

Crafting Caste in Indian Cinema: Reinforcing Stereotype or Challenging Negation?

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Abstract

'Caste' has permeated into almost every aspect of Indian society, and 'cinema' has a major mass reach in India, hence to read them both together becomes quite imperative. The present paper would read 'caste' through the lens of caste system with specific focus on films such as *Jai Bheem* and *Article 15*. The methodology involves developing the theoretical base of the 'caste-based' films and 'reading' them from the constituents of film-making, i.e light, music, dialogue, camera angle etc. The study intends to celebrate the emergence of New Wave cinema with dalits as assertive protagonists and takes a sharp critique on the films where dalits were either absent or present only tangentially. The aims of the study are, to foreground the necessity of discussing 'caste' unabashedly; to study the impact of Dalit movement on Indian cinema; and to discuss the emergence of a new wave cinema. An attempt would be made to read these films as a form of "politicizing art" (Benjamin) by re-visiting Indian cinema and questioning the exclusion policy of the 'mainstream' cinema.

Keywords: Caste; Dalit Movement; Mainstream cinema; New Wave Cinema; Politicizing Art.

Introduction

Is 'caste' in India a thing of past? The educated, urban Indians would answer the question in the affirmative as the purity-pollution concept that was practiced earlier is not very much apparent. However, just a peep into the social framework and the minds would be put to think on the 'internalized casteism' (Dutt 146). The changed form or the disguised caste discrimination still nourishes the 'legitimized apartheid' in our society. India is a graded society where caste system is socially accepted and is religiously sanctioned. The dalits are 'systematically neglected' by the le-

gitimate social structures branding them as 'socially frail, economically needy and politically powerless'. (Rajkumar 115) The incidents of dalit students committing suicide in higher education institutes¹, the cases of mob lynching, honour killing, rape of dalit women, and the most recent ones, the discrimination in the quarantine centres during Covid 19 pandemic² are evidence enough to justify the pressing need to talk about caste.

Cinema for Indians is the major source of entertainment, and has a looming mass appeal. For the unversed, Indian cinema industry produces more than 1500 films every year, and almost half of this are given by Bollywood (Hindi cinema) itself. It is important to recount the numbers to ponder over the limited space given to the caste question. Talking on the issue of 'cultural exclusion' of dalits in Hindi cinema, Gopal Guru observes, 'In Hindi movies, dalit issues particularly those based on caste exploitation, atrocities and discrimination are completely ignored.' (112) Similar views are echoed by Jiya Rani, a Dalit Indian journalist (in Pal 2019), "the mainstream media is not for the poor, not for the oppressed. It has carved its kingdom out of loyalty to the powers, to bureaucracy, to domination."

Critics may list down an exhaustive range of films on/about dalits, ranging from *Achhut Kanya* (1936) to *Article 15* (2019), however, one must examine the approach of the film-makers. Mostly, either it is an inter-caste love story portraying the upper caste partner in the revolting vein to take side with the lower caste partner, or the dalits are just tangential-ly mentioned. The messiah figure, or the 'Brahminical saviour complex'³ (derived from Teju Cole's the 'White Saviour Industrial Complex') overshadows the 'real' dalit. Their portrayal is only of being the 'victimized other'. Wankhede also questions the typecast portrayal of dalits, saying, in mainstream Indian cinema "the possibility that the Dalit character [...] may enter to transform the terrible social structure by 'fist of fury' or by philanthropist grace is not an admissible topic". One can conclude that media acts as a catalyst in perpetrating the prevailing dominant discourse by invisibilizing the question of caste to the extent of normalizing it. Yengde too opines that 'Cinema, as a cultural product, form of expression and mass entertainment, appears to dutifully genuflect to an Indian Brahmanical order'. (503) Arti Singh and E P Abdul Azeez, in their paper, "Caste in Contemporary Bollywood Movies" have done an extensive study on some 40 Bollywood films between 2014-2017, in context to the reel name of the character, their profession in the film and their caste. Their findings clearly indicate the obsession of Bollywood 'with the storylines of the dominant caste order due to the issues of caste complexity and marketability of the films.' (97) On the one hand, there is a lack of dalit-centric

films, on the other side, the vectors of surname and occupation chosen to analyse the films only reinforce the caste system, 'reflecting (that) the socio-cultural circumstances of India, the Dalit and other backward castes were unheard and unreached. Their stories and narratives are seen and treated as worthless in the popular culture of cinema as same as they have been treated in real-life circumstances. (97)

