ROUTLEDGE

The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India

Edited by Joshil K Abraham and Judith Misrahi Barak

The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India

This companion is the first study of caste and its representation in Indian cinema. It unravels the multiple layers of caste that feature directly and indirectly in Indian movies, to examine not only the many ways caste pervades Indian society and culture but also how the struggle against it adopts multiple strategies.

The companion:

- critiques Indian cinema production through the lens of anti-caste discourse;
- traces the history of films beginning from the early twentieth century, focusing on caste representations across India, including Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil as well as silent films;
- makes a foray into OTT media;
- includes analysis of popular films such as *Padmaavat, Masaan, Fandry, Sairat, Sujata, Article 15, Chomana Dudi, Lagaan, Court, Ee.Ma.Yau, Kaala, Pariyerum Perumal, Perariyathavar*, among many others, to critique and problematise the idea of caste.

A major intervention, this book alters traditional approaches to 'caste' in Indian cinemas and society and explores new political strategies implemented through cinematic creation and aesthetics. It will be indispensable for scholars and researchers of film studies, social discrimination and exclusion studies, human rights, popular culture, and South Asian studies. It will also be of interest to enthusiasts of Indian cinematic history.

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Introduction[1]

Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak

It sometimes feels as though there were a wide-spread belief, among spectators and scholars alike, that the discourse of caste has become visible in Indian cinema only recently. Many critics and scholars have insisted on not seeing the existence of caste in cinema. And when caste is identified at all, it is perceived as belonging to the Dalits and the lower castes. Hence, any reference to caste in Indian cinema has often been confined to discussions on caste discrimination and atrocities perpetrated on Dalits and lower castes. It was an object of some astonishment, for instance, that, in response to the call for contributions for this Companion, the co-editors were sent several proposals that read 'caste in cinema' as synonymous with 'Dalits and lower castes in cinema'. The authors of those proposals undoubtedly rejoiced there should be a co-edited volume of critical essays on the topic, even though it wasn't the first one, but they simply bypassed the fact that its focus was neither Dalit cinema, nor the cinematic representation of caste oppression, nor the resistance to caste-based violence, even though such elements are obviously among the primary interests of the volume. Somehow, such a misreading of the call for contributions was symptomatic of the way one can easily forget that caste exists for everybody living in India, even people who are genuinely convinced caste belongs to the past or is deployed only in remote villages, or that they live in caste-free surroundings. Such a misreading seems to give prominence to the assumption that 'caste in cinema' can only mean 'Dalit or lower castes in cinema', as if caste always belonged to the Other and the Lower.

At this stage of the Introduction, the increasing scholarship on the elements mentioned above cannot but be thrown into relief. Not only has the anti-caste struggle made a powerful impact on Indian and global audiences through the popular medium of film, but it has also generated a desire among readers and spectators, critics, writers, and scholars to decode the recent shift in aesthetics, gaze, spectatorship, and agency. Since the 2000s, impressive fieldwork and discursive work have been done to show the 'umbilical link' between caste, cinema, and politics, particularly Tamil politics (Gorringe 2017), and how Indian cinema reinforced caste hierarchies (Srinivas 2000), sustaining the caste system and the Brahmanical social order (Anand 2003), protecting the casteist social framework as the norm (Leonard 2015). More pointedly since the 2010s, there has been a clear determination to decipher and break down the biases in the representation of Dalits and lower castes in Indian cinema (Wankhede 2013). Closer political,

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analytical, and aesthetic attention has been paid to a cinema that claims itself as 'explicitly Dalit' (Yengde 2018) to the imbrications of caste and gaze (Edachira 2020), and to the emergence of a Bahujan Spectatorship (Nisha 2020). Increasingly, the cinematic interventions of Dalit film-makers such as Nagraj Manjule or Pa. Ranjith have given rise to aesthetics that 'not only reject stereotypical representation, but also affect the other by producing a generative discourse of "presence"' (Edachira 2020: 52).

At the root of this volume are the myriad ways in which caste, in its far-reaching and deeply dehumanising scope, has been made visible or invisible, legible or illegible, in Indian cinema, endeavouring to decode how the sphere of Indian mainstream cinema has maintained and sustained a dominant caste hegemony and, deliberately or not, a casteist ethos. This is thus not a volume on Dalit cinema *per se* nor on the presence or absence of Dalit or lower-caste characters in films. Nor is it a volume on the political stand of Dalit film-makers raising social awareness through the film medium, as if raising an anti-caste critique was only to be left to Dalits, lower castes, and, more generally speaking, Bahujans.

In a fresh and perhaps ambitious move, the co-editors and the contributors have adopted a somewhat different angle since the volume emerges from the desire to tackle the multifarious and endless manner in which caste is always there—any caste and all of them—whether it jumps out of the screen or creeps in through the back door, whether it is easy for the spectator to notice and pin down, or seeps into their unconscious and is accepted as a given, something that could almost appear as the 'norm'.

This is not the time or place to retrace the development of caste and untouchability, but since the readership of this volume will be based in India and outside India, across disciplines, we may still have to remind the reader who would not be familiar with that aspect of Indian history that these phenomena of caste and untouchability have evolved over a long period of time, resulting from conflicts over land and resources. Conflicts born out of the struggles for political supremacy and control over land between the Aryans and the indigenous communities of India eventually produced a social system based on the *varnas*, a religious and social Hindu hierarchy comprised of Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (servants and labourers). The *varnas* system was further divided into thousands of *jatis*, whose divisions and sub-stratifications developed into modern-day castes. As a quick reminder, the moral and social behaviour that was attached to the *varnas* was codified in the ancient Sanskrit text, *Manusmriti*. The Shudras were denied the *upanayana*, the sacred thread ceremony, which allowed the first three *varnas* to be born again and to study the sacred texts of the Vedas. The Panchamas constituted the fifth *varna*; outside of the *chaturvarna* system, they were the *Asprushyas*, or 'Untouchables', and had to live outside the boundaries of the villages, subsisting on the flesh of dead animals whose carcasses it was their duty to dispose of or forced to work in occupations defined by their birth and community of origin, and considered as 'impure' by the Savarnas, or caste Hindus.[2]

Since this Introduction started by challenging the wide-spread belief that the discourse of caste had become visible in Indian cinema only recently, this may be the moment to stress how intricately entwined caste and cinema have been from the very beginning of Indian cinema. There are many ways through which caste and cinema are linked, from the explicit presence or conspicuous absence of caste-based themes to the caste of the directors, actors, or technicians, to the organisation of production and post-production, to promotion and audience reception, and so on. By attempting a historical overview of films starting from the early 20th century, we would like to demonstrate that caste discourse has indeed existed in all kinds of forms, visible and invisible, from the outset. But then, so has the resistance against caste discourse in cinema.

When attempting to trace a very brief history of caste in cinema, it may be appropriate to begin with the film-maker who is considered to be the father of Indian cinema and to see how

caste has been inscribed there from the very start. Indeed, this has been the object of some debate. Dada Saheb Phalke is generally regarded as the father of Indian cinema since he is credited with releasing the first full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, on May 3, 1913. Yet, it should be pointed out that Indian cinema had several other fathers in different states of India, in different languages. One thinks of Raghupathi Venkaiah Naidu in Telugu, Rangaswamy Nataraja Mudaliar in Tamil, Dhirendranath Ganguly in Bengali, J. C. Daniel in Malayalam, and Subbaiah Naidu in Kannada, among others. One also thinks of Ramachandra Gopal Torne, a.k.a. Babasaheb Torne, whose film *Shree Pundalik* was released on May 18, 1912, a year before Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*. Why Phalke was awarded the fatherhood of Indian cinema rather than Torne is an important question to ask in the light of caste. Without much discussion, it seems, it was decided by the cultural and political elite that *Raja Harishchandra* should be considered the first full-length Indian film, one of the official reasons being that it was 40 minutes long as opposed to *Shree Pundalik*, which is around 22 minutes. Phalke was born to a Marathi-speaking Chitpavan Brahmin family in 1870. Could the Brahmin status of Dadasaheb Phalke and the non-Brahmin status of Dadasaheb Torne be an element that entered into the decision that it was Phalke who should be hailed as the father of Indian cinema and not Torne? It could well be, and such examples show that debates on the multiple ways Indian cinema has been ensnared in the evils of caste are bound to grow. Similarly, it took several decades for Kerala to acknowledge J. C. Daniel as the father of Malayalam cinema.

It's not only caste discourse that has been present from the earliest days. It is also the resistance to such caste discourse that has been there too. One of the acknowledged examples of cinema dealing explicitly with caste is Franz Osten's *Achut Kanya*, which was released in 1936. It tells the love story of Pratap and Kasturi, a Brahmin and an 'Untouchable'. While Osten, the director, and Himanshu Rai, the producer, were particular about raising social consciousness through the film, they also made sure that caste differences would be wiped out from the sets. An incident on the set of the movie is telling:

> Osten despaired of the man, who he was sure would never be an actor. But Himansu brushed aside the accident saying to Ashok, 'So you broke the villain's leg' and remained convinced he could act. On that terrible first day's shooting he also gave Ashok Kumar his screen name although he was unwittingly inspired by Osten. During the first day's shooting Osten, never quite able to cope with Indian names, called Ashok 'Mr Kumar.' As he did so, Himansu said, 'You have helped me give a new name to the new hero Ashok Kumar Ganguly. Tear apart Ganguly from his full name. Make him a casteless hero loved by all castes and classes. He shall simply be Ashok Kumar.' This was a shrewd choice. Kumar is a common middle name in India (it means young prince in Hindi) and soon new actors coming to Hindi cinema also dropped their surnames and used Kumar as their surname, seeking to bridge the many divisions in Indian society.
>
> *(Bose 2007: 113)*

While Osten and Rai made sure that the Brahmin surname was dropped to make the structural transformation, they also were conscious that film sets must be free of caste divides. Another instance from the same set tells the story of an attempt to break caste barriers:

> On Ashok Kumar's first fraught day of shooting, in order to calm the nerves of his new star, Rai had sent him a special lunch from his own lunch pack to his room. It was chicken soup, roast chicken, pudding and sweets. This was special treatment for a man he knew was crucial to his movie. But, in general, and in contrast to what happened in the rest of the country,

> Rai practiced the social equality his movies preached. So, all company members, of whatever caste, ate together at the company canteen, a huge statement in India for the 1930s.
>
> *(Bose 2007: 116)*

It is quite clear from these narratives that caste and cinema were intertwined, however much one tries to make the caste divides invisible. The fact also remains that *Acchut Kanya*, despite common belief, is not the first film to deal with caste issues. Ten years before, *Neera* (1926), directed by R. S. Choudhary and Ramchandra Gopal Torney, tells the story of Neera, the daughter of a temple priest who lives with the Tribals and saves them from the evils of the villain who tries to snatch their land. *Vigathakumaran* (1928), a Malayalam film directed by J. C. Daniel, is significant in the historiography of caste in cinema as it produced the first Dalit heroine P. K. Rosy and the first director of Malayalam cinema who belonged to the lower-caste Nadar community. *Khuda Ki Shaan* (1931) is yet another film which explicitly highlights caste issues prevalent in the society, narrating the story of Ramaki, a Dalit girl who has an illegitimate child with Manekchand, a wealthy man's son. It is a drama which attempts to critique the caste system.

Movies with themes that address the caste system were produced in several other Indian languages throughout the 1930s and not only in Hindi. The Bengali movie *Chandidas* (1932), directed by Debaki Bose, tells the story of a 15th-century Vaishnavite poet who decides to denounce caste and institutionalised religion in favour of a higher Vaishnavite call. V. Shantharam's bilingual Hindi-Marathi film *Dharmatma* (1935) narrates the story of Sant Eknath (1533–1599) who goes against the rigid caste system and breaks the customs by eating with the Dalits. With Periyar's social reformist movement gaining strength in Tamil Nadu, several movies were also made there around the issues of caste. *Balayogini* (1936) directed by K. Subramanyam was such an attempt to advocate social reform. The director was attacked by Brahmin organisations for casting an actual Brahmin girl widow in the lead role. He responded to these attacks with another movie, *Bhakta Cheta* (1940), glorifying a Harijan saint. After addressing caste successfully in *Achhut Kanya*, Franz Osten made *Jeevan Prabhat* in 1937, which addresses similar issues. After K. Subramaniam's *Balayogini* was produced in Telugu, another Telugu movie confronted the caste issue head on. *Mala Pilla* (1938) narrates the love story between a Dalit girl and a Brahmin boy.

Achhut, directed by Chandulal Shah in 1940, chronicles the story of Lakshmi, a Dalit who is not allowed to draw water from a temple well by the Pujari, which, along with other reasons, forces her father to convert to Christianity. Heaping criticism on the caste system, the movie tried to highlight the issues prevailing in society and became one of the most successful movies of the 1940s. *Nandanar* (1942) was a Tamil movie directed by Murugadasa and courted controversy as it 'offended many Dalit viewers, forcing the film to be banned in the Kolar Gold Fields until, according to some versions, Desikar came personally and apologised to the workers for having participated in the film's controversial climax' (*Encyclopedia of Indian cinema*: 295).

The 1950s saw a lot of social reformist movies in Tamil, inspired by the Dravidian movement. They include *Velaikkari* (1949), *Manthiri Kumari* (1950), and *Parashakthi* (1952). *Parashakthi* brought one of the most acclaimed actors of Tamil cinema, Sivaji Ganeshan, into the limelight. It is interesting to note that Sivaji Ganeshan is one of the only two actors whose caste has been mentioned in the *Encyclopedia of Indian cinema*. The entry records him as a 'Tamil superstar, originally Viluppuram Chinnaiahpillai Ganesan, but best known as Sivaji. Born in Sirkali, TN, into the peasant Kallar caste, although his father worked on the railways' (*Encyclopaedia of Indian cinema*: 97). The other person whose caste is mentioned in the *Encyclopedia* is 'Marathi director and technician. Real name: Yashin Mistri, a.k.a. Sahebmama Fattelal, also spelt Fatehlal. Born in Kagal, Kolhapur. Belonged to hereditary artisanal caste (Mistri means "carpenter", although

his father was a stonemason)' (95). This suggests caste names are automatically associated with lower castes while upper castes get away without caste being added as adjectives to their identity.

Sujata (1956), directed by Bimal Roy in Hindi and one of the much-debated movies of the 1950s, is still talked about by critics as a movie that dealt with caste issues, even today. However, along with *Sujata*, several other movies dealing with caste were produced in various film industries across India during that time. The Malayalam film industry saw movies dealing with the caste question from the 1950s with *Neelakuyil* (1954). The movie, directed by Ramu Kariat and P. Bhaskaran, tells the story of a Dalit girl Neeli who was found dead with her illegitimate child, born from her relationship with a high-caste teacher. The Gujarati film industry, too, began dealing explicitly with caste issues with the inter-caste love story *Malela Jiv* (1956) directed by Manhar Raskapur.

There may have been a smaller production of films trying to address caste themes explicitly in the 1960s, but an inter-caste love story between two surgeons was directed in Bengali by Sushil Majumdar with the title *Hospital* (1960). Following upon this film, the 1960s saw movies such as *Tayilla Pillai* (1961) by L. V. Prasad in Tamil and *Kulagothralu* (1962) by K. Pratyagatma in Telugu.

In the 1970s, the Kannada industry produced a lot of movies dealing with caste starting with *Samskara* (1970) directed by Pattabhi Rama Reddy. *Chomana Dudi* (1975) by B. V. Karanth and *Grahana* (1978) by T. S. Nagabharana were produced during this period. *Grahana* is

> based on the Hebbaramma Festival celebrated in some Karnataka districts where Nagabharana shot the film on location (after bribing the local high priest to obtain permission). The plot concerns an annual village ritual in which a small number of Untouchables are selected to be Brahmins, for two weeks only, provided they mortify themselves throughout this period, often in extremely cruel fashion, as a kind of purification ceremony performed by ritual scapegoats.
>
> *(Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema: 436)*

In the same year, 1978, another movie dealing with caste issues was directed by Baraguru Ramchandrappa, *Ondu Oorina Kathe*. The movie is presented as,

> a ruralist drama about caste exploitation, showing that economic exploitation goes beyond orthodox caste divides: when in power, rich Harijans (Untouchables) exploit people as ruthlessly as their erstwhile Brahmin masters did. Sometimes construed as a reply to the relentless anti-Brahminism of the Navya writers and filmmakers.
>
> *(Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema: 437)*

Such abundant production proves that vigorous caste discourses were taking place during that time in the political, social, and cinematic realms, so much so that a director/writer like Baraguru Ramchandrappa felt he had to respond to anti-Brahminism through the medium of cinema.

The 1980s also saw several movies across languages which dealt with the question of caste. They include *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980) by Ketan Mehta in Gujarati, *Sadgati* (1981) by Satyajit Ray in Hindi, the Malayalam movie *Marmaram* (1982) directed by Bharathan, and the Telugu movies *Swayamkrushi* (1987) and *Rudraveena* (1988) directed by K. Viswanath. There is also a Malayalam movie *Aryan* (1988), directed by Priyadarshan, which tells the tale of 'upper-caste Brahmins in the context of the Mandal Commission's advocacy of employment rights for lower-caste people' (*Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*: 483). The Tamil industry started using comedy to engage with caste issues with movies such as *Idu Namma Alu* (1988) directed by K. Bhagyaraj. The Punjabi movie industry also produced the movie *Marhi Da Deeva* (1989), which addressed some

questions dealing with caste and land. The debate was so strong that upper-caste directors felt the need to produce narratives that would counter anti-caste discourses going against Brahmanism. Very clearly, as in the case of the Kannada director, Baraguru Ramchandrappa mentioned earlier, Malayalam directors like Priyadarshan also started feeling the need to protect the rights of the upper castes against the lower castes by producing movies showing what they put forward as the terrible plight of the upper castes.

Some movies in the 1990s attempt to deal explicitly with caste. The Telugu movie *Apathbandhavudu* (1992) directed by K. Vishwanath saw the actor Chiranjeevi act in yet another movie attacking the caste system after his performance in the 1998 movie *Rudraveena*. The Malayalam industry produced a movie *Ponthan Mada* (1993), directed by T. V. Chandran, in which Mammootty gave an iconic performance as the lower-caste *Ponthan Mada*. In 1994, the Hindi film *Bandit Queen*, directed by Shekar Kapur, was based on the life of Phoolan Devi. The Kannada industry also produced *Kottreshi Kanasu* (1994) during the same decade, directed by Nagathi Halli Chandrasekhar, which tells the story of a Dalit student Kottara who struggles to overcome caste oppression despite being the brightest student in the class. Some other caste-related movies produced during this period include *Mukta* (1994), directed by Jabbar Patel in Marathi, or the Hindi movie *Target* (1994), directed by Sandeep Ray.

The question thus needs to be asked, if not answered, about the purported absence of caste in Indian cinema or the belief that movies dealing with caste were not produced until recently. As has been shown earlier, even if only in briefly mentioned films, a high number of movies dealt directly and explicitly with caste issues. Although the critique started by Franz Olsen was not pursued by the cultural elites of Indian cinema, it was indeed there and continued to seep through films in a more or less visible manner.

At this stage of the argument and in parallel to what has just been said about Indian movies in the 20th century, it is worth analysing the positions that some recent directors and critics have taken on caste in Indian cinema. Anubhav Sinha and his recent movie *Article 15* (2019) have been discussed widely, seeing it as a movie that tackles caste atrocities. Following the release of the movie, Anubhav Sinha was asked, in an interview in *HuffPost*, whether he had thought of having the creative participation of someone from the Dalit community. He replied:

> From a cast and crew of 300 people, I don't know the caste of any person. I was casting actors and not casting them based on caste. If someone came up to me and said I am a Kaiyasth, there's going to be a red mark in my head. I'm not going to recruit people based on their caste. Because that's casteist. In fact, there's this friend of mine whose house I would often go to, we eat and drink together and he happens to be head of department in our production. He randomly pointed out that he's a Dalit. I didn't even know that he was! And it didn't matter because to me, everybody is equal. So, their voices are there, no? I don't know the caste of my actors, maybe some of them are.[3]

Every word is important here. 'If someone came up to me and said I am a Kaiyasth [not you are a Kaiyasth], there's going to be a red mark in my head'. Further, Sinha says, 'he happens to be the head of department in our production'—not *he is* but *he happens to be*. Sinha probably didn't even know the name of the Head of his production unit, and hence he didn't mention the name in the interview. The only thing he says is that he once 'randomly pointed out that he's a Dalit'. At the end of the sentence, Sinha stops at 'I don't know the caste of my actors, maybe some of them are. . . '. He seems to indicate that perhaps some of them are Dalits whose name he doesn't want to mention like that of his Production Department Head. He doesn't know for sure what their caste is.

This is in sharp contrast to what Franz Osten and Himanshu Rai did while working on their movie sets. They knew the caste of everyone on their sets and deliberately made attempts to ensure that caste differences were wiped out. Sinha's remarks seem backward regarding movements in favour of the annihilation of caste in the movie industry. Osten and Rai, as demonstrated earlier, tried to call out the caste of Ashok Kumar and delete his surname, additionally to making everybody eat together on the movie sets. But Sinha feigns ignorance about the existence of caste and claims he does not have to tackle it. On the other hand, it is somewhat surprising, to say the least, that *Article 15* opens with the movie's credits where the producers thank Yogi Adityanath. We cannot but wonder why the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, under whose governance there have been many caste atrocities, should be thanked in a movie dealing with caste atrocities.

This contrast in addressing caste issues can be widely found among the contemporary movie directors. While some of the directors go to great lengths to make caste invisible, others aim to buttress its visibility. There is a wide difference between Ashutosh Gowariker and Nagraj Manjule dealing with caste in the movies *Lagaan* (2001) and *Sairat* (2016), respectively, both of which will be analysed at length in the chapters of this volume. Both movies have an important character named Kacchra. While Gowariker in his movie downplays caste tensions in the garb of the 'larger national interest' (of which the outcaste Kachra is not a part), Manjule makes the choice of visibility. The ending of Manjule's *Fandry* couldn't have been more powerful. With Kachra's son Jabya throwing the stone at the upper-caste audience, the question that is raised is whether the members of the upper-caste audience who practise caste, consciously or unwittingly, will start acknowledging its existence.

In recent years, making caste visible on the screen and adopting an anti-caste aesthetics has been the avowed goal of several new caste-conscious directors like Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, Mari Selvaraj, Chaitanya Tamhane, Jayan K. Cherian, T. G. Gnanavel, Dr Bijukumar Damodaran, and Vetrimaaran among others. With themes of caste being brought to the mainstream, Bollywood has tried to adapt such regional, caste-conscious films into Hindi. One such attempt was made by Shashank Khaitan, who remade Manjule's *Sairat* (2016) in Hindi as *Dhadak* (2018). Putting the two movies side by side, it is obvious that, while Manjule was able to present caste difference and atrocities as an everyday reality, Khaitan has almost erased caste from his film and replaced it with class. Even if *Dhadak* is a scene-by-scene copy of *Sairat*, caste cannot be sensed anywhere in the movie except when Gokul's father says that Parthivi's family belongs to the upper caste. *Sairat* leads us through the reality of caste violence and inter-caste love, ending with the horrific murder of Parshaya and Archi by Archi's brother and company, leaving it to their small child to discover the dead bodies. However, *Dhadak* takes us through the glamorous portrayal of the new entrant from the Kapoor family, Jhanvi Kapoor. We can see neither caste violence nor class depravity. What we can see instead is an attempt to co-opt a caste narrative for commercial interests. The final scene is also telling as, unlike in *Sairat*, it is the lower-caste Gokul and his son who die, while the upper-caste Parthivi comes back with sweets to discover their bodies. It may have been better if the producers of *Dhadak* hadn't acknowledged their borrowing from *Sairat*: it is simply not the same story. One is a caste story, while the other attempts to use caste violence for commercial gain.

With powerful film narratives such as *Kaala* (2018), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016), *Court* (2015), *Perariyathavar* (2015) and *Jai Bhim* (2021), these new caste-conscious directors have moved beyond the mere rejection of biases and denunciation of stereotypes (which was a major step in itself); they have moved beyond caste stories as life narratives, blazing a trail towards a form of social democracy that takes its roots in the empowerment of the Self through the empowerment of the Other. Through the creation of what Edachira calls the 'affective expressive archives of anti-caste sensibilities', they '[bring] into presence a

previously absent entity to a sensory reality' (Edachira 2020) and foster the possibility of a world where caste is annihilated.

This reminds us of Dr Ambedkar's last speech given on November 25, 1949, in the Constituent Assembly, when he pointed out that '[p]olitical democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy' (Ambedkar 2020: 464).[4] And further, in a comparison between the 'people of the United States' and the 'Indian nation', he asks: 'I am of opinion that in believing that we are a nation, we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation?' (464). Despite being the architect of the Indian constitution, Dr Ambedkar went on in the Rajya Sabha on September 2, 1953: 'Sir, my friends tell me that I have made the constitution. But I am quite prepared to say that I shall be the first person to burn it out. I do not want it. It does not suit anybody'.[5]

These words, in turn, recall the national anthem scene in *Fandry*. Jabya, Kachra and others are hunting a pig, but they are suddenly obliged to stop because the national anthem has started playing. So, the nation comes first, and caste is put into the background, along with caste-induced atrocities. The nation has taken centre-stage without the caste issue being sorted out. This is precisely what Dr Ambedkar had warned against in the Rajya Sabha, on September 2, 1953: 'I should say that the greatest harm will come by injuring the minorities'.[6]

This volume not only foregrounds films that are produced by caste-conscious directors who have presented caste explicitly in their films as part of their struggle against it, it will also put prominent stress on films that have invisibilised caste as well as on films which are not projected as being about caste at all. This will be analysed further in the volume, but for the sake of our argument, let us give a few quick examples, some of which are from films that are not examined in the following chapters.

A movie such as *Lagaan* (Dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001), for instance, does not purport to be about caste at all, but a closer reading reveals it to be all about caste. Ashutosh Gowarikar introduces a character named Kachra, who does not belong to the village. Finally, at the 'mercy' of the upper-caste Bhuvan, he becomes part of a cricket team that must win the match against the British to spare them taxation. Although Kachra does not have any land that would be taxed or exempt from taxation, he plays brilliantly and takes four wickets in the match. By normal cricket standards, he should have been the man of the match, but what unfolds in the end shows how caste operates invisibly. Kachra becomes invisible at the end of the movie, it is all about Bhuvan and his upper-caste colleagues.

Padmavat (Dir. Sanjay Leela, 2018) is a movie ostensibly dealing with the massive resistance offered by the Maharana Ratan Singh against Allauddin Khilji and Rani Padmavati's role in this resistance. When the movie is discussed in critical circles, it is seen as dealing with history and the brave resistance of Maharana Ratan Singh and Rani Padmavati. But we can see throughout the movie that it is less about a fight and more about caste pride, the pride of being Rajputs. With the street fights carried out by the Karni sena to protest against the movie to protect their caste pride, and the fact that the movie was renamed, *Padmavat* is clearly all about caste, onscreen and offscreen.

Similarly, *Dabang* (Dir. Abhinav Kashyap, 2010) is not a movie that seems to have anything to do with caste. But the mere fact that the police officer, the lead character in the movie, is named Chulbul Pandey and constantly displays his Brahminhood as the reason for his bravery shows how caste penetrates narratives from all angles.

Dangal (Dir. Nitesh Tiwari, 2016) shows the caste-ridden state of Haryana where to breach caste boundaries is almost suicidal. Haryana is also a state that is known for its brutal repression of women. But the movie shows how the masculine desire of the father to be a symbol of the nation can make him go to any lengths, including making his daughters participate in wrestling competitions against boys. Neither caste nor patriarchy can stand in their way. Their father's nationalism

takes them on a tortuous and torturous trail to become national champions, after which they return to the fold of their caste. One might get the impression that the nation subsumes caste, but it does not; it only suspends it for a short moment while it is useful for the nation.

The scene in *Chakde India* (Dir. Shimit Amin, 2007) where the prospective players come for training in the national camp is another telling scene. When the coach, Kabir Singh, asks them to introduce themselves, they give their name and the state they belong to. Only Vidya Sharma says that she belongs to India. When she becomes the captain of the team, one cannot help suspecting that it is because only a Brahmin can lead the nation.

Finally, *Kumbalangi Nights* (Dir. Madhu C. Narayanan, 2019) delineates the subtleties with which caste operates. Again, it is not a movie which talks about caste in any explicit way. But almost every relationship in the movie can be decoded as being dipped in caste. From the relationships between friends such as Sumesh and Bobby to the love between Bobby and Baby, to the occupations of every single character in the film or the place where they live, everything is caste-driven. And it is precisely this kind of familial, social, and political, seemingly 'natural', filiation that is questioned and upturned in the film—affiliation by choice creates other connections and enables emancipation. The film explores the possibility of moving out of Dalit as social death and remove caste as a principle of individual, collective, and interpersonal organisation. It gives, more than anything, a sensory shape to the desire to reconfigure the social place into a casteless community that could be shared by choice. Displacement and migration have often been shown as being an integral part of Dalit and lower-caste existence but paradoxically, it is precisely because it happens in a single location and doesn't offer any option outside, that mobility and movement are at the heart of the film. Like several other films, it invites us to think of what Leonard would call an 'experience of mobile community' as he uses the notion of *communitas* and movement (Leonard 2019: 48).

The notion of movement is essential to the ethos of this volume and offers a suitable transition as we proceed towards the last section of the Introduction. Shifting the gaze, changing the perspective, and adjusting positions, such is the kind of intervention this co-edited volume pursues. The volume would never have come into existence if there hadn't been transnational and transcultural co-editing—always a challenge, especially in the middle of a pandemic, but highly rewarding. The rich cross-cultural collaboration in constructing the book is itself a unique kind of movement: gathering and selecting proposals, bringing together a wide variety of scholars and filmmakers, exchanging with them at all stages of the process, honing the final orientations while keeping everyone on track. Working with international blind peer reviewers towards the selection of chapters was also an integral part of the process. They often provided crucial insights and suggestions—co-editors and contributors alike owe them sincere gratitude.

The particular way the sections of the work have been organised was prompted by the political orientation behind the co-editing of the volume and the desire to create short sections that would echo, and build on, one another, in a fluid fashion. The first section, From Spectatorship to Agency, puts the initial stress on the shifting of the gaze. It takes us from earlier representations of Dalit bodies as passive and meek objects of subjugation and violence in Hindi cinema to the slow emergence of a multiple and heterogeneous Dalit character, even if not quite yet a mainstream Dalit hero (Harish S. Wankhede). The genealogy of death politics, as evinced through Malayalam cinema, is analysed in the light of Achille Mbembe's notion of 'necropolitics' versus Michel Foucault's 'biopolitics' to reveal the power processes that project Dalits outside the realm of humanity (Rajesh James, Binu K. D., and Aswin Prasanth). Such stock-taking is the first step on the journey of transformation from what bell hooks defined as the 'oppositional gaze' through a new Bahujan agency that endeavours to bring about a change of perception among the general public (Jyoti Nisha). This move beyond the oppressed is given

shape through the concept of *Magizhchi*, as used in Pa. Ranjit's films—a Tamil term that signifies joy, happiness, glee, and excitement, thus proposing an 'anti-caste re-scripting of sensibilities' (Dickens Leonard and Manju Edachira). Such notions as *Magizhchi* and Bahujan agency stand in stark contrast with former Dalit representation and necropolitics. They preside not only over the first section but over the whole volume. This section shows how several directors such as Pa. Ranjit, Mari Selvaraj, and Nagraj Manjule among others have changed the scale and scope of presenting caste on the big screen.

The second section, Making the Invisible Visible, follows suit and stresses the role of the spectator and the critic in making the purported invisibility of caste visible to everyone in a few 21st-century movies in Hindi. Through popular Bollywood films like *Article 15* or *Arakshan* among a few others, the focus is on films in Hindi that are marketed as tackling caste oppression and being anti-caste. However, using concepts such as Hayden White's 'historiophoty' (Debjani Banerjee) or Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze (Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis), the chapters examine how the Brahmanical gaze operates and how caste bias creeps back into the cinematic choices at stake in direction and production. The section also addresses the dehumanising undertones that can be found in the use of slurs or the glorification of names, all of which, in fact, have to do with caste but are not usually read as belonging to caste (Sumit Rajak).

After the call for a radical shift, the third section, The Bigger Picture, adopts a wider frame to unpack further the multiple ways in which caste can be read through its absence or its constructed invisibility. It engages with over-the-top (OTT) productions, taking apart the perception that the online space might be free of caste since it doesn't directly confront it. Cultural productions portraying Indian marriages are examined as being a particularly significant example of this 'absent presence' (Purnima Mankekar and Sucharita Kanjilal). If Indian cinema lovers know how central a role food has played in Indian films, from Hindi to Bengali to Tamil contexts, they are not always aware of the subtle ways food and caste are related, or the even more subtle ways in which caste is 'marked' but not 'addressed' (Swarnavel Eswaran).

The fourth section, Caste and Gender, brings together analyses of films which discuss the explicit and implicit ways in which caste and gender are intertwined in a casteist and patriarchal world. It pits different female protagonists against one another, examining the representation of lower-caste women in Bollywood films (Farhana Naaz) against that of the empowered, new woman in mainstream cinema, with a focus on Manjule's *Sairat* and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora). Retracing the stories of the actresses P. K. Rosy and Devaki Bai, the 'feminine spaces' in the performance history of Malayalam cinema are probed in a comprehensive way, analysing how cinema became a vehicle to undermine caste-based relationships (Geetha). Queer narratives of desire that have been pushed to the periphery by heteronormative frames are made central in this section, particularly through the analysis of Jayan K. Cherian's films and the censorship they were subjected to (Ved Prakash). At the crossroads of caste, gender and sexuality, the body is not to be reduced to an object of torture and victimisation—it can also be propelled by the film medium into a crucial tool of resistance and agency. *Magizhchi* accompanies us still, all the way.

The fifth section, Caste on Trial, goes back to the idea of 'social democracy' articulated by Dr Ambedkar, putting the representation of radical equality on the table. It broaches the idea of democracy, nation, citizenship, and law, laying the stress on the conflicts between the discourse of the Constitution and the discourse of caste. The focus is on the ways democratic politics can be used by individuals to counter the endless practices of humiliation (Chinmaya Lal Thakur), on films that critique institutions like the judiciary or the police, raising the question of an anti-caste spectatorship again (Rituparna Sengupta) and that of a popular justice that would be re-imagined outside the frame of 'consumptive violence and non-violence' (Ram Kumar Thakur).

The sixth section, The Entanglements of Caste and Nature, points to the increasing attention that has been given to the intricate connection between caste and nature in multiple forms and works at the purported organic relationship the Dalits and lower castes are said to share with nature. Reading Gogu Shyamala's short story 'A Beauteous Light' enables a fresh (re-)vision of Bimal Roy's film *Sujata* and a critique of the alignment of nature with upper castes (Nicole Thiara). The section decodes how the lower castes are identified by their profession and the peripheral places they have been forced to live in but also how the entanglements of 'the human' and 'the animal' are embroiled in caste (Shalmali Jadhav). One needs to become more aware of how caste is environmentally located. The analysis of films like Dr Bijukumar Damodaran's *Perariyathavar* makes us reflect on environmental justice (P. Rajitha Venugopal).

Through a playful allusion to Abhishek Varman's comedy *2 States*, the seventh section, Not Two but Three States, shifts the gaze from movies produced in Hindi, which often get most of the attention, to regional cinema and to the movies produced in three regional languages. By doing in-depth analysis and adopting a single language focus, the chapters expose the extent to which these movies produced in Tamil (Stalin Rajangam and P. Aadhavan), Punjabi (Amandeep Kaur and Sahil Sharma), and Kannada (C. Mahima Raj) tell the history of caste in the respective states, analysing the working of caste in its regional cinema through many precise examples.

Extending what has been exposed in the earlier sections, the volume culminates in the longer last section, From Closer Up, which proposes specific, close readings of a selection of films and exposes how caste is made invisible or visible in these movies. As a variation on the previous section, each chapter has a single-film focus. Following suit in the chapter devoted to New Wave Kannada cinema, the section opens with the analysis of the iconic Kannada *Chomana dudi* (Jaishree Kapur) and Hindi *Lagaan* (Purnachandra Naik). Two more Hindi films are then zoomed upon: *Padmaavat* (Tanya Singh) and *Masaan* (Ravinder Singh Rana). For films in Tamil, the spotlight is brought on *Kaala* and *Kabali* (Reju George Mathew) and for the ones in Malayalam, on *Ee.Ma.Yau* (Grace Mariam Raju) and *Pariyerum Perumal* (B. Geetha). All these films are part of the discussions in the other chapters, but it is a special treat that we are finally able, thanks to the sharp eyes of the contributors, to scrutinise them afresh.

Dalit Literatures in India, by the same co-editors (Routledge 2016; 2nd edition 2018), was an intervention in the way it broke new ground in the analysis of Dalit literatures. In a non-exhaustive and fluid way, this volume on *Caste in Cinema* offers another critical intervention, one that strives not merely to revise but radically alter traditional approaches to 'caste' in Indian cinemas and society and explore new political strategies implemented through cinematic creation and aesthetics. It does not claim to be exhaustive—it cannot be. More work would be needed on regional cinemas that haven't been included in this volume. The volume humbly invites the reader to engage in further conversations across boundaries of language, state, and caste.

Notes

1 The references mentioned in this Introduction can be found in the final bibliography.
2 For further critical and historical analyses, please refer to the Writings and Speeches of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. http://drambedkarwritings.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Volume_09.pdf. Accessed on March 31, 2022.
3 www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/article-15-anubhav-sinha-interview_in_5d1f2ce8e4b01b834734ca59. Accessed on November 15, 2021.
4 B. R. Ambedkar. *A Stake in the Nation: Selected Speeches of B. R. Ambedkar*. Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2020; 464.
5 https://rajyasabha.nic.in/Documents/Official_Debate_Nhindi/Floor/4/F02.09.1953.pdf (877). Accessed on November 15, 2021.
6 Ibid.

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From Spectatorship to Agency

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1
Dalit Representation in Hindi Cinema[1]

Harish S. Wankhede

Introduction: Where Is the Dalit Hero?

People watch cinema to break away from everyday boredoms and depressing socio-economic realities. Mainstream cinema often helps set aside the ordinary pessimistic conditions of everyday life and brings us an enchanting world of fascinating heroes that perform supreme tasks, unimaginable for a normal person (Kael 2001). Though films are socially and historically embedded, the dominant language of the Hindi cinema overtly endorses the cultural interests of the social elites. Therefore, the representation of the marginalised social groups, mainly of the Dalits, is imagined with stereotypical attributes of being powerless and wretched. It has been argued substantively that the hitherto Dalit representation in the Hindi cinema has been construed through Brahmanical gaze or under the philanthropic upper-caste sensitivities (Yengde 2018). The possibilities that the Dalit character can emerge as a mainstream hero have not been explored till very recent times. I argue in this chapter that the contemporary Bollywood cinema has brought nuanced improvisations in Dalit representation by showcasing them as vocal, rational, and capable beings too. However, the emergence of Dalit character as 'mainstream hero' remains a difficult proposition.[2]

In the first section of the chapter, I argue that there was very little space for the Dalit imaginary in the century-long history of Hindi cinema. Hindi films have remained dominated by protagonists who unapologetically endorse the upper-caste cultural values and middle-class moralities. Dalits are often invisibilised here, and even when their characters emerge on the screen, they are shown as powerless, *Sujata* (1959) and *Sadgati* (1981), wretched, *Paar* (1981) and *Bandit Queen* (1994), and dependent upon the objectives of the social elites, *Aarakshan* (2010) and *Lagaan* (2001). Such representations are close to the realities of caste societies as a large section amongst the Dalits is perpetually surviving under the brutal Brahmanical hegemony and has been suffering from marginalisation and exclusion.

However, a small but significant section among Dalits has also improved their political and economic statures by utilising the modern means of social justice and economic development. The state's affirmative action policies helped the educated Dalits to enter the corridors of power that otherwise are firmly dominated by the social elites (Srinivas 2016: 52). In the democratic arena, assertion by Dalit politics, especially in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh (UP), has made

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Dalits influential participants in electoral politics. Dalits have utilised public institutions to gain entry in mainstream spaces and their socio-cultural movements have promoted a new militant self-conscious group within the public arena. These Dalits are educated, ideologically committed, and on occasions provided quality leadership to Dalit and other social causes. However, in the narratives of Hindi cinema, these changes did not gain much dignified space for a very long time and often the worst-off Dalits found visible space on the screen.

Since the 1990s, globalisation and the neoliberal economy have changed the social and economic landscape considerably. It expanded the urban economy, introduced a new consumerist culture and engaged the population in varied new occupations made possible by the information technology revolution. It also has had a myriad impact on Dalits, as a new middle class slowly emerged that contributed to transforming the political spaces too. The visible rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in UP in the post-1990 period demonstrated the growing Dalit mobility on political, economic, and social fronts. In the second section, I suggest that films like *Eklavya* (2007), *Rajneeti* (2010), *Guddu Rangeela* (2015), *Manjhi* (2015), *Mukkabaaz* (2017), and *Sonchariya* (2019) have portrayed the emerging social changes and presented nuanced versions of contemporary Dalit lives. These films have negated the conventional stereotypes of Dalit representation and shifted the focus towards the new aspirational Dalits who have emerged in cities and mofussil towns. The Dalit is picturised as a robust claimant of dignity and an upholder of heroic credentials, thus endorsing the changed nature of social and political spaces.

In the third section, I investigate the impact of three recent films: *Bhoomi* (2017), *Newton* (2017), and *Article 15* (2019) to examine the new dimensions added in Dalit representation. The first two films refuse to utilise overt symbolic gestures (like caste names or profession) to define the Dalit person. Instead, it presented the protagonists as a casteless free body, distanced from their social past and degraded professional attributes. By underplaying the caste-based social relationships, it avoids discussion on the hierarchical power relationships. Here, a coded and subtle presence of Dalit attributes allows the audience to rethink and decipher the protagonist's lower social location. By using mild symbolic apparatuses and gestures, an unconventional Dalit protagonist is created in both the movies. They try to suggest that the lower-caste identity is futile in the new matrix of power and social change. In contrast, *Article 15* brings the audience back to the real world by presenting a narrative that weaves in the actual social realities of caste divisions, elite domination, and social violence. Interestingly, it presented the Dalits as heterogenous and segmented people on class and ideological lines.

Recent Dalit representation in Bollywood has improved to become nuanced and heterogenous. It showcases their distinct social locations, changing class statuses, and varied individual aspirations. Though the current Dalit image has been positively improvised and Dalit characters now play substantive roles in the narratives of popular Hindi cinema, I would argue that the Dalit character is yet to be explored as a mainstream Bollywood hero. The Dalit body has to operate within the given rationale of caste society and has to function under the aegis of social elites. The possibility that the Dalit body can creatively alter his/her social role and emerge as an alpha male/female hero is still outside the imagination of Hindi film-makers.

The Wretched Dalit

The British colonial regime in India adopted modern ideological tools and established new institutions of governance to understand and regulate society, religions, and cultures. Caste, though it was an ancient social institution, under the colonial realm received new attention and soon became a prudent part of the state's institutional lexicon and integrated into the practices of policy frameworks (Dirks 2001). The Untouchable castes formed a distinct identity within

the Hindu social stratifications because of their alleged 'lowest born' status and association with menial, filthy professions. They were called demeaning names like Panchamas, ashprishya, atishudhra, or Achoot and were treated with disgust and hatred. In certain regions (especially during the Peshwa rule in Maharashtra), even their shadows were considered polluted (Ghurye 1932: 9). Untouchables suffered the worst kinds of exclusion, labour exploitation, and physical violence, and often such treatments were justified as sanctioned religious acts or conventions authorised by the sacred texts.

The socially marginalised communities utilised the new opportunities of education and urban professions and also got introduced to the modern political language of justice, citizenship, and freedom. Jyotiba Phule, for instance in as early as in 1870s, organised the socially backward communities, established schools for them and vociferously criticised the oppressive Brahmanical social order (Deshpande 2002: 11–15). The new awakening amongst the oppressed communities forced the social elites to introduce reforms that would make the society compatible with ethical human values and social justice. Eradication of Untouchability thus became one of the major goals within the nationalist movement. Mahatma Gandhi became a popular torchbearer of such reformist agenda. His interventions for the eradication of Untouchability were based on the promise that the privileged Hindus shall lead the battle as the 'penance of their past sins' (Roy 2019: 113). The Untouchables were seen as the passive receivers of the philanthropic gestures by the good-hearted upper-caste people.

The early representation of the Dalits in Hindi cinema has strong reformist and Gandhian baggage. The first four major Hindi films that substantively dealt with the question of Untouchability are *Chandidas* (1934), *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Achoot* (1940), and *Sujata* (1959). The female Untouchable body presented in these films suits well the Gandhian doctrine of social reforms. These films showed that the distancing between the Untouchables and the upper castes is firm and based on religious order. The stories of the films revolved around the quest and struggles of the Dalit female protagonists to gain respectable social space in the corridors of social elites.

The women are presented as the symbol of the Untouchable body. The Untouchable women satisfy the quest of upper-caste reformist male as her integration in the family makes him a modern person without denouncing the patriarchal hegemony or challenging the caste-based social order. She is docile, humble, and powerless. To find a meaning in her life, she requires the male gaze and protection. The woman's powerlessness and dependency are portrayed as synonymous with the Untouchable condition. She does not challenge or refuse discriminatory social norms but wishes that the others shall accept her in their lives with love and care. For example, the upper-caste male protagonist (Sunil Dutt) in *Sujata* is benevolent and merciful and wishes to compassionately involve with the Untouchable girl. Similarly, the other male protagonists become the educator and the master of the illiterate, poor Untouchable bodies and bring them towards the modern civilisational values with care. These films conclude that without the patronage and parenting of the enlightened vanguard section of the elites, social integration of the Untouchables is impossible.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar refused such dependency on Gandhian reformism and wanted to mobilise the Untouchables as independent political and social actors. He instilled a modern sense of social dignity amongst the Dalits and imagined a society based on modern egalitarian values and ethical considerations. He refused to participate in the passive reformism led by Gandhi and the social elites as such an arrangement preserves the power relationships and does not allow the Dalits to utilise their independent agency to mould their lives as free beings. However, Ambedkar's radical persona, his liberal political ideas, and the impressive social movement that he had churned were invisibilised in the early films that presented Dalit characters. The post-independence popular Hindi cinema further represented the Gandhian moral values

in depicting the social ills (Sujata) and avoided the Ambedkarite perspective on the caste question. The film-makers collaborated with the nationalist ideals that critically judged the struggles of Untouchables as 'disruptive' or as a 'tool in the hand of British to break the Hindu unity', and therefore any mainstream engagement with Ambedkar and his movement is often avoided.

The second set of Dalit representations is based on empirical actualities of rural Dalit lives. The new independent state was slow and passive in bringing about radical reforms in the social and economic conditions of the poor in general and the Dalits in particular. In the rural sphere, they remained the perpetual victims of feudal fiefdom and Brahmanical exploitation. In the parallel cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, these realities of Dalit life are presented with ethnographic precisions, showcasing caste atrocities, rapes, violence, and social discrimination. The rural society became the background to narrate the atrocious stories of Dalit victims. The village landlord and the priestly castes were shown as malicious brutes with criminal intents that not only exploit the Dalits but also bring pain in the lives of the general population.

Prakash Jha's *Damul* (1985) is one of the representative films of this genre. It realistically portrayed the regressive state of India's young democracy and the plight of Dalits in the rural economy. Sanjeevan Ram (Annu Kapoor) can be seen as the stereotypical character of Dalit powerlessness and poverty. Physically and intellectually, he is a weak person who persistently gets engulfed in the treacherous traps of the village headman Madho Pandit (Manohar Singh) and ends his life on the gallows. His community is equally voiceless and submissive, and when they seek to escape the brutal feudal order, they are massacred by the feudal lord.

Damul offers more or less a realistic portrayal of the wretched conditions of the Dalits in rural Bihar. The story demonstrates the extreme powerlessness of the Chamars and the impunity of the Brahmin elites. The Dalits are disallowed to vote in elections, killed if they demand higher daily wages, exploited by the criminal moneylenders, and are neglected by the corrupt police. In this utter hopeless situation, the Dalits of the village are condemned to live with no escape from such a hellish world. Even the other 'good-hearted elites' are shown as reluctant to fight the criminal village lord.

In several art films of that decade, the village life for the poor Dalit is shown as extremely painful and discriminatory. He/she is shown as a victim of the landlord's exploitation, and escape from such social dungeon is shown as difficult and dangerous. In the Naseeruddin Shah starrer *Paar* (1984), the Dalit protagonist is condemned to suffer even when he wishes to escape the atrocious village life. In Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* (1981), the lead character Dukhi (Om Puri) gets killed under stress, fatigue, and hunger, without ever challenging the authority of the Brahmin lord. In *Akrosh* (1980), again, the protagonist chooses self-destruction as the remedy to end his tragic life. These narratives showcased the anarchic and wretched social conditions in which the Dalits have been trapped. As a person, she/he is far removed from the normal imagination of a civilised person. The Dalit character is showcased as scantily dressed and primitive (*Mrigaya*: 1977), submissive and alcoholic (*Ankur*: 1974), and sex workers/pimps (*Giddh*: 1984). Even in later mainstream films, Dalits are shown as corrupt and immoral (*Pipli Live*: 2010) and sometimes even as people with natural physical deformities (*Lagaan*: 2001). Such depictions suggest that the Dalits lack conditions and characters to be depicted as 'normal' or ethical being.

Importantly, Dalit characters as a cheerful, happy, and a normal family person are not visible on the screen. Instead they are exclusively depicted as poor, deprived, and violated beings (Wankhede 2013). Though such portrayals are close to the socio-economic realities of the vast majority of rural Dalits and provide a guilt trip to the urban cinema goers, however, seeing the Dalits as poor, scantily dressed, and engulfed in immoral occupations provides a sense of social entitlement to the non-Dalits and simultaneously creates a kind of cinematic voyeurism. The middle-class audience appreciated the realism of parallel cinema as it provides them a clinical

objectivity to understand the social reality. However, such distanced voyeuristic gaze fails to capture the other side of the Dalit story.

In post-independence India, there was an ongoing economic mobility, social change, and political consciousness because of which a small but powerful section amongst the Dalits emerged. For example, the impressive arrival of Dalit Panthers in early 1970s in Mumbai has been noted well within literary circles and intellectual corridors. The Panthers were unemployed but conscious youths that wanted to bring social and political changes through militant street struggles against growing cases of caste atrocities, including rapes and other violence in rural Maharashtra. Their angry radical posturing against the political establishment galvanised urban Dalit youths and brought a significant shift in the nature of caste politics in Maharashtra (Rao 2009: 189–191). It also influenced the cultural terrain as new form and content emerged in art, literature, theatres, songs, and folk traditions.

However, in the Hindi cinema of 1970s and 1980s, the powerful phenomenon called the 'Dalit Panthers' is curiously absent. Instead, Amitabh Bachchan in films like *Zanjeer* (1973), *Deewar* (1975), *Kala Patthar* (1979), *Coolie* (1983), and *Main Azaad Hoon* (1989) has played the role of an 'angry young man' or an archetype of Byronic hero. In these films, though he portrayed characters who were discontented, aggressive, and even poor, he visibly represented the social identity of the upper castes and endorsed their cultural idioms. The possibility that the Dalit character can emerge as an 'angry young man' and destabilise the social and class hegemony of the elites was not explored even during the times when the Panthers were popular and part of the Left-progressive social discourse.

From the early 1980s, the assertive politics of the Panthers and BSP has brought Ambedkar to the public discourse as one of the key national figures of the modern nation. However, in Hindi cinema till 2000s, Ambedkar's character found no respectable place. His portrait started appearing in scenes of courtrooms, police stations, and government offices but only in a metaphorical manner (mainly as the symbol of corrupt and passive government institutions).[3] Similarly, the stories of up-and-coming middle-class Dalits and their social and political assimilation within the larger society found no important space in mainstream Hindi films till the 1990s. It is in the post-liberalisation phase that Hindi cinema showed a renewed interest in Dalit lives and movements as their issues and characters have portrayed them with political motives, secular aspirations, and robust middle-class values.[4] The new Hindi cinema that presented the Dalit issues is different from its earlier counterpart. It separated the Dalit characters from its wretched and precarious social location and allowed them to emerge as influential and significant characters, including the heroic roles.

Presenting the Modern Dalit Self

Though the sense of rights, entitlements, and social dignity is boldly enshrined in India's Constitution, its actual application in empowering the socially deprived communities was often doubted. The first three decades of Nehruvian socialist planning for development remained detached from the Dalit struggles for land, social dignity, and economic mobility. The parallel cinema (as discussed in the earlier section) during this period honestly showcased the blood and grit of Dalit lives and critically exposed the futility of modern institutions. Yet, on the other hand, the promises of modern democracy and the possibility of economic development has always inspired the urban Dalits.

Modernity is seen as a revolutionary force that offers newer avenues and apparatuses to mould the banal human life into a superhuman, capable of performing extraordinary heroic deeds. Modern ideas help the person to transcend passive normalcy and emerge as a superlative

courageous being. Within the Dalit discourse, Ambedkar is imagined as a man who had reached the zenith of power and success and has become a national phenomenon by using the modernist means. He becomes an inspirational figure for the succeeding generations. Importantly, Ambedkar's inspirational life has not been utilised to portray the Dalit subject in Hindi cinema and even a metaphorical interpretation of his life has been avoided. However, the post-1990 phase has seen the arrival of the modern and self-conscious Dalit person in Hindi cinema. Though he/she appears to be heroic, confident, and aspirational, he/she is often relegated to the role of second fiddle and never portrayed as a mainstream hero.

A Bollywood hero performs extreme courageous and superhuman deeds and creates a distinct meaning out of his/her life. However, such heroic deeds are unavailable to the Dalit characters. The Dalit character operates within the social and cultural moralities. She/he sometimes brings passive altercations and reforms; however; the possibility that the Dalit person may destroy or transform the terrible social structure by 'fist of fury' has not been explored in Hindi cinema. Such transgressive and superhuman capacities are allowed only to the upper-caste characters. The upper-caste hero is a vanguard and can represent the aspirations of the average filmgoers, but similar power and space are unavailable to the Dalit character. For example, in Gulzar's *Hu Tu Tu* (1999), Nana Patekar's character Bhau is a balladeer of revolutionary politics and a representative voice of the poor agrarian working classes. His character has deep similarities to the young leaders of Dalit Panthers. He has heroic credentials and a dignified presence in the narrative. However, he is not the main lead of the film. The main heroic attributes are offered to the upper-caste characters, relegating Bhau to being a sidekick in the periphery.

Again, in Priyadarshan's *Aakrosh* (2010), Pratap Kumar (Ajay Devgan) is portrayed as a Dalit and plays the role of an investigation officer. However, he is not the lead investigator; instead, he has to assist Siddhant Chaturvedi (Akshay Kumar) to solve a criminal case. Though the film revolves around the case of caste violence, the Dalit character is a side-actor who assists the upper-caste male protagonist. In Prakash Jha's *Rajneeti* (2010), Suraj (Ajay Devgan) reinterprets the mythological hero *Karn*, and to do so he is portrayed as a Dalit character. He is a crucial character, representing the role of a popular and aggressive caste leader. However, he is just an alibi to the other leading protagonists and is not showcased as the main lead. These characters have substantive roles and positive representation on screen, but the possibility that these characters can independently emerge as the robust alpha hero to wage battles against social ills and criminalities through their own merit and courage is not explored beyond certain boundaries.

One of the first films that depicted a Dalit with dignified heroic credentials is Prakash Jha's *Aarakshan* (2011). It tried to break certain stereotypes about the Dalit personality. Here, the protagonist Deepak Kumar (Saif Ali Khan) is a modern, educated, and hardworking youth and not submissive to the social insults and humiliations. Instead, he is capable enough to respond with equal vigour and confidence. The caste prejudices of the social elites and the fighting spirit of the young Dalit protagonist is sensitively depicted. His social acceptability as a prospective groom for the upper-caste Brahmin young woman also breaks the conventional notion of endogamy and promotes him as an equal autonomous person. However, the story loses all its social concern after the interval (Intermission) to promote Prabhakar Anand (Amitabh Bachchan) as the main lead who fights for justice in his own 'Gandhian' philanthropic way. Thus, the Dalit character, though endowed with the potential to emerge as a mainstream hero, is reduced to an adjunct who functions under the enlightened upper-caste gaze.

Another popular mainstream film, Anurag Kashyap's *Mukkabaaz* (2018), showcases the nuances of caste relationships in north Indian towns. Here, the characters without hesitation wear their caste identities on their sleeves. The film portrays the criminal domination of Bhagwan Das

Mishra (Jimmy Shergill), a Brahmin gangster who exploits the non-Brahmins (including Rajputs and Bhumihars) and brutalises his female counterparts. The protagonist Shravan Kumar Singh (Vineet Singh) is an aspiring boxer who faces raw opposition from Bhagwan Das. Importantly, the Dalit character Sanjay Kumar (Ravi Kishan in a well-crafted role of a boxing coach) comes forward to train and promote him in the ring. Sanjay Kumar has considerable economic mobility and is presented as a man with self-respect, conviction, and courage. He readily contests the excessive hegemonic power of the Brahmin master but inadvertently gets killed by the goons.

The Entry of the Dalit Hero

Subhash Kapoor's *Guddu Rangeela* (2015) breaks the stereotype of the passive narratives that dominate the depiction of Dalit characters in Hindi cinema. Inspired by the infamous 'Manoj-Babli honor-killing' case, the film revolves around the story of two brothers who belong to a Dalit caste. The main lead Rangeela (Arshad Warsi) dares to fall in love with a woman from the dominant caste and responds to the feudal caste violence and atrocities with mainstream heroic logic. The film allows the Dalit characters to use violent means and criminal instincts to achieve their goals. Rangeela is not deeply committed to any moral teachings but seeks to bring justice to the victims of caste violence. Here, like in any other mainstream revenge drama film, the hero emerges victorious by violently annihilating the feudal lords in the final gun battles. Rangeela is subversive and an original character, like a Djangovian version of a Dalit hero.[5] The film creates a semi-fictional story without much regard for empirical accuracy or social realities.

Similarly, in Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015), Deepak (Vickey Kaushal) is a Dom by caste and under the conventional logic of traditional profession, he works in a cremation *ghat* and burns dead bodies. However, Deepak is a man with aspirations and desires and wishes to cross the borders of caste society. He studies engineering and falls in love with Shaalu, an upper-caste young woman. Importantly, when Deepak tells her about the perils of his caste profession (including that he also cremates the corpses), Shaalu remains firm and tells him that she will be with him even if her parents disapprove of their relationship. Such a narrative showcases a changing social psyche not only of the Dalit protagonist but also of the upper-caste counterpart. *Masaan* presents a Dalit hero who wishes to fall in love like a normal young man, one who cries after the heartbreak and reignites his life like a normal person. This exploration of a Dalit as an ordinary, emotional being was a fresh experiment in Hindi cinema.

Nawazuddin Siddiqui starrer *Manjhi—the Mountain Man* (2015) is another love story, based on the biography of iconic activist Dasarath Manjhi. Manjhi survives in extreme poverty and exploitative caste-based feudal order. After the accidental death of his loving wife, Manjhi dedicates his life to an emotional cause and single-handedly builds a road between a huge mountain and the city, so that people can reach to the city hospital quickly. Overcoming his caste and class deprivations, he becomes a zealous Braveheart in love and by fulfilling the impossible task, he achieves an iconic stature. The film is about man's emotional journey that surpasses his social bondages and powerlessness in the quest to reach the ultimate goal. To operate according to self-driven passion and intent is not a conventional Dalit role. Manjhi's story breaks and subverts the conventional stereotype. He is presented as a man who possesses raw sensations, deep passion, and sincere focus—attributes that are often reserved for upper-caste characters.

The Dalit hero falls in a separate category. In these films, he is the main protagonist, bestowed with human aspirations, desires, and creative abilities. Like the other heroes of mainstream cinema, he also confronts tragic events (like rape and murder), discrimination, and poverty and suffers insurmountable crises (heart break, exclusion, and violence), but his actions are not overtly destructive, transformative, and revengeful. Instead in his journey towards achieving meaning

in life, the societal norms and other institutional structures appear eternally powerful and permanent. It appears that the aggressive and angry personage of the mainstream male heroes of Bollywood is consciously reserved for upper-caste characters.

These films do rupture the conventional stereotypes about Dalits as subservient powerless objects of oppression by feudal and caste elites. They introduce dignified self-reflexive Dalit characters that contest the hegemony of the elites with heroic courage (though passively). They demonstrate the Dalits' growing aspirations and thirst to enjoy love, social dignity, and equal rights in society. In these films, Dalits are seen as normal people, celebrating the most valued human emotions of love and friendship. Such cases provided a nuanced Dalit portrayal, distinct from the 'oppressed' subjectivity that was attached to Dalit characters in earlier films.

