

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

**SYNOPSIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF
THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS)
AT JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY**

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INDIA
2023**

Representation of Caste in Film and Fiction: Texts and Contexts

This dissertation is an attempt to study how the anti-caste narrative based on the template of the Ambedkarite anti-caste politics has contextualized the ideological shift in the representation of caste in the caste-centric Hindi films with special reference to Hindi film adaptations. In the process the dissertation examines the representations of caste questions in select Hindi films and film adaptations along with their corresponding source texts which substantively deal with caste issues. For this purpose I have taken resort to interdisciplinary approach that puts various available primary and secondary sources to best use. There is a limitation I should mention in terms of the choice of primary texts for my research. Primary texts comprise of a range of Hindi films from the 1930s to the contemporary films with special reference to film adaptations, which deal with caste questions. As part of the discussion of film adaptations I have examined the corresponding source texts of these film adaptations as primary texts. It is noteworthy to mention that I have used the term 'source text' for both the literary and cinematic texts from which the film adaptations have been made. The select film texts include Nitin Bose's *Chandidas* (1934), Franz Osten's *Achhut Kanya* (1936), Chandra Shekhar's *Cha Cha Cha* (1964), Najam Naqvi's *Punarmilan* (1964), Hrisikesh Mukherjee's *Ashirwaad* (1968), Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), T.S. Ranga's *Gidh* (1984), Jag Mohan Mundra's *Bawandar* (2000), Asutosh Gwariker's *Swadesh* (2004), *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), and Sanjiv Jaiswal's *Quota- The Reservation* (2022). The select film adaptations and their corresponding source texts include:

- 1) Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), adapted from Subodh Ghosh's eponymous novel *Sujata* (1953)
- 2) Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* (1981), adapted from Munshi Premchand's story *Sadgati* (1931)
- 3) Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali* (1993), adapted from *Rudali* (1979) by Mahasweta Devi,
- 4) Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (1991) by Mala Sen
- 5) Jabbar Patel's *Teesri Azadi* (2006), adapted from various episodes of the *puranas*, *The Ramayana*, and *The Mahabharata*
- 6) Shashank Khaitan's *Dhadak* (2018), adapted from Nagraj Manjule's film *Sairat* (2016)
- 7) Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020), adapted from Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010)

While my focus is mainly on these Hindi films with special focus on film adaptations, which deal with caste questions substantively or subtly, I have engaged occasionally with the newly emerging 'Dalit Cinema' as reference points as well to find its relevance to my research topic and substantiate my argument. The emergence of Dalit Cinema has been spearheaded by the filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule, Pa Ranjith, Jayan K. Cheriyan who hail from Dalit communities. The films under this category are based on anti-caste politics. I have situated the dissertation in the template of anti-caste perspective developed through Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and other anti-caste thinkers' ideas on caste. Eradicating the caste system is the ultimate aim of the anti-caste politics. The anti-caste thinkers postulate the view that it is imperative to dismantle the religious and social sanction of caste. Inspired by such anti-caste thoughts, the filmmakers from the Dalit communities substantively incorporate the anti-caste politics in their film narratives. They question the power and privilege of the upper castes and portray the assertion of the Dalits in their films. The rise of anti-caste politics in the last few decades and its representation in the films made by the Dalit filmmakers has contextualized

an ideological shift in the representation of caste in Hindi films also. This ideological shift in the representation of caste and the conventional representation of caste in Hindi films has been discussed in this study. I have also examined the social location of the writers and the filmmakers to understand the relationship of different caste groups with power and privilege. Sundar Sarukkai's idea of 'lived experience' provides the theoretical ground to understand the experience of the lower castes in a caste-ridden society. 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. I have made use of the English translations of the literary texts of which the same is available. The quotations from the literary texts of which no English translation is available are translated by me.

In Chapter 1 entitled "Situating Literature and Film vis-à-vis Caste, and the Emergence of Dalit Cinema" I have introduced how the question of caste as cultural institution, as economic institution or as major foundational component of the Hindu social order has been dealt with in literary texts and film texts. This chapter explores 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 eradicating caste. The chapter discusses 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 in the latter half of the 20th century as a literary canon 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. The chapter focuses on 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. It shows how Dalit literature as a canon draws attention in the 1970s through the emergence of the Marathi Dalit writings. The writers like Baburao Bagul, Shankarrao Kharat, Bandhu Madhav, Annabhau Sathe, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal themselves hail from Dalit communities and present Dalit lives and the question of caste from an insider's point of view with much more nuances and subtlety. Similar Dalit writings emerge in other parts of the country in the literature of Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Odia, Punjabi, Bengali and some other languages also. The chapter informs how after its initial engagement predominantly with the mythological and religious issues 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. The chapter traces the trajectory of the Hindi films on caste and briefly introduces a range of films on caste issues. It goes on to discuss the emergence of Dalit Cinema as a new genre of filmmaking 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. I have analysed some films, namely, Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), Pa Ranjith's *Madras* (2014), *Kalaa* (2018), and Jayan Cherian's *Papilio Buddha* (2013), in this chapter which come under the category of Dalit Cinema.

