'blowing... in the wind' and the simultaneous visuals of an urban landscape filled with flyovers, well-built roads, and the remote rural setting filled with uneven roads, empty green fields add to the divide between the developed modernized city and the underdeveloped remote village. The film is an indirect reference to real life incident reported in the media as the Badayun rape case and other such incidents. In the film two Dalit girls



Fig 9: The scene featuring two Dalit girls hanged from a tree after being raped and murdered are brutally raped as they request to increase their wages by 3 rupees. This request or demand is treated by the dominant Thakurs as an act of violation n of caste codes and a challenge to their

³¹⁵ *Article 15*, directed by Anubhav Sinha (2019; Mumbai: Zee Studios), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81154455?source=35>.

authority over the Dalits. Therefore, the two girls are raped inside a school bus and also hanged on a tree in order to ‘teach’ the entire Dalit community a lesson for such ‘crime’. Things such as these have become the regular incidents in the village of Laalgaon until Ayan Ranjan (Ayushmaan Khurrana), an Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, who is also a pass out of an elite higher educational institute named St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, is sent there as the Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP). Jathav ji (Kumud Mishra), the driver, who himself hails from the low-caste Chamar community, informs Ayan Rajan when the latter asks him to stop the car and buy a bottle of water from a roadside shop that the shop belongs to the Pasi caste and they treat the Pasi, a scheduled caste community, as untouchable. They keep themselves away even from the shadow of the Pasi, a community which is associated with husbandry of pig. Therefore, an upper-caste fellow like Ayan Ranjan should not buy water from them. Ayan seems to be caste ignorant as he considers this social behaviour of the upper castes towards a scheduled caste community to be ‘funny’. When he informs his girlfriend about this ‘funny’ incident through text messages, his girlfriend Aditi (Isha Talwar) informs him that there is nothing ‘funny’ as this is the bleak reality of society. Aditi, who is associated with writing on social causes like gender equality, and is aware of social reality, informs Ayan that even in her own house, her mother used to practise discrimination against their house maid till few years ago. Jathavji also satirically comments, ‘If everyone becomes equal, who will be the king then?’, implying that the social inequality is needed and preserved to make someone king. In another scene Ayan Ranjan, a Brahmin by caste, is advised not to take food from the plate of a junior police officer who happens to be a low-caste fellow. As he is told, ‘No, no, sir. Don’t take it from my plate. I am going to manage a different plate for you.’ Bhramadatt Singh (Manoj Pahwa), the Circle Officer of the Laalgaon police station terms the death of the two girls found hanging on a tree to be ‘honour killing’, and lodge an FIR as honour killing, whereas for the family members of the two

dead girls, it was a clear case of murder. The attitude of the officer during writing the FIR statement, which they initially tried to ignore but were compelled to lodge after the IPS Ayan Ranjan's intervention, clearly displays how they are indifferent to the death of these two minor girls as they belong to the Dalit communities and how they are in liaison with the powerful Thakurs. The Circle Officer tries to convince his senior officer Ranjan that the case should not be taken seriously as this is a false case of rape and murder. As he argues, 'they are like that, sir. First they elope, and then they come back. His attitude reflects the general attitude of an upper-caste police officer to treat the Dalit communities as 'other' and consider them as 'sub-human'. His attitude is representative of the entire police system towards the Dalits. These cases are not even treated to be 'serious' by the system. The attitude of these police officers who are supposed to protect people of any caste or creed from any crime itself is not protective, but discriminatory towards particular caste groups. In this way, the system, which is supposed to protect the victim from victimization, itself victimizes the victim. In another scene, Ayan witnesses the brutal lynching of hapless Dalit young men by some dominant caste fellows for the 'crime' of having food inside the temple. Ayan is informed that this is an everyday phenomenon in the locality. This image of Dalit fellows getting badly thrashed by upper-caste fellows alludes to the 2016 Una incident in Gujarat. Bhramadatt Singh tries to manipulate the doctor into distorting the post-mortem report of the dead girls, which attests that it was a case of gang rape. It is evident from his telephonic conversation that he had already known truth of the incident, and he is in compliance with the upper-caste perpetrators. Rather he advises the parents of the girls to escape the locality until the situation is under control, making them feel guilty, as if they are the murderers of their own daughters. While the official post-mortem report denies any charge of rape and murder, and projects the incident as a suicide by the girls as they were involved in a same-sex relationship, the autopsy done by Dr. Malti Ram (Ronjini Chakraborty) reveals that the

two girls were actually raped and murdered. Denouncing autopsy report, the Circle Officer Brahmaddatt Singh treats it as 'quota prem' (love for quota) of the 'quota doctor', implying that Dr. Malti Ram who herself becomes a doctor through reservation policy is doing nothing but expressing her loyalty and commitment to her low caste communities through making false post-mortem report. The phrase 'quota doctor' implies the general perception of the upper caste folks that the Dalits are inherently ineligible, and that everything they achieve is through quota reserved for them in the constitutionally sanctioned reservation policy. He tries to convince the constable that it is only through 'their' tax (meaning the tax paid by the upper castes) that these low-caste medical students can become doctors. The driver's attempt to convince IPS Ranjan not to dismantle the social rules, which maintain, according to him, a social balance, through constructing various social groups like the *Rajas*, the *Prajas*, the *Sevaks*, *das* (implying the four-fold *varna* system), and it has been created by the Lord Brahma. An attempt to establish equality among these groups will create a chaos in society. The society must practice inequality to make someone king. It is evident from the driver's commentary on the existing social system that the age old caste system fundamentally discards the idea of equality. The scene in which three Dalit boys are beaten publically by some upper-caste fellows is a day to day reality, as informed by the driver to Ranjan. Later in the police station, an officer rebukes these Dalit boys as he accuses them of eating inside the temple. As per the caste codes, Dalits are not allowed to enter a temple. Anshu Naharia, a local builder who exercises his influence as a son of the local Minister Ramlal Naharia, assertively admits to Ayan Ranjan how much it is necessary to 'show' the Dalits their 'aukaat' or level, indicating their position in the hierarchal caste order. If the Dalit people are not taught 'lesson', according to him, all the menial jobs would have to be done by the upper castes themselves. In this case, rape has been used as a tool to repress the Dalit girls as the latter challenge the authority of the dominant castes. The dominant castes react through perpetrating

atrocities on the members of the underprivileged low-caste communities. This is a reaction of the dominant castes to the changing nature of the hierarchy of caste system. Anagha Ingole, in his *Caste Panchayats and Caste Politics in India* (2021), discusses how the hierarchy of caste has been challenged over a period of time:

Increasingly, studies of caste in India show that the acceptance of caste as hierarchy has undergone a serious challenge with the attack on occupational rigidities around caste that has diminished economic dependence on upper castes. Democratization of education, legal constitutional protections and political decentralization, have also given the lowest castes the political capital to challenge this *vertical* element of hierarchy and, as a result, some of the fixtures of caste as hierarchy have somewhat diminished.³¹⁶

Ayan Ranjan, a total outsider to such horrible morally corrupt social set up, orders to paste notice across the locality including the police station about reminding the Article 15 of the Constitution of India, which prohibits all forms of discriminatory practices on the basis of sex, caste, race, religion or region by the citizens of the Republic of India. There is a scene in the film in which the ASP Ayan Ranjan, who is an upper-caste Brahmin by caste, is seen to be engaged with his subordinate police officers in a casual discussion on everyone's caste status to understand the caste politics of the locality. The hierarchical social location of the different castes, as informed by the fellow police officers, angers Ayan as it appears to be absurd for him. The ignorance about the reality of the existing caste system and his annoyance reveals Ayan's privileged social status who has the sense of entitlement to such an extent that he, unlike the local police officers, especially those of low-caste communities, can afford to be ignorant about the practice of casteism.

Nishad (Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub), the local Dalit leader indirectly modelled upon the real life Dalit leader Chandra Sekhar Azad of the Bhim Army, is first introduced in the film

³¹⁶ Anagha Ingole, *Caste Panchayats and Caste Politics in India* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 3.

when his message is sent to the local Dalit people through a voiceover in which he tries to make his community aware of the age-old use of Dalit labour by the caste Hindus:

You and I are invisible to them, but their lives depend on us. We work on their farmlands, we clean their shit, we deliver their babies, burn their corpses on funeral pyres. Don't beg for justice anymore. You've already begged for too long. Now, whatever work you do, just stop.

Nishad's monologue in the police van in which it is revealed that he wanted to be a writer, a science writer, that the place (indicating caste) he was born in itself was a horrible accident alludes to the incident of Rohith Vemula. Rohith Vemula was a Ph.D. Researcher in the University of Hyderabad and an active leader of the radical Ambedkarite students organisation known as Ambedkar Students Association (ASA). A series of humiliating incidents led him to commit suicide in 2016. The words uttered by Nishad here were actually written by Rohith in his suicide note. In Vemula's own words,

I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan.

I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. It has become truly difficult to love without getting hurt.

The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

My birth is my fatal accident.³¹⁷

Nishad in his monologue also reveals a bleak fact that the number of people found dead while cleaning the gutter is greater than that of the martyrs in the border. The two girls were gang raped as they demanded to increase their fees from Rs. 25 to Rs. 28. The demand of 3 rupees pay hike cost them their honour and life. The upper castes often use rape as a tool, as a

³¹⁷ "My Birth Is My Fatal Accident: Rohith Vemula's Searing Letter Is An Indictment Of Social Prejudices." *The Wire*. 17 Jan, 2016, <https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices>

punitive measure to teach the Dalits ‘lesson’ or remind them of their low-caste status, to remind that they must not raise their voice. The character of Gaura (Sayani Gupta) has also been rendered with assertive Dalit voice. She is a representative of those vocal Dalit women who always fight for the rights and dignity of the hapless Dalit women. The tragic ending of her romantic relationship with Nishad (as Nishad is killed by the police in a fake encounter) unravels the impossibility of a fair dignified life in the lives of the Dalit activists who dedicate themselves to the cause of securing basic human rights of the downtrodden low-caste communities. The film can also be read as a journey of the character of IPS Ranjan, a privileged Brahmin, who attempts to discover the unexplored India, symbolically suggested with the camera showing the book *Discovery of India* (1946) composed by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India.

In its review of the film *Article 15*, the *Hindustan Times* points out the negligence and indifference to such questions which the film reminds the spectators not to forget to ask. As it states:

There are no revelations here. We’ve read about such cases, we’ve sighed about these horrors. Article 15 is not a film in search of easy answers. It is instead a reminder that we already know the questions, but don’t ask them enough.³¹⁸

200 Halla Ho: A Case of Dalit Uprising and Caste Politics

200 Halla Ho is a 2021 Hindi film directed by Sarthak Dasgupta and Alok Batra.³¹⁹ The film is produced under the banner of Yoodlee films and released on OTT platform. The film is an

³¹⁸ Raja Sen. “Article 15 Movie Review: Ayushmann Khurrana Hunts for Inconvenient Truths in an Essential Film.” *Hindustan Times*, 25 May 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/article-15-movie-review-ayushmann-khurrana-stands-tall-in-this-essential-film-about-cops-and-caste-4-5-stars/story-fivzS11g0IV7kGnY2IXISO.html>

indirect reference to the Nagpur Court incident in 2004 in which a mob of 200 women, mostly Dalits, from a local slum Kasturba nagar of Nagpur lynched Akku Yadav, a serial rapist and killer, to death in the Nagpur district court in an act of vengeance. In so doing, they take law in their hand as the system fails to protect them from the torture of Akku Yadav and deliver them justice.

The film opens with a gang of about 200 women from Dalit *basti* (slum) Rahinagar rushing to a court yard with covered faces and equipped with machetes, glass bottles, knives and other weapons, and brutally killing a serial rapist, molester and killer Balli Chaudhary (Sahil Khattar) who hails from a dominant caste background. The act is executed due to the repeated rape and murder of Dalit women of Rahinagar by Balli Chaudhary and his gang, and subsequent indifference of the police administration to the complaints of these vulnerable women. The police officer, in whose presence this incident occurs, holds discriminatory and derogative attitude towards the Dalit women of Rahinagar. Therefore, when he is ordered from the higher authority to search for the women who committed the crime, he comes to Rahinagar and asks all the women of the area to be present in front of him and his police force. Then the police arrest some of these Dalit women on the basis of suspicion. The local politicians leave no stone unturned to exploit the case for their own political gain. Mr. Lokhande, an opportunist Dalit leader, tries to hijack the Dalit women's agitation rally, led by Asha Surve (Rinku Rajguru) on demand of the release of the arrested Dalit women. He claims himself as the leader of the Dalits. But when Asha Surve and her friend Umesh Joshi (Barun Sobti) approach him directly to help release the arrested Dalit women, he refuses to extend any assistance immediately. He states that he can take action in this regard only after winning the election. Poornima (Flora Saini), the head

³¹⁹ *200 Halla Ho*, directed by Dasgupta, Sarthak, and Alok Batra (2021; Mumbai: Yoodlee Films), <https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/200-halla-ho/0-0-1z51313>.

of the Women's Rights Commission (WRC), intends to manage an election ticket (candidature) banking on the caste politics of the locality. She wants to use this murder case for her own political advantage. She orders to constitute a fact finding committee to probe into the case. For this very purpose, she tries to manage Dr. Vitthal Dangre (Amol Palekar), the former judge, who is a Dalit by his caste identity, to head the committee. She pretends to be the sympathizer of Dalit women. But in reality she plans to use the caste identity of the judge in her favour. Even after understanding her implied intention, Mr. Dangre agrees to head the committee to uphold justice in this case. Even if Mr. Dangre is a Dalit, he is respected by the officials of the administration and legal experts for his unbiased judgements. Though he is a Dalit by his caste identity, he does not intend to take side even of the underprivileged Dalit women. His focus as the head of the committee is to find out the true facts. When the journalist in the Fact Finding Committee (FFC) takes side of the Dalit women of Rahinagar in particular and the Dalit women in general, he reminds her that being Dalit does not certify one's morality. But when Asha Surve reminds her of the limitation of the legal system and the administrative bias against the Dalit people, Dangre introspects into his actions as a Dalit judge. He realizes that the label 'celebrated Dalit judge' has kept himself away from the wretched conditions of the Dalit people to who he belongs by his caste identity. He decides to reopen the file of the murder case which was closed after the court held the arrested Dalit women guilty of murder and ordered them imprisonment. Dangre starts working with Asha Surve and some close associates to ensure justice to the Dalit women of Rahinagar who were victimized, tortured, and raped repeatedly by Balli Chaudhary and his gang.