Newton and *Bhoomi*: The Vagabond Dalit Hero

Amit Masurkar's *Newton* (2017) in this respect added a new dimension to Dalit characterisation and introduced the male protagonist as a secular vagabond self. One has to decode that the lead character Newton Kumar (brilliantly portrayed by Rajkumar Rao) belongs to the non-upper-caste strata. The audience can see Babasaheb Ambedkar's portrait in his living room for a second. In another scene, when Newton rejects a marriage proposal, his father scolds him and reminds him that he will not get a Brahmin-Thakur woman for marriage. Further, the reference 'reserve' for Newton is utilised in a symbolic way to showcase how governmental jobs are available with differentiated categories (reservation for the Scheduled Castes). There is no loud announcement of his Dalit subjectivity or any details about his ancestry. However, the aforementioned vignettes, in an intelligent manner, allow the audience to infer the social background of the protagonist.

Newton, by using such creative impulses, introduces a new Dalit hero in Bollywood cinema. He is an educated and honest youth committed strictly to his professional obligations as an Election Commission officer who is posted in a Naxal-affected constituency in Chattisgarh to perform his constitutional duties. In *Newton*, the audience can witness that he is distanced from cultural or religious motifs and there is a deeper quest to remain judiciously moral by using constitutional means—characteristics that have often been associated with the Dalits. He is starkly different from earlier depictions of Dalit characters as he is not at all burdened nor does he feel brutalised because of his Dalit identity or the brutalities of social history. Instead, Newton is an independent, rational-thinking person ready to perform his professional duty without any fear or prejudice. His fearless debate with the Army Commander Atma Singh (Pankaj Tripathi) showcases his equal authority in the discourse of power. He must be aware of his lowly social past, but being an agent of the state, he empowers himself as a person with principles and challenges all the efforts that demean his constitutional authority.

Newton represents himself as a duty-bound state subject, and therefore his social identity is not restricting him from carrying out his constitutional obligations. Such sense of freedom was not available to any Dalit character portrayed in Hindi cinema earlier. *Newton*, in this regard, offers a new Dalit hero who is born in caste society but remains unaffected by its exploitative order and historic conflicts. The past of his degraded caste identity is not a restriction in fulfilling his everyday social or professional duties. Like any other lead hero of mainstream Hindi films, he is free and his social identity is not directing his persona or social roles. Imagining Dalit characters with such unrestricted human aspirations is a new shift in Hindi film narratives. It elevates the Dalit subject into a surreal space and allows him to operate as a free being. This film imagines and constructs a fictional fabricated tale separated from the terrible social conditions in which large sections of Dalits continue to live.

In Omung Kumar's *Bhoomi*, the protagonist Arun Sachdeva (Sanjay Dutt) is a shoemaker in Agra. Shoemaking in Hindu professional hierarchies is assigned to the Chamar castes. The Jatavs, a Chamar sub-caste, are known for their leather craftsmanship and have dominated the shoe industry in Agra along with Muslims for a long time now (Rawat 2011: 86). It is only in the post-partition period that the Hindus (mostly refugees coming from Pakistan) became a part of this industry. Sachdeva is not a typical Dalit surname. However, the background location (Agra), the profession of the main character, his socio-economic condition, and his relationship with the feudal elites push the audience to think that the protagonist can be a Dalit. Hardly in any other film, the profession of the lead character is so visibly associated with a profession that has conventionally been related to the Dalits.

Importantly, *Bhoomi* is also a post-rape revenge drama. Within the Dalit discourse, rape and other violence has always remained a pressing issue. A study found that more than half of Dalit women have suffered physical assault. More than 46 percent have suffered sexual harassment. Twenty-three percent have said they had been raped (NCDHR 2006: 4). In most of the cases, due to the ineffective judicial system, Dalit victims are denied justice. Such narratives dealing with caste atrocities and rape also appeared periodically in films like *Aakrosh* (1980), *Bandit Queen* (1994), and *Bavandar* (2000). *Bhoomi* appears to be just another of the similarly themed films about brutal rape and feudal violence. However, in *Bhoomi* the Dalit male character is a non-conformist who adopts violent means to achieve justice, whereas in the other three films mentioned earlier, the stories revolve around the struggles of the female victims.

Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* was a bold attempt that narrated the story of Phoolan Devi, the legendary bandit from Chambal who had punished the feudal oppressors who had committed brutal caste oppression and sexual violence on her. Very different from the earlier 'rape film' depicting women as a Durga avatar to avenge the culprits of heinous crimes (for example, *Zakhmi Aurat*: 1988), *Bandit Queen* showcases the terrible conditions of rural societies that sexually exploit and brutalise the Dalit woman if she rebels against the conventional patriarchal order. However, her revenge is not portrayed as heroic or as an act of fighting for justice but instead as a bold surviving tactic by which a rebellious Dalit woman is condemned to fight the Brahmanical feudal order. Looking through critical lenses, the film hesitates to liberate the Dalit woman as a 'Hero' but inadvertently controls her persona by engulfing her as a sexualised victim body (Dixit 2019: 237).

Bavandar also reveals the heroic potentials of a Dalit woman, Saavri Devi (Nandita Das), to fight the terrible conditions of caste violence, social prejudices, and the apathy of state institutions. This is a true story of a rape victim who struggled relentlessly to seek justice against dominant caste members with the help of a sympathetic social worker (Deepti Naval). Her husband Bhikhu (Raghuveer Yadav), as a caring and dedicated partner, is a realistic portrayal of a powerless man who is engulfed in various oppressive social, economic, and political maladies. Interestingly, the director also highlighted the hypocrisy and insensitivity of the non-Dalit characters towards the heinous act of gangrape and other violence. This film marked a qualitative shift from the 'Bandit Queen' kind of 'revenge' narrative as Saavri adopts a path of democratic protests and civil society activism in order to achieve justice.

Bavandar represents the entry of an activist Dalit. She is conscious about her constitutional rights and understands that only through the prudent use of legal provisions she can live with dignity in the regimented social structure. Thus, she deconstructs the earlier imaginary of the submissive, docile Dalit women (*Sujata*: 1959) and also the revengeful and violent anti-hero (*Bandit Queen*). She presents a character who fights social conservatism with modern democratic means and substantiates her claims as a citizen. She does this without the erstwhile compulsion of getting assisted by an upper-caste philanthropist for social change.

Leaving out scenes of caste atrocities and rape as systemic caste-feudal oppression depicted in the films mentioned earlier, *Bhoomi* focused mainly on revenge. The film hides the oppressive caste-feudal relationships that produce such heinous crimes against socially deprived masses. The narrative is silent on the social reasons that allow the dominant social elites to oppress the poor and marginalised with a complete sense of impunity. The narrative suggests that caste is a meaningless category in incidents of rape, even if the woman belonged to socially marginalised sections. It suggests that such crimes are produced only because of criminal male patriarchal psyche and not because of his social privileges. *Bhoomi* thus showcases the hesitation of the film-maker to highlight the caste question, though the background is visibly available.

In *Bhoomi*, the rape victim is not the main protagonist but an alibi because of which the male protagonist becomes a violent hero. The cobbler hero is a regular business person with basic middle-class assets. When he fails to get justice for his rape victim daughter through legal means, he transforms himself into a revenge machine, killing all the rape perpetrators in the most violent way. Sachdeva is thus different from the earlier agency-less male Dalit character like Puttilal in *Bandit Queen*, Lahanya (Om Puri) in Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh*, or Saavari Devi's husband in *Bavandar*. These male characters are shown as immoral, powerless, or mute spectators of rape and caste atrocities. The fictional possibility that these Dalit males would emerge as violent heroes who defend the victims and bring justice (as presented in other mainstream films like *Ankush* (1986), *Jigar* (1992), and *Kaabil* (2017)), has hardly been explored earlier. However, *Bhoomi* challenges such Dalit victimhood. Instead, in mainstream Bollywood style, it offers an aggressive violent protagonist to avenge the injustice.

In both the films, the audience can sense that the protagonist is not the typical upper-caste middle-class person but someone who belonged to the lower socio-economic strata. However, his socially degraded identity appears unnecessary while framing the objectives of his life. Such representation suggests that our public life is comfortably secular and free from any prejudices attached to individual identities. The lead characters in *Bhoomi* and *Newton* operate under similar logic and propose a new narrative pattern for Dalit representation.

The Heterogenous Dalit Identity

Bhoomi and *Newton* narrate stories of the Dalit hero as an independent, socially dislocated or an autonomous being. This appears surreal and ahistorical because such spaces are mostly unavailable to Dalits. There is a strong imaginative and creative logic that disturbs the conventional and stereotypical imagery of Dalit characters of the earlier Hindi cinema. However, the erasure or neglect of the caste relationships that persistently hovers around the Dalit appears dishonest. Interestingly *Article 15* emerges as a film that is rooted in the actualities of caste society and portrays various facets of social relationships that are often contaminated by caste values.

The narrative of the film highlights the way an average caste society in rural North India functions. A vast Dalit community survives in abject poverty, performs the worst kinds of filthy jobs (manual scavenging), and faces daily violence and social ostracisation. The non-Dalit characters proudly assert their social identities and act to preserve the feudal-Brahmanical order. *Article 15* does not shy away from depicting these realities of caste society. The brute power of the social elites to exploit Dalits as invisible non-entities is honestly demonstrated. Unlike *Bhoomi* and *Newton*, *Article 15* is a portrayal of social maladies in which Dalits are perpetual victims.

The film unapologetically showcases how the brutal gang rape and murder of two Dalit girls does not bring any shock or surprise to the civil society. The parents of the victims are numbed and helpless against the insensitive local police authorities. In such coercive terrible conditions, expecting justice for the victims is a farfetched dream. Interestingly, the film-maker resisted the

possibility that a Dalit person can emerge in action in the narrative to bring justice (as was done in *Bhoomi*). Instead, the director decided to introduce an upper-caste male protagonist Ayan Ranjan (Ayushman Khurana), a newly appointed IPS officer, who enters the crime scene and, in the end, brings justice to the victims.

The male protagonist delivers justice not through revengeful violent rage but by sincerely performing his duty as a righteous police officer. He is a privileged Brahmin man, educated in the western world and is unaware of brutal caste realities of rural India. He is disturbed by the way the feudal order dominates the social and modern state institutions. He dares to investigate the crime into such 'muddy water' and challenge the conservative caste-based domination without any prejudices. Firmly committed to the ethical principles of the Constitution, he brings justice to the victims with his honesty and fearlessness.

The film probably for the first time in Hindi cinema revolves the whole narrative around the Dalit caste question. Importantly, the film also brings four sets of distinct Dalit characters alongside the Brahmin hero. These Dalit fragments operate with varied social and political objectives. However, at the end, they remain confined to being the subjects of a brutal feudal order. While the Brahmin hero emerges as a messianic figure to bring justice to the downtrodden with his superior moral and mental merit, his Dalit counterparts are shown as broken, corrupt, or pathological. Though such passive and negative portrayal of Dalit characters supplement the stereotypes that were earlier done in Hindi cinema, *Article 15* is different from those films because it showcases several forms of Dalit representations and thus makes the portrayal of Dalit characters more complex and nuanced.

The first set of the Dalit characters is the poor vulnerable Dalit mass surviving under criminal patriarchal domination of the social elites. The two teenaged Dalit girls are raped, murdered, and hanged from the tree as they refuse to obey the social dictates of the feudal elites. Their parents are helpless victims, tortured by the criminal police authorities. These horrifying pictures haunt the film narrative from the beginning till the end. The second set of characters is of the social activists, Gaura and Nishad (resembling the real-life activist Chandrashekhar Ravan). Both remind us of the idealistic young leaders of the late Dalit Panthers movement that shocked the political establishment with their zealous militant activism in mid-1970s. Their stiff commitment to the radical Ambedkarite ideas and distrust of the social and political authorities are impressively showcased. In very few instances, the radical Dalit politics found space in the mainstream Hindi cinema.

Two more important characters are Jatavji, the police inspector, and Malti Ram, the apprentice female doctor in the government hospital. Both are part of state institutions, with decent middle-class salaried jobs, but being Dalits, their social status has not changed much. Both function under the domination of their upper-caste bosses and lack any independent agency. It is a critical reflection on the neo-Dalit middle class that has achieved considerable economic class mobility due to the state's affirmative action policies. However, they failed miserably to engage with the daily struggles of their poor Dalit counterparts. Finally, there is also a representation of Dalit political leadership. A Dalit leader is presented as having allied with the right-wing Hindu party and professing interest in Brahmin-Dalit unity to win the election. This narrative has been borrowed from the past political context in Uttar Pradesh when, in 1995, the BSP entered into a political alliance with The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). In the current times, Dalit leaders like Ramvilas Paswan and Ramdas Athawale have become integral to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

Article 15 thus offers a wider spectrum to showcase multiple forms of Dalit identities that are engulfed in and struggling from different locations with varied objectives. Such plural representation also breaks the lopsided negative portrayal in Hindi cinema of Dalits as perpetually

passive victims. The caste-based social order and its detrimental impact on Dalits are represented realistically here. However, the other possibility of crafting a fictional Dalit hero to negate the conventional portrayals of the Dalit has not been explored at all.

Conclusion: Waiting for a Mainstream Dalit Hero

The Dalits are often invisibilised in Hindi cinema, and even when they appear on the screen, they are shown as powerless, wretched, or dependent upon the patronage of the social elites (especially in the parallel cinema of 1980s). Often the narratives about the Dalits are monotonous tales of poverty, powerlessness, and the domination of the social elites. Such actual but depressing representation of the poor Dalit class appears close to the social realities as a large section amongst them has perpetually been surviving under the brutal feudal and Brahmanical exploitation. But it can be countered that it's only a partial reality. Such depiction in the Hindi cinema till the 1980s had only offered a glimpse of social reality without adding any imaginative or ecstatic value to the narrative. The Dalit characters are overtly excluded from the normal scenes of drama, dance, fun, and action—the key markers of popular Bollywood cinema of the 1980s.

Because of modern institutions, growing urbanisation, and political development, a new educated Dalit class has entered the corridors of power. In the democratic arena, the political assertion by the Dalits, especially in Maharashtra, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, has placed them in electoral politics as influential participants. Dalits have increasingly become part of civil society activism, intellectual, and artistic circles and have offered influential leadership to social and political causes. In the post-liberalisation process, a new stage for Dalit representations is erected that showcases the nuanced and plural abilities of the Dalits in the public milieu. Films like *Aarakshan* and *Aakrosh* do endorse the changed nature of social and political spaces as Dalit characters are now portrayed as self-aware beings with middle-class aspirations, willing to contest the Brahmanical hegemony. With films like *Manjhi*, *Newton*, *Masaan*, and *Article 15*, it appears that Bollywood is now growingly ready to make room for heterogeneous identities of Dalit characters. However, the possibility that an alternative mainstream Dalit hero may emerge here is still a distant reality.

Hindi popular cinema is not celebrated for its realistic depiction of social realities but is known for its imaginative impulse, melodrama, and pulp fiction. Bollywood has offered superlative and iconic heroic characters (often played by Amitabh Bachchan and Salman Khan) as mass entertainers. However, such mainstream heroism is denied to Dalit characters. Instead, she/he has been bracketed as a wretched or a passive being who has to operate within the matrix of social realities. Dalits are overtly depicted as inferior, powerless, and banal and only on rare occasions are they portrayed as normal people with middle-class attributes. Even in the narratives of contemporary Hindi cinema, only on rare occasions is the Dalit picturised as a robust claimant of dignity or an upholder of popular heroic credentials. Though the intent and realism of such narratives has been appreciated, on the measures of providing an inspirational solace and creative impulse to the audience, Hindi cinema has done an inadequate job. Such representations not only show the lack of creative nuances but also reflect the hesitation of the film-makers to present the Dalit as an astute hero—one who can fall into deep crisis but at the climax can emerge as a victorious person.[6]

Bollywood heroes perform courageous and superhuman deeds. However, such heroic credentials are often unavailable to the Dalit characters. The imagination to bring Dalit person as a mainstream hero who performs classic heroic tasks to emerge as a liberator, icon, or a role model is yet to be an acceptable script. Such transgressive and superhuman capacities are allowed only

to the social elites. The upper-caste character is the perpetual vanguard or philanthropist, and only he can fulfil the aspirations of the cinema goers, but similar power and space has not been offered to Dalit characters. The Dalit is still waiting for a bold Bollywood drama that would radically transform passive Dalit subjectivity and confirm the arrival of a populist Dalit hero. A Dalit character as an alpha male/female popular hero is still a distant dream.

Notes

1 Acknowledgement: parts of this chapter were previously published in *Indian Express* and *The Wire*.
2 In Marathi cinema films like *Mukta* (1994), *Fandry* (2013), and *Sairat* (2016), the Dalit character is the lead protagonist. Similarly in Tamil, recent films like *Kabali* (2017), *Kaala* (2018), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), and *Asuran* (2019) have established the Dalit character as powerful mainstream hero. However, similar examples are not available in Hindi cinema.
3 Jabbar Patel's film *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2000) was produced and supported by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Government of Maharashtra. It had a meagre budget, and after the making it was not marketed properly. It did manage to win three national awards but failed to get theatrical release at the national level.
4 *India Untouched* (2007) and *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) are two important documentaries that highlighted the Dalit question at the national level. Very recently, Jyoti Nisha's *BR Ambedkar—Now and Then (BRANT* (2020)) is another powerful attempt to engage with the Ambedkarite social and political movement through a Dalit-Bahujan perspective.
5 Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) is historical fiction drama. It is a subversive reading of American history of racism. It introduces Django as a black hero that unapologetically uses brutal violence against the white supremacists for revenge.
6 For example, Rajanikant starrers *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018) have substantively redefined the Dalit protagonist in Tamil cinema. These films portrayed the Dalit protagonist as robust mainstream hero that break the oppressive social bondages and emerge as powerful and inspiring character. In Hindi cinema, such possibility has not been explored yet.

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2

The Oppositional Bahujan Agency

Jyoti Nisha

> An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to the other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. 'Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicate experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen'
>
> (Ambedkar 1936: 43)

Even after decades of his passing, Dr Ambedkar is still relevant in the ways one must look at society in India and the larger Bahujan movement. In a century of articulating/seeing and making visible one's own idea of a nation and national identity, Indian cinema has played a concrete role since the early 1900s defining a cultural identity of India. In the current circumstance as the state's aggressive Hindu Rashtra campaign is making every move to appropriate the legacy of the anti-caste movement and the larger Bahujan experience by using Dr Ambedkar's iconography, new sites of socio-political assertion and resistance are also emerging in Indian cinema with the release of films like *Sairat* (2016, Nagraj Manjule), *Kaala* (2018, Pa. Ranjith), *Asuran* (2020, Vetrimaaran), *Palasa 1978* (2020, Karuna Kumar), *Gilli Pucchi* (2021, Neeraj Ghaywan), and *Karnan* (2021, Mari Selvaraj) in mainstream cinema.

Amusingly, this Oppositional Bahujan consciousness didn't escape the imagination of the popular culture of Bollywood either, and they produced uninformed representations of Bahujan stories via the gaze of upper-caste film-makers such as Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*, Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020), an adaptation of Manu Joseph's fiction novel by the same title, Shashank Khaitan's *Dhadak*, a remake of Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat*, Subhash Kapoor's *Madam Chief Minister* (2021) etc. distorting, exploiting, stereotyping, and appropriating the emancipatory struggle of anti-caste discourse, icons, and symbols for their own ideological representations. German scholars Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, writing from Los Angeles during World War II, noted that cultural conformity raised the spectre of fascism

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(Scafidi 2005: 10). Susan Scafidi, a law professor at Fordham University, defines cultural appropriation:

> Far from an uncontested process, however, the movement of cultural products from subculture to public domain provokes both majority-minority struggles and fraternal conflict. Outsiders attracted by particular art forms are seldom content to limit themselves to recognition and appreciation of the source community or even to limited consumption at the invitation of the community. Instead, members of the public copy and transform cultural products to suit their own tastes, express their own creative individuality, or simply make a profit. This 'taking from a culture that is not one's own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions, or artifacts, history, and ways of knowledge' is often termed 'cultural appropriation'
>
> *(Scafidi 2005: 9)*

Opposed to the popular culture's casteist and blatant appropriation tactics of anti-caste discourse and Bahujan culture, India also witnessed the agency of Bahujan film-makers such as Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi* (2012), *Madras* (2014), *Kaala* (2018), *Kabali* (2016), Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013), and *Sairat* (2016); Neeraj Ghayawan's *Masaan* (2015), *Gilli Pucchi* (2021), Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), and *Karnan* (2021); Karuna Kumar's *Palasa 1978* (2020); Leela Santosh's *Paikinjana Chiri* (2020); Rajesh Rajamani's *Lovers in the Afternoon* (2019) and *The Discreet Charm of Savarnas* (2021); Vetrimaran's *Asuran* (2019); and Jeny Dolly's *Share Auto* (2019). Such films have contributed to the cultural revolution of the anti-caste movement in Bahujan culture and sincerely attempted to correct/question/express the Bahujan representation in their stories via an impressive Oppositional Bahujan Agency and Ambedkar's way of looking.

> The concept of human agency can be traced back to the Enlightenment debate over whether instrumental rationality or moral and norm-based action is the truest expression of human freedom. Philosophical individualism, although allowed for the subsequent invention of 'looking at individuals as a "free agent" in society able to make rational choices for him(self) and the society, it was still grounded in religious morality of the times'
>
> *(Lukes 1973)*

> John Locke's rejection of the binding power of tradition (1978), his beliefs in individual experience, and his grounding of society in the social contract between individuals (1978), Parsons' belief in the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live and his focus on the notion of '*effort*' resonate with why I wanted to place myself in Indian society as a Bahujan person to locate an Oppositional Bahujan Agency. It involves *effort* of not only myself but an effort of an ancestral history of Bahujan movements—Buddha's movement in the 6th century, Ashoka's Mauryan Period in 321 BCE-185 BCE, the Satya Shodhak movement of Jotiba Phule founded in 1873, the Self Respect movement of Periyar that began in 1925, Dr. Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha (1927), the Temple Entry Movement (1936), and Ambedkar's newspapers *Mooknayak* (Mute Hero, 1920), *Bahishkrut Bharat* (India Ostracised, 1927), *Janata* (Masses, 1930) and *Prabuddha Bharat* (Awakened India, 1956), the movement of Dalit Panthers which began in 1972. The movement of Kanshiram founded Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS-4) and the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees' Federation (BAMCEF) in 1971. It also gave the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984, a national level political party in India that represented the Bahujans (the 85% majority) referring to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes,

and Other Backward Classes (OBC), along with religious minorities. As history suggests, all those who worked for the upliftment and social and political mobilisation of the Bahujans were ideologically anti-Brahmanical in nature and were invisibilized by popular culture. In 2020, I explored how Bahujan audiences see, experience, and consume popular culture's representations of caste, gender, class and sexuality in Indian cinema:

> Bahujan spectatorship relates to an Oppositional gaze and a political strategy of Bahujans to reject the Brahmanical representation of caste and marginalized communities in Indian cinema. It is also an inverted methodology to document a different socio-political Bahujan experience of consuming popular cinema
>
> *(Nisha 2020)*

This time, that oppositional Bahujan gaze has transformed into an act of creation, aesthetics, and expression indulged in Bahujan culture in Indian cinema. I have attempted to articulate the Oppositional Bahujan Agency as a new site of socio-political assertion, resistance, and possibilities of transgression and literacy in Indian cinema, challenging and transforming popular culture's ways of looking at Bahujans and women. The guiding concerns in this theory are ethical and practical in nature. In articulating this agency, I will be looking at the relation between the production of knowledge and practices of power, power relations, and the relationship between ideology and ideological state apparatuses and will be employing bell hooks' gaze of cultural criticism of Hollywood cinema. It also notes how the political context further influences film production and its creation by Bahujans. The first step that goes into creating the Bahujan Agency is to recognise the methods that we use in locating the Bahujans, women, and their themes.

Methodology

The Oppositional Bahujan Agency locates the social identity of a marginalised subject (Shudra and Ati Shudras and women), community culture, dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, sacred objects, etc., in Indian cinema by using Ambedkar's historical methods—a non-Brahminic critique of positivist history—as a methodology/epistemology/language/aesthetic *vis-à-vis* the popular culture's monolithic aesthetic of Hindu Natyashastra in India.

The five forces

I see the Oppositional Bahujan Agency manifesting in more than one way. I see five forces working in alternative combinations in the making of a narrative where cinema plays an Ideological State Apparatus: a) the story and the fate of protagonist, b) gaze and ideology, c) film-maker, d) funding, and e) demanding a greater accountability and responsibility for greater literacy for a conscious cultural production of representation of Bahujans and women in Indian cinema.

The story and the fate of the protagonist

Psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola in the book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* said,

> If courage and bravery are the muscles of the spiritual drive that help a person to become whole, then stories are the bones. Together, they move the episodes of the life myth forward. Why stories? Because the soul's way of communicating is to teach. And its language

> is symbols and themes—all of which have been found, since the beginning of time, in stories. The soul needs stories. The radiant center we call the soul is the enormous aspect of the psyche which is invisible, but which can be palpably felt. There is a "hearing capacity" in the psyche.
>
> *(Campbell 2004: XXXI)*

Taking the crucial element of the soul's desire to teach and the pedagogy that stories carry within themselves in order to locate crucial representations of caste and gender in popular culture, it becomes pertinent to understand the need of studying popular culture. 'Whether we talk about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is', elaborated in Part 3 of *Cultural Criticism and Transformation* in a 1997 YouTube series by American feminist, author and social activist, bell hooks.

The Oppositional Bahujan Agency recognises popular culture's impact and its pedagogical power when it creates motivated narratives of caste, gender, and class: projected as colour coded and victims of discrimination in Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019); poor people who cheat and lack dignity and integrity as seen in Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020); people who don't exercise their will power as seen in Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*; women whose bodies are accessible for labour and pleasure for the privileged castes as seen in Bikas Mishra's *Chauranga* (2014); and, the fact that no thought was given before appropriating the iconography of ex-Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, as seen in Subhash Kapoor's *Madam Chief Minister* (2021), reproducing the same Brahmanical patriarchy stereotypes and distorting a true Bahujan representation and agency of a woman on the silver screen.

The upper-caste(s) film-makers have refused to make a conscious connection between knowledge and representations. Their convenience has legitimised the social exclusion of Bahujans and women and problematised the structural issues of caste, gender, class, and intersectionality by denying/hijacking the real possibilities of constructive criticism and interventions where issues of social justice, human existence, and civil rights of Bahujans and women can be raised. These episodes can't be just reduced to an unfortunate incident; rather, an accountability must be demanded, an effort must be sought to rectify the wrong that's been done, because it exposes their participation in the historical exclusion of Bahujans and women.

According to Mckee, the archetypal story unearths a universally human experience that wraps itself in a unique, culture-specific expression: 'A story is about archetypes, not stereotypes' (1997: 4). A good example of this archetypal story in Indian cinema would be *Geeli Pucchi* by Neeraj Ghaywan. In this film, caste has been explored as a lived experience for Bharti Mondal. A Bengali Dalit factory worker, Mondal, albeit a victim of caste, class, gender, and sexuality in a systematic Brahmanical structure, also projects a fierce assertive agency in the microcosm of a drum factory in Kanpur, where most workers are men. Her Brahmin love interest, Priya Sharma, unconscious of her entitlement due to her Brahmin caste status plays that small town liberal who thinks she is free of caste conditioning but gets exposed when Bharti reveals her Dalit caste to her. The spectators' experience of Bharti's coming out, although affirmative and real, is equally traumatic as caste unfolds with itself secrecy and shame which is exponentially more problematic than a woman's sexuality in Brahmanical patriarchy.

The betrayal that Bharti feels when she learns that Priya was appointed as a Data Operator not because of her merit but her palm-reading skill and caste privilege stings her heart and perhaps that of every Bahujan audience aware of the pervasive caste discrimination rampant yet invisibilised in Hindu society. Priya's behaviour changes once Bharti has revealed her caste identity to her. Mondal's trust is betrayed, and she schemes to get Priya pregnant in order to claim that Data Entry Operator's job. The scheming is a bit contrived and yet feels just, when

Bharti returns the casteist taunt of Priya's mother-in-law aimed at shaming her ancestral caste occupation of midwives with that separate steel cup. With a tasteful Oppositional gaze of Bharti, Ghaywan's film claims the assertion and agency of a Dalit gay person on silver screen that hasn't been explored in Indian cinema before. Having *Geeli Pucchi* in popular cinema is an intervention towards marking a unique pedagogy to understand layers of caste, class, gender, intersectionality, merit, and gaze.

The fate of the protagonist

In December 2020, Goutham Raj Konda by looking at the film *The Discreet Charm of Savarnas* (2020) by Rajesh Rajamani reflected on the ways Dalits have usually been represented in film. In his article 'Dalit Narrative and Dalit Representation in Indian Cinema', Konda writes about the

> 'hypocritical wokeness' of Savarnas and highlights how Rajamani's film addresses an important aspect of caste prejudice among Savarna film-makers—their refusal to cast Dalit actors (with a few exceptions). Indian cinema seemingly has a disdain for casting Dalit actors in Dalit roles: Saif Ali Khan as Deepak Kumar in *Aarakshan* (2011), Ravi Kishan as Sanjay Kumar in *Mukkabaaz* (2017), Ram Charan as Chitti Babu in *Rangasthalam* (2018), Nawazuddin Siddiqui as Dasharadh Manjhi in *Manjhi* (2015), and Zeeshan Ayyub as Nishad in *Article 15* (2019). The ostentatious wokeness that Savarna filmmakers flaunt for their woke cinema on Dalits often blatantly ignore the importance of hiring Dalit actors or writers for true representation that moves beyond mere 'saving'.
>
> *(Konda 2020: 63)*

Inverting the *Natyasastra* gaze of popular culture, Mari Selvaraj's film, *Karnan*, is a story of a community's resistance in a largely Brahmanical state set-up, led by a fierce Bahujan hero's refusal to succumb to the age-old systematic caste machinery. Played by Dhanush, Mari's *Karnan* fits the apt description of the McKee protagonist: 'The protagonist has the will and capacity to pursue the object of his conscious and/or unconscious desire to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre' (1997: 140).

And yet, the fight for dignity and community resistance is so personal for a Bahujan spectator that it becomes difficult to separate oneself from the protagonist's journey. McKee's idea of a 'Plural protagonist' resonates with the history of systematic caste oppression and Bahujan resistance:

> Generally, the protagonist is a single character. A story, however, could be driven by a duo, a trio or an entire class of people. Individuals in the group share the same desire. Second, the struggle to achieve this desire, they mutually suffer and benefit. If one has success, all benefits. If one has a setback, all suffer. Within a Plural-protagonist, motivation, action and consequence are communal.
>
> *(1997: 136)*

For example, the proletariat class creates a massive Plural protagonist as seen in *Battleship Potemkin*. Pa. Ranjith in his film *Kaala* (2018) also reverses the popular gaze of Indian cinema by giving us a political protagonist who embodies McKee's plural protagonist as he represents Kaala, the leader of a systematically oppressed marginalised Bahujan community residing at Dharavi, the biggest slums of Mumbai. They share histories of state violence, and caste and communal discrimination and are still denied the ownership of land, dignity, and power because of caste

hierarchy in Indian society. The issue of land as power acquired by human beings (in this case the privileged castes) over generations is the central theme of the film. Kaala's final scene makes for a perfect description of the Plural protagonist.

Haridada's men have killed Kaala in the Dharavi riots, but the press reports Kaala a.k.a. Karikalan, who led the Dharavi strike, died in a fire accident. This is also reported by the police. But when asked by people they denied his death, giving various reasons. A woman who sells flowers said, 'this morning I saw him sitting near Buddha temple'. A pastor says, 'Jesus was crucified, didn't he rise from death?' Another woman says, 'there isn't anyone born to kill Kaala yet'. Yet Haridada believed that Kaala was dead. He arrives at Dharavi for the first Bhumi puja of his dream project, Pure Mumbai Project, in the presence of Kaala's family, Zareena, Praveen (the reporter), Bhim ji's mother, and the rest of Dharavi. As Haridada picks a fist of sand, a godlike voice-over of Kaala fills the narrative—'this is Kaala's fort. You can't take even a fist of sand from here!' Abhyankar embodies Brahmanical patriarchy to the core. He is a purist, always clad in white and is a devotee of Ram, who would do anything to acquire Dharavi. As Abhyankar smells the sand and takes a full look of the place, a child throws a fistful of black colour at his hands and the sand from Abhyankar's hand slips away. Kaala appears. Ranjith embodies Kaala's presence in the solidarity of his community against Abhyankar. The background score roars 'Single-headed Ravana', and everything turns black. The dance of the proletariat covered in black, blue, and red colour is nothing less than a haunting and revolutionary anti-caste expression on an Indian screen. Such mise-en-scenes engulfs Brahmanical patriarchy aesthetically, cinematically, and ideologically and makes the experience metaphysical at one level and metaphorical at another in the representation of solidarity, fraternity, and power of the Bahujan family. Everyone personifies a Kaala now. Abhayankar runs in fear, as he is slapped again and again. Lastly, the blue colour signifying the anti-caste movement ideology (the vastness of the sky) hits him once again with a recurring score— 'Land is our right!' Land is our right—becomes a people's movement across slums in India. Kaala is that threshold in the consciousness of the film industry that marks the agency and assertion of anti-caste politics on the silver screen in its aesthetics, gaze, politics, and position in the Indian state.

Mari reverses the popular Natyashastra gaze of Mahabharata in his film *Karnan* by making Karnan a custodian of his community and by giving him a unique anti-caste agency, who is otherwise an outcast Kshatriya king, raised by a charioteer in popular culture. He gives his characters the names of Hindu deities and kings, such as Karnan for Karna, Draupadi, Yemen for Yama, Duryodhana, Abhimanyu, etc., making ideological defiance palpable in the scope of these characters. The film opens with a haunting reminder of the state's orchestrated murder of a young child who died on a public road, suffering an epilepsy attack while not a bus stopped to see her as human because she was an Untouchable. This child was Karnan's sister. Her constant appearance in the film seeking justice for her death is symbolic and metaphorical in nature. Her claps welcome her brother and the community's assertion. Karnan's fight for Poyilal's right to education is a protest. A stone is flung by a young boy to get a bus halted for his pregnant mother in protest. The incessant efforts of the villagers to get a nameplate for Podiyakulum village, the failure of the state machinery, police, and the elite hand in glove to deny them a bus stand, are such real and structural part of the systematic caste oppression of the state that perhaps resistance is the only way to get things done. There is a scene where Poyilal and her father are harassed and brutally beaten for merely waiting at a bus stand; the mediator demands the father to leave the bus stop or he might get killed. The father says, 'It's her first day at college. I just came to drop my daughter off at college'. Karnan rightfully teaches the privileged person a lesson, 'We somehow rose from our numerous falls, covered our bruises and studied with the dream to somehow make it. But you chase our girls away by harassing them?

You will not harass our girls again'. This scene exemplifies the materiality of the Bahujan body, both male and female. Fearing caste violence, humiliation, trauma, and shame, Poyilal drops her dream of education.

> These caste pogroms feature two main forms of hate: collective humiliation and economic destruction. In the first case, the women are stripped, paraded naked, raped and molested in public, and two, the basis of their livelihood or survival are attacked—qualified /employed youth are targeted and killed, economic assets like household goods and vehicles damaged, houses burnt, and wells poisoned by pouring in kerosene. The affected population is forced to migrate to other places losing all they have in the process. The role of police and political forces is very much suspect in the process, and routinely, justice is denied by non-register of cases, sloppy or non-existent investigation, and poor prosecution, so that the perpetrators go scot-free while the victims of the violence are terrorised, impoverished and further demoralised. The system works to perpetuate the terrorising of the Othered population—the Untouchables and the poorer Most Backward Castes (MBCs)—by targeting the body of the woman as representative of the community which needs to be 'taught a lesson'. The resilience of the community, especially of the women, which has survived these atrocities with little redress for centuries, must be noted in this context.
>
> *(Stephen 2012)*

The film reflects so poignantly and poetically in its aesthetics a whole culture of Bahujan lives. When the police visited Podiyakulum to arrest the perpetrators who had damaged the public bus, Mari designed the scene in such a way that the state machinery of police had to look up to find Karnan sitting at the top of the water tank. In each of his frames an aesthetic of non-violence is exhibited in the ways animals and nature are prayed to, an ecology where everything lives in perfect harmony with each other, the plants, the animals—dogs, cat, donkey, and elephant—the predatory bird, the cows, pigs, the horse, the birds, the moths, and the headless deity that aptly conveys the systematic erasure of Bahujan culture and how Buddhism was destroyed in India by the same Brahmanical state apparatus in history.

> Pushyamitra Sunga, a Samvedi Brahmin, was the first one to destroy the Buddhist state of the Mauryan Empire. The object of the Regicide by Pushyamitra was to make Brahmins the sovereign rulers of India. After he ascended the throne and performed Ashvamedha Yajna or the horse sacrifice; launched a violent and virulent campaign of persecution against Buddhists and Buddhism. A reward of 100 gold pieces on the head of every Buddhist monk was announced to destroy Buddhism and force everybody to restore his faith in The Dharma Code of Manu.
>
> *(Baws 1979: Vol. 3, 268–270)*

I see the Oppositional gaze and Agency articulated in so many ways. The horse, an animal historically not found in India, and its significance in Aryan culture, and the connection between why Bahujans are penalised in real life for riding a horse to witnessing Mari's triumphant Oppositional Agency in giving a young boy a horse as his friend is just brilliant. Brahmanical codes and terms of life between Touchables and Untouchables in Indian villages states, '[i]t is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to ride on a horse or a palanquin through the village' (Baws 1979: Vol. 5, 21).

The casteist Brahmanical gaze pricks Karnan when the bus conductor calls Podiyakulum, his village, a wasteland. Karnan protests to stop the bus at his village and jumps from the moving

bus in order to stop it. Draupadi, and his grandfather Yemen, are distraught with Karnan's rage. Yemen pleads to lay low; a good opportunity for a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) job had come his way, nay his village. But Karnan can't take the humiliation anymore. He challenges everyone who denies him dignity. Mari inverts Mahabharata's (Natyashastra) gaze by looking at Karnan as a hero, a protagonist, not a victim, who otherwise in the popular culture was refused by Draupadi because he was the son of the charioteer. He slices the fish in two equal halves and becomes the custodian of the community, further reversing the gaze as historically the Untouchables were denied having weapons to guard themselves.

> The Brahmins flattered the Kshatriyas, and both let the Vaishyas live in order to be able to live upon him. But the three agreed to beat down the Shudra. He was not allowed to acquire wealth lest he should be independent of the three Varnas. He was prohibited from acquiring knowledge lest he should keep a steady vigil regarding his interests. He was prohibited from bearing arms lest he should have the means to rebel against their authority. That is how the Shudras were treated by the Tryavarnikas as evidenced by the Laws of Manu.
>
> *(Baws 1979: Vol 1, 62)*

Karnan stands tall to the state machinery. His power or struggle is not separate from the community. It is the community that stands for its honour against the state structure ready to sacrifice one for another. Mari makes cognizant of the significance of a government opportunity for a Bahujan person in the enthusiasm that the community shows when Karnan gets selected for a CRPF job ready to take the blame for his earlier retaliation with the police in trying to save their elders. After the caste pogrom scene, an angry Karnan raises the question to the police officer 'My needs don't matter to you. My troubles don't matter to you. All that matters is how I stand before how I address you. Didn't you just hit us for standing tall?' But an arrogant and casteist police officer responds,

> You can't kill me. When they break this door down, that is the end of you and your village. Listen to me. Drop that sword and touch my feet and apologize before everyone. That is your only way to survive. I don't care if you slit my throat, because of you, your village is going to be destroyed. The end of your village is the end of this story.

The casteist police officer is confident of his caste power. He is a perfect example of Repressive State Apparatus driven by both ideology and violence fulfilling Althusser's idea of State Apparatus, repressive and ideological.

> The (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology. The Army and Police also function by ideology.
>
> *(Althusser 2012: 18)*

Finally, Karnan slits the police officer's throat in an act of resistance. An aesthetic breakaway from the typical fair-skinned and thin-beauty women, female characters in Mari's film are voluptuous, hardworking, and bold with agency. Padmini doesn't shy away from reprimanding Karnan, her younger brother, if he takes to drinking. The grandmother praying to the predatory bird and the lover Draupadi ready to wait for her beloved for 10–15 years feels like a stretch, but that's how pervasive, hard, and real the state's allegiance to Brahmanism is. It's not just poetic, it's also real. These women participate and speak up. For example, the pregnant woman takes

equal responsibility for wrecking the bus along with her husband and child. Women say, 'if you can't protect our sons, we will'. Karnan's mother and Padmini, his sister, worrying about Karnan getting caught in caste violence are all conscious and real representations of Bahujan women who are aware of the pitfalls of standing against the state. These are characters you can relate to. They exist.

The deliverance of such cinema cannot merely be attributed to the agency of the film-maker but it's actually the history of Ambedkar, Periyar, and Iyothee Thass's anti-caste movement from the state of Tamil Nadu that has always stood the test of time. As far as the desire of the Bahujan community to have Bahujan actors play Bahujan protagonists in the mainstream cinema is concerned, I think we are still at a nascent stage in the highly capitalist film industry where the assertion of Bahujan identity is still at a place of radical negotiation. Konda cites examples of Hollywood, where film-makers have responded to cultural changes and become more inclusive in their representation of protagonists, with the emergence of Black actors like Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, and Samuel Jackson as legends, proven by the kind of roles they are offered and the prestigious awards they have won in their remarkable film careers. He also questions how India fares when it comes to the representation of the marginalised in the film industry and suggests that Indian cinema should empower, not 'save', Bahujan film-makers to portray Bahujan stories while simultaneously pushing for Savarna film-makers to get sensitised to the violence and injustice of Bahujan lives and struggles (2020: 63–64).

Gaze and ideology

> When we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it. If we 'saw' the art of the past, we would situate ourselves in history. When we are prevented from seeing it, we are being deprived of the society of history which belongs to us. Who benefits from this deprivation? In the end, the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes, and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms. And, so inevitably it mystifies.
>
> (Berger 1972: 11)

> Some of you will say that it is a matter of small concern whether the Brahmins come forward to lead the movement against Caste or whether they do not. In every country the intellectual class is the most influential class, if not the governing class. The intellectual class is the class which can foresee it, it is the class which can advise and give lead. In no country does the mass of the people live the life of intelligent thought and action. It is largely imitative and follows the intellectual class. There is no exaggeration in saying that the entire destiny of a country depends upon its intellectual class. The fact remains that the Brahmins form the intellectual class of the Hindus. It is not only an intellectual class but it is a class which is held in great reverence by the rest of the Hindus. The Hindus are taught that the Brahmins are Bhudevas (Gods on earth) and alone can be their teachers.
>
> (Ambedkar 1936: 62–63)

Gaze becomes the second pertinent reference to locate the Oppositional Bahujan Agency. While social location defines the lived experience of a person, it mustn't limit one from having a rational temperament. What really matters is the way they see the Bahujans and women in Indian society. A way of looking conveys an ideology and aesthetic, which could

be either oppositional or subversive, reflecting the historical circumstances of the state and film-maker. Proposing, 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe' (Berger 1972: 8). Thus, freeing the knowledge that the intellectual class of India has deprived India through its false Brahmanical representation in actualising the scope of Bahujan subject and women's story in Indian cinema, through Oppositional Bahujan Agency, I suggest an intervention in the possibilities and the ways one must look at Bahujans and women from here on.

In the west, Laura Mulvey through her *Psychoanalytic Theory of Hollywood's Visual Pleasure and Narrative in Cinema* (1976) saw womanhood as an object of phallocentric gaze, where woman is the image and man the bearer of the look. hooks on the contrary found Mulvey's conception of womanhood all too White and that excluded Black women's experience. hooks opposed this monolithic gaze of Hollywood by developing an oppositional gaze that both negated the popular perspective of black representation, who identify with neither the victim nor the perpetrators (1992: 122–123). Going a step further in her theory of *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, hooks described this phenomenon of being an 'enlightened witness':

> Being an Enlightened Witness is really not about freeing ourselves of representation. It's really about becoming critically vigilant about both what is being told to us and how we respond to what is being told to us. Because the answer is not in the kind of censoring, an absolutism of right-wing political correctness but in fact a proactive sense of agency that requires all of us on a greater level of literacy.
>
> *(hooks 1997)*

A Bahujan person and woman located at the fourth varna of the caste system in Indian society (actively or passively) experiences the casteist othering of the state through caste/class and gender gaze. By developing an oppositional gaze, a Bahujan person in the same way as hooks consciously negates the popular imagination of Bahujan representation, who identify with neither the victim nor the perpetrators. They become the enlightened witnesses who are aware of what is being told to them and how they respond to what is told to them. Contrary to popular culture narratives, feature films such as *Asuran* (Vetrimaaran, 2019), *Karnan* (Mari Selvaraj, 2021), *Kaala* (Pa. Ranjith, 2018), and *Palasa 1978* (Karuna Kumar, 2019) and short films such as *Share Auto* (Jeny Dolly, 2019), and *Lovers in the Afternoon* (Rajesh Rajamani, 2021) have explored the representation of Bahujan identity from a Bahujan experience in real life which are ideological (anti-Brahmanical) in nature; then whether it is fighting untouchability, the choice of food, or the desire to educate oneself, the expressions and stories are steeped in Bahujan culture, lived experience and politics.

Written and directed by Jeny Dolly, *Share Auto* (2019) is a 2-minute short film, which locates the practice of untouchability and Brahmanical patriarchy through an auto ride, giving a scope for a unique Bahujan Oppositional Agency that reflects layers of hierarchy in gender, caste, and class amongst women. The film begins with a whitish kurta-clad woman holding two big bags of groceries and being reluctant to share an auto ride. A rickshaw guy asks her destination. She declines. He insists, I have a seat for you. The auto was already packed with three dark-skinned women, amongst which one was with a toddler. He asks them to make some room. They respond, 'but there is no space'. Kurta-clad woman sits on the edge. She stares at the dark skin, blue saree-clad woman and avoids physical contact with her body. In a packed auto of four people, I see that little space between the two women as a marker of untouchability manifested psychologically at first, physically at second, and ideologically at large. The auto guy complains, 'you are sitting at the edge of the auto. Move in'. But the kurta-clad woman ignores

him. A speed bump and she hits her head against the meter. Their shoulders are touching. The blue sari woman smirks, seeing the kurta-clad woman rub her head in pain. She wears her earphones quietly and enjoys the song, whose lyrics ridicule the practice of untouchability. This is hum-bug, this is humbug. Why so petty! The super rolls, 'discrimination is injurious to health. Practice discrimination at your own risk'.

I see women are ultimately the biggest vehicles of ideology (Brahmanical patriarchy), for containing it and also opposing it. By conditioning them through rituals, performances, and behaviour and by controlling their agency and sexuality, casteism and Brahmanical patriarchy are perpetuated in society, and the kurta-clad woman is an apt example of that. Jeny Dolly's film is oppositional because its gaze is ideological, which is anti-Brahmanical in nature. Her film is a vehicle of Ambedkarite ideology.

After a century of Indian cinema, a resonance of Ambedkarite ideology is finally emerging on screen. One can say that finally a moment in the history of Indian cinema has come when representations of marginalised Bahujan communities are being explored by the Bahujan artists expressing varying oppositional consciousness, gaze, and agency in Bahujan representation. The dream of a society based on the preamble of the constitution of India—justice (social, economic, and political) liberty, equality and fraternity and social—seems to be materialising slowly. Althusser says that man is an ideological animal by nature:

> Ideology acts or functions in such a way that it recruits subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) via actions, practices, rituals and ideological Apparatuses.
>
> *(1970: 43)*

Film-maker

Who is telling the story? The question is not limited to whether it is a man, a woman, a queer person, a Bahujan person, a privileged person, etc. The question is whether the voice is a voice of the collective.

The Enlightenment era insisted that it's the individuals who are the agents of knowledge, but Sandra Harding's Standpoint theory says, it is the groups. It is the poor, disabled, and marginal people who are the agents of knowledge. Race, ethnicity/based, anti-imperial, queer, and social justice movements routinely produce Standpoint themes. It is a kind of organic epistemology, methodology, philosophy of science, and social theory that can arise whenever oppressed people gain public voice. Emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critical theory about relations between production of knowledge and practices of power, Standpoint theory was presented as a way of empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences and pointing towards a way to develop an 'oppositional consciousness' as Patricia Collins and Chela Sandoval put the point (1989). Feminist concerns could not be restricted to what are usually regarded as only social and political issues, but instead must be focused on every aspect of natural and social orders, including the very standard for what counts as knowledge, objectivity, rationality, and a good scientific method (Harding 2004: 1–6).

In May 2020, Yogesh Maitreya wrote about 'The Birth of the Dalit Protagonist' and observed that in literature and cinema, even in stories about caste oppression, Dalit characters have rarely been at the centre stage. He attributes this allegiance to the caste of the storyteller. Whether a Dalit character is a victim or a fighter in the story is decided on the basis of the socio-political reality of the storyteller. The development of the characters by privileged upper-caste writers who have no understanding of the Dalit struggle, Maitreya believes, renders the protagonist

'infertile', 'flawed', and 'bogus'. In this process, the history of the oppressed is appropriated and manipulated, and they are ousted from their own story, reduced to being mere receivers of justice. However well-intentioned, it is the oppressor-protagonist (or writer) 'saving' and bringing justice to the marginalised in our visual and literary imagination. This is Indian literature and cinema in a nutshell, produced by Savarnas. On the other hand, cinema and literature produced by Dalits are completely antithetical to this. In their art, we witness, for the first time, what Carl Jung called a complete 'individuation' between story and storyteller—the two are not separate, not at odds; the storyteller is part of the story (Maitreya 2020).

While there is some truth in Maitreya's analysis, merely the caste of the storyteller cannot be seen as a determining factor to locate the social messaging of the film. It is ultimately the ideology that decides the socio-political reality of the film/film-maker/storyteller. Althusser uses Marxist vocabulary:

> the ideas of a human subject exist in his 'actions', which he called 'material practices and rituals' defined by the material ideological apparatus through which the individual derives the ideas of that subject.
>
> *(Althusser 2012: 38)*

Therefore, social location must not limit how we must see. Through the auteurship of the author/film-maker, a place for allyship and intervention also opens; possible of conscious action, fraternity, responsibility in acknowledging the harm that has been done while creating a place for redressal to dismantle hierarchical structures of Brahmanical patriarchy as a collective. Mari Selvaraj, Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, and Neeraj have opened that space for allyship and interventions in the popular discourse.

In Chaitanya Tamhane's film *The Disciple*, the character of Maai really enamoured me. As the name suggests, 'The Disciple' opens moments of existential crisis in the life of a devoted classical vocalist, Sharad Nerulkar (24), who has committed his life to music but years of techniques still didn't instil passion to his singing until his late 30s. Nerulkar finds inspiration in the tapes of an elusive master named Maai, whose words reflect the mental anchor of his life. Tamahane takes Mai to a metaphysical level where art marries mysticism and caste is nowhere to be seen, although her surname is Jadhav. Her presence is surreal, almost like the voice of a goddess. She embodies everything that an artist desires to achieve in their life, to find oneself and the truth through one's art. Maai demands asceticism through one's work, and Nerulkar can't find stillness. Unlike a lot of people, I have not prayed to the Hindu Goddess Saraswati, a symbolic embodiment of knowledge as reflected in the film. Dr Ambedkar's record scholarships were our embodiment of knowledge. As Tamahane gave Mai an aura that was not touchable, I kept wondering about her social identity. Did she not get an opportunity to perform to an audience because of untouchability? Did Tamahane deliberately obliterate that detail? Or was she the kind of a woman who had transgressed the hierarchies of society (class, caste, gender, and sexuality) through her art and existence, so she became untouchable in another way? I was reminded of Awad. He recognised that,

> an aesthetics of Dalit is not simply concerned with metaphysical questions of beauty, truth, and judgement. It possesses a moral philosophy of life drawn from a society based on the principle of justice, equality, liberty, and fraternity, whether present or future.

And, a thought sprung in my head. Having an opportunity of finding the truth through Mai's character and raising metaphysical questions of truth, beauty, and judgement could be

Tamahane's imagination. Perhaps, that's why Mai's aura is so elusive. Seeing Mai on such a high pedestal has given me some hope though it doesn't affirm my ideological understanding. I see Mai, like I have not seen a female musician's aura before. That too, a Dalit woman. Her surreal presence in cinema is political for me. She is the master I would want to see more of. I see, thus, that cinema can serve a purpose in shifting the way we see. We may not have met ideologically fully but at least we are beginning to have a conversation. That's why I insist I never just see the social location of the storyteller to determine the social messaging of the film, it is ultimately the ideology that decides the socio-political reality of the film/film-maker/storyteller, where art serves a purpose.

In a YouTube series, 'Cultural Criticism and Transformation', bell hooks uses the term 'White supremacy' to evoke a response to race, class, and gender. 'White supremacy evokes a political world that we all frame ourselves in relationship to'. Just like White Supremacy in the west, Brahmanical patriarchy in India is the structure of graded inequality, which evokes a political world that we all frame ourselves in relation to, especially, the Bahujans and the women of this country. The Brahmanical Patriarchy finds its root in the Purusha Sukta of *Rig Veda*, a cosmogeny. Verses 11 and 12 of *Rig Veda* describe the origin of the universe and the Chaturvarna vyavastha (caste system) from the body of Purusha, the lord himself. Purushukta is a divine injunction which prescribes the Chaturvarna as the constitution of society into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishayas, and Shudras. This social order of Indo-Aryan society has never been questioned by anyone except Buddha (Baws 1979: Vol. 7, 21–23). Thus, it wasn't an individual that was wounding and damaging our lives. It is an entire apparatus of Brahmanical patriarchy that has been hurting us all along. An enlightened witnessing, critical thinking, and rationality are the weapons that will bring those institutions down and open space for allyship.

Funding/Distribution

Whatever the funders and sponsors want funded and sponsored gets turned into scientific questions. Film Finance Corporation, incorporated as a government-owned company, was registered in March 1960. In its early years, the Corporation had provided finance to film-makers like Bimal Roy, Chetan Anand, Satyajit Ray, and V. Shantaram. The Corporation funded low-budget films and sponsored talented newcomers from the Film and Television Institute (Pune) and filmed works of eminent writers in Hindi and other languages. Films such as *Bhuvan Shome* (Mrinal Sen, 1969) and *Sara Akash* (Basu Chatterjee, 1969) won seven national and international awards and strengthened the New Indian cinema during the early 1970s. By 1973–1974, FFC entered co-financing arrangements with Dena Bank but incurred financial losses and criticism over the misuse of public money for the whims of some cinematic aesthetics. With the help of Blaze Advertising, FFC supported Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974). Madhava Prasad called *Ankur* (1974) and *Nishant* (1975) 'the commercial exploitation of the political dimension of the FFC's aesthetic project' (1998: 130). Over the years the FFC Corporation in its first phase had financed a spectrum of stellar films like *Charulata* (Satyajit Ray, 1964), *Nayak* (Satyajit Ray, 1965), *Majhli Didi* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1967), *Anubhav* (Basu Bhattacharya, 1968), *Bhuvan Shome*, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (Satyajit Ray, 1968), *Dastak* (Rajinder Singh Bedi, 1969), Kanku, *Sara Akash*, *Uski Roti*, *Swayamvaram* (Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1970), *Ashad Ka Ek Din* (Mani Kaul, 1970), and more (2018: 28–30).

What was the significance of this cinema and why did it emerge then? What was the social and political circumstance of the state when such cinema was funded? How did parallel and middle cinema of the 1970s and 1980s happen to be? What pedagogy did it legitimise?

Carrying the legacy of FFC and the Indian Motion Picture Export Corporation (IMPEC), NFDC became a financially viable organisation in April 1980, although it was established in May 1975 (Report 1980: 65). The Report of the Working Group on National Film Policy, released in May 1980, upheld the significance of cinema as 'an instrument for shaping the human mind and providing enlightenment' (1980: iii) and supported ties between the government and the film industry for its all-around development, especially in the context of a developing society (1980: 10). The Corporation produced some of the most well-known feature films from this period, including *Aakrosh, Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*, *Party* (Govind Nihalani, 1984), *Paar* (Goutam Ghose, 1984), *Mirch Masala* (1987, Ketan Mehta), *Mahayatra* (Goutam Ghose, 1987), *Salaam Bombay* (Mira Nair, 1988), *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (Saeed Akhtar Mirza, 1989), and more (2018: 30–31).

Written by Sooni Taraporavala and Mira Nair, directed by Nair, and produced by Mirabai Films and Doordarshan, *Salaam Bombay* (1988) won the 36th National Award for Best feature film in Hindi. It was India's second film submission to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It later made it to the list of The Best 1,000 Movies Ever Made in *The New York Times*. A brilliant film as it is, I see *Salaam Bombay* extrapolating caste in various ways. The story explores the fate of a young Krishna, tired of his brother's bullying (a mechanic by profession), who burns a client's scooter down in anger and revenge. Poor as they were, Krishna's mother punished him to repay the loss of Rs 500, and there he found himself on Bombay streets. While the story dedicates itself to the daily lives of children living in slums in Bombay, a simple question must be raised, who lives in these slums? Chai-Pao/Krishna wears a black thread, a kind of code to segregate Dalits from the society; Chillum too wears a black thread, which is basically an indicator of social exclusion. Dr Ambedkar in his undelivered speech *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) wrote,

> Under the rule of Peshwas in Maratha country, the Untouchables were not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The Untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or neck as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch by mistake. In Poona, the capital of Peshwas, the Untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treated on lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted. In Poona, the Untouchables were required to carry an earthen pot, hung at the neck, wherever he went for holding his spit lest his spit falling on the earth could pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it. *(1936: 18)*

With the story being set in Kamathipura, the materiality of sex workers can also be traced. What sections of society do these sex workers come from? What is their social location? Who does the job of clearing pollution? Whether it's cleaning poultry farm cabins, or shredding feathers of dead chicken, or washing utensils at a wedding, or serving food? What society of children do they come from? Does it only reflect poverty? Or more?

Chai-Pao, played by Shafiq Syed, is more of a man who tries to rescue Solah Saal (16), a young teenage girl forced into sex work by setting the room on fire. He sends a biscuit to Solah Saal by Manju (7), who devours the packet out of jealousy. Chai-Pao helps his friend Chillum, played by the brilliant Raghuvir Yadav, while Baba, played by Nana Patekar, who is a pimp, drug peddler, and a violent man, forces Meena Kumari, his wife, played by Anita Kanwar, to continue staying with him despite all his false promises. Baba leaves Meena Kumari, a victim of prostitution, while he romances a young Solah Saal to ready her for sex work. Towards the

climax, Krishna attacks Baba with a dagger and emancipates Meena Kumari if not Solah Saal from that rotten hell of prostitution. They get separated during a Ganapathi *visarjan*. After all he has lost, you meet Krishna, the child toying his pain with a wooden top. I wondered what happened to Meena Kumari. Did Krishna and Manju's life have any escape? Being a hero, wasn't Krishna too a victim of systematic discrimination which kept him and Meena Kumari at the same place, pushed to the fourth varna, at the periphery of the caste system?

The Oppositional Bahujan Agency locates the historically shared, group-based experiences and trauma within hierarchical power relations as Patricia Collins observed (2014: 24). Pa. Ranjith's Neelam Productions is a great example of this practice, which has presented, produced, and distributed brilliant films on anti-caste discourse consistently. Films by Bahujan film-makers such as Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Rajesh Rajamani's *The Discreet Charm of Savarnas* (2020) and *Lovers in the Afternoon* (2019), Leela Santosh's *Paikinjana Chiri* (2020), and Jeny's *Dolly's Auto* (2019); all of them reflect an anti-caste agency and make Neelam Productions a great case of funding that opens the possibility of a pedagogy of greater literacy which reflects on legitimate scientific questions of caste, class, and gender exhibiting a different imagination of the Indian nation and giving India a unique oppositional cinema.

Demanding a greater accountability and responsibility for greater literacy

In a historic watershed moment on February 13, 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology to the country's indigenous people for the historic injustices they have suffered.

> The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.
>
> We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.
>
> We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.
>
> For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.
>
> To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.
>
> And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

Tens of thousands of indigenous children were removed over successive generations until 1970, under policies aimed at assimilation. A landmark 1997 report titled 'Bringing Them Home' estimated that as many as one in three indigenous children were taken and placed in institutions and foster care, where many suffered abuse and neglect. A government-funded survivors' group, the Healing Foundation, said it had a 'profoundly destructive' impact on those removed and their families, many of whom carried lifelong trauma (Mao 2018).

