

The 'Others' in Indian Cinema: Caste Politics vis-à-vis Mainstream Cinema

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“We have become so insensitive to caste realities that despite atrocities in the name of honour killings, we live in denial of caste oppression. [It’s] Hard to believe, but some communities are afraid to even spell out their caste.” Nagraj Manjule, Film-maker

Caste is an endogamous, hierarchical hereditary group essentially meant for division of labor in ancient India. Consequently the caste system was consolidated into a rigid organization by the colonial masters. The concept of caste system in a democratic country like India has always been a volatile variable. Post Independent India, witnessed an unprecedented social-economic condition based on caste system and the reservation policy further facilitated the lower caste population. G.S. Ghurye, a sociology professor of Mumbai University offered six characteristics of caste system in colonial India. These are as follows:

- 1) Segmentation of society by birth
- 2) Caste is hierarchical
- 3) Restrictions on acceptability of food and other Materials from lower castes
- 4) Segregation in terms of space based on caste system

- 5) Occupation inherited or by birth
- 6) Endogamy, restrictions of marriage outside caste

Ghurye's classification was based on British census report and attracted scholarly criticism for relying upon the British census reports. Ronald Inden, the Indologist suggested that caste for the later European of the Raj era is an endogamous *jatis* rather than *varnas*. There are 2378 *jatis* that colonial rulers classified.

Arvind Sharma, a professor of comparative religion agree with Indologist Basham, while equating caste with both *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* system is related to Vedic society and the groups mentioned in the old texts. Sociologist Dipankar Gupta traced the formation of guilds during the Mauryan period which eventually crystallized into *jatis*. Caste hierarchy and the treatment offered to them is not commensurate with the principles laid in Indian constitution. The fundamental Rights guarantee equality on the basis of race, class, caste and religion. Even the Directive principles of the state policy (Article 38) ensures a kind of liberal democratic and egalitarian stat of India. Even then since independence not only caste thrived in action but also propelled its force to a greater extent. The forces of modernization further consolidated the traditional norms, rather by 'traditionalizing', it attained newer dimensions.

Louis Dumont considered caste to be an ideology and behind this ideology is the concept of hierarchy. Hierarchy is again based on the age old concept of purity and pollution. M. N. Srinivas defined sanskritization as a process by which "a low or middle Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice born caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community." Srinivas's idea challenged the predominant idea of rigidity of class structure. Sanskritization denotes the fluidity of caste relations. Srinivas substantiates the fact that renegotiation of caste is possible by "adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism and by sanskritising its ritual pantheon". Though Yogendra Singh accused Srinivas's theory as "it fails to neglect non-sanskritic traditions."

Manusmriti acknowledges and justifies the caste system as the basis of order and regularity of India. At the top of the hierarchy were the

Brahmins who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and supposed to have emanated from the head of Brahma. Then came the Kshatriyas or the warriors from his arms. Third category is the Vaishyas who were born out of his thigh whereas Shudras came from his feet and does all the menial jobs. Outside the caste system were the untouchables or the Dalits. The main castes were further divided into 3000 castes and 25,000 sub castes based on their specific occupation.

It is interesting to note that how in the post independent India, caste has taken a political standpoint. Indian constitution banned discrimination on the basis of caste, class religion etc. Moreover the government reserved posts in govt. services and educational institutions for scheduled castes and tribes, the lowest in caste hierarchy in 1950. Again in 1989, quotas were extended to a group called the OBCs. Even the concept of modernization, industrialization, urbanization could not do away with the caste system. The dynamic processes of caste politics have modernity and its various aspects, thereby strengthened its form. With the emergence of non congress government in various states since 1967, caste system seems to have suffered a setback as most of the political leaders originated from non brahminical seed. Srinivas pointed out these changes, in actuality considerate caste hierarchy horizontally. Caste, therefore, has always used the privileges of western education, urbanity, for their own benefit, thereby elevated themselves into the states of a "self sufficient, improbable blocks." In a democratic political system, caste acted as ethnic community and started acting as an agent of modernity in a society like India. Caste association acted as pressure group. In "Caste in India politics" (1970) Rajni Kothari argued that the first stage involved intellectuals, and antagonism and resentment between high entrenched castes like Reddi in Andhra Pradesh, Pattidars in Gujarat, Lingayats in Karnataka, Bhumihars in Bihar, and Rajputs in Rajasthan and high ascendant castes like Kayastha in Bihar, Jats in Rajasthan. The second stage involved factionalism and fragmentation within the competing (entrenched and ascendant) castes as a result of which multi-caste and multi-factional alignments develop. The lower castes also are brought in to support high caste leaders and to strengthen a faction.

