

INDIAN NATIONAL CINEMA: INCLUSION OF DALITS

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ABSTRACT

The literature on National Cinema and subaltern existences has critically been observed. Researcher added literary references to define Dalit politics, history and culture, as a subaltern culture that predominantly exist within Indian subcontinent, as a background to this research work. Isolation of Dalits, from mainstream, has always been an evil to the societal structure of the subcontinent. Emergence of mainstream Hindi Film Industry as Indian National Cinema with subaltern reference has been reviewed further. Aftermath the researcher explores the dynamics of Dalit Culture especially with mainstream Hindi cinema, often criticised for being not sensitive enough towards social realities unlike its regional counterparts or the parallels. For that, following case study approach, five endeavours from different time period, applause both critically and commercially, have been taken as purposive samples- *Acchut Kanya* (1936), *Acchut* (1940), *Sujata* (1959), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Devdas* (2002), *Aarakshan* (2011). It is observed that unlike the criticism, the integral existence of Dalit has not only appreciated artistically; but also acclaimed these films a cult status from commercial point of view. The overwhelming effect of Hindi film industry, with this inclusion affirms a certain level of dignity and respect to the subaltern culture and history of Dalits at large. Indian National Cinema, although less in number, has a positive note in the portrayal of this subaltern existence and thus extends social acceptance for the abandons. It acts both as a document and a means of inclusion of a subaltern culture within the mainstream.

KEY WORDS: National Cinema, Subaltern Existence, Dalit, Subaltern Culture, Dalit Culture, Mainstream Cinema, Indian National Cinema

National Cinema And Subaltern Existence

Film as a mass media always has a social influence. This influence may be reflected in the films in different manners as the director portrays it according to the content. Irrespective to their contents every film is always a part of the society. French scholar Annie Goldmann in “*Cinema et Societe modern*” (1971) said that films are the link between a certain vision of the world and the characteristics of modern society. Raymond Durnat in his “*A Mirror for England*” (1970) said that films present a more or less distorted portrayal of their contemporary society in the way like a mirror works. The theoretical work of French scholar Pierre Sorlin in *Sociologie du cinema* (1977) was an important attempt to sketch a methodology to account for the various elements (social, cultural, aesthetic) which contribute to the reading of a film in connection with society. Based on their relations with society development of national cinemas took place during the post world war period. National cinema, associated with a specific country, provides a unique window to the culture, people and as a whole to the society of that country. Countries like South Korea, Russia, France, Japan and Iran have over the years produced a huge number of films those have craved the craft of their cinema. India, Africa and Brazil, with their larger markets, emerged as some significant players.

When mainstream culture let subaltern to struggle for its place in some of these National Cinema, subaltern in the

society becomes the mainstream in cinema with some other cases. For example in Iranian cinema after the new wave refers and always revolves around the subaltern cultures, be it a woman, financially deprived or religiously oppressed class. The terms *subaltern* and *Subaltern Studies* entered in postcolonial studies with the group of south Asian historians, the Subaltern Studies Group. They explored the political-role of the men and women who comprise the mass population, denying the political roles of the socio-economic elites in the history of south Asia. The term initially used in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, human geography and literary criticism, soon finds its place in film studies as well when films like *Ankur*, *Fire* or *Facing Mirrors* have been discussed and debated from subaltern perspective. Significant entities like Indian Cinema with its largest market or the Iranian film with its high aesthetics dealing with the issues of subaltern existence makes the point of National cinema and Subaltern existence a relevant one. In their article 'Fire: A Subaltern Existence', Chincholkar-Mandelia and Rujuta pointed out a point, connecting cinema and breaking of sexual hegemony, can be extended to subaltern reflexion in cinema, that "Cinema, (thus), becomes another site for perpetuating gender and sexual hierarchies and works within the patriarchal codes of representation."

Dalit as a Subaltern Culture in India

Narrowed down to our field of study, i.e. India and Dalits, one can sense the existence of Dalit as a subaltern entity not only in Indian cinema, but also in other aspects of art and literature. In her scholarly article *Self-consciousness of the Dalits as*

"Subalterns":

Reflections on Gramsci in South Asia, Cosimo Zene, quotes A. Rao, from *Gender and caste. New Delhi: Kali for Women* that

Becoming "Dalit" is the process through which the caste subaltern enters into circuits of political commensuration and into the value regime of "the human" (Zene, 2010).