The freedom and the social justice movements have had different stories to tell, a different imagination of their nation. Just as indigenous people in Australia, the marginalised Bahujan people and its culture in India have still remained caught in the institutions of casteism and slavery of the state despite the fact that India became a Republic in 1950. We cannot tell stories of freedom and justice in a culture which is seeped into Bahujan exclusion, unless we truly ready

ourselves to introspect, to unlearn the Brahmanical ways of looking at Bahujans, and learn a Bahujan way of looking at them and practice equality for real. Whether the Indian film industry has come towards a place to bring into practice (the battle at the level of policy articulation and implementation) the normative (where we battle things out ideologically) is a prominent question. Are these solidarities mere lip service or opportunities of forging a path towards equality? As creative leaders, are we ready to have a political conversation about Bahujan representation and inclusion in the Indian film industry? Have we arrived at a place of practice where a legitimate space for affirmative action denied to the Bahujan community in society and the Indian film industry can be really brought into existence via creating more inclusive leadership opportunities for them? Now the question is whether Bollywood will amplify the voices of Bahujan talent and women.

Conclusion

With an inverted gaze, I see the Oppositional Bahujan Agency as a site of greater literacy, a site of transgression and transformation because it demands from the intellectual class of India to think critically and apply Ambedkar's historical methods to locate a Bahujan and woman's experience. In that moment of applying new knowledge, a transgression is bound to happen; a possibility of fraternity emerges because while these stories lead to social justice themes, the practice of creativity led by knowledge has the capacity to free the creator of those structural limitations by which caste and gender hierarchies perpetuate in life. And then, the creator also becomes an Agent in smashing the structural inequalities of Brahmanical patriarchy. Such a practice will encourage a new understanding of Indian society and culture, in particular Bahujan culture, and create a new pedagogy of aesthetics and literacy in Indian cinema based on their lived experience which will be more diverse and inclusive in stories and narrative.

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3

To Kill or to Allow to Live

Caste Necropolitics, *Ozhivudivasathe Kali*, and Malayalam Cinema

Rajesh James, Binu K. D., and Aswin Prasanth

Introduction

***CW**:* Please be advised this chapter contains pictures depicting death and suicide.

Drawing on Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics', the chapter engages with the death politics (thanatopolitics) of caste in Malayalam cinema (hereafter MC). Although caste is apparently seen as 'a grotesque life regulating socio-political reality in India' (Venkatesan and James 2018: 143), it has also been functioning as an ideological imperative of violence for/by the upper caste(s). The Dalits and other caste subalterns who occupy the vulnerable margins of caste hierarchy are disciplined as a strangely abject population either marked for death or susceptible to their violence. By problematising the exclusive notion of caste merely as 'a grotesque life regulating socio-political reality' and arguing how the ideology of death politics is inherent in the notion of caste especially in the context of the increased killings of the Dalits in India as a result of the rise of ultranationalist Hindutva forces, the chapter explores the precariousness of Dalit bodies and their contingencies in the power structures of MC and analyses Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's award winning film *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* [trans. An Off-day Game] (2015) to explicate how a Dalit is catapulted both ideologically and physically into the liminality of (non-) existence. While exploring the regimes of caste in MC, the genealogy of death politics in its discursive space is also interrogated to enunciate how caste as a sordid reality dictates the lives and deaths of the Dalits even in its on-/off-screen spaces.

Necropolitics and the Regimes of Caste

Veering away from the Foucauldian notion of biopower as a life regulating force, Achille Mbembe in 'Necropolitics' (2003) uses necropolitics as a new paradigm to analyse how life is subjugated to death in the political economy of our times. He unlocks the imaginings of the new normal in which certain bodies are programmed for augmenting life while others are 'marked for or neglected into death' (Quinan 2018: 271). This has created a shift in the priorities where certain bodies are indexed as legitimate subjects eligible to live and others as precarious non-subjects destined to die. Although Mbembe has used the term necropolitics to account for the 'death-worlds'

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(2003: 40) of contemporary warfare and the brutal killing of people, it is a relevant theoretical intervention to review the death worlds of the caste system and the horrifying violence against the Dalits occurring in India in the name of Hindutva nationalism.[1] The caste-based oppression of the Dalits and the legitimisation of atrocities against them are deep rooted in Indian social ethos and upper-caste discourses. As a system of social stratification with 'an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt' (Das 2010: 25), caste has been controlling the lives of people based on the arborescent laws depending on their position in the caste hierarchy. Therefore, the Dalits as lower caste(s) incur the most deprivation and stringent restrictions. Having been deprived of their dignity and 'essential' humanity for centuries, Dalits have been reduced to mere slaves of the dominant caste(s) and remained ostracised as outcaste(s). Thus, the caste system, like a sovereign, pronounces an eternal 'state of exception' on the Dalits, reducing them to the status of *homines sacri*, resulting in their 'inclusive-exclusion' (Agamben 1998: 97).

Although caste has been 'a grotesque social reality' for many centuries and has remained so in spite of India's accession to independence in 1947, there is a dubious convergence of repressive and ideological state apparatuses in India especially now in the context of the Hindutva hate politics viscerally promoted by the neo-nationalist and casteist forces currently in power. Locating specifically in this conjecture, caste as a discourse needs sufficient problematising from the perspective of Mbembe's necropolitics to examine whether the notion of caste merely as an exclusivist life politics is sufficient enough to explain the relishing of 'impunity' (Geetha 2013: 15) by the cow vigilantes,[2] hyper-nationalists, and casteist *Ram-bhakts* (devotees of Lord Rama) that facilitate and legitimise the killing of the Dalits. Although caste has functioned as a technology of taxonomy to differentiate the upper caste as someone near/touching and the Dalits as someone at distance/not touching (Jaaware 2018: 1), it has now become an institution that precipitates the killing of Dalits as the only (non)intimate form of touching possible for the upper caste(s). There is an identifiable move from the conventional practice of untouchability to a new sense of (un)touchability as sexual violence and/or killing without the mediation of human intimacy. In the name of cow vigilantism, purity-pollution discourse, and hideous caste rules, the Dalits are brutally raped and lynched across India as contemporary practices of (un)touchability (for instance, the brutal gang-rape, murder, and the hastened cremation of a young Dalit woman occurred in Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh in September 2020). Since the re-emergence of ultranationalist and casteist forces, especially after 2014, the number of hate crimes against the Dalits has significantly increased; 194 cases of Dalit killings were reported till the first quarter of 2019 by Amnesty International India (unsurprisingly, Amnesty International was forced to stop its operation in India now because of political pressures).[3] Such abject murders and violence, often not reported, function as an imagery of warning for the Dalits to follow the dictates of caste rationale. 'To kill or to allow to live', as argued by Mbembe, has become the principal attribute of caste sovereignty in contemporary India (2003: 11). In this context, the necropolitics of caste in India, which operates unseen but is visible as a pan-Indian metaphor of xenophobia, is evident and concrete. In the socio-political conditions of the caste system in India, there exist systematic but (in)direct ways of manufacturing 'death worlds' (Mbembe 2003: 40) for the Dalits.

Advancing further, we situate the necropolitics of caste in the social mechanisms and imaginaries in/of Kerala [a southern Indian state] and its narratives including MC. Caste has rarely been discussed as a predominant trope in MC despite being a grotesque socio-political discourse and a necropolitical reality in Kerala. On the other hand, MC has preserved and reproduced collective historical consciousness, memories, and sentiments of the upper caste(s) through discursive appropriations in the form of narrative, characterisation, and cinematography. Since its inception, MC has been predominantly a hetero-patriarchal and casteist space that dubiously configured and normalised the upper-caste values. For instance, the exclusion of P. K.

Rosy's Dalit identity to make her 'eligible' to play the role of a Nair (upper-caste) heroine in *Vigathakumaran* is a quintessential example to this. P. K. Rosy was the heroine of the first MC *Vigathakumaran* [trans. The Lost Child] (1928) directed by J. C. Daniel. But the elimination of her identity had beneficial implications neither for her nor for the film, as it resulted in violent protests and the burning of theatre where the film was screened. Fearing execution from caste fanatics, Rosy left her career in cinema and lived in hiding for the rest of her life. Since then, barring a few exceptions, MC has largely failed in visualising the life, desires, and aspirations of Dalits and Adivasis who were cast in the precarious edges of the political economy of Kerala. While a majority of Malayalam films catered to the upper-caste sentiments, the Dalit characters who 'trickled down' in these casteist filmscapes were subordinate figures who lacked agency, subjectivity, and history. As a result, they were cast as stereotypical laughing stocks, incorrigible criminals, foil of the hero, and self-sacrificing victims among others. The characterisations of Sreenivasan in films such as *Nadodikkattu* (1987) and *Akkare Akkare Akkare* (1990) as spiteful and cloying foil to the upper-caste characters of Mohan Lal is a popular example to this. Thus, MC since its inception has celebrated the sovereignty of the upper-caste stars, usually Nair and Syrian Christian characters, in determining the course of Dalits' lives and deaths either by stereotyping them as illegitimate non-subjects worthy of no respect or as the precarious others vulnerable to ungrievable deaths in the margins (Butler 2004: xv). Commenting on such particular inclusion of Dalit characters in MC, Sujith Parayil writes thus: '[w]hile dealing with the question of subalternity or marginality, where the difference is articulated not through the exclusion of the marginalized communities but through a careful and strategic politics of inclusion' (2014: 68). As a result, the 'included ones', just as in the caste system, are used as functional levers for the narrative denouement and eliminated once the purpose is done through physical annihilations, suicides, and symbolic eliminations. This 'inclusivist politics' that warrants the elimination and subjugation of Dalit lives indicates how MC has been following the desideratum of the upper caste(s) and the necropolitics of caste.

Genealogies of Caste Necropolitics in MC

The political economy of MC since its inception has been functioning on Dalit subjugation and elimination that entails a necroeconomy, an economy built on the torture and death of the precarious Dalit bodies. In these unequal regimes of living and dying in MC, not all bodies are fostered for living; the Dalit characters in particular are marked either for death or for symbolic elimination. A genealogical inquiry into MC using necropolitics as an analytical tool unwinds the labyrinthine death world of the Dalits in the discursive casteist filmic spaces. For Mbembe, racism is the major factor that establishes and legitimises necropolitics in a society. He identifies two such forms of racism: (a) hydraulic racism or racism endemic in institutions of the State, law, and administration and (b) nanoracism or racism found in everyday social relations (2019: 58). Casteism, being a form of intraracism (racism within a community), has established and legitimised necropolitics in MC. The artefacts of MC have discursively used casteism, in both hydraulic and nano forms, to silence and eliminate caste subaltern bodies including the Dalits from its on-/off-screen spaces. This systemic casteist dimensions which eliminated Dalit bodies from MC and its epistemes since *Vigathakumaran* have fostered middle-class Nair/Syrian Christian bodies at the cost of Dalit bodies becoming vulnerable figures and non-subjects who could be used and eliminated at will. If P. K. Rosy's attempt to obtain social emancipation was undermined by the upper-caste Nair landlords who could not bear to see a Dalit woman cast in the role of a Nair woman, a similar elimination of her agency was engineered after eight decades in a period film *Celluloid* (2013) that claimed to recapture the lost histories of MC. Although

the film was based on a semi-fictionalised book *Nashtanaika* about P. K. Rosy (trans. *The Lost Heroine*, 2008), it turned out to be a biopic of J. C. Daniel, who directed *Vigathakumaran*. While Daniel is focused in the film, Rosy is reduced to a minor character to be eliminated after performing her narrative function of contextualising J. C. Daniel's life. Commenting on this shift of the focus in the film, Kamal, who directed the film, says:

> My curiosity was piqued by Vinu Abraham's book, *Nashtanayika*, on Rosy, the heroine of *Vighathakumaran*. But I felt that the focus should be on Daniel, now acknowledged as the father of Malayalam cinema. I thought this is one film that ought to be made to remind us of our history. Present-day Kerala is in a hurry to forget its past.
>
> *(Nagarajan)*

Although being a Muslim and a front runner leftist in Kerala, Kamal as a mainstream film director was only interested to bring in the story of another male director and not that of a Dalit woman. Such attempts at reconfiguring the subject position of Dalit characters in favour of dominant characters (a male Nadar figure in this context) and their 'inconsequential' erasures are not just limited to P. K. Rosy alone in MC. For instance, Neeli, an Adivasi woman, in *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009) confronts the same fate. Such inconsequential erasures of Dalit characters from the on-/off-screen spaces of MC are rooted in the systemic violence that MC nurtured. From a historical perspective, most of the lead actresses of MC were predominantly from upper-caste background or carried the 'signifiers' of the privileged castes such as names and appearances. A majority of them were 'photogenic' from the perspectival gaze of the casteist camera(man): 'fair skin tone', tall or of medium height, neither fat or slim, tubular body, and brunette among others. Such affected choices have normalised the upper-caste aesthetics of beauty and ugliness in the casteist psyches of Malayalees. This ongoing gendered/caste power play in MC has created an exclusive political economy in the discourse of MC in which the Dalit actors/characters are forced to occupy the peripheries as stock characters who could be frivolously unaddressed and eliminated. The death politics in the on-screen space is primarily done through individual and collective annihilation of Dalit bodies as helpless victims, cruel villains, suicides of non-agential and powerless Dalit bodies, and through the sudden elimination of Dalit characters as inconsequential in the narrative. For instance, *Neelakkuyil* (1955), often seen as a progressive Malayalam film, failed to attribute any individuality or agency to the Dalit characters that it sought to portray. Although initially focused on the vulnerability of an upper-caste school teacher named Sreedharan Nair who refuses to marry a peasant Dalit woman Neeli, whom he had impregnated, out of respect for the sentiments of his community, it foregrounds him as a politically agential upper-caste figure capable of progressive deliberations (Joseph 2013: 48). While the narrative enables him to accept his child in a Dalit woman in the aura of an apparent caste egalitarian humanism at the end of the film, it never takes Neeli into its narrative fold. It is reported in the film that she is seen dead and her body is found on a railway track. Her death was a necessity for the narrative to establish the progressive caste egalitarianism of Sreedharan Nair in accepting his abandoned lower-caste child. Critiquing such pseudo progressiveness and casteism in *Neelakkuyil*, Jenny Rowena remarks:

> A truly radical narrative about caste/gender inequality would have represented Neeli's story from her perspective. . .. [T]he entire narrative is represented from the upper-caste man's perspective, for whom the discourse on caste/gender equality becomes a means to establish his superior identity.
>
> *(2002: 36)*

This trope of using the Dalit lives as sacrificial lambs for the sustenance of the upper-caste lives/ideologies is a recurrent motif in the post-independent MC. For instance, Dalit characters like Neeli in *Aarudam* (1983), Muniyaandi in *Chidambaram* (1985), and Malu in *Oridathu* (1987) among many others are functional levers condemned to be exploited often as mere objects of ca(ste)mera gaze and eliminated according to the desires and fantasies of the upper-caste characters. By adhering to the dominant caste's experience, ideology, and aesthetics in its narratives by the choice of plot, setting, and casting, MC has continued its stigmatisation, humiliation, and killing of the Dalits inside its death world. Consequently, the Dalit characters of the period lacked subjectivity and agency and were thinly written or underdeveloped stock characters who can be killed and eliminated easily. For instance, in *Chidambaram* (1985), Muniyandi (played by Sreenivasan), a timid worker on a cattle farm, is represented as the subaltern Other or the antithesis of the upper-caste self of Shankaran (played by Bharath Gopi). By foregrounding his Dalit identity through his docile, meek, and servile mannerisms, Muniyandi is represented as a helpless and non-agential person who hangs himself when he realises that his wife was sexually manipulated (see Figure 3.1). From the beginning of the film, the 'unworthiness' of Muniyandi as a husband to a fair-skinned lady like Sivakami (played by Smita Patil) is established in his characterisation, costumes, and through the casual comments that other characters utter about him to justify his following elimination from the film through suicide. By the delicate use of camera angles and movements such as the blocking of Muniyandi (with his subaltern costumes) among the cattle, the closeup shots of Sivakami caressing and kissing flowers in the garden, and her meek reactions against the advances of Shankaran, the film establishes how distanced is Sivakami from Muniyandi and his subaltern world. Arguably, the casting of an upper-caste, fair-skinned actresses like Smita Patil and Sreenivasan (not a celebrated actor yet), who has an animated subaltern body language, in these roles is a conspicuous caste marker in the film that unsettles the question of 'suitability' in their marriage. While engaging with the question of death and life in *Chidambaram*, it is interesting to note that it is Muniyandi's death (suicide) that liberates Sivakami from the 'unsuitable marital bond' and 'empowers' her to meet Shankaran, her upper-caste saviour, in the final scene. In a similar manner, films like *Kodiyettam* and *Oridathu* also follow the trope of the sacrificial Dalit lives that facilitate the life of the upper-caste

Figure 3.1 A screenshot of the hanging dead body of Muniyandi from the film *Chidambaram*.

characters. For instance, in *Oridathu*, Malu, a Dalit pregnant woman, is murdered to show the banality of modernity. The film particularly uses Dalit bodies who are marked as vulnerable and voiceless to expostulate its satiric take on the advent of electricity in a village often as test subjects or 'guineapigs'. While Dalit characters are exploited and killed in the film, the upper-caste characters, often marked by their upper-caste names, flamboyant dressings, and large houses among others are fostered and protected from the ill effects and bad omens of modernity. For instance, the narrative renders an upper-caste Nair woman named Devaki from marriage fraud while it punishes Malu. This necropolitics of sustaining upper-caste lives at the cost of the subaltern Other is an underlying feature of the films of that period.

Another dimension of necropolitics in MC is the death worlds of Dalit antagonists. Following the Manichean imaginary of black-bad/white-good binary dialectics, reprobates in MC are often imagined as dark people who display similarities of morphology and clothing with caste subalterns. These dark-complexioned bodies are imagined often as walking dead bodies destined to be killed as sites of evil. As a result, it is almost a necessity of the text to kill these demonised characters and establish the protagonist's eligibility as the protector of the system. Vinayakan is one such actor in MC who has been regularly cast to play obnoxious roles primarily because of his 'appearance' and off-screen Dalit identity. Vinayakan's pitch-dark complexion, 'unruly appearances', offbeat mannerisms, idiosyncratic articulations, and avowed Dalit identity 'normalise' his stereotyped roles as unrefined, vitriolic, and savage characters such as a rapist in *Stop Violence* (2002), a drug dealer in *Seconds* (2014), a criminal in *Kali* (2016), a slum dweller in *Any Time Money* (2015), and a smuggler in *Kammatti Paadam* (2016) who indulge in extreme anti-social activities and murderous plots. For instance, in *Stop Violence*, Vinayakan is a rapist and a goon belonging to the criminal underbelly of Kochi. He lacks a proper name and carries out the schemes and tasks of the gang leader without any agency of his own. As a character without any identity and history, he is chased, beaten to death, and left as a dead body on the railway track (see Figure 3.2). Although it can be argued that such instance of murder is initiated because of the narrative's necessity, it is critically revealing to think why actors like Vinayakan are being stereotyped for certain roles and often killed in the margins of narrative (filmic) space. Is it because of the spatial and casteist marginality of their existence that Dalit characters are

Figure 3.2 A screenshot from the film *Stop Violence* shows how the character of Vinayakan is left as a dead body on a railway track.

sacrificed/killed to sustain the vainglorious 'valuable life worlds' of the upper-caste characters? The 'destiny' of an actor like Kalabhavan Mani is one such telling example of this trajectory of Dalit bodies in MC. In the casteist world of MC, Kalabhavan Mani was an unredeemable Dalit figure who would never fit into the 'normalcy of upper-caste roles' and thus he was stereotyped as a toddy-tapper in *Sallapam* (1996), a self-mocking sidekick in *Aaram Thampuran* (1997), a stray dog catcher in *Aakashathile Paravakal* (2001), and a self-sacrificing sidekick in *Natturajavu* (2004) among many others. Commenting on how Mani's off-screen identity as a Dalit functioned as a marker of his caste identity in the on-screen spaces of MC, C. S. Venkiteswaran writes:

> [t]he horizons of Malayalam film narratives and social imagination were far too bound by upper-caste, middle-class desires, dreams and biases, which denied Mani's body its basic humanity, leave alone positive representations. In that narrative world, his body could never represent the norm/al: it was invariably placed against the norm/alcy of fair, upper-caste bodies, and so, it necessarily had to be mean, excessive, perverse, divergent or dangerous.
> *(2016: 136)*

Such representations of his body as divergent and dangerous naturalised and justified the physical violence his body incurred in the screen spaces. Apart from his stereotyped roles, Mani's body has been a site of physical violence. He has been physically abused, beaten down, and killed in many films such as *Rakshasa Rajavu* (2004) and *Chotta Mumbai* (2007). His identity as a Dalit vindicated such killings since it unconsciously subscribed to the dominant imaginary that a Dalit body is a deviant Other which deserves punishments (retributive justice). For instance, in *Rakshasa Rajavu*, Mani plays the role of a corrupt politician named Gunasekharan. Although such corrupt politicians were a common phenomenon in the films of the 1990s, the film categorically states that Gunasekharan's corruption is rooted very much in his identity as a Dalit. It establishes that he was a thief, who used to steal coconuts from the rich, before becoming a politician. While the film saves another corrupt politician named Attuva Avarachan who is an elite Christian, it attributes a different destiny to Gunasekharan. In *Chotta Mumbai*, while the narrative transforms the protagonist Vasco (played by Mohan Lal) from a carefree goon into an endearing character, it kills Nadeshan, a Dalit police officer (played by Mani). While Dalit characters are punished and killed, upper-caste characters of MC, even when they are antagonists, rarely get such treatment. For instance, upper-caste villains such as Mundakkal Shekaran in (*Devasuram*), Kulappully Appan in (*Aaraam Thampuran*), and Manappally Pavithran in (*Narasimham*) are not killed but allowed to live (assuming they can be reformed). Thus, the caste necropolitical space of MC has saved its upper-caste antagonists and even improved their standard of living, at the cost of Dalit bodies like Mani's. Another curious case of necropolitics in MC is the fate of nameless and non-agential caste subaltern bodies who side with the antagonists. They are mere walking dead bodies to be crushed to project the machismo of the upper-caste heroes. Such unaccountable, non-grievable, and un-answerable deaths/killings of caste subaltern bodies normalise the idea that 'power can be acquired and exercised only at the price of another's life' (Mbembe 2019: 35). The credibility and power of its upper-caste characters are established through demonising, mocking, and finally annihilating such subaltern characters in the filmic representations.

Although the post-millennial Malayalam films such as *Papilio Buddha* (2013) by Jayan K. Cherian and *Karie* (2015) by Shanavas Naranipuzha with its stylistic innovations and conscious Dalit politics have tried to engage with larger questions of caste, gender, and other identity issues, there is still a preference for upper-caste discourses in contemporary MC, particularly in the mainstream commercial films. Some of the critically acclaimed films released after 2010, such as *Chappa Kurish* (2011), *Ee Adutha Kaalatthu* (2012), and *Kammattipaadam* (2016), irrespective

of their bold attempts to represent the voice and agency of the marginalised groups such as Dalits, largely failed to engage with the experiences of the subaltern population from their own variegated cultural and social locations. For instance, in Rajeev Ravi's *Kammattipaadam* (2016), although there is an apparent engagement with the lives of Dalits in Kammatipaadam, a slum locality in Kochi, the focus of the film is more on the tragic story of their elimination and the subsequent revenge of an upper-caste character against the real estate tycoons who killed his Dalit friends. The overt glamorisation or glorification of the uncanny aspects of Dalit corporeality and the dyslogistic imaging of Dalit subjects in the film reflect the general misconception about them in society. For instance, characters like Ganga (played by Vinayakan) and Balan (played by Manikandan) with their unattended attires and mismatched teeth, often framed as spectacle, subscribe to the general stereotypes about Dalits as people devoid of education, refinement, and restraint. They are portrayed in the film as anti-socials indulging in immoral practices and crimes at the behest of their upper-caste masters. While most of the Dalit characters including Ganga and Balan are brutally killed in the narrative 'befitting' to their 'anti-social behaviours' (*karmaphala*), the upper-caste character Krishnan, their fellow gangster and partner in crime, is spared and allowed to live. What saves Krishnan from being killed while all his Dalit co-gang friends are either killed or eliminated? Krishan in the film not only enjoys this exemption from being killed but also is authorised to avenge the killing of his Dalit friends. Thus, in a film that predominantly narrates the geopolitics of a Dalit ghetto, an upper-caste character Krishnan is given the agency and the 'right to live' either by killing the dark-skinned Dalit characters or by unacknowledging their agency and their unsung rages and resistances. It is in this context of MC's failure to critically engage with many dimensions of caste in its discursive (on/off) screen spaces, a film like *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* becomes significant in the way it forefronts the pervasiveness of caste and the in-betweenness (of life and death) of Dalit existence in the political economy of Kerala.

Necropolitics of Caste in *Ozhivudivasathe Kali*

Unlike the other films of the post-millennial period in MC, *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* (2015) is a prodigious film that problematises the caste economy of Kerala by foregrounding it as a social reality that formulates disjunctive and hierarchical social relations among people based on their origins. As a consequence of their lower-caste origins, the film demonstrates how Dalits are reduced to the state of the *homines sacri* in everyday social relationships to be killed by the dominant caste(s) as inhuman humans (Agamben 1998: 97). Perhaps it is the first Malayalam film that exposes the necropolitics of caste in the political economy of Kerala and in the topography of MC. As a critique of the death politics of caste, *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* also engages, though indirectly, with the systemic caste economy of MC that regulates the Dalit lives in its on-screen and off-screen spaces. Although caste has been a concern of the political unconscious of a few post-millennium films, what distinguishes *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* from them is its polemical exposition of caste necropolitics that runs beneath the (non)progressive organisations, institutions, and literary/filmic narratives in Kerala. Furthermore, it clearly represents the one-to-one correlation between caste and death; death is endemic to the survival and stabilisation of caste hierarchy. The film depicts the story of five friends, representing a cross section of the caste-ridden Kerala society, who go to an isolated bungalow in the interior of a dense green forest for revelry on an election day. The five characters among the friends are imagined as belonging to the different strata of caste system: Thirumeni [the Brahmin], Dharman [a Kshetriya], Vinayan [a Vysya], and Asokan [a Shudra]. The fifth character is Dasan, a Dalit who is outside the four-fold caste system and located both inside and outside the friendship fold as an outcaste who is destined to

serve his upper-caste friends. While eating food and consuming liquor in the bungalow, they revel in conversations on topics such as corruption in politics, strategies to deal with women, and the question of social equality among others which inadvertently reveals the pettiness and hypocrisy behind their projected progressive self. Their archetypal casteist outlooks also divulge when they force Dasan to perform servile tasks such as fetching a jack fruit by climbing the tree, killing a fowl, and serving drinks among others, which they believe are traditionally meant for Dalits. Their prejudices resurface with vehemence when the five friends decide to play a game that reinforces the values of a caste-graded society. It is worth noticing how Dasan is reluctant to participate in the game and he had to be coerced as he is aware that in the play of *Chaturvarnya*, it is Dalits who are always made victims.

Although the film is apparently about a jovial friendship gathering in a remote bungalow turning into a disaster, it insinuates the casteist mindset of the mainstream Keralites, conveniently hidden in their everyday life. The tendentious jokes and cajolery in the conversation among the friends disclose their caste prejudices and abhorrence towards lower caste(s). As a critique of the elite Kerala culture that has reduced Dalit lives to '*zoe* or bare life', *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* unveils how the unspeakable caste prejudices of the upper caste(s) impose social and civil death on Dalits across institutions and social organisations (Agamben 1998: 4). The choice of the film's setting in a dense green forest with little sunshine and occasional heavy rain is an ideological space for the upper-caste characters to unleash their murderous caste prejudices on the outcaste Dasan. More as a symbolic private place with less light and people, the first thing that Dharman says after seeing the place is: 'superb place! Even God won't know if someone is killed and immersed in this river'. The location and its curious spatiality drive the latent necropolitics of Dharman inscribed beneath his 'progressive' face as an educated and employed man. Although the temporal setting of the film, with its series of establishing handheld shots of the thick political campaign called *Kottikalassam* by the various political parties, is the time of Aruvikara by-election of 2015, its spatial setting is imaginary. The entire part of the film, except the early scenes, takes place in the middle of a forest inside a forest bungalow. The camera never dares to trace the whereabouts of the forest except its attempt to establish that the bungalow is not far away from an ordinary Kerala city with its cine drone shots. The unknown spatial setting of the film seems to have lot to do with the theme of the film: the unleashing of caste feelings lying deep in the psychic unconscious of the upper-caste Malayalees who relish the privilege of being born in dominant castes. Once inside the forest, the characters come to their elements leaving behind all the disguises of modernity. While they indulge in the desires of their 'id', their caste instincts too are manifested which had long been suppressed. The film effectively demonstrates that Kerala continues to be a casteist society as caste impulses are deeply rooted in individuals' psyche in spite of the socio-cultural and political reforms that happened in the state. The title of the film *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* apparently points to a game *The Police and the Thief* that the characters in the film engage with. Although the character roles in the game are decided apparently by casting lots, it is finally shared between them based on their caste(s). Accordingly, Dharman becomes the king, Vinayan becomes the minister of the king, Asokan becomes the police officer, and role of the thief is bestowed upon Dasan. Although it begins as an off-day game, it becomes a caste necropolitical game which culminates in the killing of Dasan. As implied in the semiotics of the word 'game' (which presupposes players and a plaything), the film in a broad way looks at the caste system as a game and the upper caste(s) as the players. Thus, Dasan becomes a plaything for his upper-caste friends in the film.

Dasan as a Dalit is always pointed at for his identity and for his bodily features. When Dasan, spurred by the glorious beauty of the forest, utters strange, ecstatic sounds, the others mock him with casteist remarks: 'he always howls if he sees the forest'. In another instance when Dasan

climbs the tree, Dharman makes a remark that 'he belongs to the department of monkeys', which everyone else in the group agrees with. These reductions of his body as a 'site of affective excess' (Mokkil 2020: 13) and animality are instances of necropolitics that impose a social or civil death on Dasan before physically killing him in the end. The film also shows how the upper caste(s) exercise their casteist sovereignty in disciplining the undesirable Dalit body of Dasan by dictating his course of action. When everyone in the resort finds it difficult to kill a fowl, Vinayan forces him to kill the fowl by making a casteist advance: 'Dasa, son, everyone is fated to do certain things'. In another instance, they force him to climb the tree to collect jackfruit irrespective of his resistance. Though Dasan is as well-educated and as respectable as his friends, they cannot treat him as equal because of his Dalit identity. The film exposes this cowardice and malice of the much praised 'Kerala Modernity' that apparently tackled traditional forms of caste oppression and eliminated absolute deprivation among caste subalterns by showing how the caste divide has been recast in modern times among different social relations (Devika 2010: 803). It is this latent caste consciousness that prompts them to demand services from Dasan like killing the fowl, climbing the tree, and serving them drinks despite Dasan being educated and employed like them. As long as Dasan renders his service without demands, he is subsumed within their company as a liminal being. But he is killed as a *homo sacer* at his slightest protest against their caste domination.

The immediate provocation for the murder of Dasan comes when he recites a poem which evokes 'A Poem to My White Brother', a poem attributed to Léopold Sédar Senghor.[4] Acutely aware of the unequal treatment meted out to him, his mind eventually rages out and Dasan, like Senghor, expresses his protest by reciting the poem.

> When I born . . . I'm black.
> When I grow up . . . I'm black.
> When I in the Sun . . . I'm black.
> When I sick . . . I'm black.

Figure 3.3 A screenshot of the hanging dead body of Dasan from the film *Ozhivudivasathe Kali*.

When I die . . . I'm black.
But you . . .
When you're born . . . You're pink.
When you grow up . . . You're white.
When you're sick . . . You're blue.
When you die . . . You're brown.
And dare you call me coloured?

By reciting the poem, Dasan challenges the normative and hegemonic detrimental traditions of caste and confronts the casteist ill-treatment by his high-caste friends. But when he assumes his identity and ceases to be a mere outcast, his high-caste friends get provoked and start to punish him, which eventually leads to his annihilation. As long as Dasan fits into the stereotype of the subordinate body who obeys the dictates of the upper caste(s), the death politics is at pause and he is permitted to live. But he is killed when he confronts them and exposes their casteist mindset. It is through the killing of Dasan that the upper-caste characters consolidate their power and sovereignty against his raging voice. Such instances of caste necropolitics was visible in the political economy of India especially after the rise of the extreme right-wing Hindutva forces (particularly after 1990s). MC in the 1990s has also echoed this reactionary right-wing upper-caste approach to Dalits and other caste subalterns, particularly against reservations by representing/imagining Dalit characters such as the inspector Chandappan in *Aryan* (1988) and the vehicle inspector in *Varavelppu* (1989) as inefficient and ill-mannered officers who are employed not on the basis of their merit but through caste reservations. The upper-caste characters in *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* show a similar attitude towards Dasan and they cannot accept, let alone appreciate, any intellectual deliberations or sensible serious talk from him. They display their intolerance when Dasan makes deliberations on casteism in Indian democracy. The killing of Dasan and the establishment of casteist sovereignty of the upper-caste characters in the film is reminiscent of the aggressive reassertion of an upper-caste Hindu identity established through the larger-than-life heroes in post-1990s MC. The neo-Brahmin heroes such as Mangalassery Neelakandan in *Devasuram* (1993) and Jagannadhan Thampuran in *Aram Thampuran* (1997) in the post-1990s MC are equipped to face any challenges and they are able to consolidate their sovereign power over others unlike the despairing educated higher-caste protagonists such as Balagopalan in *T. P. Balagopalan M. A.* (1986) and Devanarayanan in *Aryan* (1988).

The episodic final game in *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* is an allegory that divulges how caste necropolitics works in the political economy of Kerala. While they engage in the game *Police and Thief*, the police figure *Asokan* fails to identify the thief according to the logistics of the game; yet he escapes the punishment of his failure by bribing the rest. At last, when Dasan is identified as the thief, he has no choice but to succumb to the sovereign's punishment (here his upper-caste friends). All the players in the game, leaving aside their caste hierarchical differences, agree to hang him. Connivance of the four upper-caste friends in killing Dasan forgetting all their differences underscores the unpleasant and dangerous reality of caste which looms large in Kerala society. The upper-caste-dominated Kerala society, with its manipulative apparatus of caste system informing every aspect of the state's social, political, and cultural life, reduces the Dalits to walking dead bodies who may be brutalised and murdered by them at will. The controversial case registered against Kalabhavan Mani in 2013 for allegedly intimidating forest officials during a vehicle check-up near Athirappilly in Kerala exemplifies this. After the incident, orders were issued to arrest the actor as if he was a wanted criminal. He was finally arrested and underwent legal procedures. Although it seems like a natural outcome for somebody who has committed a crime, the outcome would have been different if he was an upper-caste actor. People from the

film industry or political parties rarely came out in support of Mani, unlike many other cases where the upper-caste actors were involved. While commenting on the casteist dimension of this incident, Sujith Kumar Parayil writes:

> [c]ase shows the way in which both the state and the communities of viewers share a common but dominant cultural perception of Mani, wherein his body becomes a cultural artifact. This instance also demonstrates how caste works in the public domain and how his personality and body are constantly recognised by an imposed social identity.
>
> *(2014: 74)*

The system which ensures the punishment of the caste subalterns like Kalabhavan Mani in on-/off-screen spaces dodges the crime done by the upper-caste actors and the influential. When a Dalit-Christian youth, named Kevin, was brutally chased and killed in the district of Kottayam by the relatives of his upper-caste wife, the police had initially failed to arrest the culprits. In a similar manner, when two Dalit girls were brutally raped and killed in the town of Walayar, all the accused were acquitted due to the improper police investigation. Similarly, in *Ozhivudivasathe Kali*, while the system punishes Dasan, it compromises with the failures of Asokan and protects him. Such on-/off-screen cases of caste necropolitics explain how/why the upper caste(s) in Kerala, who dominate and control virtually all spheres of the state, collude with each other in carrying out their historic murderous game of betrayal and subjugation of Dalits and other caste subalterns

Coda

While *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* can be seen as an experimental film that critically addresses caste necropolitics in its narrative, it would be interesting to explore further the portrayal of Geetha, a Dalit maid character in the film. Although Geetha's role in the film is limited to a servant girl who cooks for men and is occasionally framed to their lascivious gazes, she emerges as a strong woman who reacts to the sexual advances of the upper-caste men. The two Dalit characters in the film, Dasan and Geetha, are portrayed as victims of caste and patriarchy. While Dasan finds a liminal inclusion in the social circle of his upper-caste friends in spite of being a caste subaltern (though only to be excluded later), Geetha, the gendered caste subaltern, on the other hand is totally excluded from that circle. She has no access to the social circle of men, to their fun, jollity, and drinking. She cannot participate in their discussions on burning social and political issues, not even when questions concerning man–woman relationships are discussed. The strength of the film *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* lies in its effective demonstration of the intersectionality of caste and gender that defines a Dalit women's role in a conservative patriarchal society. The film also makes a historical critique of the Malayalee imagination that could not ever position a Dalit female in any other roles except being a servant girl or as a sexual object for the upper-caste men, to which MC is not an exception. But what is remarkable and unique about *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* is the way it foregrounds the resistance of a Dalit female character. Although she appears silent in most scenes, she reacts (using swear words) in her final scene with a sickle in her hands when Dharman attempts to violate her modesty. At this sudden reaction that demonstrates the strength of her character and Dalit woman's mettle (which Kerala has seen in historical instances like *Kallumala Samaram*),[5] Dharman, who plays the role of king, is shaken to the core. Thus, Geetha provides an antithesis to the stock image of Dalit female in MC as an object of pity by articulating her voice of protest. While Dasan is killed by his casteist friends in screen, she survives. Her final exit from the screen is a dignified walkout of a Dalit woman from the social structures and institutions such as MC that have been subjugating or eliminating

'her' for centuries. Her final exit is a 'challenge to the spectatorial regimes of fetishised suffering Dalit body' (Mokkil 2020: 13) and a counter dynamic to the ongoing necropolitics of eliminating Dalits and other caste subaltern characters in MC such as P. K. Rosy in *Vigathakumaran* and *Celluloid*, and Neeli in *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* among others. What distinguishes *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* from the rest of MC is the way it unveils the long-standing on-/off-screen regimes of MC, which continued its casteist necropolitical drives behind the facade of its apparent inclusiveness. Such a perspective generates a critical spatiality that not only foreground those who are politically/socially suppressed but also scrutinise those who subjugate.

Notes

1 Hindutva Nationalism refers to the majoritarian militant Hindu nationalism supported by the ruling BJP government.
2 Cow Vigilantes refers to those extremists who militantly try to protect cows and prevent cow slaughter.
3 https://amnesty.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Halt-The-Hate-KeyFindings-Amnesty-International-India-1.pdf. Accessed on May 28, 2020.
4 Matthew G. Stanard attributes the poem 'A Poem to My White Brother' to Léopold Sédar Senghor (141). Although Dasan recites a similar poem in the film, it is not the same version that Matthew G. Stanard attributes to Léopold Sédar Senghor.
5 Kallumala Samaram refers to an agitational movement by Dalit women in 1915.

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4

Magizhchi!

'The Casteless Collective' and the Sensorial Exscription

Dickens Leonard and Manju Edachira

The depiction of caste as the actual culture of India, in cultural expressions such as films, has constituted its seductive *imaginaire* across the world. This was based on an *inscription* of sensorial communities through caste-gaze, for more than a century, where violence and discrimination as *habitual* life-worlds are normalised, generalised, and governed (through cinematic cultures). This chapter proposes and attempts to explore why the spectre of caste inhabits contemporary Indian cinema, and how it is slowly and powerfully exorcised by relentless efforts of contemporary film directors, such as Pa. Ranjith among others, to re-script a 'Casteless Collective'.

Cinema and Caste

Cinemas of India portray caste as a quintessential element of Indian culture whether consciously or unconsciously. From the inscribed caste surnames to the constructed spatialities of caste, films in India follow a dominant caste-gaze to represent Dalits.[1] Moreover, this depiction of caste as normative and everyday practice inscribes the caste-gaze on Dalits, treating them as mere bodies. It is significant to note that the caste violence on Dalits in India does not stop in the virtual world but extends to the actual spatialities of cinema.

For instance, the Chunduru massacre in 1991, where 13 Dalits were killed by dominant caste men, in Andhra Pradesh, India, began over an issue in a cinema theatre. Ravi, a Dalit graduate, purchased a chair class ticket instead of a floor class ticket, challenging the caste culture of the village.[2] While watching the film, he crossed his legs, which apparently touched an 'upper-caste' woman in the front seat.[3] Infuriated by Ravi's action, which challenged the caste privilege, the upper-caste Reddies attempted to beat up Ravi, but he retaliated with the help of his friends (Samata Sanghatana Samiti Report 1991: 2079). After the incident, the upper-caste members attacked Ravi's family and asked them to leave the village. But Dalits in the village supported Ravi's family and insisted that they should not succumb to such intimidation. This solidarity

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among Dalits infuriated the dominant castes, and on August 6, 1991, they attacked the village and killed 13 Dalits. As the Samata Sanghatana report suggests:

> . . . a caste, class and gender segregated reality of life, evident in the politics of the floor and chair class in the Chunduru cinema hall, contradicts the egalitarianism and the social mobility fantasized in the film narrative and image
>
> *(1991: 2082).*

Similarly, P. K. Rosy, the first female actor in Malayalam, was a victim of casteist social and cinematic sphere. Rosy acted in *Vigathakumaran* (The Lost Boy; Dir. J. C. Daniel; 1928), the first Malayalam movie. However, the screening of the film witnessed upper-caste unrest over Rosy, a Dalit woman, playing the role of a Nair (a non-Brahmin dominant caste) woman. The furious crowd disrupted the shows and attacked Rosy and her family. This led to her exile, not only from the geographical space but also from the history of Malayalam cinema (Edachira 2020a). Hence, caste becomes a major factor within and outside cinema, and it cannot be contained within the representational questions. However, the questions of representation and the discourse on Dalit presence in Indian cinema are closely related. The presence of Dalit directors such as Pa. Ranjith[4] and Nagraj Manjule[5] has also opened new possibilities in representational questions. They break the caste-gaze inscribed by mainstream Indian cinema on Dalits, tribes, and lower castes. In order to understand how they deconstruct the caste-gaze and offer an oppositional yet affective gaze, it is necessary to look at the way how gaze is theorised in film studies.

However, Dalit-themed films in the history of Indian cinema in general are far from normal. Even amidst a majority of commercial films which are generally casteist, misogynistic, patriarchal, and feudal, there is an iconic evolution and treatment of caste after the emergence of the maverick film-maker Pa. Ranjith. His films *Attakathi* (Cardboard Knife, 2012), *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), and *Kaala* (2018) were produced in a time when these 'contested narratives' are part of a historical 'new wave' in the 21st century, that is arguably described as a hybrid genre (Velayutham and Devadas 2021: 9–13). The Tamil screen ecology had gone through a drastic transformation that is enabled not only by digital technology but also of platform multiplicity, including the rise of social media. In a sense, one can argue that technology is used in mainstream film-making for changing the structural paradigms, particularly of caste, in the historical transition from celluloid to the digital technologies.

While a new future is enabled by digital technologies, it is however true that, at once, caste conflict and politicisation of caste as well as gender violence and inequalities haunt the Tamil life-world even today. It is in this context, Ranjith's contributions have been thought of not just 'delegitimizing a territorial stigma' but also 'transforming' Tamil cinema as a cultural practice, while at once inspiring a new generation of Dalit film-makers who then bring 'Dalit subjectivities to screen' (Damodaran and Gorringe 2021: 28). While his latter films—the Rajini Kanth starrers—are also read as addressing the tensions in articulating and refashioning a 'global' Dalit from a Tamil 'location', outside Tamil Nadu, that moves from 'recognition to redistribution' on-screen (Manoharan 2021: 62), however, not much have been foregrounded on how sensibilities can be re-scripted, if not inscribed, in the cinematic landscape of India, particularly in Tamil Nadu where popular culture represents, discusses, and critiques caste.

It is in this context, we propose to conceptualise *Magizhchi*—a Tamil term that signifies joy, happiness, glee, and excitement—made popular by the Tamil film director Pa. Ranjith in general and through his films in particular to understand and evaluate the sensorial signification of his experiments with performance and music (*Aadalum-Paadalum*) in the filmic medium. Through *Magizhchi*, an affect which prompts one to move beyond the oppressed past towards

an emancipatory future, Ranjith transforms the way Dalit subjectivities are imagined in Indian cinema. Thus, instead of focusing on Dalit sufferings and humiliation, he strives to present their colourful life-worlds of happiness and festivities in his productions. This is significantly different from the *(in)tensions* of defining Dalit literature and aesthetics, as Ranjith readily rejects the categorisation of Dalit cinema.

This chapter attempts to foreground the music band that Ranjith initiated, 'The Casteless Collective'—inspired from the 20th century anti-caste Tamil intellectual Iyothee Thassar—which features *Gaana* (Tamil music form mainly performed by Dalits in urban slums),[6] hip-hop, and fusions of world music, and by analysing the song performances in his films *Atta Kathi* (Card Board Knife, 2012), *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), and *Kaala* (2018), we suggest an anti-caste re-scripting of sensibilities as a 'becoming-other-than-itself' (Nancy 1990).[7] Thus, we wish to demonstrate that Ranjith's interventions not only expose inscriptions of caste but also creatively stage acts of *exscription* against caste in films.

Caste-Gaze and Objectification

Gaze is one of the significant aspects of film studies as cinema is largely perceived as a visual medium of entertainment. Though sound is equally important in the later films, the significance given to the images and the reception of the same among the spectators has been studied widely, especially in Western cinema (Mulvey 1975; hooks 1992). Interestingly, many of the notable studies on the gaze in cinema have also come from feminist scholars. For instance, Mulvey, in her seminal work 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', argues that the gaze offered by narrative cinema is largely a male gaze which objectifies the female body as object of sexual desire (1975). Firstly, it is done through a large predominant presence of men behind the camera; secondly by the domineering presence of male characters within cinematic representations; and lastly by the receptive presence of the 'spectator'—identified as male—who consumes this gaze, she concludes.

However, bell hooks, the renowned African American feminist scholar, argues for the power of opposing the encompassing gaze which Mulvey proposes (hooks 1992). By studying young female Black spectators, hooks put forward the possibility of an oppositional look. The overwhelming cinematic whiteness in Hollywood films and the negation/stereotyping of the Blacks made them realise the fact that 'race and racism determined the visual construction of gender' (1992: 122), and there is no place for their desires in the Hollywood films. Thus, these Black female spectators rejected the gaze offered by the Hollywood classical cinema through an oppositional gaze. Instead of consuming the cinematic whiteness produced by the Hollywood narrative cinema, the oppositional gaze enables them to create an independent Black cinema which emancipates the already constructed images of the dominant cinema. In a way, hooks demonstrates the inherent power of looking. For instance, hooks gives the example of white slave owners punishing their enslaved Black people for looking. Slaves were denied their right to gaze, especially to look at their masters. This repression paved the way to their resistance, initially by looking back and then talking back. hooks notes that 'one learns to look a certain way in order to resist' (1992: 116).

Three decades after bell hooks' observations, Isabel Wilkerson, an African American journalist, demonstrates the violence of caste-gaze[8] inflicted upon Blacks in the US (2020). In her book *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, she describes an anecdote from her life which prompts one to think about the extent of caste-gaze in our daily lives. As a reporter for *The New York Times*, Wilkerson went to interview a white boutique owner with a prior appointment. However, when she met him in person, he refused to acknowledge her as a reporter from *The New*

York Times though she displayed her credentials. In fact, she was even accused of impersonating herself. The white man could not imagine a Black woman as a reporter from *The New York Times* and dismissed her instantly. This proves how caste-gaze is inscribed on the oppressed and how the system reproduces this in every aspect of life. And when it comes to cinema, both the film-makers and the viewers together produce this caste-gaze on the oppressed.

For instance, critiquing the construction of Dalit masculinity imagined as short and dark, within Malayalam cinema studies, Anilkumar points out the role of the viewer in the process of meaning-making (2012). Contrary to Mulvey's feminist theory of the gaze, where camera identifies with the male voyeur, Anilkumar discusses Kuleshov effect of Soviet cinema, which questions the autonomous role of the camera in producing meaning. The Kuleshov effect is a film editing technique through which viewers could derive meaning from the juxtaposition of two sequential shots than a single shot. It was experimented by the famous Soviet film-maker Lev Kuleshov in the 1910s and 1920s.[9] Kuleshov edited the same close-up shot of the expressionless face of Ivan Mosjoukine, a popular Russian actor, which was alternated with three various other shots: a plate of soup, a child in the coffin, and a woman on a divan. Kuleshov showed these three different scenarios to three different groups of viewers and asked them to identify the emotion of Mosjoukine. The first group, who saw Mosjoukine with the plate of soup, identified his expression as hunger. Whereas the second group, who was shown the face of Mosjoukine, along with the child in the coffin, said that his emotion is grief. The final group, who saw the face and the woman in the divan, stated that his face indicates desire or lust.

By giving this example of film editing, Anilkumar argues that the audience who could arrive at different meanings from the same shot, which was combined with other three different shots, are historical viewers. Through this, he suggests that 'the elements that have played in the construction of the subjectivity of the viewer will also influence his or her meaning-making process' (2012: 74). The Kuleshov effect challenged the totalising gaze of the camera by combining two sequential shots and emphasised the psychological effect that was created among the viewers, outside the autonomous influence of the camera. Anilkumar elaborates on the historical knowledge which the audience possess in interpreting each scene, which would have been different with another set of spectators who are unfamiliar with the cultural and social contexts of Russia.

It is this historical viewer who interprets Malayalam cinema according to their knowledge about the Kerala public sphere and its caste consciousness, which Anilkumar argues with the particular example of Srinivasan's characters. Srinivasan is a Malayalam actor and screen writer whose characters are often identified as subaltern and Dalit at times even when his characters are not depicting Dalit self, primarily because of his dark complexion and short stature. Anilkumar deconstructs these casteist notions based on skin colour and body stature by analysing the historical viewer who brings his/her own knowledge in interpreting the film text. Thus, the underestimated role of the viewer is questioned here, not only from a camera perspective but also from the position of the political unconscious.

Though there are academic discourses which deconstruct the caste-gaze imposed on Dalits, such an attempt was unimaginable in the language of cinema until recently. Thus, anti-caste film-makers such as Nagraj Manjule and Pa. Ranjith deconstruct the caste images through their films. Ranjith simultaneously rejects the stereotypical images of Dalits produced by the dominant Tamil cinema and offers new oppositional and affective images of Dalit lives (Edachira 2020b). However, just images do not make up the cinematic experience of a culture. Indeed, it is performative sound-scape that induces a transformative and creative reconstruction of a community in a neglected cultural space such as cinema in India.

Caste of Carnatic Music and a Cast-Off *Gaana*

In 2018, the *Economic and Political Weekly*—one of the significant humanities and social sciences journals from India—published a series of conversations on a significant debate in its pages, particularly foregrounding the relationship between art and society through the case of carnatic music. It discussed the viewpoints of four interesting interlocutors on 'caste and music' (Ganesh 2018a, 2018b; Krishna 2018; Subramanian 2018; and Vajpeyi 2018). The debate started off with T. M. Krishna, the popular carnatic musician, writer, and activist, who raised the issue of 'social composition of those involved in specific art forms', such as the carnatic music and its influences on aesthetics and politics around giving that art form a classical status. He stated, in the name of an articulate critique of the field, that it is being practiced 'for and by' only Brahmins in *A Southern Music* (2014), in his book-length work that challenges the existing notions of carnatic Music in Southern India.

Ganesh, while engaging with Krishna's critique, not only concurs on the Brahmin dominance of the metropolitan Chennai-based *Katcheri* formats but also underlines it as a collusion of hegemonic colonial public sphere that stood for a nationalist reform in the cultural domain. She precariously reads the phenomenon as collaboratively reproductive and concludes that 'a caste-based society's art forms' would be apparently 'caste-based'. This syntagmatically, if not crudely, justifies the 'mimesis' argument, where art only merely represents, if not mimics, reality (2018a: 91–93). And therefore, caste-based art-practice is seemingly justified, by Ganesh, because it just represents the caste-based society. In a crisp response, Krishna argued and goes on to contend that 'influential manifestations' of carnatic music today is the concert format. Clearly, there is 'very little diversity' in any aspect of carnatic music, both 'musically and sociologically', he declares. He concludes that it is necessary to interrogate how this influential manifestation has adapted itself overtime to stand for a Brahminical paternalistic and devotional ethos, which 'serves a particular caste' for a '*narrow* idea of the Hindu' (2018: 121). However, Ganesh maintained that the 'classical' will continue to command a dedicated space, and this manifestation could be at once 'devotional and universal' in her curt response, which silently outsources the problem to the 'other' (2018b: 124).

However, historians Subramaniam and Vajpeyi significantly build on Ganesh's important engagement on the social role of music and its practitioners. Subramaniam, on the one hand, states that Krishna's interventions challenge the 'social compact' between performers and their publics, where the musician may accord a 'greater agency' in 'constituting the listening public'. However, she maintains that the domain itself has remained 'isolated' from contemporary social issues such as democratic participation, thus maintaining 'spatial exclusion'. Thus, the practitioners may keep stating that 'caste politics must not interfere with music', where they just be a '*self*-fulfilling community of listeners'. Staging 'new aural experiments', for her, would only ultimately create 'creative conversations' across genres, if not spaces (2018: 125–126).

Vajpeyi, on the other hand, foregrounds 'endosmosis', a very interesting concept that the young Dr B. R. Ambedkar uses to understand and propose what can be 'an ideal society' in his Graduate student paper at Columbia University titled 'Castes in India' (1916), not only to study music but also to intervene in this debate. She calls for 'a parity of arts, of knowledge systems, (and) of resources', in a broad stroke, so as to make up for a truly 'egalitarian *vision*' of Indian society. Thus, she celebrates a *vizha*, a festival, at the Olcott-Urur Kuppam *Kalai Vizha* (Olcott-Urur Kuppam Art Festival). She reads into the cultural programme, which was largely organised by T. M. Krishna at a fisherman's colony in North Madras, that dynamically attempts to open the spatial exclusions of carnatic concerts by integrating differentiated music forms. This turns the aesthetic regime of caste, a social order, into a *vizha* that integrates disregarding caste. Vajpeyi goes on to

foreground this as drawing a line 'by connecting everything that *moves* us to a social movement for the annihilation of caste', that Ambedkarite vision of a future society (2018: 125–127).

It is interesting to highlight, however, that without changing the spatial dynamics, or focusing on what is the 'outside' of these concerts, these interlocutors, on the one hand, gave an interesting reading of the experience of music and caste in India. On the other hand, their discussion can be touted as a self-fulfilling communication between themselves, i.e., 'by and for' them. As it neither recognises nor engages with the outside/r of these custodial concerts, their words do not seem to transform, if not 'reconstitute'—which is an Ambedkarite force—all 'other' spaces as concert-worthy and valuable. Besides, as it does not treat any *kind* of music as *moving* anyone equally, they narrowly limit their readings of these spaces as belonging to a singular yet differential order only; thus, the music of/by/for castes, extending their discourse, would be singular and different, though brought on to a stage altogether like a museumised spectacle one after other. They can only go back singular and different—diffidently against each other—as these 'concert' discussions.

Collective Fusion as Casteless Music

It is in this context that Pa. Ranjith changed the way Tamil cinema operated in India (Damodaran and Gorringe 2021; Manoharan 2021), so much so not only to change the screen space of Tamil films remarkably after his entry but also to identify the interventions he has made with sensorial engagement, particularly of art. On December 27, 2017, Ranjith announced the formation of a 'fusion music band' called 'The Casteless Collective' (Rao 2017)—inspired from the anti-caste Tamil intellectual Iyothee Thaasar Pandithar, who in the early 20th century had called the 'outcastes' to identify themselves as *Sathibethamatra Dravidar/Tamizhar/Bouddhar* (Casteless Dravidians/Tamils/Buddhists). The phrase, a self-identificatory signifier, was in response to the call of colonial census enumerations on religion and caste that the British government started in 1872 in Madras presidency (Leonard 2020). It is worthwhile to state that amidst the discussions on 'caste and music', and therefore the caste of music, during the same time in *EPW* pages, Ranjith remembers to call a pragmatic initiative of a 'collective fusion' in music outside the carnatic corridors as 'caste-*less*', invoking Iyothee Thassar.[10]

Interestingly insisting on 'independent music' and political fusion so as to create 'cultural effects', Ranjith ideates this attempt as a 'fusion' of rap and rock (western genres of protest music) along with native *Gaana*. This had to particularly insinuate from musicians who hail from underprivileged backgrounds, largely Dalits, for him. This would then create a 'cultural effect' that has 'human feelings', which would generate a sensorial scripting of casteless-ness (Rao 2017). This interesting phrase, 'the cultural effect of human feelings', presumes the paradigm of affect amongst the community of spectators.

Apparently, when called to interview and write about the band members in *The Hindu* on 'The Casteless Collective'—the 12 to 15 members who were selected by Ranjith's *Neelam* cultural centre—T. M. Krishna, who had earlier started the debate on 'music and caste', describes their music as 'no-holds-barred' (2019). This interview for many imminent reasons is an interesting engagement by someone who had created an intervention in the field of carnatic music and caste. Krishna interviews the members by asking a series of questions to each one of them. Starting from the journey of the band to the social-economic background of the artists, the role of discrimination in their lives, the life-story, the role of music in their life, and of course the caste question. The musician-writer, apart from conducting this interview, also conducts his own self as a recorder of these 'no-holds-barred' performers. The questions themselves demonstrate a 'no-holds-barred' caste unconscious.

For a particular question on how the band members would 'reimagine' the term 'casteless' by their collective experiment with fusion music, especially, when their music is perceived to be located as anything but 'lower' than carnatic music, the band members *deviate discretely*, if not defiantly, and start talking about the distinct aspects of *Gaana* songs as a cumulative genre for everyone. *Gaana* (song in Hindi) is touted as a genre of liberation and freedom, where songs are sung in Tamil by the oppressed community. The instruments connected with it however, the band members complain, are 'naturally scorned and treated badly' by the mainstream society. Though the *Gaana* musicians sing about the 'hardships of life', never is this form of sensible singing given profound respect. Thus, practitioners often state that *Gaana* is always sung 'with the body'. It is to state that music is never isolated from the mobilisation of the body; it is indeed not a 'distantiation' but a 'fusion' of bodies and minds as performance. Therefore, the band members often revert back that 'it is music only when your body sings' (Krishna 2019), always, collectively.

Scripting Madras *Gaana* on Death and Community

How do we take this statement, if not a rebuttal: 'it is music, only when the body sings', in response to a question on the caste location of *Gaana*? In one of the rare occasions in two different films in his career, Ranjith captures two kinds of communal sensibility, a gathering where the community participates in bodily singing (or music), through *Gaana*. The first case, in the film *Atta Kathi* (Cardboard Knife, 2012), a coming-of-age sleeper hit from a North Madras locale, *Gaana* songs inscribe themselves within the narratorial space: be it through bus routes, community celebrations, or post-dinner communes. The coming-of-age romance narrates the story of a young college-going Dinakaran (Dinesh), hailing from the outskirts of north Chennai, and his (mis)demeanours with women over the narrative. Not only are the spatial significations picturised by distinct visual imaginary but also the sound-scape that fills these semi-urban locales on-screen are at the outskirts of the Chennai metropolis—hitherto unheard sounds particularly of *Gaana* fill the air that the spectacle space offers. For instance, the song *Adi en gaana mayil kuyile* (Oh my Peacock and Cuckoo of *Gaana*) though performed during a public wailing of a death, an *oppari*, the song and dance not only commemorate the passing-away of life but also remind one of everybody's death. This song in *Gaana* form communicates a philosophy of life, its beauty and death; however, it also reminds one, the return of any life-less body back to earth, where it would ultimately decay and stink.

The song works as a performance—where the singer sings it amidst a wave of drum beats by *parai/dappu* players—addressing a beloved, while the protagonist tries to impress the crowd with his dancing and acrobatic prowess. The song cannot be imagined without the performance of the body—including the performance of the *parai/dappu* players. Ranjith had mentioned that it is these 'cultures of performance' amongst the oppressed of North Madras, specifically the Dalits, that were hitherto marginalised in films. Thus, cultural performativity as sensorial scripting within the cinematic screen had to outdo earlier inscriptions of marginalisation, if not rejection.

Thus, in a post-dinner family gathering, Dinakaran had to sing *Nadu kadalula kappala irangi thalla mudiyuma?* (Can one push a ship in the middle of an ocean?), a love ballad in the *Ganna* form accompanied by minimal bodily music, which evokes failed attempts of love, but also on mindless spending, family planning, on death, on desires and acts, and also on the gap between seeing and bodily experience. Sung at night, in darkness, to a community neighbourhood about an unrequited love, the protagonist Dinakaran evokes a sensorial exscription that rejects and continuously departs from the scores of inscriptions that have marked the narrative space of North Madras as dangerous and deviant. Through a performance of *Magizhchi*, this Dalit space sensorially yields meaning that is not enclosed.

