



## Examining the Presence of Dalit identity in Hindi Cinema

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### Abstract

A century of Bombay's popular cinema has overtly celebrated the upper caste hero on screen. Major genres of Hindi cinema are stuffed with the Hindu-Brahmanical cultural values, social themes and political interests. The caste and question of Untouchability not even figured as the peripheral aspects of the cinema. The narratives revolve around certain abstract upper caste Hindu identities, divorced from the idea that in the actual Hindu social order caste distinctions play a crucial role. Bombay's popular Hindi cinema though showcased artistic and intellectual agency by representing the problems of urban poor during its 'Golden Age' period, however the caste question is visibly ignored. Importantly, the problems of the Untouchables were discussed in the national political spectrum and the new Constitution offered them a new identity and special provisions to facilitate their entry into mainstream civil life, the Hindi cinema of 1950s neglected their concerns and voices under the influence of nationalist-socialist rhetoric. It is only in the neo-liberal era that the cinema industry witnessed the arrival of nuanced Dalit representation on screen.



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### Introduction

#### In search of a Dalit Hero

Indian cinema is one of the oldest film industries in the world and has contributed immensely in crafting India's cultural values and national symbols. However, more than its artistic and creative aspects, the popular cinema has attracted 'low priority' in the discussions on nation's art (Vasudevan 2011: 4) and often known for celebrating hyper melodrama,

illogical actions scenes, tantalizing patriarchal emotions and sensuous dance numbers on screen. Bollywood keeps distance from serious, artistic and intellectual genres that can enhance critical reflexivity and ethical prospect of the audience and often been celebrated for its indigenous 'fluffy masala, dreamlike and escapist movies' (Dudrah 2006: 28). Popular Hindi films that engages with the issues of socio-cultural diversities,

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while providing dignified representation to the caste and Dalit questions has yet to receive significant recognition in the industry.

India's 100 years old film industry has been dominated by the cultural values and class interests of the social elites (Wankhede 2013). Film industry remained disengaged with the artists and performers that historically been serving the traditional entertainment and artistic professions—mainly the people belonged to the lower castes. The actors that we see on the screen, often belonged to the upper caste strata, whereas artists belonged to the socially marginalized communities found negligible space on the screen. The issues related to caste and untouchability appeared sporadically on the screen or elided by subsuming the low caste characters under the passive categories of 'poor', 'the common man' or even as 'orphan' (Yengde 2018).

The small Dalit representation in Hindi cinema has perpetually been about their precarious class condition, violated bodies and undignified social location. Hardly the Dalit characters emerged as normal people, around whom a popular narrative can be stitched. The possibility that a Dalit character can appear on screen, showcasing normal human abilities and can tell an entertaining story has few takers in Bombay cinema. Instead, it is the upper caste hero who is treated as the symbol of people's aspiration, whereas the Dalit characters are often showed as the prisoner of caste body.

This paper discusses the perpetual exclusion of the Dalits in cinema enterprise, their stereotypical representation on screen and the changes that the neo-liberal economy has introduced. The post-liberalization period initiated a remarkable shift in cinema business, exhibition industry and has improvised the artistic techniques. Further, it is witnessed that the mainstream ruling party at the center, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), especially in the post-2014 period has constructed its image as a 'big-tent' mass party that attracted greater support from the Dalit-Bahujan groups. It is also noted that the BJP has influenced sections within the Dalits by executing smart socio-cultural strategies and by adoring Babasaheb Ambedkar as a nationalist icon. It groomed popular Dalit-Bahujan leaders at the organizational and regional levels and

establish the idea that the BJP is sensitive about the cultural and social issues of the marginalized communities (Mehta 2022).

In order to mobilize the non-social elite groups, the Dalit-Bahujan cultural values and their independent socio-political concerns found a respectable recognition in the right-wing's cultural strategies. As at the political level, the campaign about the arrival of 'Subaltern Hindutva' is impressive (that highlights the expansion of the BJP into the Dalit-Bahujan communities), it is also witnessed that Hindi cinema Industry has also witnessing a crucial change in representing the Dalit characters on screen. In the recent times, a new 'Dalit cinema' genre has arrived with a small but influential class of Dalit entertainers, artists, producers and technicians making impressive inroads in the process of cinema making. Their stories elevate the viewers perspective beyond the banal logic of entertainment and offer serious intellectual deliberation on cinema. It also disturbs the conventional authority of the social elites over the show business and challenges cinema's ideological values and practices.

