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## Caste and Gender Dynamics in Indian Cinema from 1930s to 2000s

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper aims at drawing a trajectory of how Indian cinema has grown in its portrayal of caste and gender issues over the decades. A rear view would reveal that Indian cinema's first decade both before and after Independence did respond quite strongly to the socialist nerves as issue of caste became a part of the popular film narratives like in Achhut Kanya (1936) and Sujata (1959). The 1960s however, saw cinema narrowing down its concerns to the socio-economic confines of the upper-middle class people. Then from the 1970s began the Amitabh era which shifted the Indian cinema into a very imaginative space with the 'angry young man' trope at its centre. It never occurred to any filmmaker to portray a Dalit protagonist fighting against social evils. However, the parallel or the new wave cinema did make efforts to bring the lower caste subjectivity on the big screen. The social questions like of caste-based gender violence and feudal exploitation gathered remarkable momentum through films like Shyam Benegal's Ankur (1974). The latter part of the paper deals mainly with films belonging to the later decades of the twentieth century and portrays the change that a Dalit woman's persona has gone through over the decades. The stereotypes are done away with; and the rebelliousness and the fighting spirit among rural Dalit women, which is a novel phenomenon has been explored in these offbeat films, namely, Shekhar Kapur's Bandit Queen (1994), Jag Mundhra's Bawandar (2000), and Priyadarshan's Aakrosh (2010).*

### **1. Introduction**

March is not only the month of spring, and of days "when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade"<sup>1</sup>; it is also the month when the entire world comes together to celebrate the International Women's Day. But amidst the paraphernalia attached to the 'festival' – if we may call it that – what is forgotten is the unswerving reality of subaltern women.

Within world societies, the economic, political and social relations revolve around issues of inequality based on race, gender, caste and class. In India however, they revolve primarily around caste, though other aspects too impinge their impact one way or the other. If historical evidence is to be believed, the Dalits and the Adivasis were the original dwellers of this country.<sup>11</sup> Today Dalits comprise a little more than one-sixth of India's population, which amounts to some 160 million people, and live a contingent existence, shunned by the society because of their rank as Dalits – the lowest caste of the India's caste system. And within this class of Dalits, the worst affected are the women, who constitute almost half of India's 160 million Dalits, comprising about 16% of India's total female population, and 8% of the total population. They are weighed down by the triple burden of the oppressive hierarchies of caste, class and gender. While they have to bear the brunt of poverty and the social stigma of caste with the Dalit men, they also have to withstand the patriarchal power which makes them vulnerable not only to domination by the upper castes, but also by the very same Dalit men. Hence, they become the sites also of the sexualized forms of oppression. Dalit women have to face the paradox of being regarded as polluted and untouchable and yet get exploited in the most intimate sphere of social relations.

It is through this subaltern lens that I want to review Indian cinema in this paper. The accustomed supposition that cinema's intent is to produce narratives to satisfy the entertainment acumen of the people should undergo an essential scrutiny. Films as being the most potent forms of artistic expression cannot be considered sans their politico-ideological objectives. However still, when one looks at the century-old Indian cinema from a Dalit perspective, only a handful of senile, obscure examples come to the fore. Caste, despite being a persistent and acceptable fact of Indian reality is often cast away by the Hindi filmmakers.

#### *1.1. Achhut Kanya (1936)*

Hindi films may have boasted of a reformist *Achhut Kanya* (1936), the love story of a Harijan girl and Brahmin boy very early on in its life but there have been few Dalit stories and characters down the hundred years of its existence. Franz Osten's *Achhut Kanya*, both because of a modern and a critical look at the traditional and rudimentary social practices of Indian society and because of its polished film style, is still considered to be one of the high points of Indian cinematic accomplishments. The controversy that was generated by

the portrayal of the love affair between a Brahmin boy, Pratap and an Untouchable girl, Kasturi, is wrapped up within the film through the pivotal dialogue of “*Tum Brahmin ho, main acchut*” (You are a Brahmin, while I am an untouchable); as if that is a decree writ in stone and cannot be challenged. This emphasizes the degree of fear and the feeling of defeat that is engrained in the mind of a Dalit girl who has lost all her assertive power under the debilitating effect of the caste system. What we see in *Achhut Kanya* is not a triumphing love cutting across caste barriers and culminating in a union but a subversive, inhibited and a controlled transgression by a Dalit woman that ultimately ends in a personal tragedy.

### 1.2. *Sujata* (1959)

Another incident of controlled transgression is seen when Indian cinema returns to the issue of caste, untouchability and a possibility of an inter-caste marriage, in Bimal Roy’s *Sujata* (*Well-Born*) in 1959. This is a film that tugs at our heart strings with its portrayal of the pain and dilemmas of an untouchable girl growing up in a Brahmin family.

