

# Performative Progressivism in *Madam Chief Minister*

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## Abstract

Augmented by Dalit voices and activists on social media, recent times have witnessed an upward trend in Dalit assertion. This move towards Dalit assertion has also garnered 'allies' for the Dalit cause. Films, being the much-acclaimed mirror to society, have not remained untouched and the past decade has seen numerous films taking up the Dalit question. This article conducts a critical textual analysis of Subhash Kapoor's 2021 film *Madam Chief Minister* to uncover its articulation of the Dalit cause. The article posits that the film's narrative takes what can be termed a 'Dalit By-pass' and betrays performative progressivism that ties into the dominant culture of the country.

**Keywords:** Caste; Dalit; Discourse; Hindi cinema; Representation.

## Introduction

### Makings of Dalit Cinema

Recent times have witnessed an upward trend in Dalit mobilisation and Dalit activism. This has played out especially well on the internet (Thakur, 2020) where second-generation, university-educated Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi (DBA) youth have found, on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, a space to platform their voices. While it can be argued that digital capital is more readily accessible to the privileged castes (Shubham, 2022), nonetheless 'Digital Dalits', a term sometimes used pejoratively, have been successful to make their presence felt by generating a discourse on caste as a lived experience. Social media has afforded a much-needed and opportune means where they are freely and unabashedly voicing their concerns and sharing their perspectives. Instagram and Twitter handles like [@dalitjournal](#), [@dalitcamera](#), [@bahujanlivesmatter](#), [@artedkar](#), [@](#)

[ambedkariteIND](#), [@buffalo.intellectual](#), and [@yashicadutt](#), are asserting their identity and making themselves visible in society. Such social media accounts are singlehandedly responsible for addressing the information lacuna by posting news and events that mainstream media turns a blind eye to in concurrence with its elemental desideratum to invisibilise caste.

Films, which are understood to be a mirror of society, have not remained untouched by this phenomenon. Specifically looking at films that have emerged from the Hindi film industry in the past decade, there has been a rise in cinematic narratives forged around Dalit issues and Dalit characters. Caste has never found such a resounding articulation onscreen as it does today. Dalit filmmakers like Pa Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, and Neeraj Ghaywan have created the building blocks of an anti-caste aesthetic that exists as a counternarrative to the existing caste-blind and casteless cinematic narrative.

While Hindi cinema has been slow to warm up to this phenomenon, Tamil, Marathi, and Bengali cinema have long begun to carve a niche when it comes to what Yengde (2018) terms 'Dalit Cinema'. Nonetheless, as previously observed, cinematic narratives around Dalits are seeing the light of day on Hindi cinema screens and quite a few of these films have also experienced much-coveted box office success. Thus, studying these cinematic representations of Dalits becomes an imperative exercise as they have a bearing on the past, present, and future of the socio-political landscape of the nation. Critical analyses of these films can unveil the workings of power discourse within the country.

### **Filmic Narratives of Dalits**

Media representations matter. They hold intense significance in any culture because they have a direct connection to the nation's pulse. Media representations have the power to shape public perception and formulate public opinion. They also, in a manner, guide people to make sense of the world around them. As Hall (1997) elucidates, media representations are important because they are a central practice that shape and produce culture. Culture is what defines a nation, thus rendering media representations crucial to understating as well as defining a nation.

For almost the entirety of the history of cinema in India, specifically the Hindi cinema industry, stories have been narrated by a select few who control the reigns. As per a Foucauldian understanding of this phenomenon, the 'enunciating subjects' of discourse (Foucault, 2013) within the

filmmaking industry have primarily belonged to the privileged castes. Thus, the social practice of 'knowledge' generation within this discourse has been at the service of power, domination, and ideology for the privileged castes. Consequently, Dalits have either been absent from mainstream narratives, their stories invisibilised, or stereotyped as being weak, meek, and dirty (Chauhan, 2019; Vidushi, 2015; Wankhede, 2013; Yengde, 2018). This nature of the portrayal of Dalits stems from and is in conformity with the purity-pollution ideology of the ascriptive foundations of the Hindu caste society (Chakravarti, 2020). Additionally, the generation of knowledge by a dominant group posits what Adichie warns of as the 'danger of a single story' (TED, 2009). This single story either completely negates the existence of caste or plays into the trope of stereotyping what the so-called 'lower castes' are supposed to look like, speak like, dress like, and work like.

