

Dalit Marginalisation in *Swades*

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Abstract

Through a close analysis of Ashutosh Gowariker's film *Swades*, this paper attempts to establish that upper-caste normativity has always been dominant in Bollywood. Hindi cinema deftly avoids complying to crude problems of socioeconomic reality, instead imposing a scripted narrative designed to address the emotional and psychological interests of Hindu social elites. Bollywood films are written, produced, and directed by a set of people who believe in promoting the upper class/caste population's preferences and ideals. Bollywood cinema is studied by film critics, historians, and researchers as a separate art form from the instability of current society. Unfortunately, in Indian film tales, like in society, experiences of caste prejudice and segregation play a marginal role.

Keywords: Bollywood; Caste; Dalit; Marginalised.

Introduction

"Hesitating to act because the whole vision might not be achieved, or because others do not yet share it, is an attitude that only hinders progress" (*Swades* 00:30:00).

The above quotation by Mahatma Gandhi, which has been used as an epigraph to Ashutosh Gowariker's 2004 film *Swades: We the People*, undoubtedly places the film within the purview of societal progress. The film attempts to highlight the age-old caste, gender and religious barriers that have been rendering our nation incapable of fighting off the other, more discernible social issues, such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, and lack of basic necessities such as electricity and clean drinking water. The claim that cinema can perform a reformist role in society is not ill-founded. The film in discussion belongs to the Hindi film industry, more commonly known as Bollywood, a term formed by blending the colonial name

of Mumbai, i.e., Bombay; and Hollywood. Naturally, it was difficult to choose a single language as the language of cinema in a multilingual country, let alone in the polyglot metropolis of Bombay. However, after considerable deliberation and hesitation, the filmmakers decided on Hindustani, a blend of Urdu and Hindi that served as the lingua franca in North and Central India and provided the largest market. Instead of assigning a regional character to Bollywood through the use of a regional tongue, this act of picking a language that a large portion of India's population spoke in some form or another resulted in ascribing a national character to Hindi cinema (Ganti 187). As a result of this qualification, Bollywood films became productive propaganda tools. Between 1931 and 1987, for example, more than six thousand Hindi films had been produced. And since 1971, India has been producing the maximum number of films the world over, averaging 800 per year (Chakravarty 9). But needless to argue, apart from being India's most popular form of entertainment, Hindi film is also the country's most important medium for mass communication and opinion formation, a nation comprising 551 million Hindi speakers and only 74.04% literacy rate, according to the 2011 census (Sawee; "Literacy Rate -7+ Years(%)"). This makes cinema extremely instrumental in changing and improving people's psyche towards age-old customs that are detrimental to the development of our society.

Historical Review of Bollywood

For a quick recap, if one is to look back to the 1950s, it becomes clear that Hindi film in the first decade following Independence reacted powerfully to the socialist concerns. The 1960s, on the other hand, saw cinema restricting its interests to the upper-middle-class. Then came the Amitabh era in the 1970s, which transformed Indian film into a very innovative zone with the 'angry young man' cliché at its heart. This cinema largely debated concerns of economic inadequacy, corruption, and anarchy, but showed little interest in social ills such as caste prejudice or women's empowerment. No director ever considered portraying a Dalit protagonist confronting social problems. The concept of imperative metanarratives was critically examined in Bollywood beginning in the 1980s. This was done to see whether there was a way to give historically marginalised ideals and ideas equal and visible space. Women, black males, LGBT topics, and physically challenged individuals had gained enough prominence in Hollywood cinema by this time to emerge as separate and independent subjects in film storylines, assisting in the democratisation of filmmaking to a significant degree. However, in popular Hindi cinema, such democratic features were not yet visible.

The widespread cliché that film is an accurate mirror of contemporary society that represents the major changes in the socioeconomic milieu is not an entirely true claim. Upper-caste normativity has always been dominant in Indian cinema. Socially marginalised groups' socio-political attempts to express their legal rights in public spaces, which peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, have yet to be made into a major film. Indian films are only flimsy attempts to obscure socio-political truths. The remarkable fictional storylines are clearly distinguished from a commoner's routine entanglements. In most situations, Bollywood deftly avoids complying with crude problems of socioeconomic reality, instead of imposing a scripted narrative designed to cater to Hindu social elites' emotional and psychological needs. Indian films are written, directed, and produced by a set of people who believe in promoting the upper class/caste population's tastes and beliefs. Film reviewers, historians, and researchers all study cinema as an art form separate from the tumultuous social reality. Experiences of caste prejudice and segregation, unfortunately, play a rather marginal role in Indian cinematic storylines, much like in society.