Asha Surve, a young educated Dalit woman, dares to confront Balli Chaudhary and his gang when they attempt a sexual assault on her. She mobilizes the vulnerable Dalit women to stand up against the barbaric torture of the serial rapist Balli Chaudhary. She approaches the police station to free the arrested Dalit women. She approaches even a local Dalit leader to do

something for the powerless and helpless Dalit women of Rahinagar, and communicates with the fact-finding committee to ensure justice for them. Surve reminds the former Dalit judge Dr. Vitthal Dangre of the limitation of the Judiciary in delivering justice to the vulnerable Dalit women. She finally launches an organized protest rally against the arrest of the Dalit women. The transformed Dalit judge realizes his need to return to Ambedkar who put forward his objection to Gandhi for having no homeland of the Dalits. The retired Dalit judge came back to his profession and took up the black coat of the lawyer to fight for the justice of the Dalit women of Rahinagar. It is evident that it is Asha Surve and Dr. Vitthal Dangre, who are Dalits by caste identity, who take the lead in the cause of securing justice for the Dalit women of work for them as a collective and bring out the collective leadership from the Dalit women of Rahinagar, rather than projecting themselves as their 'saviours'. The film features an important role of Umesh Joshi, a young practising advocate who is a Brahmin by caste, in the fight for justice for the Dalit women. But the film limits his role to an important associate in this fight. The film narrative has not spared a space for the Brahmin advocate to become the leader or saviour of the Dalit women of Rahinagar. In so doing, the film contrasts the trope of upper-caste saviour of the Dalits usually portrayed in caste-centric Hindi films by the upper-caste filmmakers. This is the way, this dissertation argues, the discourse of the anti-caste politics and newly emerging Dalit cinema which recognize the need of Dalit leadership for the emancipation of the Dalits influence and determine the narrative of the Hindi film *200 Halla Ho* which is directed by the upper-caste filmmakers.

***Geeli Pucchi* (2021): Constructing the Agency of a Dalit Queer Woman**

Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi*,³²⁰ released on Netflix, is a part of the anthology *Ajeeb Daastaans* consisting of four films. Neeraj Ghaywan who is a Dalit by his caste identity explores the complexities of caste, gender, sexual orientation, patriarchy, and the inter-connectedness among them, and addresses a complex question of constructing the agency of a Dalit queer woman. It is a tale of complex relationship between two women Bharati Mandal (Konkona Sen Sharma), who hails from a Dalit community, and Priya Sharma (Aditi Rao Hydari), who is a Brahmin by caste. Bharati works in a factory as a machine operator, and aspires to be a data operator. Although she fulfils the eligibility criteria for being the data operator of the factory, she is denied the job. She is informed by her elderly colleague that it is due to her low-caste identity that she is repeatedly being denied the job of data operator. He tries to show Bharati the real picture of caste-ridden society by saying that had her surname been Mishra, Banerjee or Sharma, the surnames which indicate one's upper-caste identity, she would get the job. He also elucidates that she must not forget that they are Dalit by caste, and that they can get meals on their tables, have a chair to eat the meals, but they are not entitled to a job in which they can work sitting on a chair. The job of data operator has been given to someone called Priya Sharma. Bharati feels discriminated when Priya introduces herself as the latter's surname reminds Bharati of her elderly colleague's words. When Bharati gets injured in a brawl with her co-worker who taunts her regarding her gender identity, the humble soft-hearted Priya nurses her injury. They become friends, but Bharati conceals her low-caste identity while making friendship with Priya to avoid further discrimination and introduces herself as Bharati Banerjee instead of Bharati Mandal. But as their friendship grows deeper, and they understand their mutual attraction to each other,

³²⁰ "Geeli Pucchi" in *Ajeeb Daastaans*, directed by Neeraj Ghaywan (2021; Mumbai: Dharmatic Entertainment), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81206929?source=35>.

Bharati reveals her real caste identity. She informs Priya that she is not a Banerjee and that she is a Dalit. Her mother and grandmother work as midwives. This disclosure of Bharati's low-caste identity immediately creates a gap in her relationship with Priya, who lives with her conservative in-laws, and who was warned by her mother-in-law to be careful in making friends. The queerness of their sexual orientation brings them closer to each other. On the basis of sexuality both of them are marginalized. But their different caste identity creates a distance between them. In examining the film's treatment of the intersection between two characters' queer sexual desire and caste identity, Sohini Chatterjee, in her article "Caste, Desire, and Dalit Queer Resistance in "Geeli Puchhi", observes, "Geeli Puchhi" does not hypersexualizes the Dalit queer woman represented, neither does it desexualizes the Brahmin woman but explores homoerotic possibilities between the two women without diluting their agency while also narrativizing the limits of such agency when confronted with structural violence produced by caste, class, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy.'³²¹ Chatterjee also observes how instead of grappling with caste atrocity and violence which usually gets more attention in caste-centric films, Ghaywan's *Geeli Puchhi* focuses on how the nuanced, subtle casteism is practised against a Dalit woman with a different sexual orientation, and her resistance against it which usually goes unnoticed. As she argues,

The film departs from the depiction of caste-based killings by upper castes as the only evidence of harm and injustice against Dalits but brings to the fore, incisively, the caste-based violence and vagaries of everyday life that the Dalit queer protagonist comes up against, which in their impact on the life of the character, exposes the hierarchy of harm. Moreover, the film is not exclusively preoccupied with the body and life of the Dalit queer protagonist to gather evidence of casteism but simultaneously focuses attention on the Brahmin family to problematize the presence of caste in intimate encounters, gestures

³²¹ Sohini Chatterjee, "Caste, Desire, and Dalit Queer Resistance in "Geeli Puchhi",³²¹ *Women's Studies* 51, no. 1 (2022): 50-69. DOI: 10.1080/00497878.2021.2007924

of desire, seemingly affable domestic spaces, profit-driven capitalist enterprises, and purportedly caste-agnostic professional environments.³²²

Throughout the film Bharati has been portrayed as an assertive, vocal Dalit woman who struggles against all odds of her life. She can acknowledge her sexual orientation as lesbian, the unequivocal admission of which itself is a revolutionary act in a society which does not sanction any kind of sexual orientation other than the heterosexual one. She militantly fights back when her co-worker humiliates her mocking at her gender identity. She is assertive in front of the factory manager about her rightful demand of getting the job of data operator. She cannot accept that she cannot pursue her aspiration to become the data operator just because of her low-caste identity. The film departs from the traditional representation of women in general and Dalit women in particular. The portrayal of women characters in the films are mostly in congruity with the women from the upper-caste backgrounds.

Thus, Ghaywan's film documents the experience of a Dalit queer woman, and constructs her agency as a Dalit individual as well as her sexual agency as a Dalit queer woman. Although marginalized on the ground of caste, gender as well as sexual orientation, Bharati Mandal, the Dalit queer woman in Ghaywan's film, is not reduced to a vulnerable submissive underdog; rather, much like the Dalit women characters in Dalit Cinema such as Manjusree in Cherian's *Papilio Buddha*, she is endowed with agency, individuality and a power of resistance.

***Jhund*: Representing the Aspirational Side of the Slum-dwellers**

The internationally acclaimed Dalit filmmaker Nagraj Popatrao Manjule makes his directorial debut through the 2022 film *Jhund* (herd).³²³ The film is produced under the banner of T-Series,

³²² Sohini Chatterjee, 53-54.

³²³ *Jhund*, directed by Nagraj Manjule (2022; Mumbai: Zee Studios), <https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/jhund/0-0->

Tandav Films Entertainment Pvt. Ltd. and Aatpat Films. The film is inspired by the life of Vijay Barse who as a sports teacher managed to distract the attention of some slum boys from continuing their lives with drugs, alcohol, petty criminal activities or illegal means of earning money due to their wretched socio-economic condition, and found the NGO Slum Soccer. The film is an attempt by Manjule, who is known for his path-breaking Marathi films on caste questions like *Pistulya* (2009), *Fandry* (2013), and *Sairat* (2016), to make a new narrative in keeping with Dalit aesthetics a part of filmmaking in the Hindi film industry popularly known as Bollywood. The Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan has played the role of the sports coach Vijay Borade, modelled upon the real life Vijay Barse. Vijay Barse's story in uplifting the slum boys through the game of football came to public notice for the first time when an episode entitled 'A Ball Can Change the World' as a part of a popular TV show 'Satyamev Jayate', hosted by the popular Bollywood actor Aamir Khan, was broadcast. This is another film by Manjule which departs from the conventional representation of the slum-dwellers. What is important is that this time Manjule does this in the Hindi film industry. Manjule develops the film narrative from an insider's point of view. He portrays the slum boys as the central characters in the film, not as the aberrant other of society. Throughout the film, Manjule attempts to represent the peripheral life-world of the slum-dwellers as the mainstream of society. The slum boys are engaged in coal trafficking, theft, gambling or robbery. The characters like Don, Babu Chitre, Angel, Kartik, Aman, Saajan, Raju have been portrayed as typical slum boys. The film rarely talks about the specific caste identity of the slum boys. Don's actual name Ankush Meshram indicates that he belongs to the Mahar caste largely found in Maharashtra. Manjule also portrays the adivasi character Monica (Rinku Rajguru) who participates in the slum soccer

tournament and speaks in her own tribal language. Their self-fashioning, funky hairstyle, language, activities represent a type character of the slums of any part of the country. They are victims of the administrative bias of the police system as they are always treated as criminals, not as humans, by the local police station. Their slum Gaddi Godaam is partitioned from the main locality, inhabited by the so-called 'sophisticated' upper-caste, upper class people, by a wall which metaphorically stands for caste division prevalent Indian society. Whereas the mainstream society always tends to find the criminal side of the slum boys, Manjule highlights the aspirational side of them. Contrary to the stereotypical representation of the slum-dwellers in the films as criminal, drunkard, helpless, Manjule depicts their assertion, their dream for emancipation. Manjule's anti-caste politics is explicit in the framing of the scenes. The celebration of Bhim Jayanti on the occasion of Ambedkar's birthday, waving of the Panchsheel flag, and a procession with large portraits of Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Shivaji is fraught with anti-caste ethos. Vijay Borade's argument in the court trial scene that 'They are the ostracized people in society; you consider them as herd; I consider them as the National football team' is nothing but an appeal to society to acknowledge the slum life-world as part of the mainstream society. Showing Deekshabhumi at the background in the scene featuring Don aka Ankush running towards the airport is a deliberate ploy to introduce the audience with Deekshabhumi. Deekshabhumi is a place which bears immense historical significance in the history of anti-caste movement as it is the place where Ambedkar converts into Buddhism along with almost five million Dalits. The last scene featuring the flying aeroplane over a wall on which it was written that 'Crossing



Fig 10: The last scene featuring the journey of the slum boys through flight and crossing the wall which separates their slum from the mainland to participate in the football tournament. Crossing the wall metaphorically stands for crossing the boundary of caste

the wall is strictly prohibited' is suggestive of the film's message that the society has to cross the wall of caste division.

Quota-the Reservation: A Visual Document of Humiliating Caste Discrimination and Violence in Higher Educational Institutes

Sanjiv Jaiswal's *Quota- the Reservation* has been released in the month April, 2022 on the OTT platform Baba Play app, an OTT platform which serves to spread Ambedkar's philosophy and anti-caste thought across the globe.³²⁴ The film is a visual document of caste-based ragging, discrimination, humiliation faced by Dalit students due to their low-caste identity as well as availing constitutionally sanctioned reservation or quota. This is the story of Saurabh Rawat, a first-year student of a prestigious medical college who hails from the Chamar (tanner) caste, a low-caste group traditionally associated with the occupation of tanning and leather craft as per the convention of the caste system. In the college Saurabh undergoes a series of discriminatory

³²⁴ *Quota-The Reservation*, directed by Sanjiv Jaiswal (2022; Kanpur: Baba Play in association with Rudraksh Movies), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rx8ESLom840>.

and humiliating treatment by the Brahmin and other upper-caste senior students and professors of the college. A college senior, Pankaj Shukla, who proudly asserts his Brahmin identity, rags Saurabh for his Chamar identity and taking admission to the college through the caste-based quota system. Pankaj forces Saurabh to smoke cigarette which the latter refuses to do. As a result, Pankaj and his two other upper-caste friends enter Saurabh's hostel room and badly injure him to teach him a lesson. Saurabh approaches the liaison officer of the college to lodge a complaint but the latter suggests him to remain silent as it is evident, as the officer convinces him, from the previous cases of complaint that college management does not take any action on such incidents and such incidents have been normalized in the college campus. Saurabh again receives a negative approach from a police officer when he goes to the local police station for lodging an FIR (First Information Report). The police officer displays his caste bias as he denies registering the FIR on the ground that such complaint cannot be registered before investigating the incident. Dr. Trivedi, a senior professor who is a Brahmin by caste, expresses his caste prejudice and humiliates Saurabh when the latter approaches him for the humiliation and violent attack on him. Saurabh at last gets help from a local Dalit activist Rajsekhar who approaches the Dean of the college to take action. The Dean, Mr. Shukla who is also a Brahmin by caste, displays his caste bias during the conversation and comments that he does not support the quota system as it, according to him, degrades the standard of medical education, implying that he cannot stand by Saurabh in this case of caste discrimination. Even a Dalit IAS officer admits his helplessness in taking action against such incidents. The discriminatory treatment to Saurabh continues to happen as the latter is allotted a score below the pass marks in the examination. He fails in Dr. Trivedi's paper. When he approaches Dr. Trivedi to recheck his paper, the latter once again insults him on caste ground, saying 'you guys are undeserving'. Dr. Trivedi claims, it is because of the presence of Dalit students who get a seat through quota system that the reputation

of this prestigious institute is at stake. Saurabh approaches a local Dalit MP to look into the matter of rechecking the paper. But he also disappoints him. Saurabh Rawat who aspires to become a great doctor finds his dream shattered to the ground. As a result, a helpless Saurabh decides to do something which can redress such humiliating experience of Dalit students like him. Inspired by the story of the freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, who threw bomb at the Assembly not to kill anyone but just to awaken the countrymen over the atrocities perpetrated by the Britishers, Saurabh commits suicide in his hostel room after recording a video message in the hope that his words in the video will awaken the people over the issue of caste humiliation faced by Dalit students. Saurabh's death agitates the students across the country as his last video goes viral on the social media platforms. The college management is put under pressure and a high level enquiry committee is formed to probe into Saurabh's suicide case. The report of the committee reveals that Sourav actually passed the paper with high marks in which he was allotted a score below the pass marks by Dr. Trivedi. Dr. Trivedi is found guilty and arrested. The film ends with paying tribute to the Dalit students who committed suicide in the recent past in the higher educational institutions due to facing humiliating caste discrimination and violence from the upper-caste students, professors and the authority.

Unlike Prakash Jha's 2011 film *Aarakshan* which holds a dubious position on the issue of caste-based reservation, Sanjiv Jaiswal puts forwards the discourse of reservation from a Dalit student's point of view. In the process, he includes in the film narrative the agitation of the Dalit students, student organization guided by Ambedkar's political philosophy, the logic of social justice behind the caste-based reservation system, informs the audience about the state of the recent institutional caste discrimination in the educational institutes and its victims like Rohith Vemula or Payel Tadv. Such realistic representation of caste violence on students in the campus

and the organized resistance of the Dalit students against it, contextualized by the recent anti-caste student politics, are new to Hindi cinema.

Anti-caste Politics, Dalit Cinema, and the Transformation of the Hindi Film Adaptations

The dissertation also advances the thesis that the anti-caste politics and Dalit Cinema have historically contextualised the transformation of the Hindi film adaptations on caste question also, as is exemplified in the adaptations *Dhadak*, *Serious Men*, or *Teesri Aazadi*.

Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* and Problematizing Its Anti-Caste Politics in Shashank

Khaitan's *Dhadak*

Caste has always been 'untouchable' when it comes to its representation in Indian cinema. The socio-cultural stigmatization of caste or the political ideologies of the filmmakers, and the commercial risk in portraying caste as a subject-matter due to apathy of the general movie-goers towards the issue of caste have rendered the issue of representing caste in cinema the character of an aberrant other. Although there are few cases of representation of caste in films in the overall of the Indian film industries, the regressive outlook, the secular, the so-called 'left-liberal' as well as sympathetic approach on the part of the filmmakers towards the question of caste have deprived the institution of caste from getting a fair treatment with all its inherent characteristics in cinema. It is mainly the arrival of the filmmakers in the film industry from the Dalit (erstwhile 'outcastes' or 'untouchables' in the hierarchal caste system) backgrounds which marks a remarkable transition in the history of representation of caste in Indian cinema. Nagraj Popatrao Manjule, a filmmaker in the Marathi film industry, is one such figure among others who redefines the way of portraying caste in cinema. Hailing from a Dalit background, Nagraj

Manjule attempts to ‘show’ the ‘lived experience’³²⁵. There is no place for the ‘subject’s will’ in undergoing that very experience. It is the predestined experience of the Dalits. Through his films like *Pistulya* (2009), *Fandry* (2014) and *Sairat* (2016), Manjule announces his arrival in the film industry with the perspective and gaze of a kind which was scarcely noticed earlier in Indian films. Commenting on the treatment of caste-ridden social space both in *Fandry* and *Sairat*, Hrishikesh Ingle argues,

The rural space where these romances unfold are poignant as they are markers for locating social marginality in present times. The villages of Akolner and Bittergaon are real spaces, and as such, provide the topography to bring out the subdued but observable caste relationships. This gives a certain corroborating relevance to the stories in terms of locating the tales in lived realities.³²⁶

As a part of this dissertation I will delve deep into the film *Sairat* (2016)³²⁷ to explore the caste question. *Sairat* (literally meaning, ‘wild’) is the story of romance between a Dalit boy Parshya and an upper-caste girl Archie. Although they become successful to get married, they cannot escape their fate of being the victims of caste-based killing. Through a analysis of the cinematic narrative of the film *Sairat* (2016), this section attempts to argue that it is the Dalit gaze or perspective, which, contrary to the ‘casteist’ or the so-called secular, liberal or leftist gaze or perspective, represents the true picture of the ‘lived experience’ of the Dalit life-world.

Manjule’s *Sairat*, literally meaning, ‘wild’, is a story of love relationship between a young boy Parshya who belongs to a lower caste family and Archie who happens to be a young girl of a dominant upper caste family. The journey of their love is fraught with and shaped at

³²⁵ I have borrowed the concept of ‘lived experience’ from Sundar Sarukkai. See Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34-35.

³²⁶ Hrishikesh Ingle, “Fandry and Sairat-regional cinema and marginality.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 45 (2018): 46-53.

³²⁷ *Sairat*, directed by Nagraj Manjule (2016; Mumbai: Zee Studios), https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/sairat/0-0-movie_1921832123?utm_source=google_web&utm_medium=watchaction&utm_campaign=google_watc&utm_content=sairat

each step by the challenge of caste system. Parshya, a young boy from a fisherman's family, falls in love with Archie, who hails from an upper caste background and the daughter of the powerful political leader Tatya Patil. Once their affair is disclosed, Archie's family members, especially her brother Prince, along with some goons, badly beats Parshya and his friends Salya and Pradeep, who assist Parshya at every stage of his love relationship. As the story unfolds, Archie and Parshya escape from the village and reaches Hyderabad. In the new and unknown environment of a big city they have to face a number of logistical difficulties and struggles to sustain their lives. However, they eventually manage to get some jobs and settle in the city, and get married. But that is not the end of the story as their love is at every stage chased by caste. When Archie's father comes to know, after a long time, about the whereabouts of Archie and Parshya, Prince, along with some goons, comes to Hyderabad and visit Archie and Parshya's newly built home and congratulate them. It seems that now their relationship has been accepted by Archie's family and everything is going to be settled successfully. But the last scene comes up with an unexpected twist as we see the couple Archie and Parshya getting brutally murdered by Prince and his goons.

Here comes the discourse of the 'lived experience' of the Dalits as compared to the traditional happy ending of an inter-caste love affair usually shown in Hindi films *Sujata* (1959). If we examine the fate of the Dalit character Parshya within the discourse of 'lived experience' it could be understood that he was doomed to undergo the fatal blow he received at the end. That to fall in love with an upper-caste girl results in the unspeakable oppression or even death is the 'lived experience' of a Dalit boy, in which 'there is no element of choice or freedom associated with it', and it is the experience 'over which the subject (here, the Dalit boy Parshya) has no choice of whether to experience or not'. And this 'lived experience' is imposed on Dalit folks like Parshya by the age-old structure of caste system. There is a general trend of terming such

killing of the lovers by their family as ‘honour killing’, but Manjule here portrays this killing of Archie and Parshya by Archie’s family members as—to use the phrase of the renowned scholar Kancha Ilaiah—‘caste-based killing’ as he reminds the audience time and again of the presence of caste throughout the narrative. He also reminds the lived experience of caste sometimes by showing the separate settlement of the Dalits at the outskirts of the village, sometimes showing Parshya, Parshya’s father, or Salya doing their works, like fishing, working in garage, as the Dalit people are generally seen to be engaged in, or sometimes by showing Parshya’s father scolding Parshya for messing with upper caste folks. The humiliation faced by Parshya’s family after Parshya’s affair with Archie is disclosed is also an instance of gruesome lived experience. The scene featuring Parshya’s family leaving the village shows how difficult it is for a Dalit family to live with humiliation. It is the spectre of caste which haunts Parshya and Archie at every stage and ultimately leads them to their demise. Even if it is assumed as an honour killing, there can be no denial, as I argue, that this sense of honour emerges out of the structure of caste, which is based on, as Louis Dumont argues in his seminal work *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (1980), the notion of purity and pollution, wherein those who belong to the upper rung of the caste structure believe themselves to be ‘pure’, and essentialize the lower caste people as the ‘polluted’. Therefore, the Dalit who dares to contaminate the so-called ‘purity’ of the caste Hindus, therefore violating the sanctity of the *shastras* or scriptures, must be taught a lesson to maintain that purity. To view the Archie-Parshya love story from the Dalit perspective, death can be the only destiny for the couples as they transgress the diktats of caste. Therefore, I argue that by showing the caste system playing the pivotal role in the life of the characters in the film, and shaping the fate of Archie and Parshya’s love relationship, being the ultimate decider of everything, by depicting the ‘lived experiences’ of the Dalit characters in the

film in-the narrative from the Dalit characters' perspective, the 'outcaste' director of the film has managed to portray the 'lived experience' of the Dalits,

Thus, in *Sairat*, Manjule has characterized caste as the protagonist which determines the fate of the Dalits like Parshya. To maintain the structure of caste, the casteist fellows do not bother even to kill their dear and near ones, as is evident in the murder of Archie along with Parshya. Elucidating the politics of intersection of caste and gender Pradnya Waghule (2016) argues,

The recent Marathi film "Sairat" reinforces the fact that gender is also about caste. [...] the protagonist of the film, Archana, or Archie as she is referred to through the film, becomes the locus of this same struggle. It is her body and desire that have to be curbed for the prevailing caste norms to continue undisturbed.³²⁸

The plotline of Manjule's *Sairat* has been adapted and remade in some other regional languages also. The most popular among them is the 2018 Hindi film adaptation *Dhadak* directed by Shashank Khaitan. The other adaptations and remakes include 2017 Kannada film *Manasu Mallige*, 2017 Odia film *Laila O Laila*, and the 2018 Bengali film *Noor Jahaan*, and the 2017 Punjabi film *Channa Mereya*. For the scope of this dissertation, my discussion is limited to the analysis of the Hindi film adaptation *Dhadak*.

Dhadak (2018), the Hindi film adaptation of *Sairat* (2016), produced under the banner of Dharma Productions, directed by Shashank Khaitan faces harsh criticism from the film critics and reviewers for allegedly subsuming the explicit and authentic treatment of the caste question of *Sairat* in its weaving the love story.³²⁹ Rendering a not-so-serious treatment to the much debatable caste question, *Dhadak* weaves the tale of love relationship between two college

³²⁸ Pradnya Waghule, "The Big House," *Economic and Political Weekly* 51 (2016), 71.

³²⁹ *Dhadak*, directed by Shashank Khaitan (2018; Mumbai: Zee Studios), https://www.zee5.com/movies/details/dhadak/0-0-19151?utm_source=google_web&utm_medium=watchaction&utm_campaign=google_watch&utm_content=dhadak.

students of the same locality Madhu and Parthavi. Madhu, who hails from a lower caste community and economically a lower middle class background, falls in love with Parthavi, the daughter of a powerful political leader of an upper caste background. Their romance continues in their secret meetings on a happy note until their affair is discovered by Parthavi's family members during the birthday party of Parthavi's brother Roop. Madhu and his friends who assist in every stage of his affair with Parthavi are thrashed badly by Parthavi's family members and their goons. Ratan Singh, Parthavi's father, the powerful political leader, registers false charges against Madhu and his friends and asked the police to put them behind the bars. By virtue of Parthavi's courageous acts, they all manage to escape from the police station. Madhu and Parthavi found themselves at Kolkata where they face a number of adverse situations and struggle very hard to survive there and find a settlement. At last Madhu manages a job at a roadside restaurant and wins the heart of the owner of the restaurant with learning to speak in Bengali with the customers. Parthavi also manages a job at a call centre and works successfully. As the story unfolds itself, they got married and have a child, and later purchase a flat to start a happy and comfortable life. Meanwhile, Ratan Singh caught his wife talking to their daughter Parthavi over telephone, and he himself talks to his daughter over the phone rather indifferently and manages the address of Parthavi's residence during the conversation. He sends his son Roop along with some men who work for them with some new clothes and gifts to Madhu and Parthavi's newly purchased house in pretence to congratulate them on their having a baby and starting a new journey. Though Madhu doubts this seemingly unexpected gestures from Parthavi's father's side, Parthavi feels excited in the hope that everything is going to be settled now and her relationship with Madhu will be accepted hereafter by her family. But contrary to Parthavi's expectation, the story of their love relationship ends when her brother Roop and the men who came with him mercilessly kill Madhu and his little son Aditya when Parthavi went out

to bring some sweets for the ‘guests’. Thus their love is thrashed and killed by the feudal and casteist mindset of Parthavi’s family.

Manjule uses the trope of silence to draw the attention of the spectators to the caste-based killing in the name of honour in the climactic scene of his movie *Sairat*.

In the climax, contrary to the usual intensifying music, to show the death of the protagonist and his beloved, Manjule employs pin-drop silence to convey the horror of (dis)honour killing in India. In comparison to sound, silence speaks aloud. An extremely orchestrated silence transfers from the screen to the spectator—a contagious emotion—rupturing the genre of romance in Indian cinema in its treatment of caste. Perhaps, this is the unnamable, which cannot be brought into language as sound, but only as silence: the silence of death..³³⁰

This trope of visual depiction of a brutal caste-based killing without sound cannot be ignored in its Bollywood adaptation *Dhadak*. In the climactic scene of *Dhadak* the filmmaker retains this trope of silence to intensify the emotion. The Hindi film adaptation, I argue, adds another dimension to the scene as it takes the brutality of caste values to another level through the killing of the innocent child of the couple who can be considered unholy as per the *varna* system. As per the Hindu social order, the child born through the sexual union of a Brahmin woman and a Shudra man is considered unholy and labelled as ‘chandal’. Therefore, in this film the child of Madhu and Parthvi is viewed as a chandal-like offspring of ‘impure’ blood, and he has to be killed as the child carries the impure blood of a low-caste man. One of the core aspects of the *varna* system is that it is based on the binary of the ‘pure’ high caste and the ‘polluted’ low caste.³³¹ The body of the low-caste fellow Madhu is a ‘polluted’ one as opposed to the ‘pure’ body of Parthvi, and as per the conventional patriarchal norms, the child bears the legacy of his

³³⁰ Manju Edacharia, “Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 55, no. 38 (2020): 50, <http://iisjao.org/sites/default/files/iisjao/July%202022/4.pdf>

³³¹ See Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus* for detailed discussion on purity/pollution binary in the caste system.

father's 'polluted' body. In this regard, Khaitan's *Dhadak* departs from the traditional happy ending trope of inter-caste romance subsumed under the inter-class identity in Bollywood films and cannot refrain from following the norm of Dalit Cinema in foregrounding the complex dynamics of caste.

Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* and Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men*

Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* is a 2010 English novel which narrates the story of a Dalit fellow named Ayyan Mani who takes resort to some strange tricks to ensure upward mobility for his son.³³² Ayyan works as a personal secretary to Dr. Arvind Acharya, a Brahmin scientist at the Institute of Theory and Research in Mumbai. Ayyan lives in the chawls of Worli along with his wife and son. Born and brought up in a poverty-stricken Dalit family, Ayyan nurtures angst against the miserable situation of his own life as well as the life of his fellow Dalit people. He intends to get out of this downtrodden status and aspires for upward mobility. He does not want his son to lead the same struggling life. Therefore, he cooks up a strange story in which he projects his son as a mathematical genius. Ayyan himself trains him in mathematics and other science subjects. He feeds his mind with scientific knowledge which is usually difficult to know for a child of his age, and forces the child to mug up those facts and figures. The child's genius gets media coverage. The newspapers and news channels shower heap of praises upon the child for his genius. The whole world becomes awestruck at the child's exceptional ability in solving mathematical problems. But eventually, Ayyan's trick gets disclosed as the child can no longer tackle the burden of appearing as a prodigy.

³³² Manu Joseph, *Serious Men* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2010).

The story is set in Worli Seaface of Mumbai. Mani lives in one of the chawls of Worli. Joseph's description of the chawls informs the readers about the living conditions of the protagonist and other downtrodden communities:

It was a hive of ten thousand one-room homes carved inside a hundred and twenty identical three-storeyed buildings that stood like grey ruins, their paint long removed by old rains. A million clothes hung from the grilles of small dark windows. Portions of the outer walls, sometimes even roofs, kept falling off, especially in the calamitous rains of August.³³³

Ayyan Mani detests the life-world in which he has been brought up. The narrator describes his attitude to escape this life-world in the following words:

Even though the men here loved Ayyan through the memories of a common childhood, he had long ago cut himself off from them...He laughed with them always, lent money and on humid nights chatted on the black tar-coated terrace about who exactly was the best batsman in the world, or about the builders who were interested in buying up the chawl, or about how Aiswharya Rai was not very beautiful if she were observed closely. But in his mind he did not accept these men. He has to abolish the world he grew up in to be able to plot new ways of escaping from it.³³⁴

Mani sarcastically talks about the manners of the people of upper echelon. He informs his wife Oja how they attribute name to everything they do. For example, they call the time spent with their family 'Quality Time'. Mani reveals the privileged position of this class when he informs Oja how these people ponder over the question "Who am I? What am I?" or consider 'hairfall' to be a big problem. Sister Chastity, a Salesian matron and the principal of Adi's school, reminds Mani of the tortured past experienced by his forefathers due to the oppressive caste system. Although her purpose is to convert Mani and his family into Christianity, she makes critical observation on the divisive nature of Hinduism. As she remarks,

...How beautifully you've forgiven the people who brutalized your forefathers. The Brahmins, the kind of things they did. The things they do even now. In private, they still call you the Untouchables, do you know that? In public they call you "Dalits", but in private they call you horrible things...Hinduism is like that, Mr Mani. It has the upper

³³³ Manu Joseph, 6.

