

Social Empowerment and Tamil Cinema: A Study of Portrayal of Dalits in Select Hindi and Tamil Films

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Abstract

The portrayal of Dalits in Indian cinema has evolved through different periods. Initially, non-Dalit filmmakers introduced Dalit characters to achieve political ends, without genuine concern for their plight. This led to superficial inclusion and later sidelining of Dalit characters. The second wave, driven by government intervention, reintroduced Dalit characters but often depicted them in disempowered and stereotypical ways, lacking self-respect and agency. The acceptance of Dalits in their natural essence by the audience marks a significant step towards their empowerment. Regional cinema, especially Tamil cinema, has been more progressive, while Hindi cinema still lags in this regard. Overall, the portrayal of Dalits in cinema has been a journey from political tokenism to more authentic and empowering representations. This shift is crucial for the natural growth and empowerment of Dalits in society.

Keywords: *Dalit Cinema, Dalit Portrayal, Gandhian Portrayal, Stereotype Dalits and Tamil cinema*

Cinema is a powerful art. It has an immediate and lasting effect on society. The cinema in modern times dominates popular imagination. It is a powerful agency that builds public opinion around social concerns and values. Cinema depicts the shared imagination of society and thus becomes an important site of creation, re-creation, and contestation of popular imagination. Due to its enormous reach and emotive appeal, it affects society and at the same time is affected by it.

Dalits constitute about one-sixth of India's population. They have been at the bottom of India's social pyramid for centuries. They were denied basic human rights, such as access to drinking water from public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, freedom to choose an occupation (other than assigned by birth), freedom to keep property and education, and so on. They are practically invisible from every public domain so much so that their identity itself has been stigmatised.

Dalits were traditionally and conveniently kept away from film production and the silver screen. Their entry into the cinematic space was a conscious and deliberate act and not a self-propelled organic one as is the case of other performing arts in India. Dalits' first engagement with cinema could be observed in the last century's late twenties and early thirties. Bollywood audiences and filmmakers are still reluctant to adopt and accept Dalits and their concerns. However regional cinemas have given sufficient focus to Dalit concerns and Dalit characters.

The question of representation of Dalits in Round Table Conferences brought the issue of Dalits to the forefront. The upper-caste intelligentsia and other artistic classes class used cinema to establish Gandhian ideology. The Gandhian ideology became the norm and the Ambedkarite ideology was relegated to the background. The upper-caste filmmakers, kept Dalit characters, Dalit filmmakers, and their concerns at a safe arm's distance. Their portrayal was limited to portraying their plight, suppression, humiliation, exploitation, and victimhood.

Certain common features could be observed in the portrayal of the Dalits (then depressed class) people in the introduction to the novels and films. Only female characters were portrayed and the Dalit concerns were subsumed in male-female relations sidelining and concealing the Dalit concerns. They were portrayed only as meek and submissive to oppression lacking any agency. The portrayal of Dalits was as such that the root cause of all the handicaps in their life was fate and one must endure it without resentment in the hope of a better life in the next birth. The only way out was reforming the upper caste by selfless devotion or death. There was no place for questioning the norms, resentment, rebellion, or even voicing their concerns. This could be observed in the following films that portrayed Dalits.

Chandi Das (Hindi, 1934) directed by Nitin Bose was a remake of the same titled *Chandi Das* (Bengali, 1932). It was a commercial success. Rami a Dalit woman meekly accepts that she is not worthy of being loved by a priest of the upper caste and believes that by loving her he is showing generosity towards her. The same phenomenon could be observed in *Achoot Kanya* (The Untouchable Girl, Hindi, 1936) directed by Franz Osten.

Despite her love for Pratap, she accepts that she cannot be the wife of Pratap. She never thought of breaking or questioning societal norms set for them.

In *Malapalli* (A Mala [Untouchable] Girl, Telugu, 1938), a film directed by Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, a Brahmin boy falls in love with Sampalatha, a Dalit girl. Failing to see the possibility of acceptance of their love in society they eloped and got married. The father of Nagaraju was initially against them but later accepted them due to the selfless dedication shown by the Dalits in saving his wife from the fire.

Sujata (Hindi, 1959) directed and produced by Bimal Roy. It is a love story between Adheer a Brahmin Man and an untouchable woman, Sujata. Charu, Sujata's foster mother never accepted her as a daughter as she was born in a Dalit family. Sujata's blood from rare blood groups saves her foster mother's life who requires it due to an accident. This brings her a change of heart and she willingly allows her to marry Adheer.

In the novels and films discussed above, Dalits show the Gandhian ways of dealing with the caste system. A complete submission to the oppressor is needed without remorse. One should wait for the oppressor to change their heart with selfless dedication. The critics, artists, and upper-caste intelligentsia conveniently kept writers and artists of the depressed class at a safe arm's distance and were able to shove their concerns safely and silently under the carpet keeping their progressive faces intact.