The divide of 'mainstream' and 'parallel' cinema further reduces the chances for dalit-centric films. The mainstream cinema, according to Durren has a "well-defined protagonist" and for Bordwell, the "deadline plot structure" is required. In common usage, in India mainstream cinema refers to popular Hindi cinema that rarely carries any social message; rather aims only to provide entertainment to the masses for the maximization of profit. (Singh and Azeez 94) This compartmentalization of 'cinema' and the chief focus on making commercially successful films cause a neglect of caste discourse.

Contemporary Dalit Activism and Dalit Cinema

Harish S Wankhede, a political scientist, begins his argument by challenging the celebration of 100 years of Bollywood and expresses an urgent need to review the industry from the 'subaltern perspective'. Though the film-makers have experimented with varied themes, from patriotism to poverty to unemployment to disillusionment to class to religion, and even women and gender, a serious study needs to be presented about dalit resistance. To continue with Wankhede's views, films are not just medium of entertainment, films 'as artistic expression cannot be devoid of their politico-ideological objectives.' If one is to recall Hindi films with dalit characters, only films like *Achhut Kanya*, *Ankur*, *Sujata*, *Sautan*, *Prem Rog*, and some latest ones like *Aarakshan*, *Masaan*, *Lagaan*, *Article 15* come to the foreground. And in these films too, a very stereotyped, victimized dalits are presented. This invisibilization of caste in Indian cinema makes it imperative to initiate a discussion for a serious cinema to answer Yengde's observation of Indian cinema 'as a project that has failed to embody inclusion and diversity'. (503) He propounds the idea of Dalit Cinema as 'an alter-imaginaire...an act of defiance leading to a sustained cinematic struggle.' (503) He reads Dalit Cinema being similar to the dalit liberation movements since the 1960s and defines it '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.' (503)

To understand Yengde's implication of Dalit Cinema as a political project, it is necessary to know the trajectory of dalit liberation struggle. Every dalit artist (be it a writer, musician, even film maker) is an activist, the intention being to resist the upper caste hegemony and to re-gain the visibility long denied to dalits. The initial ripples created by the Bhakti poets were furthered by reformers like Jotiba Phule, Periyar, Narayan Guru, Guru Ghasidas etc, eventually reaching Ambedkar. With Ambedkar, began a formal and channelized protest against the erasure of dalits, in society, politics, culture, literature etc. The fight for the rights in the political and social sphere was translated into literature, and it gave us a new genre of Indian writing, i.e Dalit literature. This literature of protest challenged the mainstream writings by creating an alternative aesthetics of literature. The angst of the Dalit Panthers was reflected in the aggressive writings of Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal and the likes. However, after the demise of Ambedkar, the movement had its lull phase. Due to Sanskritization, the second generation dalits started preferring to camouflage their identity by adopting the common surnames as those of the upper caste, imitating their lifestyles and by disregarding their dalit roots. This drifting apart from the movement severed them from the dalit consciousness and gave rise to a new section of dalits, the 'Elite' dalits or the 'Neo-Kshatriyas'⁴/ 'Brahmanized Dalits' (Kancha Ilaiah vii).

Nonetheless, the Gen Z⁵ of dalits has once again pulled the movement out of the dungeons. Their exposure to the urban and Western world, accessibility to education and technology, and presence at the global platforms has enabled them to 'celebrate their dalithood'. They wear their dalit identity with pride and their names are suffixed with their distinct sub-caste. Not just this, they are taking dalit protest to a newer level, beyond political and religious confines. It is an accepted fact that unless a distinct dalit culture is established (rather, re-established), the makeover of the society cannot be possible. Hence, Dalit youth is digging deep into their native culture/s to design alternative and new idiom, new symbol of resistance. Culturally, they are exploiting dalit folk culture, music, dance forms; the students take to the streets with plays, slogans, songs to sensitize and to provoke - each aims to define their selfhood. And such measures are producing notable results. Now we just do not have Dalit Literature, but also Dalit literature festivals; dalits on digital platforms (with their own websites, YouTube channels, twitter accounts etc), and even in popular culture, dalits are not invisible. In music, rappers like Sumeet Samos, Ginni Mahi, Sheetal Sathe and the bands like the Casteless Collective, Dhamma Wings etc are singing their identity, and in cinema, film-makers like Pa Ranjith and Nagraj Manjule are busy creating some serious dalit cinema.