³³⁴ Manu Joseph, *Serious Men*, 7-8.

castes and it has the Dalits. The Brahmins and the Untouchables. That can never change. People only pretend that it has changed.³³⁵

Mani, a descendant of the untouchables whose fate has been determined by the discriminatory caste system, agrees with Sister Chastity, and furthers her argument when he remarks,

You speak the truth, Sister. The Brahmins ruined my life even before I was born. My grandfather was not allowed to enter his village school. They beat him up when he tried once. If he had gone to school, my life would have been better.³³⁶

Mani's act of renouncing Hinduism and embracing Buddhism can be traced to the historical step taken by Ambedkar who renounced Hinduism in 1956 along with almost 5 lakhs followers, and embraced Buddhism in order to free the lower caste and untouchables from the casteist Hindu social order.

Mani's sarcasm at the ambience of the Institute of Theory and Research, like labelling it to be a 'sanctuary for those who wanted to spend their entire life trying to understand why there was not enough lithium in the universe, or why the speed of light was what it was, or why gravity was such a weak force'³³⁷ is the result of a feeling of alienation as he or his community is culturally deprived of formal scientific knowledge for centuries due to their location in the lower rung of caste-ridden Hindu social ladder. His family or community had never been a participant in practicing academic knowledge as a low cast they have been historically excluded from acquiring formal education. That is why all these grave discussions on the specialized fields of knowledge sound alien to Mani. He cannot relate his life to such practice of academic knowledge. As the author describes,

Ayyan had a haunting desire to escape from this mad house. Thirteen years was too long. He could not bear the grandness of their profession anymore, the way they debated whether universe must be spelt with a capital U or a small u, and the magnificence with

³³⁵ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 21-2.

³³⁶ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 22.

³³⁷ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 22.

which they said, after spending crores of public money, ‘Men knows nothing yet. Nothing.’ And the phoney grace with which they hid their incurable chauvinism and told reporters, ‘A physicist is ultimately judged through citations. She has to constantly publish.’ They were highminded; they secretly believed that their purpose was greater; they were certain that only scientists had the right today to be philosophers.³³⁸

The peon also passes a remark which indicates the cultural privilege enjoyed by the likes of Arvind Acharya. It indicates the historical truth that these positions have been exclusive privilege for the Brahmins and the other upper castes who monopolise the educational field.

Ayyan is worshipper of Buddha. Not only he considers Buddha to be his god, but he also nurtures hatred towards the gods of Hinduism. He hated the Hindu gods so much that whenever his wife Oja, who practices Hinduism, brings the idol of lord Ganesha home, he throws it away from home. He tries to convince Oja that the Brahmins have created these gods, cooked up stories in which these gods fight the demons who are none but his forefathers. In his own words, ‘Buddha is our god. The other gods are gods the Brahmins created. In their deviant stories, those gods fought against demons which were us. Those black demons were our forefathers.’³³⁹

Ayyan’s words point to the Aryan race theory espoused by the 19th century anti-caste social reformer Jyotiba Phule. According to Phule, the Aryans invaded the Indian subcontinent and made the indigenous communities like the Adivasis, untouchables their slaves. It is through the use of religion and mythology that they enslaved the indigenous communities by designing the *varna* system, cooking mythical stories which project the Aryans as gods and the non-Aryans, the Ati-shudras (erstwhile untouchables) of this land as demons. Mani considers the epics to be the conspiracy of the Brahmin caste, and he considers Hinduism to be the religion exclusively of the upper castes.

³³⁸ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 23-4.

³³⁹ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 50-51.

Joseph portrays the typical reservation debate in his novel. When the question of providing reservation to the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) comes to the fore, the faculties and researchers of the Institute of Theory and Research who comprise of the upper caste feel uncomfortable. Mani already knows what their positions would be on the issue. He knows that after all the discussions and debates the Brahmins would resort to the argument ‘Past mistakes must be corrected; opportunities must be created...But merit cannot be compromised.’³⁴⁰ He does not expect from the upper castes that they will acknowledge their privilege and honestly to do away with the existing caste inequality, let alone supporting the reservation policy designed to emancipate the low caste, adivasi and other backward social group. He understands that ultimately the upper castes will play hypocrite in their approach to their reservation policy. He knows that at the initial level of the debate over reservation they will utter some liberal vocabulary but at the end, with adding ‘buts’ and ‘ifs’, they will oppose it to safeguard their privileged positions which they enjoy since ages by virtue of the caste system.

This is why he can sense that there is a caste system-like hierarchy among the vehicles on the road. He puts car on the top most position resembling the topmost social position of the Brahmins, the cars are followed in the hierarchy by the motor cycles which are superior to the pedestrians and the cycles occupying the lowest position in the hierarchy, as the cycles are given the least importance as a vehicle by the pedestrians. As he observes,

The cars, their faces frowning in a superior way through the bonnet grills where the Brahmins. They were higher than the motor cycles who were higher than the pedestrians. The cycles were the lowest of the low. Even the pedestrians pretended that they didn’t see them. The bus had to be something in this structure, and Ayyan decided it was him. Lowly, but formidable and beyond torment. In any given situation in this country, Ayyan

³⁴⁰ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 59.

thought with a chuckle that did not surface, someone was the Brahmin and someone was the Untouchable.³⁴¹

Ayyan always carries within himself a grudge against the Brahmins. It is the accumulated rage of a Dalit against the Brahmin caste. That is why whenever he finds an excuse to denigrate them or to take vengeance even to a slight extent, he never loses that opportunity. As he acts in the case of writing on the black board, the 'Thought For The Day' in the institute. He would invent quote on his own to make the Brahmins of the institute realise the wrongdoings their forefathers did to the untouchables. As he wrote once: 'Reservations for the low caste in colleges is a very unfair system. To compensate let us offer the Brahmins the right to be treated as animals for 3000 years and at the end of it lets give them a 15% reservation.—Vallampuri John'.³⁴² On another occasion he wrote: 'A greater crime than the Holocaust was untouchability. Nazis have paid the price but the Brahmins are still reaping the rewards for torturing others.'³⁴³ And in his trickery he attributed this statement to the renowned scientist Albert Einstein.

Later in the story a minister narrated an incident from his childhood in his speech which drew attention of the audience to the prevalent caste discrimination in the society. He informed that he was tied to a tree by some Brahmin priests as he committed a crime by entering a temple. But Ayyan noticed that the minister skipped how he turned into a politician from a thug, and from a 'coordinator of freelance goons', that how he used the enraged Dalit youth to make personal profit both economically and politically. The portrayal of this vile politician by the author is selective in nature which indicates his *savarna* gaze, a gaze which typically perceives a Dalit politician to be only as a leader who indulges only in his own interests and ambition, completely neglecting the interests of the Dalit communities. The author considers the Dalits'

³⁴¹ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 82.

³⁴² Joseph, *Serious Men*, 98.

³⁴³ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 92.

acquired right to be touched by the upper castes as a fellow human being to be useless. The author undermines the social implication of the meaningless right, and only values the economic prosperity of the Dalits. As he viewed through Ayyan's eyes: 'The Untouchables, in modern times, had won the useless right of being touched by the high caste, but they remained the poorest in the city.'³⁴⁴ Ayyan was well-aware of the deep-rooted casteism inherent in the minds of these Brahmin astronomers. How much these astronomers are casteist as well as misogynist to the core are revealed in their conversation. Nambodri mocks at Ayyan's claim that the latter's IQ is 148, arguing that if Dalits can have that level of IQ, they would not have asked for reservations from the government. Professor Jal has an objection to the manner of Ayyan's talking. As he said, 'I can't believe this. That's what happens when you put someone who is meant to clean toilets in a white-collar job.'³⁴⁵ Nambodri even goes to the extent of claiming that the intellectual inferiority of the Dalits can be confirmed on biological grounds. As he remarks, 'If there are clear morphological characteristics that are defined by the genes, obviously even intellectual traits are decided that way.'³⁴⁶ Nambodri in a similar vein attributed this intellectual inferiority to women, who are also historically subjugated in the male-dominated society for centuries.

Ayyan is smart enough to record the conversation in his Dictaphone and smarter enough to inform the peons of the Institute, who are also from low-caste communities, about the rancour and prejudices nurtured by the Brahmins and other high castes. Ayyan translates some portions of the conversation into Marathi for their convenience, and inform them that 'you are black because your parents were black. They are saying that you are dumb because your parents were dumb. And the Brahmins are smart because their parents were smart. And they are saying about

³⁴⁴ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 280.

³⁴⁵ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 294.

³⁴⁶ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 294.

me that I am only fit to be a toilet-cleaner because I am a Dalit.’³⁴⁷ This very conversation of the high-caste scientists instigates the peons so much that one of them spit into the coffee prepared for these casteist scientists.

In his take on the treatment of the characters, Manu Joseph clarifies, ‘Indian writers in English usually take a very sympathetic and compassionate view of the poor, and I find that fake and condescending.’³⁴⁸ He adds,

It’s a class thing...Most Indian readers of literary fiction written in English are of a certain class, and one of the recreations of the Indian upper class is compassion for the poor. I think the poor in India are increasingly very empowered, and the time has come when the novel can portray them in a more realistic way. Ayyan is still an underdog but that is due to his circumstances, not due to his intellect or aspirations.³⁴⁹

K. Purushotham’s article “Imagined Dalitness: Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men*”³⁵⁰, which problematically categorizes Joseph’s *Serious Men* as Dalit writing in English, discusses whether the novel represents the Dalits in a way that furthers the understanding of Dalits’ subjugation and their struggle for emancipation, and also whether the caste question has been reduced to an exotica. K. Purushotham evaluates Joseph’s novel under the yardstick of Dalit aesthetics. The portrayals of the Dalit characters are, according to the author, stereotypical and devoid of agency. It is found that rather than showcasing the systematic, institutionalised exploitation of the Dalits, the novelist focuses on the human vices of his protagonist as the cause of his downfall. More than attacking the structural problems of caste systems, he highlights the human limitations of the Dalit character.

³⁴⁷ Joseph, *Serious Men*, 295.

³⁴⁸ “Manu Joseph’s controversial tale of caste wins Indian literary prize,” *The Guardian*, 2 Nov 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/nov/02/manu-joseph-india-serious-men>

³⁴⁹ “Manu Joseph’s controversial tale of caste wins Indian literary prize.”

³⁵⁰ K. Purushotham, “‘Imagined Dalitness’: Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men*”, *Literary Vibes* IV, no. 1 (Jan 2015): 1-8.

The novelist in an interview informs ‘when Mani first formed in my head, he was just the same but he was not a Dalit. He had this anger and a comical interpretation of the modern world and modern women and science and everything around him. But he was not a Dalit. Then I asked myself, why is he so angry, can I give him a justification? And the idea of a Dalit male who is trying to create from thin air the first Dalit boy genius just fascinated me.’³⁵¹ S. Anand points out the context which provides the author impetus to such kind of Dalitness when he argues, ‘Mani’s specific kind of imagined ‘Dalitness’ is clearly a by-product of the post-Mandal anti-reservation rage of the upper classes of India, represented with deep sympathy by the Brahmin-controlled media.’³⁵² That the novelist’s major focus is not on the caste question or on the Dalitness of his protagonist is evident from his following statement: ‘But yes, I am surprised that everybody seems to be talking about the fact that Mani is a Dalit while I think that is the least important detail of the novel.’³⁵³ Joseph emphasizes the class of his protagonist rather than his caste. Through the portrayal of a scheming, shrewd, cunning, opportunistic Ayyan Mani, who is a Dalit by birth, throughout the novel, Joseph makes his point clear that given the scope, opportunity, and privilege a Dalit or any man from lower class can develop vile characteristic traits or he or she can be as cunning, shrewd or opportunistic as a man from the upper caste or upper class can. He is critical of the conventional sympathetic approach of the writers in dealing with the Dalit characters in their works. He does not delve into or present a coherent understanding of the structural nuances of the hierarchical caste system. Instead, he treats his protagonist who belongs to a low-caste community as a representative of the economically weaker section, a treatment

³⁵¹ Cited in S. Anand, “Lighting Out for the Territory: The arduous journey of modern Dalit literature,” *The Caravan*, 1 Feb 2011, <https://caravanmagazine.in/essay/lighting-out-territory>

The arduous journey of modern Dalit literature

³⁵² S. Anand, “Lighting Out for the Territory: The arduous journey of modern Dalit literature”, 2011.

³⁵³ Cited in “I don’t see pure milk-and-honey goodness in the poor,” *rediff.com*, July 27, 2010, <https://news.rediff.com/report/2010/jul/27/an-interview-with-novelist-manu-joseph.htm>

which is problematic. Although the writer showcases the grudges of a Dalit against his fellow Brahmins to a certain extent, he cannot develop his Dalit character into a rebel against the systematic oppression of caste. Rather the socially and economically deprived Dalit character has been reduced to an opportunistic Dalit who is eager just to enjoy the same power and privileges as a Brahmin, who acquires the topmost social position in the hierarchical caste system, or any other dominant caste man does. Joseph's handling of the Dalit protagonist in this novel reflects his own inhibition regarding the reservation policy. He associates the rise of a Dalit man through the reservation policy with the rise of a corrupt man who can go to any extent to accomplish his goal. As per his treatment of the Dalit character in the novel the reservation system can make the Dalits opportunistic.

Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men*: Adaptation of Dalit Aspiration and Assertion

Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020)³⁵⁴ is an adaptation of Manu Joseph's 2010 novel *Serious Men*. The film is about how a Dalit fellow, traumatized in his childhood due to downtrodden socio-economic status, cunningly manipulates situations in favour of his son in a desperate attempt to attain higher social status. Ayyan Mani, a young Dalit fellow, works as a personal assistant to the scientist Dr. Arvind Acharya who is a Brahmin by caste in a research institute of national repute. He realizes the importance of English-medium education to get rid of lower social status. Hence, he tries his best to get his son Adi admitted in a convent school run by the Christian missionaries. He asks for recommendation from his boss Dr. Acharya, who is also an alumnus of that very school, to get his son admitted. Dr. Acharya refuses to give the same on the ground that he recommends only on the basis of merit. In the school, Mani gets irritated when he is asked some questions which are supposed to bear casteist implications. When Mani is asked in

³⁵⁴ *Serious Men*, directed by Sudhir Mishra (2020; Mumbai: Cine Raas Entertainment), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81086997?source=35>.

the admission desk ‘what kind of people are Manis?’ ...what...where are they from?, which is supposed to indicate the enquiry about his caste background, he feels agitated and somewhat furious as he thinks that this is a roundabout way of asking one’s caste. And Mani’s way of responding to the question makes the clerk, who puts these questions before him, uncomfortable. A school is supposed to not look for the background of any student but the clerk’s indirect or casual query about Mani’s surname, which is unfamiliar to him, does not escape Ayyan’s discretion as the latter immediately senses the hidden casteism lurking in the clerk’s casual questioning. And therefore, he expresses his rage but with a certain degree of politeness, ‘oh, that way. We’re Shudras. Lower caste. Do I tell you?’ The clerk gets unsettled getting such a harsh reply from Mani, and requests Mani to discuss such a sensitive issue there. Ayyan comes to get his son admitted in the school on Dr. Acharya’s recommendation. But his son’s admission is denied. And Ayyan comes to know from the clerk’s telephonic conversation with the Principal that Dr. Acharya did not genuinely recommend Adi’s admission, and that all the admissions should be based on merit, Ayyan feels upset and senses the hypocrisy of the upper caste people like Dr. Acharya who only believe in the idea of merit, ignoring the age-old historical injustice done to the lower castes which kept them at a weaker social position for thousands of years. At the time of leaving the school, Ayyan told the sweeper of the school with whom Ayyan can relate himself as both of them are from the lower strata of society that ‘caste-based reservations should stop. Merit is everything.’ This statement by Ayyan in sarcastic tone expresses his rage against the upper castes’ celebration of the idea of merit and their rant against the caste-based reservation policy.