While cinematic narratives with Dalit representation have seen a much-appreciated rise in Hindi cinema, who is telling these stories and how Dalit characters are represented onscreen becomes an important field of academic inquiry. In accordance with this chain of thought, this paper examines the representation of Dalit issues and characters in one such film – Subhash Kapoor's 2021 feature film *Madam Chief Minister*, contextualising it within the caste-latent social framework.

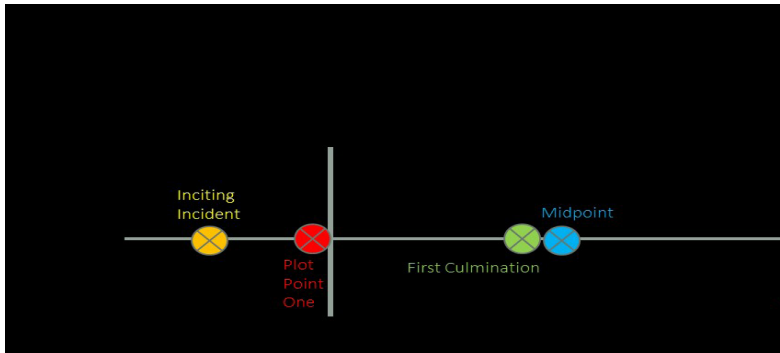
## Material and Methods

### Data Collection

This paper is guided by Syd Field's Three Act Paradigm (Field, 2003, 2005; Lazarus 2019) to identify key scenes in the film for analysis. An important name in the field of screenwriting, Syd Field developed the concept of the three-act paradigm. This paradigm identifies a film's narrative as divided into three acts - act one, act two, and act three. Each act comprises key events that are important to drive the narrative forward, as explained visually in *Figure 1*. below.

Act one, known as setup, forms one-fourth of the entire film's length and has two important events - inciting incident and plot point one. Act two, known as confrontation, is the majority of the film i.e., one-half of the film's total length. It comprises three important events - the first culmination, midpoint, and plot point two. Act three is one-fourth of the film's length. Termed as resolution, it comprises the climax (also called the second culmination of the film).

Based on this paradigm, key scenes in the film under study have been identified for analysis to fulfil the purpose of this article. Observation and note-taking are employed to collect and collate the data.



**Fig. I. Visual Representation of Syd Field's Three Act Paradigm**

*Madam Chief Minister* is constituted of forty-six scenes in total. As per Syd Field's paradigm, the following scenes have been identified for analysis:

- Inciting Incident – Scene 4
- Plot Point One – Scenes 7, 8, 9
- First culmination – Scene 29
- Midpoint – Scenes 30 and 31
- Plot Point Two – Scene 42
- Climax (Second Culmination) – Scenes 44 and 45

### **Data Analysis**

A film is a cultural text that is the product of its social and political milieu. An analysis of such a text can be reflective of its context, enabling an understanding of the social structures that govern its modes of production. The modes of production in a given society are controlled by the elite, who are responsible for the creation and distribution of knowledge and knowledge is power (Foucault, 2013). By controlling knowledge creation, the dominant class governs the social construction of reality.

In order to unearth the subtext in *Madam Chief Minister*, the method employed for the analysis of collected data is textual analysis. Performing

textual analysis of a text entails making an educated guess of what may be its most likely interpretations (McKee, 2001, 2003). These are, to an extent, subjective interpretations made by the researcher. However, the researcher needs to be reflexive and work towards bringing in as much objectivity as possible in the analysis.

For the purpose of this research article, scenes and sequences selected as per Syd Field's three act Paradigm have been analysed in the following two categories:

- Dialogues and narrative
- Appearance and visual setting

## Findings

### Dialogues and Narrative

A closer look at dialogues from the selected scenes helps open up various layers of meaning that are constructed in the film. Tara, who is the protagonist of the film and plays the title character, is identified by her name for the first time eight minutes into the film. This is in the form of her referring to herself in the third person (four minutes after her character has been visually introduced), while the character of her love interest, Indramani Tripathi, is identified as soon as he makes his first appearance in the film. Scene 4 also sees Tara refer to Indramani, as 'TripathiJi'. This is important because, Tara, who inhabits the intersectional location of at least two marginalised identities – she is a woman and she is Dalit – is not identified by her full name till way into the second act of the film's narrative; while Indramani's character, a privileged caste male, is addressed upfront by his surname. This automatically establishes his caste identity front and square in the minds of the audience.