We even had the first ever Dalit Film and Cultural Festival (at New York City, February 23-24, 2019), an initiative of United States Ambedkarites (with Suraj Yengde in the lead). The festival was attended by Pa Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, Mari Selvaraj, along with Miss Earth and actress Niharika Singh. It was not just a Festival, but a Movement to declare that though the dalits/dalit issues are neglected by the Brahmanical mainstream cinema, dalits have created a separate space for themselves in Indian cinema.

Such counter narratives coming straight from the oppressed, shame the 'dominant' group, and also pronounce assertively that the dalits will not be satisfied with just the 'object/prop' status in the art world too. They need no sympathy as now they are laced with defiance, out to portray their resistance. Yogesh Maitreya, the founder of Panther's Paw Publication, applauds the "justice with aesthetics" in the films by dalits and calls it the creation of a 'new wave of cinema'. The changed strategy of film-makers has come out of the set mould of dalits being the victims to be saved and the upper castes being the saviour/philanthropists. Manju Edachira appreciates the efforts of the new film-makers,

The cinematic interventions of contemporary Dalit film-makers in India, Nagraj Manjule and Pa Ranjith, among others, represent modes of resistant historiography, employed by Dalits, against the aesthetic regime of stereotypical representation, through innovative techniques in visuals, sound, music, and cinematography....these film-makers not only disturb "the unconscious of caste" through an explicit anti-caste aesthetics but also produce affective, expressive archives. In other words, they bring into presence what was previously impossible through the processes of denunciation (of casteist images) and innovation (of anti-caste aesthetics).

With the change in the purchasing power and also, urbanization, it is necessary to accept dalits also as a significant consumer of cinema. Herrero talks about the impact of 'globalisation and new modern media and social platforms (that) have contributed, not only to reinventing the very dynamics of cinema production and consumption, but also to developing new film genres that dare to question and counter hegemonic ideologies and aesthetics. (37) In such a case, to ignore the films on dalit issues is a grave mistake. Also, it needs to be questioned that any depiction of dalits in films is based in rural India. Should one to conclude that the urban spaces are sanitized from caste discrimination? All such questions make films a political act, as Levin writes in 'Film', 'The cinematic experience

can become a transformative moment whereby the audience propels the dialectics of social change'. (qtd in Yengde, 516) Something that happened in the 1960s Latin America, can be seen being replicated in India now. The emergence of "Third Cinema" in Latin America echoed 'the popular resistance movements of the period, presenting effective critiques of the profiteering purveyors of elite film-making and, by achieving prominence in regional circles, challenged the American and European cinematic presentation of white characters as indomitable.' (Yengde 516) Similarly one must read Indian cinema critically 'as a politics in and of Indian society' (505) and thus film making and film screening both, become a political act. The emergence of Dalit Cinema is an example of Benjamin's concept of 'politicizing art' whereby the casteist project 'by countering aestheticised caste dogmas, is an appropriate response to normative caste ideals'. (517) Herrero understands Dalit Cinema as 'a movement of visual creative art made by Dalit film-makers with a view to embodying and dignifying Dalit subjectivities and inspiring socio-cultural criticism and resistance'. (37)

Elaborating on 'dalits' estrangement' from the cinema industry, Yengde brings in the issue of 'dalit gaze' and the role of Central Board of Film Certificate (CBFC) in India. The Board was established under the Cinematograph Act of 1952, 'which embodied colonial legacies and was modelled on the English Cinematograph Act of 1909. 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'. (512) All this has heavily affected the dalit in Indian cinemascesapes. Thus, the emergence of 'new cinema' is seen as 'cinematic resistance' (Yengde 517) to foreground the stories of dalits, narrated by dalits, to avoid the 'danger of a single story'⁶ (Adichie).