The parallel or art cinema that came about in the 1970s, on the other hand, did attempt to include Dalit subjectivity in motion films. Social issues such as caste-based violence and feudal exploitation gained a lot of traction. In this field as well, realism took off when storytelling ended up displaying popular preconceptions of marginalised lives rather than delving into the underlying discussion of social realities. These ostensibly "realist" stories, however, fall short of presenting the audience with the naked societal truth. They portray Dalits as inert, obedient people who have no hope for a better future. The cinematic landscape of India changed dramatically during the 1990s. There was a clear need for elements of entertainment and sensationalism to reach the audience. As a result, filmmakers separated themselves from their artistic responsibilities to society at large, creating a cinema genre with a broader worldwide appeal. Films began to be developed expressly for upper-middle-class audiences, who could afford to spend significantly more in the new multiplexes than the average moviegoer. This viewpoint has shifted since the year 2000. Films about social issues began to appear again, though in fewer numbers. Even if the audience did not embrace films that devoted an episode or two to societal issues such as caste, the audience at least, began to tolerate films that did. This could be due to a growing Dalit young population obtaining an education and becoming active members of the film audience, or to people becoming more sensitive and welcoming of Dalits with time.

It is during this wave of cinema, that Ashutosh Gowariker launched his

film *Swades*. Despite not doing well at the box office, the film received critical acclamation both nationally and internationally since “the failure of a film commercially may also have little to do with how many people actually consume it” (Delacy). Heralded as “entertainment with purpose,” *Swades* spoke fluently about the social and political handicaps that mofussil India faces in the twenty-first century (“Ashutosh Gowariker”). One of the biggest societal issues that fails to find a representation in popular commercial films is the awful truth that haunts India’s Dalits. Whatever meagre depiction of a Dalit exists, it is inaccurate, stereotyped, and bears the stamp of Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’ imagery. The Dalit character is either meek, as in Franz Osten’s *Achhut Kanya* (1936), or dependent, as in Bimal Roy’s *Sujata* (1959), or appropriate to Brahmanical socio-cultural ideals, as in the position of Kachhra in Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan* (2001). The Dalit movement, which had a significant impact on the nation’s socio-political position and generated an athletic, autonomous ‘political Dalit,’ has almost little or no representation in mainstream Indian films. This paper emphasizes the portrayal of caste discrimination that has been done vis-à-vis an upper-caste gaze in the film.

Analysis

The film *Swades* opens at National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) headquarters in Washington D.C. where the film’s protagonist, Mohan Bhargava, played by Shahrukh Khan, is a manager working on NASA’s Global Precipitation Measurement project. This upper-caste, foreign-educated and privileged Indian, “is a fully assimilated, literally globalized scientist who skillfully handles a press conference in high-tech, jargon-laden English” (Chatterji). This film is ostensibly about his journey to rural India which he undertakes to retrieve his former nanny, Kaveri Amma, who brought him up from infancy to adulthood with motherly affection and whom he had shamelessly forgotten and “lost touch” with, post his academic journey to America (*Swades* 00:09:09). However, the film turns into a bildungsroman-ian tale of an NRI scientist who steadily metamorphoses from being a person who goes around drinking bottled water in his fully equipped caravan (recreational vehicle), to someone who embraces his “Indianness” entirely (Chatterji). Mohan finds himself in a village named Charanpur, a few hundred kilometers away from the capital of India, in pursuit of Kaveri Amma, who lives there with Gita and her little brother, Chiku; who have been recently orphaned.

The disparities between urban and rural societies are portrayed in popular culture in a very skewed manner. The majority of the authors associate

village life with the biblical Garden of Eden. From Premchand's "Deliverance" through R K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* and U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, the concept of a unified village has been explored. In general, metropolitan life is critiqued for being wicked, tainted, unethical, and a place in need of regeneration, whereas the rural population is considered to consist of people who prefer noble simplicity to corrupt luxury and who bring new energy and beauty to moral squalor and degradation. In comparison to the loudness and bustle of the city, many authors agree that village life gives tranquility and quiet of mind.