In Chapter 2 entitled "Hindi Films and the Representation of Caste" I have attempted a detailed analysis of the conventional representation of caste questions in Hindi films through examining select Hindi films like *Chandidas* (1934), *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Cha Cha Cha* (1964), *Punarmilan* (1964), *Ashirwaad* (1964), *Ankur* (1974), *Gidh* (1984), *Bawandar* (2000), *Swadesh* (2004), *Aarakshan* (2011), *Masaan* (2015), *Chauranga* (2016), *Poorna*

(2017), *Hichki* (2018), *Super 30* (2019). In dealing with the caste questions these films primarily focus on the issues of 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. Analyzing the scenes, dialogues and characters the chapter has substantiated the arguments.

Chapter 3 entitled “Visual Politics of Victimization in Film Adaptations” focuses on the treatment of the caste issues in adapted texts, and the visual politics of caste in adaptations. In this chapter, I attempt to investigate the film adaptations Bimal Roy’s *Sujata* (1959), Satyajit Ray’s *Sadgati* (1981), Kalpana Lajmi’s *Rudaali* (1993), and Shekhar Kapur’s *Bandit Queen* (1994) vis-à-vis their corresponding source texts, namely, *Sujata* (1953) by Subodh Ghosh, *Sadgati* (1931) by Munshi Premchand, *Rudali* (1979) by Mahasweta Devi, and *India’s Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (1991) by Mala Sen, and show how visual politics of caste reshapes the understanding of caste question both by extending and contracting the documentation of precarity of the Dalits and the institutionalized discrimination against them on the ground of caste. The chapter discusses in its various sections the issues like Adaptation and the Visual Imagination of Caste, Caste as a Notion in *Sujata*, Framing Caste as a Notion in the Film Adaptation *Sujata*, Decoding Gandhian Approach to Caste in Bimal Roy’s *Sujata*, Understanding the Brahmanical Social Order in *Sadgati*, Satyajit Ray’s *Sadgati* and the Humanization of the Oppressive Brahmin, Adapting Exploitation of Dalit Women, Caste Feudalism and the Making of a *Rudaali* in Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali*, Kalpana Lajmi’s *Rudaali*, Understanding Caste in Kalpana Lajmi’s *Rudaali*, De-casting Caste in the Film Adaptation *Rudaali*, 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 , Shekhar Kapur's Film *Bandit Queen* as a Visual Documentation of Rape.

Chapter 4 entitled "Anti-caste Politics, Dalit Cinema, and the Ideological Shift in Hindi Films with Special Reference to Adaptations" attempts a critical analysis of select contemporary caste-centric Hindi films with special reference to select film adaptations. This chapter examines select contemporary films, namely, *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007), *Article 15* (2019), *200 Halla Ho* (2021), *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), *Jhund* (2022), *Quota- The Representation* (2022). The chapter also examines the adaptations *Teesri Azadi* (2006), *Dhadak* (2018), *Serious Men* (2020) along with their respective source texts. The chapter examines in its various sections issues like *Eklavya: The Royal Guard*: Representing the Constitutional Provision as Safeguard against Caste Humiliation, Caste Politics in *Article 15*, *200 Halla Ho*: A Case of Dalit Uprising and Caste Politics, *Geeli Pucchi* (2021): Constructing the Agency of a Dalit Queer Woman, *Jhund*: Representing the Aspirational Side of the Slum-dwellers, *Quota-the Reservation*: A Visual Document of Humiliating Caste Discrimination and Violence in Higher Educational Institutes, Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* and Problematizing Its Anti-Caste Politics in Shashank Khaitan's *Dhadak*, Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* and Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men*, Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men*: Adaptation of Dalit Aspiration and Assertion, and the anti-caste politics in Jabbar Patel's *Teesri Aazadi*. In so doing, it argues that the 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 major findings of the study have been discussed in "Conclusion". I have summarized how the Hindi films are increasingly focusing on the representation of anti-caste politics. In this process I have discussed the upper-caste gaze and the notional existence of caste, the critique of the upper-caste gaze, and the increasing tendency to reverse this upper-

caste gaze. I have discussed how the notional existence of caste among the upper-caste filmmakers has shaped their ideology in framing the visuals of caste reality and Dalit life-world. And how the prevalent dominant ideology moulds their approach to caste question has also been explored. The influence of the Gandhian politics of caste, his anti-untouchability project, Nehruvian socialism of post-independent India, the aesthetics of realism in filmmaking on the upper-caste filmmakers in making films on caste has been discussed. I have also noted how the Dalit filmmakers and critics have critiqued the upper-caste gaze in portraying the Dalit characters and caste issues in the films. The Dalit filmmakers have reversed this gaze in their films. For this purpose they have developed new film aesthetics and grammar. The “Conclusion” ends with discussing how the rise of anti-caste thoughts, anti-caste politics, and the emergence of Dalit Cinema have influenced the Hindi films in bringing an ideological shift in the representation of caste. And this ideological shift has been extended in film adaptations like *Teesri Aazadi* (2006), *Dhadak* (2018), and *Serious Men* (2020) also.

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