Experimenting with the Aesthetics

The film *Jai Bheem* (2021) directed by TS Gnanavel is based on the real-life legal case (1995) of a young dalit man, who was killed under police custody, and his wife's battle for justice. *Jai Bheem* got critically acclaimed in India and abroad for dealing with a real-life story that speaks for the justice to mankind and need for human rights.

The film *Article 15* (2019) directed by Anubhav Sinha, revolves around a gangrape and killing case of two minor girls of village Lalgaoon situated in

rural North India. It is broadly based on a true story of 2014 gangrape case in Baduan, Uttar Pradesh, India. The newly inducted IPS Ayan Ranjan orders for an investigation to the case to find the truth on the girls' death. The story of *Article 15* has been told from a non-dalit protagonist's perspective. But it sheds light on the caste discrimination that is penetrated deep in the mindset of the people and their outlook about dalit community.

It is worth appreciating the initiative of the filmmakers to come with the theme that has allowed understanding dalit cinema in a new form and style. The directors have been able to focus on the issues throughout the film without diluting the main objective of the story. The films *Jai Bheem* (2021) and *Article 15* (2019) have tried to experiment with new style of storytelling on Dalits. These question the existing narrative structure of films on marginalized communities in India so far. With popular and successful films like Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001), the character of *Kachra* has been able to establish the 'other', who is weak, physically challenged, poor and oppressed, but possesses a special skill of spinning the ball that helps him to be included in the team of non-dalit cricket group. However, the film does not revolve around the perspectives of *Kachra* as a dalit. Similarly, Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015), which is a masterpiece in telling the stories of individual's struggles and suffering whose life changes because of the caste that they belong to. Over the years, the mainstream commercial films have been showcasing caste issues in various plots. In the selected samples for the study, *Article 15* has the 'non-dalit' as the protagonist, who comes as a 'saviour', whereas dalit characters lack central space in the film but the cause is centralized. Meanwhile, *Jai Bheem* comes up with dalit protagonist who is assertive and not silent, unlike *Article 15*.

Jai Bheem portrays the atrocities of police on Dalits where even the pregnant woman (lead character) is shown tortured and harassed by the non-dalit uniform men. There is a representation of power of the dominant section on the non-powerful and weaker section of the society, i.e, Dalits. *Irula* community as a whole has been shown as united, supportive and simple living human beings staying in clusters, who are helpful to the society even though they are treated as 'others'. As a human being, everyone has a right to have privacy and live a descent life. Referring to the global goals, Sustainable Development Goal 16 talks about peace, justice and strong institutions in the country. In *Jai Bheem*, the violation of human rights, gender discrimination, non-inclusive approach to Dalits can be observed. Films present the reality and with *Jai Bheem*, the director tactfully represents the bitter truth of the social discrimination and treatment done to dalits by the upper caste. In one of the heart-breaking scenes of the film,

the female pregnant woman was made to stay with the male suspects inside the jail which is deliberate to show them small and valueless. Harassment, unequal treatment, molestation are a few common crimes that dalit women regularly face but to showcase these issues on screen is the most challenging task.

The film *Article 15* starts with a satirical background song along the title sequence which establishes the class and caste difference in the society, the rich versus poor living standards and conditions. The song reflects the use of local dialect based on North India. It narrates the sufferings of poor dalits and compares the haves and have-nots, i.e. the poor dalits and rich upper caste community. The opening visuals mostly shows the close ups, mid-close ups to show the group of people singing the song on a rainy night with their expressions, emotions and engagement to narrate the story of poor people. The use of long shots and extreme long shots adds in the identification of the locale and conditions surrounding the area. With the title sequence, there is PAN⁷ right to a moving bus and abrupt pop up of a mid-close up shot of a hapless young girl in a dark setting inside a bus. The film builds the context of caste discrimination and constitution of India by showing the long shot of the statue of Ambedkar situated in the town. The visuals of rain add to the dramatic effect of the scenes, the philosophy of nature and mankind. It may connote about the temporal structure and belief system of the society, positive change and consequences. The *mis-en-scene*⁸ of the overall title sequence briefly contextualise with the genre of the film, i.e. crime and mystery. Anubhav Sinha's use of famous song of legendary Bob Dylan's *blowin.. in the wind* with the drone view of a moving car from an urban setting with modern roads, multiple flyovers, proper road identification markers to a rural landscape that has unidentified roads and boundaries accentuates the effect. The song fits appropriately to the bigger questions of life related to peace, humanity, equality and existence as shown in the film. The song fades with the tilt up shot of a gentleman sitting inside a vehicle.