At one point in time, the privileged caste characters are referred to as being *dabang*. *Dabang* is Hindi for authoritative or overpowering and refers to someone who practices power over others. Additionally, almost exclusively, privileged caste characters and non-Dalit characters are referred to by their surnames – *TripathiJi*, *Tiwari*, *Yadav*, *KushwahaJi*. It is also important to note here that *Ji* is a Hindi suffix used with names as a mark of respect. This form of address for privileged caste characters stands in stark contrast to the Dalit characters in the film, who are never addressed by their surnames nor are they identified as 'Dalit'. The filmmakers are able to insinuate their caste location by using the trope of othering and an

'us versus them' dialogical apparatus.

The analysis of selected dialogues exhibits the presence of a strong 'us versus them' lexicological characterisation. When talking about themselves and their community, Dalit characters use terms like *hum log*, *humare log* – meaning 'us' while privileged caste characters refer to Dalits as *tum log*, and *tumhare yahan* – meaning you, yours. This theme of 'us versus you' or 'us versus them' establishes and marks the various characters into sharply defined social groups that exist in a hierarchical structure governed by their caste locations. The use of such language also builds cinematic legitimacy for the differing treatment of these social groups.

Of all the scenes studied for this paper, only one scene (plot point one) indulges in any kind of discussion or deliberation on Dalit issues when Surajbhan, Tara's mentor, tries to guide her to channel her anger for Indramani, towards working for the betterment of her community. Apart from this one instance, there is no other moment of serious consideration of caste. While the film arguably is about a Dalit character, post midpoint, the film's narrative can best be understood as a political thriller. There is no discussion on the central theme introduced in the setup (act one) which is caste identity and the associated societal evils. A sub-narrative that can be identified in the film is that of Tara's female identity. This plays out very well in inciting incident, midpoint as well as climax, where she is showcased as defying all odds and breaking stereotypes of how a woman is supposed to conduct herself in society.

### **Appearance and Visual Setting**

Examining the appearances of various characters in the film also opens up another layer of visual meaning at play in the film's visual universe. Tara's introduction shows her riding a motorbike. Similarly, in scenes 44 and 45, Tara is seen riding a motorbike with a huge crowd of people marching behind her. This establishes and reiterates her as a defiant and strong woman. However, Tara's caste location has no bearing on this audio-visual spectacle. She could very well be a privileged caste woman who inhabits a rural landscape – which has long been stereotyped as being socially backward and oppressive of women – and is able to stand up to gender-based discrimination.

Drawing a comparison between the visual portrayal of different characters in the film reveals the privileged caste characters' portrayal as fairly light-skinned and always sharply dressed. There are also religious mark-

ers like beaded chains, rings, and vermilion on the forehead that are used to allude to their caste identities. Dalit characters such as Surajbhan and specifically, Bablu, Tara's cousin brother, are cast as dark-skinned, scrawny, shabbily dressed, and/or in flashy clothes – an aesthetic that does not match the 'upper caste aesthetic'.

Another point of divergence for privileged caste and Dalit characters in the film's narrative is the places they inhabit. Surajbhan's non-descript, dark courtyard in a rural setting stands in stark contrast to Indramani's bungalow, which is lined by SUVs. Such depictions either work to create a version of a social reality where Dalits live a ghettoised life or reinforce existing biases in the minds of the audience.

Ambedkar, the political ideal of Dalits, maintains a quiet presence around Surajbhan and Tara's characters appearing in the form of a statue in Surajbhan's courtyard and as photographs hung on the wall. Allusions are also made to him with the presence of the Constitution. These allusions, however, pale in comparison to the constant in-your-face references to the privileged caste identity of other characters.

## Discussion

It is commendable that the narrative of *Madam Chief Minister* seems to not fall into the trope of limiting caste-related discrimination and atrocities to rural India. As Mandal opines, caste 'resides in universities and power corridors' of the nation (Mandal, 2019), a reality that 'Bollywood' films like *Article 15* (2019), *Lagaan* (2001), have shied away from capturing on-screen. *Madam Chief Minister* pulls the caste-based discrimination out of rural India and foregrounds it against a very real backdrop of student and university politics as well as the state. And yet the filmmakers have let the opportunity pass as the caste question is almost completely invisibilised in the film.