On the social position of Dalits in Indian society Mantra Roy has noticed, in her article *Speaking Subalterns- A Comparative Study of African American and Dalit Indian Literature*, that while putting much attention to the role played by Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders against British rule Indian historiography often seems to neglect the domestic or internal condition of the millions Dalits under the cruel caste system. Critically analysing the Gandhi's point Roy further notes,

It is important to note here that just like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership raises the question of elitism in the African American movement in USA, Gandhi's leadership had a similar elitism that the Subaltern Studies group has effectively critiqued and has led to the rewriting of history in South Asia from a subaltern perspective (Roy, 2010).

Gandhi, considered to be the epitome of sensible attitude towards Dalits whom he preferred to call as *Harizans* or the Children of God, played less sensitive with his refusal to Ambedkar's claim for a separate electoral for Dalits immediately after independence.

Due to lack of education and therefore good employment opportunities, the Dalits remained economically backward and the absence of a separate electorate further reaffirm their subaltern existence in the socio-politico system ruled by their educated and upper caste elected leaders who would never address their issues or would work toward their development because of religious sanction.

This subaltern existence with its reference as a non-mainstream entity within the sphere of art and literature soon

resulted into a subaltern culture. The constitutional rights entitled to the oppressed section and their real entitlement has been discussed as 'citizen-in-theory' and the 'population at large' by scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Madhava Prasad. When in reality the difference between the two has been very much there; but in cinema there's been a continuous effort to merge both which will be discussed in the later parts of this article. In the field of literature it had often been noticed that more often they did not mention their cultural traditions and focussed on only the oppression and abuse carried out upon them by the upper caste Hindus. Especially the Post Colonial Literary texts often take into account the miseries of their life neglecting the cultural traditions coming out of that misery that struggles for its position in mainstream. Gradually it shaped as a literary culture that evolved with the idea that the *oppressed* want to relieve themselves from the tyrannical clutches of the *oppressor*. Soon this literary culture emerged as the as a whole Subaltern Culture of Dalits or the Dalit culture.

Emergence of *Bollywood* or Mainstream as Indian National Cinema

While analyzing the dynamics of cinema and subaltern cultures the dynamics of Indian Cinema and Dalits makes an interesting point of entry, given the fact that Indian cinema is the cultural capital of the country. It has wider reception than any other form of art in the country including literature. Though Indian cinema is not confined only to Hindi cinema or the Mainstream Hindi Cinema in particular, yet emergence of this category as the National Cinema of the country with a large mass audience spots them significant. Regional counterparts of Hindi film industry, referred as Bollywood after the city of its origin Bombay, though at times revolves around certain universal issues; but their characterization or plot remains very much regional, hence they fail to be the face of Indian cinema. On the other hand Mumbai based Bollywood or Hindi cinema, with its market orientation, tends to grasp story ideas from every part of India so that they can grab a hold on the audience from those parts.

When that happened during 1950s, with the eminent artistic endeavours from Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt etc, which were appreciated in Box Office as well, mainstream Hindi Cinema became the face of Indian Cinema. The following decades, post 50s, also maintained the glory. '70s on one hand gave us some of the best parallel films by acclaimed directors like *Shyam Benegal*, *Mani Kaul*, *Kumar Shahani* like *Ankur* (1974), *Bhumika* (1977), *Manthan* (1976), *Nishant* (1975), *Juunoon* (1978), *Uski roti* (1970), *Ashadh ke ek din* (1971), *Duvidha* (1973), *Maya Darpan* (1972) etc, on the other it witnessed the rise of commercial cinema in the form of enduring cult films such as *Sholay* (1975). Although the bifurcation between Art house and Box Office became visible more with the coming of 1980s when various reasons contributed to the dark age of Hindi cinema.

During 80s when films started failing in theatres due to the overwhelming effect of VCRs and home theatres, second grade remakes of Hollywood action and thrillers entered the industry, Parallel cinemas firmed its stand against the commercial success in Box Office. Socialist propaganda played by NFDC further added to the problem that finally ended in a serious identity crisis faced by Indian National Cinema. On one hand while parallel films claimed to be the face of Indian cinema in the festival, common audience do accept the appeal of mainstream films. Parallel or Art House movies never reflect the vibe of common audience with their choice of movie viewing though these movies centred on their lives. These movies were never targeted or segmented for the subject of characters of their stories. Hence for non-elite, non-art house audience mainstream Hindi movie remained the face of Indian National Cinema.