There is an attempt by the director to present the issues and challenges faced by the dalit community. Be it honour killing, rape, murder or missing cases, victims generally belong to the dalit community as they don't have power to fight against the system. In a developing country like India, the crimes against women are high. The film revolves around a missing minor girl (lower caste) and the investigation to find out the culprits of the gangrape case of other two minor girls. It can be analysed that caste is politics which is controlled by the powerful authorities to suppress the oppressed. The story plot builds the suspense to find the guilty with mul-

multiple climax scenes. There are many sub plots to the main story and each plot narrates the struggle of an oppressed in a different angle.

The Craft of Camera

The opening scene of *Jai Bheem* shows the inconsolable crying of a baby girl sitting on her mother's lap, who is waiting outside the jail to receive her husband. The sequence shows the interrogation of the suspects by the police official based on their names and caste. The suspects of lower caste are made to stand separately and are booked for alleged criminal charges against them whereas the other suspects of high caste are allowed to go home. The family members of the dalit suspects keep waiting outside the jail to watch their men getting thrashed and assaulted in front of them. The very beginning of the film sets the context of the film that attempts to highlight caste discrimination. The film gives the audience a mixture of emotion of happiness, tragedy and suffering with songs and sound effects. The use of silence as sound inside the jail is very powerful to evoke the fear and suspense among the audience. The film begins with a bird's-eye view of a beautiful harvesting field that is situated on mountainous terrain with the villagers working in groups to find and catch rats. The *Irula* community is migratory in nature and their basic livelihood comes from catching snakes and rats.

Unfortunately, this group of community lacks land documents, voter id, ration card – the basic prerequisites to have identity proof of being citizen of the country. In order to establish the poor living conditions of the tribe, in one of the scenes, the camera tilts up to show the house door (made of mud) damaged due to heavy rains, to an owl sitting on a branch of tree opposite to the house. The scene is symbolic in nature. Camera tilt is generally used to show the magnitude of high-rise structures, which in case of the film shows the mud huts which are small and fragile like the community itself. Rain has been shown as a symbol of beauty, hope, power and destruction. The owl in the film can be interpreted as the mute spectator who sees and knows the truth but cannot speak it out. The owl has been the prime eye-witness to the film's protagonist's families struggle when others were sleeping at night.

In cinematic language, high angle camera shot is used to show the characters as inferior. In *Jai Bheem*, the characters of *Irula* community are shown with high angle shot, where they are 'charged guilty' or are punished. Even the caste discrimination can be interpreted with the camera angles in the scenes where dalit local people are not allowed to sit on the same place

where a high caste person sits.

One of the most powerful scene in the film shows a small girl running and crying out looking at her mother, the use of mid-Close up and close up shots establishes the pain and suffering of the victims. The shots taken inside the courtroom consisted mostly of mid-close up, close up, long shot, extreme long shots to establish the different moods and situation. A lot of over-the-shoulder-shots were used to show the conversation between the lawyer Chandru and the witness in the courtroom.

In the film *Jai Bheem*, the struggle of women of *Irula* community has been shown that raises the question of violence against women and injustice done to the tribe. Their voices are unheard; they are mistreated, molested physically and verbally. The *Irula* people are tagged as habitual offenders so the police discriminates them and behaves in the non-humanistic way. To bring the serious tone of the film, the use of low key lighting can be seen in the jail scenes. The use of high angle shot can be seen where the protagonist Rajakanna was lying on the floor and sub inspector Gurumurthy looks back at him with an authorial position. The continuous use of high and low angle shots establishes the difference between the oppressed and the oppressor.