The untouchable girl ironically enough is named Sujata, meaning well born. She is the infant girl who is the sole survivor of a trolley coolie’s family that has succumbed to cholera. And since her family belongs to low caste no one in the locality is willing to take care of her, except Upendra, a progressive Brahmin who despite repeated objections from his wife Charu, refuses to let go of the girl and brings her up as her own daughter, of course sans education. The twist in the tale arises when Adhir, a well educated Brahmin boy originally chosen as a prospective groom for their real daughter Ramaa, falls in love with Sujata. The shock caused by this development puts off Charu so bad that while one of her diatribes against Sujata, she falls down the stairs and loses a lot of blood. And when a need for blood transfusion arises, the only blood group that matches with that of Charu is that of Sujata. She comes to Charu’s rescue with her blood and Charu finally learns that blood has no ‘caste’ and accepts that Sujata is as much her daughter as Ramaa is. The film closes with the suggestion of an acceptance of Sujata’s marriage to Adhir with the parental sanction of both families. If *Achhut Kanya* and *Sujata* are to be compared, one has to agree to a certain degree of liberalism that has seeped into the society and the cinema at large within the course of twenty-three years, which is the time gap between these two films. All the more, while in *Achhut Kanya*, Kasturi is hardly given any voice throughout the movie and ultimately sacrificed for the endorsement of tradition, Sujata’s silence is turned into a near assertive voice when she saves her adoptive mother with her blood.

### 1.3. *Ankur* (1974)

Similar agency can be seen in the character of Lakshmi in Shyam Benegal’s 1974 film *Ankur* (*The Seedling*). Although this film cannot be considered a product of mainstream cinema, it very powerfully brings out the feminist conception of identity and burden in a feudal society where caste dominates.

In this film Surya, the Zamindar’s son gets increasingly attracted to Lakshmi, the Dalit woman employed to take care of his house. Disconcerted by her loyalty to her deaf-mute good-for-nothing husband and miffed by her snubbing of his advances, Surya wastes no time in removing Kishtaya from the scenario. On being caught one day stealing toddy (palm wine) from Surya’s farm, he is made to sit on a donkey backwards and paraded in the village with his head shaven. Due to the humiliation incurred, Kishtaya runs away abandoning his wife. Surya, his head full of the romantic fantasies of Hindi cinema, tells Lakshmi that he will look after her now; and Lakshmi yields to him out of economic necessity. However, their brief affair is unexpectedly terminated as soon as Saru, Surya’s wife, who has heard rumours of this liaison, comes and dismisses Lakshmi from the job.

By this time Lakshmi is pregnant with Surya’s baby and Surya, fully aware of the shame and humiliation that the birth of an illegitimate child will bring upon him, desperately tries to persuade Lakshmi to have an abortion, but she doesn’t concede, since having a child had been her devout wish, which she has not been able to accomplish with her impotent husband. Meanwhile Kishtaya returns and is overjoyed to learn that she is carrying what he believes is his child, and he innocently hands over to her the money he has earned while he has been absconding. Boosted by a fresh hope and confidence, and aware of the urgent need to provide for his wife and upcoming child, Kishtaya goes over to the farmhouse with the intention of asking Surya for work. Surya, anxious at seeing Kishtaya approaching the house with a stick, misunderstands the latter’s purpose and beats him black and blue. Witnessing this from the hut, Lakshmi runs to her husband’s rescue, and lets loose an outburst of curses at Surya, who makes a quick and disgraceful retreat to the house. In the final scene of the film, a young village boy is shown as hurling a stone at Surya’s house. This act of brazenness coupled with the blood-red screen that ends the film advocates the anger and frustration felt by the peasants towards the long-exploiting feudal dynasts. Interestingly, the liberalism of thoughts that we witnessed in the character of Upendra in *Sujata*, is absent in the character of Surya, despite both being University educated men. This goes to show how deeply the caste-based sensibilities are ingrained in the Indians, that education being the most potent weapon of development also fails at its feet.

The protagonist of *Ankur* is a Dalit woman Lakshmi, and the story is the drama of her self-empowerment in the face of feudal caste-based oppression. Benegal takes her two-fold marginalized status and turns it around such that, her position with respect to her gender and caste gets reordered as more powerful than that of Surya. He does this by allowing Lakshmi, as well as other female villagers an agency to assert themselves by speaking out. Lakshmi indeed, despite being a subaltern, empowers herself at every turn. She not only speaks up for herself alone but also for her deaf-mute husband.