In *Madras*, for instance, the introduction song reclaims *Vada Chennai* (north Chennai) as an 'address' of the people who stay there amidst the sounds of band and tape music, dancing along with *Gaana* songs. Though oppressed and discriminated against in their cuckold residences, they lay claim to the iconic landmarks, such as the Ripon building and the High Court, of the city-scape as possessing their blood and sweat. The song likens the residents of North Madras to a community that is as evocative as *Satti* and *Molam*, the native percussion instruments, which defy any confinement. Emboldened by music and performance, this anti-caste sound-scape, unlike the concert enclosure, generates a joyous up-beat environment. This introductory song of *Magizhchi* (joy and happiness) is as much a claim on the city, as it is a scripting of a sensorium by the most oppressed of the city.

The *oppari*, death wail, becomes part and parcel of this exscription which is an anti-caste re-scripting of sensibilities, as a 'becoming-other-than-itself'. Intriguingly, death perhaps is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself and reciprocally as its other. It is death which reveals the community as a finite reality to its members. The motif of revelation through death, of being-together or being-with, and of the crystallisation of the community around the death of its members, around the loss or the impossibility of immanence, lead to a space of 'thinking', or rather a scripting, which is incommensurable with mere sociality or inter-subjectivity. This mode of scripting community is calibrated on the idea of death, as it is revealed in the death of others, hence, it is revealed to others as oneself. Community, in that sense, is what takes place through others, and for others, revealed by death. Perhaps it was this sense that the band members reciprocated on the meaning of *Gaana* back to Krishna on his question about caste and *Gaana*.

Irandhidava nee pirandhai? (Were you born only to die?), in *Madras*, inscribes this sharing of the community through death, and the threat to presence of life amongst others, as *oppari*. Through death, and an *oppari* on the life of this death, the community consciously undergoes the experience of its own sharing. Set in north Chennai premises, this song captures a violent death, and the violence of death as murder, in the life of youth in the city. Sitting cross-legged, just wearing a *kaili* or *lungi* (a piece of cotton cloth wrapped around the waist) with a harmonium and a *dholak* for accompaniment, the performance and lyrics of singer *Gaana* Bala ultimately signifies the meaning of life and death that script the community, by participating and exposing oneself to the death of someone else. Here, the singular being undergoes the experience of the community as communication in this lyric.

Scripting becomes a political act, where writing to and communicating the anguish of the community, in solitude, invokes a community that no society contains or precedes, even though, one may punctuate, every society is implied in it. Community, not merely as a collective subject, happens only by scripting and by sharing the communication of death itself. Therefore, by exposing the limits, writing makes every singular being share their limits and share each other's on their limits—that is, in death. Thus, in *oppari*, community happens as communication at their limits. It is with this synergic energy that the films *Kabali* and *Kaala* used music to couple along with the star image of Rajini Kanth, where the word *Magizhchi* was pronounced for the first time on-screen space, in the voice of Kabali as an aged Tamil don in Malaysia.

Kabali's tag line *Magizhchi* is strikingly different from the superstar's history of taglines from earlier movies.[11] Ranjith (2019) notes that he does not want to make films of Dalit suffering and humiliation, instead he wants to present the colourful life-world of happiness and festivities in his productions. This is significantly different from the *(in)tensions* of defining Dalit literature and aesthetics, as Ranjith readily rejects the categorisation of 'Dalit Cinema' (Yengde 2018). This anti-caste aesthetics, which rejects any essentialism, by questioning the preconceived notions of Dalit identity, towards an emancipatory future, is the philosophy which Ranjith offers through *Magizhchi*, in extension through his films.

Magizhchi as an Affective Exscription Against Caste Inscription

Interestingly, it was 'The Casteless Collective' music band that released their maiden album titled *Magizhchi* (2019) comprising eight songs with a bonus instrumental track. Produced by 19 members, the album was released on the New Year's Eve. The title track, performed by almost all the artists, clarifies with a statement on the untranslatability of the Tamil word *Magizhchi*—which can indeed variously express, but cannot exactly capture, the truest joy and happiness embodied in its meaning. The song as rap performs a sensorial exscription—a becoming other that oneself—through a truest yet un-captured performance of joy and happiness.

For instance, filled with colourful conglomeration of smoke on the screen, the performers clad in Ambedkarite suits—a statement on caste and dress—rap and dance about *Magizhchi* affirming it as an address and identification of the oppressed communities. Craftily directed by Pa. Ranjith himself, the song is sung by three members of the band, one after the other by Stony Psyko (Tony Sebastian), Arivu (Arivarasu Kalainesan), and Dope Daddy (Rajesh Radhakrishnan). They go on to state what can be the referential meanings of the term *Magizhchi*: a union beyond differences, where they are slaves to none, while celebrating the moment as casteless Tamils. Even as the frame is sprayed with multiple colours with a bluish tinge, they claim fearlessness of death, realising their worth as human, of neither valour nor fear but forgiveness and love that define them all human, which is a necessary forgetting of the past so as to constantly move with content. This becomes an address for *Magizhchi*, where music is taken as recourse to limitless change and movement—that which does not establish or locate caste in others—even as they liken this community to the blue flag, which is a tinge of the limitless sky.[12]

Caste impositions on human senses, especially in the case of Dalits, which make them untouchables, unseeables, and unhearables proves how caste works as a system of sensorial inscription by the Brahminical caste regime. This sensorial regime is intrinsically linked with aesthetics, and it affects the sensory experience primarily. Thus, anti-caste aesthetics works as an antidote to the sensorial regime of caste. In other words, to break these sensorial caste inscriptions, one needs to exscribe the same through anti-caste aesthetics. This is exactly what Ranjith does in his films as well in his artistic endeavours; it is not only a political resistance but also an affective aesthetics which can affect the Other. And it is through *Magizhchi* that Ranjith exscribes the caste inscriptions of Tamil cinema.

Magizhchi thus signifies joy, happiness, glee, and excitement. Though the term suggests happiness, it is different from the happiness projects (especially the recent surge of such works in the West) in its imagination and articulation. For instance, Sara Ahmed discusses how happiness is employed to justify oppression by citing the 'feminist critiques of the figure of "the happy housewife," Black critiques of the myth of "the happy slave," and queer critiques of the sentimentalisation of heterosexuality as "domestic bliss"' (2010: 2). Ahmed suggests happiness projects as an oppressive capitalist venture. In this formulation, happiness as an affect is used to lure people towards a perfect world without sorrows. Contrary to this conceptualisation, *Magizhchi* is an affect which is immanent and generative. And most importantly, it prompts one to move beyond the oppressed past towards an emancipatory future.

Taking affect studies to investigate anti-caste aesthetics can be very complicated as caste itself could be seen as an affect, which discriminates and distances human lives, hence, exclusive in nature. Then, can we think of an affect against caste? Though it is difficult to imagine such a formulation, as caste-affect is so dominant and entrenched in our societies and in our minds, however, Ranjith uses *Magizhchi* to counter caste-affect and caste-gaze. It is at once oppositional and affective. Instead of following the usual theoretical conceptions of affect in the Massumian formulation,[13] where affect is the pre-cognitive sensory experience, we like to approach affect

in a generic sense as Cvetkovich points out. She prefers the word 'feeling' as it at once suggests embodied sensations and cognitive experience where the conception of mind and body are integrated without any distinctions (2012: 4). However, we prefer the word 'affect' in a broader sense, which encompasses feelings, emotions, and sensibilities; especially, the capacity to touch (affect) and be touched in a caste culture that enforces untouchability. This is significant in this chapter as it attempts to explore the oppositional and affective film-making by Dalit film-makers in India.

When Dalits are represented and even perceived as mere bodies, affect as only a pre-cognitive sensory experience cannot express the depth of anti-caste aesthetics offered by Dalit film-makers. Hence, the term affect here suggests feeling and the capacity to affect others, especially in the context of visual and sound culture. Thus, affect is neither apolitical nor independent of the other socio-cultural factors. It is also not exclusive of the rational epistemological questions. It is considered that 'the premise of Dalit studies resides in the affirmation of the thought of the Dalit' (Kawade 2019: 20). Dalit studies focus mostly on caste oppression and counter movements through history, politics, and literature but mostly outside the domain of the popular,[14] whereas Cultural Studies as a discipline in India largely remains a critical study of dominant narratives. However, we suggest the need to combine both methods to study the possibilities of anti-caste aesthetics in the emancipatory movements. This is significant to recognise the potential of expressive cultures beyond the disciplinary boundaries. We follow the method of African American intellectuals who engage in the field of Cultural Studies in the US by foregrounding Black expressive culture (hooks 2015; Taylor 2016).

Most of the studies on affect concentrate on negative feelings in order to investigate the socio-political conditions that led to the generation of the same or to examine the negative feelings as a possible resource for political actions (Moten 2003; Cvetkovich 2012). The same framework can be seen in Dalit studies where the focus is either on the repressive socio-political conditions that pushes Dalits towards pain and humiliation or on the sufferings that inspires them to resist the dominant caste power. While it is significant to study the negative emotions as a 'ground for transformation' (Cvetkovich 2012: 3), it is also important to study the positivities created by such resistance movements. In other words, the resilient survival is not only about overcoming the negative emotions but also about embracing the positive moments in life. Hence, it is necessary to foreground the positive affects generated in the resistance movements that transcend the negativities imposed on oppressed lives.

For instance, Ambedkar, in one of his most celebrated speeches, reflects that the fight for emancipation is a spiritual and joyful struggle. He declares,

> The battle to me is a matter of full joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or sordid in it. For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality.
>
> *(Ambedkar 1942: 275–276)*

Similarly, Cornel West, a prominent African American public intellectual, expressed his thoughts on the joy in struggle, in a Commencement address given to the class of 2019, Harvard Divinity School, during the multi-religious service:

> Last but not least, in celebrating you, I want you to never, ever forget that you have the capacity to preserve your revolutionary joy. . .. There'll be joy in that kind of struggle, joy in your intellectual courage exercise, joy in your moral and spiritual witness enacted even as you fall on your face.
>
> *(2019)*

Both Ambedkar and West succinctly present the emancipatory joy which cannot be compared to the capitalist rhetoric. Ranjith's *Magizhchi* captures this at its best, where anti-caste aesthetics is an invocation of a joyful struggle of love, life, freedom, equality, humility, and justice, even in the face of death.

It can be assumed that Kaala, the title character of the film *Kaala* (2018), dies in the climax, but after igniting a revolution against the oppressors. The song *Katravai, Patravai* (educate and agitate) exemplifies the philosophy of *Magizhchi*, in extension anti-caste aesthetics. From the carefully penned lyrics to the beautifully composed music, from the aesthetically choreographed scenes to the ideologically charged colours, from the powerfully charged vocals to the ultimate dialogue on the land rights, *Katravai Patravai* illustrates the joyful struggle of anti-caste aesthetics. It is unstoppable even in the face of death. In a caste-infected country, *Magizhchi* is the vaccine to unite beyond differences. As The Casteless Collective *Magizhchi* song presents, music will be the change, *Magizhchi* is love, and it is to become human. To borrow from Alain Badiou, a French philosopher, 'love is a construction, a life that is being made, no longer from the perspective of One but from the perspective of Two' (2012: 29). Thus, love presents the possibility of a co-possibility irrespective of differences. And *Magizhchi* offers this possibility of sensorial exscription within the impossible regime of caste.

Thus, to conclude, there is a distinct difference about *Magizhchi* in these emancipatory struggles amidst the all and sundry capitalist happiness projects. While one enables oppressed communities to surpass the sorrows in the hope of a liberated society, the other appropriates the oppressed conditions and decapitates the revolutionary fights. It is also problematic to celebrate only the pain and humiliations of the oppressed communities but not their success and happiness. This is the formula followed by Indian film-makers in the representation of Dalits and lower castes. This historicised caste-gaze, that darkens and silences the colourful and sensorial lives, is the caste of cinema as it can only visualise Dalits as wretched beings and not as humans with relative dignity and aspiration. The Casteless Collectives shall deconstruct such caste-gaze so as to reconstruct them through an affective touch.

Notes

1 Dalits in India are one of the most oppressed communities in the world, who were (and are) denied the basic human rights. They are also the ex-untouchable communities in the country. The caste system mandates Dalits to be in the bottom of the hierarchy.

2 The caste system in Chunduru insists that Dalits should purchase only the floor class ticket not the chair class ticket. Such impositions are part and parcel of caste system in India. This suggests that despite having education and better economic conditions, Dalits are not permitted to transgress the caste regime. Dalits are tortured, and even killed for riding a horse, for wearing a cooling glass and anything that challenges the caste culture.

3 Though there are different narratives on the incident, our analysis is primarily based on the Samata Sanghatana 1991 report.

4 Pa. Ranjith is a director and producer of films, largely in Tamil language. He debuted with the film *Attakkathi* in 2012. However, the success of his second film *Madras* (2014) sealed his place in Tamil cinema. Hailing from Dalit background, Ranjith is vociferous about caste discrimination and violence within and outside cinema. Ranjith owns a production house named Neelam Productions which makes anti-caste films. He also started a music band called 'The Casteless Collective' which features *Gaana* (a Tamil folk variety of music mainly performed by Dalits), hip hop, and other forms of world music. Moreover, Ranjith established a publishing house called Neelam Publications.

5 Nagaraj Manjule is a film-maker, producer, screenwriter, and actor from Maharashtra, who belongs to Dalit community. He is known for his films *Fandry* (Pig, 2013) and *Sairat* (The Wild, 2016), both portrayed the caste-entrenched rural Maharashtra. Manjule is very articulate about the absence of Dalits in Indian cinema, especially in Hindi film industry.

6 *Gaana* is a particular brand of subalternised musical tradition, which is an artistic 'subculture' practiced at the fringes of Chennai's slums that mainly represent 'an evocative and reflexive rendering' of the city's poorest and marginalised, who tell stories about their own lives while asserting their marginalised identities (Damodaran 2016). Largely linked with the death ritual expressionist traditions, like that of the Grime music that Gilroy conceptualises as a musical genre, it lays claim to 'lived experience' of a specific and particular space (Gilroy quoted in Damodaran 2016). *Gaana* too, similarly, has a specified relationship to songs sung during deaths in Chennai slums but also particularly involves use of 'casteized' and 'discriminated' percussion instruments such as the *Parai*, *Molam*, and *Satti*, which are different kinds of native drums made and used by those abused as outcastes for generating performative music.

7 French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy introduces the term 'exscription' to refer 'becoming-other-than-itself,' whereby writing and reading exposes oneself to the other—to 'exscription.' He states that 'writing, and reading, is to be exposed, to expose oneself . . . to "exscription." The exscribed is . . . that opening into itself, of writing to itself, to its own inscription as the infinite discharge of meaning' (Nancy 1990: 64). He differentiates it from inscription thus—'the being of existence can be presented . . . when exscribed . . . where writing at every moment discharges itself, unburdens itself' (64). Moreover, it 'distances signification and which itself would be communication . . . they communicate as complete what was only written in pieces and by chance' (65). It is an exscription of finitude, Nancy argues. This could be applied to any 'script' that is against caste and Brahminism, especially, with critical deconstruction and creative reconstructions of caste-less communities—as these scripts would then expose, discharge, and unburden itself to the other of caste.

8 Wilkerson suggests caste as a rigid and arbitrary system of discrimination that precedes race. She compares race with language and caste as the grammar of the same. While race is a visible form of caste, caste is more like grammar, fixed and rigid. Hence, even though she talks about racial gaze, which she had to encounter, in effect, she argues, it is a form of caste-gaze that is embedded.

9 Lev Kuleshov is a Soviet film-maker who is known for the development of Soviet montage, a style of film-making, which focuses on the psychological underpinnings of the audience. He uses editing technique to emotionally influence the audience, which was later known as the Kuleshov effect.

10 Iyothee Thassar (1845–1914) organised his community in the name of Sathi Betha Matra Dravida Mahajana Sabha (Casteless Dravida Mahajana Sabha) and gave content to the idea of casteless-ness, Buddhism, and Tamil community prior to any contemporary debates on castelessness and merit. His was a concrete agenda that relied not only on self-identification as an emancipatory process but also on the idea of anti-caste community as a cosmic imaginary in the early twentieth century Tamil society. It was a Buddhist universal, whose material was local, limited, finite, ordinary, and the everyday; yet the untouched.

11 Rajnikanth is one of the most popular super stars of Indian cinema. His films, and especially his characters, are known for their mass dialogues. Most of his blockbuster films have punch taglines such as *Nan oru thadavu sonna nooru thadavu sonna mathiri* (If I tell once, it's equal to hundred times) from *Baasha* (1995), *Aandavan solran, Arunachalam seiran* (God tells, Arunachalam does) from *Arunachalam* (1997), and *En vazhi, thani vazhi* (My route is a single one) from *Padayappa* (1999). Unlike these dialogues, which enhance the power of his characters, *Magizhchi* is an affect which transforms and inspires one to become human.

12 The colour blue is symbolically identified with the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement in the Indian subcontinent. Blue was also the colour of the flags of the Scheduled Castes Federation of India and the Republican Party, later floated by Dr. Ambedkar in 1942 and 1956, respectively. Thus, the blue-coloured flag (in comparison to the red or the saffron-ones) is often referred and highlighted by Bahujan political movements as well as Dalit socio-cultural activists across the country.

13 Brian Massumi in his seminal article 'The Autonomy of Affect' suggests that affect is a pre-cognitive sensory experience which is distinct from emotion. Though it foregrounds the embodied nature of affect, such a formulation creates a binary between the mind and the body. Massumi also extends the philosophical tradition on affect by Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guttari.

14 For instance, see the first Dalit Studies volume by Rawat and Satyanarayana (2016).

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Historiography and Historiophoty in Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*

Debjani Banerjee

The nationalising impulse that runs through Indian commercial cinema, also known as Bollywood, is both the cause and the effect of its vast popularity. It has been amply demonstrated that Bollywood films[1] participate in a nation building project in multiple ways using the upper-caste, patriarchal and largely Hindu family as the ideological epicentre of Hindi cinema (Chakravarty 1998; Prasad 2008). Despite pluralities in themes and contexts, the core Indian identity was affirmed through 'Brahmanical mindsets' (Basu 2010: 6). The standard film script remains patriarchal, heterosexual, and upper caste where the family serves as the microcosm of the nation. Even though the ideal of nationhood has changed continuously from 1947 to the present moment, Anirudh Deshpande has demonstrated the ways in which the bourgeois audience of Hindi films have upheld patriarchy and caste privilege through the years (2007: 95). Diasporic popularity of Bollywood has added one more function to the ideology generating machine. The films forge strong transnational ties between the homeland and the diaspora through homogenisation of identities, and they constitute a formative influence on definition of South Asian diasporic cultures, partially because of their key role in South Asia itself (Desai 2004). The immense audience of Bollywood cinema makes it an important vehicle of ideology, and one that has deep access into the crevices of a multilayered, multilingual Indian society; its ability to influence the construction of identity makes it a fraught territory where film-makers, states, and social organisations wrestle to capture the dominant discourse. As Rajadhyaksha has demonstrated, state-sponsored ideologies are continuously consolidated by the history of governmental regulations, connections with state policies, and ostensible ethnic neutrality as 'the state finds itself dramatically implicated in the question of cinema' (2009: 6). The homogenous national identity that began to emerge in the nascent nation state was largely controlled by state ideology; this in turn was manipulated by English-educated elites and landed upper castes who did not regard conversations about caste hierarchies compatible with their aspirations of nation building. Developing a homogenous national culture is central to the project of nationalism (Nigam 2006: 43), and cinema became one of the vehicles of that culture as well as a means of reconciling tradition and modernity (Deshpande 2007: 103). These formations of an incomplete national identity, therefore, became commonplace in Indian commercial cinema in the Hindi language; simultaneously, it thrived on masking issues of identity, gender, religion, and caste.

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While historians and historian anthropologists have tracked varied and overlapping processes through which caste-based identities get constructed in the political sphere over time, Indian popular cinema has barely engaged in this discussion. The paucity of films engaging with caste distinctions or making upper-caste privileges visible is undoubtedly connected with the nationalising project of Bollywood. It also reflects the ideological compromise and the active discouragement of critical apparatus. Scattered productions like *Achyut Kanya* (1936) and *Sujata* (1959) centralise the question of caste through the exploration of endogamy and its limits. Mostly however, the burden of caste is borne by one character, usually portrayed as a victim, and exemplified in films including *Ankur* (1974), *Aarakshan* (2011), *Bawandar* (2001),[2] *Lagaan* (2001), and *Sadgati* (1981). The anxiety about a national identity that cuts across ways of belonging can only be addressed by covering over the question of caste. While Dalit[3] literature has come of age in the past decades (Limbāle 2004: 2; Jaffrelot 2015) and posed a radical challenge to the homogenous national identities, the voices of Dalits in Bollywood cinema are heavily muted. Regional cinemas continue to offer politicised caste-based scripts such as *Sairat*, *Fandry*, *Manhole*, and *Kaala* to name only a few. *Sairat* even gained impressive commercial success.[4] However, films made under the sign of Bollywood continue to circumvent the issue of caste as a daily reality, in the lives of Indians, in order to uphold a forced nationalistic framework. Within this space, questions of caste are made visible only when connected with Dalits and always within a framework of pity. One of the corollaries of a patriarchal and upper-caste framework within Bollywood films has been the masking of upper-caste stereotypes. This is done by promoting a homogenised identity; through caste practices including vegetarianism, dress codes, religious rituals, and access to temples, the Bollywood spectator sees upper-caste markers as the norm (Gajarawala 2012: 130). Upper-class practices are ostensibly not about caste. Over and above, caste is paraded as class or an issue of rural poverty. This invisibility is supported by what Gajarawala has called 'transcoding', where caste is sublimated into class (2012: 134). The same phenomena can be seen in Bollywood films. Here too, caste is marked as belonging elsewhere, connected with underprivileged bodies and available only for emotional melodrama. As Gajarawala has asserted, the complex genealogy by which upper caste-ness has been perceived as secular caste-lessness is difficult to trace (2012: 137). It is in this context that the chapter draws attention to the difficulty of re-configuring Dalit histories through the reading of films produced within Bollywood. Anubhav Sinha's film *Article 15* (2019), in particular, seeks to investigate caste privileges and the ways in which they are masked. Having performed well at the box office and garnered critical acclaim, the film deserves a critical assessment of the ways in which it enriches the historical debates around Bollywood cultural productions. The film's popularity, since its release in June 2019, shows that Sinha has claimed representative space for his reformulations of issues involving caste histories.[5] His film has co-opted the multiplex audiences for his counter hegemonic reconstruction of Dalit histories.[6] The chapter explores the process by which Sinha uses contemporary events and historical elements to challenge normative narratives of nationhood; the histories, then, I will demonstrate, emerge as discontinuous moments through cracks and fissures and engage with the narratives of justice and constitutionality. This argument is premised on Hayden White's blurring of the boundaries between historical truth as fact and a fictional narrative (1988). The film, *Article 15*, I contend, offers strong examples of 'historio*photy*' as articulated by White (1988: 1193). The chapter demonstrates the complex dimensions of historical thinking in *Article 15* through a nuanced analysis of different Dalit histories that run in parallel trajectories and tie into the issues of Dalit citizenship. Through this exploration, this chapter contributes to the discussion on reconstructing Dalit histories through popular cinema.

New generations of film-makers in India's mainstream cinema industry seek to differentiate their work from their predecessors through stylistic experiments and thematic novelty. While Sinha's contemporaries, including Anurag Kashyap and Dibakar Banerjee, have done this largely through a 'new junk aesthetic' (Chatterjee 2017: 200) that stylises violence within urban spaces, Sinha's work has straddled the urban and the rural seeking to unmask the privileges of the spectators of Bollywood. Challenging dominant discourses in popular cinema is integral to Sinha's practice. His earlier works, *Mulk* (2014) and *Thappad* (2020), are notable for questioning religious and gender privileges that are normalised within standard Bollywood fare. In *Article 15*, which, alongside its success with the multiplex audience, is also being streamed on Netflix since June 2019, he navigates this territory, skilfully, providing entertainment and challenging the interpretative inertia of the spectators. To appreciate Sinha's strategies, it is important to understand the composition of this group of spectators, and Rachel Dwyer's work is useful in this regard. In her attempt to map the ethnography of a Bollywood audience, she follows Bourdieu in identifying cultural consumption or taste, as opposed to cultural production, as the leading factor contributing to class formation (Dwyer 2006: 224). The middle class defines taste, and Dwyer's interpretation underscores the middle-class aesthetic as that which identifies 'cultural capital' (225). Bollywood aesthetic is thus defined as a platform which assembles middle-class definitions of taste and then disseminates them through film screens. Given that Bollywood is dependent on its consumer base for financial support, this ideological equilibrium is difficult to disrupt. To Sinha's credit, he has been able to challenge the audience by making specific choices that shape the aesthetic. Moving away from the melodrama and pity, Sinha, the director and co-writer of the script, shows that caste in popular cinema can be made visible through upper-caste stereotypes and practices as well; he also negotiates this ideological impasse with a linear plot. Based loosely on the Badaun rape case and Unnao cases[7], the plot of *Article 15* centres around the fictional village of Lalgaon where the suspected rape and murder of two young girls and a missing third girl divides the village and the police department along caste lines. Additional Commissioner, Ayan Ranjan, the protagonist, is a newcomer to the village and spearheads the investigation. Clearly, spectatorial empathy is drawn with a Bollywood star in the role of Ayan, and while the linear plot keeps the audience engaged, Sinha textures the screenplay with a scaffolding of caste histories. He develops a critique of judicial and police processes through the details of the investigative process and brings those details to bear on the fragmented histories of Dalit oppression that emerge across the narrative. The cover up in the investigation parallels the cover up of Dalit socio-political realities in contemporary India. These cover-ups, the chapter shows, gesture towards larger histories that are impossible to record—the histories of caste relations in India. Casting aside the formulaic expectations of the Bollywood audience, Sinha explores the chequered relationship between caste and history to reveal four layers that are inextricably linked: the social oppression of Dalits, the story of inequality despite constitutional guarantees, reservation policies as solution or perpetuation of social hierarchies, and the use of Dalits as electoral pawns in contemporary politics. Anustup Basu has urged that the analysis of Bollywood cinema is most effective not when it focuses on storytelling but when it grapples with '*how* [emphasis not mine] in a historical field of problems . . . the stories of nations are told' (2010: 25). These four sections construct a representation of reality which, the chapter argues, challenges a monolithic version of history offered routinely by Bollywood cinema. Sinha's use of 'historiophoty' (White 1988: 1193) makes it possible for a wider audience to participate in the discussion around Dalit histories and Dalit politics. In his discussion of historiophoty, Hayden White has claimed that 'there is no reason why a filmic representation of historical events should not be as analytical or as realistic as any written account (1988: 1196)'.

The subsequent discussion, I argue, establishes Sinha's analysis and reconfiguration of Dalit histories through the four historical discourses.

As the title credits roll, Sinha takes us to the heart of the debates where modernity, tradition, and the idea of touch intersect and constitute the vocabulary of caste. Ayan wants to buy a bottle of water, while travelling to Lalagaon, but is dissuaded by his co-workers; the script makes clear that even state employees refuse to drink water from a Pasi village and practice and advocate caste discrimination with impunity. The director, thus, gestures towards the heart of the debate: untouchability. Untouchability within Hindu religion has been a core practice that has been consistently challenged by scholars and historians on grounds of theological weakness (Ambedkar 2016; Ilaiah 2019). Yet, reductive readings of ancient texts have continued to sustain hierarchies. As early as 1950, the Indian constitution had included several safeguards to challenge this inequity. *Article 15*, the title of the film, refers to this section of the constitution that safeguards this equality. Associated with Article 15 of the constitution is Article 17 which declares that 'untouchability' is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of 'Untouchability' shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.[8] Scholars have shown how the idea of untouchability has been re-imagined and deployed at different historical junctures (Jaaware 2019: 57; Saha 2019: 43). The plot of *Article 15* reminds us of Gaura's unemployability in the school kitchen as her touch is considered polluting, and of manual scavenging being done by the Dalits even after it has been illegal since 1993. Caste supremacy in India is perpetuated by a set of unwritten laws and rules that work daily against Article 15 of the constitution of India and other guarantees of the constitution that were enshrined for a semblance of equality across caste and classes. Ironically, through the discussion of Ayan Ranjan and his companions, Sinha drives home this gap between the legal guarantees and the social political realities in the very first scene of *Article 15*. But throughout the film, Sinha emphasises the possibilities of the constitution; in this, his views resonate with that of several political scientists and constitution experts who have maintained that the Indian constitution has provided for good democratic processes (Bhargava 2010; Hansen 1999). In his efforts at de-stabilising the power structures and sedimented bureaucratic processes, Ayan Ranjan, the upper-caste protagonist, is able to use the words of the constitution; he posts the text of Article 15 on the walls of the police station and around the village to remind people about equal citizenship rights that are accessible to all Indians. This action is accompanied by a voice-over reading out the Article; the audio track switches to play the national anthem. Textuality and sound, together, reinforce the essence of the constitution and the political contract. While the spectator sees the invoking of the Constitution as an empowering moment, Sinha also makes good cinematic use of the police station as a space where the Dalits and the upper-caste officers can converge. The spatial metaphor of the police station, a government institution as well as the central trope of democratic processes is imagined as the centre of law and order. Since the history of untouchability is inextricably linked with physical marginalisation, any reconstruction of Dalit citizenship must begin with the occupation of public spaces. Most importantly, Sinha's film identifies a space for the reconfiguration of rights of the Dalits.

Along with sound and text, the manipulation of the legal and judicial systems is exposed within the film through 'historiophoty'. Three minor Dalit girls are missing, and the police procrastinate on filing a report. The central incident that sets the ball rolling has to do with death: two of the three girls are found dead. The most startling shot in this visibility-making project is a diffused frame. Cinematographer Ewan Mulligan resists the impulse to sensationalise by using a low contrast and a dull grey to portray the scene of the minor girls hanging from the trees. On the other hand, the camera focuses on the hanging bodies and the audience are

made to confront the brutality of the crime. The misty haze in which the scene is shot resonates with the impossibility of the search for justice. Moving away from the black and white or sepia images, Sinha's cinematographer offers a new chromatic space, dull and grey, within which the plot starts to unfold. Mulligan speaks about his choices in an interview: the 'mysterious light' 'forty minutes before sunrise and after sunset' deepened a sense of being 'caught between two worlds' as well as trapped 'at the edge of something'[9]. Conversely, he thought it would be 'ironic and dramatically useful' to have the characters who profit from this system to be bathed in bright sunlight.[10] Sinha's use of death to demonstrate the machinations of power in the village underscores the ways in which Dalits and other castes are kept in check through continuous oppression. Commenting on the Badaun rape case of 2014, Kannabiran has asserted the responsibility of the 'rogue state' that participates in the 'routinely heightened violence' committed on the bodies of women who are Dalits (2014: 13). Examining the workings of 'necropolitics' in early and late colonial moments, Achille Mbembe raises pertinent questions that help to identify the vulnerable population: 'What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?' (2003: 2).[11] The women's bodies in *Article 15* bear witness to this systematic use of force. Gang-raped and killed for demanding their rights, the girls are a reminder to the Dalits of the village that 'castes form a graded system of sovereignties high and low' (Ambedkar 2016: 295–296). Mbembe, writing more recently, points out that sovereignty can be defined as the 'power and capacity to decide who may live and who must die' (2003: 13). Kannabiran's and Mbembe's formulations help us conclude that rape and death are used by the upper castes to indicate disposable bodies in the social configuration of the Indian village and to thus maintain their sovereignty. Two women are dead and other Dalit bodies are compelled to be in a continuous state of disempowerment or near-death; the latter can be interpreted as exclusion from juridical and legal rights and is a routine matter in upper-caste-dominated villages (Kannabiran 2014: 14) like Lalgaon. Because their basic rights are diluted, the families of the rape victims, in *Article 15*, are unable to file a missing report on time; they try but their complaints are not registered. Gaura, whose sister is missing, is persistent in her attempts to seek justice, and she divulges that the police department does not even have a picture of the missing girl. When the complaint is eventually registered, the fathers of the girls are arrested as possible perpetrators; necropolitics is re-framed as honour killing. Nishad, the radical Dalit leader, organises a successful protest and they are released conditionally. The Dalits' unequal or delayed access to law and judiciary is highlighted by these circuitous processes. Significantly, here we see not the functioning of a centralised state power but a space where a 'patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule emerges . . . and asymmetrical suzerainities . . . abound' (Mbembe 2003: 22). It is these capillaries of power that Sinha's historiophoty emphasises. Whether this exact sequence of events happened during the Badaun rape case or trial is not the moot point here; Lalgaon is evidently a fictional place. What is significant is that the narrative continues to build up a certain relationship between history and images for its exploration of caste and politics. In his discussion of historiophoty, Hayden White has asserted that the concreteness with which images are endowed is significant. He writes about the relationship between history and images in Attenborough's film *Gandhi*:

> The veracity of the scene depends on the depiction of *a* person whose historical significance derived from the *kind* of act he performed at a particular time and place which act was a function of an identifiable type of role playing under the kinds of social conditions prevailing at a general, but specifically, historical time and place.
>
> *(1198)*

Lalgaon provides that specific time and place, and the film furthers its task of decoding the upper-caste history of privilege by following Brahmadutt Singh closely as he uses his political power to manipulate, murder, and thus circumvent due process. The camera follows his shifting body language, servile to his superiors and vicious to people of different castes, his veiled threats to those who oppose him, and his invocation of the supposed balance needed in the social system. But he is not alone in his bid to power. The politics of Lalgaon rests on a nexus between Brahmadutt and the businessman Naharia who are ably assisted by an ancillary group of characters: Nihal Singh, the police constable, Dr Awadesh the coroner, who is on medical leave, the local journalist, and Satyendra, Ayan's friend and officer of the local pollution board. Kannabiran, in discussing the Badaun rape case, attests to the fact that 'impunity is guaranteed to the perpetrators of targeted assault through police complicity/calculated inaction' (2014: 14). Additionally, in *Article 15* we see that when the local power structures are weakened, the state sends support in the form of Paniker, the officer of the Central Bureau of Investigation. Central and local politics coalesce to recriminalise the Dalit families. More than Brahmadutt, it is Paniker who epitomises the failure of the Nehruvian vision of a modern and secular India where liberal and democratic processes were supposed to have eroded caste hierarchies. Paniker is a paradigmatic example of a modern Indian individual for whom caste identity is a matter of erasure and criminalisation; denying any caste-based discrimination in the investigation, he re-directs the blame at the Dalits. In this way, the film brings together the histories of prejudice and injustice to provide frameworks within which to understand Dalit lives and choices. The continued violence, rooted in caste hierarchy, has reconstituted itself severally through the decades—understanding of caste is always in flux (Banerjee-Dube 2008: xivi) and therefore, always a threat to those in power. Nationalism in India today is founded, in part, on two core perspectives: the influence of European ideologies on colonial India and the previously established caste hierarchy of Hinduism (Bhatt 2001; Hansen 1999; Nigam 2006). While the caste system is old, in the pre-colonial space regional identities were scattered and often affiliated with the territories, languages, and religions (Hansen 1999; Omvedt 2006; Zavos 2000). However, colonial histories of classification and hierarchies, in the name of scholarship and control, have played a significant role in configuring the hierarchies inherited by the postcolonial state (Banerjee-Dube 2008: xiviii) After independence, the discursive shifts kept the power structures intact; while Gandhi renounced untouchability as a sin, he accepted *varnasrama* as a non-competitive system of dividing occupations. Nehru, the leader of independent India in cooperation with the bourgeois and landowning classes, spearheaded a liberal democratic system without equal representation for Dalits. The driving vision of the nation, thus, privileged one group of people and left the other to the mercies of mercurial local politicians and law enforcement officers. We see the impact of this in *Article 15*; the director points to the dominant caste majority in public service where the concerns of Dalit families are routinely deprioritised. In anticipation of this, Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, had included Constitutional safeguards for the Dalits. However, he had also warned that without cultivating 'a constitutional morality' the rights would be diluted. These constitutional rights, in the form of law and justice, are significant to Dalits as the film makes abundantly clear. Sinha focuses not only on Article 15 but also judicial equality as always deferred for the Dalit. As the investigative process closes in on Brahmadutt and he is brought into the police station in handcuffs, he lashes out at Jatav, the Dalit officer in his team. He does not blame any of the others who have participated in solving the case. Neither does he think that the institutional processes have played their part in catching him. Brahmadutt's deepest beliefs come tumbling out: that 'they', people like Jatav and the Dalit policeman, were fit to stay underfoot and be trampled upon because if they were given a chance, 'they' would turn on the Brahmins. Jatav slaps Brahmadutt in return, a retort that arguably stems from a system of empowerment which the next section explores.

Where the crisis of justice in *Article 15* is designed to draw spectatorial empathy, Sinha's film has undertaken the challenge to confront Bollywood audiences with the debates around reservation. Brahmadutt and his cronies feel threatened by the reservation policies and mobilisation of Dalit politics; in this, they encapsulate the majoritarian and middle-class response to reservations which has been negative based either on an ahistorical understanding of merit or on the more rampant anxiety around hierarchies, where a Brahmin clerk may have to serve under a Dalit officer. The film, however, is particularly successful in staging the conversations around reservation which has had an important role to play in improving the access of Dalits to education and employment. A whole gamut of responses to these complex politics and paradigms is built into the film text that include Gaura, Mayank, Jatav, Dr Malti, and most importantly Nishad. Sinha uses the lens of Nishad to show how the story of nation building was taken over by providing reservations for some castes included in the constitution of India; Nishad points out that even if Dalits come up the ranks and achieve equal pay, the issue of caste pollution is not one that can be resolved. Reservations have also been perceived as inattentive dole outs given in lieu of electoral seats (Nigam 2006: 98). The latter clearly had more potential of transferring power to the disenfranchised but was withheld. The ambivalent responses to these histories have been played out for the first time in Bollywood cinema in *Article 15*. Reservation has been the entire subject of a film as in Prakash Jha's *Aarakshan* (2011), which in Hindi means reservation and yet Gopal Guru has pointed out that while 'many found the repetitive expressions against reservation to be innocent, . . . they're ontologically anchored in the Dalit as a concrete being' and therefore re-introduce bias and marginalisation (Guru 2013: 42). Sinha's cinematic framing of the problem is, certainly, much more nuanced where he involves various perspectives that record the successes and the failures of the system. As Mayank, an upper-caste character, points out, Jatav's father was the sweeper of the school and Mayank's father was the teacher. They now work together at the same pay grade; for Mayank, this demonstrates the success of reservations. Undoubtedly, reservations have brought limited success and achievement; beneficiaries of affirmative action appear to have facilitated horizontal mobilisation (Chandra 2000: 44). This horizontal mobilisation has led to a 'serious achievement' which according to Varshney (226) is the production of a counter elite. The figures of Jatav and Dr Malti do much ideological work in narrating the histories of Dalit achievement and in challenging police complicity. Brahmadutt, predictably, claims that it is his tax paying money that has paid for her 'free' education when Malti refuses to falsify the post-mortem reports on the gang-rape. Dr Malti's and Jatav's ability to stand up against the representatives of upper-caste oppression is definitely indicative of transformative possibilities. Clearly, representation in employment is not just about a bigger piece of the pie. Sinha is trying to demonstrate that it is also about the political voice of the community. However, the paradox of reservations is firstly that merit is always called into question, and secondly, as a system, it works against annihilation of caste (Teltumbde 2018: 25). Additionally, Guru discusses the complex nature of inequality promoted by reservations through the metaphor of the marathon. Reservations, he claims, are like a marathon where people run, without clear demarcated tracks, and Dalits compete against one another.[12] The double bind of the system is that in order to correct historical blunders, Dalits are now competing for a small piece of the pie. Within the narrative of *Article 15*, Jatav also feels this competition as he reveals in his conversation with Mayank. Teltumbde has pointed out the helplessness of Dalit individuals who become part of the public offices and then perpetuate the systemic oppression (2018: 59). Therefore, perceived as a zero at the beginning of the film because he lacks agency, Jatav buys into the story of individualism. He expresses disdain at the ghetto he has left behind and echoes the upper-class thought process that Dalits are responsible for their own troubles. His transformation is also showcased in the film where he moves away from the need to bow to

the upper-caste nexus and shows his commitment to the constitution. Jatav's success, the one implied by the director as possibly the way forward, in the absence of a transformative moment in Indian social structures is a significant one. More importantly, Sinha's staging of this discourse around the contentious issue of reservation shows his continuous commitment to his goal of reconstructing the fragments of caste history through his film.

Despite Sinha's presentation of multilayered histories, criticisms of *Article* 15 have included the valid point that Nishad could have been the protagonist of this film instead of an upper-class hero acting as a saviour. Whereas Nishad's lens is valuable for excavating the histories and presenting them to the mainstream spectator, it is Ayan who is the star and protagonist of the film. The director's unease with his choice is palpable when he claims that 'it would have been too Bollywood to have a Dalit hero'[13] (interview). Clearly, Sinha sees his work as not typical Bollywood as he eschews song and dance, superficial and perfunctory family values, and melodramatic spectacle. Referring to the regular Bollywood audience who see cinema as a reinforcement of these normative values, Sinha defends his objective which is the unmasking of upper-caste privileges. His goals are clear; he wants the audience of the film to question their privilege or their complicity, and Ayan is the best vehicle for this journey. To denounce the film because Nishad is not the prime mover is to misunderstand the need to challenge upper-caste privileges and therefore ignore the subtle dynamics of historical change. Ayan's naivete about his caste is an ignorance afforded by caste privilege: most Dalits need to know their exact position to negotiate everyday material realities. Within the narrative, the protagonist evolves, learns about the purity/pollution binary, names of castes, and also confronts caste oppression with conviction and the aid of the constitution; significantly, he teams up with Dalit characters to bring the investigation to a close. Ayan, also, serves as a foil to Paniker who epitomises the failure of the urban, educated Indian complicit with upper-caste feudals in denying justice to the Dalits. Paniker, in fact, is who Ayan must not become. While Nishad's position in the narrative acknowledges the limits of a vision of radical alterity for Dalits, the discourse between Ayan and Dalits remains crucial for a radical narrative of nationhood. Gopal Guru in his discussion on speaking across communities and the intellectual life of Dalits writes that the idea is not for Dalit communities to walk alone; 'they require interlocutors' who will not talk down while Dalits continue to fight the battle 'to gain hold of their self-description' (Guru 2013: 43). Sinha plays out this idea of a walk in the denouement of his film. The linear trajectory of the plot ends in a journey across the swamp at the edge of the village, an area that is deemed unknown and dangerous even by the local inhabitants. Metaphorically, the swamp is overdetermined as a symbol but makes for good cinema. The camera travels the physical landscape which is filled with plants and muddy water, clearly a metaphor for the marginal and the ambiguous status of the Dalit community as well as for the quagmire of casteism. The geographical topoi clearly replicate a cultural one where the solution to the problem is across the divide. As Ayan and his men get ready to wade through the swamp, the film-maker suggests that histories can be re-written if the upper-caste groups and the Dalits together traverse across unknown terrain. The missing girl is indeed found in the forest across the low-lying land.

While the investigation comes to a just end, the unresolved moments in the film *Article 15* are equally critical. The ideological work done by the figure of Nishad is significant because he also underscores the complexity of Dalit histories. It is through his perceptions that Sinha presents the deeply problematic relationship between Hindutva ideologies and the Dalit groups. Based on the iconic figure of Chandrasekhar Azad,[14] the Dalit leader of the 'Bhima army', Nishad's militant politics is a strident critique of contemporary electoral spectacles where Dalits are co-opted for their electoral numbers. Nishad, too, is critical of Dalit leaders like Shantiprasad, his erstwhile mentor, who, in quest of individual power, align with national parties.

In the diegetic space of the film, the political rally provides the brightest moments where the camera moves away from the dull greys to a vivid saffron. The probing camera focuses on a meeting between the Dalit leader Shantiprasad and the Brahmin priest Mohantjee who is building a multiplex temple. The two are shown partaking of a meal apparently declaring the bond of Brahmins and Dalits. Commensal practices must be claimed for electoral victories, but they may well be optical illusions, Gaura points out. Sinha's critical familiarity with the complex textures of realpolitik is evident in these sections of the film as he maps the possible dangers of this liaison. In his home state, Uttar Pradesh, communal-based identity politics define the electoral fabric (Pai 2014), and Hindutva parties are using the religion card to recruit Dalit Hindus to offset the votes of Muslims, the religious minority. While systematic recruitment of aspirational Dalit leaders (Hansen 2019: 38) has led to considerable electoral gains for the ruling party, the Dalit voter seems to be suspended between economic underdevelopment and coalition with upper-caste Hindus. Rajni Kothari has argued that '[p]olitics in its search for legitimate power identifies and manipulates existing and emerging allegiances' (1970: 4). The collusion between Dalit leaders and upper-caste political organisations, who have been their consistent oppressors, may be understood in that light. Although the alliance of local and national brings hope for inclusion, 'Dalits do not have any place of significance within [the coalition]' asserts Sudha Pai (2019: 42). Figures like Nishad understand this elitist character of the majoritarian party and their hyper nationalism. His disruption of the Brahmin-Dalit political rally is symbolic of this understanding. The rhetoric of Hindu collaboration is superficial and only the product of electoral arithmetic; in most cases, Dalits get used as pawns, their politics is de-radicalised (Teltumbde 2018: 266; Pai 2019; Schoenhaus 2017: 65) and dissenting voices like Nishad's are suppressed. The question of social transformation of the Dalits, thus, must wait again as caste is being made invisible in the political discourse of Hindutva nationalism. Nishad's death, therefore, is not so much an end of possibilities as it is a visualisation of dangers stemming from Hindutva nationalism as forced collusion with the ruling party. In sum, Sinha uses the concreteness of images to undertake a sophisticated analysis of the contemporary political situation in the state of Uttar Pradesh[15] with a clear focus on the dangers of being dominated by a Hindutva party. Bollywood cinema has shared a lasting relationship with Hindu nationalism which has emerged as the dominant ideology in the last two decades (Deshpande 2007: 103). The complicated relationship between state processes and Bollywood is sharply revealed through Sinha's acknowledgement of the Hindutva party chief minister and the state of Uttar Pradesh in the film's credits. This ironical gesture does not, however, protect Sinha from majoritarian outrage. Clearly, Sinha's unmasking of upper-caste privileges is significant enough to have produced enough anxiety; the film, the director, and the protagonist have received various threats from upper-caste organisations.[16]

Article 15 thus brings together a cinematic representation of Dalit histories through social injustice, unequal access to citizenship rights, nuanced discussion on reservation policies, and the arithmetic of electoral politics. As this chapter has shown, the four layers traverse simultaneously challenging upper-caste privilege and offering reformulations of national belonging. While caste is ostensibly an age-old method of stratification of Indian societies, Sinha's film points to the ways in which caste gets modified in new ways and reformulates the relationship between caste and politics. The director carefully weaves the discourses of justice, untouchability, reservations, and electoral politics through 'concrete images' to produce analyses of history through multiple perspectives. Additionally, Sinha's film offers an archive that provides a record of processes and violence against citizens that explore the general state of caste politics at the time. Working as an interruption of hegemonic historiographies, the film offers a framework of meticulous discussions that challenges those audiences, accustomed to technicolour fantasies,

through unsparing details of brutalities committed and suppressed. Much has been written about the ways in which Bollywood films shape national and diasporic identities and cultures. Within that context, the work done by a film like *Article 15* is significant. We must remember that 'the most straightforward readings of any text are also situated arguments about fields of meaning and fields of power . . . any reading is also a guide to possible maps of consciousness' (Haraway 1988: 112). This chapter has analysed Sinha's multivalent readings of Dalit histories to emphasise the ways in which the fields of meaning around Bollywood cinema could be reconstituted.

Notes

1 I use it following Dwyer's discussion of the term (2015) where she describes it as the internationally popular coinage for mainstream Hindi cinema made in Mumbai.
2 This is a strongly politicised film, but its box office collections were dismal. See www.imdb.com/title/tt0280465/. Accessed on June 10, 2020.
3 The word Dalit itself is not an umbrella term. It was popularised by Ambedkar's use of it as a term for people who are broken (dal = broken underfoot). Jaffrelot has discussed the term in *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies*. This chapter does not associate the word caste with low caste as it is often universalised in the popular imaginary. Careful attention has been given here to show that upper-caste invisibility is a strategy.
4 India has had rich traditions of regional cinemas as well as new wave and parallel cinema. See Dwyer (2006: 60) and Sawhney (2015). However, this cinema reaches a small fraction of the people.
5 The box office collections and figures for the film *Article 15* are close to $735,000. In addition, the film has been available on OTT since October 2019. This assures a wide audience. See www.imdb.com/title/tt10324144/. Accessed on June 7, 2020.
6 For the details on parallel cinema, see Dwyer (2006: 60–62).
7 To know more details about the Badaun rape case, see Sonia Faleiro's book *The Good Girls: An Ordinary Killing*. This has also been reported extensively on media: www.indiatimes.com/news/india/badaun-gangrape-a-year-ago-two-girls-were-raped-and-hung-from-a-mango-tree-in-badaun-this-is-a-story-about-how-we-failed-them-2. It is important to mention that there have been no convictions in the case so far.
8 www.india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/npi/files/coi_part_full.pdf. Accessed on April 25, 2020.
9 www.firstpost.com/entertainment/article-15-cinematographer-ewan-mulligan-on-capturing-anubhav-sinhas-gaze-on-caste-discrimination-6896511.html. Accessed on April 15, 2020.
10 Ibid.
11 See the chapter that makes use of Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics' in this volume.
12 Gopal Guru: www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE_PKEmFhRA Dec 7.2017. A lecture organised by SAHMAT. Accessed on May 30, 2020.
13 Interview with Anubhav Sinha: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/article-15-anubhav-sinha-on-brahmin-hero-caste-privilege-and-discrimination/articleshow/70107762.cms. Accessed on April 15, 2020.
14 For a study of Azad as the icon, read Ananya Kabir's article here: https://scroll.in/article/947721/chandrashekhars-azadi-with-swag-the-fabulous-mystique-of-the-bhim-army-chief. Accessed on January 10, 2021.
15 For a detailed understanding of politics in Uttar Pradesh, see Angana Chatterji 'Remaking the Hindu nation: Terror and Impunity in Uttar Pradesh.'
16 More information regarding the threats and the director's response can be found on various news platforms including www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/bollywood/210619/article-15-ayushmann-khurrana-and-anubhav-sinha-receive-threats-from.html. Accessed on June 3, 2020.

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Filmography

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6

Aarakshan and *Article 15*

Is There Any Transformation in the 'Brahminical Gaze'?

Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis

> Flying, sitting behind a Lower caste leader. But who is the upper caste in today's scenario? The one who sits in the business class 1A being attended by ground staff or the ones who are trying to find half inch space for their elbows on the armrest. I was born a Brahmin and this leader was born a Dalit. But today as he sits on 1A and me on 26 B the pyramid is inverted.
>
> ('Agnihotri's "Dalit-Brahmin" Tweet Sparks Twitter Outrage' 2018)

This Twitter comment made by Vivek Agnihotri—a Hindi film-maker—raised a furore among the netizens. Agnihotri was severely criticised as his observation on Dalit–Brahmin relation overshadowed the painful reality of oppression which a large section of Dalit population in India is compelled to endure. On the other hand, Twitter responses supporting Agnihotri's comment revealed the contentious nature of caste—especially in the context of 21st century. The complexity of caste is further exposed when Agnihotri clarified his position claiming that his message was 'nuanced' and that he actually meant: 'in 2018, real dalits are those who don't have money or power. And upper caste are those with money and power. Also, being a Brahmin doesn't mean you are powerful and oppressor' ('Agnihotri's "Dalit-Brahmin" Tweet Sparks Twitter Outrage' 2018). In contemporary neoliberal, globalised India, when a new Dalit middle class is on the rise, an argument such as this is increasingly gaining traction among a group of high-caste, upper-middle-class, educated Indians who feel they are deprived of their rights due to caste-based reservations in the fields of education and employment. Debates regarding the usefulness of affirmative action are escalating not only due to limited job opportunities but also because of the State's failure in redressing grievances of those communities whose poor economic status, irrespective of their caste identity, prevents them from having access to social and material resources. In this context, the rhetoric of sameness places emphasis on merit and opposes discrimination based on the policy of reservations. The demand for meritocracy arises largely from upper-caste, middle-class educated Indians who, in consonance with neoliberal principles, claim that qualities such as merit, hard work, and ability of an individual should be set as criteria for being eligible for educational and occupational opportunities. However, this argument makes the latent Brahminism apparent if one understands how the dominant classes'

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'affirmation of sameness' occludes the development of Dalits by replacing caste with the 'language of liberal individualism, equality of opportunity and free choice' (Pandey 2006: 4740). In this chapter, I seek to examine this subtle machination of Brahminical ideology which operates within Hindi films produced in Bombay/Mumbai film industry. Given the limitation of space, I will restrict my study to the analyses of two mainstream Hindi films: *Aarakshan* (Dir: Prakash Jha, 2011) and *Article 15* (Dir: Anubhav Sinha, 2019) and appraise their in/ability to address the issue of caste.[1] Interestingly, both films strongly denounce the caste bigotry that is still prevalent in contemporary India. However, I argue that despite their progressive outlook, these films deploy a Brahminical gaze while narrating their stories and thus fail to subvert the dominant ideological discourse.

Indian visual media, especially the film industry, is unabashedly dominated by high-caste film-makers, producers, and actors. Hindi film industry located in Bombay/Mumbai is also no exception. According to Rachel Dwyer, Hindi film industry does not have any 'major Dalit or OBC star' though '[M]any film stars are Muslim . . . and some Christian' (2014: 99). Moreover, the history of Hindi cinema endorses the fact that Dalit characters, barring a few, do not generally emerge as part of the main narratives. On the contrary, protagonists of Hindi films, usually, hail from upper castes. This fact is unfailingly visible from such caste marker as surname/family name. Although some films do include non-Hindu characters as protagonists, yet few scant references do not justify the overwhelming Brahminical usurpation of the cinematic space. Furthermore, the inclusion of Brahminical ritual in the form of *puja* (worshipping) or wedding marks the inclination of Hindi films to propagate the Savarna ideology.[2] Through perpetuation of caste-Hindu tropes, these films often suggest that India is a 'normatively Hindu, patriarchal and upper caste' (Deshpande 2007: 98) country. Needless to say, the predominance of upper-caste protagonists in filmic representations elides religious and caste-based differences and establishes class as an overarching category which subsumes all other forms of subalternity. *Achhut Kanya* (Untouchable Maiden, 1936), made during the colonial period, is one of the early films that raised the issue of caste bigotry. However, for a long time, Hindi films' engagement with the issue of caste was limited to criticism of untouchability and compulsory endogamy. *Sujata* (1959), a remarkable film by Bimal Roy, despite having its backdrop informed by the principles of Dr B. R. Ambedkar upheld the notion of benevolent Brahminism. Both *Sujata* and *Achhut Kanya* maintained an orthodox approach which rather followed the Gandhian principle of uplifting the Harijan[3] than the Ambedkarite notion of annihilating the caste. Although social and political life of the period was not unfamiliar with Dalit movements led by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, and other stalwarts, yet these films, surprisingly, remained silent about the revolutionary fervour of Dalit community. Instead of portraying a positively inspiring Dalit identity, they represented Dalit characters as mute sufferers without agency. Interestingly, the tradition of proffering benevolence and charity to the downtrodden Dalit has been continuing in the mainstream Hindi films till date. *Lagaan* (The Tax, 2001), which is set against the backdrop of colonial India, follows the Gandhian belief of including the untouchables within the Hindu community without annihilating the existing power relation. The practice of token inclusion of marginal groups within the mainstream discourse has been an integral part of the project of Indian modernity, and Indian cinema which enjoys a strong connection with the culture of modernity sustains this project further.[4]

The trend of omitting and/or misrepresenting the lower castes continued even in 1970s when the angry young man genre chose to uphold themes of social inequality and injustice. Similarly, the parallel/art films, which are known for questioning the hegemony of the privileged, disregarded caste as they largely built their narratives upon the matrix of class dynamics. Indeed, there are exceptions. Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (The Seedling, 1974), *Manthan* (The

Churning, 1976), and *Samar* (Conflict, 1999) and Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* (Deliverance, 1981) do posit caste ostracisation at the centre of their narratives. Yet, the practice of symbolically annihilating (Tuchman 2000) the Dalit did not cease to exist. Pointing out the absence of caste-based themes in Hindi films, Dwyer observed that the practice of sidelining caste issues could be a consequence of several factors—ranging from avoidance of controversy or censorship to apathy of urban, upper-caste, middle-class population for whom caste is an unimportant topic of discussion (2014: 102). However, while these factors contribute to the marginalisation of Dalit characters in Hindi films, it is also necessary to evaluate the role of cinema in disseminating social and educational values which in India are largely predicated upon the tenets of Brahminical patriarchy. Celebrating the Brahminical way of life as the norm certainly expedites the erasure of alternative worldviews.

New Trend and Dalit Visibility

However, it is true that the power dynamics within and among caste groups in contemporary India is far more complicated than it was in the time of *Achhut Kanya*. In recent times, caste has gained more visibility in Hindi films than before. While mainstream commercial films, such as *Aarakshan* and *Article 15* with Bollywood stars in lead roles, base their plots on caste atrocity and reservation policy, biopic like *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2000) reminds us of an iconic leader's endless endeavour to uplift the status of Dalit community. Furthermore, films released in recent past show how complex inter- and intra-caste relationships were incorporated by film-makers in *Chauranga* (2016, Mumbai Film Festival 2014), *Masaan* (2015), *Mukkabaaz* (2018, TIFF 2017), and *Sonchiriya* (2019). It is an unprecedented phenomenon since mainstream Hindi film industry has often excluded or carefully avoided controversial discussions of caste from its purview. This new trend of confronting the issue of caste sets these otherwise mainstream Hindi films apart from their traditional counterparts where caste is usually reflected indirectly in an uncritical manner. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the new visibility of caste in contemporary Hindi films owes significantly not only to the socio-political changes that have made discussions on caste more ubiquitous but also to the transformation brought by post-millennial digital media revolution that has re-defined the experience of media consumption for Indian viewers. Hindi film industry faced a challenge after 1990 as liberalisation of Indian economy transformed not only orthodox ways of experiencing cinema but also traditional approaches to storytelling. The rise of multiplexes at urban and semi-urban locales coincided with the advent of a new group of film-makers who altered the conventional form and content of Hindi films to cater to the taste of global India (Paunksnis 2019). Among other themes, that these new Bollywood films explored,[5] is the issue of caste which already became quotidian in post-Mandal India[6] and received renewed attention in the hands of these new-age film-makers. Besides, the upsurge of Hindutva and the dominance of a right-wing party fuelled the visibility of caste as a political category. Furthermore, the availability of a growing body of scholarship on caste as well as the accessibility to writings by Dalit authors acted as catalyst in bringing caste to the forefront of social discussions. Nevertheless, what remains problematic is the manner in which caste is represented by Savarna film-makers in contemporary Hindi films. In spite of their professed intent of critiquing a hierarchical caste-based social order, these films, in most cases, turn out to be the purveyors of dominant Brahminical ideology. Employing Laura Mulvey's theory of gaze in the context of Hindi films, it can be claimed that the Brahminical gaze of the camera, which follows Savarna (mostly male) protagonist's point-of-view, compels the audience to subscribe to a Brahminical (mostly, Brahminical patriarchal) ideology. Furthermore, it is often noticed that Dalit characters, much like the passive females described by Mulvey,

enact insignificant peripheral parts (Mulvey 1975). The two films discussed in this chapter aptly exemplify how the Brahminical gaze relegates the Dalit presence to the periphery. Hence, despite a rise in the number of Hindi films dealing with caste, questions are being raised about the legitimacy of Dalit representations by high-caste film-makers. Although the debate over authentic representation of Dalit life started in the domain of Dalit literature (Limbale 2004), yet it is increasingly becoming relevant in the discussion of Hindi films as the portrayal of Dalit characters by Savarna film-makers fails to produce a positive, empowered Dalit identity. This raises two important questions: a) is it possible for a non-Dalit creator of art to express Dalit experience in an authentic manner? and b) can a film made by a high-caste film-maker include a Dalit point-of-view? The question of authenticity is, indeed, a problematic one. While such factors as social location and lived-experience play a crucial role in shaping and influencing our worldviews, it is also argued that a non-Dalit individual can reinvent herself/himself in order to transcend the boundaries of her/his caste identity (Rege 2006). The debate grows more intense with the question of employing a Dalit point-of-view in a film made by a high-caste film-maker. It provokes scholars to set the parameters of what is known as Dalit cinema. According to Suraj Yengde, Dalit cinema is ‘a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, *relating* to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, and as a universal monument of time and space’ (Yengde 2018: 1, Emphasis in original). If the Dalit identity of a film-maker is solely measured by the caste identity ascribed at birth, films made by Savarna directors on issues of caste bigotry and atrocity cannot be part of Dalit cinema. Yet, it would be wrong to undermine their capacity to start a critical dialogue or build socio-cultural resistance since these films may be pregnant with a Dalit consciousness despite the locational (dis)advantage of their Savarna creators. Here, what is important for us to understand is that the absence of a Dalit point-of-view in a film made by a high-caste film-maker does not necessarily affirm the existence of a Brahminical gaze. Bikas Ranjan Mishra’s *Chauranga* exemplifies an acute Dalit consciousness while Neeraj Ghaywan’s *Masaan* is a brilliant instance of how narrow confines of caste-specific discourse can be transcended. The aim of this chapter is not to trigger a discussion that holds caste-at-birth as the only valid factor to mark a film’s level of caste-consciousness. It rather attempts to understand the subtle execution of Brahminical ideology that interpellates an uncritical, unsuspecting spectator into a certain set of assumptions. The purpose of this study is to raise awareness among readers about the mechanisms of dominant Brahminical principles which lie camouflaged between the lines of an otherwise subversive text. By critiquing *Aarakshan* and *Article 15*, the chapter not only intends to question our readiness to accept the Brahminical worldview as the norm, but also suggests the need for searching alternative locations of knowledge production.