Article 15 has a dark colour tone with lighting effects that adds up to the mystery genre. High angle shot is used to show the lower caste villagers who were sitting on ground, barefoot and low angle shot to show the non-dalit IPS officer. The camera establishes the difference in caste that these personalities carried. Extreme close-up shots of feet, hairs and hands of girls hanged from trees give the impression of minor girls belonging to poor community. Most of the conversation scenes are Over-the Shoulder shots between the protagonists and other characters in the films such as Nihal Singh, Bhramadatt, Gaura, CBI officer, Nishad, Satyendra etc. The purpose of the shot is to bring out the emotions and reactions of the situation.

Casting the 'Unstereotyped'

The film setting reflects on a rural, forest landscape where the *Irula* community stays in temporary mud huts. The director presents to the audience the social struggle, cultural practices and economic status of the tribe in a developed society. It portrays that Dalits are still unaware of their basic rights and basic needs as they are oppressed under the social system. Even proper education is not made available to the lower caste

tribes which itself as a barrier to their development. Senggeni (Lijomol Jose), the protagonist of the film *Jai Bheem* is a tribal woman who fights against the injustice done to her husband with the support of the lawyer cum activist Chandru (Suriya). Senggeni is shown as a strong, optimistic, caring, uneducated, hardworking, skilled lady, who is determined to find out her missing husband Rajakannu (played by Manikandan) from police custody. Her facial expression and body language determines her strong determination unlike other females from the same community. It is a challenging task for a woman that too from a lower caste to fight against the system. The film has portrayed Senggeni as a wounded tigress who, in spite of the hardships and obstacles decide to fight for justice. The protagonist of the film has been able to present the struggles of a Dalit pregnant woman and the ill-treatment that she received from police. Rajakannu is shown as kind-hearted, soft spoken, gender sensitive, skilled, god-fearing, simple, loving husband and father.

Talking about the cast of the film in this caste-based movie, Suriya as Chandru has been able to stand tall as a lawyer and activist for human rights, law and justice. The character of Chandru is the depiction of a responsible lawyer who is not money minded and fights for justice. He believes in the Constitution and follows it thoroughly for the betterment of society. The character of Chandru reflects on the responsible lawyer of the state who offers to help anybody who is fighting for their rights irrespective of caste and class that they are from. Maithra played by Rajisha Vijayan is a school teacher who tries to provide the basic education to the villagers and make them aware of basic rights. She acts as a backbone to Senggeni to fight her battle.

Prakash as I.G. Perumalsami, is the most sensitive and responsible policemen who proved his capacity and objective decision-making attitude. The role of Mosakutty has been played by Rajendran, who is also from *Irula* tribe. Mosakutty is accused of hiding his brother's hideouts so got punished brutally inside the judicial custody. Mosakutty plays an important supporting role of a man who respects women and raises voice for them. The villain of the film is S. I Gurumoorthy, he plays the corrupt police officer who is responsible for cruel behaviour and action to prisoners. Gurumoorthy is the symbol of bad policeman who is responsible for defaming the entire police force. As a whole, the film shows the three important aspects of society- caste, judiciary, law and education.

Article 15 highlights the layered caste system that India has and the superstitious beliefs that high caste community endorses to differentiate

them from Dalits/lower caste origins. Some of the common practices that are followed by high caste people in the film are, 1) Not to drink water from lower caste group, 2) Not to touch even the shadow of a lower caste person, 3) Higher caste person can't share same space with a lower caste person, 4) lower caste community is responsible for cleaning the garbage, toilets and drains.

The protagonist of the film *Article 15*, newly inducted IPS Officer Ayan Ranjan (Ayushman Khurana) is a well-educated Brahmin graduate with good looks and intelligence, who is born and brought up in urban and well-to-do family. In the beginning of the film, camera tilts-up (camera movement) to unveil the protagonist (IPS Ayan), who is well-dressed and seated with a dark sunglasses on his face inside a vehicle with other uniform men sitting at the front of the vehicle. The scene is very powerful and symbolic here as it locates IPS Ayan Ranjan as an outsider who cannot see the realities of the rural India and has a filtered understanding of the issues of caste dynamics in the society. The scene established the protagonist with the misn-en-scene of a government high rank officer. Another interesting prop (film setting) used here is the book, *Discovery of India* (by Jawahar Lal Nehru). During the journey, Ayan texts his friend about the beautiful landscape of the countryside and the simplicity of the locals. Ironically, the officer got his education both in India and abroad so his notion of 'beautiful India' was totally different before joining his new assignment at Largaon, a small village in North India. The experience of injustice, social discrimination, gender inequality, honour killing, crime on women and caste-based violence led Ayan Ranjan to think differently and act responsibly for the betterment of the society at large. He discovers India in the truest sense, which he had read and heard but not experienced. In the end of the film, it is shown how IPS Ayan discovered and perceived India and Indians in terms of caste discrimination. The film reflects on the caste discrimination from an educated, rich non-dalit's viewpoint and it gives an opportunity to every film reader to think critically on the issues of caste and its representation through cinema.