In his comparative review of the novel and the film, the adapted text and the adaptation respectively, Uday Bhatia remarks:

Manu Joseph's novel is a sly and scabrous work, almost gleeful in its portrayal of Mumbai as a dirty, teeming, unequal, ambitious metropolis. Mishra and his co-writers, Abhijeet Khumaan and Bhavesh Mandalia, greatly condense the book's weakest link—a long B-plot involving institute director Arvind Acharya and his affair with a colleague—and keep the focus on Ayyan and Adi. There is, however, a softening of tone. Mishra said in an interview to Lounge that his is a 'gentler mind' than the one that wrote the book, and though the film is often acerbic, this doesn't ring true. The book resolves its problems with unsentimental manoeuvring on Ayyan's part; the same issues are tackled on a more emotional level in the film.³⁵⁵

Compared to Manu Joseph's 2010 novel *Serious Men* which seems to focus largely on the cunningness of a representative poor Dalit man who can scheme any plan to accomplish success, money or fame, and focus less on the Dalitness of him, Sudhir Mishra's 2020 adaptation *Serious Men* has been turned into a tale of an angry young Dalit and the issue of Dalit assertion and anti-caste politics has found a profoundly considerable space in the film's narrative. One important aspect of anti-caste politics is the incorporation of the Dalit discourse on English as a language for Dalit emancipation. The film provides a legitimate ground to foreground the linguistic politics vis-à-vis English language as part of the larger anti-caste politics. It foregrounds the debate concerning the prioritization of English language over other Indian languages, both as a means of communication and as a medium of instruction in educational institutions. Although the socio-economic or political empowerment forms the centrality in the discourse of all-round development of the underprivileged section, be it women, the blacks or the Dalits (erstwhile 'untouchables'), the linguistic politics adds an important dimension to the discursive space of Dalit politics. Ayyan Mani's declaration to the people of BBD *chawl* (a slum like place of residence) of the redevelopment project gets approved that he will construct a

³⁵⁵ Uday Bhatia, "'Serious Men' review: Lying for a better life," *mint*, 29 Sep, 2020, <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/big-story/world-sleep-day-how-india-s-sleep-debt-is-rising-111679031864185.html>

temple dedicated to the goddess of English is a direct reference to the politics surrounding the construction of a temple of the 'Dalit Goddess English' occurred in Uttar Pradesh in 2010. The Dalit politics over the English language becomes a news when, on 30 April 2010, a bronze idol of Dalit Goddess English measuring 30 inch is installed at Bankagaon village of Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh. (Raghavan 2014) The Nalanda Public School, a private school located in the village, hosted the *shilanyas* or foundation ceremony led by a Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit entrepreneur and columnist. Chandra Bhan Prasad acts as a priest in the ceremony wearing a suit. His self-fashioning is a point to make his politics of preferring English language and culture explicit. Instead of the traditional religious *mantra* (hymn), the letters 'A-B-C-D' of the English alphabet is chanted. A song composed by the teachers of the school is performed. Raghavan also mentions that around 1500 local Dalits pledge to learn and worship the English language as their goddess. The politics behind this entire event is to make the Dalits aware of the importance of English language in the life of the Dalits, what changes it can bring forth in the Dalit life-world if the Dalits consider it as a vehicle of emancipation. As Prof. Ganvir records the reason behind this event,

Indian Outcastes put faith in English. Dalits are building a temple in the honour of the language, as they believe that it can liberate them from the oppression of the caste system. The legacies that India had inherited from the British Raj are: English and Western Education. Six years on Pro-English campaigns from the two-million strong Dalits from the community of the Oppressed classes of the traditional religions have gone a step further and are erecting a black granite temple dedicated to the Goddess English hailing her as a deity of liberation from poverty, ignorance and Oppression.' She is modelled on the statue of liberty, holding aloft a pen and Indian Constitution and her pedestal is not the usual lotus, but a computer monitor' said an English teacher, Amarchand Jaubar, supervising the temple's construction.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁶ Cited in Veena R Ilame, "The English Language as an Instrument of Dalit Emancipation," *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (July-August, 2020), 1001, <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.54.25>

Posing English as an alternative to the prejudiced native languages, Prasad argues,

...Goddess English is all about emancipation. It is a mass movement against the caste order, against local languages. Indian languages are more about prejudices, discrimination and hatred and less about expressions and communications...English speaking Dalits/ Adivasis are less disrespected. Empowered by Goddess English, Dalits can emancipate from all caste-based occupations. There has been no caste without an occupational identity, and vice versa. Occupation-caste linkage being the lifeline of the caste order, emancipation from all caste-based occupation will cause enduring emancipation of Dalits.³⁵⁷

Prasad also goes on to declare 25th October as English Day in a ceremony in New Delhi, which is the birthday of Macaulay, the British official who consolidated English education in India through his policies known as the 'Macaulay Minutes' of 1835. Such political and cultural expression of the Dalits to see a liberating force in English language and deification of the language is not new to their anti-caste politics.

The legacy of such acts can be traced back to Savitribai Phule's veneration of English language as a mother recorded in her 1859 poem entitled "Mother English". In her poem, Phule has invoked 'mother English' to rescue the downtrodden untouchables from the clutches of caste system. It is noteworthy to mention the contribution of Savitribai Phule and her husband Jyotiba Phule as the pioneering figures in spreading the need of education especially for girls. They establish school for girls in Pune. In fact, they are credited with establishing the first school for girls in Pune in 1848. Although they face backlash and humiliation from the upper castes for taking this initiative, they continue their activism for spreading education among those sections of society who are denied the basic right to education. They also establish schools for the children hailing from the low-caste and untouchable communities.

³⁵⁷ Cited in Vellikkeel Raghavan, "On Worshipping English, the Dalit Goddess: MANU, MISSIONARY, MACAULAY, AND THE MARKET," in *English in the Dalit Context*, edited by Alladi Uma, K. Suneetha Rani and D. Murali Manohar (Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2014), 125-47.

Comparing English language to the ‘milk of lioness’ Ambedkar also advocates English as a medium of instruction in schools and colleges. He comments during an interview on July 3, 1953 at Aurangabad, ‘I think no other language in India including Hindi can be used instead of English in schools and colleges’.³⁵⁸

Mani’s attempt to write his application to Dr. Aravind Acharya for paternity leave in impeccable English selecting the standard words from dictionary or his endeavour to get his son admitted in an elite English medium school is representative of the Dalits’ long-cherished penchant for English education which is a key to upward mobility in a globalized capitalist modern life-world. Reiterating the emancipatory characteristic of English language in the Dalit context, Mogalli Ganesh, who prioritizes the cause of English education for the Dalits, argues,

...For marginalized communities the only access to education has been through modernity. In spite of its late arrival, the awareness it has created has been momentous. English education, by showing the Dalits a glimpse of the wider world, pointed to a new possibility of liberation... What was a weapon of the state and the means of colonial exploitation was a boon as far as the Dalits were concerned. Brahmanical communities have used modern English education for their cultural revival. The lower castes have avoided this and their quest has been different... For whom is English, and globalization shaped by English, harmful? Ambedkar’s success in fashioning a vocabulary of liberation for the Dalits, in English, is one of the most significant milestones of the century... The fact that English destroys native languages should be juxtaposed with the fact that it is the Dalits who need English the most. In fact, Dalits should be given English education as a matter of priority.³⁵⁹

Kancha Ilaiah, one of the leading Dalit intellectuals, and an ardent advocate of English education for the Dalits, argues, while commenting on the central government’s decision to introduce English teaching from class one in the government schools in 2011,

³⁵⁸ Jagath Jayaprakash, “Never Abandon English: Thoughts by Ambedkar,” *Indus Scrolls*, June 29, 2022, <https://indusscrolls.com/never-abandon-english-thoughts-by-ambedkar>

³⁵⁸ Jagath Jayaprakash, “Never Abandon English: Thoughts by Ambedkar.”

³⁵⁹ Rajendra Chenni, “Struggles over the Sign: Discourses on English,” in *English in the Dalit Context*, edited by Alladi Uma, K. Suneetha Rani and D. Murali Manohar (Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2014), 44.

The recent decision of the Central government to introduce English teaching from class one in all government schools will enable all the lower castes of India are going to enter into a new phase of English education. Though this method of English teaching does not take the dalit-bahujan and minority community children to the level of convent educated upper castes, it makes a new beginning of dreaming for egalitarian education in future.³⁶⁰

Politicizing the Mythical Past in *Teesri Aazadi* from Dalit Perspective

Jabbar Patel's 2006 independent Hindi film *Teesri Aazadi* (literally, Third Independence)³⁶¹ was not released on theatre. It was released on YouTube. The film created huge controversy and made headlines the moment it got released. The CD of the film was banned by the Government due to the contentious issue the film portrays. It was alleged that the film negatively portrayed the Hindu gods, myths and epics deemed sacred by the Hindus. Therefore, such representation amounted to hurting the sentiments of people who followed Hindu religion. A Member of Parliament (MP) of the ruling Party, i.e., Bahujan Samajwadi Party, of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, was accused of distributing the CD. But the BSP government dismissed the charge as baseless, and denies any kind of association of her party with filmmaking or distribution of the CD. As Mayawati, the Chief Minister of the then Uttar Pradesh, who was fondly called "Behenji" (dear sister) by her supporters, claimed, 'neither my government, nor the Bahujan Samaj Party has anything to do with the CD.' (2013) One news channel made the Dr Ambedkar Samaj Sudhar Samiti (Dr Ambedkar Social Reformation Organization), a UP based political organization, responsible for making this contentious film and distributing it throughout the state and other parts of the country.³⁶² The news channel also claimed that Lalmani Prasad, the BSP

³⁶⁰ Kancha Ilaiah, "Dalits and English," *Deccan Herald*, 14 Feb 2011, <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/137777/dalits-english.html>.

³⁶¹ *Teesri Aazadi*, directed by Jabbar Patel (2006; Lord Communication), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wM98m3mkS1w>.

³⁶² "Anti-Brahmin CD rocks UP government," *DNA*, Nov 19, 2013, <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-anti-brahmin-cd-rocks-up-government-1155786>

MP from Basti, was associated with the circulation of the CD and that he was also a member of the aforesaid organization. In his defence, Prasad stated, 'I was a member of the samiti a long time ago. But after I joined the BSP, I have had no contact with it.'³⁶³

The film is an adaptation of select episodes from the ancient *puranas* or myths, and the ancient epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The film describes the Aryans as invaders who destroyed the egalitarian social relations prevailed among the *adivasis* or indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent and turned the latter into their slaves through devising the four-fold *varna* system. The film is also a critique of the *Dashavatar* myth according to which the Hindu god Lord Vishnu takes *avatar* or incarnation in different forms and appears to ensure the victory of the good over the evil. These *avatars* include Matsyavatar, Varahavatar, Kurmavatar, Parshuram, Narasimhavatar, Vamanavatar, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki.

The narrator upholds a vivid portrayal of the life of the Mulnivasis (indigenous people) through his commentary. The narrator describes how the culture and civilization developed by the Mulnivasis was the most progressive one of the then world before the Aryans invaded it. The civilization was built on the bank of the river Sindhu (Indus) and disseminated across the country called Bharatbhumi or the land called India. The land was full of greenery, and characterized by agricultural growth. In every field, the civilization made the prosperity possible. In this civilization, every human was independent to choose the ways of their lives, they followed the ideal of equality, earn their livelihood through proper business and trade, and art of music, dancing etc. were highly encouraged. In a nutshell, the Mulnivasis would lead a happy, prosperous, and most importantly, an egalitarian life. They are seen in the film to enjoy their life and indulged in merry-making through their music and dances.

³⁶³ "Anti-Brahmin CD rocks UP government," *DNA*, Nov 19, 2013.

The Mulnavasi life-world was completely demolished after the Aryan invasion. The Aryans deprived the non-Aryans from their basic human rights of acquiring education, property and wealth. They wrote down religious scriptures and inserted rigorous penal codes in the scriptures for the non-Aryans to serve their own interests. The film opens with such brutal assaults unleashed by the Aryans who set the houses, farm lands of the Mulnavasi communities on fire, and as the narrator and commentator of the film describes, destroyed the well-built well-planned civilization of the Mulnavasis, plundered their resources and property, demolished their art, architecture and sculpture, captivated and assaulted the women, and disrupted the entire life-world of the Mulnavasis. The narrator goes on to describe that the inhabitants who did not obey the Aryans or rebelled against them got their heads chopped off, and this was how the Aryans succeeded in establishing a new regime of the high-caste and the low-caste. The Anaryas, the Mulnavasis were captivated and labelled as ‘Rakshasas’ or demons, and the independent Mulnavasis were turned into slaves by the Aryans. These Mulnavasi-turned-slaves come to be called Shudra and continue to serve the Aryans as their slaves. The narrator commented that the popular myth of Lord Vishnu appearing in the material world in various avatars or incarnations to protect the dharma, supposed to mean protect the ideal of justice or prevent the degeneration of society into *adharma* or anarchy or unjust social order, is principally, in disguise, to protect the Brahmins from any crisis or defeat from the Anaryas or Mulnavasis. Constructing the myth of the avatar of Lord Vishnu, therefore, is, as per the conspiracy theory, nothing but the conspiracy of the Brahmins to maintain their dominance. Through the conspiracy of this myth, the Aryans succeeded in killing the powerful Shudra kings and usurping their thrones. The Aryans also dismantled the revolt of the Anaryas through devising the principle of *saam-daam-dand-bhed* (roughly translating, appreciation-pay-punishment-divide, implying by any and all means). With the help of the myths, the Brahmins protect their supremacy through inducing the fear of

fictional gods in the minds of common people. The entire myth of *avatar* has been constructed in the *purana* to maintain the Chaturvarna system in every epoch. According to the myth of the Ramavatar, Lord Vishnu assumes the earthly avatar of Rama in order to ensure victory of the good over the evil. The battle between the good force and evil force has been projected through the battle between the Rama, the king of Ayodhya and Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. The film narrates an episode from the legend of Rama in which king Rama killed a Shudra sage Shambuka to restore *varna* system in the land. The film, then, questions the attempt of the *savarna* Hindus to appropriate Buddha into the Hindu fold through claiming him to be the ninth avatar of Lord Vishnu.

The narrator now intervenes into the Hindu *puranas* or mythologies in order to convey how these *puranas* or myths have been constructed by the Brahmins to serve and protect their own interests and maintain their social supremacy. The narrator particularly explained the myth of *avatarvad* or *Dashavatar* narrated in the *puranas*, and put the narratives about it into question. According to the Hindu myth of *avatar*, whenever there arises a crisis brought in by some evil force which puts the *dharma* (righteousness) of mankind into danger, Lord Vishnu, who is considered to be the Preserver of the Universe in Hindu religion, appears in the material world in various avatars or incarnations to protect the *dharma* or righteousness.

The disclaimer of the film addresses the issues like why the lower castes were tagged as ‘untouchables’ or ‘Shudra’ or what their sin was for being victimized and dehumanized for centuries. The film also traces the root of the caste system through the sacred texts of the Hindu religion.

The narrator commented on how the myth of the avatar of Lord Vishnu³⁶⁴ developed. He informed that it was the evil design propagated by the Brahmins to ensure their ideological control over the lower castes.