Though the visibility of Dalit characters and issues related to the caste hierarchies has improved in Hindi cinema, this paper further explores the possibility if the Dalit characters can represent the aspirations of the general people or if the Dalit artists can emerge as the mass entertainers? My answer is in negative as I will be arguing that it is the social elite artists and characters that represents the aspirations of the normal people, whereas for the Dalit that option is often denied on screen. Cinema as a creative art field has not helped the Dalit to play the role of a free person and to escape the Brahmanical social boundaries. Instead, cinema imprisons the Dalit body with stereotypical roles and forces it to reproduce the conventional caste psyche.

### **Political-Economy Of Entertainment?**

Modernity has significantly transformed the nature of performative arts, aesthetics and its conventional relationships. During the colonial times, the commercialization of theatre and later the arrival of cinema, simply revolutionized the entertainment industry. As art and artistic skills are commodified in the new market, it also allowed a new 'common' audience to enter into theatres to consume the dramatic performances. Ironically, the new

entertainment business is not necessarily belonged to the 'traditional' strata of artists and performers (often belonged to the lower or service castes) but was dominated by the families and class, belonged to the social elites. The conventional performers (like the Tamasha and Lavani artists in Maharashtra) are relegated to periphery as 'folk' or 'local' talents whereas the new class of performers belonged to the social elites are designated as mainstream popular artists.

The arrival of the social elites in the entertainment business has a historic context. For example, when Dadasaheb Phalke wanted to cast female actors in India's first feature film *Raja Harishchandra*- the women of 'good' social background refused to participate in it as performance on stage was than identified as the profession of the 'lowly' people. The women from the 'good' households therefore stayed away from it. The first few female actors (like Durgabai Kamat and her daughter in Mohini Bhasmasur (1913) were ostracized, condemned and face humiliating backlash from the Brahmins. The first female actors of the silent film era were non-Indian white women (remember the Australian born-Indian actress, fearless Nadia) that had less hesitation to play roles on screen. Otherwise the man has to impersonate like woman for the act.

Interestingly, in the Mumbai region though the Dalit performing artists were crucial part of the traditional entertainment practices (like Lavani and Tamasha performances), they were not approached for the roles on screen. Cinema separated itself from the folklores, local talents and the conventional performing class that was attached to 'cultural labour'. Further, the issues and concerns associated with the socially marginalized groups, especially the Dalits and the Adivasis hardly found any space in the new enterprise. Cinema alienated them not only as the producer and performers of the entertainment art but also relegated them as unimportant subject of cinematic representation.

Modern entertainment industry, especially the film making business thus brought important shift into the entertainment business. With the rise of cinema as a capitalist enterprise that gives rich commercial dividends and popularity, it soon attracted the rich and the social elites into this medium, including the

well-educated Brahmin women (like Durga Khote, Shanta Apte, Shobhna Samarth, etc) (Somaaya 2012: xii-xiii). It made the social elites' dominant contributors as artists, performers and producers of the cinematic art. From being the 'master audience' in the sphere of public entertainment, now they become the leading creators and performers in the business.

By the time of India's Independence, the Bombay film industry was dominated by the powerful production houses- run by the social elites, including the Muslim elites. Under their domination, cinema offered a higher cultural purpose and nationalist objective that were closer to the heart of the social elites. The Brahmins and other caste elites further engage with cinema, promoting it as a crucial instrument for strengthening the nationalist values and as an impressive tool to reinvent the Hindu civilizational symbols. The classical Hindu mythological/devotional tales or fantasy cinema thus emerged as a dominant genres during the early history of cinema. It was heralded as the cultural mission that would educate the audience about new cultural goals and would also reclaim the lost traditional asset that is under distress because of imperial exigencies (Hansen 2004: 65).