Dalit Culture in Mainstream Hindi Cinema: Accepted Debate

More often it is alleged that mainstream Hindi cinema, more market oriented in nature, hardly reflects a true reflection of marginalization, oppression and torture of the Dalits and other oppressed and uses a standard approach to produce anecdotes to satisfy the entertainment quotient of the people. Harish S. Wankhede, in his article Dalit Representation in Bollywood published in Mainstream Weekly, observes,

from a Dalit perspective when one enquires about their space during the past one century of the film world, only a handful of non-decay, obscure examples are presented. (Wankhede, 2013)

Quoting Swati Mehra from *Exploring caste in Hindi cinema* Shoma Chatterji points out how Dalit oppression gets manifested not through the character or story development of Bollywood films made by upper caste filmmakers,

The majority of the stakes in the film industry is held by higher castes, their films portray a very elitist image and way of life. The culture and traditions shown in the films, for instance are very Brahmanical. Or the concept of class has taken over caste in popular cinema. For instance, in Karan Johar's films or in films made by Yash Chopra, one comes across titles like Raichand, Mehra, Melhotra etc, mainly high caste Punjabis who are rich businessmen. Their marriage ceremony is based on the Brahminical tradition with the priest given supreme importance. Lavish weddings and related ceremonies are another feature, which reflects the feudal nature of the Indian society. The rich and flamboyance can be attributed to the same. (Mehta, 2009)

Most of the film critics are of the view that oppression of Dalits by the upper castes and untouchability as an Indian reality is an acceptable fact for the society; but it is often cast away by the Bollywood filmmakers. However, this is not a fact that they observe to be there in the industry from the very beginning. The first Hindi film to deal with the theme of untouchability is *Achhut Kanya* (1936). As one of the case studies to this research work we'll go into the details of it in the next segment; but Devika Rani's portrayal of a Dalit girl fell in love with an upper caste Brahmin boy made a significant entry for the cinema audience of the country which till date only had a few encounters not only of subaltern culture of Dalits; but also of social films as a whole. Most of the films released till date were religious or mythological stories recorded in a linear, theatrical way. Even in other languages apart from Hindi there are a few handful experiences like *Malapilla* in Telegu, *Devdas* in Bengali or *Indramalati* in Assamese are some such off beat movies that revolved around such issues of Dalit culture. In Hindi two other films, have made significant entry with Dalit issues were Nitin Bose's *Chandidas* (1934) and V. Shantaram's *Dharmatma* (1935).

The first decade after independence Bollywood responded quite significantly to the modernist-socialist outlook. The rich, social elites were portrayed as insensitive towards the poor and with their selfish motives they were also violent with animalist instinct by filmmakers like Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Chetan Anand etc; but the most significant entries were made by Bimol Roy with his films like *Do Beegha Zameen* and *Sujata*, adopting the Italian neo-realist films characterizing the rebellion of the subalterns. However soon after the '70s, with the raising stardom and heroism of Hindi film actors like Rajesh Khanna or Amitabh Bachchan this realist current gave way for the escapist-fantastical films. It was reflective of the fact that the idea of Heroism needed a peculiar upper caste social background and hence no-body, during this age of 'anger and frustration', even imagined to portray a realist Dalit protagonist fighting against social and capitalist ills. Most of the scholar of film studies considered this to be the end of subaltern reference of Dalit culture in mainstream films at large leaving the job for the parallel movies like *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Aakrosh* (1980), *Damul* (1985) etc.

On the contrary to this widely entertained argument this research work tries to explore a different debate altogether. The overwhelming affects of cinema in India posses the potential of affirming a certain level of dignity and respect to the subaltern culture and history of Dalits at large and this was exactly happened with the films of 1950-60 periods. While going through the films with Dalit reference this researcher find a significant fact that the integral existence of Dalit has not only appreciated artistically; but also acclaimed a few films of post 1970 era a cult status from commercial point of view. It indicates a change both in the social psyche and the possible role played by mainstream cinema in achieving that. On the contrary to the more accepted argument that after 70s there is not enough portrayal of Dalit character and culture in mainstream there are certain cases where reference of Dalit, may not be as strong or frequent as it was expected to be, has happened not only as an existence; but it has also advocated the inclusion of this subaltern culture into the mainstream by taking them in account.

From their characterization, it is noticed then one can find a change in the portrayal of a Dalit character from a submissive oppressed to an educated, positive and outspoken personality that Avijit Ghosh has summed up as,

Once the submissive underdog; he is now educated, assertive and ready to take on the system. The emerging Dalit hero is a sign of how Bollywood has evolved. (Ghosh, 2011)

For example, *Phunsukh Wangdu* alias *Ranchod of Three Idiots*, Dalit identity of whom is often not thought and considered of, not only guided himself; but also enlightened a generation. Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya* (2007) also had a very new Dalit protagonist: a brave police officer *Pannalal Chauhar* who not only affirms his Dalit identity but also stands up against the caste based oppression that still spreads through certain parts of Rajasthan. However the bests among the lots are Prakash Jha's *Deepak* in *Aarakashan* and his namesake from *Masaan*.