Analyses of *Aarakshan (Reservation)* and *Article 15*

Apart from angst about casteist practices, what binds *Aarakshan* and *Article 15* is their faith in the liberal democratic nature of the State. In spite of frequent occurrence of atrocity on Dalits in India in which the State either becomes the perpetrator or a mute observer, both the films display an unwavering faith in the State’s ability to ensure justice and dignity to the downtrodden. Both vehemently criticise caste discrimination and proclaim the message of equality and freedom. Yet, despite their commitment to upholding progressive, liberal ideas, *Aarakshan* and *Article 15*, in my opinion, allow their narratives to be steered by an oppressive Brahminical gaze.

Aarakshan (2011) is primarily about a morally upright dedicated teacher’s fight against a corrupt, commercialised education system in contemporary India. Directed by Prakash Jha, who is known for making socially conscious meaningful cinema, the film exposes the deplorable state

of Indian education which is increasingly dictated by profit-driven business groups and greedy politicians in order to further capitalist interests. While the overarching framework signifies the film's intention of opposing corporate strategies of turning education into a commodity, the plot compels viewers to confront the question of reservation policy in education and employment. Its representation of ideological conflict among characters over the issue of *aarakshan* (reservation) reveals how inextricably education is fraught with caste and that any effort to bring changes to education system in India will not be successful without addressing caste and the policy of reservation.[7] The narrative revolves round Dr Prabhakar Anand, the principal of STM—a fictional private college in Bhopal—and shows how Dr Anand, whose upper-caste lineage is revealed through hints and suggestions, triumphs at the end despite social and political challenges that try to malign him and his strong ideals. There are several scenes in *Aarakshan* where Dr Anand's justness and impartiality are portrayed. In one such scene, he is seen reprimanding and suspending his Dalit student Deepak Kumar as the latter was found embroiled in verbal fights with an upper-caste student Sushant Seth over the question of reservations. However, the scene emphatically suggests that all students are equal to Dr Anand and hence Sushant is also duly rusticated. The film unambiguously establishes that Dr Anand's generosity towards his poor upper-caste student Pandit is as genuine as his dedication to the under-privileged, low-caste school students whom he taught for free in a makeshift classroom inside a cowshed. Moreover, his derision towards the idea of maintaining caste purity by physically and socially distancing Dalits becomes visible when he rejects the offer made by some wealthy, upper-caste parents to set up a separate school for their children. Despite the temptation of monetary benefit, Dr Anand remains firm in his egalitarian principle which certainly makes him stand tall over the rest of the characters—especially the Vice-Principal Mithilesh Singh who ousts Dr Anand with the help of vile politicians and gets himself promoted to the position of Principal. Judged against the parameters set by the film, Singh, who belongs to an upper-caste community, fails to qualify as a true educator since he not only commodifies education but also holds a grudge against low-caste students.

Aarakshan carefully builds the image of a tolerant, inclusive nation by expunging aggressive caste-specific rhetoric. It intends to propagate for a caste-free society without engaging with the history and mechanism of caste in everyday life of an average Indian. The film promotes Gandhian principles of including lower castes in the Brahminical social order without diminishing the structural inequality that is embedded in the caste system. Dr Anand's unflinching adherence to his ideals as well as his fight for what he accepts as truth may remind one of M. K. Gandhi. The resemblance seems to be more vivid in the context of Dr Anand's opinion (or lack thereof) about Indian state's policy of reservation. In an overwhelmingly dramatic scene where Deepak was demanding an unambiguous answer with relation to the Supreme Court's verdict (2008)[8] on reservations, Dr Anand remained silent. Interestingly while on one hand, Dr Anand supports the Supreme Court's verdict regarding OBC reservations, on the other, he expresses discomfort as this allegedly personal opinion of his gets published in the newspaper. His ambivalence evokes memories of the ambiguous position M. K. Gandhi adopted, especially during the Poona Pact (1932). Although Gandhi denounced untouchability, yet he was resolutely opposed to the Colonial Government's suggestion of allocating separate electorates for Dalits (then known as Depressed Classes).[9] The conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar over this issue still sparks controversy. While followers of Gandhi point at his intention of maintaining social unity by including Dalits within Hindu community, the Ambedkarites often deride the way Dalits were manipulated and coerced to succumb to the interests of the Brahminical hegemony. The denial of separate electorates deprives them of the opportunity to assert their agency. Besides, it should be noted that the reservation of seats in local constituencies does not necessarily guarantee the possibility of an emergence of Dalit voice.

Interestingly, the resolution of caste conflict in *Aarakshan* follows the Gandhian strategy of co-option rather than the assertion of a distinct Dalit identity. The film's commitment to Brahminical principles is revealed as it ensures that dissident voices are mainstreamed and made to echo the pseudo-progressive ideology of the liberal State which is largely founded upon Savarna values. Perhaps, for the same reason, Dalit characters are portrayed in a stereotypical manner. Despite the vitriolic rhetoric, Deepak turns out to be an impulsive, emotionally vulnerable character. Although he successfully confronts caste-prejudiced interviewers and reminds his upper-caste friend Sushant of the hollowness of meritocracy, yet his character never assumes a position of authority. On the contrary, his imprudent behaviour at the police station portrays him as a thoughtless bully. Similarly, several scenes focus on the unruly behaviour of some Dalit students whose actions are delineated as violation of discipline and decorum. Such portrayals are dangerous as they reinforce the stereotypical image of Dalits as essentially violent and irrational. Besides, the film also negates the opportunity for showcasing Dalit assertion. Deepak's ancillary role in Dr Anand's protest against corruption eclipses any scope for a collective Dalit movement to grow. Moreover, the affirmative image of anti-caste movements is smeared as Dalit politics is reduced to a domain solely controlled by hooligans and self-seeking politicians. Furthermore, the film's reluctance to acknowledge Dalit subjectivity manifests as Dalit characters appear in binary good/evil pattern while upper-caste characters are depicted with various shades of emotion. Apart from one educated Deepak Kumar, a selfish, easily malleable Dalit leader, and a few non-descript students belonging to low castes, Dalithood remains absent from the ambit of *Aarakshan*. The film makes no mention of the educated, politically aware Dalit middle class whose presence in upper echelons of bureaucracy as well as in academia has initiated significant changes. Although there have been arguments about the feasibility of developing a 'subaltern middle class' (Pandey 2009), yet the emergence of a new Dalit middle class in India, in last few decades, has brought in phenomenal transformations as the rising Dalit intellectuals no longer confine their interests within the domain of political empowerment but rather 'emphasize on the need for economic empowerment through a variety of new methods' (Pai 2013: 119). Unfortunately, the film remains silent about them. On the contrary, it follows conventional trajectory of viewing Dalits with a hegemonic Brahminical gaze which evokes either hatred or pity.

Aarakshan's subliminal camaraderie with Brahminical values is displayed abundantly within the narrative. For instance, all decision-making positions are unquestionably held by high-caste members. Similarly, the final resolution, too, relies upon Savarna intervention as Shakuntala Thakral, the reclusive founder of the college, appears as the deus-ex-machina. These instances along with the final triumph of Dr Anand expose the film's ulterior motive of telling a story of social change without unsettling the tradition of upper-caste hegemony. *Aarakshan's* complicity with Brahminical ideology is most conspicuously visible in the film's failure to provide any substantial argument regarding privileges based on caste identity. Although it attempts to broaden the discussion by incorporating question of deprivation endured by under-privileged high-caste members who are not beneficiaries of any affirmative action policy, yet it does not show any interest in analysing structural inequalities. Contemporary caste politics in India is hugely shaped by this issue. Hence, the film could bring new insights into the debate on reservations if it explored this aspect further.

It is interesting, however, that *Aarakshan* had to face severe oppositions from both Dalit and non-Dalit groups prior to its release. Despite obtaining clearance from Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), the film was banned in Uttar Pradesh (UP)—a north-Indian state which was then governed by pro-Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and its leader Ms. Mayawati. The rationale behind suspension of the film's release was to protect the law-and-order situation which, according to the official statement, could be turned volatile as the film's content might

'incite public sentiment' (Chandra quoted in Schulz 2016: 550). While a massive opposition to the film was launched by Swarajya Party demanding voices to be raised against reservation policy, cases of protest against *Aarakshan* by few Dalit groups were also reported from and around Lucknow. It is true that political interests played a crucial part, but the '*Aarakshan* ban' in UP, as Schulz observes, opened a space for critical discussions regarding the 'caste composition of the CBFC or of the film industry itself' (2016: 552). According to Kancha Iliah, not only the issue of reservation and right to education was rendered problematic in *Aarakshan* but the film also exposes the caste composition of Bollywood (Schulz 2016: 552). None of the actors who played the major characters hail from Dalit background. However, what seems to be more disturbing is the film's Brahminical standpoint which evidently distances those who seek to experience the film with a non-Brahminical/Bahujan gaze.[10] The story of *Aarakshan* is narrated from the point-of-view of a Savarna man whose fight for justice reinforces the traditionally constructed image of an upper-caste saviour rescuing the hapless Dalit. Furthermore, it is with Dr Anand, and not with Deepak, the audience are asked to identify with. The film, like many of its predecessors, consolidates the dominant Brahminical notion that development of low-caste communities is solely reliant on the benevolent engagement of the upper castes.

A similar engagement with what I call upper-caste Messiah complex is also noticed in Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019). Outwardly, however, there are striking dissimilarities between these two films. For instance, in *Aarakshan*, Dr Anand is well aware of the presence of caste discrimination in society whereas, Ayan Ranjan, the protagonist of *Article 15*, seems to have been ignorant about the impact of caste in everyday affairs until he is transferred to Laalgaon—a remote village in north India. Again, while *Article 15* exposes how caste taints every aspect of life, *Aarakshan* emphasises more on the prevalence of corruption, especially in the education sector. The caste-space in these films is also distinctly different. Laalgaon is divided between touchable high castes and untouchable low castes whereas the corridors and canteen of STM College in Bhopal appear to be a free space allowing intermingling of diverse castes and creeds. Yet there are crucial moments when both the films converge, and this can be attributed to the Brahminical gaze that controls the narratives and their cinematic executions. As in *Aarakshan*, so in *Article 15*, the protagonist hails from an upper-caste background and is portrayed as the saviour of Dalits.

Article 15 prepares us to encounter two contrasting images of India, one which is poor, caste-obsessed, and traditional and the other, affluent, caste-liberal, global. The villagers' song with which the film opens underscores the perennial divide between the privileged and the non-privileged. The scene becomes acutely intense with an implied suggestion of rape as the visual of villagers is intercut with images of three terrified teenage girls trapped in a moving bus. Interestingly, this violent rural scene is juxtaposed with one where the camera tracks a car (carrying Ayan Ranjan) along a sophisticatedly built highway. The gradual receding of urban development and the car's subsequent entrance into a non-modern space convey the film's core message. Ayan's illusion about countryside India's serenity is shattered when the car stops near a roadside shack and Ayan Ranjan, the city-bred IPS officer from Delhi, learns first-hand what caste discrimination means. His initial surprise at the absurdity of such idea that one person's shadow can be polluting to others turns into emotional outburst when he witnesses the prevalence of caste segregation among his subordinates and colleagues at the Laalgaon police station. His bewilderment and anger at the rampant manifestations of caste prejudice imply the film's intention of portraying Ayan Ranjan as a representative of the new-age global -Indians who view caste as an irrelevant relic of past. It is important to note in this context that Ayan's upper-caste identity, which was regarded by Ayan as an unimportant piece of information, was pointed out to him by one of his subordinates who was trying to explain to him the hierarchical

nature of caste and sub-castes. What is interesting about *Article 15* is the way it represents caste inequality through minute details. However, what seems awkward is the manner in which the film employs a binary framework that not only separates the urban from the rural but also hierarchises them by pitting the educated, global city-centric India against the primitive, parochial, village-oriented *Bharat*. The film's tendency to label caste as a primitive, rural matter which is deemed not only redundant in new urban India but also damaging for the country's ascent as a global power jeopardises attempts to understand the centrality of caste in overall existence of an average Indian. Such act of exteriorisation of the problem involves certain dangers. First, it depicts the caste-ridden rural space as the threatening Other that undermines the achievements of 'an allegedly "egalitarian", free market space of modern individuals or citizens' (Krishnan 2008: 141) and second, it upholds the State-sponsored capitalist modernity as the only viable option to counteract 'savagery and caste bigotry' (Krishnan 2008: 150, 152). *Article 15*'s narrative structure and characterisation reinforce the neoliberal agenda of creating the myth of casteless urban location as opposed to casteist rural space. Ayan, who hails from a well-to-do Brahmin family, grew up in Delhi—a thriving modern metropolis. He studied in one of the best colleges in India and has been exposed to the world outside. Immaculately dressed in the Western/global attire, Ayan represents new India which believes in the idea of progress founded upon principles of science and reason. Repeatedly the film focuses on Ayan's unfamiliarity with the caste system. His ignorance about caste segregation is projected as new India's rejection of a pre-modern regressive practice that now exists in undeveloped, non-urban spaces. What such representation yields is an understanding that caste is a non-existent category in developed modern Indian cities. Not only is it an inaccurate interpretation, it is also an endeavour to transform urban space into a Savarna space because the luxury of not knowing one's own caste is squarely a Brahminical privilege. Hence, the concomitant processes of erasing caste stigma from modern city and locating it within primordial village problematise the film's putative claim of critiquing caste-based exclusionary practices.

Ayan's role as the redeemer, furthermore, complicates the film. He initiates the process of registering the case of a missing Dalit girl, ignores political and bureaucratic pressures to stop investigation, ensures submission of correct medical evidence, and finally helps the local Dalit community get justice. Besides, he fights against corrupt officials who have been enjoying privileges due to their superior caste positions. His final act of wading through a swamp and rescuing the missing Dalit girl confirms his role as the saviour. Such portrayal reinforces the absence of Dalit agency and reveals how the film perpetuates Brahminical gaze. Although it makes a nuanced critique of caste by exposing the prevalence of caste hierarchy among sub-castes, yet *Article 15* fails to dislodge the hegemonic Brahminical power centre. The final scene emphasises this point further. Here, Ayan is seen sharing meal with his colleagues and workers of different castes who helped him find the missing girl. He asks the caste of the female food seller, but the audience cannot hear the reply as her voice gets drowned in the loud honking of a truck which had *mera bharat mahan* (my India is great) written on its back. The scene's attempt to underscore the irrelevance of caste in modern India apparently seems commendable. However, imagining a caste-free India with Savarna leadership at the helm involves the danger of erasing Dalit agency.

In fact, the film does relegate Dalit voice to the margin. Apart from Nishad, the rebel Dalit leader, and his fiancée Gaura, most of the Dalit characters are represented as powerless victims. Kisan Jatav, despite holding rank in police department, endures humiliation hurled by his high-caste senior Brahmadutt. Jatav protests only once and slaps Brahmadutt when the latter gets arrested for raping three Dalit girls. Nevertheless, we must remember that such outburst was made possible only after the involvement of (Brahmin) Ayan in the case. However, the characters that attract the audience's attention are Nishad and Gaura. Nishad's profound speech reveals

how power remains concentrated in the hands of high castes despite the existence of a legally approved reservation policy and the rights provided to Dalits by the Indian Constitution. He is a stark contrast to the other Dalit leader in the film who is portrayed as an opportunist. It is true that *Article 15* divulges more shades of Dalit politics than *Aarakshan*. It hints at the collective voice of Dalit protest which is largely absent in the latter. However, the endeavour seems problematic as these protests are represented more as disruptive acts than rightful demands. The scene where Dalit activists surround the police jeep at night or the one where Dalit workers unload garbage on the road as a mark of protest does not really convey much about Dalit assertion. Contrarily, they seem to raise an alarm, warning upper-caste spectators about the consequences of their discriminatory practices. Similar scenes imagined from a Dalit standpoint are likely to voice Dalit consciousness.[11] The Brahminical gaze in *Article 15* also becomes apparent through the message written on the film's poster: *Farq Bahut Kar Liya, Ab Farq Laayenge* (We practised discrimination for a long time, now we will bring change). The allocation of the role of the saviour to a Brahmin ensures that the film does not imagine Dalits to be part of this collective we mentioned on the poster. Even Nishad and Gaura cannot reclaim Dalit voice fully. Their inclusion, rather, appears to be an ideological necessity if the film is interpreted as an example of State-sponsored criticism which is purposefully wrought to advance interests of a neoliberal economy. Nishad's death, for the same reason, is inevitable too. While his radical ideas are required for a modern India to earn recognition at the global level, his rebel existence is too intimidating for the narrative of development to unfold. Hence, although *Article 15* posits caste at the centre of discussion, it reduces Dalit presence to the level of token inclusion and thus perpetuates the Brahminical gaze in the same way as *Aarakshan* did. While it is laudable that mainstream commercial films such as *Aarakshan* and *Article 15* do take up the issue of caste as focal point of their narratives, it is also worrying to find that representation of caste in these films remains dominated by the Brahmanical gaze. Given the popularity of mainstream Hindi films, one can imagine how perilous the impact will be if commercial films such as these foreground Savarna supremacy in the name of eradicating caste prejudice. Not only do these films reinforce Brahminical hegemony, they also negate the prospect of developing a Dalit consciousness. It is not difficult to understand how misrepresentation of Dalit lives, simultaneously showcased with Savarna values as the norm, makes Dalit viewers strangers to the experience of cinematic realism. Their alienation is further accentuated by the fact that capital investment and technical knowledge—two important prerequisites for cinema—have long been under the monopoly of dominant upper-caste groups (Yengde 2018). Besides, mainstream Indian films rarely create characters that capture Dalit life in its myriad aspects and thus they prevent Dalit spectators from identifying with their screen images. On the other hand, participating in the enjoyment of Brahminical cinematic experience may cause loss of identity for Dalit audience. Hence, the questions that become paramount in this context are: how do Dalit viewers respond to such situation? Do they simply filter out the humiliating portrayal of Dalit lives in order to be part of the cinematic pleasure? Or, do they assume a 'posture of subordination' and submit themselves to 'cinema's capacity to seduce and betray'? Or, do they develop an 'oppositional gaze'? (hooks 1992: 120, 122). The critical oppositional gaze that hooks mentioned is a site of resistance, and it can create a space for the dominated to articulate their identity which is otherwise denied or distorted by the mainstream discourse. By contesting and interrogating the filmic images over-determined by Brahminical values, Dalit spectators not only can disengage themselves from an oppressive looking relation that compels them to respond through desire and complicity, but they may also formulate a new subjectivity by discovering who they are. The task of developing an oppositional Dalit gaze is certainly complex as Dalit identity is anything but homogenous. It may also incite criticism for nurturing a phallocentric gaze. Yet, formulation of an interrogating gaze can lead to the deconstruction of dominant cultural images which the

'structures of power' compel us to consume '(. . .) uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways' (Kuhn qtd. in hooks 1992: 123).

Conclusion

The question of Dalit agency is seldom explored in Hindi cinema. Both *Aarakshan* and *Article 15* raise relevant questions regarding social and economic predicament of low-caste communities; however, they fail to capture the vibrant assertion of Dalit consciousness. Contrarily, they reinforce Brahminical (patriarchal) beliefs that Dalits are dependent on Savarna saviours for escaping from their ignominious life situation. Although the titles of these two films explicitly refer to the Indian Constitution, yet the films fail to ensure the dignity that is promised to Dalits by the Constitution.[12] Besides, their approach reveals how media can reinforce the dominant power's strategy of co-opting dissenting voices without altering the hegemonic structure. Indeed, endeavours to celebrate an oppositional gaze have begun in the Indian film industry. Marathi film-maker Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and Tamil film director Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018) are just two examples of how a non-Brahmin/Bahujan gaze can challenge the Brahminical-capitalist social order and at the same time enable spectators to identify with a vibrant image of Dalit culture. The determination of these films to make the experience of the marginalised as the point of departure contributes to the formation of an oppositional Dalit subjectivity. It is certainly a significant achievement since Dalits in Indian films have generally been denied an affirmative, empowering portrayal. Nevertheless, the monopoly of Brahminical worldview coupled with the demands of a neoliberal economy still prevents effective filmic representations of Dalit consciousness. This reflects the appropriateness of Dr Ambedkar's description of Hindu society as a tower where 'one was to die in the storey one was born' (Keer 1990: 41). Dismantling this otherwise sacrosanct structure requires Dalit experience to be posited as the 'vantage point' since it makes us understand how 'caste constitutes the self' (Kannabiran 2008: 70). In order to 'annihilate caste' (Rodrigues 2002), it is imperative that we question dominant systems of knowledge production and relocate ourselves to positions that offer alternative views because in the end, it matters who tells the story.

Notes

1 *Aarakshan* contains references to the verdict regarding OBC (Other Backward Classes) reservations given by the Supreme Court of India in 2008. *Article 15* is loosely based on 2014 Badaun rape case in UP, India.
2 Savarna refers to the four-tier categorization of the Hindu society comprising Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Dalit and tribal people do not belong to the Savarna category.
3 Harijan—M. K. Gandhi referred to untouchable community as 'Harijan' (God's people).
4 See Gokulsingh K. Moti and Wimal Dissanayake's 'Introduction'. In *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
5 See Sangita Gopal. *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012 and Šarūnas Paunksnis. *Dark Fear, Eerie Cities: New Hindi Cinema in Neoliberal India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019.
6 Mandal Commission, set up in 1979, recommended that the members of OBC should be granted reservations to 27% of jobs under Central Government and public sector units. In August 1990, the then Prime Minister of India, V. P. Singh, declared his intention of implementing the recommendations made by the Mandal Commission. It resulted in wide-spread protests. The Mandal Commission report was implemented in 1992.

7 *Aarakshan* is a Hindi word which means reservation. In the film *Aarakshan*, the word has been used to refer to the Indian state's policy of reserving some seats for certain communities (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and OBCss) in education and employment. This is an affirmative action policy which is enshrined in order to protect the communities which have been historically disadvantaged and thus made vulnerable.

8 In 2008, the Supreme Court of India issued a verdict that upheld 27% reservation for OBCs in central educational institutes in India. It however, stated that the creamy layer from the OBCs should be excluded. See 'Supreme Court okays quotas in IIMs, IITs'. *The Times of India*. April 10, 2008. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/. Accessed on August 1, 2022.

9 See N. S. Gehlot. 'Dr. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and Dalit Movement'. *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 54.3/4 (July–December 1993): 382–387.

10 For Bahujan gaze, see Nisha Jyoti's article in *EPW*, May 2020.

11 For instance, *Fandry* (2013) by Marathi director Nagraj Manjule.

12 *Article 15* refers to the Article 15 of Indian Constitution. It prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. *Aarakshan* focuses on affirmative action policy enshrined in Articles 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution.

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7

Visualising the Invisible

Decoding Caste Pride and the Casteist Slur in Bollywood Films

Sumit Rajak

Introduction

Casteism, the notional and material practice of the caste system, is a hierarchical social stratification in which the upper castes dominate and discriminate the lower castes in every sphere, and forms the core of the socio-cultural lifeworld in India. It is a particular mindset or behaviour which has its roots in the ancient *Chaturvarna* system, a hierarchical division of society into four *varnas*, namely the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and the Shudra. The various communities hailing from the first three *varnas* constitute what is called the 'upper castes', whereas the Shudras come to be known as the 'lower castes'. Subsequently, this form of social stratification gives birth to another degraded social group formerly known as the 'untouchables' and who later claimed to be known as 'Dalit'. The terms 'lower caste' and 'Dalit' are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the communities victimised by the upper castes. Not only do these lower castes and Dalits face banal caste discrimination and atrocities, they get discriminated and humiliated through certain sophisticated and subtle verbal expressions, conduct, or gestures which usually go unnoticed. All the socio-cultural spaces are replete with such invisible, unnoticed markers of casteism which have got normalised with time. Therefore, whereas the visible or, so to speak, recognised forms of caste discrimination and caste atrocities have to face setbacks time and again through a number of social, cultural as well as political movements and sometimes get checked by the constitutional and legal safeguards, the invisible markers of casteism scarcely face any challenge. Not to mention the regressive societal space, even the supposedly liberal, cultural, and political spaces practice casteism through the use of such unnoticed casteist markers like boasting one's high-caste background, calling a low-caste person by his or her caste name with a view to demeaning him or her, or equating a caste name with something of low worth, thereby playing a crucial role in reproducing casteism. Given the magnitude of impact these markers of caste sway over the socio-cultural life of the Indian subcontinent, one can scarcely overlook the crucial role played by them in determining the fate of the lower-caste communities. Boasting of caste pride and hurling casteist slur at a particular caste are two such markers of caste which I will engage herewith in order to decode them.

There are hardly any better cultural texts than the mainstream Bollywood films which can be examined to decode this boasting of caste pride and hurling casteist slur. A number of Bollywood

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mainstream films archive a naked display of boasting caste pride by the dominant castes, sometimes in the form of publicly showing *janeyu* (the so-called 'sacred' thread usually put on by a Brahmin to showcase his superior status compared to other castes),[1] or twirling one's moustache (a culturally loaded gesture done by the members of certain dominant high-caste communities like the Rajput or the Thakur in order to assert their powerful social status), sometimes in the form of glorifying one's *varna* identity, caste name or family clan like 'Brahman', 'Kshatriya', 'Rajput' or 'Suryavansh'. On the contrary, the Dalit characters are scarcely seen to flaunt their caste names in the films. As exemplified in Prakash Jha's 2011 Hindi film *Aarakshan* (reservation), the character of Deepak Kumar (Saif Ali Khan), an assertive Dalit voice, is not found to flaunt his caste name in the films, even though, as a lecturer from the Dalit community, he dares to confront the upper-caste ideologues in order to defend the reservation policy, an affirmative action to provide reservation to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and the Other Backward Classes in government jobs and in admission in institutes of higher learning. The character of Pannalal Chauhar (Sanjay Dutt) in Vidhu Vinod Chopra's film *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007) is another case in point. Albeit a DSP, he just warns the feudal lord Ranapratap not to insult him by his caste name; he does not use his caste name as a tool to flaunt his caste pride. Although there are few cases of flaunting caste names by the Dalits as a political tool in certain socio-political and cultural spheres, as demonstrated later in this section, in the cases of the Bhim Army chief Chandrashekhar Azad and popular rap singer Ginni Mahi, flaunting caste names by the ordinary Dalit characters in Bollywood films is yet to be made visible. Yet, the Bollywood films substantively bear testimony to flaunting caste names by the upper-caste characters. This boasting of caste pride by the higher castes amounts to demeaning the dignity of the lower castes.

While the boasting of caste pride by the few socially privileged as well as dominant social groups presupposes the existing inferior social status of certain social groups, the articulation of words like 'Ardali', 'Chamar', 'Chandal', 'Kanjarkhana', 'Kameena', 'kachra', 'Kasai', 'Dhobi', 'Dhobi ka kutta', and 'Mochi', which have been normalised as forms of expression in the social, cultural, or political spectrum, bear a dehumanising undertone characterised by a stink of casteism, community-bashing, and verbal atrocity. Chamar, Chandal, Dhobi, and Mochi, among these expressions, are names of low-caste communities, which are uttered in day-to-day life to demean something or someone, with knowingly or unknowingly hurting the sentiments of these low-caste communities. It is noteworthy that in a number of cases related to casteist abuse, the Honourable Supreme Court of India declares the use of low-caste community names such as 'Bhangi', 'Chamar' or 'Dhobi' as 'offensive'.[2] But even after such legal prohibition, such expressions continue to be used. Therefore, caste pride, which is employed to apotheosise the higher castes, is here in a symbiotic relationship with the casteist slur, which is used as a modality to derogate the lower castes. It is interesting, on the other hand, to note that certain Dalit groups have recently been making use of their same caste identity, which is usually used by the upper-caste groups to demean them, to assert their identity. Instead of feeling humiliated, they are making a claim over their caste identity. They are using it as a tool to demand their basic human rights and dignity, connecting it with their tortured past of historical exploitation. The recent incident of Chandrashekhar Azad, the chief of the Bhim Army, an organisation which works for the social and educational empowerment of Dalits, asserting his Chamar identity by putting up a board, which read, in English translation, 'The Great Chamar, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar village, Ghadkauli, cordially welcomes you', in March, 2016 at the entry point of Ghadkauli village of Saharanpur district, Uttar Pradesh is a case in point.[3] Azad's self-fashioning is a conscious attempt to assert his Dalit identity. The same can be exemplified in the case of Ginni Mahi, a Punjabi rap and hip-hop singer hailing from a Dalit community, who goes viral

on the social media for her song 'Danger Chamar', thus using rap as a tool to assert her caste identity. She uses the very caste name, which is usually employed as a casteist slur, as a mark of pride.

Barring these cases of Dalit assertion by using the caste name, the larger societal picture of demeaning the lower castes through their caste names is still recurrent. One often comes across some YouTube videos, Facebook posts, blogposts, stuff on other social-media platforms, which expose how casteism in the guise of boasting one's caste pride or hurling casteist slur at the members of particular social groups operates in day-to-day life. I intend to mention one such YouTube video, among others, which has drawn public attention as it attempts to decode some casteist slurs used on regular basis.[4] This video is an eye-opener for an ordinary social-media user regarding how certain expressions, which are replete with casteism, go unnoticed yet are very much part of our everyday life. In this video, Divya Kandukuri, a freelance journalist, in her campaign against 'everyday casteism' tries to explain how people, especially of the privileged class, in their day-to-day life, casually use certain casteist slurs like 'Janglee' (forest dwellers), 'Bhangi' (low-caste community traditionally associated with the occupation of manual scavenging), 'Chamar' (leather worker), 'Mahar' (a low-caste community from Maharashtra), 'Napit' (barber community), and 'Adivasi' (aboriginal), which amount to demeaning the members of these low-caste communities. It is an act of dehumanising these communities because, as rightly pointed out by Kandukuri, their caste names are repeatedly used to connote something substandard, weird, uncivilised, filthy, despicable, of low worth, etc.

The writers and thinkers from Dalit communities also express their concern over the derogatory use of such low-caste community names. For example, Manoranjan Byapari, the renowned Dalit writer and activist from Bengal, is often found to be vocal against the popular use of casteist slurs of similar nature of similar nature such as bracketing the caste name 'Chamar' with 'chori' or 'churi', meaning the act of theft (Kafle 2019). As he intends to point out, one is hardly aware of the fact that while juxtaposing the word 'chamari' with 'churi', one is equating the morally unacceptable act of theft with the professional activities of a Chamar. Not to mention, this synonymous use of the caste name 'Chamar' with 'churi', the act of theft, has made the members of the CHAMAR community the stock of public humiliation. This *modus operandi* of casteism in the forms of hurling casteist slurs or boasting of caste pride can be described as what Gyanendra Pandey calls 'universal prejudice',[5] the invisible prejudice 'passed off as common sense' (Pandey 2013). Such widespread prevalence of unacknowledged caste prejudice makes it imperative to examine how cultural texts, which largely document everyday life and sway an enormous influence in shaping the public conduct or social behaviour, represent such prejudice. For this purpose, this chapter engages here with the Bollywood films which bear testimony to this. Through an analytical study of dialogues, songs, and expressions tinged with caste pride and casteist slur in Bollywood films, this chapter explores how these have been incorporated into the cinematic language, thereby reinforcing these markers of caste in getting substantively normalised in socio-cultural parameters, and how the cinematic representation of these symbiotic markers of caste do contribute to constructing a deviated 'Other' on the basis of caste. For this purpose, this chapter focuses on mainstream commercial films which are not categorised as 'caste-centric' or 'Dalit' films. This is because while the 'caste-centric' or 'Dalit' films are taken into consideration for their explicit portrayal of caste or untouchability, the mainstream films often contain subtle forms of inherent casteism which usually go unnoticed and therefore are not taken into consideration in spite of their crucial role in reproducing caste prejudice. In this context, I will revisit the literature on the subject in the following section as doing so will be conducive in unmasking this role of the films in framing subtle casteist expressions.

Revisiting the Representation of Caste Markers in Cinema

Bikash Ranjan Mishra, the screenwriter and film director, mostly known for his screenwriting for the 2014 film *Chauranga*, argues how in Bollywood entertainment has become synonymous with the popular dominant cultural expression, which is nothing but the cultural expression of the high caste Hindu male chauvinism: 'Producers ask you to make purely entertaining movies, and because these issues are convenient to the dominant political paradigm, they are apolitical. Pure entertainment means you perpetuate the beliefs of the mainstream, which is the upper-caste Hindu male' (Jha 2019). So privileged the film personalities in Bollywood were since its earlier times, when fostering a nationalist sentiment among the populace through cinema was part of the larger project of nation building, that caste was a *non-issue* [emphasis mine] for them, even though caste was very much present with its subtlety in the films. This paradox of considering caste as a non-issue, its unrecognised presence in the films can well be illustrated in the following argument made by Shyam Benegal, the acclaimed film-maker of the Art House Cinema:

> What India's nationalist movement brought to the forefront was that Indians should be seen as Indians. It wasn't even recognizing that there were backward castes though, internally, the caste system was playing out in society . . . Indian cinema came up during this time, so it also reflected the popular feeling. If you look at early Indian films, it is very rare that caste was even a subject in the film. Our films never told you where the hero came from, what kind of a household he grew up in, or which caste he belonged to—none of these things are ever seen.
>
> *(Jha 2019)*

This observation by Benegal is deeply problematic as the acts like the boasting of *khandaan* (lineage) by the upper-caste characters, flaunting upper-caste surnames, flaunting *janeyu* (the sacred thread for the Brahmins), and the unapologetic use of caste-sensitive expressions, which have always been represented as 'normal' behaviour in the films, have not been interpreted here as caste issues, even by progressive film-makers like Benegal because the upper-caste norms and ways of living are always considered to be the norm for caste-ridden Indian society. Focusing only on the explicit portrayal of Dalit lifeworld, showing slum life, or representing a character with low-caste or Dalit identity as caste issues is an act of ignoring the implied subtleties of the caste question. Therefore, contrary to Benegal's view, the Bollywood films have been replete with caste issues since its inception.

In this context, it is imperative to illustrate these observations through a few studies on the subject. S. Anand (2002) in his essay 'Eating with Our Fingers, Watching Hindi Cinema and Consuming Cricket' problematises the depiction of a Dalit character named Kachra (Aditya Lakhia) in Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (agricultural tax).[6] Set in colonial India, this 2001 Bollywood film narrates the story of how the villagers of Champaner took up the Britishers' challenge to play a cricket match against them to get rid of *lagaan* or agricultural tax and subsequently won the match under the captaincy of Bhuvan (Aamir Khan), the protagonist. Apart from pointing out the banal casteism, which is explicit in the film during the upper-caste villagers' opposition to Kachra's inclusion in the cricket team as the latter is an *achchhut* (untouchable), Anand ventures to expose the subtle casteism inherent in the characterisation of Kachra (meaning 'wastage'), a name which bears a dehumanising undertone, in the film. He

argues that casteism is referred in the film only through the Dalit character Kachra, and the film dissociates casteism when it comes to the exclusive depiction of the ordinary village lifeworld. As he elucidates,

> Till the introduction of this Dalit character [Kachra], Dalits and, indeed, caste never figures in the cinematic village. The brahman is conspicuous by his absence, except as the priest in the background with no dialogue. In fact, no character seems to be caste-marked in the pristine village—the Gandhian ideal. It is only Kachra who bears the burden of caste identity. From the raja to Bhuvan we are not made aware of anybody's caste.
>
> *(Anand 2002)*

Anand also argues how the film further 'Dalitises' the disabled Kachra (one of Kachra's hands is disabled) by crediting his disability behind his ability to spin the ball, implying that an abled Dalit is not talented enough to become a good spin bowler. As he illustrates,

> What comes across as being most obnoxious is that after all the drama over Kachra's inclusion, we are told that he is a good spinner not because of ability, but because of his disability. The token Dalit is further Dalitised. When Kachra wants to throw the ball with his 'normal' hand, know-all Bhuvan insists he use the disabled hand. Kachra's being an untouchable is hardly significant; his disability is. Kachra's talent is not based on merit, the will to excel or the determination to defeat an enemy, like Bhuvan's is. It, like untouchability, comes with birth. And it is Bhuvan who discovers this 'innate' talent. Kachra knows nothing.
>
> *(Anand 2002)*

Thus, Anand's study is an eye-opener to the subtle dehumanisation of a low-caste character portrayed in Bollywood films. Dr Rakesh Kumar Patel (2018) in his article 'Unconventional Bollywood: Constructing Cinema of Caste Pride', which studies the representation of caste in Bollywood in general and the movies based on 'lived experiences' of the Dalits by the Dalit film-makers in particular, unravels how Bollywood displays casteism in subtle and sophisticated manner. He mentions how the lifeworld of the majority has been invisibilised by the Bollywood film-makers who hail from upper-caste backgrounds. It is only the Dubeys, Mishras, Chaturvedis, or Pandeys who become the central characters of Bollywood films. Not to mention the fact that all of these surnames are of the Brahmins. He notes how all the major characters from the Saif Ali Khan starrer film *Bullet Raja* (2013), directed by Tigmanshu Dhulia, belong to the Brahmin caste. Along with the Brahmin protagonists, the surnames of other high-caste communities like Malhotra, Mehra, Singhania, Chopra, Sharma, Singh, Kapoor, and Chauhan are the 'chosen ones' for the Bollywood film-makers. The author also points out the casteism hidden in the Bollywood Diaspora films. He argues:

> Diaspora films of Bollywood depict stories of elite and upper-caste Diaspora who migrated with higher education and skill to developed countries like UK, USA and Canada. We could not [name] any Bollywood film which tells stories of Fiji, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Caribbean countries as indentured labourers a kind of slave.
>
> *(Patel 2018)*

In order to show how the Dalit film-makers like Pa. Ranjith pose a counter-narrative to these upper-caste-centric representations of characters, the author quotes Deepti Nagpaul, who argues:

> when filmmakers from the so-called lower castes tell their stories, they not only aim to correct the near-erasure of their history and existence from popular culture; but they also wish to tell stories from the inside, which *humanize* [emphasis mine] the life of Dalits and depict it in all its complexity.
>
> *(Nagpaul, as cited in Patel 2018)*

While talking about the Dalit film-maker's way of film-making, Nagpaul points out what I consider to be the most revolutionary element deployed by the Dalit film-makers. In Bollywood films, the invisibilisation, negligence, and marginalisation of Dalit lives amount to a sort of dehumanisation of Dalit personality. The attempt to 'humanize' the Dalit lives by the Dalit film-makers certainly adds a revolutionary dimension to the film industry as it is an attempt on their parts to normalise the agency of the Dalits. These findings on such a grave yet often ignored issue deserve greater attention, and in keeping with such findings I will attempt to further the discussion in the following sections.

Bollywood Films: The Cultural Platform for Boasting of Caste Pride and Hurling Casteist Slur

One can scarcely ignore the role of Bollywood films in playing a pivotal role in reproducing and reinforcing the existing caste inequality in terms of its representation of verbal expressions fraught with casteism. The caste-insensitive film-makers in the guise of caste-neutral or casteless film personalities script films year after year without pondering much over the usage of caste-sensitive expression and its impact on the spectators. Be it their caste privilege, lack of caste consciousness, casteist mindset, or ignorance about the existing caste inequalities, their insensitivity towards the caste issues and the treatment of caste-sensitive linguistic expressions have resulted in the apotheosising of the upper castes and dehumanisation of the lower castes. And this is the result of nothing but the constant use of expressions which connote boasting of caste pride and hurling casteist slur at the low-caste communities. For the analysis of this case, I have selected some popular mainstream films which are frequently watched in the Indian households as these films are broadcast on popular TV channels at regular intervals. These popular films are an integral part of the cultural life of Indian movie buffs, and the generally unrecognised caste markers these films represent sway an enormous influence in shaping a kind of public morality, the basis of which is caste. I will illustrate certain cases in the following sections to substantiate my view.

Valorisation of the *Unchi Khandaan* or High Birth

A person who watches movies in the television regularly in an average Indian household, by virtue of being able to afford a TV with cable network, is familiar with the popular channel Set Max (now Sony Max) which on a frequent interval broadcasts the film *Sooryavansham* (Lineage of the Sun-god).[7] It is a 1999 Hindi film directed by E. V. V. Satyanarayana and a remake of the 1997 Tamil film *Suryavamsam* (Lineage of the Sun-god) directed by Vikraman. Lost in the melodramatic plot of ideological conflict between an arrogant feudal father and his 'disobedient' son who hardly cares for his individual as well as family dignity and social status and their subsequent reconciliation, thanks to the typical Bollywood villain who acts as the catalyst to this reconciliation, one can miss the fact that the film is fraught with caste pride, particularly when it comes

to boasting about one's dominant caste lineage. The film is meant to glorify some *Soorya vansh* (lineage) which is culturally feudal in mindset and possesses a sense of superiority complex in relation to various other social groups. The fashioning of Thakur Bhanu Pratap Singh (Amitabh Bachchan) consists of an elongated moustache which bears a culturally loaded implication indicating the high social status of the Thakurs as a historically dominant upper-caste group, a particular kind of attire usually worn by a lord-like personality of a particular locality, a boss-like attitude with which he dominates all the other family members, and fiery eyes combined with a baritone voice. All these elements contribute to the imaging of the superior status of a Thakur. This fashioning is a statement that he belongs to a dominant caste. Towards the end of the film, in the decisive duel, Thakur Bhanu Pratap, in a moment of emotional outburst, screams, *Heera bete, Sooryavansh ek aag hai, isme doshto ke liye jitna pyaar hai, dushmano ke liye utni jwala* (Heera, my son, Soorya clan is like fire, it possesses as much flame towards its rivals as much it possesses love for its friends).[8] The expression *Sooryavansh ek aag hai* (*Soorya* clan is like a fire) is a pure glorification and boasting of a dominant caste clan. The title track of the film, sung by the celebrated playback singer Sonu Nigam, glorifies the protagonist of the *Sooryavansh* by attributes like 'Daanveer' (the great donator) and 'Kalyug ke Ram' (Lord Rama of the present evil era). Under the garb of constructing the image of *Sooryavanshi* the saviour, the film undermines the magnitude of socio-cultural implications the boasting of dominant caste lineage bears. All these fashioning of the Thakurs, identifying themselves as *Sooryavanshi*, are indicative of the glorification of Kshatriya *varna*.

Bajirao Mastani (Bajirao and Mastani), a 2015 Sanjay Leela Bhansali film, is another instance wherein the glorification of Peshwa warrior Bajirao amounts to reclamation of superior militant status of the Peshwas who were Brahmins by caste.[9] The representation of Peshwa Bajirao (played by Ranveer Singh) as a great warrior with a considerable command over the *shastras* (religious scriptures) is an attempt to reclaim the caste pride possessed by the Peshwas of Maharashtra. One must note the voice-over at the beginning of the film to comprehend how the cinematic language has been used to deliver a glorifying and boastful account of Peshwa Bajirao, making the audience speculate over the glorious militant existence of the Peshwas. The voice-over glorifies Peshwa Bajirao in the following language,. . . *talwar mai bijli si harkat, irado mai Himalay ki arakta, chehre pe Chitpavan kul k Brahman ka tej aur ankho mai ek hi sapna—Delhi ke takht par lehrata hua Marathao ka dhwaj* . . . (Waving the sword like lightening, the Himalaya-like determination in fulfilling the purpose, the audacity of a Chitpavan Brahmin in the face, and the only dream in the eyes—the waving flag of the Marathas on Delhi empire). Here, the phrase *chehre pe Chitpavan kul k Brahman ka tej* (the audacity or fierceness of a Chitpavan Brahmin in the face) is a glorification of the audacious Chitpavan Brahmins,[10] a section of the Brahmin caste who usually inhabit Western Maharashtra, and is known to be a historically dominant caste group in the region. Such a glorifying description of the militant nature of a caste creates an aura among the spectators about the legacy of that particular caste. Now it is important to understand how such a glorification of the Chitpavan Brahmins or the Peshwas relates to the historical imagination of the lower-caste groups. Dr Ambedkar, perhaps the highest authority on the history of caste, documents this in his seminal work *Annihilation of Caste* (1936),

> [u]nder the rule of the Peshwas in the Maratha country, the untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or around his neck, as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch by mistake. In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind himself the dust he trod

> on, lest a Hindu walking on the same dust should be polluted. In Poona, the untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot hung around his neck wherever he went—for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it.
>
> *(1979: 11)*

Such kind of inhuman treatment meted out to the Untouchables under the Peshwa rule in Maharashtra attests to the thesis how the act of glorifying the Peshwas or the Chitpavan Brahmins amounts to the demeaning of the Untouchables as torturing the Untouchables and practicing casteism in the most rigorous form played a foundational role in the formation of caste pride on part of the Peshwas or the Chitpavan Brahmins.

Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (Crematorium), a critically acclaimed 2015 Hindi film, portrays an inter-caste love affair between Deepak (Vicky Kaushal)—who belongs to the Dom community, a lower-caste community, formerly untouchable, traditionally associated with the burning of corpses at the crematorium—and Shalu (Shweta Tripathi), who belongs to the Gupta community, a dominant upper-caste Bania (businessmen) community traditionally associated with trading, and a part of the Vaishya *varna* in the hierarchical *Chaturvarna* system. Although the love affair ends on a tragic note as an accident takes toll on the life of Shalu, one must not ignore the casteist mindset of Shalu's family. In one scene of the movie, Shalu, while conversing over the phone with Deepak, expresses her concern for the future of their relationship and says that her parents would never accept Deepak. Apart from this banality of casteism of Shalu's family, her family's caste bias is also understood when one of her family members, while having a meal at a hotel on their way to a pilgrimage, passes a casteist remark that the food of that hotel is delicious as the hotel belongs to some person of their own community, meaning the Gupta clan: *Achchha to hoga hi, Gupta logo ka hotel jo hai* (It is bound to be delicious as the hotel belongs to the Guptas). While such a remark usually goes unnoticed, it is to be noted that the expression is highly loaded with caste pride. As an upper caste of the hierarchical caste structure, the Guptas share in Indian society the same status as enjoyed by some other socially and economically dominant Bania communities like Agarwal, Mahajan, Jaiswal, and Barnwal in various parts of the country. Like the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, these Bania communities tend to be staunch followers of the caste system and nurture a feudal mindset. Shalu knows only too well that an upper-caste family like hers would never consider Deepak to be a suitable match for her, as the caste laws do not allow her to have a relationship with someone who belongs to an ex-untouchable Dom community. Let alone her wish to engage in a romantic affair with Deepak, she is not even, according to caste codes, allowed to touch Deepak. Both Shalu's concern for her affair with a Dalit and one of her family members' boasting of her Gupta lineage originate from the privileged location of the Guptas in the higher rung of the caste ladder. Along with framing such kind of caste prejudice of the high castes, the Bollywood films on a parallel line dehumanise the lower castes, a case which I will explore in the next section.

Bollywood Films and the Case of Community-Bashing

In caste-ridden Indian society, bashing the low-caste communities is normal practice, and the subtle reflection of it in popular Bollywood films deserves to be examined. In a 1998 Govinda starrer film *Dulhe Raja* (The Groom fondly called King), directed by Harmesh Malhotra, there features a song that goes *Chachundar ke sar pe na bhaye chameli/ Kahaan Raja Bhoj aur kahaan Gangu Teli* (A string of jasmine ain't no good on a rodent/ Bhoj shall always be king, Gangu Teli redundant)[11] and in a Dilip Kumar starrer 1974 Hindi film *Sagina* (Sagina), directed by

Tapan Sinha, there features a popular song *Sala Main To Saab Ban Gaya* (Sala, I have become an officer), which incorporates a line *Kaisa Raja Bhoj bana hain mera Gangu Teli* (How my Gangu Teli is turned into Raja Bhoj). The line *Kahaan Raja Bhoj aur kahaan Gangu Teli* is an oft-quoted Hindi proverb suggesting the hiatus in stature between two personalities. To convey the unequal stature of two personalities one who is considered to hold the higher stature is compared with the king Bhoj, whereas the inferior one is compared with a Teli, mostly recognised as a low-caste community traditionally associated with the pressing of oil. The proverb aptly indicates how in Indian society it is seemingly imperative, or rather normative, to compare a person of lower quality with a low-caste group. Here, the status of king Bhoj can only be elevated by demeaning that of the Teli community, the community to which Gangu Teli belongs.

The title track of the 2007 Madhuri Dixit starrer film *Aaja Nachle* (Come, let's Dance), produced by Aditya Chopra and directed by Anil Mehta, contains a few lines which created a controversy during the release of the film as the lines connote some casteist implications, which result in denigrating or humiliating the Mochi community, a low-caste group traditionally associated with the 'derogatory' occupation of shoemaking or shoe-repairing. In the states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and later in Patna, the capital city of Bihar, the film was banned as these lines were replete with casteism. In Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab the ban was lifted only when the states obtained a written apology from the producers of the film and had the controversial lines replaced. The issue was also raised in the Indian Parliament by the member of the Republican Party of India, Ramdas Athawale, alleging that the lines hurt the sentiments of the Dalits, and therefore a ban should be imposed upon the film by the government.[12] Thus go the lines penned by Pankaj Mishra, a Brahmin by birth: *Mohalle mein kaise maramar hai/ Bole mochi bhi khud ko sunaar hai* (There is an outbreak of chaos in the locality/ Even the cobbler dares to call himself a goldsmith). In the conventional caste hierarchy the 'Mochi' (cobbler) is located at the lower rung, whereas the 'Sunaar' (goldsmith) acquires a higher rung in the caste ladder than the former. Therefore, these lines denote that a chaos breaks out in the locality because the cobbler is claiming himself to be a goldsmith which causes disruption in the caste hierarchy. The lines reflect the existing inequality on the caste lines by implying that the act of claiming himself to be a goldsmith on the part of the cobbler is an audacious act as far as the composition of the caste system is concerned. That a Mochi or any member of the low-caste community must not claim a higher status for themselves in society as it will create a disruption in the social structure is communicated by the lines. In the film, the name of a nomadic tribe 'Kanjar' has been deployed as a casteist slur when the character Manju (Kiran Kher) compares the royal kingdom with the *Kanjarkha*na (a house full of Kanjar people) to mean the conflicting nature of the royal families. A royal family, engaged in fighting on a regular interval, has been compared with the Kanjar peoples as the Kanjars were stereotyped as the peoples who always indulge in fighting (Gautam 2017). The word 'Kanjar' is also used to connote a person having a low moral character.

In a 2007 Hindi film *Journey Bombay to Goa*, directed by Raj Pendurkar, there is a sequence in which the Indian cricketers hop on the bus. The cricketers get badly ridiculed on the bus by the driver, the conductor, and other passengers of the bus in order to evoke laughter among the audience as it is meant to be a comedy film. In that sequence, the bus conductor Lal (Sunil Pal) ridicules Mahendra Singh Dhoni, the then wicket-keeper batsman of the Indian cricket team, as he failed to perform his job in the 2007 ICC Cricket World Cup. While ridiculing Dhoni, Lal takes resort to the language of community-bashing. He utters, *Mere Dhobi, are tumhe team mai rakkha gaya tha kyu ki tumhe ball dhoni thi. Tum bol to dho nehi paye, baal to dhoya karo* (My Dhobi [washerman], you were selected in the team so that you could wash the ball. You failed to do that; at least clean your hair). In the hierarchical caste society, Dhobi is a low-caste community conventionally associated with the occupation of washing and ironing clothes. They are also

traditionally treated as Untouchables. Here, Dhoni's ball-hitting quality has been compared to the act of washing clothes by the Dhobis, implying the exclusive responsibility of the Dhobis in a caste-ridden society to wash the clothes. Here, ridiculing Dhoni amounts to bashing the Dhobi community. It reflects the deeply entrenched caste practice in which the Dhobis live with the stigma that they are entitled merely to wash the dirty clothes. It reveals how the apparently 'liberal' Bollywood film industry which oftentimes boasts of National pride in its attitude and treatment to the game of cricket, capitalising the huge popularity of the game across the country, remains unaware and callous regarding the casteist implications of its verbal expressions and gestures.

Nomenclature and Gesture, and the Dehumanisation of a Dalit

In this section, I enlist a few nomenclatures or gestures represented in the films which contribute to the dehumanisation of the lower castes. These nomenclatures or gestures reveal the tradition of the caste-ridden Hindu society of attributing a Dalit with a name which degrades their human dignity. There are several such nomenclatures which are occasionally invoked in Bollywood films to dehumanise a Dalit or a person of low-caste origin or an entire community. For instance, the frequent use of the word 'Mawali' as a synonym of 'gunda' (goons, ruffians, or hooligans), and the juxtaposition of the word with 'gunda', i.e., the expression 'gunda-mawali', to denote a street ruffian or harasser is scarcely unknown to a common movie-goer. One is necessarily aware of the fact that associating the word 'mawali', which is the name of a particular community, with 'gunda' or goons amounts to the act of community-bashing. As informed by Shireen Moosvi, Mawalis were the 'converted Iranians' who were degraded by the Arab Caliphs to the status of a 'depressed class within the Islamic community' (2011). Other instances include the use of 'Ardali' (servant or 'slave'); 'Chandal', the name of an untouchable caste, traditionally associated with the occupation of burning the dead bodies at the crematorium, which is usually employed to denote a person of low-birth, a person with a mind of brutality, an uncivilised fellow; 'Mali' (gardener), the name of another community, which is often used derogatively to demean a person, thereby demeaning the profession of the Mali caste, and so on. This practice of attributing a Shudra (low caste) person with a name connoting his or her servile status in society has been there in caste-ridden Indian society since time immemorial as it is the *shastric* (scriptural) injunction which gives birth to such a dehumanising practice. Even these *shastras* (scriptures) like *Manusmriti* (Law of Manu) and *Parasar Smriti* (Law of Parasar) frame some pernicious codes of conduct for each of the *varnas* which give birth to casteist gestures of the upper castes like 'twirling the moustache', 'shameless display of *janeyu* (the so-called sacred thread)', frequent boasting of high-caste identity like 'Brahmin', 'Kshatriya', 'Rajput', 'Thakur', and 'Chauhan', following a particular dress code to assert their supremacy over the low-caste communities.

Conclusion

The chapter has been an attempt to put the upper-caste gaze in question by foregrounding the subtle metaphors of caste which are not infrequent in Bollywood films but in most cases go unnoticed during the process of mass consumption and critical review as the upper-caste gaze trains the spectators to consume the films by silencing and marginalising the Dalit lifeworld. Through the Savarna gaze of most of the film-makers in the guise of liberal humanism, one tends to reduce the metaphors of caste to 'non-issues'. But these 'non-issues' play a foundational

role in reproducing a deviated 'other', reducing the low-caste members of society to an almost sub-human status. This chapter has attempted to critique the practice of unapologetically reproducing the caste markers without pondering over its pernicious impact on the Dalit lifeworld. For this very purpose, the chapter has resorted to the tool of 'Bahujan spectatorship', which—to use the words of Jyoti Nisha, well-known for her recent documentary film *B R Ambedkar—Now and Then*,[13] 'relates to an oppositional gaze and a political strategy of Bahujans to reject the Brahminical representation of caste and marginalised communities in Indian cinema . . . an inverted methodology to document a different socio-political Bahujan experience of consuming popular cinema' (2020). As this chapter is limited in its scope, more detailed research can further this discussion which deserves greater critical attention in order to unearth in films what Gyanendra Pandey calls the 'universal prejudice'.

Notes

1 Through the ritual called *Upanayan*, a Brahmin boy gets the right to wear the sacred thread to assert his twice-born status, which marks his distinctiveness and superiority in the society over other castes.

2 Chirali Sharma, 'Calling Someone Ch*nki, Bh*ngi, Can Land You In Jail; These & Other Racist Slurs Which Are Illegal', *ED Times*, Sep 11, 2020. https://edtimes.in/calling-someone-chnki-bhngi-can-land-you-in-jail-these-other-racist-slurs-which-are-illegal/. Accessed on December 15, 2020.

3 Deeptiman Tiwary. 'Walking the faultlines: The Bhim Army has been slowly gaining ground among Dalits locally'. *The Indian Express,* June 26, 2018. https://indianexpress.com/article/india/walking-the-faultlines-bhim-army-bjp-bsp-yogi-adityanath-mayawati-4687743/. Accessed on Aug 30, 2022.

4 'Casteist Slurs You Need to Know'. YouTube video. www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJwkIxOpqZA. Accessed on July 20, 2020.

5 'Gyanendra Pandey: Modern Prejudice: "Vernacular" and "Universal"'. YouTube video. www.youtube.com/watch?v=59szLdE3NoQ&t=661s. Accessed on July 20, 2020. In this lecture, Pandey talks about different forms of prejudice which he largely explores in his book *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States* (2013). He makes a rough distinction between 'Vernacular' prejudice, by which he refers to the prejudices which are visible, recognised, understood and therefore, draw attention of the state and society, and 'Universal' prejudice, by which he implies the invisible, unacknowledged, unrecognised form of prejudice which he describes as 'the common sense of the modern'.

6 *Lagaan* (agricultural tax) was a 2001 Hindi film directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. The film starred Aamir Khan in the lead role. It was a critically acclaimed film which got nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. See the chapter dedicated to the film in this volume.

7 According to Hindu mythology, *Soorya vansh* or the solar dynasty was a dynasty founded by king Iskvaku. It belongs to the lineage of *Kshatriya varna*, the second-most powerful high caste after the Brahman in the hierarchical *Chaturvarna* system. The legendary king Rama, the protagonist of the *mahakabya* (roughly translating, 'epic') *Ramayana*, belongs to this *vansh* or dynasty. But some Buddhist texts claim a different origin of the dynasty. Whatever be the truth of its origin, in contemporary times, the attribute 'Sooryavansh' is used by some high castes, especially the Kshatriyas, to claim a dominant, militant high caste origin and to consolidate a superior socio-political status over others.

8 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

9 The Peshwas were generally the chief executive officers of the Maratha Empire, founded by Chhatrapati Shivaji. Later the Peshwas, belonging to the Chitpavan Brahmin sect, became the highest administrative authority of the Maratha Empire. The Peshwas reached the zenith of power under Baji Rao I, who ruled the Maratha Empire during 1720–1740.

10 'Brahmin Chitpavan in India'. https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/19935/IN. Accessed on May 28, 2020.

11 'A string of jasmine ain't no good on a rodent/Bhoj shall always be king, Gangu Teli redundant'. Trans. S. Anand, 'The Ballad of Gangu Teli: There's More to Raja Bhoj, and Even Gandhi, If We Look at Them from a Dalit Perspective', *OPEN*, March 3, 2010. https://openthemagazine.com/features/india/the-ballad-of-gangu-teli/. Accessed on May 29, 2020.

12 *Aaja Nachle*. 'Controversy'. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaja_Nachle. Accessed on May 29, 2020.

13 *B R Ambedkar—Now and Then* is a documentary film directed by Jyoti Nisha, a Mumbai-based independent film-maker. The film was released in 2018. See the related chapter in this volume.