The higher virtues of Nehruvian secular citizenship, blended with the cultural values of Hindu social elites has emerged as the new symbols to define the characteristics of post-colonial cinema. The nationalist cinema defines the Hindu identity through the merits of upper caste man, and exclusively portrays the Brahmanical cultural traditions. In the deliberation over Hindu nation and society's culture, it is the popular Hindu deities like Rama, Ganesh, Shiva or Durga that takes the central stage. The local Hindu religious figures, saints and spiritual leaders that are popular amongst the Dalit-Bahujan social spheres, found no mainstream mentioning on the celluloid appearances. Early cinema was disengaged from the caste questions and shows no interests in showcasing the lives of regional legends and icons belonged to the Dalit-Bahujan history. Like making films on the Bhakti tradition saints (Kabir, Tukaram, Chokhamela, Muktabai, etc.), or on great leaders (like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, Ambedkar, Mangoo Ram, etc.) or on significant historic events (The battle

of Bhima Koregaon, Savitri Bai Phule's opening of the first school for the girls, Ambedkar's struggle for drinking water at Mahad, the maverick rise of Dalit Panthers in Mumbai during 1970s, etc.) has not been given any thought by the Hindi film industry.

However, its closeness to nationalist cultural agenda and social values of the upper caste junta, alienated the cinema from the traditional folklore and local practices of entertainment. Further, cultural artists belonged to the lower strata (like dancers, singers, storytellers, travelling balladeers, magicians (*beharupiyas*), circus artists, puppeteers, clowns, etc.) were relegated or had a peripheral space in the new entertainment economy. The Bombay Cinema legitimised this notion emphatically that the Dalit and Adivasi cultural values and symbols are not required to portray the civilizational prospect of new India. Cinema overtly separated itself from the issues related to the Dalits, Adivasis and other vulnerable communities and serves the political and class interests of the social elites. The post-Independence cinema thus fabricates the idea of people, culture and nation by erasing the presence of socially marginalized groups. The Dalit appearance on the screen and behind the camera was unwanted and even when sporadically the caste and Dalit issues appeared on the screen, it is portrayed under the upper caste gaze. To watch a prominent Dalit character on the screen, the audience has to wait for a long period.

### **Dalits In Hindi Cinema**

The post-Independence cinema witnessed an overt absence of the Dalit characters and their issues on screen. Though at the national political scene, because of Babasaheb Ambedkar's powerful presence the question of social justice and emancipation of the worst-off communities were deliberated with sincere reformist zeal, the Bombay cinema appears unaware of such development. For example, the only major film in the 1950s that addressed the issue of Untouchability was Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1957). This film disengages the audience from the Ambedkarite perspective on Untouchability and offers a Gandhian solution to deal with the caste question. The female protagonist is presented as an agency less 'submissive and introvert' person (Chauhan 2019) who can find meaning of her life only when she serves the Brahmin family with ultimate dedication.

The Dalit question re-appears prominently in the Art-House Parallel cinema of 1980s. Both the popular and parallel cinema of these decades reprimanded the political class for its anti-poor behaviour, showcased the corrupt and criminal nature of ruling elites and often proposed that such villainous rule shall be uprooted completely by violent heroic actions. Amitabh Bachchan became the leading mascot of the youth anger and was decorated with title of 'angry young man' because of his anti-establishment rhetoric. The Parallel cinema supplemented this anger by introducing realism and intellectual depth in its representations. By showcasing how poor working classes are exploited by the feudal authorities in villages (*Nishant* 1975, *Mirch Masala* 1987) or making a satirical tale about the capitalist-politician nexus in the big cities (*Jane Bhi do Yaron* 1983), the art house cinema provided a deep social sensitivity to the cinema medium.

It was a promising and creative period as the Parallel 'new wave' cinema, also brought realistic representation of the Dalit precarity on screen. These films portrayed the problems of feudal exploitation (*Nishant* 1975 and *Damul* 1985), caste violence (*Paar* 1984), exploitation and repression (*Gidh* 1984 and *Sadgati* 1981) with anthropological authenticity. However it was just a half story told, as the 'realistic cinema' remained content mainly in showcasing the popular stereotypes of the marginalized lives and neglected the emerging voices of Dalit struggles and progressive social change that was parallelly organized by the Dalit movement during the same time.