Thus by the end of the 70s, Dalit women had achieved some minimal levels of expression in Indian cinema. And with the passing of a few more decades of development and upliftment programmes, there have been changes, if not in the living conditions of Dalits but in the level of antagonism and the level of a will to fight against oppressors. This transformation is witnessed more in women than in men as they are at the receiving end of stronger modes of oppression.

The decade of 80s unfortunately seems to be a decade that was silent on the issue of Dalit feminism. But in the following decades, there have been caste based films in Indian cinema, although extremely few, which have chosen to give some sort of voice to the Dalit women. Examples include Shekhar Kapur's internationally-acclaimed *Bandit Queen* (1994) and Jag Mundhra's 2000 film *Bawandar* (*The Sandstorm*), both based on real life incidents.

#### 1.4. *Bandit Queen* (1994)

*Bandit Queen* through Phoolan Devi's life has very poignantly portrayed the intersection of caste and gender in the everyday life of rural north India. Through a representation of caste based segregation in villages, Phoolan's child marriage and the endless torture by her paedophilic husband, her exploitation at the hands of upper caste Thakurs and subsequent humiliation when she's paraded naked in front of the entire village in the presence of villagers as passive spectators; Kapur has attempted an indictment of the gender and the caste hierarchies present in the rural areas of India.

The latter half of the film deals with the dramatic killing of the *Thakurs* by Phoolan Devi in the infamous Behmai massacre, when this brave woman chose to take justice and her destiny into her own hands. She takes revenge from all those who saw her being paraded naked in a mutilated and raped condition, and did not come for her rescue. The largest massacre in the history of free India by a group of bandits raises Phoolan to the highest pedestal of notoriety, and has the entire nation snarling for her blood. The film then recounts the rest of the story, leading to her much awaited and broadcasted surrender before 8,000 people, in Bhind.<sup>iii</sup>

Kapur's representation of repeated rapes that sparked off a sharp public debate, also demonstrate that the construction of the boundaries of gender is always entwined with the politics of caste. Phoolan Devi is repeatedly assaulted not just because she has defied hegemonic social norms by leaving her husband but because of a caste based construction of sexual accessibility where upper-caste men often assert violent sexual authority over lower-caste women. Dalit women's activists echo the notion that Dalit women are hit the hardest in everyday life and during caste clashes.

However, the Indian government has time and again failed to prosecute cases of rape. Beginning with the lodging of the First Information Report (FIR) at the local police station through to the judge's opinion, should a case reach that far, women in India are faced with daunting obstacles in prosecuting cases of rape. And if the woman is poor, belongs to a low caste and lives in some rural area, it becomes all the more difficult to get any action done. And those who are indeed able to pursue cases of sexual assault have to in the process battle inescapable biases with the police, the doctors and the judges. One of the cases that illustrate a typical example of the influence of caste bias on the justice system is Bhanwari Devi's rape case where "rapists were acquitted on a Judge's reasoning that 'an upper-caste man could not have defiled himself by raping a lower-caste woman'."<sup>iv</sup> This judgment sparked many protests and the case was taken up by many women's rights organizations in north India. Within a decade of the incident, a cinematic representation of the same was directed and released by Jag Mundhra by the name of *Bawandar* (*The Sandstorm*, 2000).

#### 1.5. *Bawandar* (2000)

Bhanwari Devi, the protagonist of this film was a typical illiterate village woman before she joined, under the influence of social worker and activist Shobha Mathur, the Rajasthan Government Women's Development Programme (WDP) called *Sathin* in 1985 as a grass root worker. This organization worked primarily against caste based discrimination and orthodox practices like child marriages in villages. In April 1992, she reported the child marriage of the one year old daughter of Ram Karan Gurjar to WDP authorities, due to which the police came to the village and created an intervention. As a retaliatory measure, the Gurjar (high caste landlord) family gang-raped Bhanwari in the presence of her husband on September 22 of the same year. When she approached the police, Bhanwari was told that she was too old and unattractive to merit the attentions of young men. Even after undergoing a whole lot of trouble in getting her case heard, she ends up disappointed with the trial judge acquitting the accused on the reasoning that "rape is usually committed by teenagers, and since the accused are middle-aged and therefore respectable, they could not have committed the crime. An upper-caste man could not have defiled himself by raping a lower-caste woman."<sup>v</sup> Her case has been reproduced on the screen in a fairly meticulous manner by Jag Mundhra.