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8

Over-the-Top

Online Media and the Transnational Travels of Caste

Purnima Mankekar and Sucharita Kanjilal

Indian marriages have long been a popular topic in films (both in Bollywood and beyond), television (for instance, the reality show *Rakhi ka Swayamwar* [NDTV; 2009]), and, more recently, on streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Full of colour and drama, these popular cultural texts represent and recursively constitute marriage as central to the preservation and reproduction of 'Indian' culture in India and its many diasporas. In contrast to an earlier moment when paradigmatic films like *Achoot Kanya* (dir.: Franz Osten; 1936) and *Sujata* (dir.: Bimal Roy; 1960) directly confronted the fraught relationship between caste, gender, and sexuality, caste is an absent present in many recent productions (Marathi films *Fandry* [dir.: Nagaraj Manjule; 2013] and *Sairat* [dir.: Nagraj Manjule; 2016] are among the notable exceptions).

Cultural productions featuring the arrangement of marriages in Over-the-top (OTT hereafter) media like Amazon Prime and Netflix place caste in a particular representational regime as both *invisible* (these shows rarely, if ever, feature caste or explicitly portray its many implications for the arrangement of marriages) and *legible* through discourses of respectability and skin colour as well as depictions of caste in practice through formulations of taste, desire, and embodiment. These OTT productions, which include Amazon's *Made in Heaven* and Netflix's *The Big Day*[1] and *Indian Matchmaking*, have been launched during a historical moment marked by a precipitous rise in caste-based violence in India in conjunction with the Hinduisation of 'Indian' culture, the marginalisation of religious minorities, and, last but not least, anti-Muslim racism.[2]

We focus on the first season of *Indian Matchmaking*, a Netflix reality show that has been enormously popular in India as well as overseas; it has also been highly controversial because of its portrayal of gender, sexuality, class, 'Indian' culture and Indianness, and, as some perceptive viewers and reviewers have pointed out, of the (in)visibility of caste in marriages in India and Indian America (for instance, Yashica Dutt 2020). While its popular reception and critical reviews have been preoccupied with evaluating the show's purported ability to appropriately represent the 'reality' of arranged marriages and the real, off-screen lives of its characters, our objective is markedly different. We take as a given that reality TV is elaborately scripted and staged: media texts can neither be reduced to straightforward reflections of sociocultural 'truths' nor do they determine behaviour. We are interested, instead, in how *Indian Matchmaking*, in the choices it makes as a form of cultural production, simultaneously elides and recasts normative

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formations of caste-marked conjugality, racialised chromatics, and discourses of desire, taste, and embodiment, with particular reference to the articulation of caste and race in Indian America.

Streamed on OTT platforms, shows like *Indian Matchmaking* circulate transnationally: their reception and interpretation are likely to vary depending on viewers' knowledge of and, in many cases, their conceptions of 'India' and 'Indianness' (Mankekar 2015). For viewers familiar with Hindu-Indian cultural codes, discourses of respectability, skin colour, community, and family background render legible the unspoken subtext of caste differentiation and hierarchy; in contrast, caste might seem irrelevant to audiences unschooled in Hindu-Indian cultural codes of chromatics, community, and respectability.[3]

In Hindu-Indian communities, marriage is an important site for the maintenance of caste privilege as well as for the production and regulation of erotics. Like many cultural productions featuring marriage (including reality shows like ABC's *The Bachelor* [2002–present] and Netflix's *Love is Blind* [2020]), *Indian Matchmaking* foregrounds the staging and curation of desire in how erotics adhere to certain bodies rather than others: even when caste is not always discussed or visible, it is embodied in heterogeneous ways in bodies that desire and are desired.[4] At once reinforcing and problematising cliched renditions of 'the arranged marriage' as the dominant trope in representations of 'Indianness' in the diaspora, *Indian Matchmaking* brings to the fore the complex intersections of respectability, cultural purity, and racialised chromatics in Indian America. Furthermore, *Indian Matchmaking* suggests some of the ways in which the simultaneously invisible and legible presence of caste articulates with race for Indian Americans.

Putting Caste in Its Place

In his landmark article aptly titled 'Putting Hierarchy in Its Place', Arjun Appadurai posited that the complexity of India had been reduced to caste hierarchies in academic and popular discourses (1988). Other scholarly arguments have foregrounded the role of colonial, Orientalist, and postcolonial practices in hypostasising caste (Beteille 1990; Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). Despite the validity of these critiques of representations of caste as static and its fetishisation to the exclusion of other social and cultural formations in India, relatively little attention has been paid in canonical scholarship to the *reconfiguration* of caste as an important axis of inequality and structural violence or its imbrication with discourses of development, modernity, Hindu nationalism, and neoliberalism. This is not to say that these conversations have been absent; rather, it points to the sidelining from the theoretical canon of Dalit scholarship (Guru and Sarukkai 2018) which has engaged powerfully with these questions since the pre- and postcolonial writings of B. R. Ambedkar (Yengde and Teltumbde 2018) and, more recently, in the works of other Ambedkarite and Dalit feminist scholars, including Guru (1995), Rege (1998), Pawar and Moon (2014), Paik (2014), Geetha (2007), Teltumbde (2018), and Waghmore (2013).

Recent years have witnessed a significant surge in violence against communities placed at the bottom of caste hierarchies, some of which is a backlash against the political mobilisation of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Dalits. Upper-caste violence has been particularly brutal in contexts of inter-caste marriages: marriage is deemed a boundary that cannot be breached (Mankekar 2021). The absent presence of caste in popular cultural representations of romance and intimacy is therefore jarring: for the most part, caste is rarely, if ever, explicitly discussed, yet it is encoded in the last names of characters, skin colour, and the presence of Brahmin priests officiating at weddings. Apart from occasional portrayals of lower-caste characters, the caste identities of upper-caste protagonists remain unmarked. Consider, for example, the blockbuster film *Dabangg* (dir.: Abhinav Kashyap, 2010) in which there is no explicit discussion of caste despite the fact that the protagonist Chulbul Pandey is legible as upper caste because of his last name. This

purported invisibility of caste, the fact that it is unmarked and unremarked upon, symptomatises upper-caste ideological dominance, monopoly on material resources, and social privilege.

The absent presence and, in most cases, the invisibility of caste in cultural productions centred on Hindu-Indian marriages is particularly puzzling given its continuing significance in 'regulating sexuality, configuring ties of kinship, and representing desire' (Rao 2005: 715). Along with the gastropolitics of caste implicated in the sharing, preparation, and consumption of food (Kanjilal 2021), marriage remains an exemplary site for the generation and regulation of desire *in terms of* caste. In Hindu-India, marriages are regulated through the rule of endogamy according to which marriage must occur within a caste and *gotra* (lineage) exogamy which prohibits marriages within a gotra: marriage, therefore, is a crucial terrain for the preservation of caste privilege. A 2018 study found that fewer than 10% of urban Indians had married outside of their caste group, and richer families were less likely than poorer ones to transgress caste rules of endogamy (Rukmini 2018).[5] At the same time, while endogamy has been crucial to the maintenance of caste barriers, its rules do not apply to lower-caste women whose bodies are deemed accessible to upper-caste men both within and outside marriage (Rege 2018; Geetha 2007: 191–192; Abraham 2014: 57).

Furthermore, far from being static, caste endogamy is highly contingent: it is fundamentally shaped by temporally specific dynamics of power. Social reformers and activists like Tarabai Shinde, Jyotirao Phule, E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, and B. R. Ambedkar took the lead in pushing back against upper-caste practices of marriage, sexuality, and kinship; additionally, the contingency of caste endogamy is predicated on everyday forms of power and inequality generated, in turn, by historically-specific hierarchies (Abraham 2014: 56; Rao 2005; Rege 2018). Simply put, intersections of caste, gender, and sexuality are shaped by the institutionalisation of power and inequality. Thus, misidentified as honour killings, the murders of couples flouting rules of caste endogamy occur for heterogeneous and complex reasons that might have as much to do with the maintenance of patriarchal power over women's bodies as with preserving caste privilege and access to material resources, thereby underscoring the intersection of caste hierarchies, patriarchal control of women's sexuality, and political economy (Rege 2018). For instance, Jats in Haryana have justified their brutal violence against Dalits who enter into sexual liaisons with Jat women with the argument that, after stealing their jobs, Dalits are now going after 'their' women (Chowdhry 2009: 437; Mankekar 2021).[6] Inter-caste marriages result in violence and tensions precisely because of the subversive dynamism of these relationships of power.

Indian Matchmaking

In 2020, India was the fastest growing OTT market in the world, drawing USD 2.92 billion in revenues (KPMC 2020)[7] and viewership soaring by 30% to 29 million because of the Covid-19 pandemic (IBEF 2020).[8] The country is expected to become the world's sixth-largest in OTT revenue by 2024 (PWC 2020).[9] While viewership remained concentrated in metropolises, new subscriptions grew faster in smaller cities and rural areas in 2020 (Samtani and Kohli 2020).[10] This growth was enabled by the widespread availability of cheap data and smartphones, the preferred device for OTT streaming; Indians spend an average of 18 billion minutes a week streaming video content on their phones (Samtani and Kohli 2020).

Indian Matchmaking was released in July, at the height of the pandemic-induced OTT boom. Significantly, the show was commissioned not by Netflix India, but by Netflix's Los Angeles office with film-maker Smriti Mundhra as producer (Ramachandran 2020).[11] Mundhra's previous feature, the documentary *A Suitable Girl* (2017), was based on similar themes of familial marital pressures in India. *Indian Matchmaking* would eventually be hosted by Sima Taparia, the

mother of a protagonist in *A Suitable Girl* and Mundhra's own matchmaker. The cast included six main characters who were looking to be 'matched': Aparna, Nadia, Pradhyuman, Akshay, Ankita, and Vyasar, all Hindu-Indians or Hindu-Indian Americans, and Rupam, a Sikh American. The supporting cast included suitors, family members, friends, and experts from the matrimonial industry. *Indian Matchmaking* was quickly declared viral, drawing a large viewership in India, heterogeneous Indian diasporas, and among non-Indian international audiences. This virality was, in part, due to the controversy it generated: it faced widespread criticism for stereotyping 'traditional' arranged marriages for White audiences or for failing to show the 'reality' of modern marriage in India. Trade experts noted that, while viewers may have had mixed reactions, these extra-textual controversies ultimately helped Netflix capture large emerging OTT markets such as India (Rai 2020).[12]

In this essay, we eschew interpretations of *Indian Matchmaking* in terms of essentialist evaluations of the 'authenticity' of its portrayal of Indian wedding traditions or reductionist dichotomies of 'tradition' versus 'modernity'—all of which were repeatedly mobilised in many reviews. That the show was produced in the United States for a transnational English-speaking audience and Mundhra's choice of Sima as the host already limited the show's content in terms of the socio-political milieu it depicted. As Mundhra told *Variety*, 'We had to be authentic to Sima's world. We'd be having too heavy a hand as producers if we said she has to do a match for an LGBT couple, or a Muslim couple.' Predictably, there are no 'lower'-caste, Dalit, Muslim, or Christian characters in *Indian Matchmaking*.

The very first episode foregrounds the modernity of the marriages arranged by Sima. As she claims, 'In India, marriage is a very big industry. A very big fat industry': capitalist and consumerist practices are central to the arrangement of marriages. Even as she draws on the expertise of Brahmin priests and astrologers (she addresses them as *panditji*, a form of address reserved for Brahmins), she also depends on FaceTime, Skype, and WhatsApp to stay in touch with her clients. She claims that her primary responsibility is to bring young couples together: whether or not they proceed to get married, she insists, depends on the 'chemistry' between them and, ultimately, on their destiny and whether or not their stars align. If Sima consults Brahmin 'face readers' who read the personalities of clients, she also directs clients to life coaches who can counsel them to change their behaviour. Additionally, *Indian Matchmaking* both recreates the binary between love and arranged marriages and problematises it.[13] Sima claims that, in India, there are marriages and there are 'love' marriages, hence rendering normative the practice of arranged marriages. Yet, as multiple conversations about chemistry underscore, erotic desire or sexual attraction may also determine whether or not Sima's matchmaking will succeed. As her client Ankita, a young New Delhi-based businesswoman, points out, matchmaking is 'Tinder Premium[14] but with families involved'.

The series depicts the agency of men and women as complex and contradictory.[15] Sima insists that the decision about whether to get married lies with the young people and their families. One of Sima's young clients, Akshay, is constantly nagged by his domineering mother to get married within the year; yet, despite his apparently passive behaviour, he stubbornly refuses to accept marriage proposals until he is ready. Ankita rejects a prospective groom because he has concealed a previous divorce. Men and women are asked to be 'flexible' and to 'compromise' or 'adjust' in order to have a happy marriage. Ankita, for example, is asked by Sima's colleague to 'go with the flow' because women have to sacrifice for the stability of their marriages; however, Sima also constantly exhorts Pradhyuman and Akshay to be flexible and 'compromise' because, she insists, they can never get everything they want in a life partner. Men, unquestionably, have an upper hand in the negotiations surrounding the arrangement of their marriages: Akshay and Pradhyuman reject multiple proposals. But we also see women turning down possible suitors.

Houston-based Aparna rejects several men, and Manisha turns down Vyasar when she feels they have nothing in common. To this extent, then, *Indian Matchmaking* undermines stereotypical discourses of arranged marriages as forced.

Yet, caste shapes Sima's efforts to match couples in fundamental ways. Beyond the invocations of the expertise of Brahmin priests and astrologers, caste plays a crucial role in arranging matches. At the very beginning of *Indian Matchmaking*, Sima states unequivocally: 'India, we have to see the caste, the height, we have to see the age'. These, she believes, are the most important factors in the construction of 'biodatas' and in vetting candidates during the matching process. Similar to a resume, a biodata includes a photograph of prospective candidates and contains details about their background, their interests, and what they are looking for in a spouse. The biodatas put together by Sima mirror the apparently ambiguous yet crucial role of caste in matchmaking. Some biodatas prominently note the caste of the candidate in terms of 'community'. Thus, we learn that Pradhyuman is Marwari and Vinay Chadha is Khatri.[16] Other biodatas reconfigure caste under the sign of language, 'culture', or preferences in vegetarian versus non-vegetarian food: here, caste operates through its resignification as caste-lessness which is sometimes coded as cosmopolitanism (Deshpande 2013: 33; Guru 2009). Furthermore, because of the strong overlaps between caste and class, caste is foundational to the class privilege of Sima's upper-class clients whose access to education and capital has been shaped by intergenerational caste capital.

In *Indian Matchmaking*, caste is coded in subtle and less subtle ways in terms of respectability, skin colour, dietary practice, and the production and regulation of sexuality and desire. While caste in India is routinely upheld through overt forms of repression, upper-caste violence, and legal regimes of punishment and criminalisation (Sonavane and Wadekar 2020),[17] its stubborn endurance in everyday life is rooted in its slippery ability to become enfolded into and invisibilised as embodied customs, tastes, and desires. Ambedkar describes this ability of caste to persist without force using the affective phrase mental habitudes: these, he argues, are embodied as 'certain habits not only of acting, but of feeling and believing, of valuing, of approving and disapproving' which, when they become 'crystallized into customs and traditions . . . do not need any sanction of law for their enforcement' (Ambedkar 1989: 283). Central to this argument is the way caste disciplines and reproduces the social body and informs erotic desire which, in *Indian Matchmaking*, is couched in the liberal language of 'attraction' or 'chemistry'.

When Ankita likens matchmaking to Tinder ('but with families involved'), the show suggests that, rather than being archaic and forced, matchmaking allows for the agentive exploration of erotic desire. Yet, as Christina Dhanaraj (2020) writes, even though dating apps like Tinder do not use caste as a criterion for matching, once dates go offline caste shapes erotic desire in fundamental and somatic ways: desirability is encoded in upper-caste ideals of chaste femininity, competence, and just-enough confidence. Dalit women, on the other hand, are seen as too 'dark-skinned, polluting, loud and tough' and treated either as voiceless victims or promiscuous and sexually available to satisfy unconventional desires while never being desirable enough for serious relationships that would require 'involving families', as Ankita puts it. The case of Nadia, as we suggest in the next section, illustrates some of these caste-based politics of desirability.

Further, compulsory heterosexual desire, fundamental to maintaining and reproducing caste endogamy, is the central theme in the story of Pradhyuman. When *Indian Matchmaking* was released, the question of Pradhyuman's sexuality became a popular subject of online gossip. Viewers noted the show's focus on his love for cooking and designing miniature clothes as well as the prolonged scenes inside his fashionably stocked 'closet' in which there appears to be no room for a future wife. Pradhyuman later denied being gay or bisexual and complained that he was 'stereotyped' by the show. Our interest is not in discovering the 'truth' of Pradhyuman's

sexuality. Instead, what is revealing is that *Indian Matchmaking's* wink and nod to Pradhyuman's presumably ambiguous sexuality is most clearly articulated by juxtaposing those scenes with his family and friends' anxieties about his distinct *lack* of desire for women. Explaining why he is not married yet, Pradhyuman says, 'I'm just not attracted to them . . . if I meet them once I don't feel like meeting them again'. Later, Sima notes, with some frustration, 'Pradhyuman has seen 150 girls and he has rejected all of them'. Pradhyuman's lack of interest in women and, thus, his failure to marry and settle down is presented not only as a problem for him and his family but as a threat to the heterosexual marriages of his well-heeled friends. When they gather for drinks at a high-end Mumbai bar, one friend remarks wistfully that once Pradhyuman gets married, 'everyone's life will be settled and calm'. Another complains, 'Right now, he's pulling my husband all over the place and asking for boys' trips every other day . . . once he gets married, my life will be settled, my baby's life will be settled'. Pradhyuman's very existence as a seemingly queer, non-desiring subject imperils the institution of heteronormative marriage as shaped by the imperative of the biological and cultural reproduction of caste and class privilege.

At the same time, his inability to be attracted to 150 women does not deter his family and Sima from introducing him to still more women suitors, all of whom are fair-skinned, demure, and normatively feminine, features notably embodied in the desirable upper-caste woman (Dhanaraj 2020). The question of caste, desire, and skin colour becomes even more salient, and more complicated, in caste-(un)marked marriages in the Indian diaspora. We turn next to the transnational travels of caste in Indian America.

Caste, Race, and Marriage in Indian America

Sima's clientele extends across diasporic communities across the world, as she puts it, in 'Bangkok, Hong Kong, and America'. The Indian diaspora is the world's largest, with about 32 million people of Indian origin living abroad and represents an enormous growing market for Indian media content. According to some estimates, more than half of this population pays for Indian content, often in regional languages or English with dubbing and subtitling. The OTT market among the Indian diaspora is expected to grow to $1 billion by 2023 (Samtani and Jindal 2018).[18] Indian Americans are more likely to consume Indian content via YouTube or on global streaming OTT platforms such as Netflix (Samtani and Jindal 2018).

If the arranged marriage is a patriarchal 'artifact' that reinforces gender asymmetry, caste hierarchy, and class privilege in India (Sharangpani 2010: 271), it is a particularly significant terrain for the intersection of class, gender, and caste in Indian America. Marriages put on display the class positions and aspirations of Indian American families; even more crucially, marriage represents a crucial site for the construction of female sexuality as metonymic of the cultural purity of the community (Mankekar 2015). In both India and Indian America, internet technology has transformed the way in which marriages are arranged (Agrawal 2015; Pillay 2019; Sharangpani 2010; Titzmann 2013). For over two decades now, online portals such as Shaadi.com and Bharatmatrimony.com have enabled individuals and families to find prospective spouses, and caste is a significant criterion on these matchmaking sites (Agrawal 2015), with some of these portals going to the extent of launching standalone caste-specific offshoots such as Brahminmatrimony.com and Kayasthamatrimony.com.[19]

If Indians and Indian Americans are deemed culturally and racially foreign in White supremacist discourses of cultural citizenship and national belonging, the trope of the arranged marriage is central to these representational regimes and is itself a modality of their racialisation as irrefutably Other.[20] Yet, unlike stereotypical representations of arranged marriages in terms of a hypostasised 'tradition' in contradistinction to its polar opposite, a 'modern' marriage based

on individual choice, *Indian Matchmaking* complicates some of the tropes representing arranged marriages in Indian America through, for instance, its minimisation of parental authority. In portions of the show based in the United States, parents remain in the background either as passive bystanders to provide moral support or, in two instances, as sceptical of Sima's efforts to arrange marriages for their children. Thus, instead of portraying matchmaking in terms of an intergenerational conflict, where (purportedly traditional; read: Indian) parents attempt to coerce their (presumably modern; read: American or Americanised) children into arranged marriages, we learn that Sima's young Indian American clients hire her because they have exhausted other possibilities of meeting people, including dating apps and social networks.[21] Aparna's mother is sceptical of the proposals that Sima brings to her daughter: her priority is that Aparna should not end up marrying someone who will 'crush her spirit' and she takes great pride in the fact that Aparna is opinionated, driven, and successful in her career.[22] All of Sima's Indian American clients have close relationships with their families. Nadia is so close to her parents as to share her dreams and fears with them; in fact, she takes her mother along to Chicago when she meets Shekar for the first time, and she and Shekar talk about how their parents are their best friends.

Caste and class have converged in significant, yet not always obvious, ways for many Indian Americans. Drawing on the discourse of Asian Americans as model minorities, Indian American self-fashioning rests on assumptions of upward class mobility (Mankekar 2015). However, the class privileges of most Indian Americans, particularly for those who have immigrated as professionals, arise from upper-caste privilege in India. Caste has historically shaped access to higher education in India which, in turn, has enabled immigration to the United States (Subramanian 2015). Indeed, it may be argued that, by opening the door to the immigration of highly educated professionals from India, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act laid the foundation for upper-caste privilege, and its denial, in Indian America: discourses of meritocracy and the American Dream only reinforce the elision of caste capital as a primary source of educational capital (Pillay 2019).

Thus, middle-class and upper-middle-class Indian Americans can occlude their caste privilege by reverting to claims of meritocracy foundational to the model minority discourse. They are able to insist that their caste is irrelevant because, 'having encashed its traditional caste capital and converted it into modern forms of capital like property, higher educational credentials, and strongholds in lucrative professions, this section believes itself to be "caste-less" today' (Deshpande 2013: 32). Yet, recent news reports point to how caste violence against 'lower' castes and Dalits persists in Indian America, including in educational institutions and in high-tech companies like Google (Tiku 2020). A survey launched by Equality Labs of Indians in the United States reports that 26% of its respondents had experienced a physical assault because of their caste, while 59% reported that they had been the target of caste-based jokes and verbal abuse. Another report argues that caste restrictions continue to shape marriage in Indian America, with one commentator comparing them to marriages between White and Black Americans in the Jim Crow South (Pillay 2019).

Discourses of respectability undergird the production of marriage as a site for the generation and regulation of erotics. In *Indian Matchmaking*, the significance of caste to Hindu-Indian constructions of respectability is most legible in its lack or ambiguity. The sole Sikh American family in the show is positioned *outside*, and throws into relief, Hindu-Indian regimes of caste. Sikh religion is, *in principle*, anti-caste, and Sikhs have long been marginalised by Hindu nationalist conceptions of citizenship, nationhood, and belonging. The show's representation of Sikh American Rupam and her family reinforces their outsider status. From the perspective of Hindu-Indian respectability, they transgress several norms: Rupam is divorced; her sister is

married to an African American man and has biracial children; and she eventually finds a partner through Bumble[23] rather than through a matchmaker. Rupam and her family are outsiders to Hindu-Indian America in more ways than one, not least because, within the moral economy of the show's narrative, they are ostensibly caste-less.[24]

The intimate relationship between respectability and cultural authenticity on the one hand and caste, embodiment, and desire on the other is clearest with regard to Nadia, Sima's Indo-Guyanese client. Tall, successful, and the most dark skinned of all her women clients, Nadia's caste is both ambiguous and central to how she is perceived by her suitors and by Sima. Nadia worries that Indian American men do not perceive her to be 'truly' Indian because her parents are from Guyana: the ambiguity of her caste position is articulated through discourses of cultural (in)authenticity. Nadia's ancestors were part of cohorts of indentured labourers who were transported to British Guyana around 1838. Many of these labourers came from lower-caste communities and became indentured to escape acute poverty and indebtedness to their upper-caste landlords. Initially, caste segregation and rules of purity and pollution could not be followed on the passage from India to Guyana and this led to a loss of caste status for these labourers. Subsequently, a version of caste hierarchy re-emerged over the years with the formation of settled Indo-Guyanese communities and the growth of Hindu organisations like the Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharma with their divergent positions on caste (Smith and Jayawardena 1959: 323; Jayawardena 1980: 436).[25]

Nadia is indignant that she is perceived by Indian Americans as South American and 'not Indian enough'. Her dark skin and Guyanese ancestry suggest how caste status is imbricated with Indianness: her lack of caste purity is synecdochic of her lack of cultural purity. Upon first meeting her, Sima remarks to the audience: 'She is Guyanese. It will be difficult for me to match a traditional Indian boy'. When Sima first presents Nadia with three possible suitors' biodatas, Nadia's mother begins to respond, 'I take it they are open to a Guyanese girl rather than a . . .', but Sima interrupts her by saying, disingenuously, 'Yeah, yeah, caste is not a problem for anybody'. Sima's words underscore how Nadia's Guyanese ancestry is reframed in terms of caste and, more specifically, as a caste 'problem'. Through its representation of Nadia's unsuccessful efforts to find an Indian American man who will marry her, *Indian Matchmaking* suggests that caste purity and the cultural purity of Hindu-Indian Americans may be inextricably entangled. Nadia is portrayed as highly desirable, yet no Hindu-Indian American man wants to marry her. When Guru and Nadia meet at a restaurant, Nadia seems to immediately put him off when she orders a mimosa; when she asks him what he would like to order, he retorts curtly that he does not drink alcohol. The dynamic between them shifts and becomes visibly more strained when she asks if he eats meat, to which Guru uncomfortably retorts that he is trying to cut back 'for health reasons'.

Gopal Guru (2009) argues that a fundamental way of distinguishing 'touchable' castes from 'untouchable' ones has been the separation of vegetarians from meat-eaters. Caste regimes are thus embodied through the regulation of food and consequently mobilised through the affects of humiliation, disgust, and distaste during inter-caste dining encounters. Nadia's alterity is repeatedly indexed by her taste for meat, a dietary practice not highlighted for any other Indian or Indian American character on the show. She is shown to order meat dishes in three scene-setting moments: first, as she describes her Guyanese heritage while ordering chicken patties at a Guyanese restaurant in Queens; the second time, when she orders a bacon mac-and-cheese while on her date with Guru; and finally, when she meets upper-caste Vinay Chaddha at a restaurant and picks a chicken-and-okra dish. That this particular dietary boundary remains meaningful in questions of marriage is, like other caste-markers, rendered simultaneously invisible and legible throughout the show. As the camera zooms in on the 'biodatas' of Nadia's suitors,

we can see their preference for vegetarianism/non-vegetarianism innocuously mentioned under 'social information'. Moreover, while bourgeois, upper-caste Indians might often refrain from outright disavowals of 'non-vegetarian' food in order to claim the aspirational values of liberal cosmopolitanism (Staples 2020), the fraught meanings of vegetarianism and caste respectability are often recast in the language of ethics or nutrition, while remaining encoded in embodied and somatic responses to meat. Overtly, Guru and Vinay gloss over their choices to avoid meat, citing 'health' and a recent turn to veganism. Yet the atmosphere of Nadia and Guru's date and both their bodily comportments change noticeably when the bacon mac-and-cheese arrives. Guru's recoil at her taste appears to discipline Nadia, such that when she goes on her next date—this time with Vinay—her frank manner is replaced by an obvious hesitance when the subject of what to eat comes up: 'Are you okay if I get . . . meat?' Vinay breezily interrupts and reassures her saying 'Yes, of course', and Nadia's face relaxes. We are led to understand that Vinay, though not Guyanese, is open-minded and that Nadia's caste is not a 'problem' for him after all. This purportedly liberal attitude is then repeated in their dinner-time conversation about her Guyanese heritage, by which Vinay seems unfazed.

Vinay goes on several dates with Nadia but, as their relationship becomes more serious, stands her up twice: he is willing to date her but does not seem to want to take their relationship further, presumably because she is not respectable enough to marry. Middle-class respectability has historically been associated with caste purity in India (Chakravarti 1989). For instance, in colonial Bengal, sexual purity was deemed intrinsic to bourgeois respectability and enabled upper-caste (*bhadramahila*) women to differentiate themselves from lower-caste women (Banerjee 1989; Sangari and Vaid 1989). While these discourses of upper-caste respectability were consolidated in nineteenth-century Bengal, and although their modalities have changed, they have cast a long shadow over discourses of gender in postcolonial India as well as in the Indian diaspora where the sexual purity of women has become metonymic of the cultural purity and authenticity of the Hindu-Indian community (Mankekar 2015). In the Caribbean, the inextricability of caste/cultural/sexual purity became salient among Indian communities when Hindu community organisations like the Arya Samaj insisted that the cultural purity of women was predicated on their sexual purity (Smith and Jayawardena 1959). Due to her Guyanese ancestry, Nadia is not just 'not Indian' but is represented as impure precisely because her caste position is ambiguous; she is an object of desire but is deemed not respectable enough to marry, underscoring some of the ways in which caste plays a formative, even if not always overt, role in constructions of gendered respectability among Hindu-Indian Americans.[26]

Nadia's ancestry, which marks her as casteless or caste impure, is further complicated by the fact that she is dark skinned. Moreover, she is dark skinned and from the Caribbean, encoding a proximity to Blackness from which Indian Americans have historically and self-consciously distanced themselves. Rosemary Marangoly George argues that middle-class and upper-middle-class South Asian Americans deny that they have been racialised: 'What is refused by nearly all upper- and middle-class South Asians is not so much a specific racial identity but the very idea of being raced' (1997: 31). In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, incidents of racial violence against Sikhs, Muslims, and others deemed to be Muslim temporarily shook this sense of race-blindness or race complacency for many middle- and upper-class Indian Americans (Mankekar 2015). For the most part, however, middle- and upper-class Hindu-Indian Americans have tended to occlude their racialisation through a recourse to discourses of ethnic or cultural identity, even as Muslim and Sikh Americans continue to face racial violence.[27]

The relationship between chromatics and identity is considerably more complex among Indian Americans because of how it indexes *both* racialisation and caste.[28] While skin colour is salient to Indian American conceptions of beauty, class, and, ultimately, caste, chromatics also

enfolds processes of racialisation.[29] Conversely, if 'skin colour becomes the surface on which racial identity is read and sometimes evaded' (George 1997: 32), it is also the surface on which caste privilege is maintained even when it is denied. Thus, although White supremacy shapes the racial terrain on which Indian Americans must position themselves vis-à-vis other communities of colour, skin colour or chromatics cannot be *reduced* to White supremacy because it also connotes caste privilege. In India and, to a large extent, within India America, gradations of skin colour are associated with chromatics that range from being fair enough to pass as European and 'wheatish' to 'olive,' dark skinned and *saanvla/i*.

Indian Matchmaking is replete with references to skin colour. As we have noted earlier, if skin colour is associated with caste privilege in India, it is even more fraught for Indian Americans because of its association with race. Sima and some of her male clients explicitly express their preference for fair-skinned women. These discussions of skin colour are not merely articulations of colourism but are manifestations of how caste is resignified in Indian America; at the same time, fair skin as a code for upper-caste status is also sedimented by White supremacist notions of beauty (Banks 2015: 671–672; Grewal 2009; Harpalani 2015).[30] If the preference for light skin is critical in discussions of women's marriageability in India (evident in matrimonial ads and the proliferation of skin-lightening products), *Indian Matchmaking* foregrounds its prominence among Indian Americans for whom skin tone remains a significant marker of the articulation of caste with race.

Further, the significance of skin colour is deeply embodied as the affective terrain for the generation of caste-appropriate erotic desire. Though Sima emphasises the importance of suitors' photographs in their biodatas, she cautions her clients from basing their choice on the picture alone, saying, 'Don't go by the photo, you'll know in person, fair skin colour or anything . . .'. Sima's insistence on her clients meeting in person is an attempt to resignify skin colour as chemistry or attraction, which is used throughout the show to suggest independence, agency, and the subversion of normative, and racially Other, arranged marriage. Yet, given the relationship between caste and chromatics, this preoccupation with skin colour's attendant erotics suggests that sexual desire is not, in fact, constrained by caste restrictions or family pressures around arranged marriage; rather, it is *produced* by embodied caste regimes and, for Indian Americans, is additionally mediated as a form of erotic distancing from Blackness.

Conclusion: The Transnational Travels of Caste

The proliferation of OTT media has spawned new modes of production, circulation, and audience engagement. Our analysis of *Indian Matchmaking* proceeds from the premise that, like all reality shows about dating or marriage across the world, what is being produced and curated are historically specific articulations of erotics with other social formations, in this case, caste, class, and race. By rendering caste simultaneously invisible and legible, *Indian Matchmaking* underscores some of the ways in which caste privilege has been reframed and reinscribed in Hindu-Indian communities in both the homeland and Indian America. At times displaced onto the terrain of gastropolitics and, at other times, reconfigured through erotics, desirability, and respectability, caste mutates as it travels transnationally.

Indian Matchmaking makes possible the *reformulation* of caste privilege that is all the more insidious for being invisible. In Indian America, caste privilege articulates with racialisation in powerful ways through representations of chromatics and class mobility. Through a perverse irony, the denial of caste deepens caste hierarchies within Indian American communities. Additionally, caste capital is consolidated through its transformation into the educational and professional capital that are fundamental to racialised discourses of the model minority and meritocracy to accentuate rifts with other communities of colour (Prashad 2001). Caste privilege is resignified as a

discourse of cosmopolitanism predicated, in turn, on its denial: here we see its displacement onto discourses of food habits, 'values', and 'culture'. Likewise, liberal notions of choice and sexual attraction provide opportunities for the reinforcement of caste privilege through the modality of heteronormative erotics. Far from disappearing, caste, even as it is denied, is reconstituted as a vector of structural violence and systemic inequality as it travels across transnational space.

Notes

1 *Made in Heaven* (2019) was a multi-episode Indian drama series launched by Prime Video, which centred around a wedding planning company that organised lavish weddings for upper-class (and caste) New Delhi clients. *The Big Day* (2021) was a reality show produced by Netflix India that documented the extravagant weddings of six couples of Indian origin.

2 By speaking of anti-Muslim racism in India, we do not by any means suggest that Muslims belong to a single race. On the contrary, it is discourses of anti-Muslim racism that construct Muslims as a singular race or community, thereby homogenising internal differences: this, we believe, is fundamental to processes of racialisation. While delving into the specificities of anti-Muslim racism is beyond the scope of this chapter, we wish to point out that anti-Muslim racism in India is both contextually and historically specific and partakes of the transnational circulation of discourses that racialise Muslims in diverse ways. For some of the most important research on anti-Muslim racism as a global phenomenon, see Daulatzai and Rana eds. (2018), Puar and Rai (2002), Rana (2007, 2016), and Razack (2004, 2005, 2008, 2018).

3 We use the term Hindu-Indian to foreground the slippage between Hindu and Indian identity generated by the hegemonic rise of Hindu nationalism since the 1980s. Similarly, we use the term Indian American advisedly to signal the recreation of 'Indianness', in contrast to the identity-category South Asian American which connotes the crafting of political solidarities across national(ist) boundaries.

On how caste is (apparently) elided in favour of discourses about 'values' and 'family background' in marriages in Mumbai, see Sharangpani (2010).

4 On the discursive construction of Dalit masculinity, including by Dalits, see Gupta (2015).

5 www.livemint.com/Politics/mnVzCfIEbqvzEu01LTxqLM/Urban-Indians-still-get-married-the-way-their-grandparents-d.html. Accessed on May 15, 2021.

6 As Prem Chowdhry argues, in the context of the changing political economy of the region, Jat groups in Haryana have violently reacted to the *perception* that Dalits first 'stole' their jobs and then proceeded to marry their daughters; as she insists, marriage and employment are inter-connected and extremely volatile (2009: 437).

7 https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2020/09/synopsis-kpmg-india-media-and-entertainment-2020.pdf. Accessed on April 7, 2021.

8 www.ibef.org/industry/media-entertainment-india.aspx. Accessed on April 7, 2021.

9 www.pwc.in/industries/entertainment-and-media/global-entertainment-and-media-outlook-2020-2024.html. Accessed on April 7, 2021.

10 https://web-assets.bcg.com/2b/d6/90c369a34b229e5d7dce8da4706b/lights-camera-action-cii-report-2020.pdf. Accessed on April 7, 2021.

11 https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/netflix-indian-matchmaking-sima-taparia-1234716974/. Accessed on April 8, 2021.

12 www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-24/netflix-s-reality-series-on-roving-indian-matchmaker-goes-viral. Accessed on April 8, 2021.

13 See also Mody (2002), Sharangpani (2010), and Uberoi (1998) for how the line between love and arranged marriages are sometimes blurred in India.

14 Tinder is a widely used, free online dating app on which users can anonymously pick suitors after browsing their profiles and connect with them if both users 'match' with each other. Tinder's premium services are paid for and offer more exclusive services such as unlimited usage and more closely curated matches. Unlike a traditional marital matchmaking service, however, Tinder is more commonly used for casual romantic and sexual encounters.

15 Sharangpani makes a similar argument about Mumbai women who 'browse for bridegrooms', thereby appropriating practices of arranged marriages towards their personal goals (2010: 253).

16 Marwaris are said to originate in the Marwar region of Rajasthan and form a regional and linguistic community. As a *jaati*, Marwaris are deemed part the Vaishya *varna*. Khatris are a *jaati* and, while they

are regarded a part of the Kshatriya *varna*, they have been associated with trade and commerce. Both Marwaris and Khatris are part of the 'twice-born' upper castes.

17 www.akademimag.com/the-law-is-casteist. Accessed on April 9, 2021.

18 https://image-src.bcg.com/Images/Entertainment-Goes-Online_tcm21-208006.pdf. Accessed on April 7, 2021.

19 Agrawal posits that internet matchmaking services have only reinforced the centrality of caste to what she terms is the 're-arrangement' of marriages in India and among NRIs (2015).

20 For an analysis of representations of arranged marriages in US media, see Dave (2012).

21 In narratives about Asian Americans, intergenerational conflict is a dominant trope for describing the so-called clash between 'Eastern' and 'Western' values. See Dave (2012) and Lowe (1991) for important critiques of this trope.

22 Rupam's father objects to Sima's proposal for a man who was previously married to an American woman: again, the tension is not between 'tradition' and 'modernity' but ensues from his ostensible wish to protect Rupam from repeating the mistake she previously made when she married someone who turned to be the wrong match for her.

23 Bumble is the second most popular online dating app in the United States after Tinder. Bumble has sought to distance itself from other dating apps by giving its female users the right to initiate contact in a heterosexual match, thus branding itself as a 'feminist' dating app.

24 To reiterate: in principle, the Sikh faith is anti-caste and, in fact, egalitarianism is one of its founding tenets. This is not to say that, over time, caste differences have not emerged within and across Sikh communities.

25 It goes without saying that the role of caste as a system of inequality and hierarchy varies across Hindu-Indian diasporas. For example, despite the overall weakness of the caste system in Mauritius, it persists as a force that shapes marriage because of a continuing adherence to rules about caste endogamy (Hollup 1994). See also Sharangpani (2010) on the persistence of caste in Indian American marriages.

26 See Dhillon-Jamerson (2019) on the persistence of discourses in Hindu-India that impute immorality and impurity to lower-caste women.

27 On the racialisation of religious difference with regard to Sikhs and Muslims in the United States, see Ahmad (2002), Mankekar (2015), Puar and Rai (2002), Rana (2007, 2016), and Volpp (2002).

28 www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-08/us-isn-t-safe-trauma-caste-bias, accessed March 15, 2021.

29 Let us recall how earlier immigrants drew upon a purported 'Aryan' identity to make claims to Whiteness and citizenship, for example, the case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923) in which Thind filed a petition to be granted US citizenship on the grounds of being Aryan and, therefore, White (see Harpalani 2015, Leonard 1994, and Takaki 1998 for powerful analyses of this complex history). The relationship between discourses of 'Aryanness' and caste in India and Indian America is beyond the scope of this chapter.

30 For a pithy definition of colourism and its imbrication with white supremacy, see Banks 2015: 676. Grewal has argued that 'dismissing the fetishisation of fair skin as . . . random or benign . . . neglects the power and continuing vitality of the rhetoric of white supremacy throughout the world' (2009: 323, in Banks 2015: 672). Dhillon-Jamerson describes, what she terms, pigmentocracy as a project of racialisation (2019). Compare with Harpalani, who makes an important distinction between colourism and racism with particular reference to South Asian Americans (2015).

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9

Indian Cinema, Hunger, and Food

Family, Class, and Caste

Swarnavel Eswaran

If we look for sequences of food addressing issues of caste, in a society structured and driven by the Brahminical/upper-caste hegemony of untouchability and purity, epitomised mainly by the exclusion of the human body/contact and food, you will be disappointed in knowing how scarce they have been in the last millennium of the celluloid-driven cinema in one of the largest film industries in the world. Of course, it reveals the hegemony and control of higher-caste Hindus over production, distribution, and exhibition of films. In contrast to such a trend, the last decade has been relatively progressive at least as far as the visibility of Dalit cinema, as instanced by films like Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi* (2012), *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), and *Kaala* (2018), and Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), and the representation of caste-based oppression and exclusion and the assertion of Dalit voice/politics are concerned. But still there is a long way to go. Dalit representation is still negligible if we see the ratio or frequency of such representation both inside and outside the mainstream Indian cinema. In the context of this chapter, what is challenging is while the reference to food is ubiquitous in Indian cinema, it has mainly to do with the sustenance part of it. For instance, films with *Roti/Chapati* (Indian flatbread, which is generally made out of wheat flour) in their titles abound in Hindi cinema: *Do Roti* (Two Flatbreads, dir. Ismail Memon, 1957), *Roti* (Flatbread, dir. Manmohan Desai, 1974), *Roti Kapda aur Makhaan* (Food, Clothing, and Shelter, dir. Manoj Kumar 1974), and *Roti Ki Keemat* (Value of a Flatbread, dir. Ramesh Ahuja, 1990), to mention just a few. In these films, the titular *roti* generally invokes the precariousness of life without food: what it means to go without food? Recent years have seen the success of films like *Cheeni Kum* (Less Sugar, dir. R. Balki, 2007) and *The Lunchbox* (dir. Ritesh Batra, 2013) that are feel-good films with finesse wherein food plays the conduit for romance/love while *Stanley Ka Dabba* (Stanley's Tiffin Box, dir. Amole Gupte, 2011) has the traces of an earlier cinema regarding food as a marker of class. Earlier, *Bawarchi* (The Chef, dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1972), a remake of the Bengali film *Galpo Holeo Satti* (Truth Seems Like Fiction, dir. Tapan Sinha, 1966), had posited the protagonist chef as the conduit for peace at a middle-class home where the members are pitted against each other due to their pettiness, whereas the recent *Chef* (dir. Raja Krishna Menon, 2017), which was an official remake of *Chef* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2014), tried to focus on the titular protagonist's journey and his transformation as a chef.

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While food has played a central role in cinema as can be seen in the reference to the handful out of the thousands of films made in India, my purpose here is to draw attention to those rare films that address the issue of caste in a generally myopic cinema where caste is erased or pushed to the background. I am zeroing in on the works of two masters of the last century Indian cinema, Mehboob Khan and Satyajit Ray from inside and outside the mainstream, who had different styles and made distinct narrative choices, in consonance with their aesthetics driven by melodrama and realism and investment regarding form and content. Additionally, I will also engage with Tamil films, one from an earlier period where caste is marked but not addressed and a recent one where caste occupies the centre to foreground the changing trend. The initial segment of this paper will, therefore, engage with P. Bhim Singh's *Bagapirivinai* (Partition, 1959) and Mehboob Khan's *Roti* (Flatbread, 1942), and the later one with Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder, 1973) and *Sadgati* (Deliverance, 1981), and Tamizh's recent film *Seththu Maan* (Deer in the mud, 2021). While the initial section focuses on the centrality of food in the melodrama-driven Indian cinema and the casteist prejudices in the family and regarding Others, mainly the tribal populace, the later one engages with the Brahmin/Dalit caste divide and the voices of the Dalit community in interrogating oppression in contemporary cinema/life.

Indian Cinema: Famine, Hunger, and Food

Before engaging with the films, it is important for us to ruminate on the significance of food and the centrality of caste to Indian people who have suffered some of the worst man-made and avoidable catastrophes like famines in the past, particularly during the last century, an unparalleled one just about 80 years back in the form of the Bengal famine of 1943 (Mukerjee 2010; Siegel 2018). Recent Scholarship has uncovered the nexus between caste and the Bengal famine relief and rehabilitation work. For instance, Abhijit Sarkar has detailed how the right-wing extreme organisation of

> the Hindu Mahasabha used the famine for political purposes. The party portrayed Muslim food officials as 'saboteurs' in the food administration [and] by dwelling on beef consumption by the army at the time of an acute shortage of dairy milk during the famine, the Mahasabha fanned communal tensions surrounding the orthodox Hindu taboo on cow slaughter
>
> *(2020).*

Around the same time in 1942–1943, during the famine in Malabar in South India, Dalits were excluded from the outreach regarding typhoid vaccinations (Priya 2014: 628–638).

> In the rural areas, the landlords . . . let loose naked oppression on the cultivators and . . . engaged in black marketing and hoarding and became rich . . . stocks were withheld and speculation in grain was rife throughout Malabar. Above all the peasants were asked to contribute to the war fund by officials.
>
> *(632)*

The landlords, who are from the higher castes, thus exploited the Dalits, who were mainly cultivators—landless labourers and small landowners who were farmworkers. Even after eighty years, unfortunately, the struggle of the farmers continues till this day. Among them, the landless who labour on the fields amidst unrelenting dry tropical weather are the most affected (Greenough 1982). Therefore, even if their caste is not explicitly stated, it is not far-fetched to argue that a significant number of people who perished among the 1.5 million to 3 million during

the Bengal famine as per various records were Dalits. We have to also keep in mind the inaccurate data since there were serious omissions and obfuscations in the enquiry commission report (Mukerjee 2014: 71–75). This backdrop is important for us to understand why the spectre of hunger has haunted Indian cinema, particularly from the 1940s onwards. It is this historical backdrop that sheds light on the significance of roti in the title of many Indian films. Of course, roti will become *kaippidi choru* or *saadham* (a handful of) cooked rice in films from the south, particularly in Tamil. A predominantly agrarian economy driven by the cultivation of cereals like rice and wheat also meant that a vast majority of people had to depend on, and be at the mercy of, the rain god. The parched earth, symbolising draught, is also a ubiquitous imagery in the Indian cinema of the last century. So, also, are the shots of the gathering cloud in the grey sky and the celebration of the tropical rain juxtaposed with cultivable soil/agricultural fields, punctuating key moments in Indian cinema, as can be seen in the films of Satyajit Ray (*Pather Panchali*/Song of the Little Road, 1955) as well as Raj Kapoor (*Barsaat*/Rain, 1949). In Tamil cinema too, not only the earth getting quenched by the rain but also the consequent boiling of rice in a *pongal* (pot) is celebrated, often with songs, as the village as a collective acknowledges and pays its respect after the initial harvest. Thus, *roti* and *pongal* have become signifiers par excellence in a cinema where the vast majority of audiences still come from an agrarian background, whether they live in villages or migrated to the city because of the economic necessity.

Bagapirivinai: Joint Family, Melodrama, and Others

Let us begin with dissecting the feudal family romance, the all-pervasive genre of the studio-era Indian cinema, particularly from the 1940s to the 1970s (Prasad M. 2008). Food has always remained central to the melodrama-driven Indian cinema. Consider, for instance, Tamil mainstream cinema's popular director of the last century, P. Bhim Singh, who delivered its greatest hits as far as the family melodrama—a genre synonymous with the studio-era Tamil cinema—is concerned. *Bagapirivinai* (Partition, 1959) and *Paasamalar* (The Affectionate Flower, 1961) are Bhim Singh's commercially and critically acclaimed films, which are part of the Tamil canon and folklore. The plot of *Bagapirivinai*, written by Tamil cinema's pre-eminent screenwriter of the family socials, M. S. Solaimalai, revolves around the joint family of two brothers, Vaithiyalinga Moopanar (T. S. Balaiyya) and Sundaralinga Moopanar (S. V. Subbiah), who live together in their spacious ancestral home with their families. The narrative of *Bagapirivinai*, which is a classic example of melodrama, focuses on the celebration of *Pongal*[1] in a pot, signifying the celebration of the Harvest Festival, to bookend the film. The midpoint of the film/narrative is the splitting of the family, after the apparent peace is ruined by the arrival of the brother-in-law, Singaram (M. R. Radha), of the older brother, from Singapore. The divide in the family is punctuated by a partition/compound wall that splits their home into equal halves. Subsequently, the rice is boiled in two separate pots by the families of the two brothers and visually it stands out as the custom which is to offer the obeisance/gratitude to the Sun God for the harvest by boiling rice in the open, outside the main door/gate in the morning after taking bath. The rice boiling in two pots stands starkly in contrast to the beginning and end, wherein we see the family together singing and celebrating the offering of *pongal* to the Sun in gratitude when the film begins, and having been reunited after the conflict, offering *pongal* together in a single pot, after the in-between compound wall of hatred and malice has been demolished. Food or the rice as it boils in a pot, thus, marks the key moments of a canonical Indian film signifying melodrama par excellence: the beginning of the family together, the midway of the split or the break, and the closure of the family reunion or the image of the group photograph again, as explicated by melodrama specialists like Linda Williams (2001). However, Williams's path-breaking

intervention, in the context of Hollywood/American narratives, regarding race—caste in this instance—as the subtext or images deeply ingrained through culture which has an immediate resonance is not overtly visible in *Bagapirivinai*. One could argue, unlike race, caste is not generally visible on screen as a stark binary of black and white. However, by marking the joint family as Moopanars, a caste lower in the hierarchy, the film alludes to the family as (small time) landowners who work on their fields. Besides, it offers other insights into the prejudices of the casteist Tamil psyche by juxtaposing disability with food and the idea of the outsider as the pollutant and harbinger of tumult.

Nevertheless, as elucidated by Linda Williams regarding melodrama, the parallel narrative with a similar graph of a peaceful beginning or repose, rupture, and reunion is there in *Bagapirivinai* as well. The initial happy family is ruptured by the entry of Singaram, the brother-in-law from Singapore. As a signifier of modernity and its cynicism towards tradition, he creates the ripples and disturbs the tranquil family of the affectionate brothers, by using his 'fashionable' sister, Amudha (N. Lalitha), marked by her modern dress, as an enticement and bait to lure the educated Mani (M. N. Nambiar)—the younger of the two sons of the younger brother—and create misunderstandings and conflicts in the family. The rupture thus created is resolved when Singaram's evil designs are exposed and he is forced to leave the village in the end. What is important for us here is Singaram's most quoted line from the film, wherein he makes fun of Tamil people by ridiculing how 'they are still making tons of *idlis*/boiled rice-cakes from the steam, whereas those in the West are using it for propelling airplanes into the space'. The *idli* has also been the marker of South Indians, particularly the Tamil people, in the popular imaginary, in contrast to the North Indian staple food of *roti*. The binary of the wheat and rice thus marks the divide between the North and South, even if the most flavourful rice, *Basmati*, mainly comes from Punjab and the Himalayan foothills in the North. However, in this quintessential Tamil melodrama, the attention is reflexively drawn to their weakness for the exemplary cuisine, which in contemporary times has become a globally popular dish (Prasad J. G. V. 2017: 91–100). *Bagapirivinai*, through its reference to *idli* as a local item, mainly consumed by the Tamils, also marks the period of the film as prior to globalisation as we understand it now. But Singaram's arrival from Singapore and his reference to and familiarity with *idli* and the way it is prepared informs us of the global nexus of Tamil people/films through the network of the Tamil diasporas in Singapore, Malaysia, Ceylon, and South Africa, among others, from a much earlier period. Thus *Bagapirivnai*, through *idli* deconstructs the idea of a globalising world as something new and contemporary, and a phenomenon to reckon with only after the early 1990s and the post-Mikhail Gorbachev world. The *idli* thus becomes a schizoid signifier of an apparently unchanging tradition as well as a mobile cuisine/culture of Tamils, travelling across borders.

Additionally, not only food but the act of eating also plays a central role in the film. The montage wherein Ponni (B. Sarojadevi) falls in love with Kannaiyan (Sivaji Ganesan)—the elder son of the younger brother—who has been disabled by an electric shock he received while climbing an electric pole to retrieve a kite when he was young begins with food. The focus is on Kannaiyan's ability to use only his right hand since his left hand has been paralysed because of the accident. Thus, when he struggles with one hand to eat rice and drink water at the same time from the nearby mug, Ponni helps him in his effort. Such compassion on her part blossoms into love. Later, during the climactic sequence, through the *deus ex machina* of the electric current that unexpectedly strikes Kannaiyan through a short circuit, as he is trying to save the life of his infant son, he recovers his ability to move his left hand which is now reverted to its normal state. The electric current which disabled him enables him now to save his child from the elephant in the circus and the machination of Singaram. Thus, *Bagapirivinai* is ambivalent in its take on modernity as far as electricity is concerned. But its racial attack on the foreigner,

even when he is blood-related, addressed as Singapooran/the Singapore Guy, who comes from outside to interrogate the conservatism of a typical Tamil family and test its values regarding unity, is scathing and virulent. One could see its contemporary resonance in the response of Indian celebrities to the iconic Rihanna's justifiable critique of the Indian state's apathy towards its farming community, during the current farmer's march and protest in India that is centred on the price and procurement of grains/food (Pandey 2021). Despite the globalisation-driven image that the right-wing government wants to project of a 'shining India', Indians prefer to be insulated and are touchy about criticism from outside. The polluting agent or the contaminant, which is at the heart of the casteism-driven oppression and the Brahminical/higher-caste hegemony surrounding untouchability in a predominantly Hindu village, is transposed onto the figure who comes from outside, thus enabling the local community/culture to avoid introspection of its prejudiced and non-inclusive mind. The outsider is also marked as monolithic and dark. *Bagapirivnai*, thus prefigures a popular trope of Tamil cinema—the outsider who arrives at a village, creates ripples in its tranquillity and causes conflict, for instance, the doctor character from the city in Bharathi Raja's iconic *16 Vayathiniley* (At Age 16, 1977) (Chakravarthy 2018). Simultaneously, there is the Othering that takes place inside to oppress/exclude those who are disadvantaged or on the fringes. Consider, for instance, the attitude of the venomous wife, Akhilanadam (C. K. Saraswathi), of the elder brother towards the disabled Kannaiyan. Her trenchant and inhumane ridicule of Kannaiyan recalls the discourses surrounding disability studies, which sees such behaviour as an extension of racist (casteist) behaviour (Charlton 1998). In Indian films, the characters are often marked with disability, and rendered as evil, rather than with their caste. Thus, in much Indian cinema, the binary of the upper-caste hero is the unmarked lower-caste villain who, nonetheless, is punctuated as physically challenged. All the major villains in Hindi films of the past, particularly from the 1950s to 1980s, from Pran to Amrish Puri, have played the stereotypical one-eyed men. One could even argue it is fashionable for villains to cover one of their eyes at least in a key sequence with a designer black flap. And even the next generation of villains, like Raza Murad, walk tentatively with a stick in their hand, drawing attention to their disability (*Janbaaz/Daredevil*, dir. Feroz Khan, 1986), recalling the villain Ajit whose foot got caught between the railway tracks during the climax (*Yaadon Ki Baaraat*/ Procession of Memories, dir. Nasir Hussain, 1973). However, in *Bhagapirivinai*, and its remake in Hindi, *Khandaan*/Pedigree (dir. P. Bhim Singh, 1965), it is the hero who is marginalised and marked as disabled. The tradition/modernity binary is played out in an agrarian village family in *Bhagapirivinai*, whereas it is staged as a melodrama between an industrialist and a couple from a tribal community in Mehboob Khan's *Roti*.

Mehboob Khan's *Roti*: Business and the Tribal Community

Mehboob Khan's *Roti* does not explicitly state the caste of its characters either, as exemplified by the name of the main character Seth Lakshmidas (Chandramohan) who symbolises wealth. His class, thus, is foregrounded rather than the specific (business) community he comes from, in accordance with the erasure of, and the reluctance to engage with, caste and the denial of casteism in much Indian cinema of the last century, although he is marked as belonging to a higher caste by the allusion to a business community through the sobriquet *seth* (merchant) in his name. Additionally, Lakshmidas's identity is further complicated in the narrative since he is not the benevolent feudal capitalist of the Gandhian dispensation but an imposter who is actually a homeless man, starving on the street. Prior to his being an imposter, Khan frames him as different from the other homeless people, who are sleeping on the street, through his ragged coat. Nonetheless, *Roti* marks a departure in Indian cinema by positing its counter voices

as those of a couple from a tribal community, although their specificity regarding community is disavowed by not naming it. We come to know of their pristine tribal background mainly through their culture: their costumes, behaviour, and most importantly their love for nature, symbolised by the ubiquitous monkey which comfortably sits on the shoulder of the tribal man Balam (Sheikh Mukhtar) and the pair of buffalos that he and his wife Kinari (Sitara Devi) love more dearly than their lives. In much Indian cinema, as exemplified by films like *Insaniyat*/Humanity (dir. S.S. Vasan, 1955), *Haathi Mere Saathi*/Elephant, My Friend (dir. M. A. Thirumugam, 1971), and *Ghai and Gori*/Cow and the Girl (dir. M.A. Thirumugam, 1973) from the production house of Chinnappa Thevar, animals, like children, have mostly played unreal larger than life roles of solving intricate crises and the saviour, particularly during the climax. One could say prior to the strict rules regarding the use of animals and the clearances from official bodies—NOC (No Objection Certificate) from Animal Welfare Board of India—in 2016, animals were mostly exploited in Indian cinema (Mishra and Dutta 2016). It is therefore unusual and remarkable that in *Roti* the monkey is not forced to perform any trick and allowed to sit quietly on the shoulder. In action sequences, too, its performance is believable and not over the top. Similarly, in Hindu culture, the cow is celebrated, but the buffalo is regarded as inauspicious, as it is considered the vehicle of Lord Yama—the Lord of Death. Besides, its dark colour is also not favoured by the white-skin-obsessed higher castes. In fact, it is the search for the lost buffalos that brings Balam and Kinari to the city from their unpolluted tribal land. They could empathise with the predicament of the buffalos because of their ethics regarding gratitude and equity. There are also parallels between the compassionate demeanour and marginality of the buffalos and the tribal Balam and Kinari. More important, tribal communities are listed under 'Scheduled Tribe' which is at the bottom of the official caste hierarchy along with the 'Scheduled Caste', much akin to the status of the buffalos.

Historians Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal have informed us of how 'the shock of the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s overturned most of the equations of the metropolis-colony relationship' (2018: 106) and how Britain 'responded to the crisis of the Depression with policies of deflation, erection of tariff barriers, and huge cutbacks in foreign lending' (2018: 107). Mehboob Khan's *Roti*, released during the 1940s, delineates the anxiety and the uncertainty surrounding the economy, even for those industrialists who were in the upper echelons and found favours with the colonisers. *Roti* is remarkable for depicting this unrest through its narrative ploy of a capitalist who not only exploits his workers through the intermediary of the foreman but also is relentless in his greed for gold and pursuit of wealth to the point of insanity. Such an attitude of self-centredness on the part of Lakshmidas, reflective of the condition during the Great Depression in the West, could be argued to symbolise the British Presidency in India through portrayal of the city as divided between the extremities of wealth not only through the narrative but also through the chiaroscuro lighting, inspired by the aesthetics of Weimar cinema.