1970s and 80s was also the period when the Dalits have started refusing the dictates of the ruling classes and on various occasions demonstrated their free will and heroic agency to challenge the conventional social order. They showed impressive social mobilization in Maharashtra (the Dalit Panthers' Movement) and Tamil Nadu (initially the anti-caste movement Dravidian movement and later with the arrival of Dalit party Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi). Further, impressive mobilizations of Dalits are witnessed in Bihar under the leadership of Ram Vilas Paswan (also the militant Naxal uprising) and in Uttar Pradesh (BAMCEF and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)) (Ahuja 2019: 24-25). These

movements impacted the national politics and make Dalits as an integral part of democratic processes.

Further, within the literary and intellectual circles, a new radical voice of the Dalit literature groomed emphatically to demonstrate the fallacy and limits of the conventional literature that claims to write about social truths. The Dalit social, political and intellectual movements introduced a young generation that wanted to transform the conventional idioms of power and aspired to play the role of leadership. Interestingly, it was in Mumbai, that witnessed the maverick arrival of Dalit Panthers' movement, however the Bombay film industry overtly ignored the subaltern voices.

Hindi cinema till 1990s failed to showcase the Dalits as young and promising community that may emerged as a vanguard class to bring radical transformation in social and political milieu. For example, it was possible to imagine Amitabh Bachchan as a Dalit proletariat in Yash Chopra's *Deewar* (1975). A fictional tale about a Dalit man that overcomes the social and class boundaries and defeats the criminal elites (like many Amitabh Bachchan movies) is closer to the everyday actualities and desires of the city dwellers. Such tales could have inspired the migrant Dalit working class tremendously. However, the Dalit characters are not offered such heroic and inspiring roles. Instead, often it is the upper caste 'superstar' that single handedly resolves the personal and public anguishes with a fist of fury and appeared as a 'prophet' hero (Dasgupta, 2006, p. 22). When it comes to the Dalit characters, cinema only showed the graphic details of their poor and wretched lives and missed the presence of the aspirational and conscious Dalit person in social and political sites.

### **The Arrival of Dalit Heroes**

It is in the third phase, especially in the post-liberalization period, that cinema witnessed the emergence of a nuanced Dalit representation. This was also the period of the maverick rise of the BSP at national politics. Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* (1994), Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya* (2007) and later Prakash Jha's *Aarakshan* (2011) are the few films that provided a crucial space to the political and social claims of the new Dalit generation. The later Hindi cinema also bring stories about the

Dalits in cities and mofussil towns in *Rajneeti* (2010), *Guddu Rangeela* (2015), *Manjhi* (2015), *Mukkabaaz* (2017), *Soncharya* (2019), *Masan* (2015), *Newton* (2017) and very latest in *Jhund* (2022). The Dalit characters in these films represented the emerging socio-economic changes and introduced the Dalit person with heroic abilities, ready to challenge the associated stereotypes. For example, in Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019), the Dalits are presented as heterogeneous and segmented people on class and ideological lines- including that the Dalit person can be a part of revolutionary party as well as of corrupt state's establishment.

The new stories of urban Dalits are distinct from the stereotypical portrayal of the Dalit lives offered by the Parallel cinema. The new Dalit character is portrayed as an aspirational being with basic desires and dreams (Manjhi). He is pictured as a robust claimant of dignity and an upholder of heroic credentials (Newton). He is now shown ready to contest the degraded social and class conditions with human capabilities (*Guddu Rangeela*) and can achieve his dreams (*Jhund*). Though such imagery has improvised the meaning of Dalit characters positively, the Dalit character has not emerged parallel to the mainstream Bollywood hero. The Dalit body has to operate within the given rationale of caste society and has to perform under the dominant ethical and social codes. The possibility that the Dalit body can creatively alter his social role and emerge as an alpha male hero, or even as a part of common people is still outside the imagination of filmmakers.