The narrator of the film claims that the Matsyavatar myth of Vishnu incarnating as a fish to save humanity from flood and to kill an Asura named Hygro is actually nothing but a conspiracy to defeat the progressive Dravidian civilization. According to the film, Vishnu's advent as a kurma (tortoise) in the Kurmavatar myth is to ensure the Aryan's compromising act in the form of a treaty with the Asura king, and it is this treaty which later gets popularized as 'samudra manthan' (churning of the sea to extract nectar) in the *puranas*. Next incarnation of Lord Vishnu is that of a Varaha or boar. As the film claims, it is to kill the Asura king Hiranyaksh and capture his kingdom that Varahavatar myth is constructed. The film shows how the Narasimhavatar myth in which Vishnu incarnated as a half-man-half-lion is devised to cover up the conspiracy of the Aryans to kill the powerful Asura king Hiranyakashipu. Vamanavatar, the fifth avatar of Lord Vishnu was Lord Vishnu's incarnation as a dwarf. According to the Hindu myth, this incarnation of Lord Vishnu was a conspiracy against the Asura king Mahabali. According to the film, as the Aryans were incapable of defeating the powerful king Bali, they constructed the myth of Vamanavatar. The Parasurama incarnation of Vishnu in the form of a man holding an axe in his hand appeared to ensure the victory of the Brahmins over the Kshatriyas in the clash between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. Vishnu came as Parasurama to ethnic cleansing of the Kshatriyas. As per the film, this clash was nothing but a result of the four-fold *varna* system devised by the Aryans after defeating King Bali. In the myth of Ramavatar

³⁶⁴ In one of my previously published articles related to this thesis, I have elaborated the construction of the myth of avatar of Lord Vishnu, and the subversion of the same from Dalit perspective in greater detail. See Sumit Rajak, "Castigating the Hindu Myth or Constructing the Dalit Myth?: Understanding the Re-telling of the Myth of Dashavatar in TeesriAazadi," *Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal* 12, no. 2 (2022): 1-10.

Vishnu incarnates as King Rama to defeat the evil force. The evil force comes in the form of the *Rakshasa* king Ravana who has to be defeated by Rama. The film shows how Rama who is deified by the people of Hindu religion as the epitome of good virtues killed the Shudra sage Shambuka just because the latter became a learned person despite being a Shudra. As per the varna system, the Shudras were not entitled to get education. So, as a king Rama killed Shambuka to maintain the Hindu social order. The narrator of the film also mocks Rama's act of killing Bali through guise like a coward, and his act of insulting his wife Sita who is compelled to undergo *agnipariksha*, walking on flamed pyre to prove her chastity. Thus the film critiques the myth of Ramavatar which valorises the Kshatriya king Rama. In its narration of Buddha, the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the film informs how Buddha's teachings made people aware of the tyranny of the *varna* system, and how it preached the principle of equality. The film shows how the Brahmins ruthlessly exterminated the Buddhist monks, their disciples, and burnt the books containing Buddha's teachings to maintain the supremacy of the Brahmins. Buddha's teachings fundamentally opposed the Hindu social order which was premised upon the principle of inequality and discrimination. Therefore, the film puts question on the Hindu priests' claim that Buddha was an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, thereby appropriating him into the fold of Hindu religion.

The film also shows the contentious Eklavya-Dronacharya episode from *The Mahabharata*. The film narrates how Eklavya, who hails from a low-caste community, is discriminated by guru Dronacharya. Eklavya's skill in archery excels that of Arjuna. Eklavya is discouraged by Dronacharya, whom the former considers his guru, to pursue archery because as a low-caste fellow the former has no right to learning. In order to ensure that Eklavya can not

surpass Arjun in archery, Dronacharya asks from Eklavya his thumb as his *gurudakshina*³⁶⁵. This is an exemplary case from the ancient epic of how Dalits have been discriminated by the high castes in terms of securing their emancipation.

This is how the film politicizes the mythical past in which the myths or epics are written to ensure the dominance of the Brahmins and other higher *varnas* over the low *varna* and untouchables.

Spectre of Ambedkar

Ravi Shinde in an online magazine article “Lights, camera, caste – An Ambedkar photo made it to Bollywood after 38 yrs of independence”³⁶⁶ claims that it takes 38 years after India’s independence from the British Empire for Bollywood to put a portrait of Ambedkar in the backdrop of a scene. In this context he also notes the statement of the renowned Tamil Dalit filmmaker Pa Ranjith who puts immense importance on the backdrop of a scene, ‘the backdrop is everything... they tell the story of the people living there. Every backdrop has a story behind it and I believe it contributes immensely.’³⁶⁷ (Shinde) Shinde has discussed how Bollywood has side-lined the issue of acknowledging Ambedkar through its films. It has not even considered even a portrait of Ambedkar worth hanging in the backdrop of a scene. As he argues, ‘For years, Dr B.R. Ambedkar was treated like an ‘untouchable’ by the casteist filmmakers of Bollywood. Forget about the foreground, he was erased from even the backdrop of scenes for a long time.’

³⁶⁵ See footnote 94.

³⁶⁶ Ravi Shinde, “Lights, camera, caste – An Ambedkar photo made it to Bollywood after 38 yrs of independence,” *The Print*, 9 Aug 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/lights-camera-caste-an-ambedkar-photo-made-it-to-bollywood-after-38-yrs-of-independence/478068/>

³⁶⁷ Ravi Shinde, “Lights, camera, caste – An Ambedkar photo made it to Bollywood after 38 yrs of independence,” 2020.

(Shinde) It is the other way around of not acknowledging Ambedkar's contribution as a social reformer on the part of Bollywood through its films. However, things start changing in the recent past after an uprising of anti-caste Ambedkarite politics, the emergence of Dalit Literature and the subsequent upsurge of Dalit Cinema. The recurrent use of Ambedka's portrait, statue, his works as crucial narrative element in Dalit Cinema has popularized and accelerated the spectre of Ambedkar to be used in the films repeatedly. It has changed Bollywood's approach to Ambedkar and his politics also. In *200 Halla Ho* Ambedkar has been invoked repeatedly throughout the film. After the summon of the police officer, the camera foregrounds a bust of Ambedkar, the iconic anti-caste crusader who works enormously throughout his life for the social, political, cultural and economic emancipation of the Dalits, and no woman moves from their collective group. The bust of Ambedkar is significantly foregrounded to suggest Ambedkar's historic call for the Dalits to 'Educate, agitate and organise', the clarion call he expressed at the All India Depressed Classes conference in July, 1942 in Nagpur. Later again in the film when Dr. Dangre goes through spiritual crisis after visiting the Dalit women in jail and introspects that as a judge he has done nothing for the Dalits, he takes resort to a portrait of Dr. Ambedkar, and confesses that due to the tag of 'celebrated Dalit judge', he had forgotten Ambedkar's words expressed to Gandhiji 'I have no homeland', implying that the Dalits have no country of their own. Again, Dangre's complete faith in the Constitution of which the principal architect was Ambedkar himself makes Ambedkar's presence felt in the film.

The film *Article 15* tries to contextualize the title of the film with the camera showing a statue of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar (with the Constitution in his hand), the Chairman of the Drafting Committee in the Constituent Assembly and the principal architect of the Constitution of India. The order of Ayan Ranjan, the Additional Superintendent of Police, to paste in the notice board and the walls of the locality the printed copy on which the provision of Article 15 of

the Constitution is boldly written to make the local villagers aware of the constitutional provision of the Article 15, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, creed or religion, is to make Ambedkar's Constitution effective. Nagraj Manjule's film *Jhund* also portrays a large portrait of Ambedkar during a song. It is to be noted that Manjule uses this frame on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti celebration by the local slum-dwellers. A song in celebration of Ambedkar's birthday is new to the Bollywood filmmaking. Apart from delivering Ambedkar's message, featuring such kind of celebration of rituals surrounding Ambedkar is first of its kind in a mainstream 'masala' movie. Celebration of the Hindu festivals like the Ganapati utsav (celebration of Lord Ganesha's birthday), Krishna Janmashtami on the occasion of Lord Krishna's birthday, Durga worshipping is not infrequent in Hindi films. But featuring celebration of the birthday of a Dalit icon in a Hindi film is something the spectators of Hindi films are not familiar with. In Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya: the Royal Guard* also the high-ranked Dalit police officer Pannalal Chauhar warns the influential feudal lord, who tries to insult him through using the officer's caste name 'Chauhar' derogatively, taking resort to the Constitution principally framed by Ambedkar. In Sudhir Mishra's film adaptation *Serious Men* the wall-hanging portraits, photo of Ambedkar have been foregrounded a number of times. Adi has been compared with Ambedkar by a local Dalit leader Keshav Dhavre. Ambedkar's name has been mentioned in a speech also. When Adi's admission has been denied in an elite English medium school even after Dr. Arvind Acharya's recommendation, and Ayyan comes to know that even Dr. Acharya is obsessed with the idea of merit like the average upper-caste people, he passes a sarcastic comment, 'caste-based reservation should stop. Merit is everything.' This implies Ayyan's rant against the upper-caste people's obsession with meritocracy and ignoring the importance of caste-based reservation as well as social justice. It is to meet this purpose of social justice that Ambedkar fought for caste-based reservation and incorporated it in the Constitution.

Ambedkar's portrait is again foregrounded in the film when Anuja Dhavre discusses the matter of redevelopment project. Jabbar Patel's *Teesri Aazadi* which is explicitly based on the Ambedkarite politics portrays his leading role in the historical events like the Kalaram Temple Entry movement and the Manusmriti Dahan (burning of Manusmriti).

Sanjiv Jaiswal's *Quota-the Reservation* is replete with the frames featuring Ambedkar's portrait and statue. The portrait is found in the room of Rajsekhar, the Dalit activist, in the office of the liaison officer of the college and other places with Ambedkar's words inscribed on it. Saurabh, the Dalit student from Chamar caste, whose dream to become a doctor has been shattered due to institutional caste discrimination and humiliation is found to break down in front of a statue of Ambedkar where he tenders apology to the Dalit icon for his decision to commit suicide. The framing of the agitation of the Dalit students' organization, the Ambedkar Students Organization with its banner on demand of justice for Saurabh is something unprecedented in the history of Hindi cinema. The film also frames photos of the Dalit students who committed suicide due to caste-based discrimination in the educational institutes at the end of the movie to remind the audience of the caste violence in the higher education sector.

This recurrent use of cinematic frames featuring photo, portrait, statue, books, activities or celebration of the birthday of the most influential anti-caste social crusader, namely, Ambedkar, who is a fierce critic of the Hindu religion, philosophy of Hinduism, Hindu social order, Hindu mythology, in a film narrative is not only uncharacteristic of the mainstream Hindi films but also counter-intuitive in nature. In this respect, the overwhelming presence of Ambedkar in cinematic frames may appear to be a haunting spectre of Ambedkar for a film industry which is largely fraught with the frames of Hindu gods and goddesses. This is how the increasing use of the image of Ambedkar as a metaphor in the contemporary Hindi films has been historically contextualised by the rise of anti-caste politics and the emergence of Dalit Cinema.

Conclusion: From Caste to Anti-caste

This study has carefully examined the question of representation of caste in select Hindi films with special reference to select film adaptations along with their corresponding source texts. For this purpose I have organized the study in certain stages. After introducing the subject of my study, I have divided the study into four chapters. In the “Introduction” I have discussed the rise of films on caste from anti-caste perspective in the recent past. I have elucidated the institution of caste from the perspective of various schools of thought. The approaches of the Colonial historiography, nationalist historiography, and Marxist historiography to caste have been discussed to a considerable extent. I have also noted how the institution of caste has been interpreted from Dalit perspective. I have reviewed the literature available on the representation of caste question in films and related issues to find the relevance of these studies to my topic. Some of the studies I have reviewed are Bharati P. Falari’s Ph.D. thesis ‘Literature to Films: A Study of Select Women Protagonists in Hindi Cinema’ (2013), Shoma A. Chaterji’s work *The Cinema of Bimal Roy: An ‘Outsider’ Within* (2017), Manoj Kumar’s article “Portrayal of Voiceless in Cinema and Literature” (2014), Nishat Haider’s article “In quest of a comparative poetics: a study of *Sadgati*” (2016), Vishal Chauhan’s article “From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit representation in popular Hindi cinema” (2019) and so on. I have noted the research gaps in these studies and tried to address the same in my study. The aims and objectives of the study have also been laid down. The rationale behind taking this study has been explained. I have also elaborated how the multidisciplinary approach has been adopted in this study. In “Chapter 1” I have situated the caste question vis-à-vis literary texts and film texts. I have categorically

introduced how caste has been portrayed in the literary texts written by the upper-caste writers, and how Dalit Literature as a literary canon constructs counter-narrative to such representation of caste. I have also enlisted the Hindi films which deal with the representation of caste, and briefly discussed how the Dalit filmmakers and critics critique such representation. I have also discussed the arrival of Dalit Cinema which portrays caste in the films from anti-caste perspective.

Through analysing some of the films I have explored the new aesthetics and anti-caste politics central to Dalit Cinema. In “Chapter 2” I have analysed select Hindi films ranging from 1930s to the present day and examined how caste has traditionally been represented in these films. In most of these films the practice of caste and untouchability has been treated as an aberration, as an evil practice which has to be reformed. The Dalit characters have been represented mostly as victimized, exploited, submissive, and without a sense of agency. In “Chapter 3” the portrayal of caste has been discussed exclusively in select film adaptations and their source texts. In the process I have tried to understand how the visual politics of caste adds as well as erases the nuances of caste portrayed in the source texts through reading the scenes, dialogues or characters in the film texts. In “Chapter 4” the ideological shift in the representation of caste in recent Hindi films as well as film adaptations has been traced. The chapter has explored the anti-caste rhetoric and elements in these films. The chapter has explored how the Hindi films are increasingly turning away from the stereotypical representation of caste and turning towards the Ambedkarite anti-caste politics in addressing the caste question. Even the film adaptations also are adding anti-caste politics in the narrative which is absent or not adequately portrayed in their respective source texts. In this chapter, after briefly discussing how the upper-caste gaze and notional existence of caste is contrasted by the anti-caste gaze in recent films, I have noted down the major findings in my research.

Upper-Caste Gaze and the Notional Existence of Caste

India is a country with a long heritage of rich literature produced in innumerable languages. Full of resources, the country has never exhausted issues or elements to produce literature. Few things are there which have never been dealt with by the writers of various ages across the country. The issues ranging from the political conflicts among the empires to an otherwise insignificant domestic affair have been dealt with in poetry, prose, essay, drama, novel, short story or any form of literature oftentimes with philosophical insights. But, in the discussion of understanding Dalitness or Dalit consciousness or anti-caste sensibilities of a cultural text, what has turned out to be more significant question in the contemporary political development of anti-caste struggle than that of the representation of an issue in a cultural text is the identity of the writer who represents the issue, and most importantly, how an issue has been represented in that particular cultural text. These are the questions which require to be addressed while discussing a topic like representation of caste in literature or any cultural text.