Omar Ahmed in his illuminating and astute reading of the film draws attention to the influence of German expressionism, New Soviet Cinema, and Social Realism on Mehboob Khan and his extraordinary *Roti* (Ahmed: 'Reclaiming'). Arguing for the centrality of hunger in the film, Ahmed points to the economic backdrop of the Great Depression leading to the Bengal famine of 1943–1944 and *Roti*'s anticipation of the man-made disaster through the Marxist lens of Khan, influenced by Soviet cinema—the films of Vsevolod Pudovkin and Alexander Dovzehnko in particular—and the ideology of socialism as filtered through the lens of Nehru, enabling the focus on the predicament of the tribal community/workers and the critique of the rising capitalists: 'In many ways, *Roti* refracted the political crisis of the time, participating in a collective filmic dialogue, speculating on a prospective postcolonial India in which industrial

capitalism is represented as an evil' (Ahmed: 'Reclaiming'). I would like to add Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) and Chaplin's *Gold Rush* (1929) to the list of influences. While there are remarkable parallels between Seth Lakshmidas and *Greed*'s protagonist Dr John Mcteague, who practices dentistry without license, in their greed for wealth that leads them to a deserted land and their isolation as a hoarder/prospector where wealth is not able to quench their yearning, the nod by Mehboob Khan to a similar socialism-driven Chaplin and his *Gold Rush* is visible through the footwear that Seth Laksmidas's wife Darling (Akhtaribai Faizabadi aka Begum Akhtar) discovers when she desperately digs through a parcel for food towards the climax as they land in a desert when their car breaks down. Thus, food/water through its absence plays a major role during the climactic moment of *Roti*. Additionally, Mehboob Khan contrasts the lack (of humanity) on the part of the desolate and selfish Lakshmidas with the abundance of Balam and Kinari who, forgiving the misery caused by the corrupt capitalist, come forward to help him by carrying the corpse of Darling, who had just passed away due to thirst and starvation, and offering water to the emaciated and dying Lakshmidas. But, blinded by his love for wealth, he holds on to the gold in his possession and rejects their offer to nourish and be alive. The caste as well as the class divide, epitomising the dissimilarity of their humanising and dehumanising cultures, between the haves and the have-nots has seldom been marked so clearly in Indian cinema. Consider, for instance, how the very naming of characters informs us about their caste: Lakshmidas, literally the *das*/devotee of Lakshmi/wealth, marking clearly his upper-class business status is posited against Kinari which resonates with lower-caste usage. Kinari means 'Goddess of wealth' as well as 'shore'. Thus, Lakshmidas keeps yearning for more but does not reach ashore, whereas despite being poor and a tribal woman, Kinari remains contended and is willing to give till the very end. In a similar vein, Balma/beloved and Darling too mirror each other. Balma is rustic and recalls the verdant tribal milieu from which he comes, whereas Darling is an English word and urban, and indicative of the higher caste she belongs to. Nonetheless, *Roti* does not recycle the eternal love story of the beloved and the lover, as in the popular narrative of Heer-Ranjha, but rather focuses on discrimination and exclusion, because of caste/class, through food. Through *Roti* one could thus read food as a 'threat and promise', one of the major preoccupations of Mehboob Khan as exemplified by films like *Aurat* (1940) and its remake, the iconic *Mother India* (1957) (Baron 2014).

More important for us is the narrative impulse of *Roti* in structuring two journeys in reverse—one away from and the other toward the city: one propelled by the desire for gold and the other by the love of buffalos. While the journeys of Lakshmidas and his wife Darling twice away from the city are marked by the crashing of their plane and the breakdown of their car, Balam and Kinari's nightmarish sojourn in the city is not able to destroy their spirit despite a series of hardships and struggles, in the form of the imprisonment of the naïve but morally upright Balam and the attempted rape of Kinari by the salacious foreman. Unlike the voluntary choice of Lakshmidas to hunt for or protect his wealth, Balam and Kinari are forced to move to the city in search of their buffalos, Changu and Mangu, which are lost because of the machination of Darling who entices the vivacious Kinari with a piece of gold to get Balam to the city as she is bitten by cupid and loses her heart to him. Balam's innocence and energy as he is in consonance with nature attracts Darling, who is repulsed by the soulless imposter Lakshmidas—the cold-blooded murderer of her father Tarachand. In fact, her father asphyxiates to his death when he is locked inside the gold vault, in one of the defining scenes in the film about the heartlessness as well as the aggressive violence of the new breed of capitalists, emblematised by Lakshmidas, waiting to wreak havoc upon the nation's independence. Far removed from the inhumanity of the upper-caste Lakshmidas is the camaraderie and egalitarianism of the tribal folks and their idealistic and utopian way of life. Darling is moved to see the harvest crop shared equally by the members of

their community. Mehboob Khan contrasts this with the cruel Lakshmidas who will buy all the grains in the market and hoard it for a higher price during scarcity, thus starving his own workers. Here starving is also a metaphor for the denial of food by the upper Bania or business caste to the lower castes. Thus, *Roti* forebodes Churchill and the British Government's inhumane actions that led to the artificial scarcity of food and the starvation of millions of Indians to death, particularly of the lower castes, mainly the Dalits (Tharoor 2016, 2018).

Suffocating in her married life with the delusional Lakshmidas, Darling falls head over heels for Balam. Such a celebration of woman's desire without marking it as inappropriate or immoral, despite the diktats against adultery and the celebration of chastity by a conservative society, is rare in Indian cinema. One could understand why she wants to abduct the buffalos and, thereby, Balam, when she has to return to the city with her depraved husband. Lakshmidas, as his name signifies, abides by the diktats of caste regarding business and wealth and lacks tenderness. Darling also is sceptical of the guy who took over her late father's hard-earned business without much effort. Therefore, she is attracted to Balam who is warm and falls in love with him. Of course, her agency is enabled by her being a partner with equal share in the wealth of Lakshmidas. As expected, when Balam and Kinari arrive at the city to retrieve their beloved buffalos Changu and Mangu, they are shocked by the arrogant and inhospitable behaviour of Lakshmidas, who does not reciprocate their warmth and welcoming attitude, when his plane crash-landed near their home. Even as Balam and Kinari are entering the city and the unique *sutradhar*/the free-wheeling interlocutor-interrogator in the film, Jaggu (Ashraf Khan), joins them, Kinari expresses her hungriness. When Ashraf takes them to a restaurant and they eat the *roti* of the city (dinner roll), they are shocked to learn that they have to pay for food. Despite the mistreatment of Lakshmidas, Balam and Kinari land again at his place since they are hungry. When they see Lakshmidas is shamelessly eating his meals from a huge plate (an Indian *Thali*/meal) and being indifferent to their pleas, the interlocutor Jaggu informs them as well as us of how four people die every minute of hunger out of the four crores/four hundred million Indians. The huge plate-full of vegetarian food items when juxtaposed with the multitude who have died, through Jaggu's commentary, connotes the privileged higher castes who are secure and have (hoarded) enough for a lavish meal in contrast to the millions on the lower rung of caste hierarchy who are in abject poverty and dying of hunger. Thus, hunger and food are not only tacitly addressed through the narrative but directly as Jaggu's comments to the camera/audience, exemplifying Mehboob Khan's engagement and familiarity with the theatre of the Left and his anticipation of the social-realism-driven Indian People's Theatre Association, which came into being in 1942, the same year as *Roti*'s release (O'Donnell 2010: 261–275). More importantly, the hungry Balam pushes Lakshmidas who falls on the floor from his chair. Thereafter, Balam and Kinari snatch the dish and start eating from Lakshmidas's plate (of excess). Even such a confrontational moment predicated on dire hunger invokes the compassion of Kinari when she says that they should leave some food for Lakshmidas, recalling the earlier response of Balam regarding his refusal to attack/kill Lakshmidas with his spear: *Seth Hamari Yehan Khana Ka Chukein*/Seth has eaten with us. Kinari also reminds the cold and indifferent Seth who feigns innocence regarding the whereabouts of Changu and Mangu: *Changu Mangu Ko Bhool Gaye Aur Unka Maa Ka Doodh Piya Khoob Maje Se*/You have forgotten Changu Mangu but had drunk their mother's milk with great relish. Later the unruffled Darling's stern orders for freeing Balam and Kinari, who are detained by Lakshmidas's men, providing them with accommodation, and giving Balam a job mark Darling as one of the rare women with agency in early Indian cinema. Similarly, Sitara Devi's portrayal of the tribal woman Kinari is exuberant and unforgettable. She is not bitter towards Darling despite knowing that she tried to take the buffalos away to lure Balam to the city. Such an understanding of Darling's desire on the part of Kinari is possible only

because of her tribal background where they live together in a larger community that involves thinking beyond the personal, as instanced by the food they share. Thus, *Roti* could be argued to be a landmark and seminal film in foregrounding caste, class, and collectivity, and woman's agency through food and hunger in Indian cinema.

Satyajit Ray and Caste: *Ashani Sanket* and *Sadgati*

> The question of famine has previously served, as it does for the economist and moral philosopher Amartya Sen, as a paradigmatic instance of the injustices of colonial rule and the promise of redress that its abolition offers; hence his oft-cited claim that famines occur in totalitarian rather than democratic dispensations. Famine was one of the notorious features of colonial rule, British rule in India being bookended by two notable instances, the Bengal famine of 1769–70 and that of 1943–44.
>
> (Roy 2011: 21)

Therefore, Satyajit Ray's film *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder, 1973) which is an adaptation of Bibhutibhusan Bandhopadhyay's novel of the same name, *Ashani Sanket* (1944–46), written during and in the immediate aftermath and backdrop of the Bengal famine, attains significance. Ray remained true to the source, but *Ashani Sanket's* reception at the time of its release was underwhelming. Ray's return to a village for a film after a decade had also to withstand the comparison with his earlier adaptation of a Bandhopadhyay novel in his landmark debut film *Pather Panchali*. Many felt that *Ashani Sanket* was too dramatic for Ray's sensibilities. Pauline Kael criticised the 'baby doll' look of its leading lady Ananga, played by the Bangladeshi actor, Babita, whereas Indian critics found the film 'insufficiently "angry" or direct in its statement' (Robinson 2004: 21–25). Others accused him of 'glamorizing famine' (226). One of the striking things about the film was the lack of any parched land, instead the characters were framed in a lush backdrop, often with rich colours. 'He uses colour in the film so as to point up the contrast between nature's throbbing vitality and lushness, and the gradual ebbing away of life from human beings. People are dying even though there is a good rice-crop' (225). Now we know that Bandhopadhyay lived through the famine in his village and Ray experienced it in Calcutta, and the novel and the film are a statement regarding an artificially created famine of epic proportions mainly due to the apathy of the British and its self-centredness, and colonial aggrandisement (Patnaik 2018).

But what is significant for us is the way *Ashani Sanket* focuses on rice and food throughout the film and engages with caste/untouchability through its Brahmin protagonist Gangacharan, the priest and the schoolmaster, who keeps tracking the planes and informing the villagers about the Second World War and the fight of the British against the Japanese and the Germans. He is respected because of his status as a Brahmin. Soon the situation changes and the reality dawns about the scarcity of food, emblematised by rice in the film. Gangacharan is shocked to see almost all the men in the village clamour for rice at Biswas's store. His wife Ananga, being a Brahmin like him, is not used to manual labour. But due to scarcity, she is forced to husk a bag of rice in return for a handful. The handful of rice becomes a metaphor for the famine/hunger in the film: Ananga opens her palm to reveal the rice and assuage her hungry and tired husband who returns without any luck in his search for grains in the neighbouring village. In contrast, their neighbour, the starving and hungry Chutki, whose opportunistic husband had sold the rice to benefit from the soaring prices, emblematised by the montage of rising numbers in the price boards and newspapers, is tempted by the man with a scarred face at the brick kiln. He also

reveals his handful of rice to seduce and convince a doubtful and reluctant Chutki about the rice in his possession and break her will. Ray superimposes women and food in *Ashani Sanket*: when Ananga accompanies Chutki and her friend to collect wild potatoes in the forest, she gets tired and takes a breather and is attracted to a flower nearby and plucks it. Thereafter, Chutki's joyous shriek informs us of her success in pulling off a huge potato tuber from the ground. As the three of them are returning, Ananga, who stays behind due to the rough terrain, is molested by the voyeur who had been hiding behind a tree. On Ananga's cry for help, Chutki saves her by hitting the guy with the thick piece of wood in her hand. Later we see the stream reddened by blood. Ananga, Chutki, and the friend who accompanies them are, thus, posited as women from the higher castes but with differences. Chutki is not a delicate Brahmin housewife like Ananga. She is not only familiar with the raw terrains of the forest but also adept in courageously responding to intrusion. Chutki's friend seems to be more at ease with the environment.

But the first death due to starvation is that of a girl towards the climax: the unnamed 'untouchable' girl, from the village where Gangacharan used to live, whom we have seen early on in the film when she is welcomed with warmth but kept at a distance by the casteism-inflected Gangacharan and his wife. Towards the end of the film, we see her, emaciated by starvation and hunger, under a tree, as Ananga comes with the sparse (cooked potato/root) food in her hand. But the young girl, even at the point of death, is unwilling to touch either the food or Ananga. She responds by raising four of her fingers indicating the number of days she has gone without food. This moment marks the breaking point for Gangacharan when he takes her hand and reads her pulse, but it is too late. At this point, Gangacharan's conscience gets rid of the bondage of caste, at least momentarily, when with Ananga by his side he cremates the girl. The fact that even at the point of death, the girl would indicate through her fingers the number of days she has starved, instead of eagerly anticipating and extending her hands towards food, informs us of Gangacharan's earlier treatment and exclusion of her, remaining true to the hegemony of caste and subscribing to its oppression. Satyajit Ray's compelling biographer sums up the ambivalence regarding Gurucharan's act of breaking of the taboo/caste-barrier in the end:

> Satyajit . . . also believed that the old, irrational system of values that had helped to create it, must pass. At heart he was a revolutionary: it was more vital to him that Gangacharan should, of his own volition, begin to reject caste, despite the shattering crisis required to bring this about, than that the status quo should be maintained in all its benighted sterility. [However,] Gangacharan's decision to cremate the girl's corpse was regarded by Ray as 'a big step forward, an enormously progressive gesture'.
>
> *(Robinson 2004: 230)*

Being a Brahmin, for Gangacharan, as well as for Ray, cremation as a ritual may have a special significance in terms of appeasing a soul. But one could argue the ritual of feeding a body when it is hungry attains greater significance, particularly when it is holding onto its breath during a famine. In *Sadgati*, made almost two decades after *Ashani Sanket*, what the famous Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay calls Ray's 'cruelest' film, he does not offer any such hope regarding the challenging of the caste system. In a 50-minute film produced for Indian National Television (*Doordarshan*), Ray chose the eponymous short story 'Sadgati' (1931) by the pre-eminent Hindi writer Premchand to adapt. Casting iconic actors like Om Puri as Dukhi, who is a Dalit from the Chamar (leatherworker) caste, and Smita Patil as his wife Jhuria, who is also a Dalit from the same community, Ray delves into the heart of darkness regarding caste that perpetually haunts the Indian psyche. In *Sadgati*, the Brahmin priest Gashiram (Mohan Agashe) would sadistically punish the weak and unwell, and the silent and starving Dukhi to death by making

him chop a heavy and impenetrable log of wood with a feeble and blunt axe. Dukhi, who wants the priest to come and bless his only daughter of marriageable age, despite his wife's advice to rest answers the call from the priest and obediently attends to chores like cleaning the verandah and transferring the heavy rice sacks and finally, till his death, splintering the wood. Meanwhile, we see the priest offering homily to a young widower and eating a sumptuous meal. Even the famished and delirious Dukhi's plea for coal for the tobacco receives an arrogant response form the Brahmin's wife when the burning coal comes flying back and targets his foot.

The Chamar community protest, on coming to know of Gashiram's intentional torture, and refuse to remove Dukhi's body. The Brahmins in the village express their displeasure in not having access to the well as the dead body of an 'untouchable' is on the way. A helpless Jhuria comes to find the body of her beloved Dukhi by the log. She wails and knocks at Gashiram's door in vain before she collapses that rainy night. By the break of dawn, Gashiram secretly hauls away the body of Dukhi without touching it, by tying a thick rope to the right foot of the dead Dukhi by lifting it with a stick and tightening the noose. Gashiram hauls with all his might Dukhi's body a long way and dumps it amidst the skulls and carcasses outside the village. Finally, Gashiram is seen ritually purifying the area near the log of wood where Dukhi's corpse was lying by chanting a mantra and splashing water from the small pot in his hand. Thus, in *Sadgati*, food and water are signifiers of ideological/Brahminical oppression, decimation, and eradication of a Dalit even after his death in the name of caste, tradition, and purity. Ray points to how things have not changed and caste hierarchy and oppression and Brahmin hegemony remain unaffected in the five decades from 1931, when Premchand wrote the short story to his realisation on screen in 1981, by retaining the climax as it is. The ideology of caste has rendered the Brahmin priest Gashiram inhumane and beyond redemption, mirroring the larger sociocultural milieu in India, whose institutions are dominated by the higher castes. That the unjustly widowed Jhuria's cries fall on deaf ears signifies the entrenchment of caste to such an extent intentionally and deliberately killing someone through the denial of nutrition/food, who is vulnerable because of being a Dalit, needs only a superstitious and heartless purification ritual to return to his status and business as a Brahmin priest, despite committing a casteist and venomous killing of an innocent and helpless Dukhi.

Contemporary Indian Cinema and Caste: *Seththumaan* (Deer in the Mud) a.k.a. PIG

In the Indian cinema of the new millennium, particularly of the last decade, caste is increasingly represented through food, particularly in scenes revolving around beef and/or pork, which is particularly associated with the Dalits since it is a taboo among Muslims and synonymous with filth and, therefore, excluded by the higher-caste Hindus, even by those who eat meat on a regular basis, as a response to the politics surrounding food in contemporary India permeated by right-wing Hindu extremism, where eating beef or pork can lead to violent attacks and even death. While eating beef has enabled the targeting of Muslims, pork, the Dalits. Nevertheless, there is also the other buoyant side of it which is the celebration of Dalit culture and food habits. Concomitant to the casteist oppression is the bottom-up subaltern assertion of space and voice which is irrepressible. For instance, a Malayalam film like *Ustad Hotel* (dir. Anwar Rasheed, 2012) celebrates chicken biriyani as the specialty of the protagonist chef, while *Angamaly Diaries* (dir. Lijo Jose Pellisery, 2017) sings a paean to the pork-eating culture of Kerala with its brilliant long-take aesthetics. While a Marathi film like *Fandry* (Pig, dir. Nagraj Manjule, 2014) focuses on the catching of a pig for its climax and questions the superficiality surrounding nationalism without inclusion, the Assamese film *Axone* aka *Akhuni* (dir. Nichoas Kharkongor, 2019) sheds light on the ethnic hatred

surrounding 'Northeasterners' through the struggle of its protagonists, who, due to the bigotry of the people around, have to secretly strive to make a smelly and pungent cuisine from Nagaland for their best friend's wedding. But I will engage here with the recent Tamil film *Sethumaan* aka *Pig* (Deer in the Mud, Tamizh, 2021) since it directly addresses the issues surrounding eating beef and pork in these times of the politicisation of the culinary. In Tamil cinema, the trend of distinctly marking a character as Dalit began with director Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi* (Cardboard Knife, 2012). Over the last decade, Ranjith went on to direct *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), and *Kaala* (2018), besides producing *Pariyerum Perumal* (Horse-Mounting Deity, 2018), Jyoti Nisha's feature-length documentary *B. R. Ambedkar: Now and Then*, and the film under discussion, *Seththumaan* which arguably is the most significant when it comes to caste and food.

Seththumaan's narrative borrows from two of the short stories of the famous Tamil writer Perumal Murugan: *Varugari*/Fried Meat for its main narrative revolving around the higher-caste landlord's desire to eat pork and *Maappu Kudukkonum Chaami*/Please Forgive Us! (2022) for the backstory of the protagonist's grandfather, who had to pay a price in the past for being a Dalit. The grandfather Poochiyappan (Manickam) goes to remove the carcasses of the cows since higher-caste Hindus will worship the cow but not touch its body when dead. The meat that would come out of such carcasses was tasty but rare. When four of the cows of the higher-caste people are found dead in quick succession, Poochiyappan and his fellowmen are suspected and targeted. They are charged for having poisoned and killed the cows. When the higher-caste men come to Poochiyappan's hutment in the outskirts, and harass the Dalit people, seeking the name of the poisoner, and start attacking and violently beating up the women and children and men, as well as their hens and roosters and goats, a fight breaks out. In the ensuing mayhem, Poochiyappan escapes from his home with his young grandson Kumaresan (Ashwin), since he had already lost his son and daughter-in-law to a caste/beef-driven riot. He travels far with his grandson and earns his living weaving baskets and working for the landlord Vellaiyan (Prasanna) by attending to his chores. Thus, *Seththumaan* is informing us of the long history of the higher-caste Hindus' violent attack on the Dalits with the cow as the object of contention. Additionally, it also exposes the hypocrisy surrounding the sacred object of the cow turning into an untouchable/abject figure once it dies. While the Hindu right-wing groups flaunt the cow as the holiest of all living beings and, thereby, claim that its excreta like urine or dung have medicinal and mythic properties regarding cure and cleansing, it is not an uncommon sight in rural India to encounter decaying carcasses of the cows at various stages, since the same advocates are the first to abandon them once they die. Thus, it is the 'untouchable' who comes to the help of the most sacred/revered object in its final hours on this earth. It is their touch that heals the sacred object, now polluted by death, and provides for its deliverance.

Poochiyappan, having learnt the hypocrisies of the higher castes from his eventful life, decides to put up with insults and injuries for the sake of the well-being of his grandson. He will do anything to get the bright and astute Kumaresan educated in contrast to Rangan (Kumar), who is from his community and adept at pig-rearing. The defiant Rangan questions the casteist landlord's power and arrogance and unlike Poochiyappan, often gets into trouble. Therefore, he keeps ridiculing and provoking Poochiyappan for his subservience. But Poochiyappan has his own way of subtly but pungently responding when his dignity is hurt, just as in the tea shop when he sees separate paper cups being used for Dalits to prevent contamination and retain the 'purity' of the higher-caste customers. Nevertheless, Poochiyappan would not vent his feelings often as he wants his grandson to study and escape his destiny of being an obedient servant in a casteist milieu. He dreams of his grandson's successful career, as he is encouraged by the success of Ramnath Kovind from the Dalit community, whose election by the electoral college to the post of President of India is announced through radio and newspapers. Thus, marking the

period of the film as 2017. *Seththumaan*'s uniqueness lies in the way it complicates the received understanding of the caste binaries in contemporary India. It focuses on the lived reality of the Dalits. Unlike Satyajit Ray, director Tamizh's enunciation is from inside the community, therefore, the general point of view of the higher caste from outside that sees Dalits primarily as victims is disavowed and deconstructed here. Consider, for instance, the contradictory pragmatism/cynicism of the progressive Rangan: he asks Poochiyappan to teach his trade of basket-weaving to his grandson as education maybe too expensive. Similarly, Poochiyappan's relationship with Vellaiyan is also fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, the landlord who is at odds with Rangan is kind to the servile Poochiyappan, by anticipating his needs and giving money in advance and asking him to cook and sharing the food with him, while on the other, instrumentalising him as a Dalit for his longing to eat pork by having him catch a 'clean' pig—lowest in the hierarchy of animal/meat—unlike the one contaminated in the market, thus subscribing to the caste-inflected 'purity'. Poochiyappan too is aware of the hegemony as Vellaiyan wants to eat pork on the sly. When Vellaiyan's wife accuses Poochiyappan of encouraging her husband in his desire to eat pork and bringing them down to his level, Poochiyappan retorts by saying that vegetarian food also grows on (human) manure. *Seththumaan*, thus, explicitly engages with caste through food and the hypocrisy surrounding it. It makes its response to the current political situation conspicuous. Director Tamizh's unique intervention of shooting almost the entire film on a handheld Red Dragon camera, which is professional but lightweight, with the help of his cinematographer Pradeep Kaliraja, lends a grittiness to the film reflecting the immediacy of caste (Tamizh 2021). Additionally, it grounds the narrative, through its aesthetic of instability and unpredictability, to the soil/mud which is often visible as the camera moves through the frequent long-duration shots with the characters, reminding us of the unevenness of the terrain and work that is needed to level. The close-ups are sparse and effective, for instance, in the above sequence between Poochiyappan and Vellaiyan's wife. Here the closer shots inform us of her anxieties and Poochiyappan's ironic nonchalance. Nonetheless, the long-duration shots that frame the sequences in the domestic sphere and the one inhabited by the male-centric world of Vellaiyan and his friends outside showcase the two parallel worlds as coexisting but insulated from each other. Nonetheless, caste is ubiquitous in both the spheres, though expressed in a nuanced but pungent way in the domestic sphere and with an air of inclusivity but authoritarian masculinity in the public. While pork is denied entry in the kitchen, the outside world with its dried wood and pastures, and taste inculcated from childhood, seems inviting.

More importantly, from the point of view of the narrative, it is neither Rangan nor Poochiyappan who are the binary opposites of Vellaiyan but Subramani (Suruli) who is from the higher caste. Thus, shifting the source of conflict enables Tamizh to focus, through the aesthetic of the rowing handheld camera and long takes, on the extended climatic sequence on the catching and hauling of the pig and the cooking of pork. Poochiyapan's experience and Rangan's expertise and their indigeneity is on display, as the film foregrounds the voice and culture of a community of people that is generally disavowed/erased. It stands out amidst the hundreds of scenes in Indian cinema with the stereotypical vegetarian *thali*. However, *Seththumaan* further complicates our received notion of the bifurcation of food along caste lines: Vellaiyan, Poochiyappan, and Rangan share the pork and eat it together along with Kumaresan, who tags onto his grandfather for the pig hunt. Through such a sequence, *Seththumaan* details the reality of pork-eating across caste and questions the rigid aligning of food with caste for derision and oppression. Consider, for instance, the pork-eating among the Thevars—a community categorised as MBC/Most Backward Caste—in *Vamsam*/Lineage (dir. Pandiraj, 2010). *Seththumaan* goes beyond the ethnographic impulse of documenting eating habits, by using it as a space for its politics against caste oppression and exclusion. As Tamil cinema's eminent critic Baradwaj

Rangan points out, 'And how interesting that it's Vellaiyan, a man from the dominant caste, who makes this point: "we have the right to eat anything we want, and who are you to say otherwise!"' (Rangan 2021). But here we should note how class intervenes to deconstruct the rigid borders of caste. Eating beef and pork among the non-Dalits is not unheard of in Tamil Nadu. In fact, in rural areas, what is available is preferred as it is also what is affordable. The pastoral lands and the environment conducive to grazing and pig-farming often enable developing a taste for beef and pork from childhood—a trait which haunts Vellaiyan and makes him yearn for pork, though caste will not allow him to openly admit it. Remaining true to its melodramatic mode, *Seththumaan* thereafter focuses on the longstanding enmity with Subramani leading to the higher-caste men attacking Vellaiyan for breaking the taboo and eating pork, and during the skirmish, in trying to avoid violence between Subramani and Vellaiyan's gang and avert bloodshed, it is Poochiyappan who gets savagely hit and loses his life, leaving the highly talented Kumaresan alone to fend for himself in this caste-oriented cruel world.

Thus, one can see from *Roti* (1942) to *Seththumaan* (2021) food plays an important role in informing us through cinema of the caste-driven hegemony and oppression, and violence and killing, while simultaneously providing the space for sensitive film-makers to draw attention to (faint) hopes regarding humanity as well as strong voices from the oppressed community to question the injustice and hypocrisy.

In a country where still hunger and starvation remain one of the chief causes for death, particularly of people from the lower castes and Dalits, food justifiably haunts the Indian psyche. Cinema being a cultural artefact reflects both the anxiety surrounding food and its centrality to any discourse of denial, exclusion, and oppression by marginalisation through caste and class. The significance of the famines cannot be overstated as one could see how it has affected the Indian psyche. While it is 75 years since the British left, the spectre of hoarding due to insecurity continues to hold its sway, as could be seen in the exponentially increasing gap between the rich and the poor in postcolonial India, particularly in these globalising times, where outsourcing creates its own unequal economy in the urban spaces littered with sweatshops. The farmers in the rural spaces continue to be excluded. Since the vast majority of farmers and farmworkers are Dalits, they are forced to bear the brunt of this inequality. Cinema, therefore, has a major role in foregrounding this disparity and inhumanity, predicated on the systemic evil of caste, so that the conscience of the Indian society, which claims itself to be democratic, secular, and egalitarian, is held to account. What better way to arouse the collective consciousness for egalitarian purposes than through cinema and the possibilities it offers for disparate narratives, as we have seen earlier? What can be more consequential than addressing the spectre of the omnipresent caste through the ubiquity of hunger to shed light on the artificiality of barriers between people?

Note

1 *Pongal* has two significant meanings in Tamil culture: *Pongal* is the preeminent Tamil festival of thanksgiving for the harvest to nature, in the form of Rain and Sun Gods, at the beginning of the month of *Thai* (mid-January). People gather as a family and community in front of their houses and boil rice in a mud pot, placed over firewood. *Pongal* is also the name for the common and popular dish made with rice and lentils. It could be spicy or sweet, depending on the context of festivity or regular consumption and preference.

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Caste and Gender

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10

Re-cast(e)ing the New Woman

Caste and Gender in Contemporary Indian Cinema

Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora

This chapter inserts caste as a predominant theoretical and practical consideration in scholarship about contemporary Indian cinema's representations of women. The new woman is the predominant model of empowered womanhood that Indian (especially Hindi) cinema has resorted to since liberalisation. This figure is characterised by a neoliberal, postfeminist subjectivity, geographical mobility, a reliance on consumerism to articulate her entrepreneurialism, and sexual autonomy. Here, we focus on the narratological, political, and emotive function that women serve in two recent Indian films that deal explicitly with caste: *Sairat* (Wild in Love, dir. Nagraj Manjule, 2016) and *Kaala* (Black or Death), dir. Pa. Ranjith, 2018).

Mirroring Indian cinema's invisibilising of caste, film studies scholarship too has rarely paid attention to caste as a heuristic. In more recent years, this lacuna is being acknowledged with a small body of work that engages in anti-caste perspectives to examine the Indian film industry (Vidushi, Yengde, P. Rao). For instance, through her focus on the Bollywood film *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), Pallavi Rao shows how this ostensibly 'caste-less' film is really all about caste as it invisibilises exploitative caste labour practices around defecation in rural India. Suraj Yengde focuses on emerging Dalit film-makers such as Manjule and issues a call for Dalit cinema as 'a medium for Dalit affirmation' (514). More often than not, he argues, Bollywood elides 'caste as a theme by subsuming it within categories of "the poor", "the common man", the hard-toiling Indian or, at times, the orphan' (505). While these films make us engage with the 'struggles of the downtrodden', caste is never allowed to be an explicit variable of subalternity (504). MSS Pandian calls this 'caste by other means'—'The subtle act of transcoding caste and caste relations into something else . . .' (1735). In contrast, these films, we argue, contest the marginalisation of Dalit identities from the fabric of both 'New India' and new womanhood; in addition, they challenge mainstream cinema's proclivity for constructing upper-caste women protagonists as being casteless/caste-neutral. We thus turn to films in which the principal women characters are unequivocally identified as inhabiting and embodying a casteist world.

The figure of the new Indian woman emerged as a product and index of post-1990s neoliberal India. The large-scale shifts in the socio-economic and cultural landscape—the influx of foreign goods, information, images and ideas—also led to an anxiety over the perceived threat to Indian cultural identity and a concomitant rise of Hindu nationalism. In this context, scholars have examined the emergence of the new woman as someone who was 'iconic of liberalized

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India'—celebrated but also viewed with ambivalence (Oza 2006; Mankekar 1999). Rupal Oza writes, 'In contrast to the more docile and homely figure of the idealised Bharatiya nari (traditional Indian woman), this new woman was aggressive, confident, urban, and she displayed a sexual identity that had previously been associated with vamps in Bollywood cinema' (22).

What's silently assumed in most mainstream discussions of the new woman, including in her cinematic renditions, is her Brahmanical/upper-caste identity; the silence further normativising her hegemonic caste. While Indian cinema's new woman is symptomatic both of India's rise to the status of a world superpower as well as a site upon which the contradictions of this meteoric ascendency are worked out, Dalits, especially Dalit women (and the poor, the rural, Muslims) remain on the outskirts of inclusion into categories of 'newness'. The resurgence of patriarchal Brahmanical Hindutva politics, at best, evacuates caste and religious minorities from national narratives of 'Shining India,' and, at worst, proactively persecutes these populations so as to consolidate its fantasy of an upper-caste *Hindu Rashtra*.

In our chapter, we put pressure on this ostensibly unmarked/normative new woman figure that has dominated much post-1990s Indian cinema by bringing an intersectional perspective to bear upon it. We examine how the conspicuous caste-ing of women reconfigures or expands the category of the new woman. The depiction of caste-identified women, we believe, alters the modality—of the new woman—through which women's gendered experience is predominantly articulated in contemporary Indian cinema. To this end, we explore the transgressive possibilities, and catastrophic consequences, of the upper-caste new woman exercising her sexual autonomy by falling in love with a man of a subaltern caste identity. In emphasising caste as a significant analytic, we explore if and how the defining characteristics of the new woman morph when caste intersects with gender under a neoliberal regime. We investigate how the new woman is reconstituted or destabilised within patriarchal relations that are cross-hatched by caste.[1] Significantly, this investigation also allows us to track the shifts that occur in mainstream Indian cinema's templates/tropes/clichés when Dalit identities are visibilised and their experiences narrativised on film.

Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack:[2] The New Woman's Lessons in Intersectionality in *Sairat*

The highest grossing Marathi films of all time, *Sairat*, set in small-town Maharashtra, presents its anti-caste agenda through the portrayal of the inter-caste love, marriage, and tragic 'honor-killing'[3] of Prashant Kale (Parshya), a lower-caste 18-year-old who belongs to the fisherman (Pardhi) community, and Archana Patil (Archi), an upper-caste young woman from an influential land-owning family. The film firmly locates its female protagonist, a new woman, in a casteist world, thereby exploring how her caste identity intersects with tropes associated with the new woman: sexual desire, autonomy, choice, and mobility. Consequently, the film reveals how Archi's agentic new womanhood is really a symptom of her structural (upper-caste class) privilege, instead of a manifestation of her exceptional, individuated personality. It is the 'invisible knapsack' of her caste-class privilege that Archi has to forego and unlearn once she rejects 'safety-first love' and chooses 'risky love' for a Dalit man (Badiou 2012: 6). The simple act of falling in love, thus, takes on a political, radical dimension. It holds the promise of personal liberation from the repressiveness of caste regimes but also unleashes a violent backlash. *Sairat* is at once an exploration of the dangers and near impossibility of inter-caste love, the reconfiguration it enables for an upper-caste new woman's social-emotional subjectivity, as well as the violent tenacity of caste's endogamous imperative.

Right from the beginning, it's apparent that Archi's dominant caste empowers her to navigate the tricky politics of gender, home, and public spaces. Archi is identified as having many of the characteristics associated with the post-1990s new woman: she exercises remarkable physical mobility—we see her riding a horse, her brother's motorbike, a scooter, and even a tractor; is at ease with technology; assertive with men; readily expresses her sexual desire and autonomy; and threatens to 'explain' things to men in 'English'. Archie's 'feistiness' is also articulated through her bossiness with men (Parshya's friends) bathing in the village well, when she forces them to leave so that she and her friends can enjoy the same activity. It is important to note, however, that the men grudgingly scuttle away because they are cognisant that they rank lower than her in the caste-class hierarchy. Her assertiveness with men, then, cannot be read just as the fearlessness of the new woman; it is, in fact, very much a function of her social-caste dominance.

In a similar vein, Archi's open articulation of desire and sexual autonomy is a manifestation of her upper-caste confidence. Very quickly, we learn that Parshya is smitten with Archi, but we also recognise the convoluted rituals of secrecy that encircle his admiration—he can do so only from a distance, through contrived pretexts, and under a constant threat to his life. This is because, as a Dalit man, he is aware that he inhabits a world where even the hint of transgressive desire can prove catastrophic. Even in the unconscious world of his dreams, he's afraid to imagine himself as the agentic partner in their relationship; in his sleep fantasy, in a classic instance of projected desire, it is Archi who, unabashedly, storms into his house, lies on top of him and kisses him. In reality, as in fantasy, it is Archi who takes charge, and the brazenness of her desire suggests an obliviousness to the workings of caste privilege.

In contrast to Parshya, who cannot even fathom the possibility of Archi reciprocating his feelings or flirting with him, once she realises that she's in love with him, she loses no time in letting him know. Unapologetically and openly, Archi stares at him in the classroom, even as a scared Parshya signals for her to look away. Similarly, she is the first one to vocally declare that she loves him, significantly while they're on her 'turf', as she proudly shows off her father's farmlands to him. It is she who rescues Parshya when her cousin, Mangya, threatens and beats him. Mangya stops only because Archi intervenes with a counter-threat, 'If you dare touch [Parshya] again, I'll smash your face'. The film, then, is unique in how it implicates women as the beneficiaries of their upper-caste identity.

The notion of 'choice', so central in mainstream cinematic renditions of the new woman, and celebrated as a marker of women's liberation, gets re-cast as something threatening and truly destabilising of the status quo; this is because Archi's love for a Dalit man turns 'choice' into a much more dangerous signifier than the new woman's new-found ability to be a consumer citizen or travel abroad with friends. Within hegemonic caste discourse, upper-caste women are seen as 'caste property' (Rao 2009: 236) and as a means to ensure caste purity, while the Dalit man is constructed as a rapist, with inter-caste desire painted as unnatural, illicit, and criminal. This is why Archi's vehemence in proclaiming that running away with Parshya was the exercise of *her* will is so jarring to a casteist social order. Archi refutes the charge of rape against Parshya and his friends publicly, 'I got them to flee . . . File a case against me'. Her affirmation of desire for, and defence of, a Dalit man is a political act that threatens the caste order predicated on upper-caste men's regulation of upper-caste women's sexuality.

That Archi's new-woman confidence ensues from her caste-class privilege becomes evident when we see her inhabit an unprecedented precarity in the city—Hyderabad—where she and Parshya end up after elopement. It is important that Archi's journey, literal and metaphorical, begins with the loss of the bundle of jewellery she ran away with; this inaugurates the process whereby she will have to unlearn/unpack her 'privilege-knapsack'. The vulnerability that she's

hurtled into forces her to recalibrate the self, sans caste privilege, and, for the first time, experience 'the world on the basis of difference' (Badiou 2012: 80).

The film, thus, draws attention to the fact that the mobility and spatial agency granted to the new woman in mainstream cinematic constructions is a result of the protective shield of class-caste privilege, without which she is just as vulnerable as Dalit or working-class women. Thus, in contrast to Archi's hometown, where she is propped up/protected by her dominant caste, in Hyderabad, her characteristic defiance puts her in danger. Penniless and homeless Archi, for the first time, becomes prey to sexual assault by city thugs looking to exploit vulnerable people, although she is miraculously rescued last minute by a stranger. Ironically, this scene of public/street violence follows after Archi and Parshya walk by a billboard that urges women to 'Run/Cycle/Walk' for International Women's Day, with the slogan, 'My safety. My responsibility'. By juxtaposing these two scenes, the film mocks the predominant caste-neutral construction of the new woman, where structural inequalities (of class and caste) are turned into an individual affair that women must tackle through the personal choices they make. The symbolic interventions of 'running/walking' as women's protest, ring hollow for a woman who's just 'run' away from a casteist world that threatened to kill her and her lover; these neoliberal protest-gestures can mean little to a woman condemned to walking the streets because no motel will give her and her Dalit lover lodging without identity documents.

Archi has to undergo the experiential hell of losing all social standing and alienation from her friends and family to recognise the provisions of her privilege. To begin with, she has a hard time acclimatising to the slum: she's unable to withstand the stench of open sewers and communal toilets; she sits around looking lost as Parshya cleans their shanty and sneezes in response to the dust; she doesn't know how to cook (or even peel garlic). Her dominant caste-class background has rendered her fragile and unprepared for what it means to live without privileges. The picture-perfect poster featuring an idyllic house in the hills, that Archie puts their paltry grocery money towards, confesses her desperation to hold on to the fantasy of privilege, through the very object that articulates its loss. A little later, in a conversation with a co-worker at the bottling plant where she works, Archi talks about her family's social status, wealth, and repeats several times how 'good' they all are. The vacant, lifeless expression of her face, however, belies the truth of her words. Her face communicates the violence of, and the impossibility of adhering to, the hegemonic clichés about families that deter us from defying social dictates and hierarchies; after all, the deification of familial relationships disincentivises challenging the most conservative caste codes that are channelled, in great measure, through the family.

Another moment marks a crucial turning point in her subjective transformation: after a fight with Parshya, she's on a train, ostensibly returning to her parents' home, when an elderly beggar couple on the platform request alms through the train window. This confrontation with utter poverty somehow propels her to return to Parshya—perhaps because they provoke a reminder of her and Parshya's struggle to survive in Hyderabad; their own experience of penury and disenfranchisement; and a shared-suffering that cannot be shaken off. In returning to Parshya, then, she chooses a life of vulnerability, of loss of caste, a chosen life instead of the privilege she was born into. This choice, to return to Parshya, is born out of learning what it means to live and practice inter-caste love as a daily act of defiance, an ethical commitment to a radical love over congenital privilege. And, at this junction, her choice to return to Parshya, and their life of minimalism, resonates louder than the one of their initial elopement.

Interestingly, then, Archi's defiance and naivete are two sides of the same coin. They are both signs of her upper-caste new womanhood, and both exact a heavy toll. She naively assumes that her choice to love freely and flout caste norms will be eventually accepted by the patriarchs in her family, and, unfortunately, this political obliviousness renders her small inter-caste family vulnerable

to upper-caste violence. Because of her caste conditioning, she is underprepared to deal with the destructive and oppressive forces of caste hate, in contrast to Parshya who instinctively knows that the 'failure to observe caste codes of endogamy invites severe and public penalties in the case of a Dalit man's sexual relationship with a dominant caste woman' (Aloysius et al. 2020: 177).

In a quick succession of suggestively interconnected scenes toward the end of the movie—that transpire about five years after Archi and Parshya's reconciliation—we learn of Archi's father's electoral loss to a woman; Archi's conversation with her mother where she also inadvertently discloses their domicile in the hope that her father will have forgiven her by now; and Archi and Parshya witness anti-love-jihad Hindu nationalist goons harassing interreligious couples by the roadside. This fleeting scene reminds us that the Brahmanical forces that govern the rules of love are part and parcel of urban existence as well.

It is no surprise, then, that Parshya looks terribly worried to come home and find men from Archi's family in their living room. Archi, against Parshya's wishes, urges him to serve tea to them, credulously stating, 'Everything will be fine now'. The tragic irony of her statement and the gravity of her error are revealed in the very next scene when their toddler son walks in to finds his parents' bloodied corpses, with their throats slit. The film's insistent silence in this moment—we only see the child cry and scream, not hear him—forces us to witness and process the shocking scene as Archi and Parshya's son does—in aphasic horror.

Variegating the New Woman: Destabilising Urban Upper-Caste Woman's Cultural Hegemony in *Kaala*

Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* is an unprecedented cinematic exposition of a Dalit-working class's material and political struggle to claim land rights over their spaces of inhabitancy and livelihood. The film lays bare the power nexus of state (political parties, corrupt politicians, and police force) and corporate apparatuses (urban developers, builders, and NGOs) that treat these sites with derision and appropriative exploitation. It reveals the bureaucratic and discursive procedures by which certain urban territories are marked as 'filthy', 'criminal', and 'impure' as well as expropriated for 'development' and beautification projects that dispossess the poor and add to the personal coffers of those in power. On the side of the disenfranchised, this tussle is spearheaded, in the film, by Kaala (Karikaalan), an assertive, fearless, and proud Dalit leader, revered by the diverse tenement dwellers of Mumbai's slum, Dharavi. Kaala's uncompromising adherence to safeguarding the interests of the labouring poor, caste, and religious subalterns is matched in tenacity, and superseded in might, by the Brahmanical, religiously xenophobic, patriarchal, and megalomaniacal leader of the political party in power in Maharashtra, Haridev Abhayankar. Undoubtedly, what occupies the central thrust of the film is the contestation between these two larger than life characters and their ethically and politically polarised lifeworlds.

Even so, in what is a rare occurrence in Indian cinema, *Kaala* renders a wide range of female characters, endows them with complex social identities, subjectivities, and grants them robust agency. In doing this, it resists diluting its women characters into feminine-cinematic typologies and thereby produces, as N. Sukumar and Shailaja Menon have argued, 'a new grammar of cinematic aesthetics'. Most significantly for our purposes, *Kaala* executes, on multiple registers, a radical reconfiguration of the new woman.

First and foremost, it diversifies the viewer's conceptualisation of the cinematic new woman, who is, for the most part, predominantly identified with the glitzy spaces of liberalisation—bourgeois homes, malls, multiplexes, corporate offices—and with the mobilities of globalisation—international brands, foreign travel, and global citizenship.[4] Ranjith's film, instead, gives us characters like Zareena and Stormy, who resolutely embody and articulate

qualities of the new woman—her 'modern' aptitude, confidence, and agency—in a chawl. Their ease of navigation through the narrow, crowded gullies of Dharavi—on foot, riding scooties, in the rain, and at night—compels viewers to recalibrate their assumptions about the automatic confluence between class, urbanism, and new womanhood. These characters disrupt the notion that modern metropolitanism is the monopolistic preserve of the bourgeois new women or that it is her neoliberal sagas of consumption (*Aisha*, 2010; *Veere Di Wedding*, 2018) and self-improvement (*English Vinglish*, 2012; *Queen*, 2013) that are the only narratives of the new woman worth telling. Instead, through Zareena and Stormy, the film delineates the new woman who operates, whether by virtue of caste (Stormy) or religion (Zareena), from the margins of privilege and proffers alternative modes of ethical engagement with/in an inequitable world instead of consumerism or individuated self-care.

Second, the film disrupts the toxic, misogynistic binary between the traditional woman and the new woman. This dichotomisation of femininity has a long legacy in Indian cinema and invariably entails a sexual fetishisation of the new woman and a neo-conservative preferentialisation of the traditional woman as a viable matrimonial candidate. When Zareena, Kaala's ex-lover, enters the film's narrative fold, it appears as though her globe-trotting worldliness, professional persona as an 'NGO madam' familiar with the slums of Brazil and Africa, and her status as a single mother make her an antithetical counterpoint to Kaala's wife, Selvi, and a contender for Kaala's amorous attention. Selvi's sartorial traditionalism (sari and jewellery) stands in sharp contrast to the urbane-ethnic chic, handloom outfits that Zareena wears and further entrenches the viewer's initial sense of the women's oppositionality to one another. As the film progresses, however, it becomes apparent that the two women do not function as competitors or even as irreconcilable embodiments of femininity.

Selvi and Zareena are more alike than not—in their ferocity (neither of them is afraid to confront men), their political acumen (they both recognise the political repugnance of Haridev on their first meeting with him), and in their appreciation for Kaala (not simply as their object of desire but in how they share/come to share his political vision for the rights of the dispossessed). What's also important is that Selvi doesn't turn Zareena into the scapegoat for her anxieties about Kaala or the fate of her marriage. On the contrary, she grants Kaala and Zareena privacy in her own home, removing herself and other relatives from the room so that the ex-lovers get a few moments alone. Later, she invites Zareena to her house for Kaala's birthday celebrations. In fact, Selvi and Kaala continue to banter about the latter's fondness for Zareena till moments before Selvi's death (in an assassination arranged by Haridev). These must not be read simply as acts or signifiers of wifely martyrdom but rather as self-possessed gestures of generosity that make allowances for the complexity of human relationships. If Zareena's modernity is earmarked through her single motherhood and in her refusal to explain the context of its non-normativity, then Selvi's liberality[5] is captured in her felicity with emotional nuance and in her refusal to lash out at the 'other' woman. Sartorial differences are, thus, not turned into arbitrary, metonymic indicators of empowered femininity; neither are they used as occasions for entrenching patriarchal dichotomies endorsed by films such as *Mujse Dosti Karoge!* (2002) and *Cocktail* (2012).

It is significant that Kaala curtails the sparks of attraction between him and Zareena, not in response to an implied moral deficiency in Zareena as a new woman, or out of a feudo-patriarchal preference for a traditional woman, but as an acknowledgement and honouring of the long history, trust, and solidarity that he and Selvi share. The choice to remain in his marriage, then, is an ethical choice he makes and not a decision prompted by a hierarchised moral viability of the two women. The film's emphasis on Kaala and Selvi's relationship, on explicating the grammar of desire and conjugal joy between them, is a radical move, especially given the

paucity of a cultural iconography that normalises Dalit love, desire, and familial bonds. This is why scenes of Kaala and Selvi—two Dalits—fighting about their ex-lovers; playfully demanding declarations of love from one another, and being indulged; and resolving family dynamics with recalcitrant sons acquire a precedential aura. It is as crucial to the film's visual semantics that, together, Kaala and Selvi occupy public spaces (the chawl, the courtyard outside their home, and Kaala's jeep) as it is that we see them in their intimate spaces (bedroom and balcony). The film, then, is radical in its delineation of a Dalit couple, in which both partners are intellectual, emotional, and political companions.

It is integral to the film's agenda that viewers unlearn their internalised Brahmanical codification of femininity and register Selvi, a dark-skinned Dalit woman, as dynamic and beautiful. As Dalit feminists have argued, Dalit women are often constructed as existing outside the pale of desirability. In this context, it is especially poignant that the romantic song, 'Kannamma' (My Darling), that plays in the background to Kaala and Zareena's rekindled desire concludes not with Zareena but Selvi. Throughout the song, it is Zareena who is the unambiguous referent of the endearment. We hear the word *kannamma* hover in the ether, as we watch her riding her scooty home at night, after her meeting with Kaala where they decide not to pursue the remnants of their longing for one another. The next scene cuts to Selvi, lying in bed, angrily awaiting Kaala's return. The song, however, lingers into this scene, as the male voice sings *kannamma* one last time. This slippage, whereby the mantel of the beloved shifts from Zareena to Selvi, is subtle but important, one that obliges the viewer to acknowledge Selvi as the final recipient of, and rest-stop for, Kaala's love.

The film's validation and preservation of Selvi and Kaala's relationship, however, does not entail Zareena's narratological disappearance—a sure sign that her function in the film, and thereby her legitimation as a woman in her own right, is not abridged to a romantic plot-complication that the male protagonist must surmount. Even during the song, 'Kannamma', when Zareena is presented to the viewer within an amorous framing, it's obvious that her *raison d'être* is not reducible to her as a prospective love interest for the male protagonist. On the surface, the song is incredibly romantic and sexually charged, and within it, Kaala and Zareena are framed through the classic tropes of Indian cinematic romance. Mumbai rains add to the sensuous slow-motion sequences of the ex-lovers exchanging electric glances; together, the camera, the *mise en scene*, Rajinikanth and Huma Qureshi's acting successfully create an atmosphere where the characters have a heightened awareness of each other's corporeal presence.

And yet, the song also serves the function of establishing both Kaala and Zareena as working tirelessly to execute their respective responsibilities and visions for Dharavi. We watch them, with their entourage of associates/comrades, visiting government offices, negotiating with the authorities, as they traverse the matrix landscape of the slum. Every time they cross paths, the two of them are on their way to, or in the midst of, their work in and for Dharavi. What's apparent, then, is that the song represents both of them, not just as (ex)lovers but also as (co)workers, as solidarity builders, and developers of a community (albeit their vision for that development varies substantially at this point in the film). Their matched mobility and agency, their shared purposiveness in improving Dharavi, makes them—a Dalit man and a Muslim new woman—equals in this urban site.

This is why Zareena's presence becomes more and more foregrounded as the film advances, not as a replacement for Selvi after her death but as Kaala's comrade in the political struggle for land rights for the inhabitants of Dharavi. In the long sequence that captures the progress and intensification of the worker's strike against Haridev's campaign to 'clean' and 'purify' the slum, we see several scenes of Kaala and Zareena standing side by side, organising the strike, agitating, educating, and mobilising people. In fact, at this juncture, the film gives us no indication

of the contours of their revised relationship. This is because the film's end goal is more radical than simply to chart the undulations of individual Dalit lives. It supersedes the lure of the private, individuated subaltern narrative, about a Dalit hero, in favour of a story about a collective, in which the affiliations that really matter are not romantic but ideological—to stand against fascism, Brahmanism, Brahmanical patriarchy, and corporate exploitation. Without disinvesting in its primary Dalit protagonist, the viewer is ushered into a more dispersed empathetic schema. Ultimately, it is not an individual at all, but an entire community—constituted by the working class, Dalits, and Muslims—which emerges as the force that moves the plot and elicits our affective-ideological loyalty. Kaala, having acquired mythic proportions after his death, still walks among the masses not just as a spectral reminder, to those in power, that authoritarianism will always meet resistance from below, but also as a literal face mask worn by every child, woman, and man in Dharavi; in 'wearing' his 'face', they both immortalise their hero but also internalise his courage.

What is more is that the film deliberately genders its configuration of the community and the uprising masses. Working class, Dalit, and Muslim women are at the frontline in every scene of political agitation. The film begins with Stormy, a young Dalit new woman,[6] and her fiancé Lenin (Kaala's youngest son) standing with a large crowd at Dhobi Ghat, protesting the builders, police, and politicians who have arrived to initiate Haridev's development scheme for Dharavi. Stormy's fearlessness is striking; she sloganeers with an intimidating vehemence and refuses to be cowed down by the humiliation tactics of men in power. Her irreverence with Kaala and Selvi (her prospective in-laws), refusing to be 'demure' in front of them, engaging with them as an equal is another dimension of her as a new woman. Until the very end, she retains her strident political acumen and resiliency.

During the riot engineered by Haridev to break up the strike, Stormy is sexually assaulted by three policemen who beat her and forcibly remove her *salwar*—all this depicted in terrifying detail. We see the look of horror on her face as the men grab her limbs and strip her. In the midst of the assault, Stormy finds herself on the ground on all fours, with the choice to either retrieve her clothing or grab a giant *lathi*. Given her fierceness, it is unsurprising that she goes for the *lathi* and charges at her assaulters. And, yet, this simple choice on her part irrevocably shatters Indian cinema's decades-old depiction of rape through the image of a trembling rape victim, desperately trying to cover up her nakedness in a futile attempt to reinstate her modesty. Even as Stormy's vulnerability to sexual violence as a working-class Dalit woman[7] is emphasised, her choice to rage and retaliate reminds us that while gendered violence is constitutive of the experience of Dalit womanhood, their tales of resistance are just as vital.[8]

Many other minor female characters—all residents of Dharavi—are integral to the film's political landscape. Memorable among them are the middle-aged women who joke about meeting prospective husbands when standing in line to use public restrooms; the old woman who, in a public meeting, calls out Zareena for pedalling a false fantasy of apartments in high-rise buildings, when in reality their land will be taken over to construct golf courses and they'll be shunted into a matchbox-sized homes: the promise of an 'attached toilet' in the house is not 'enough' to fool her.

At the end of the film, Haridev, dressed in his pristine white kurta pyjama and confident of having vanquished people's resistance by murdering Kaala, arrives in Dharavi to inaugurate his grand development project. He picks up a handful of soil and with a smug smile on his face takes a deep whiff of the land that he imagines he now controls. On all sides, he is surrounded by an angry, restless crowd, which includes a battalion of taciturn-faced children, dressed in black and covered in soot, a reminder of the destructive, literal and metaphorical, fires that ravaged many homes in the slum during the riot orchestrated by Haridev. A little girl,

standing front and centre in the crowd, flings a black ball of dirt/soot at Haridev, whose sullied hands and attire, and stunned expression inform us that both his Brahmanical fixation with white and his feudal-capitalist entitlement to land have been permanently jeopardised. A will of a self-aggrandising patriarch, obsessed with caste purity, who'd unceremoniously designated *Kaala*—the nomenclature and the colour—'ugly' and 'disgusting' has been torpedoed by the impertinence of a little dark-skinned girl. The film, then, is replete with women as major and minor characters, of all of age groups and of differing levels of political consciousness, aligning their intellectual and corporeal stratagem to disabuse Haridev of his omnipotence.[9]

Kaala spends precious time inviting us into the lives of non-bourgeois, Dalit women and encourages us to comprehend the structures of their marginalisation. Most significantly, in a strategic cinematic reversal, the film spatially and narratologically sidelines the neoliberal new woman who otherwise dominates contemporary Indian cinema. In doing so, it rejects and critiques the figure of the de-politicised new woman, ensconced by her privilege into a lack of empathy for others. We encounter this figure fleetingly in two miniscule scenes in the film: a woman in a mall lounging in a massage chair is asked by a news reporter what she thinks about the strike; she casually proclaims that at least 'sixty percent' of the people striking—taxi and rickshaw drivers, street food vendors, janitorial staff and clerks in offices, and sanitation workers—are 'criminals'. In another instance, a young woman in a dress complains to a news reporter that her 'driver didn't come' which is why she had to travel by the local train, something she's never had to do before. 'What is this?' she asks outraged. The film does not editorialise on how we should read these responses, but given that we see a wide array of groups join the strike and convert to its cause—from Kaala's own sons who at the start of the film wanted to leave Dharavi to the thousands who support the movement on social media and the lower-caste members of the police force, lawyers, and local MLAs who join the protest—these two women's emotional and ethical opacity is frightfully jarring. The film, then, includes the mainstream new women only to reject their bourgeois grandstanding as callous and blind to the reality that surrounds them.

At the same time, the film is invested in exploring the ways in which women's gender marginalisation can offer an inroad into developing intersectional networks of solidarity with others who are oppressed.[10] As a Muslim new woman (another rare presence in Indian cinema), who grew up in Dharavi until her family had to leave because of communal riots and by virtue of her NGO work and global travels, Zareena straddles the two Indias—the one featured in 'India Shining' campaigns and the India of itinerant workers, daily wage earners and tenement dwellers. Her political trajectory in the film is a reminder that the ideological and practical misconceptions induced by our privilege can and must be unlearned. To begin with, Zareena does not recognise the way in which her activisty-zeal to develop Dharavi and collaborate with private builders plays into Haridev's scheming. In fact, she castigates Kaala for his 'rowdy' disruption of her development plans, accusing him of using the residents of Dharavi for his personal enmity with Haridev.

What shifts Zareena's politics, however, is an encounter that encapsulates, perfectly, the intersectional workings of gender, caste, religion, and patriarchy. She visits, along with Lenin, and the builder working on the Dharavi project, Haridev in his palatial residence, to reassure him that it is only a handful of miscreants who are opposed to the project and that he shouldn't be put off by them into withdrawing his support of refurbishing Dharavi. Haridev's subtle but spine-chilling response to Zareena when she introduces herself (her name instantly identifying her as Muslim) and when she lets him know that she's a 'single mother' consolidates the man's personal-political malignancy. In response to both pieces of information, he squirms a little in his alabaster throne (all the furniture in his mansion is white, of course) and leans forward, indicating that he needs her to repeat what she's said. His body language induces intimidation and

awkwardness, which Zareena valiantly tries not to succumb to. When they're ready to leave, the builder goes and touches Haridev's feet—a Hindu ritual enshrined in caste and patriarchy—and then prompts Zareena to do the same. A mortified Zareena looks around, and all that meets her gaze are the faces of several men, all ogling at her, waiting to see her prostrate herself before this powerful man. Her repulsion and anxiety are palpable before the scene cuts; the very next scene gives us an irate Zareena storming out of Haridev's home.

What's interesting in this moment is that Zareena's response of anxiety, panic, and a recognition of her vulnerability, mimics the response of women in Indian cinema when they know they're in physical-sexual danger. The camerawork, too—zooming into the faces of cruel, malicious, and salivating men—converts the anticipation of touching Haridev's feet into a euphemistic sexual violation, as though she is expected to perform a sexual favour instead of simply receiving his 'blessings'. The fact that the scene cuts before she touches his feet adds to the subliminal perception that what transpired in the room was a violation of her consent; the details of which the censor board would banish from being 'shown'.

And, the truth is that there is, in fact, a definite overlap and interplay between the aggressions being committed against her: as the only woman in the room, as a Muslim surrounded by politicians who espouse Hindutva politics, as a human being expected to touch an upper-caste man's feet, and as a single mother being read as 'sexually available', Zareena's position in this moment absorbs the vulnerabilities of her multiple, intersectional identities. What brings her to Haridev's house, allows him to treat her with salacious condescension, and coerce her to touch his feet is not any one reason—either her status as a woman, or that she's a professional new woman, or that she's a Muslim, or even the fact of her single motherhood. Instead, it is the confluence of all of these identities that makes her susceptible to Haridev's Brahmanical-patriarchal authority. This moment, then, marks a turning point for Zareena as well as allows the film to posit an argument for how women's gendered experiences of precarity can become a segue for them to think about their own privilege—be it class or caste privilege—and build an allyship with others who exist in structures of palimpsestic vulnerability.

By locating their female protagonists in a caste-ist world, then, both *Kaala* and *Sairat* firmly contest the caste-neutral constructions of empowered femininity in mainstream Indian cinema and emphasise instead the intersectional workings of gender, caste, religion, and patriarchy in the articulation of the new woman. By bringing caste to the foreground, even as they barely mention it explicitly, these films make explicit its omnipresent reality and brutality in the everyday functioning of our gendered existence.

Notes

1 In doing so, we follow Sharmila Rege's lead, who argues that the task of Dalit feminism is to 'map the ways in which the category "women" is being differently reconstituted within regionally diverse patriarchal relations cross-hatched by graded caste inequalities' (2013: 36).

2 We borrow the title from Peggy McIntosh's influential essay where she argues that 'white privilege' is an invisible and 'weightless' knapsack or package of unearned and unrecognised assets, benefits, and entitlements attached to whiteness in the US.

3 Acts of violence committed ostensibly to punish caste transgressions and reinstate caste hierarchies are often referred to in popular discourse as 'honor-killing'. It is more appropriate, however, to categorise them as caste violence and caste murders.