Such superficial attempts to mystify the socio-political realities in Bollywood films can play positive in changing psyche of the movie goers of the country who go banana over the movie stars and just replicate whatever the stars seem to play in those films. With this, the differences between the ideas of 'citizen-in-theory' according to rights entitled by the constitution and the 'population at large' in reality, has been attempted to dismiss or at least lessen. Therefore the efforts put by these films, to include the subaltern culture of the Dalits, could not be ignored though such efforts are really less in number. Hence following case study approach this research work dealt with three post 1970 films with good commercial success, along with three others from pre 1970 period, to observe how Indian National Cinema dealt with the issue of Dalit and how.

Case Studies

Acchut Kanya

The first Hindi film with the theme Dalit, untouchability and oppression that attracted a number of audiences was *Achhut Kanya* (1936) as have been mentioned before. Two leads portrayed by Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar, shows a tragic story of love, caste barriers and death. Caste prejudice separated Kasturi, a Dalit girl, and Pratap, a Brahmin youth – childhood friends madly in love and prevented their marriage. Soon, Kasturi, as a girl faced another level of suppression that forced her into a loveless alliance with one from her caste. The lovers bumped into at the village fair that brings them together. Kasturi's husband, out of jealousy and suspicion, beat Pratap at the railway level crossing, where the later worked as a gatekeeper. While the two were fighting unaware of the fast approaching train, Kasturi, is run over and dies, in an attempt to save them.

This film is considered to be a cult not from the realist cinematic format that's been used or from the Dalit perspective that we are exploring; but also from the feminist point of entry that also has been used. However the Dalit perspective was so strong that it is still considered to be the first film to raise the issue of untouchability and caste prejudice with an effective hit on mass of that time as the film went well in Box Office as well as the artistic and aesthetic appreciation it still gets within the intelligencia of the country as well abroad.

Achchut (1940)

Achchut, literally means untouchables or Dalits, is a Bollywood film that earned highest grossing in the year 1940. The film had Motilal and Gohar as the lead casts Lakshmi and Ramu. In the film when Lakshmi, a low caste girl, fetches water from a temple, the priest, an upper caste Brahmin, got furious and broke the earthen pot on her head. This incident prompted Lakshmi's father, who already was feeling humiliated from other such incidents, to adopt Christianity. When Lakshmi was brought into this by his father, her mother remained Hindu. Later, rich businessman Seth Haridas adopted Lakshmi and she got a quality life with the daughter of the Seth, Savriti and got education. Unfortunately both the girls fell for the same guy and to secure his daughter's love interest, Seth Haridas informed the boy's family about the societal background of Lakshmi. Lakshmi had to return to her mother, where she met Ramu, with whom she shared a child marriage lock. Both Ramu and Lakshmi then stood against the injustices faced by their people and finally they were allowed to enter into the same temple where once Lakshmi was assaulted for taking water from.

The Film was well received by common mass and made quite a sensation. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel stated that "If the picture helps India to remove this curse, it can be said to have helped India to win Swaraj as untouchability in one of the chief obstacle in the road to freedom." In a way Achchut had stood on his expectation as it did created awareness against untouchability and showed an assertive tone for the Dalit culture and lifestyle to be taken into the mainstream.

Sujata (1959)

The most significant entry among the films revolve around Dalit culture, that till date enjoys the status of a cult classic both at national and international retrospectives of Bimal Roy's films and of Indian films, and that did equally well both in Box office and critics reviews, is *Sujata*, meaning to be born in a superior caste. When the film won Cannes Golden Palm award, it also grabbed four Filmfare awards.

Although Upen and Charu, an upper caste Brahmin couple, adopted orphaned Dalit Sujata, Charu could never fully embrace her and never failed to remind Sujata of her social identity. When Sujata realised that something was wrong for her mother to constantly introduce her as 'she is like my daughter'. She had self-imposed silence as an expression of her feelings of betrayal and also as her voice of rebellion, that effected the blooming relationship of her with Adheer, a Brahmin young man. However, with Charu, encountered an accident and Sujata willingly giving blood to her, all the issues were taken care of. Charu understood her mistake and accepted Sujata from heart. Later Sujata got married to Adheer.

In and through *Sujata*, many of the contradicts, as for poverty and wealth, renunciation and worldliness, desire and law, the upper caste and the Dalit – are worked out in terms of the family-as-nation/nation-as-family ideal of 1950s India. The upper caste foster mother of Sujata symbolized the social conscience of Indian people that is expected to rise like it happened with Sujata's foster mother. Sujata's getting married to upper caste Sudheer is suggestive of social inclusion of all Dalits and their culture into the mainstream society.