As Indian society follows the diktats of the caste system for centuries, and the right to education was exclusively concentrated to the Brahmin and other upper castes only, the resources to produce mainstream literature were hijacked by these castes, especially the Brahmins. Until the recent emergence of some Dalit writers, the domain of mainstream literature in India was almost entirely occupied by the writers hailing from the upper-caste communities. The similar case occurred in the domain of film until the emergence of Dalit Cinema at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Therefore, treatment and representation of an issue related to Dalit life-world or caste question in literary texts and film texts by the upper-caste writers and upper-caste filmmakers have always been put to question by the Dalit writers, filmmakers and critics. In most of the cases, the filmmakers or the film industry itself prefer to remain silent on

the issue of caste. The act of remaining silent on the part of the privileged castes on caste question has been considered by the Dalit scholars as well-crafted way of supporting the system. As pointed out by Yengde, 'By choosing to remain silent, the dominant castes effectively practise a thinly veiled 'caste terrorism' by pleading 'ignorance' over caste issues. This 'ignorance' is practised, it is intentional to not have to face up to reality and instead continue living in a cocooned world.'³⁶⁸ Although the upper-caste writers who deal with a caste issue oftentimes remain sympathetic to the Dalit cause, what needs to be examined is their perspective, viewpoints, ways of seeing a phenomenon in the Dalit life-world, i.e., their gaze. Not only of the writers, but the gaze of the filmmakers, painters, patrons of fine arts of the non-Dalit backgrounds can also be carefully examined to understand their treatment of a particular issue related to Dalit life-world.

Gaze is theoretically understood to be the act of unconscious interpretation of the visual representations in cultural texts. Gaze theory is instrumental in understanding the visual depiction of objects, persons, events or incidents in certain cultural texts like painting, photograph, film, graphic novels etc. In feminist discourse, male gaze is a much discussed question which generally refers to the visual depiction of women in the aforesaid cultural texts from a patriarchal, male-chauvinist, hetero-normative perspective which relegates women to objects who are to be looked at by the male artist, the spectators as well as the other participating characters in the cultural text. In India the domain of the mainstream culture is monopolized by the upper-castes, especially the Brahmins, and therefore, it is highly fraught with what is generally referred to as 'upper-caste gaze'. It can be understood to be a particular way of looking at the Dalit or lower-caste characters and their life-worlds in certain cultural texts. The upper-caste artists, along with the upper-caste characters and common spectators, put the gaze on the

³⁶⁸ Suraj Yengde, *Caste Matters*, 10.

Dalit characters and their life-world. Dalits are the objects to be looked at. It is the Dalit life-world which is to be explored and discovered by the upper-caste artists.

As this dissertation deals with some upper-caste filmmakers' treatment of caste issues in their films, other than that of literary artists, it is imperative to understand their gaze while addressing such an issue. A film is formed of images or photographs. The very act of imaging or taking a photograph by camera on the part of the director is so political that it cannot help informing his or her subject position or, so to speak, ideological location. But what is more significant is that what is supposedly invisible in framing an image or taking a photograph. This invisible element is the notional existence of caste. This question of notional existence of caste is what Ambedkar points out when he argues, 'Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind.'³⁶⁹ This idea of notional existence of caste can be read with Amrita Ghosh and Arun Kumar's understanding of caste as habitus. Reflecting on the idea of caste as habitus, Amrita Ghosh and Arun Kumar argue,

Caste is a habitus. It generates certain normative principles and taken-for-granted behaviours that an individual absorbs over time from family, society and the world, and manifests through their body, behaviour and cognitive response. Caste, as an ideology and practice, evolved to divide the human society among the upper three varnas (Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaisyas); "low and inferior" Shudras ("lower castes"); and Atishudras (the outcaste Dalits, whose only existence was to serve the three higher varnas). For social elites, as political scientist Gopal Guru notes, the affirmation of caste brings power, status and ego. But for the others, it brings low-paid, degrading manual labour, along with outcaste status, humiliation and suffering. The job of the caste habitus, then, is to safeguard this division in normal times and times of crises. It normalizes and justifies hierarchy, difference, violence, humiliation and systemic othering of the lower castes and Dalits. This habitus is inculcated from childhood through families, schooling, everyday conversations, conflicts, media, texts, and covert and overt violence.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 68.

³⁷⁰ Amrita Ghosh and Arun Kumar, "Casteism continues to thrive among Indians abroad – through surnames," *Scroll.in*, 28 Aug, 2020, <https://scroll.in/global/970262/casteism-continues-to-thrive-among-indians-abroad-through-surnames>

This question of notional existence of caste is instrumental in understanding the socio-cultural location of the upper-caste non-Dalit filmmakers. Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, Shashank Khaitan, Kalpana Lajmi, Shyam Benegal all the filmmakers whose films have been studied in this thesis hail from a caste location which shapes their outlook in dealing with a caste issue or Dalit cause in their films. They did not undergo the ‘lived experience’ of the Dalits. Their knowledge of caste or Dalits is shaped by what Sarukkai calls ‘experience’, which is contrary to ‘lived experience’. This category of ‘experience’ includes in its schema the choice or freedom to escape the unbearable precarity of Dalit life-world for one who wants to know the Dalits simply or gain knowledge of the precarious existence of Dalit life-world by spending a fair amount of time period with the Dalits in a Dalit habitation. While experiencing the Dalit life, they remain psychologically well-aware of the fact that they have the liberty to leave that world whenever they feel discomfort. The impossibility of undergoing ‘lived experience’ on the part of the upper-caste filmmakers stems from their location in the structure of caste. They, to the best of probability, might become the experiencer of the ‘experience’, not that of the ‘lived experience’. This impossibility of having the ‘lived experience’ fails them in terms of developing Dalit consciousness, understanding Dalit aesthetics, ‘Dalit Love’ (Yangde 2020) and philosophy. Although most of them detest the caste system, they do not go beyond the extent of becoming ‘casteless’, ‘caste apologist’, ‘caste-insensitive’, ‘caste-blind’, or ‘caste-neutral’. As argued by Anwer and Arora,

In a majority of Indian films, caste is invisibilized either through the presentation of upper-caste protagonists as caste-neutral, or through other kinds of obfuscation, such as in the film *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), where the question of gender/women’s vulnerability distracts attention away from the reality of caste.³⁷¹

³⁷¹ Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, “Love, Interrupted: Caste and Couple-Formation in New Bollywood”, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 2021, 4.

Sai Thakur, Byasa Moharana and Rimil Bobonga in their very recent study entitled “Caste and the Culture Industry of Hindi Cinema: From Sairat to Jhund via Jai Bhim” (2022) observe, ‘In India, it is typical of the upper-caste, middle-class people to claim to be “casteless” even as they continue to enjoy all the power and privileges associated with their social locations. The film industry dominated by the upper-caste elite does not want to talk about the realities of castes.’³⁷² The impossibility of undergoing ‘lived experience’ fails them to become an anti-caste. Along with their caste habitus, the prevailing socio-cultural discourse within which they were born and brought up de-prioritized and de-politicized the caste question for them. The ‘nationalist’ Congress leaders, the Indian Communist leaders of the twentieth century generally de-legitimized the primacy of caste. In their ideology caste never featured as the most prominent issue which debilitated India. In the following section I attempt to understand how the prevalent dominant discourse has been instrumental in the formation of their upper-caste gaze. As an example I will illustrate the upper-caste gaze in Satyajit Ray and Bimal Roy’s films in this regard.

The upper-caste gaze in Satyajit Ray’s films is a case in point. Dukhi’s rage in *Sadgati* (1981) is not that of a Dalit rebel but of a mentally exhausted Dalit who prefers to destroy himself to fight the onslaught of caste system. Ray focuses only on the victimization and exploitation of the Dalits. He does not put his gaze on the privileged caste location of the Brahmin priest. Darius Cooper points out how Ray frames Dukhi’s victimization in his film using gaze when argues:

Ray’s camerawork highlights the tanner’s victimization. We see Dukhi constantly passing under two predominant gazes: one of the papier-mache demon Ravana and the other of this village’s flesh-and-blood incarnation of Ravana, the Pandit. Ray adds to this surveillance an additional, ironic twist, as we observe our earthly Ravana lazily relaxing

³⁷² Sai Thakur, Byasa Moharana and Rimil Bobonga, “Caste and the Culture Industry of Hindi Cinema: From Sairat to Jhund via Jai Bhim,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 36 (2022).

on his swing and delivering a lecture on generosity from the Gita to a select group of devotees while, within his own courtyard, a man has been reduced to a beast of burden.³⁷³

Ray's other two films *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1992) and *Kapurush* (The Coward, 1965) can be referred to in this context. Satyajit Ray, who is highly influenced by the Italian neo-realism, poses a liberal-humanist view in interpreting caste in his film *Agantuk*, when his representative character states that he does not obey caste, equating its role with that of religion as a divider of mankind. Ray makes his stand somewhat problematic when his character Bimal Gupta (Haradhan Bannerjee) in *Kapurush* enunciates his view on caste system while offering suggestion to Amitabha Roy (Soumitra Chatterjee) in the following terms, 'Mr. Roy, I can give you a subject for your story. There is a rigid caste system in this area. A manager can socialize only with another manager. I would not have a cup of tea with you if you were the Assistant Manager of our factory. Atkinson, T.D. Chatterjee, Mehra, Teddy Walter...they are of my status. You people follow it.' When Amitabha enquired about whether they had accepted this system, the former replied, 'The British had established it in their 200 years tenure. I cannot break the rule by my 'one man's revolution'...I did not like it in the beginning. But later thought that my life will be easier, smoother if I follow it. I don't think about it now.' When Amitabha put a 'but' to this response of Bimal, he replied with a gesture of reducing the issue to one of laughter, 'Conscience? Mr. Roy, it's very simple. If you have your conscience, you should drown into alcohol.' While Ray is taking a caste-neutralist stand in his disapproval of the caste system in his film *Agantuk*, his knowledge of the system, as informed through his film *Kapurush*, is based on a flawed theory of caste which claims caste to be a colonial construct, a theory which denies the existence of caste in the pre-colonial period, a theory highly contested and refuted by the Dalit scholars as well as prominent non-Dalit theorists of caste. Also the statement 'there is a rigid caste system in this area' is problematic since the speaker is in denial of any existence of caste in

³⁷³ Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 193.

his own locale, i.e., Bengal. This position of the speaker is in congruity with the much hyped myth that caste does not exist in Bengal. While the materiality in terms of the operation of caste system in the region the speaker is talking about is highly acknowledged, the materiality of the same is denied although it exists in the speaker's own locale with its different local character. Bimal Roy was convinced with the dominant discourse that Gandhism is the way through which the problem of caste and untouchability could be redressed. The way Adhir upholds and glorifies the Gandhian outlook to the caste question while imparting the knowledge of history of struggle against casteism and untouchability to Sujata attests to this position of the filmmaker. The dominant discursive faith in Gandhism is further intensified in the film through the symbolic use of the framed image of Gandhi, his statue, the location called Dhobighat (literally, a place at the edge of a pond used to wash clothes by the washermen, a low-caste community traditionally associated with the occupation of washing and ironing clothes) as a place of serenity and peace where the central characters take refuge in the evening. The article "Cinema and Caste: Examining Marginalised Narratives in Film" (2019), published in the section 'engage' of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, discusses how the recent films like *Papilio Buddha* (2013) by Jayan Cherian subvert this way of looking at Gandhian model of dealing with caste question, and stand in stark contrast by revealing the flaws of Gandhism in approaching the caste question, that Gandhism is a failed project in the mission of annihilation of caste.³⁷⁴ As Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Rajesh James are quoted saying in the article:

The film finds triumphalist narratives about Gandhism beguiling the reality of the Dalit experience of social segregation and severe brutality. In ideological terms, the movie exposes how Gandhism implicitly perpetuated and collaborated with caste-based racism...the film appropriates as well as exposes the Gandhian affinity with mainstream Hinduism which treats Dalits as the "other" and, in so doing, *Papilio Buddha* illustrates

³⁷⁴ "Cinema and Caste: Examining Marginalised Narratives in Film," *Economic and Political Weekly* (29 Aug, 2019), <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/cinema-and-caste-article-15-marginalised-film-fandry-sairat>

how the discourse of Gandhism facilitated and promoted a culture of segregation based on caste. Cherian not only dismisses but also contests the idealised and normative image of Gandhi to unmask the racial/caste foundations of Gandhism itself. This view is dramatised towards the end of the film when the Dalit rights activists station a Buddha idol and conclude the meeting by stating that they are not anybody's Harijans.³⁷⁵

Thus, it is the notional existence of caste in the lives of the high-caste filmmakers which put them at the limits of reformism, caste-neutrality, caste apology, and caste blindness.

Critiquing and Reversing the *Savarna* Gaze

The emergence of Dalit Cinema and the subsequent ideological shift in the representation of caste in Hindi films have challenged the *savarna* gaze in making films on Dalits and caste issues.

Harish Wankhede, a noted scholar of Dalit studies, critiques the reformist gaze, which is a dominant gaze with the upper-caste filmmakers dealing with caste question in their films, of the film *Article 15*:

Portraying Dalit subjectivities in a nuanced manner is welcome. However, the reformism of the upper caste elites seems to dictate the actions of Article 15's Dalit characters. They are burdened with sufferings, become part of radical militant outfits or get associated with corrupt political regimes. The Dalit character as an independent hero, who can battle criminal elements without fear, is yet to find a respectable space in mainstream Bollywood films. Dalits are monitored as subaltern subjects who need the upper caste savior.³⁷⁶

Yengde also discusses the institutionalized casteism of the film industry through questioning the institutional integrity of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), the official authority to regulate the cinematic content in India, which often censors the caste-related issue and any film which challenges the status quo, and prevents its release or screening considering it as 'sensitive'. As he argues,

³⁷⁵ "Cinema and Caste: Examining Marginalised Narratives in Film," 2019.

³⁷⁶ Harish Wankhede, "An upper caste gaze," *The Indian Express*, July 16, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/an-upper-caste-gaze-article-15-dalits-bollywood5831109/>

The CBFC has controlled cinematographic creation, production and distribution since its inception; its influence is palpable throughout Indian cinema. Its rules and decisions are made by a few government-appointed members, many of whom are politically connected with or sympathetic to the governing party, and who do not necessarily have any cinematographic expertise.³⁷⁷

It is the Dalit filmmakers who hit the unconscious of the general audience through making movies with anti-caste sensibilities. Manju Edacharia in her article “Anti-caste Sensibilities and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema” discusses the anti-caste sensibilities as deployed in their films by the filmmakers from the Dalit background.

Selvaraj plays with the unconscious feelings of the audience...disturbing and prompting them to think beyond their comfort zones. While Artaud is interested in challenging the unconscious feelings of the audience in order to break notions of false reality, these Dalit directors disturb the unconscious of caste through the use of anti-caste aesthetics. They also look forward to the affective expressive realm of the audience. Their intention is to bring into presence what was previously impossible through the processes of denunciation (of casteist images) and innovation (of anti-caste aesthetics).³⁷⁸

Neeraj Ghaywan, the acclaimed film director of the film *Masaan: Fly away Solo* (2015), also points out the absence of the Dalit gaze in the filmmaking when he claims, in an interview with Rahul Desai, ‘The irony is that this industry is not bigoted or casteist, it’s just that we’re ignorant. People need to acknowledge the gaze is simply absent.’³⁷⁹ It is also to be noted that most of the films dealing substantively with caste question focus on the caste discrimination in rural India, implying the presence of a sanitized, caste-neutral urban space. Manju Edacharia discusses how the filmmakers from Dalit communities are challenging these normative techniques in filmmaking influenced by upper-caste gaze, and creating new grammar of films to

³⁷⁷ Suraj Yengde, “Dalit cinema,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018), 512.