Caste identity, in the entire film, is coherently spelt out when it comes to privileged caste characters but it is not the case with Dalit characters. Quite paradoxically, the people who are at the receiving end of discrimination on account of their caste location in the real world, remain 'casteless' in the film's narrative. It is another paradox that 'castelessness' exists as something that the privileged castes experience in the real world as they monopolise the casteless 'general' category (Deshpande, 2013) India felt duty-bound to 'abolish' caste, and this led the State to pursue the conflicting policies of social justice and caste-blindness. As a consequence, the

privileged upper castes are enabled to think of themselves as "casteless", while the disprivileged lower castes are forced to intensify their caste identities. This asymmetrical division has truncated the effective meaning of caste to lower caste, thus leaving the upper castes free to monopolise the "general category" by posing as casteless citizens." "author":{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Deshpande","given":"Satish","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""},"container-title":"Economic and Political Weekly","id":"ITEM-1","issue":"15","issued":{"date-parts":["2013"]},"page":"32-39","title":"Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the 'General Category'", "type":"article-journal","volume":"48"},"uris":["http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=64a0971d-4a86-480d-b1f1-0e04574850f7"]},"mendeley":{"formattedCitation":"(Deshpande, 2013.

Dalit characters, their appearance, and the spaces they inhabit are another bone of contention in this film as they have been made to fit a privileged caste understanding of what a Dalit looks like or what a Dalit space looks like. It can be said that the film suffers from what can be termed as the 'Savarna gaze' (Parvataneni, 2021). I am using the term 'savarna', because the film has been directed by a person who does not belong to the Dalit community, rather to the privileged caste community. The film has been produced and directed through a lens that keeps the privileged caste perspective at its centre. Even though the film is ostensibly about a central character that belongs to the Dalit community, the film's narrative fails to deliver it from a Dalit perspective. The fact that not once the term 'Dalit' has been used to identify any of the Dalit characters is also very telling. It is almost as if the director and producers of the film are uncomfortable spelling out the core issue of the film. This might not appear deliberate, however, the fact that every other character's caste identity is blatantly on display, provides evidence of the contrary.

The intersectional identity of Tara also remains unaddressed as a lived experience. While establishing her as a strong female character, her Dalit identity is stripped off of her. This can be understood as a parallel to the Savarna Feminist movement in India that has failed to assimilate Dalit women's marginalisation in its advocacy for equality and equity.

Untouchable, Unstoppable - reads *Madam Chief Minister's* publicity poster. But that is about it when it comes to directly or indirectly addressing the caste issue in the film. Furthermore, it is worth noting here that the filmmakers have chosen 'untouchable' as the preferred term over 'Dalit'. While 'untouchable' has origins in a Savarna understating of caste

and boxes the oppressed castes' identity as dirty and polluting, the term 'Dalit', which is Marathi for broken or split, carries with it the baggage of millennia-old oppression and has been a tool of identity assertion by the oppressed castes. The poster of the film had also received flak from Dalit activists and youth on social media for its 'unapologetic savarna gaze' (Donthi, 2021) in its stereotypical representation of Dalits.

The film carries superficial and farcical deliberations on caste that 'invisibilise' the whole issue. Post-midpoint, the film is nothing but another run-of-the-mill political thriller featuring a tussle for political power. The filmmakers, during the course of promoting the film, termed it 'a gut shaking political drama' (Facebook, 2021) and that is what it eventually becomes. The film fails to talk about Dalit issues and essentially ends up taking a 'Dalit bypass'. In act one (the setup), the audience is made to believe that there is going to be some conversation about the issues and challenges that mar the Dalit community, but the director and producers end up taking the audience via a bypass. They barely touch upon 'Dalit' and then the film goes away in a different direction altogether.

In the absence of any substantial addressal via dialogues and narratives, Ambedkar's visual presence falls short of drawing attention to the Dalit issue. Thus, *Madam Chief Minister* slides into the genre of a political drama without effectively addressing the politics of its core issue. While choosing to narrate a story with a Dalit protagonist can be considered a mark of a progressive mindset, yet, in the case of *Madam Chief Minister*, it ends up being a performative gesture since the narration lacks a sincere effort to understand the nuances of being a Dalit.

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