Gaura (Sayani Gupta) is a strong female dalit activist who cares for her fellow people and fights for their rights. The character gets respectable space in the film that hints on the director's intention to make a balance of dalit and non-dalit voices. The character of Nishad is the representation of resistance and voices from the margins to the mainstream who speaks for a free and equal society. The dalit community needs a torchbearer to fight for their rights and give them the hope to live with dignity. Nihal Singh (Sushil Pandey) is the most humble and sincere police officer from an upper

caste. He plays a protective brother to her own younger sister but commits the most unforgiveable crime to other girl because of fear and pressure from his peer. Bhramadatt Singh (Manoj Pahwa) is the antagonist of the film, who plays the role of an upper caste corrupt policeman who was one the main person responsible behind the gangrape case. In the end of the film, Brahmadatt is arrested and the third missing girl is found by IPS Ranjan. There is no dearth of such uniformed men in our country and the character of Bhramadatt allows us to understand the complexities of caste and belief system that people have adopted generation after generation. The film shows that caste is controlled by power and victims of caste are always oppressed by the society.

Speaking out Resistance

Through the appropriate use of language, both the directors have highlighted the purity-pollution concept. The dialogues in *Jai Bheem* are strong, moving and distinctively portray the plight of the tribes.

“Sir ji, inko lene koi nahin ayega kya, inki galti kya hai.”

“Inki galti hai, yehi hai ke paida hue hai.”

The scene infers that a person's identity is constructed by the society. Caste identity is more important to identify a person from a place rather than his/her identity as a human being. The caste defines your innocence or guilt charged for a crime.

“Kon sa kanoon kehte hai ki admi mei ek case lagao, har bakre mei do do case thok do. Koi nahin pohchege”

Law and order are in hands of the upper caste people who decides the fate of the marginalized community. Nobody is allowed to raise questions on the decisions made by the supreme authorities like uniform personnel.

“Tumhe gaon mei bulake galti ki, izzat se pesh aaoge to sar pei chadh jaoge”

It has been the age-old practice in our country to keep suppressing the weaker sections of the society. It carries the taboo that Dalits/tribal people should be always dominated so that they can't raise their voice and act according to the wish of the supreme.

“Mei aur tere gaon se? Tune sakal dekhi hai apni ayne mei, ab bolega ki mei teri

biradari ki bhi hun".

In the very beginning of *Article 15*, the protagonist is shown sitting inside the vehicle, telling the driver to stop by to buy a bottle of mineral water. In response to him, driver says, *"Sir, yeh pasiyo ka gaon hai, choti jaat ke, suwar palte hai. Hum inki haat ka pani nahin pite"*

"Touch bhi allowed nahin, parchayi bhi"

In a scene, when IPS Ayan Ranjan attempts to take some food item from his junior police officer, he insisted not to eat from his plate, *"Nahin nahin sir, hamari plate se rehne dijiye, hum apke liye dusra mangwate hai."*

Society has properly marked spaces for dalit community. People with higher caste discriminate them with man-made beliefs to isolate the community as untouchables., *"Agar sab barabar ho jaayenge tog raja kaun bane-ga?"*

In a scene, talking to IPS Ayan Ranjan, Bharamadatt says, *'Inka yehi hai sir, bhaag jaati hai, phir wapas aa jati hai'*. It can be inferred that generally Dalit girls are often charged with elopement cases and missing cases should not be taken seriously as it is their nature to do so. It says clearly that dalit girls are like that.