Pakeezah (1972)

Pakeezah, an all time big hit that Hindi film industry ever had, is a story of a young Muslim courtesan, Sahibjaan, longed to escape the cage like her mother did long back and ended up embracing death miserably. When a young man, Salim Ahmed Khan, from a respectable family, fell for Sahibjaan and decided to marry her going against his family, without interrogating her about her identity. Sahibjaan, out of fear of losing him hide her identity initially; but could not escape from her conscience as Salim believed her and renamed her Pakeezah that means pure, uncontaminated, and clean. Later she had been invited to perform in Salim's marriage. At Salim's place, during her performance, she injured herself and got fainted and there it'd been revealed that Salim's uncle happened to be Sahibjaan's father. On the last wish of uncle Salim married Sahibjaan.

Though Pakeezah's story is not based on Hindu caste system; but at large it falls under the larger context of untouchability and caste as well as class barriers. Besides it evidences the existence of caste prejudices even in other sociological backgrounds that stands out of the realm of Hindu caste prejudice.

Devdas (2002)

When love triangle among Devdas, Parvati and Chandramukhi has more been discussed and debated, the fact of Parvati getting rejected by Devdas's family as their daughter-in-law, for being lower caste (than Devdas's family) and courtesan lineage from her mother's side, has often been not considered.

Devdas, the classic novel of *Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay* of Bengal, has been adopted into cinema four times; but in this article the recent adoption by *Sanjay Leela Bhansali* has been taken into account for its wide mainstream audience. Devdas and Parvati, childhood friends and lovers planned to marry; but his parents did not approve it. They believe that Parvati's family, who descend from a line of dancers, is of a lower class than their own. Ironically to that rejection, Devdas had been taken care of by a courtesan dancer unless he surrendered to alcoholism and died, when eventually Parvati married to a rich man.

Aarakshan (2011)

With the Supreme Court's judgment on controversial reservation issue in favour of the Dalits, a conflict had been raised in between the students of SMT College. A moderate comment slightly in favour of the reservation ended Principal Dr Anand in losing his post as cons pirated by political authorities. He resolved to take back on them by educating more and more Dalit students in a cowherd offered by one of his friends Shambhu. He succeeded doing that with help from two of his old students Deepak, a lower caste boy, who once misled him and Sushant, one upper caste classmate of Deepak, who stood against the judgement of Supreme Court. Later with the help of Shakuntala Tai, who started STM, evil politics had to wither away, re installing Dr Anand as the lifelong Principal of STM Remedial Centre.

Ironically the film ended up with the same fate with Dr Anand and caught by evil political games. However, despite bans the film received Rs 424.3 million net in Box Office in its fifth week of release.

Findings

There has been a change in the characterization of the Dalits in mainstream films after 1970 from the films before 1970s. For centuries Dalits were oppressed in India and it'd been reflected in Bollywood and they were primarily projected as victims. But in recent years, there's been a gradual change in their portrayal in Hindi films. Now they are educated, sound

and rebellious. Without an upper caste hero they can claim their right. These changes happened in society get reflected in the films and in a way such changes not only adhered; but also got advocated through the earlier films made the changes shown in the later films feasible.

Altogether, Indian National Cinema, although less in number, has a positive note in the portrayal of this subaltern existence and thus extends social acceptance for the abandons. 'Citizen-in-theory' and the 'population at large'—differences between the two have been dismissed in Indian Cinema. The integral existence of Dalit has not only appreciated artistically; but also acclaimed films with Dalit references a cult status from commercial point of view. Given the fact of overwhelming effect of Hindi film industry, it can be said that this inclusion affirms a certain level of dignity and respect to the subaltern culture and history of Dalits at large. The films act both as a document and a means of inclusion of the subaltern culture of Dalits within the mainstream.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSIONS

It is a firm fact that Cinema, to be precise the mainstream Bollywood, as the most appealing, adhered and sought after mass media in the country, has a far more potential in including the Subaltern culture of Dalits in mainstream; but with the positive ends of accepting the Dalit characters by the society or their adopting families, these films account a positive portrayal of this subaltern culture and thus works for the social inclusion of those excluded. However, contemporary films on this issue have a separate take on it, where the characters are far more rebellious and not satisfied with the acceptance or up gradation of their social status; but craved for the same to thousand others like them. Such characters like Deepak from Aarakshan make an interesting point to think, discuss and debate on.

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