Cinema has historically remained a capital-intensive industry and has been controlled and dominated by wealthy upper-caste families. Understanding the potential of cinema in democratisation and integration, the Government of India established the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1960. Later in 1975, it was reconstituted as NFDC (National Film Development Corporation of India) as a PSU (Public Sector Undertaking) under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to support and promote good cinema in line with government policy. With the inclusion policy through FFC/NFDC, we could observe a few Dalits on screen.

It is worth mentioning here that around 300 film projects were funded directly or indirectly by the NFDC on various social concerns in various Indian languages. Yet, not a single Dalit filmmaker could get funds for any project. Mainstream cinema in India has reproduced the upper caste/class gaze as a metonymy for the whole nation. The upper caste names, Brahminical cultural rituals, and Hindu aesthetics were portrayed as the natural essence of the entire nation. Dalits have been looked upon. The absence of depressed-class artists and filmmakers makes the portrayal of Dalits artificial and unconvincing. It was seen as an entirely alien phenomenon. As a critic says:

Most films about Dalits have come from upper-caste filmmakers and one could cite a series of films where Dalit/Adivasi portrayals are patently unconvincing: Devika Rani in *Achhut Kanya*, Shabana Azmi in *Ankur*, Smita Patil in *Aakrosh*, Nutan in *Sujata*; still, there is more to it than unconvincing character portrayals". (Raghavendra)

The Brahminic aesthetic gaze takes out the vitality and individuality of Dalit characters and reduces them to mere stock characters or caricatures at most. In exploration of the themes such as love, identity, politics, and everyday life, the gaze is the most important factor. The upper-caste-gaze takes out the very essence of humanity from it. Margaret in her study has pointed out that the portrayal of Dalits by a certain gaze distorts them to the extent of caricatures. She writes:

The untouchables are represented as drunkards and as prone to self-destruction because of their habits, customs, and festivals. They are portrayed as a dehumanised bunch of people and termed dirty, uncivilised, and barbaric because they do not follow Hindu culture. The notion that they are themselves responsible for their degraded existence, that is their habit of drinking alcohol, eating meat, animal sacrifice, and dancing that make them beyond redemption recurs repeatedly. (Cultural Gandhism: Casting Out the Dalit Woman)

The next important aspect is foregrounding and backgrounding certain cultures. The upper-caste film producers purposefully use techniques that silence the history, wisdom, and symbols of the marginalised populations a push their culture and values into the background. They are deprived of the rightful place they deserve. It is desired that Dalit cinema should highlight Dalit perspectives by foregrounding them. It should create a space for artistic expression that resonates with Dalit communities, and display the rich culture of Dalits from the *inside*. A Dalit critic Nagpal quoting Tamil Dalit director Pa Ranjit states that:

There have been films in the past that depict Dalit characters and lives. They were made by non-Dalits, who view us through a lens of pity. Our world is shown as colourless and poverty-stricken. Yes, we are economically poor but not culturally so. Where is the depiction of our vibrant culture, music, and food? Why is our world shown bereft of it all? (When Dalit filmmakers embrace their identity and reclaim their stories)

The important thing is the inversion of aesthetic Brahminic aesthetic norms. Brahminic aesthetic norms look down upon the producer class. It must challenge, redefine, and if needed invert the upper-caste aesthetic norms that look down upon the producer class. It should empower Dalit voices and make them heard through the medium of cinema. The portrayal of poverty and handicaps should be taken as an opportunity to prove determination and resilience. It must try to redefine the aesthetics of gaze. In the words of Manju Edchara:

Kaala (2018), the title of the film, does the same reversal of meanings. Kaala in Hindi or Sanskrit refers to the colour black, which is often associated with darkness in Hindu mythology. But Ranjith employs a different hermeneutic to deconstruct and reconstruct the name Kaala. When Hari Dada (the villain) asks sarcastically,

“Kaala, what sort of name is that?” Kaala replies that black is the colour of labour. The movie itself is a story of an urban slum community. But unlike other popular films which depict only the negative aspects of slum life, Ranjith highlights their life, struggles, and celebrations. From the act of naming, these films offer an anti-caste aesthetic that is also an oppositional gaze to mainstream Indian Cinema. (Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema)

Dalit cinema should challenge the dominant caste hegemony perpetuated by mainstream cinema. It should break away from stereotypical portrayals and present multidimensional, true-to-the-world characters. A film that perpetuates caste supremacy, promotes the status quo approach and does not promote egalitarian social structure, can't be accepted as a Dalit film. The role of fate should be limited. It must have a vision for the betterment of society and humanity. As argued by Suraj Yengde, the well-known Dalit critic:

Dalit cinema has the potential to offer performative 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. ...Realism, impressionism, and post-impressionism were the modern art forms that rejected the bourgeois romantic versions of the world. (Dalit Cinema)

Dalits were missing from the cinematic space before the question of their representation arose in the second decade of the last century. All of a sudden, they could be seen as protagonists in novels and films. Dalits again went into oblivion once the question of representation was settled and could not be seen for the next few decades. So, Dalits' entry into the cinematic space was not a normal development. It was the tool and means to gain some political ends. Once the goal was met, they were again pushed to oblivion.