Here, a Dalit woman's body becomes a most prominent site of exploitation when she is gang raped by four upper caste members of the same Gurjar family in what forms the most disturbing scene of the film. The film through this sequence reinforces the idea of the Dalit body as being something that can be easily used as a site for vindication, can be easily abused, tortured, and then disposed off. What's commendable is that despite this traumatic experience, she pulls herself together and convinces her husband to file a FIR report and pursue the case further. However, Sanwari (name changed in the film), can still not be seen as an iconic figure of Dalit women's emancipation since all her efforts and her persistent plea for justice goes in vain.

In this context, the scene which shoots the court trial becomes extremely overwhelming because while being cross-examined, Sanwari gets raped again, and this time verbally. She's asked inappropriate questions with implicit sexual connotations which are aimed at embarrassing her and proving her to be a woman with no moral standards. Though Sanwari did not break down at all and in fact exhibited a sheer eloquence through her curt replies, the accused were all set free. The judge pronounced what could be some of the most shocking remarks that were ever made in a judicial statement. The film borrowed the same words of the judgment which translate as "Bhanwari Devi was a Dalit and so, her rapists, upper caste men, could not have possibly raped her."

The film *Bawandar* nevertheless was critically acclaimed and Nandita Das, who played Sanwari was applauded for her performance. However, this film too like *Bandit Queen* was of a controversial nature. It was censored by the Central Board of Film Certification, and given the 'Adult' Certificate with a recommendation of five cuts. There were also concerns that the film might end up annoying the Gurjar community, to which the accused belong. The Government was worried about the film leading to caste-based contention.

However, despite the controversies regarding its distribution, the film *Bawandar* did very well in showcasing the caste-based victimization of Dalit women especially in rural landscapes.

#### 1.6. *Aakrosh* (2010)

Another film that we might consider in this work is Priyadarshan's *Aakrosh (The Wrath)* which released in 2010, exactly ten years after *Bawandar*. This film is centred around the issue of 'honour killing' which is prominent in rural areas; and in this film involves a Dalit boy who falls in love with a girl belonging to *Thakur* community (upper-caste landlords). Apart from the honour killing which is being investigated by two CBI officers, one Dalit and one Brahmin; this film consists of a sub-plot involving poor Dalit peasants. Atrocities are committed on the families of these peasants, their houses burned down, their family members hanged in front of their eyes by a certain *Shool Sena* that's reminiscent of *Bajrang Dal*.<sup>vi</sup>

The Dalit woman's role is mainly limited to the bringing about of the climax of the film; that unleashes a retributive justice upon the culprits behind the honour killing not by the courts but by the hands of a Dalit woman who shoots them dead minutes after they are acquitted. This Dalit woman had been brutally tortured over the film; her tongue severed by the members of *Shool Sena* so that she would not raise her voice in the court. Moreover, her village was burnt down, and family members consisting of a husband, a son, and grandfather were hanged and their bodies charred to death. In her revenge, with the help of cops, who also realized that a non-bail-able offence and a fine is not going to change the stinking ideology of people who are a disgrace to the society; she catches hold of a gun and shoots them all. Although she has been devoid of a voice, first by virtue of being a Dalit woman, and later by forceful handicapping, she is given an agency towards the end so that she can seek vengeance for the unspeakable torture her people are made to go through. Here we see a *Bandit Queen* like retribution.

## 2. Conclusion

Given the far-flung cinematic representations of caste issues, there are many who feel that the attempts to portray the ravages of the caste system in Indian commercial cinema have been far from satisfactory. Though opinion is somewhat divided on whether casteism has been dealt with adequately in the films or not, almost everyone agrees that in the film industry caste has always been exiguous.

One of the objectives of cinema as a potential medium of communication and a propagandist tool is to construct social realities. But, one can say that since the major stakes in the film industry are held by upper castes, their films often portray a very supercilious image and way of life. The traditions shown in the films are for instance, very Brahminical. The marriage ceremonies shown pertain to the Brahminical traditions with the priest given the supreme position in all customs, and the lavish weddings with great pomp and show completely discount the feudal nature of Indian society and the denial of Dalits to have wedding processions in villages.

Never the less, cinematic representations can indeed function as a medium of deconstructing caste binaries if they are allowed to grow without any restrictions. Therefore, I feel that there is a need to expand the horizon of Indian cinema in terms of content and subject matter so that an appropriate picture can be placed in front of the mass audience. There is also a need to create a space for the marginalized groups, and more so for marginalized women, who have remained in a vacuum by virtue of their marginality since time immemorial.

## 3. References

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5. *Ibid.* pp.175.
6. The *Bajrang Dal* is a hardline Hindu organisation in India, is the youth wing of the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* and is based on the ideology of *Hindutva*. There have been allegations against the organization for having perpetuated caste-based violence