In popular consciousness, rural areas or the village metaphor, have long represented a non-political space that proudly symbolises India's rich cultural heritage. And popular cinema has reflected this romanticised, predetermined, and mythical vision of the village as utopian and the villager as a guileless and untainted human. However, it appears that Bollywood's social model of a village is quite unclear, because caste and gender violence are certainly rampant in villages. Without a doubt, such deceptive portrayal is the result of characters being depicted without a thorough knowledge of caste hierarchy, which is an unavoidable and more relevant element of rural India than urban India. The village Charanpur, "as the repository of the ideal community in opposition to the city... is very much the village of Gandhi" (Delacy). In fact, one of the inspirations for the film was Rajni Bakshi's book *BapuKuti: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi* (1998), which tells the story of twelve people who left lucrative jobs in metropolitan India to work in the rural countryside and devote themselves to the Gandhian ideal of the independent village community (Delacy). Gowariker, in a genius move, provides the audience with a peek of this book, during a scene in a Delhi Bookstore where Mohan and Gita meet for the first time (*Swades*00:21:17).

Rural development being the driving force of the film when Mohan is compelled to confront this mofussil world "that is plagued with seemingly insurmountable problems of underdevelopment and poverty, as well as by age-old issues of caste and gender discrimination, illiteracy, and child marriage," he resolves to get involved in order to enhance the villagers' quality of life (Delacy). This transformative journey of Mohan begins with a debate that ensues between Kaveri Amma, Gita (who works as a dedicated teacher at the school she has set up in the village) and Mohan, about the state of affairs in the country where he passionately notes how "we are plagued with problems... illiteracy is rampant... we have administrative problems... we are yet under-developed... caste discrimination, overpopulation, unemployment, corruption. Our state of affairs is dismal.

It's pathetic" (*Swades*01:09:06). While he rants about the Government's inability to bring about any positive change, Gita reminds him that "the Government is a system, of which public is also a part" and therefore, it is the responsibility of every citizen to eliminate weaknesses within this system (01:10:16). Post this debate, albeit, for an ulterior motive, Mohan goes around the village convincing people to send their children to Gita's school. She has been given three months' notice by the Village Council, to either increase the number of students in her school or to let go of the current school building for a smaller space on the outskirts of the village. It is during this enterprise that Mohan comes face to face with caste-based discrimination. When he tries to rope in Mela Ram, a lower-caste villager to convince children from his community to also join the school, the shocked members of the village council object, stating how "lions and sheep never drink water from the same pool" (01:15:52). When Mohan responds to their query about his caste with "I am a Brahmin," they urge him to behave like one, by acknowledging the lower caste status of Mela Ram and to, therefore, avoid food cooked by him (01:16:12).

Mohan dismisses these ideas as outdated and orthodox, angering one of the Village Council members who retorts back, "don't you dare degrade our piety! You have been corrupted. Why drag us down as well?" (01:16:34). While this caste-laden discourse is being wrought, Mela Ram coyly stands outside the temple compound, given his caste-based restriction on temple entry. Having found no support from the Village Council members, Mohan along with Mela Ram visits the Dalit settlement on the outskirts of the village and asks one of the Dalits named Bisra, if he would like to send his children to school. Living in a dilapidated hut with two malnourished and scantily clad kids, Bisra is shown to be deeply conscious of his caste, who questions Mohan about "how a village which doesn't allow us to work within its boundary to feed our empty stomachs, be accepting of educating our children" (01:17:23). Despite Mohan's insistence, Bisra, out of his meekness, refuses to comply with his offer as he has internalised caste oppression deeply and accepted the fact that the upper-caste villagers are hostile to their community and that to be deprived of education is his children's destiny.

In the next scene, a film screening of a 1973 Hindi film *Yaadon Ki Baraat* is organized by the village council in the village compound. This multi-star film is "identified as the first masala film, combining elements of the action, drama, romance, musical, crime and thriller genres" making it quintessentially Bollywood (Wikipedia Contributors). Gowariker employs this component to not only juxtapose his film seething in social issues with