The paradigm shift of upper caste to lower castes began since 1960's when regional parties started gaining prominence, and few fractions consolidated themselves through caste identity. The Mandal Commission and the publication of its report witnessed an unprecedented resurgence

of caste solidarity. For luring prospective vote bank, reservations for OBC's gained prominence. From the 80's there the 90's "politics of ideology" shifted to the "politics of representation" and the new social movements dominated the political scenario in the post colonial India. Jodka in his book elaborated how there has been a transformation from welfare state to the states dominated by market economy and already there had been a huge disenchantment for Nehruvian politics. Since globalization happened, the concept of movements have gained a different kind of identity as well as momentum. Due to the new reservation policies, a new middle class grew among the lower castes and they felt more confident in articulating their problem areas. The politics of caste identity have gathered a new dimension. In fact, caste politics can very flexibly adapt itself to the changing scenario of democratic politics. The middle class in the dalit movements have brought them into the mainstream discourse.

Cinema is considered to be the archive of the society; therefore it would be interesting to note the connection between the caste system and the trajectory of Indian cinema through history. Caste is a complex subject to be addressed and to explore caste system in India through Indian Cinema over the decades needs tremendous commitment and enthusiasm. It is also relevant here to survey that whether Indian cinema has seriously looked at the caste system or used it as an occasional experience to be used in the narrative. Let us go back to the pre-independent era, where caste is usually used as a mean to ensure division of labor in the society i.e varnashrama. Gradually it is reduced to the practice of subjugation and inhuman exploitation of the higher caste on to the lower caste. Lately lower castes asserted their existence over series of violation of human rights over their community. Cinema as the archive of a nation has always tried to act as a cohesive force to ensure national consensus. Bollywood has represented India both at home and abroad, thereby it seldom provokes the ruptures, rather it tried to iron out all the fractures of Indian social system thereby emerging as a cohesive force.

Achhut Kanya (1936/ 135 mns/ Hindi) is one of the first of its kind to exhibit the atrocities of caste and denial of human rights. Kasturi played by Devika Rani (one of the prolific film stars with western education and founder of famous Bombay Talkies) was a low caste village girl in love with upper Hindu boy Pratap. Society rejects their companionship and both of them married other partners. Eventually as a victim of conjugal

conspiracy, Pratap and Kasturi's husband Mani were caught in a fist cuff and Kasturi gets herself killed by a running train in order to stop them. Thereby her sacrifice elevates her status from an untouchable to a martyr in the eyes of the villagers. *Achhut Kanya* is known to be a landmark film in Indian Cinema history as it challenged the caste system in the country.



Immediately after *Achhut Kanya*, post independent India saw the release of another blockbuster *Sujata* (1959/ 161 mins / Dir. Bimal Roy). *Sujata* (played by Nutan) is born into a Dalit family and raised by a Brahmin couple. Based on a story by Subodh Ghosh, *Sujata* deals with the controversial issue of untouchability. It was a part of 1960 Cannes film festival. The way the director Bimal Roy has portrayed the character *Sujata* and the perennial problem of caste system of India is commendable. 1960 and 1970's have explored the upper middle class, middle class and their socio-political conflicts. No Dalit protagonist was seen anywhere near the mainstream cinema. Dalits and adivasis were the original inhabitants of India, even then Dalit men and especially women and her objectification as a site of sexual oppression never really occurred to filmmakers' until much later. Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974) and *Nishant* (1975) dealt with the subject as well as in his *Manthan* (1976), *Aarohan* (1982) and *Mandi* (1983).