There is scene of mob lynching especially to lower caste people of the region, *"Yeh yahan ki roz ki kahani", sir!*

Religion is considered pure and dalits are not allowed to enter temples. So, they are often punished and molested for doing so. In India, religious sentiment is way higher than humanity and mankind. Bhramadatt accuses the poor villagers charged of guilty in entering the religious space and having food there. *"Mandir mei baith ke khana kahyenge"*

Seeing the war on caste in the village, IPS Ayan his fellow unit men what caste they belong to? *"Sir mai chamar ho, yeh pasi hai, hum inse khafi uppar hai, hamara inse koi lena dena nahin. Inka chuwa hum khate bhi nahin"*

The film ends with the IPS officer and his unit sitting on ground outside a food stall and eating together the same food cooked by one local woman seller. On this IPS Ayan Ranjan asks her, *"Amma, Kon se jaat se ho?"*

This closing dialogue presents the most complex identity issue that people

are still carrying and finding answer for it. Caste depiction in the film ends with a positive note where dalits and non-dalits come together and break the stereotypes that exist in the society.

Conclusion

It is time for Indian cinema to become more receptive and inclusive. The line between 'mainstream' and 'parallel' cinema needs to be erased, the premise of the mainstream should be ruptured to generate 'an anti-caste discourse on/in cinema' (Edachira, 51) and also to accept the 'new mainstream'⁹ created by makers like Pa Ranjith and Nagraj Manjule. It is necessary to acknowledge Dalit Cinema as the new genre in film-making, that 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. (Yengde, 516)

Besides the art of filmmaking, it is required to recognize the efforts of the film-makers, may be by instituting awards in this category and also by consistently organizing Dalit Film Festivals (within the country as well). Also, to conclude, Indian cinema should aim at overhauling, both, the art of filmmaking, and the art of watching/approaching the film. If the film-makers should become inclusive, the audience too should be prompted 'to question conventional practices and, even more importantly, ponder the implications and ethical dimension, at once political and poetic, of the often unquestioned caste system.' (Herrero, 41). Therefore, Herrero emphasizes that 'anti-caste aesthetics should therefore become *anti-caste aesthet(h)ics*.' (41)

The lopsided presentation of dalits, confined to rural India, living in depravity needs to give way to the new age urban dalits, who are educated and have a wider exposure to the world. However, one needs to applaud the filmmakers who are moving against the conventional dalit representation and have 'shifted the focus towards the new aspirational Dalits that have emerged in cities and *mofussil* towns. He is pictured 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.' (Wankhede)

Endnotes:

¹Though Rohith Vemula case (2016) of Hyderabad Central University is quite known, many other cases like that of Fathima Lateef (2019) at IIT Madras, Devika (2020) in Kerala, and the casteist outburst of a Professor at IIT Kharagpur (2021).

²In many places such as in Nainital's Bhumka village, the upper caste people in the quarantine centres refused to eat food and drink water touched by a Dalit woman cook. (May 2020)

³Teju Cole, the Nigerian writer, coined the term 'The White Saviour Industrial Complex' in his tweet (@tejucole) stating that it is "not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege". It is believed that people of colour lack courage to stand/ speak for themselves. Taking a cue from this, in Indian context, we can speak of the Brahminical Saviour Complex that gives the rights to the upper caste to speak for the Dalits because the latter lack agency and power.

⁴Ilaiah uses the term for the Sudra upper castes, i.e the dalits (second generation) who imitate the upper caste and drift away from their dalit roots to get assimilated into the upper caste society.

⁵Refers to the contemporary dalits, active primarily from the last decade of 20th century. They are using innovative ideas and strategies to champion the caste issues. Having access to English education, technology and Western exposure, they are exploiting various avenues to further dalit activism.

⁶Adichie's concept talks about the danger of listening to a single narrative, unaware of the flip side of the story existing as well. In the present context, it refers to knowing the story of the dalits, as experienced and narrated by them, for better understanding and authenticity.

⁷Camera movement

⁸Overall film setting/set up

⁹From the article, 'The Rise of the Dalit Aesthete in Marathi Cinema', The Hindu (12 Sept. 2016). The new cinema, with the intersection of parallel and mainstream/ commercial cinema; the serious social message of the former but presented as the latter.

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