the usual Bollywood content but also to raise a reformatory voice against caste rigidity. The curtain that has been suspended in the middle of the compound forms the metaphorical as well as literal divide within the rural community, with upper-castes seated on one side of the screen and the Dalits on the other; while the untouchables (the lowest rung of Dalits) also look on from the margins. While there is an apparent division in society, they all enjoy the film with the same enthusiasm. Through this film screening scene, "popular cinema's unifying potential is emphasized, and reaction shots of the crowd depict the responses of different audience segments to a given song sequence" from the film *Yaadon Ki Baraat* (Chatterji). However, much to the chagrin of all present, an electricity failure, that has been pitted as one of the major developmental issues plaguing the village from the beginning of the film, cuts short their cinematic experience. This is when Mohan steps in, and to cheer up the disappointed children, starts teaching them about stars and constellations. In order to keep the audience engaged, he breaks into a philosophical song about unity which is picturised "tellingly with the large shadow of Mohan falling across on the screen as he dances with gay abandon" (Chatterji).

Singing of the rainbow, he implores the audience "to think if each of these colours were alone, there wouldn't have been any rainbow at all. Likewise, if we don't unite, there would be none to fight injustice" (*Swades*01:31:00). This scene is performed as a song and dance interlude that figuratively "compares individuals to night sky stars, drops of water, and colours of the rainbow which only attain their full potential in composition with others" (Reynolds). Halfway into the song, the curtain dividing the crowd is brought down while Mohan encourages children from erstwhile divided segments of society to mingle, to sing and to dance in unison to the song "*ek tara, nau tara, sau tara*", meaning "one star, nine stars, hundred stars" stressing on the strength of unity (*Swades* 01:35:35). Through this song sequence, it has been aesthetically emphasized that just like beautifully shaped constellations can only be formed when stars are seen together and in unison, people can also achieve their true potential only when they work as a united community and shed off divisive forces of society such as caste discrimination. The lyricist, Javed Akhtar won the prestigious Filmfare award for this song in 2005. Every element of this song, be it direction, singing, or cinematography has been done brilliantly.

Another key scene that locates this film within the scope of caste is the school admittance ceremony of new students who have been enticed by Mohan's propaganda. The ceremony is held on the day of Dussehra, the Hindu festival celebrated to mark the triumph of good over evil. While the

ceremony takes place with each student being felicitated on stage with a vermilion mark on forehead and a stack of books, the untouchable Bisrais again shown as standing outside the school courtyard dressed in humble clothing ecstatically revelling at his daughter Lajwa's stage stint. The fact that Lajwa will get to study in the same school as the village council head's granddaughter Kusum is pointed out in a subtle fashion by the filmmaker Gowariker. After the completion of this ceremony, when a discussion ensues on America's greatness in terms of infrastructural developments, the village elders point out the significance of "*sanskar and parampara*" ("culture and tradition") that America can never possess and what makes India the greatest country in the world (02:16:01). However, Mohan outrightly disagrees with this decree with what forms the most crucial string of dialogues in the film, "I don't agree that India is the greatest country in the world...but I do believe that we have the potential and the strength to make it great" (02:16:38). When Mohan expresses his displeasure at the discrimination that is inherent in Indian society based on caste, the ancient character of caste hierarchy is thrown in his face, stressing on the immortality of caste, "*Jo kabhinaijati, usi ko jatikehte hain*" (caste identity can never be shed)(02:08:07). Mohan takes them to task by rejecting the notion of acknowledging whatever is ancient as correct. He points out that "we keep fighting amongst ourselves, when we should be fighting against illiteracy, the growing population and corruption" (02:18:30). In the evening when a skit on *Ramayana*, one of the prominent epics within Hinduism, is being performed, Mohan, who has been meandering through emotional perturbation since morning, affixes to the imagery of Rama, his claim that "Rama is in compassion, Rama is in peace, Rama is in unity, Rama is in progress...whoever erases Ravana [symbol of evil] from the mind will find Rama in his heart" (02:24:47). Thereafter, shockingly enough, the main focus of the film shifts onto solving the recurrent electricity outage problem in the village and Mohan's migration back to India.

Conclusion

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 as discussed in this paper; 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. As the Marathi Dalit filmmaker Somnath Waghmare indicates in an interview, “even if there aren’t enough Dalit stories being told on screen, no one is doing charity by making these films. If you don’t have the skill, capacity or understanding to deal with such issues, it is better to pass the mike to people who do” (Joshi). This statement might come across as bold, but it speaks of an aspect that cannot be ignored. And this silencing or marginalisation of Dalit within the annals of Bollywood has to stop, especially keeping in mind the marked impact Hindi cinema tends to have on India’s masses.

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