A dynamic shift in the portrayal of the Dalit characters emerged once the films are produced and directed by Dalits like Pa Ranjith (*Madras* 2014, *Kabali* 2016, *Kala* 2021 and *Sarpatta Parambarai* 2022), Nagaraj Manjule (*Fandry* 2013, *Sairat* 2016 and *Jhund* 2022), Neeraj Ghaywan (*Masan* 2015), Mari Selvaraj (*Karnan* 2021 and *Periyerum Perumal* 2018) Sailesh Narwade (*Jayanti* 2021), etc. These films have introduced a vibrant and powerful Dalit characters, especially as the lead protagonist, one that understands his deplorable social location and ready to contest it with revolutionary zeal and passion. Often these films subvert, mock and challenge the dominant forms of cinema and provide critical reflexivity to the audience. It re-introduces the Dalits as the enlightened entertainers that can

now tell serious stories, escaping the coercive gaze of the master class and their ideological imperatives. Hindi cinema's regional counterpart promises the arrival of 'Dalit Genre' in Indian cinema.

The Dalit representation in cinema has improved tremendously with the new module of Dalit genre. It has become nuanced and heterogenous and the Dalit characters are bestowed with mainstream heroic credentials (like Rajanikant's character in *Kabali* and Dhanush in *Karnan*). Importantly, while it sensitively showcases the dreams and desires of the marginalized communities, these films also endorse the mainstream entertainment requirements like dance, music and drama and action. This genre thus offers a possibility that the Dalit character may emerge as 'mainstream hero', their stories can become inspirational tales and the artists belonged to Dalit-Bahujan strata may gain popular fame. It appears that the Dalit genre of cinema has now arrived prominently and can entertain the general people like the other counterparts.

### Conclusion

#### **Cinema's Trust Deficit Towards the Dalit Identity**

Traditional cinema provides popularity to the national cultural symbols, designed by the social elites. For a very long period, we witness the visible exclusion of the Dalit bodies as mainstream artists, technicians and characters in films. Though they are important part of the traditional entertainment practices, the modern cinema industry has not treated Dalit as subject of entertainment. Instead, it neglected their talent, cultural symbols and provided no space to their social thoughts and political ideas. Within the mainstream entertainment practices, the Dalit aesthetics and artistic traditions are relegated as folk and base culture of particular caste group and their political aspirations are treated as disturbing to the values of cultural nationalism and civic morals.

Dalit presence on the screen creates a different cinematic experience. His arrival on screen does not amuse or entertain the audience, but create anxiety, uneasiness and disturbance. The Dalit body has not been explored as a 'hero material', as the credentials required to perform the role of a legendary protagonist is often been reserved for the social elite character. The mainstream hero

often wears the upper caste social identity and act as an alpha male. The social elite hero can fall in love with anyone, can sing and dance, can challenge and defeat the powerful villainous class, and can emerge as a superior agent of change. We can notice that the Dalit character is often divorced from such fundamental cinematic entitlements and credentials for a very long time. Instead, in conventional cinema the Dalit character's presence reminds the audience about his precarious, unfree and wretched conditions.

Therefore, seeing a dancing Dalit hero or the one who can defeat the mighty supervillain with his fist of fury and emerge as the victorious legend, is an alien subject for the filmmakers and the general audience. It was acceptable norm that the Dalit character will not be entertaining the audience but shall only be used to showcase the troubled social realities, poverty and perpetual class struggles under which he/she survives. The Dalit character is not even presented as an ordinary person that can perform mundane social and cultural acts without any fear or prejudices. Instead, the Dalit characters are often stereotypical- a perpetual prisoner of the degraded caste body that cannot escape the gaze of the social elites.

The new films in Dalit Genre challenge the conventional order. It has witnessed commercial success and also celebrated as fine artistic expressions. However these films too castigate the Dalit characters in particular caste location, dis allowing them to play the role of an abstract free individual (like the mainstream hero). The protagonist's actions are determined by his caste subjectivity and he is not even free to perform as a normal-average person.

The way Hollywood has presented the Black characters and their stories as the growing part of popular mainstream culture- that includes offering them roles of superheroes and saviours of the universe- such possibilities are distant in the case of the Dalits in Bollywood cinema. Though the Dalit filmmakers and new characters have created their niche space in the industry, they are far away from becoming the mainstream entertainers of the people. Because of their caste identity, their artistic talent



will be scrutinized with critical apprehensions and will not be allowed to become the representative voice of the entertainment business.

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