Not only the aesthetics of cinema was undergoing a huge transformation but also the left leanings of the new breed of directors started making their mark on Indian Cinema at that hour. The social ills perceived by these directors are totally different from their predecessors, who were more idealist in their thought process. Influenced by Gandhian ideals and Nehruvian socialism, the earlier directors highlighted casteism under the garb of strong romanticism. But in *Ankur* (The Seeding, 1974) Benegal in

his strong leftist approach amalgamated humanism with leftist ideology to address the problem of caste system and exploitation of women. It is no more the duty of the film makers to idealize and participate in the construction of a newly independent state with occasional probe into the social evils, but rather challenge, question and subvert the social system per se. The casteism, poverty, exploitation of women, all were sewed to gather in *Ankur* where Surya, a feudal lord (played by Anant Nag) comes to the countryside to look after his father's estate where a low caste couple, the mute Kishtaya (Sadhu Meher) and his beautiful wife Lakshmi (Shabana Azmi) take care of him and his farmhouse. Gradually he develops an illicit relationship with Lakshmi impregnates her and refuses to take the responsibility. How with the turn of events this lower caste couple suffers in his hands and how they create several moments of revolt forms most certainly creates a complex tale of oppression. The treatment in *Sujata* and in *Achhut Kanya* was sporadic but Bengal with his vision of having a caste/class less society and gender oppression almost dedicated himself in making such films, one after another, in his decade long career. With the course of time, Benegal's approach became much more straight forward, more violent and overtly political. In *Nishant* and *Manthan*, Benegal's first trilogy is based on 'ownership and power' thereby challenging the feudal infrastructure in the country. Benegal himself attributed the success of the new cinema to the existence of a demand "political cinema will only emerge when there is a need for it". Though *Ankur* was set in 1945, the peasant insurrection of 1970's gave it a contemporary edge. Benegal is the first filmmaker in Hindi film industry, even if is not mainstream, who consistently and coherently addressed the Dalit question in his films. He used his cinema as a trope for social change. Within the democratic set up, he questions the discriminatory post colonial nation states and its policies. While *Achyut Kanya* was a liberal step on part of Himanshu Rai to comment on Caste system, Bimal Roy and Benegal were driven by their left leanings and an ideology proclaiming egalitarianism. The famous third cinema of the developing countries intends to question the inherent hegemonic domination within the society. Driven by the same urge, Benegal and his fellow filmmakers like Girish Kasaravalli (*Ghatashradha*), Pattabhirama Reddy (*Samskara* /1970) used cinema to question the caste system and the violation of human rights. Restoration of human rights was always a part of their egalitarian agenda. They are never pedagogical, their activism is subtle but effective.



Over the years the caste issue has made a dent in Indian politics as well as Indian society. The era of sixties and seventies was a time for rebellion. IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) movement paved the path of protests through cultural activities and cinema was one of it. Besides the leftist cultural movement film societies came to the forefront to disseminate some sort of film culture in our country. These avant garde film makers were direct products of film societies not only in terms of the distinct sensibilities but also increased their social political and cultural affiliations towards soviet and European culture as well as their ideology. Benegal's and Bimal Roy's films are the natural extension of their social consciousness. After Benegal, it was Govind Nihalani carried the bastion forward based on true stories from the newspaper. *Aakrosh* (1980) is a poignant satire on the corruption of the judicial system and the victimization of the underprivileged by the powerful. Vijay Tendulkar, the prolific writer, about whom Ashish Nandy once wrote, Tendulkar never guarantees a good bedtime read- He never fails to make you feel that you have entered a dentists chamber with an undiagnosed abscess in the molars. The journey from resistance movement against a corrupted state machinery to the rising demands of restoration of human rights in India has not changed much in nature. Bhiku (Om Puri) a tribal low caste worker refutes the arbitrary commands of forest contractor and as a result the upper echelons of administration, police molests and kills his wife Nagi (Smita Patil). However an upper caste lawyer Bhaskar Kulkarni (Naseeruddin Shah) fights his case which eventually resulted in counter violence to avoid further humiliation for Bhiku and his family. Thus Nihalani illustrated the inescapable marginalization and subjugation of the

poor and the dispossessed in Indian society. He presents a complex portrait of the social entrenchment of traditional caste that arises, not out of human weakness, complacency or inertia but as a resigned impotence towards the incestuous union of power, wealth, and authority as well as the systematic intimidation and victimization and the silencing of the underprivileged. Inevitably, it is this pervasive dehumanization that propels Bhiku's unconscionable act. A desperate coup de grace borne, not out of madness or displaced rage but a tragic sense of merciful liberation from the inescapable corruption of privilege. The film which was made several years ago still has its intensity intact.