³⁷⁸ Manju Edachira, “Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 55, no. 38 (2020), 50, <http://iisjoa.org/sites/default/files/iisjoa/July%202022/4.pdf>

³⁷⁹ Rahul Desai, “Neeraj Ghaywan on Exploring Caste and Sexuality in His Ajeeb Daastaans Short,” *Filmcompanion.in*, 16 April 2021, <https://www.filmcompanion.in/interviews/bollywood-interview/ajeab-daastaans-netflix-neeraj-ghaywan-on-exploring-caste-and-sexuality-in-his-short-konkona-sen-sharma-aditi-rao-hydari/>

represent Dalit reality and locate the problem of caste in the upper-castes' imagining of social structure: 'Manjule's and Ranjith's experiments with different forms of expression convert lived experience into a narrative that is at once local and universal, yet singular and immanent.'³⁸⁰

Suraj Yengde categorizes these films tinged with Dalit aesthetics as 'Dalit Cinema', which, in keeping with the political spirit of the anti-caste movements, act 'as a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, relating to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, and as a universal monument of time and space.'³⁸¹

In fact, organizing the first ever Dalit Film and Cultural Festival held at New York City, February 23-24, 2019, by the United States Ambedkarites is an epoch-making event in history as it takes the cultural assertion of the Dalit artists one step further at a global stage. The festival features the screening of a number of caste-centric films and interactive sessions among the renowned Dalit filmmakers, artists like Pa Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, Mari Selvaraj, Miss Earth and Niharika Singh, and scholars like Suraj Yengde. It is an initiative on the part of the Dalit intellectuals to claim the cultural platforms historically dominated by the upper castes. It is an initiative to discuss how to weave the counter-narrative into filmmaking in order to visualize normalized caste-insensitivity of caste-ridden society. The sympathetic portrayal of Dalit characters have been discarded in the films made by the Dalit filmmakers. The recent Hindi films on caste issues are increasingly incorporating anti-caste politics. In very recent times, there is a trend of reversing the gaze especially on the part of the filmmakers who hail from Dalit backgrounds. The latest short film *The Discreet charm of the Savarnas* (2020)³⁸² is a case in point. I will end my discussion of this section with briefly pointing out how the reversal of gaze

³⁸⁰ Manju Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 52.

³⁸¹ Suraj Yengde, 503.

³⁸² *The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas*, directed by Rajesh Rajamani (2020; M Jayalakshmi, R Rajamani), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJBkmtpu1sQ&t=23s>

operates in this film. The film is made on the backdrop of a real incident in which a film production house called for ‘an actor who looks like a Dalit’ on Facebook for the purpose of casting the actor as a Dalit character in their film, an incident which elicited critical response on social media. The film deals with reversal of the *Savarna* or upper-caste gaze in a light-hearted mood. The storyline of the film includes the characters Dilip, Aruna and Swaminathan, three independent filmmakers who are in search of an actor who can play the role of a Dalit character. They are in hurry as their deadline is approaching. All of them hail from an urban upper-caste, upper-middle class background and talk to each other in English. While Dilip is seen to be immersed in reading the African-American authors like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Karuna is obsessed with political correctness. Their car gets stuck in a traffic jam as people are celebrating the Ambedkar Jayanti on the streets. An apparently race-sensitive Dilip remains insensitive to a prominent event like the Ambedkar Jayanti, which is significant in terms of the cultural and political assertion of the Dalits. They reject a girl for the role of the Dalit character just because she looks, according to them, too fair to be a Dalit. Thus the film is a travesty on the caste consciousness of the *Savarnas* who nurture a deeply entrenched caste prejudice under the garb of the labels like ‘progressive’ or ‘liberal’. Thus, the film attempts to show caste of the ‘casteless’ progressive *Savarnas*, who form the cultural elites in Indian society. In the *Savarna* imagination a good-looking, intelligent Dalit is non-existent. In a response to the question that what prompts Rajesh Rajamani, the writer and director of the film, to reverse the gaze on the upper-castes in his short film, Rajamani states,

I think increasingly in academia, news media and popular culture, caste has become synonymous with Dalits and it’s almost as if the rest of society is distanced from caste. Films on caste too are obsessed with dark and depressing themes like honour killing,

sexual violence or, at times, reservations. For instance, *Article 15* is like a collage of atrocities on Dalits. Mainstream cinema is obsessed with the death of the Dalit...³⁸³

To substantiate his view, Rajamani argues,

In reality, caste is not about Dalits, they are its last symptom. Caste comes from the power centres which comprise the Brahmins or Savarnas. But today, instead of talking about them, we talk about the people who have the least control over the structure of caste. Dalits are a product of caste—not its creators. So I thought, why can't we do the opposite of this? I felt it was important to put the limelight on those upholding the structure and reverse the treatment too, so we made it a fun movie with colourful clothes and happy music. We inverted everything a caste movie is generally about.³⁸⁴

Research Findings

One of the major findings of the study is that whereas the writers and the filmmakers have predominantly taken resort to the Gandhian model and the Nehruvian paradigm, and the upper-caste filmmakers have adopted the aesthetics of realism in their filmmaking, and let their films influenced by both the Gandhian politics and Nehruvian socialism, to address the caste question, the Dalit filmmakers have developed a new film aesthetics and grammar, often referred to as 'anti-caste aesthetics' among the Dalit intelligentsia, to address the same. To be more precise, the writers like Munshi Premchand, Subodh Ghosh have been deeply influenced by the Gandhian model of caste reformism through anti-untouchability project, and the post-Independence Nehruvian socialism with focus on nation-building, developmental politics, modernity which treat caste as aberration. The master filmmaker Bimal Roy has resorted to the same method in the politics of representing his low-caste characters in the film *Sujata* (1959). Satyajit Ray who was highly influenced by the Italian neo-realism and the films like *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and

³⁸³ Rajesh Rajamani, cited in "Reversing the upper-caste gaze: Rajesh Rajamani on his vision for *The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas*," by Nolina S Minj, *Firstpost*, Oct 08, 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/art-and-culture/reversing-the-upper-caste-gaze-rajesh-rajamani-on-his-vision-for-the-discreet-charm-of-the-savarnas-8881041.html>

³⁸⁴ Rajesh Rajamani, cited in "Reversing the upper-caste gaze."

other western film movements adopted the method of realism in treating the caste question in his films.

On the other hand, the emergence of Dalit Cinema is a promising development with regard to the negotiation between caste and cinema. As Yengde (2018) observes, the Dalit Cinema with a new film semiotics has

the potential to offer performatory resistance to the interwoven threads of the caste–capital nexus. By critiquing caste, gender, class and other forms of oppression, Dalit cinema could foreshadow a cohesive battle against hegemonic caste supremacy. It would then be possible to argue against the dominance of oppressor castes in Indian cinema more generally. Dalit cinema as a resistance movement definitely has the potential to be among the pioneers of modern artistic resistance; that potential could be harnessed by departing from traditional forms of art.³⁸⁵

This ‘potential’ has been studied through examining the affective dimension of touch by Edacharia in her analysis of Manjule’s *Sairat*:

Sairat urges one to unravel the ethico-political dimensions of the sense of touch in a regime of untouchability that operates as culture in the subcontinent... *Sairat* could touch the viewers, and “pollute” the conceptions of popular Indian cinema. The film, which otherwise follows popular yardsticks (*Sairat* has all the elements of a Bollywood flick and was remade into Hindi), differs in its manifestation of caste—not normalised but effectively presented as an atrocity. It disrupts the manifestations of caste in Indian cinema, by offering an anti-caste aesthetics—visuals and sound—that is capable of affecting the spectators. Moreover, the film is also an affective archive of the brutalities of honour killing without fetishising violence.³⁸⁶

It is noteworthy that after the arrival of the Dalit filmmakers in the film industry across the country there is a significant ideological shift in the nature of representation of caste questions in the films. The Dalit filmmakers like Pa Ranjith in the Tamil film industry, Nagraj Manjule in the Marathi film industry, Neeraj Ghaywan in the Hindi film industry have developed a new semiotics and grammar of filmmaking in filming the caste issues in the highest possible nuanced form. Their global recognition has helped their politics of aesthetics in finding a space in the

³⁸⁵ Suraj Yengde, “Dalit Cinema,” 516.

³⁸⁶ Manju Edachira, “Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema,” 50-1.

caste Hindu dominated film industries. This politics of aesthetics, in turn, has transformed even the upper-caste filmmakers' ways of grappling with the caste question. As pointed out by Wankhede, it

shifted the focus towards the new aspirational Dalits that have emerged in cities and mofussil towns. He is picturized as a robust claimant of dignity and an upholder of heroic credentials, thus endorsing a Dalit individual's triumph in social and political spaces. With recent films like *Newton* and *Article 15*, it appeared that Bollywood is now slowly getting ready to play with heterogeneous Dalit identities.³⁸⁷

The Dalit filmmakers like Ghaywan, Manjule create uncomfortable situations for the upper-caste male members of society through the deployment of romantic relationship between Dalit man and upper-caste woman. This discomfort of the upper-caste man, a by-product of Brahmanical patriarchy, is a consequence of the rise of the educated Dalit male. This emergence of the educated Dalit male as depicted in the films is deemed to be a threat to the Brahmanical patriarchy as the former, through achieving a certain degree of class mobility, can mingle with upper-caste woman. As noted by Anwer and Arora,

a socially mobile Dalit man further triggers upper-caste male anxiety about Dalit assertion/rise to power; a Dalit man's access to an upper-caste woman aggravates the upper-castes' perception of loss of power, which they invariably retaliate against by punishing – with rape, lynching, flogging – caste-transgressive behavior.³⁸⁸

As the films are made in most of the cases to cater to the tastes of the general audience whose values are shaped by caste codes, it is normal, according to Shoma A. Chatterji, to question the intention of the filmmakers in making films on caste issue. As she argues, 'Indian cinema is

³⁸⁷ Harish S. Wankhede, "It's 2020, and We Still Don't Have an Iconic Dalit Hero in Bollywood," *Huffpost*, 6 September, 2020, www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/dalit-hero-bollywoodhindi-cinema_in_5f54532ec5b6578026cf14cd.

³⁸⁸ Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, "Love, Interrupted: Caste and Couple-Formation in New Bollywood," 10-11.

majorly dependent on its positive reception by the mass audience. Thus, it is natural for social scientists, film scholars and critics to question the intentions of Indian filmmakers'.³⁸⁹

Thus, this study has attempted to explore how invisible casteism operates through the narratives by showing how it structures the representation of caste questions in the films before the rise of Ambedkarite anti-caste movement and Dalit Cinema. The study has gone through a comprehensive analysis of inter-caste relationships among the onscreen characters in order to show how the traditional visualization of casteism interrupted the vision of an egalitarian society. As far as adaptations are concerned, they are not merely a visual spokesperson of the adapted texts; rather it has the potential to influence the act of reading the adapted texts. The immense significance of adaptation of as sensitive and contentious an issue as caste lies in its transformability of reading the source text and perceiving the notion of caste. This study with a special focus on film adaptations has attempted to some extent to comprehend this transformability in terms of the representation of caste question. The drive to situate Dalit studies in the framework of film adaptations has been stimulated by my interest in highlighting the politics of caste as operated within the film texts as a part of culture industry. I consider the earlier film texts examined here as furthering the dominant hegemonic discourses of caste, whereas there appears an ideological shift in the representation of caste in most of the films produced in the wake of the Ambedkarite anti-caste politics and Dalit Cinema. As far as the film adaptations are concerned, they reproduce in most of the cases the dominant narratives of the source texts, rather than evoking any significant rapture, through situating the narratives in the same socio-cultural context. The film adaptations in most of the cases do not show the courage to alter the earlier context in favour of shifting discourses on caste questions, and rather prefer

³⁸⁹ Shoma A. Chatterji, "The Dalit in Indian cinema," February 2016, [Indiatogether.org.https://indiatogether.org/the-dalit-in-indian-cinema-reviews](https://indiatogether.org/the-dalit-in-indian-cinema-reviews)

mostly to retain the original context of the adapted texts as far as possible in their attempt to remain faithful adaptations. Yet some of the film adaptations, as examined in this dissertation, cannot avoid offering certain caste questions different from the ones in the source texts: the negotiation of caste through mediation, the visual politics of caste-centric narratives, visualization of invisible pattern of casteism, the use of narratives of Dalit Cinema, and the trope of anti-caste politics.

Levin argues, ‘The cinematic experience can become a transformative moment whereby the audience propels the dialectics of social change’.³⁹⁰ It is to bring in this ‘transformative moment’ that the filmmakers have resorted to various methods and aesthetics of filmmaking from time to time. The dissertation has attempted to examine which politics of aesthetics is more effective and thought-provoking in terms of making the audience uncomfortable on the question of caste or in order to reveal, as Edacharia describes, the ‘unconscious of caste’. The dissertation has examined various kinds of films produced in the Hindi film industry ranging from early films made on the practice of untouchability and caste to parallel films of the eighties to the twenty-first century mainstream films or to the film adaptations of different times. It has also studied the adapted texts from which the select film adaptations are made. The dissertation has focused on the films of the filmmakers and the adapted texts of the writers from different social groups. The study has found that the ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu) plays the most crucial role in shaping the ideology of both the filmmakers and the writers. It is the caste habitus which defines certain limitations of the upper-caste filmmakers and the writers on the one hand, and allows the artists from the low-caste social groups make the films in keeping with their ‘lived experience’ (Sarukkai) on the

³⁹⁰ Cited in Suraj Yengde, “Dalit Cinema.” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (2018), 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848>.

other. The Dalit artists put their focus on fixing the normative casteism, privileges, cultural capital of the dominant social groups, whereas the films made by the upper-caste artists mostly remain fixed in portraying the victimhood, atrocity, subjugation of the low-caste social groups, and how it is important for the upper-caste social groups to be benevolent towards their low-caste counterpart. The upper-caste characters like Pandit Ghasiram from *Sadgati*, Mithilesh from *Aarakshan*, or the Thakurs from *Bandit Queen* or *Article 15* remain unequivocally casteist in their attitude and treatment to the low-caste communities. But the characters like Upen and Sudhir from *Sujata*, Lachhman Singh from *Rudaali* or the IPS officer Ayan Ranjan from *Article 15* who are portrayed as ‘casteless’ and sympathetic to the low-caste characters are not found to recognize or acknowledge the privileges or cultural capital which they enjoy for centuries by virtue of the caste system. They are more concerned with the precariousities of the Dalits than their own accumulated privileges. It can be argued that whereas the Dalit filmmakers have delved deep into revealing and exploring the vast horizon of the unconscious of mainstream Indian society or, to be precise, that caste is the unconscious of the Indian social life-world, the writers and the filmmakers from the dominant caste groups remain limited in revealing the conscious of the Indian society. The thesis also argues that the ideological shift in terms of politics of representation of caste has been contextualized through the rise of the anti-caste politics, anti-caste social and cultural movements, and the emergence of Dalit Cinema does not remain confined to the contemporary mainstream Hindi films of the first two decades of the twenty first century like *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007), *Article 15* (2019), *200 Halla Ho* (2021), *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), *Jhund* (2022), *Quota-The Reservation* (2022), but has also been extended to the filmmakers’ politics of adapting caste into films, as exemplified in the film adaptations like *Teesri Aazadi* (2006), *Dhadak* (2018), and *Serious Men* (2020).

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Signature of the Candidate