Some films have tried to experiment with portraying Dalit characters but, unfortunately, hardly any of them could be characterised as Dalit films. The films that portray Dalits in the second wave are *Ankur* (Hindi, 1974), *Nishant* (Hindi, 1975), *Manthan* (Hindi, 1976), *Aakrosh* (Hindi, 1980), *Sadgati* (Hindi, 1981), *Paar* (Hindi, 1984), *Damul* (Hindi, 1985), *Antarjali Jatra* (Bengali, 1987), *Diksha* (Hindi, 1991), *Lagaan* (Hindi, 2001), *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (Punjabi, 2011), and *Chauranga* (Hindi, 2016). The films listed above have Dalit protagonists or characters in some prominent roles, but all Dalits in the above films are portrayed through Brahminic gaze. A Brahminic gaze that takes out the vitality from Dalit characters and reduces them to mere stereotypes and caricatures.

However, some courageous filmmakers have started experimenting with Dalit characters giving them some space and portraying them as natural beings. A few mainstream films that have experimented with giving space to Dalit characters are *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (Hindi, 2007), *Aakrosh* (Hindi, 2010), *Aarakshan* (Hindi, 2011), *Article 15* (Hindi, 2019), etc. Though these are very few in numbers and in some of these films the role of Dalit characters is insignificant but still their contribution is immense. They have given courage to other filmmakers and paved the way for other filmmakers to give more space to Dalit characters.

Acceptance of Dalits in mainstream cinematic space led the way to portray them as lead characters. It further gives liberty to filmmakers to produce films applying Dalit aesthetics. A few films in which Dalit aesthetics could be observed are *Fandry* (Marathi, 2013), *Papilio Buddha* (Malayalam, 2013), *Masaan* (Hindi, 2015), *Ozhivudivasate Kali* (Malayalam, 2015), *Sairat* (Marathi, 2016), *Kabali* (Tamil, 2016), *Manusangada* (Tamil, 2017), *Pariyerum Perumal* (Tamil, 2018), *Kaala* (Tamil, 2018), *Asuran* (Tamil, 2019), and *Palasa 1978* (Telugu, 2020) etc. This list is not exhaustive and several other films could be included in it.

The Dalit portrayal in the films listed above is a leap forward in repositioning Dalits in the popular imagination. At the same time, Dalits now could be imagined in the driver's seat who henceforth were either missing or relegated to sidekicks or wretched state. Also, it is creating space for Dalit filmmakers for creation who were seen as exceptions in cinematic space. It is widening the restricted canvas of society for other filmmakers to creativity.

Conclusion

Hence it could be concluded that the introduction of Dalits in the 20's of last century to the cinematic space was a conscious effort by non-Dalit filmmakers. It was not an expansion of cinematic space but was only a means to gain and meet a political end. The most important feature of this wave is that Only Dalit characters were accepted on screen but in the filmmaking, they were conveniently kept at arm's distance. Hence, after the political goal was achieved, they were pushed to oblivion for around four decades. This introduction of Dalits to cinematic space with filmmakers with no concerns for Dalits was detrimental to the image of Dalits and their empowerment in society.

In the second wave with the intervention of the government through FFC/NFDC, they were reintroduced in the cinematic space, but relegated to the position of caricature and stock character. They were portrayed as meek, weak, voiceless, lacking self-respect and agency, and so on, lacking human essence in them. They were portrayed as Gandhian *Harijan* rather than Ambedkarite Dalit. This was again more toward their disempowerment rather than empowering them. It has hindered the natural growth of Dalits in cinematic space.

Acceptance of Dalits in their natural essence by the audience is a leap forward in Dalit empowerment through films. This has paved the way for Dalits and other filmmakers to portray Dalits in their natural essence and at the same time created space in popular imagination. These experiments with Dalit characters were observed in mainstream cinema and were not limited to art or parallel cinema. Regional cinema is more open to giving space for Dalits especially Tamil cinema is the pioneer in this field. Hindi cinema still seems to be reluctant to accept Dalits in their natural essence, it is still to come out from Gandhian hangover.

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