Following *Aakrosh*, there are few recent films which also commented upon the Dalit or the perpetual tragedy associated with caste system still prevalent in India. Being the avant garde films, the films of Nihalani, Ray and others failed to have a mass audience. Ray, inspired by Munsri Premchand's story directed *Sadgati* (1981) which talks about the grim situation faced by the lower caste in India. The way Dukhi, the Dalit worker is exploited by the upper caste Hindu is devastating yet relevant till date. All the characters are build in a way to explore the insensitivities of the upper castes and how the lower castes have internalized the age old exploitation. Sekhar Kapur in his *Bandit Queen* (1994) explored the life of Phoolan Devi, a low caste woman by birth, who was the victim of upper caste sexual oppression and seeks revenge by turning into an (in) famous dacoit in the Behamai massacre. This film is not only tells a story of a woman dacoit rather harps on the unlimited oppression of a subaltern village woman belonging to a "depressed" caste. Similarly Jag Mundhra in a cinematic representation of Bhanwari Devi's rape case (*Bawandar/* 2000) showed how a judge belonging to the upper caste acquitted the rapists saying that "an upper caste man could not have defiled himself by raping a lower caste woman". In Priyadarshan's *Aakrosh* (2010), a love story is woven between lower caste Dalit men with a woman from the upper caste Thakurs. Finally how she avenges them constructs the crux of the film. Even then, caste has remained a highly contentious and fuzzy concept in Indian social system as well as in the cinema industry in India. Of course, there has been occasional inclusion of characters like *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007) played by the scion Sanjoy Dutt. Yet many accused these films as being the outsider's gaze! After seventy years of Independent India, the rise of Dalits in society (through reservation) and their consolidation as powerful voting blocs have not yet changed their status in the larger social milieu. Globalization happened to India, casteism and the violence related to it, gained momentum.

Sustaining context of superstition, ignorance and social neurosis around it piled up.



Lower castes emergence to power, courtesy Mayawati and their rise as the powerful voting blocs left their indelible impact on Indian cinema too. This paradigm shift has definitely galvanized the timidity of Indian Cinema only to address a subject so diverse, so pertinent. Recently a few films have dealt with the caste issue more realistically. The young debutant directors are educated with a zeal to prove their worth. They are aware of the violation of human rights happening every now and then. And cinema is powerful enough to penetrate the mass psyche. As entertainment is the key issue in the film industry, caste identities never played an important roles in the narrative cinema. But for the last few years, a new breed of filmmakers with a plethora of films appeared. Notable are: *Chauranga* (2014) by Bikas Mishra, *Court* (2014) by Chaitanya Tamhne, *Masaan* (2015) by Neeraj Ghaywan, *Fandry* (2013) by Nagraj Manjule, *Sairat* (2016) again by Nagraj Manjule. Some of them have witnessed caste atrocities in real life and their films are the first hand experiences of everyday life i.e. while *Sairat* (2016) may seem to be an out and out love story with a domineering upper caste Hindu girl Aarchi (played by Rinku Rajguru) with a shy lower caste young boy Parshya. After much fiasco, they elope, get married and start living in a shanty. Gradually they start having a better life, a son is born. Aarchi calls her mother and informs about the baby. Her brothers come, hinting reconciliation. Finally both are killed as a part of ritualistic honor killings so randomly happening in any part of the country. A severe violation of human rights honor killings (a homicide of a member of a family by the family members with the belief that the victim has violated the laws of a community). Same issue has been dealt in "*Love, Sex and Dhoka*" (2010/ 102 mins/ Hindi) by Dibakar Banerjee,

another prolific film maker of the new wave cinema. But Nagraj is regional, he is Dalit and very much not Bollywood. He casts amateur artists and depicted a reality which is the biggest sleeper hit of the year, grossing over 100 crore worldwide and remade in every other languages. It was the Indian official entry to the Berlin film festival, Manjule takes pride in announcing “Sairat is my reaction to Bollywood.” By presenting it under the garb of a teenage love story, Manjule actually addresses the horror of the caste violence and challenges the absence of equality of rights in India. Honor killings are condemned as a serious human rights violation. Article 42 reads unsuitable justification for crimes, including crimes committed in the name of so called ‘honor’. Then comes another landmark in the history of Indian cinema i.e. *Masaan* (Crematorium/ 2015) is a story of ever changing cycle of life and death in the backdrop of the oldest city of the worldwide Varanasi where the younger folk is trying to find a space of their own cutting across the age old constrictions of caste, class and gender. Deepak coming from the Dom lineage, is an engineering student, yet shackled in his familial ties, falls in love with an upper caste girl Shaalu. A story of hope, loss of it and redemption, for many years past, Hindi cinema witnessed a lower caste boy as the hero of the film and quickly empathize with him. Like *Sairat*, *Masaan* also received a standing ovation in one of the prolific international film festivals, Cannes and also received two prestigious awards. The Director is hopeful about the new generation who surely would break the shackles of the society to make space for love, humanity and individual identity combating the caste and gender divide.



Chaitanya Tamhane in his significant debut *Court* (2014) commented upon Indian legal system and the hypocrisies of the middle class. The film is about a social Dalit activist Narayan Kambli who used folk music to spread his message is arrested, accused of inciting a sewage workers suicide. It gradually unfolds the inhuman condition in which the gutter cleaners work. The irony lies in the fact that Kamble, in actuality, sings to communicate the hopelessness about a Dalit lives, not to incite another Dalit's suicide. In real life Sathidar who plays Kambli is a human rights activist and the editor of the radical Nagpur based publication, 'Vidrohi'. The songs he sang were voiced by Sambhaji Bhagat, the Dalit poet and activist who committed suicide protesting the 1997 killings of Dalit residents of Ramabai Colony, in Mumbai. The film also touches upon how draconian laws such as Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 2008 and archaic colonial laws such as Dramatic Performances Act 1876 affects lives of people and our civil liberties. The defense lawyer Vinay Vora (played by Vivek Gomber) is also a human rights activities. Shunning altogether the melodrama Bollywood attaches to the court room trial, this realistic portrayal of the condition of human rights and prolong abused is long overdue. Thus by the influence of issues, forms and styles of the alternative cinema a new kind of cinema came into being.

Mainstream cinema is being made on social issues and emerging successful. Thus atrocities on human race in India are not only confined in Anand Patwardhan or Rakesh Sharma's powerful documentaries but also involved Mainstream media to make films on human rights and influence, the audience in India. Caste themes are becoming immensely popular among the masses and are emerging as blockbusters. For example: the recent super hero film starring 'Thalaivya' Rajnikant, *Kabali* (2016) centres around the hero's fight against oppression in Malaysia. Whereas the dominant narrative of Hindi film have always flaunted a picture of Gandhi in its background, the gradual shift from Gandhi's picture to Babasaheb's in the backdrop of the protagonist featuring in the film is quite a paradigm shift in terms of depiction of caste system in the mainstream Indian films .

From 1990's, Dalit movements took a new turn. Caste politics resurfaced with the aim of bringing in social justice. The (in) famous Mandal Commission Report ensured reservations for the backward classes in 1989 not only spearheaded education, employment and elected representatives in civic and legislative bodies. Cinema has increasingly included this fundamental human degradation as part of its content and participated in creating a shift in the

paradigm in the cultural sphere. What cinema did is to attack the discrimination on the grounds of caste, class, religion and gender. Since the blurring of the borderline happened all over the world, Cinema in India refashioned it was by assimilating the contents, forms, techniques and styles of the alternative cinema and presented it in a more palatable way to the audience in a fiercely competitive and market driven world. Thus with the turn of the century, Cinema in its myriad ways serving the coveted role of human rights advocate and being quite successful in doing so, by reaching to more and more audience, cutting across any kind of boundaries. Nagraj's acceptance with his film *Sairat* in Berlin Film Festival is a glaring example of this accomplishment. With this new breed of Directors, the stories of the violation of Human Rights found their way in to the multiplexes in India. The power of cinema is being justifiably used by these highly motivating directors to tell a tale from the point of view of the oppressed. Even Human Rights Film Festivals are mushrooming everywhere. Thus Indian cinema is slowly graduating into providing 'voice' to the 'voiceless' by pulling maximum audience, sensitizing them, herby popularizing the themes of human rights and building a kind of counter hegemony around it.