4 In an important reversal, the only 'glitzy' space we see in this film is Haridev's mansion, which, very conspicuously, the film does not present as a site that's accommodative of women's agency. The women in Haridev's life are only engaged in the function of serving him or they scurry away behind closed doors when he's busy attending to work or visitors. Only his pre-pubescent granddaughter occupies memorable screen-space, but her arrival is always an interruption which Haridev indulges but also cuts short.

5 Selvi's liberality is a symptom of what Aloysius et al. argue is the intrinsically 'egalitarian character' of Dalit communities (164). Selvi's 'modernity', alongside Kaala's democratic impulses in how he deals with women and children in his life, can also be understood in terms of Kancha Ilaiah's proposition that a modern egalitarianism is intrinsic to Dalit communities as a result of the absence of Brahmanical restrictions and repressions governing their lives internally.
6 Shailaja Paik's essay 'The Rise of the *new* Dalit women in Indian historiography' is an excellent source for the discussion of the new Dalit woman. Paik traces her lineages back to the late 19th/early 20th century. She does not, however, focus on the contemporary context or the cinematic field, which is where we locate our analysis of this figure.
7 As Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon have suggested, violence against Dalits is a 'permanently existing threat' and is used to punish Dalit women and men for resisting caste hierarchy. At the same time, it's also important to remember that much of the violence that Dalits are subjected to—murder, gang rape, naked parade—is directed at women and this sexual violence against them is always political (13–14).
8 Shailaja Paik extends this political imperative even further. She argues that mainstream historiography casts Dalit women either as victims—the 'laboring poor', 'broken', 'terribly trashed', and 'brutally battered'—or as 'heroines' who 'smashed the prison'. Paik reminds us that 'Dalit women's fragmented, flawed, complex and contradictory lives cannot be confined to linear readings' and that we must, instead, work to recover the 'deeper complexities of Dalit women's subjectivities'. We must remember that 'Dalit women's agency belonged to them as well as to the culturally specific and historically contingent arrangement of power in which they were located' (2018: 3).
9 In a sense, then, the film achieves what Sharmila Rege articulates as the need to 'translate the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestations of hierarchies' (2020: 164). The film's transference of centerstage, from a singular protagonist to a community, invokes Kancha Ilaiah's argument that we should move towards a 'Dalitization' not a 'Hinduization' of Indian society, because the Dalitwaada is 'identified by collective living and collective consciousness . . . the individual is subsumed into the collectivity' (117–118).
10 This is in direct contradistinction to narrative trajectories where the question of gender/women's vulnerability is used to obfuscate the reality of caste. Pallavi Rao's reading of the film *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* illustrates the ways in which open defecation, which in India is mired in caste taboos and oppressions, is treated simply as a matter of 'women's security' (87).

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11

The Construction and Representation of Lower-Caste Women in Bollywood Films

Farhana Naaz

Inequality is an endemic feature of human societies and it persists to grow with time. One such major form of inequality of modern India is the system of caste. Indeed, it has changed in form but it certainly did not disappear. With the advent of modernisation unleashed on the Indian territories and with the growth of modern and secular education, to some, caste seems to have declined and faded away. Caste is a matter of the past for the ones who are privileged enough to deny its presence; however, it is omnipotent for those who suffer from it. Caste has augmented into manifolds and in various newer forms in the contemporary times (Jodhka 2012: x). Lower castes who are now politically known as Dalits[1] are the most severely affected victims of caste. Kothari writes that even today, in the twenty-first century, the entire communities of lower castes 'are found to be in deep turmoil, face constant humiliation and growing erosion of their identity and sense of being part of civil society, the nation and the state' (Kothari 1994: 1589). However, even among Dalits, it is women who are the worst sufferers of it. They are the double Dalit among Dalits. The structural violence meted out to them because of their lower-caste status, their economic precariousness, and the patriarchal practices are often disregarded and overlooked by the state and its agents. Naturally, Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, which serves as a tool in the hands of the dominant groups functions according to the convention. This chapter aims to explore the ideological bias involved in the construction of lower-caste women characters in Bollywood films and their representation which is more often than not marginalised and flawed.

The late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries witnessed the rise of nationalist movement for Indian liberation. The focus of the Nationalists was exclusively on the hegemonic struggle against the British. At the same time, anti-caste movements were also gaining precedence under Dr Ambedkar's leadership but such discourses on equality and social justice were deemed weak. It was antagonistic to the nationalist struggle and therefore was less valid and authentic. Consequently, the subject of caste along with the subject of women, which were the concerns of the earliest reformers, was annexed and transferred to 'the realm of the culture and the private' (Rege 2013: 43). These issues were 'overshadowed by the urgency of drawing boundaries and creating a nation state' (Atwal 2018: 735). The question of caste, in particular, was invisibilised in the struggle on the pretext of keeping Hindus consolidated and save the 'greater' movement from internal rifts, divisions, and fissures. Later, with the achievement of

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independence, the principal concerns of the Nationalists were poverty and underdevelopment which led to the incorporation of both M. K. Gandhi's idealistic nationalism and Nehruvian socialism. Thus, caste was barely a subject of debate or concern. As Rege claims, the question of caste, much like the question of women, was betrayed in the name of modernity, on the narrow basis of nationalism, which was a construct of upper-caste men (2013: 43). Similarly, Torin. J. Gajarawala writes, 'Modernity, particularly in the form of national citizenship, required the shedding of old affiliations of ethnicity, religion, language, and—importantly—caste' (2013: 129). However, Partha Chatterjee argues that the new politics of Nationalists 'glorified India's past and tended to defend everything traditional' (2017: 117). They propagated the dichotomies of home/world, spiritual/material, and feminine/masculine to maintain the distinctiveness of their tradition from the west. Using the same dichotomies they resolved the women's question by eulogising them with the idea of home, spirituality and godlike qualities thus excluded them from the political domain. This 'new' woman claimed superiority in terms of culture (her feminine virtues and 'her place at home') from the western women and from the women of lower castes of her own country. This 'new woman' who was burdened with the 'honour' of new social responsibility then intensely propagated the idea of nationalism and distinguished themselves not only from the western women but also from women of lower castes. Hence, the male chauvinists and the *bhadralok*[2] women together kept the issues of lower castes at the periphery. Castelessness, consequently, became the modern imperative for the subject of nationalism (Gajarawala 2013: 129). Even if the question of caste came to the surface, it was discussed either in terms of division of labour or as a question of sanitation. Caste exploitation and caste injustices, and caste itself as an institution of inequality were buried under the discourse of Indian modernity. Later, in the post-independent times, the question of caste began to take the front seat with the rise of Dalit Panthers and various Shatyashodhak, Ambedkarite, and anti-caste counter publics. However, it remained enclosed around the struggle of Dalit 'men'. The struggles of lower castes were brought to notice through several Dalit literary and political movements, but the question of lower-caste women remained in an abyss of unexplored truth until recently. The subject of Dalit women is crucial in the contemporary discourse because in spite of all the liberation movements and the counter culture established by Dalits and in spite of all the uproars created by the women's movements, none made an effort to capture the struggles of lower-caste women. They remained almost invisible in both the discourses.

Following the footsteps of the nationalist struggle, the Hindi cinema contributed to the movement towards modernisation and nation building. Corresponding to the demand of the nation and its people, Bollywood produced its movies consciously. Films like *Andaz* (1949), *Mother India* (1957), *Naya Daur* (1957), and *Howrah Bridge* (1958) helped to inculcate the idea of a deep sense of nationalism in Indians. With the amalgam of nationalism, social reform, and entertainment, it culminated in presenting a distorted truth of secular India, hence, failed to handle the inner complexities that existed in its own society. Bollywood headstrongly adopted Gandhi's nationalistic fervour, and Ambedkar's movements against Brahmanism got brushed under the carpet. The question of caste has remained less significant in the subjects of Bollywood. It has been either handled tangentially or not at all. And when I say tangentially, I refer to the fact that the burden of caste often falls on the shoulders of lower castes and upper castes go 'casteless'. All the movies by/on upper castes that have been produced since the inception of Bollywood never bore the burden of its caste identity. The theme of caste only appears on the silver screen when it deals with the struggles of Dalits. Bollywood has certainly tried to handle the socio-political issues and attempted to invoke realism on many occasions by focussing on oppressive social conditions existing in Indian society including the issue of caste, but the consciousness of the caste struggle principally revolved around the problem of untouchability, and

therefore during 1930s, the time when the contestation between Gandhi's struggle for nationalism and Ambedkar's fight for the annihilation of caste was at its peak, it produced movies like *Achhut Kannya* (The Untouchable Maiden) in 1936 that conjured the problems of Untouchables from Gandhian perspectives. As Nisha writes, 'the popular gaze, although touched upon caste from a periphery, the depth and reason to understand the "politics of caste" have been missing from the popular discourse' (2020). Their representation in the popular discourse is often as hapless victims, contributing to their own oppression, devoid of any voice and who 'must be' rescued. Movies like *Sadgati* (1981) are synonymous with Gandhi's idea of the caste system and his struggle to incorporate Untouchables into the Hindu fold to save the system from distortion and strengthen the Hindu nation. It represents caste only in terms of untouchability and represents the popular notion of Dalits as mute sufferers of caste inequalities and oppression. But lower castes of the contemporary times are assertive, non-conforming members of the society, striving to establish a society that is grounded on the principles of social justice, equality, and human dignity (Michael 2007: 14). Even in the post-independent times, Hindi cinema 'serves nothing more than the role of an ideological state apparatus, bringing to the fore at times a Gandhian or a Brahminical view of the nation, in accordance with Hindu dogma' (Nisha 2020). The issues of caste have been investigated, but only from the perspective of the dominant castes. Dalit perspective rarely found a central stage in cinematic representation, let alone the question of Dalit women.

However, the issues of lower castes, in the general sense of the term, did reach the silver screen through the issue of untouchability, but the problem of lower-caste women, even in the contemporary times, still remain unknown to the wider world. Bollywood failed to record the subordination spawned out of the intersection of their various identities (as 'Dalit', 'poor', and 'woman' altogether). The assertion of Dalit women with their newly awakened caste identity and consciousness was clearly evident in the 1980s and early 1990s, when autonomous Dalit women's organisations, at both the national and state levels, threw 'several crucial theoretical and political challenges besides underlining the Brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of dalit politics' (Rege 1998: 39). But such challenges lacked visibility within the framework of Bollywood and we are served with fragmented truths that are nothing but clichés in the modern context.

The dominant mind while presenting the problem of caste either subsumed it within the category of class—a hard-toiling labourer, a poor Indian, a taxi driver or a coolie—as seen in the movies like *Zanjeer* (1973), *Roti Kapada Aur Makaan* (1974), *Khoon Pasina* (1977) *Coolie* (1983) or dealt only with respect to the problem of untouchability as reflected in movies like *Sadgati* (1981), *Arakshan* (2011), *Manjhi* (2015), *Article 15* (2019), etc., thus leaving the exploitation and oppression of lower-caste women completely untouched. Here the protagonists are often either from upper castes trying to free Dalits from the tyrannical practice of untouchability and caste oppression or from the category of lower-caste men who are crushed under the burden of caste. Although in the recent times movies like *Kabali* (2016), *Manusangada* (2017), *Kaala* (2018), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), and *Asuran* (2019) in other regional cinema of India did break the stereotype of victimhood, challenged the ideological location of the Savarna film-makers through portrayal of protagonists who much like what India witnessed during the rise of Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, in the incarnation of Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, etc., boldly criticised the hegemonic power of the upper castes and asserted their rights to a dignified life, such non-conforming Dalit characters were never the subjects of Bollywood. Even the character of Nishad in the film *Article 15* (2019), who initially portrayed to be fighting for the cause of Dalits, was later invisibilised in the movie. Similarly, the powerful Dalit women like Baby Kamble, Shantabai Dhanaji Dani, Shantabai Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, who were actively involved in

the Ambedkarite struggle through both literature and political movements, are hardly known to Bollywood. There is no proper investigation of the lives of lower-caste women who are twice Dalits because not only do they suffer caste and class oppressions but also have to endure patriarchal domination both inside their home and outside in the world. They barely find representation in the movies, and even if they do, they are repeatedly consigned to the position of supporting characters but never as a protagonist as the characters like Lakshmi in *Ankur* (1974), Phagunia in *Manjhi* (2015), and Gaura in *Article 15* (2019). Although Gaura was depicted as a strong character who seemed to have her own agency, the credit of her oppositional consciousness was given to her educated boyfriend Nishad who is said to have moulded her ideology. Bollywood handled the subject of Dalit women with casteist, patriarchal, and sexist undertones and hence confirms to the dominant idea about them being submissive, sacrificing, powerless victims, and mute spectators of their own deprivation who not only lack agency and voice but also contribute to their own subjugations as seen through characters like Kasturi in *Achhut Kannya* (1936), Jhuria in the movie *Sadgati* (1981), and Manjhi's mother who remained unnamed in the movie *Manjhi* (2015). The margin where the lower-caste women reside becomes the site of pity and their cinematic representation becomes a mask and an oppressive talk hiding gaps and silences.

If we employed Sandra Harding's standpoint theory, a feminist critical theory emerged in the 1970s which argues that 'all knowledge is socially situated', we would understand that in societies that are stratified by gender, caste, class and other categories, knowledge that stems out is shaped by one's own social positions (Borland 2020). The theory is developed from the Marxist argument that people belonging to the marginalised sections have special access to knowledge which is not accessible to those belonging to the privileged sections. Similarly, while creating and developing a protagonist, the storyteller's own sociological standpoint comes into play and thus, we encounter upper-caste protagonists who seem to participate in the Dalit struggle and become saviours to the marginalised, regardless of their privileged social conditions (Maitreya 2020: 80). The marginal position of Dalit women is not only a site of repression but also a site of resistance from where they see the world differently. In bell hooks' words, living on the margin they developed a unique way of seeing the reality: 'we looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both' (hooks 1984: x).

Taking this idea further, the next section of this chapter will analyse the construction of lower-caste women characters in Bollywood from the standpoint of dominant castes. It will discuss Bollywood's approach in handling the discussion of caste with special emphasis on movies like *Ankur: The Seedling* (1974) by Shyam Benegal, *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (2015) by Ketan Mehta, and *Leila* (2019) by Deepa Mehta, a Netflix series. The reason to include this series in the category of Bollywood is because Bollywood is a city-based industry and the series, though comes under the name of a foreign company called Netflix, has been directed, enacted, and produced in the studio of Bollywood. Bollywood has thus only used the platform of Netflix to showcase its series. This chapter is an attempt to problematise the construction of such women and their invisibility in the leading roles both in front of and behind the camera. The mainstream feminists' representation of lower-caste women is often confined to 'salvaging the pain rather than exploring and studying anger' (Atwal 2018: 735). This is pertinent to understand in the context of Bollywood too, which claims to speak *about/for* lower-caste women but not *to* these women or *with* these women. The purpose behind taking these movies is to discuss the three major issues which revolve around the discussion about lower-caste women. Firstly, the conception regarding Dalit women's sexuality has been highly problematic and this I undertake through the movie *Ankur: The Seedling* (1974). The decision to choose *Ankur* was

to exhibit the time when Dalit women's struggle was completely absent in both anti-caste and women's movements which were gaining precedence. Secondly, while discussing Dalit identity and assertion, Dalit women are often given a back seat and their problems become invisible in the struggle. This is dealt with the help of the movie *Manjhi* (2015), which was released two decades after lower-caste women had begun their fight for their unique positionality through both the literary and political movements. Bollywood was hardly aware of the socio-political movements of the marginalised women and hence had failed to give them any voice. Lastly, the much debated issue regarding the invisibility of Dalit women in the mainstream feminist struggle and their ultimate divorce from both the anti-caste and women's movements is discussed with *Leila* (2019). The film was released at a time when Dalit women have been firmly asserting their own theoretical stance because of the interlocking nature of their caste and gender identity yet what we receive on the platter is an upper-caste woman fighting *on their behalf* with the casteist society.

Ankur: The Seedling (1974): A Lower-Caste Woman's Complicity

Ankur (1974), the debut movie of director Shayam Benegal, based on a real-life case, is one of the most acclaimed movies that critically deals with the problem of the caste system, lower-caste woman's sexuality, and the complexities existing in the Indian society. The film received both national and international fame. One of the leading characters, Lakshmi, is a lower-caste woman often referred by critics to have broken the social taboo with respect to her sexual preference and claimed the right to her own body by choosing to get intimate with an upper-caste man. However, the deeper understanding of their situation brings to the forefront how a Dalit woman's social and economic depravity is often perceived as her being sexually 'free', which ultimately makes her the victim of sexual violence. The construction of characters like Lakshmi represents not only dominant group's rejection of her subjectivity but also of political agency (Sowjanya 2020). The value of a woman in Indian society is synonymous with the purity of her caste, and this purity has to be sustained in order to maintain the hierarchical structure of the caste system. Uma Chakravarti states that caste purity, women, and material resources 'are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently organising female sexuality' (1993: 579). So, women's sexuality becomes the axis around which the caste system stands and hence endogamy (marrying within one's own caste) becomes the sole criteria for maintaining the dichotomy of pure/impure and controlling the material resources. Women's sexuality, particularly her reproductive power, becomes the biggest threat to the structure of caste system and therefore patriarchy comes in to operate as a saviour of caste by controlling women's body through the aid of *shastras*.[3] It is for this reason that Ambedkar insisted on annihilating *shastras* in order to annihilate caste. Therefore, Dalit women are represented through the Savarna lens as sexually autonomous because their caste status deprives them of security. These women are bound to be 'free' because of their economic deprivation and this leads to 'the lack of stringent controls on their labour, mobility and sexuality and this renders them "impure" or "lacking in virtue"' (Rege 2018: 31). Her 'freedom' makes her a complicit in her own subordination which in this case is Lakshmi's reciprocation to the sexual invitation of Surya, an upper-caste male chauvinist and later mortified by her own infidelity towards her husband and the system that operates to maintain the hierarchical structure. The movie from its beginning also emphasises the importance of reproduction for Lakshmi. Infertility is highly stigmatised in the rural Indian society and often children become a tool to attain social respectability and marital security. To a certain extent, her liaison was presented as a solution to her conjugal discord which stemmed from her barrenness.

Having said this, one needs to understand that caste, class, and gender in India are intertwined and the subordination of oppressed sections (like Dalit women, trans-Dalit woman or disabled trans-woman) cannot be understood without understanding the interlocking nature of their various identities, which leads to their oppression. Dalit women being the lowest on the caste ladder often find themselves at the mercy of upper-caste men and this found a way to the silver screen with the characters of Lakshmi and Kaushalya, the mistress of Surya's father. Surya's sexual frustration due to his child bride not coming up of age and his ultimate liaison with Lakshmi verifies that upper-caste men have often considered it legitimate to become sexual predators of women from the lower castes. He followed in his father's footsteps to attain sexual satisfaction which his youthful body demanded. However, unlike his father who continued to keep his mistress Kaushalya and their illegitimate child Pratap by providing them with land and other resources, Surya took a step back and ostracised Lakshmi when he impregnated her. Not only did he refuse to take the responsibility but he also forced her to abort the child. This is reflective of the strategy of upper-caste men who use their social power to keep Dalit women subservient through the routine sexual violence directed against them and through controlling their bodies by leaving their seeds. It is not just economic deprivation that makes them undergo such oppression; it is their lowly caste status that confines them to this routine exploitation.

However, they 'have been neither passive victims of nor willing accomplices to their own domination' (Collins 1989: 747). Hence, to fully comprehend the position of women like Lakshmi, one needs to incorporate intersectionality, a theoretical tool and an analytical framework to understand how different aspects of a person's social and political identities amalgamate and produce different forms of discrimination and privilege. The movie was released during the time when both anti-caste and women's movements were growing exuberantly and gaining momentum. We therefore get the idea of women movement's blindness towards the 'differences' existing within their own social movement. Saru, the child bride of Surya, when she comes back to her husband (while Lakshmi was still working in his house) refuses to accept food made by Lakshmi. Characters like Saru and Surya's mother, presented as the victims of lower-caste women's 'sexual freedom', represent the agonistic attitude of upper-caste women towards their 'other' sisters. This idea of 'othering' was also adopted and appropriated by the film-makers.

> (This) 'othering', silencing, and appropriating the existence of history, knowledge, and symbols of the marginalised communities have been tools employed by the upper-caste film-makers deliberately. Evidently in that process, they have not only capitalised on such discourses, but have also stripped the marginalised characters of their dignity and agency replicating the same hierarchical structures of caste on screen.
>
> *(Nisha 2020)*

This 'othering' is quite implicitly revealed through the cinematic techniques too. Surya's mother, who remained nameless in the entire movie, was presented as dispirited and often seen pressed down because of Kaushalya's presence. In contrast, Kaushalya is portrayed as an opportunist who often visits Surya's father to meet her demands. The idea of anonymity through namelessness of both Surya's father and mother can imply the commonality of experiences that upper castes undergo because of the supposed 'freedom' of lower-caste women. The camera also captures some important aspects which are not overtly expressed. Even though Surya allows Lakshmi to cook him a meal despite her being a low-caste woman, the camera records the disparity of socio-economic status of both the characters. While Surya sits on the chair, Lakshmi consciously sits down on the floor; while the house of Surya, though traditionally built, is shown to have spread on the large pukka floor, the house of Lakshmi which is right in front of his

house is shown to be tiny and tattered, standing weakly on the field. Also, if we go by the picturesque representation of India, it reflects the glorification of traditional rural life surrounded by greenery. Even Surya, who returned back from the city to his village, seems to have no complains. The entire atmosphere is surrounded by peace and tranquillity. The bleak house with no electricity and colourless walls did not affect him. On the one hand, he is shown to be liberal in his choice of food and sexual preferences, and on the other hand, he is quite 'Hindustani' (Indian) in the choice of his traditional life (i.e., in his decision to settle in a village and in his denunciation to accept his illegitimate child). The character of Surya captures the struggle of Indians caught between tradition and modernity. However, the movie ends with a kid throwing a stone at Surya's window, thus signalling the sign of growing assertiveness of Dalits and their revolutionary spirit.

Manjhi: The Mountain Man (2015)—Problematising Dalit Assertion

Marginalised women did find representation on the silver screen, but 'the popular discourse remains passive on the politics of caste and its intersection with gender. The question as regards the genesis of patriarchy and the political quest of a marginalised character on the silver screen remain unexplored' (Nisha 2020). *Manjhi* (2015) directed by Ketan Mehta, deals with a true story of Dashrath Manjhi, 'the Mountain Man', a labourer from the community of *Musahar* (rat eaters), a resident of the village of Gehlaur, near Gaya in Bihar. *Manjhi*, played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui, is an embodiment of the struggle of lower castes. The movie revolves around Manjhi's fight against the mountain to carve out a pathway. The mountain stood as a barrier between the village and the town and became a reason for deaths of many villagers, here particularly Phaguniya, Manjhi's wife who couldn't be taken to hospital on time. The love for his wife compelled him to undertake the massive task of breaking the mountain which is also reminiscent of the impudence of power holders, the rich dominant caste people. It is also emblematic of the internal struggle every Dalit endures. The camera, time and again, shows us the difference between powerful and powerless through the mountain and Manjhi looking at each other. The movie is said to represent the time around 1950s when untouchability was officially abolished by the government but not by the villages and towns. The local governance system of the village also represents the deeper dichotomy of the powerful and the powerless. Mukhiya spat at Manjhi and whipped him ruthlessly for his audacity to touch him, reminding him and the viewers that no law can permit an outcaste to freely socialise with the upper castes. It presents the grim yet authentic picture of the structural violence meted out to people residing in the bottom of the caste ladder. The movie opens with the oppressed speaking truth to power. It begins with Manjhi's questioning the powerful mountain, '*Bahut bada hai tu? Bahut akad hai tora me? Bahut jor hai? Arey bharam hai, bharam*' (You think you are too big? You are too proud? Too powerful? It's nothing but delusion).[4] This questioning of the powerless to the powerful is a vigorous attempt taken up by the Hindi cinema. *Tune humri jindagi ko kharab kiya hai, hum torako cheer ke rakh denge* (You have ruined my life, I will rip you apart), this statement of Manjhi to the Mountain signifies the contemporary Dalits who are assertive of their rights to equality and dignity (Naaz 2015: 168).

The character of Phaguniya, played by Radhika Apte, a Dalit woman and wife of the protagonist, has been presented in the very beginning of the movie as a brave and spirited woman who earns her living by selling bangles. However, her robust character is consigned to the position of the beloved. Phaguniya merely serves as a partner to Manjhi and makes no other contribution to the society. Through the technique of flashback, the movie brings out their unusual chemistry and romance in a dream sequence. She is portrayed as sensually beautiful and is quite often

spotted smiling affectionately at Manjhi's antics and hypnotising him by her charms. Similarly, the character of Manjhi's mother, whose role has far greater significance as she is the one to awaken a sense of freedom in the young Manjhi who eventually runs off and breaks free from the clutches of his village's *mukhiya* to whom his father, out of dire poverty, was about to sell him as bonded labour was given a small part. Moreover, the film-makers did not feel the need to name her as she was solely referred to as Magru's (Manjhi) mother throughout the movie. These women, though bold and assertive, are confined to be either lovers or mothers/sisters and are hardly considered crucial for any central role.

One of the shortcomings of this movie is its lack of Dalit women characters. Do women, other than Phaguniya, have no contribution in Manjhi's life? Does the village Gehlaur lack women or are all women from the village submissive? The character of 'Gaura' from the movie *Article 15*, played by Sayani Gupta, is also presented as courageous and confident, who would not fear questioning the structural violence and injustices. But unfortunately, she too is relegated to the category of merely a lover. This positionality of Dalit women also brings to the frontline the question of their incorporation in both Dalit and women's movements. Both the movements have invisibilised the 'differences' of Dalit women. Therefore, the catchphrase, 'Masculinisation of Dalithood and a Savarnisation of Womanhood' captures the sentiments of Dalit women (Rege 1998: 42). Dalit women do suffer severely from the dominant casteist society but both mainstream Dalit movement and feminist movement are complicit in her marginalisation. The former incorporated their caste identity while the latter incorporated their gender identity, thus de-emphasising their marginalisation from either of the identity, caste or gender, invisible. Dalit women believe that the mainstream feminists' caste-neutral movements provide no space for their particular grievances, which is deeply marked by caste violence. Dalit movement too has failed to incorporate the patriarchal practices existing within their own community. Therefore, Guru insists that Dalit women should, must, and do talk differently (1995: 2548). Even after two decades since the commencement of lower-caste women's assertion, these women still haven't got a space in Bollywood. Also the movie's exclusivist approach highlights the urgency to bring in the discourse on the intersection of caste and patriarchy into the mainstream discussion. However, one cannot deny the authentic portrayal of lower castes' struggle in this casteist world. Manjhi embodies the fight of all the oppressed against the oppressors. With just a hammer and chisel, Manjhi proves to be more powerful than the mountain itself.

Leila (2019)—An Upper-Caste Woman's Gaze

Leila (2019), a Netflix series directed by Deepa Mehta and an adaptation of Prayaag Akbar's novel *Leila*, underscores the evils of the caste system but through the journey of an upper-caste Hindu woman and her struggle to deal with social segmentation and the blindness of the privileged men and women towards it. It represents the dystopian universe where 'segregation is the only constitution: the privileged live in walled cities that are categorised by community, religion, or caste' (Sharma 2019). The series is set in the near future, 2040, when water and fresh air have come to be regarded as luxuries and when the powerful and powerless are segregated by a great wall (quite literally) dividing the nation, though the metaphorical wall continues to exist since time immemorial, where the Aryavarta rules the nation and establish their own religion as the guiding principle in the lives of Indians. The movie's protagonist Shalini, played by Huma Qureshi, is a Panchkarmi, a privileged upper-caste woman whose journey to find her lost daughter 'Leila' is replete with upheavals. The dichotomy of the pure and the impure plays a crucial role in the series. Shalini's marrying outside her caste and religion and later giving birth to a child of mixed breed underscore the point that caste is the major criteria to identify people

of the Indian society. And a child born out of such wedlock is nothing but chaos in the well-structured casteist society. Prayaag Akbar, the author of the novel *Leila*, writes caste continues to be 'a resolute, nimble institution, surviving the dramatic political and economic transformations of three millennia. There is no question of it having disappeared from either the rural or urban context' (qtd. in Sharma 2019).

The series, though intensely political and a realistic representation of the contemporary nation state, solely deals with the struggle of a dominant caste woman's perception of caste and the society's response to it. In the twenty-first century when India is striving for globalised modernity, when caste has become highly political, when 'the very sufferers from the system (including the caste system) are invoking caste identity and claims' (Kothari 1994: 1589), and when 'differences' have begun to be acknowledged within various social reform movements, the popular cinema portrays an upper-caste woman becoming a messiah of 'her' oppressed sisters. The women's question is represented as the question of upper-caste and middle-class women, 'their struggle with the tradition and their desire to be modern' (Rege 2013: 66). Women from the lower castes have once again been given a back seat in the entire series, except through Shalini's maid who eventually turns into a high-class woman under the guardianship of Dr Joshi, the head of the nation of Aryavarta. Such politics in terms of their representation confirms the rejection of their subjectivity and agency and testifies to the fact that feminism in India is still synonymous with upper-caste women. The absence of assertive Dalit women in the films is nothing but the politics of the denial of their reality. This is also symbolic of casteist Hindus who believe it to be their *dharma*[5] to be the saviours of the downtrodden while simultaneously maintaining the social hierarchical structure.

There is also a little girl named Roop who belongs to Doosh, a community consisting of lower castes. She represents the 'ressentiment'[6] of the marginalised from the other side of the wall. When one reads the autobiographies of Dalit feminists like Baby Kamble, Bama, or Urmila Pawar, the central idea that revolves around their narratives is the endorsement of education which these women, even in the dire poverty, made accessible to their children. But what the dominant caste could perceive is in the form of Roop, a little girl, poor, illiterate, dirty, and rude, too young to claim her identity and dignity. Caste becomes the 'other' of the modern. Here, it belongs only to Roop who epitomises the lower-caste women. Also the entire suburb of the community of Doosh is presented as grimy and rotten. The camera quite aptly captures the pure/impure binary in a single frame. It keeps highlighting the huge dividing wall where on one side resides the hyper modern world with super advanced technology while the other side is populated by the lowliest lot. The rebellion from the community of Doosh is portrayed only through Bhanu (Siddharth), a lower-caste man who, under the garb of an Aryavarta servant, is shown to be plotting strategies to regain the country from the grips of Mr Joshi. Priyadarsini, an independent Dalit woman film maker who started *The Blue Club* to teach marginalised women the technicalities involved in producing films, says:

> Don't represent us at all if you don't want to put in any effort into doing it properly and truthfully. Leave us alone and we'll be better off than when you represent us as uncivil sub-humans. The popular media are the main reason for the societal perception of us as rude, aggressive, and dirty.
>
> *(Alagarsamy 2018)*

The series, consisting of six episodes, ends with a lot of questions unanswered, leaving viewers in anticipation that the next season would bring in all that is left unsaid. The series' 'greatest prophecy is not the imagination of a future, but the articulation of denial and ignorance

that prevents us from accepting that it is already here' (Sharma 2019) It also underscores the point that contemporaneousness of the urban world did not kill caste, rather it has grown and metamorphosed into a much more casteist society. The city, its well-furnished homes, schools, the labour camp, hotels, malls, and markets, all epitomise the casteist world that we have been led to. The series has little to do with the issues of women from the marginalised sections. All it seems to be obsessed with is the privileged women's struggle in the casteist world and their faith on their 'castelessness' which is nothing but delusion. The segregation of the poor from the rich through the big wall of the Hindu nation is a reflection of the segregationist attitude of the dominant caste towards the marginalised.

A Space of One's Own

Dalit women believe that both the mainstream Hindi cinema and parallel/alternative cinema have failed to represent their position. They are either non-existent or traumatic beings, often are victimised or eroticised characters in Bollywood. Such exhibitions are gross perversions of the reality. This way, the directors appropriate and manipulate the history of the marginalised and oust them 'from their own story, reduced to being mere receivers of justice' (Maitreya 2020). Therefore, there is an urgent need for the Dalit women to be involved in the mainstream media. Uma Devi, a lyricist, says while discussing women in the field of media:

> There are several stories within us. These stories aren't being talked about, written about, or being screened. Because more often than not, we don't get the opportunity to spread our stories because we are busy securing our next meal. This needs to change. . .. When I say we need more Dalit stories on screen, I don't mean stories of our trauma. We hold within us stories of joy, of celebration, and of triumph. I want to see those stories on the big screen. *(Alagarsamy 2019)*

If Bollywood is at all willing to indulge in the discourse of caste, then it should incorporate either or both of these two approaches—'one where annihilation of caste is the only way to emancipate the Dalits from the tyrannical structure of caste system and the other is the affirmation of one's own caste as an assertion of self-respect, power, dignity, solidarity and pride' (Muthukkaruppan 2014: 42). Commercial films are often exclusively concerned with the entertainment of the masses and therefore make it difficult for women coming from the margins to get along with their own voice or opinion. Priyadarsini believes that justice can be done to the characters portrayed in the silver screen only when women get themselves involved in writing their own stories. That is, the story has to be analysed from Dalit feminist's standpoint and that is possible only when Dalit women themselves tell their own stories. She says in an interview, 'I wanted to create a space where a woman with experience in the field could help other young women with learning the technicalities of film-making, because there are very few opportunities for women, especially the ones from marginalised communities, to learn it' (Alagarsamy 2018). However, if we applied Sandra Harding's standpoint theory here, we would understand the relationship between the production of knowledge and the practices of power. Those at the top of social hierarchies are most likely to lose sight of real human relations and the social reality existing within society and therefore unable to critically assess the social world (Borland 2020). This is why we see the production of movies like *Achhut Kannya* (1936), *Sujata* (1959), *Ankur* (1974), *Manjhi* (2015), *Article 15* (2019), and *Leila* (2019). People belonging to the marginalised groups have a unique understanding of their positions and the social reality in which they exist. The position of Dalit women, who are thrice marginalised and twice Dalits, has a unique and

distinct standpoint which both the society in general and Bollywood in particular need to listen to, comprehend, and incorporate. Space needs to be created for them to represent themselves. Also, this standpoint can be achieved by a group which is conscious of the struggles of Dalit women and are willing to participate physically or/and intellectually in the collective political struggle. As Rege declares, this standpoint is 'emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e., the thought begins from the lives of Dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought)' (1998: 45). It provides them (the dominant groups) with the scope to understand their own complicity in the power and privileges. It is only when we contribute meaningfully to the struggle that we as a society are able to justify their representations. To use Ashis Nandy's words, Dalit women of the new generation want neither sympathy nor solidarity; they want agency and the right to deny that they have a cultural burden to carry (2012: xi).

Notes

1 'Dalit' is a Marathi word which means 'broken'. It is used for all the sections of the society that are oppressed in the names of caste, class, religion, gender, ethnicity, and convictions. Here the author has employed it to refer to the lower-caste members of Hindu society who have been subjected to various inhuman tortures and humiliation. The term gained prominence in the post-independent India with the rise of Dalit Panthers movement as a self-assertion of the new political identity of the oppressed.
2 A Bengali term for prosperous and well-educated people.
3 Shastras are religious scriptures in Hinduism.
4 All translations are mine.
5 *Dharma* is derived from Sanskrit. It has multiple meanings with reference to the Indian religions and traditions. However, here it implies the moral duty and 'right way of living' with respect to the religious scriptures.
6 Friedrich Nietzsche used it in terms of master-slave narrative. See *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

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12

P. K. Rosy and Devaki Bai

Cast(e)ing the Malayalam Silent Film Actresses

Geetha G.

The performance history of Kerala is rooted in caste-based art forms and ritualistic performances as part of social and religious beliefs and practices. This chapter looks into the multifaceted narratives to analyse the context in which the two actresses of the Malayalam silent cinema were ostracised from film and society by placing the figure of the actress within the matrix of the social history of Kerala. The traditional art forms of Kerala are directly associated with the hierarchical caste structure with aesthetics moulded by the sensibilities groomed by Hindu religious codes. The caste structure was so rigid that the Kerala caste system had its own distinctiveness with hierarchical rules based on purity, pollution, and desecration. The art forms related to the temples were performed and viewed in restricted caste spaces by the 'unpolluted' caste.[1] Only the privileged caste groups were entitled to enter the temple premises or even walk along the roads near the temples.[2] The women were outsiders to many of the caste-based performances, and men masquerading as women performed female roles in different art practices.[3]

The body of women entering the forbidden spaces of performances subverted the caste rules and played an integral part in the conception of an egalitarian society, though not acknowledged in *his*-story. Women's role in the performing arts was limited to *Koodiyattam*, a caste-based theatrical art form, *Dasiyattam* (a dance form), whose lineage is traced from the *Devadasi* tradition of the temples, and some folk art forms. The lower castes and other religious groups were not given access to these caste-defined highbrow cultural spaces, and entertainment was confined to society's gentry. The Christian missionaries used education as armament for social change; they facilitated modern medicine, influenced the Travancore princely state to issue orders relating to social progress, like the abolition of slavery and caste discrimination, and helped the deprived people to get education and economic independence. Western education, social, and literary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries helped the entry of actresses into film and theatre.[4] Nevertheless, society devised many strategies to control and administer women's performative spaces and bodies.

The performing arts history of the early nineteenth century had its origin in exclusionary aesthetics of dominance and oppression, with art forms like *Kathakali*, *Koodiattom*, and *Krishnanattam*, having flourished as a leisurely entertainment form or as part of the ritualistic temple tradition of the upper castes. In contrast, the folk arts like *Theyyatam* and *Purattunadakam* emerged from and developed proximity to pastoral lives and resistance to feudal oppression. Sanskrit drama was confined to the intellectual groups in Kerala and was published and circuited among the

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elitists. In almost all the Sanskrit plays, the women, the uneducated, and the lower caste spoke in 'Praakrit' as opposed to the King (important characters) who spoke in 'Sanskrit', which shows clear discrimination of who should use the standard language of Sanskrit. At the end of the nineteenth century, Tamil touring theatres with musical plays brought in a new change to this social and cultural scenario. They can be identifiable as the first model for a popular art form, a subaltern form different from the elitist one, and most importantly, one where women came on stage as part of public performances. There was incredible popularity for the Tamil musical play as it attracted people from all social strata. The Malayalam musical play with a direct lineage from the Tamil musical play accommodated people from all castes and religions. Though Kerala's art forms did not entertain women, the Tamil Musical Plays had women performing on stage.[5] The Malayalam musical plays denied female artists entry into their plays in the initial stages of their production and subsequent tours till the twentieth century. Even when the silent films had actresses in their maiden ventures, plays like *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* (*From kitchen to the stage*, 1929), which was part of the social reform movement in Kerala, did not have female artists.

The touring cinemas preceded the Tamil Musical Plays and ran parallel to them. The touring theatre groups and the touring film groups had women performers. The nascent southern film industry had its first feature film, *Keechakavadam*, made in 1916 by Nataraja Mudaliar, and 'the production of silent films continued till 1934 in Madras, Vellore, Nagercoil and Mysore. More than 124 silent feature films and 38 documentaries were made' (Bhaskaran 2009: 3). Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee (henceforth to be referred to as the ICC) noted that in 1928 Madras province had touring cinemas which opened and closed almost every five or six months, and 'there were only 40 permanent theatres, 12 travelling theatres, and a total of 350 cinemas in the whole of India' (1928: 210, 377, 378).

By the end of the 1930s, the new medium's growing enthusiasm and loss of interest in the theatre were evident. K. Balakrishnapillai, in the article *Nadakavyavasayathinte Bhavi* ('The Future of the Theatre Industry') published in 1939 wrote,[6]

> Those in the remote villages who never saw films would walk 8 or 10 miles to watch a film being exhibited at some festival grounds. Those who ran the show made a lot of money. If you pay two chakras and sit on the floor, you could see a musical concert by a famous musician who took 500 or 600 for a rendition or sensual dances by beautiful women on the screen. It lasted two or three hours, and you could return home happily.
>
> *(Balakrishna Pillai 1939: 6)*

Touring cinema in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin and places under the British presidency in Kerala was different from the rest of India; it had male interpreters and musicians and used sensuous dancers to attract audiences. The ICC Report spoke about this peculiarity, '[i]t was only in Malabar that we heard of such interpreters or demonstrators' (1928: 42).

Later, apart from the women's presence on screen, women were dancing off-screen to attract viewers. Bhaskaran refers to the scantily clad women who dance during the intervals of films as 'stage dancers'. The artists like Rampiyari and M. M. Radha Bai later emerged as actresses in Tamil cinema (2009: 49). The real body of women apart from the screen image was thus part of the entertainment. People were attracted to the new medium rather than the musical play, as the new medium provided unique expression and fascination, which was something new for the audiences. Nagavally R. S. Kurup summed this up:

> Dance, magic shows, plays and street circus were part of the show to attract the audiences. It was performed in between the films and at intervals. Dance did not mean Bharathanatyam

> or Mohiniyattam (traditional classical dances) but a voluptuous shaking of the woman's body. One dance I remember was by one Miss Bhikshavathi. The audience got value for their money.
>
> *(1987: 25)*

The trajectory of the visibility of women can only be studied by deconstructing the history of the performing arts in Kerala, focusing on the transition of women's invisibilities from the caste art forms to the popular art form, and their visibility in the Tamil Musical Plays and the new medium of cinema. Cinema, the new medium, changed gender and caste relationships and power equations within and outside the cinema.

Refiguring P. K. Rosy: Caste, Cinema, and her Life in Exile

It is a recuperative reading of the polymorphic nature of the hegemonic relations of caste and gender that this chapter engages in here. The study of the history of silent cinema in Kerala throws up several exceedingly amusing and significant anecdotes full of disturbing incidents like the ostracisation of the actress, who performed the lead role in the first silent film, her experience of dire poverty, life in exile, and disguise.

The first Malayalam silent film *Vigathakumaran* directed by Dr J. C. Daniel was shown at the Capitol Theatre in the princely State of Travancore on November 7, 1928,[7] a period significant to this study, marked by the impetus of social reform movements that upheld the doctrine of equality.[8]

The first silent film *Vigathakumaran* (1928) and the second silent film *Marthandavarma* (1932) had women performers when the theatre employed men to play female roles. Cinema revolutionised the caste spaces in the realm of art by introducing a Dalit woman, an untouchable, as the heroine. The film *Vigathakumaran*, directed by Daniel, achieved this feat by having to select an actress, P. K. Rosy, from the Dalit[9] community, although with terrible consequences for the woman who was ostracised for her daring act.

Only one of the two silent Malayalam films, *Vigathakumaran* and *Marthandavarma*, has survived. The latter was recovered and has been restored by the National Film Archives, India. Daniel's Son, Haris Daniel, revealed how the print of the first silent film *Vigathakumaran* was lost as part of child play. He also narrates how his family members treated the film box containing the reel of the film as a sign of a bad omen, a Pandora's box, which they carried everywhere they journeyed. In 1941, when he was only six years old, he used to cut the film roles and exchange them for the pictures of P. U. Chinnappa, who, at that time, was the star in Tamil cinema and finally, as part of a child prank, he 'set fire to the remaining and watched the bright blue flame' (2014: 45–46).

Daniel went to Bombay to study film production, returned to Trivandrum, and established a film studio. He described his involvement with films in an interview published in the *Cinerama* film magazine:

> [I]n those days, the camera did not operate with electricity; the camera and the projector were hand-cranked. In November 1928, the film *Vigathakumaran* was shown in the Capitol theatre situated in the place where Marikar motors is now located, opposite the Accountant General's Office. Malloor Govinda Pillai inaugurated the first show. Afterwards, the film was shown in places with theatres like Kollam, Nagarcoil, Alappuzha, and Thalassery. I could not get back the money I invested, and it ended up in a loss. However, I wanted to make another film, but my second attempt was futile.
>
> *(interview by Rajagopal 1974: 5)*

The new medium of cinema entered Kerala's cultural scenario at a later stage, much after it had developed into an industry and had become part of the public sphere and an entertainment form in cities like Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. The ICC report parses the stigma attached to film acting, 'the actresses are mainly recruited from the "dancing girl" class, Indian women of the better class do not take up film-acting as a profession' (1928: 59). Only a few women were part of the ritualistic art forms in Kerala, and in such a social situation, the availability of women to act in films was unthinkable. Janet, the wife of Daniel, acknowledges this and says, 'women were even restricted to see a film, and among Christians, it is considered a sin' (interview by Gopalakrishnan 2013: 18). At the same time, Dr J. C. Daniel was unwilling to cast a male actor for a female role in his film, as it was common in the theatre groups. The ICC Report points out that the difficulty in getting an Indian actress has 'been overcome to some extent by the employment of Anglo-Indian actresses' (ICC 1928: 33). Jayanthy, an immediate relative, in the biography *Dr J. C. Daniel—Father of Malayalam Cinema*, narrates his search and selection of an Anglo-Indian actress from Bombay and her refusal to act in the film *Vigathakumaran*. Daniel published advertisements in two renowned newspapers published from Bombay and Calcutta and also contacted his friends. Miss Lana, an Anglo-Indian woman, responded with a photograph suggesting they meet in Bombay. However, Miss Lana demanded a huge amount of remuneration from Daniel (2014: 45–46), a fabulous amount compared to the rate of the permanent actors in the large studios of Bombay 'whose salaries ranged from about Rupees 30 for a supporting actor, to Rupees 700 or Rupees 800 for a star' (ICC 1928: 33). Though Daniel was in an acute financial crisis, he had no other alternative but to yield to her demands, as getting an actress to act in a film was beyond the realm of reason. Miss Lana was not satisfied with the comforts provided to her, including her stay and travel. Exhausted, Daniel made arrangements for her departure.[10] In such a predicament, Johnson, one of the actors in the film *Vigathakumaran*, helped the director by introducing P. K. Rosy, a Kakkarishi Nadakam artist.[11] Rosy was a lower-caste Dalit coolie worker living in Thycaud in Travancore (Mani 2013: 53).

The only report available so far about the incidents on the day when the film *Vigathakumaran* was first screened in the Capitol Theaters on November 7, 1928, is the description of K. P. Panthalam published in *Cinerama* magazine on July 1, 1967:

> *Vigathakumaran* was screened only for one day, and the show was stopped brusquely in the middle due to the chaos created by the audience. When the woman who cuts grass in the local area, appeared on the screen, the audience who knew her called out her real name and interrupted the show by booing and screaming. I think both my friend and I were part of the jeering. The heckling was at its peak when the main actor chased the heroine on a bicycle and touched her back with his leg and tried to take a flower from her hair and smelled it . . . but suddenly, stones started pelting on the screen from the backside, and the screen was torn. Moreover, those who sat in the front row could have been hurt. The film screening was stopped abruptly; we both escaped somehow without any injury. Thus, I witnessed the birth and death of the first Malayalam film.
>
> *(1)*[12]

One cannot conclude what happened really as distinct from the personal narrative of K. P. Panthalam about the violence inside the theatre. The above description underscores that the audience identified with the actress' caste and was exasperated with the fact that she was playing the character of an upper-caste Nair woman. The violence reached a peak while a love encounter was on screen. The memoirs of theatre and film personalities of a period register quite a few incidences of mob violence in musical plays and film theatres. Once the viewers did not like the

movie, or some technical problem occurred during the projection, they threw cow dung, pelted stone, and sand on the film screen. torching the theatre by the furious mob at the cancellation of the musical play, was also reported then.[13]

The musical play's audience had authority over the stage, and the actors enacted the song or scenes twice or thrice to the audiences' demands. With the advent of film, the barren white screen of the film replaced the lively stage of musical plays. When films were screened, the audience did not have control over the lifeless screen or the image; their response eventually turned towards the film screen and then consequently identified and attacked the actress and the film director. The public hatred against Rosy for acting in the film did not end with this single incident.

> On November 10, 1928, some goons with lighted country torches came to her home at night, shouting. They started pelting stones and finally torched her house. Rosy and her family members ran for safety, and Rosy reached the Karamana Bridge from where she, with the help of a lorry driver (Kesavan Pillai), reached Nagercoil.
>
> *(Mani 2013: 55)*[14]

The outrage of the upper caste/class society towards the Dalit actress P. K. Rosy for enacting an upper-caste Nair girl in the first Malayalam silent film *Vigathakumaran* can better be understood by placing this particular event within the historical context of caste struggles and social movements in Travancore. The attack on Rosy's house needs to be seen against the backdrop of the caste riots that were frequent at the time; the thatched houses were often attacked and burned as part of riots. Such attacks were not exceptional in South Travancore. Gnandason explains the social reality that prevailed in the middle of the nineteenth century, '[i]t was the feudal nature of society, the strange laws of land ownership, the agrarian economy, the division of labour and the caste system that ushered in slavery which remained a bleeding wound in the body politic of Travancore' (1994: 28). Without an analysis of the social milieu in which Rosy was ostracised by caste society for enacting the role of an upper-caste woman in *Vigathakumaran*, the study of the invisibility and visibility of the actress in Malayalam film history will not be complete. I am also hinting at some of the crucial struggles and movements that accelerated change in the caste society of Southern Travancore. The Channar struggle (lower-caste Channar women came forward asserting their rights to cover up the upper part of the body),[15] reformist movements under the Dalit leader Ayyan Kali, and Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) spearheaded caste struggles for the right to travel in the public road which was forbidden for Dalits which eventually developed into Chaliyar riots,[16] the struggle for implementing the 1910 government order ensuring education for the Dalits, which finally intensified into a significant riot, the Pulaya riots,[17] were consequent upon the lower castes starting to assert their civil society rights.

Caste problems pestered the society of the early twentieth century. The report in a newspaper *Kerala Dasan*, a vernacular newspaper published from Trivandrum, dated December 13, 1924, states that two upper-caste Brahmin accounts officers assaulted an *Ezhava* man (lower caste) who was appointed as a *panka* (fan) puller in the government service by not permitting him to do his job, alleging caste pollution. Finally, a *Mappila* officer (Christian officer) was willing to take an *Ezhava panka* puller as his subordinate. A letter was sent to the Chief Secretary to the Government, Huzur Cutcherry Trivandrum, by N. Kumaran, B. A. B. L., Member, Legislative Council, Quilon regarding this caste discrimination (Punka Peon Archives: 218.881/25). While the upper castes alleged caste pollution through the air and tried to oust the lower castes from the government office, the history of Kerala by the early twentieth century reached a crucial juncture under British dominance. Society witnessed conflicts between modernity and a tradition rooted in the caste system. The *Times of India* report of June 16, 1928, endorses such

skirmishes; a report on women's education in Travancore shows that women were keener on education than in other parts of India and the number of girls getting education increased tremendously. 'Last year, there were 495 recognised educational institutions for girls as against the 469 in the previous year, and their strength also rose from 1,70,479 to 1,76, 419' (1928: 6). In this particular context of caste rivalry and the introduction of modern education by the princely state under British rule, Dr J. C. Daniel decided to introduce a Dalit actress in an upper-caste woman's role in the film.

Nevertheless, he was not aware of the social consequences of his decision, which resulted in mob violence and the ultimate prevention of film screening, which led to the ostracisation of the actress from society and the land she belonged to. Society did not welcome the inclusion of a Dalit woman as an actress on the screen; the newspaper reports on P. K. Rosy deliberately negated her performance as an actress but hinted at the 'lack' of a 'cultured actress' and reported her as a *Harijan* (untouchable), the woman who sold grass or food in the Bazaar.[18] *Cinemamazika Onam Visheshal Prathi* contained a report ridiculing her by saying that she could act in films though she did not have education.[19]

Apart from P. K. Rosy, two women, Reena and Kamala, as well as the children of Dr J. C Daniel, Sulochana, and Sundaram, performed in the film *Vigathakumaran*.[20] In his book, Gopalakrishnan mentions the actress Kamalam, but the whereabouts of Reena are still missing. He says Daniel revealed the pathetic situation of the supporting actress Kamalam, she had to endure strong opposition from society and had to live a miserable life (2011: 34).

The Interplay of Caste: P. K. Rosy and Devaki Bai

Reading the actress as a 'lower-caste' performer distinct from the performative role, which was that of an 'upper-caste' woman, had led to the violence in the theatre at Travancore. P. K. Rosy, the Dalit actress, had to live a life in anonymity. The travesty of fate made her live the life of an upper-caste woman after being ostracised for enacting the role of an upper-caste Nair woman in the film *Vigathakumaran*. The second silent film *Marthandavarma* (P. V. Rao 1932) featured Devaki Bai, originally from the upper-caste Brahmin community, married to Sundarrajan, the producer-cum-actor of the film. Both actresses had to hide their identities for the rest of their lives.

As women had to be the bearers of caste and religious codes and protect the caste society's patriarchal values, actress Rosy had to change her name to 'Rajammal and lived in Oottupura street Vadapazhani, Tamilnadu, with her husband Kesavan Pillai in a rented house. She applied greasepaint for only one film, but she masked her identity as an actress and lived as Rajammal' (Mani 2013: 56). Thus, Rosy lived another life without revealing her identity to protect her family's upper-caste honour and had to live the rest of her life incognito. Vinu Abraham says that the son of Rosy, a bank officer, who married a woman from the aristocratic upper-caste family, was not ready to reveal the identity of his mother (2013: 85).

The heroine of the second silent film *Marthandavarma* (1932), Devaki Bai, was a woman who sacrificed her film career, popularity, and monetary benefits for living with Sundarrajan. After marrying Sundarrajan, Devaki Bai converted to Christianity and changed her name to Gunasheeli.

In 1965, Edamaruk interviewed Sundarrajan and Devaki Bai, for *Aruna Chitra Masika*, and writes,

> Devaki Bai said, 'now I am a Christian, and I am trying to forget the life as a film actress'. Devaki Bai or her children never went to see films. . . . I tried to take a photo of both

> Sundarrajan and Devaki Bai; they did not allow it. Sundarrajan said if people knew that his wife was an 'actress', their daughter wouldn't get a good marriage alliance.
>
> *(1965: 29)*

Though Devaki Bai had gone through bad times in life, she was proud of having married Sundarrajan. She says,

> He married me after the completion of the film. It was the first time that a producer married an actress . . . For in those times, actresses were looked down upon. Our marriage estranged him from his family. He belonged to the Nadar Christian community. Soon after our marriage, I changed my name to Gunaseeli.
>
> *(Krishnamurthy 1987: 10)*

She transformed into a new woman with an identity completely different from that of the past. Obliterating her upper-caste Brahmin identity and her identity as an actress, she draped herself in the attire of a poor housewife, a devout Christian woman. Unlike the actress P. K. Rosy, at a particular moment of her life, Devaki Bai declared before the world her identity as the heroine of the silent film *Marthandavarma*. Devaki Bai read in the newspapers that *Marthandavarma* had been retrieved and restored after 46 years by the National Film Archives of India and was publicly screened on April 15, 1977, at Gorkey Bhavan Trivandrum. Uninvited she went to see the film with her children. However, before the screening, someone identified her, and she was introduced to the audience (Sadanandan 1977: 7). On June 2, 2001, at the age of 92, Devaki Bai died.

The film *Vigathakumaran* ran for two weeks in Nagercoil, Alleppy Quilon, Trichur, Tellicherry, and a few other places which had cinema halls. However, the collections were so disappointing that Daniel could not recover even the production costs. But no incidents of violence were reported. The repercussions in the theatre at Trivandrum were the result of the societal identification of the caste body of the performer, the untouchable caste body in the image of an upper-caste character that should be separated by a '30–100 feet distance' according to the Hindu caste rules in social space.[21] When the film was screened in places where the performer's identity was not disclosed or identifiable by caste markers, the caste remained anonymous, and the body of the artist was positioned as caste-neutral. Anonymity blurs the dividing line between different castes. Rosy became an object of pollution only in a social structure where her caste was identified and had antagonistically tagged her as a polluting subject. Society marks the caste and decides on the layers of subservience based on 'identification', which is discernible and ruled by echelons of hierarchical dominance. It is thus intriguing to find that the Dalit woman P. K. Rosy masqueraded her caste and lived as an upper-caste Nair woman after being ostracised from society, while Devaki Bai, the heroine of the film *Marthandavarma*, lived as a religious Christian woman without disclosing her identity as an upper-caste actress, after marrying the actor-cum-producer of the film, and finally revealed her identity only after the death of her husband.

The failure of the first Malayalam film cannot be attributed to the incidence of violence that occurred in the Capitol Theatre in Travancore. Before *Vigathakumaran* came to the screens, many western films followed by other Indian films were screened by the touring theatres, which were technically perfect and more attractive to the people in Kerala. Kurup describes the films that were screened in those days: 'most of the films were adventurous and were silent films. Since it was a silent film, we did not find any difficulty between English or Indian films. *The Thief of Baghdad (1924)* pulled the audience in hundreds' (1987: 23). The ICC Report also points out the popularity of western films compared to the Indian-made ones and emphasises the need for the improvement of their quality and says that in Madras they heard that one or two

theatres, which used to show Indian films, had reverted to foreign films (ICC 1928: 60). The film *Vigathakumaran* was shot by exposing 1,000 feet of raw film continuously. There was no shot division, and the film captured the acting sequence consistently (Gopalakrishnan 2013: 32). The film *Vigathakumaran* could not compete with the technical or professional skills of western films, and the viewers might have outrightly rejected the film in other places.

The film *Vigathakumaran* was screened in the same theatre four years before the screening of the biopic *Marthandavarma* and was attacked by a violent mob, whereas the biopic was well received until it was banned. From the narration of the actor, Aandi, it is evident that the film *Marthandavarma* was screened for about eight days before the court confiscated it due to a copyright issue (interviewed by Manarkadu Mathew *Malayalam Manorama*: 1973). The sensual role of the other state actress, the erotic dancer's character, or the many kiss scenes in the film *Marthandavarma* did not instigate any sort of violence in the theatre. The biopic *Marthandavarma* might have been influenced by western films where kissing is a normal expression of love. Films like *Thief of Bhagdad* (1924) had lip-lock kiss scenes picturised in long shots and attracted the local audience in Kerala. The couple in the lip-lock kiss scene, Sundarrajan and Devaki Bai (Bheeram Khan and Fathima), finally decided to live together in real life.

The actresses in the film *Marthandavarma* belonged to another place; they were Tamil actresses. Their bodies did not belong to the caste society of Kerala and were therefore not within the binary of pure and impure. This feature of the caste society, which indulged in policing and purifying the internal social structure of Kerala, resulted in the violence against Rosy and the transition of the Tamil Brahmin actress Devaki Bai to a maternal, dependent Christian woman after marrying the actor-cum-producer Sundarrajan of the second silent film. Janet Chandrika, the granddaughter of J. C. Daniel, illustrates how Daniel rejected outright the offers to act in films for his family members, especially women:

> He was conservative in dealing with his family members, especially his daughters. I say this because when my mother and my aunts received offers from AVM studio to act in films, my grandpa turned down the offers with a stern hand and went all the way to Madras and wrangled with those responsible for devising such ideas. We were all beautiful, but Grandpa would immediately blow up if anyone suggested the idea of bringing us on screen. My mother was a good singer and a Veena artist like her mother (Janet), but her inherited talent was restricted within the four walls of her home.
>
> *(2014: 75)*

Both Daniel and Sundarrajan strongly resisted the family members' wish to act in any cinematic ventures, especially the women in their family. Firstly, both of them never wanted anyone from their families, especially the girl children, to enter films in any role. The concern for the children may have risen from the fact that they had ruined their lives due to their filmic zeal, and in the later stage of their life, both of them were found depressed. Secondly, they did not want their wives or children to be represented as 'Wayward girls and wicked women' by society.[22]

Conclusion

Historicising an actress is a complex process that involves placing her in specific historical contexts within the events happening in history. The scarce fragments of information scattered in newspapers and magazines become the crucial materials for reconstructing, even re-sculpting actresses' history. The caste rules were so rigid that the hierarchies within the caste system

dictated the social space of people belonging to different caste groups. The fear of polluting restricted the 'other' from entering the performative/ritualistic art spaces guarded and controlled by strict caste rules. The body of a woman was treated as a private entity and was placed within the protective space of the family, with only the role of a homemaker and a reproductive being allowed for her. Public spaces were inaccessible to women, and they had no role in the manifestation of art and culture until the beginning of the twentieth century. When public performance was considered taboo for women and restricted them, men who were engaged in public performances established their male hegemony over Kerala's art and culture.

Nevertheless, society devised stratagems to regulate and administer the performative spaces of women and their bodies. One of the dreadful attempts was to sexualise the performative body and attack it in the name of degradation of cultural and moral values. The violence in the theatre at the time of screening of the first silent film *Vigathakumaran* was neither unique nor an isolated event; it was the reflection of the caste violence that infected society in the entire 19th and the early 20th centuries. Careers in theatre or films were moreover treated as lowbrow and suited for the 'uncultured' lower strata of society. Even the directors of the two silent films who initiated the presence of women in early Malayalam cinema—J. C. Daniel who includes a Dalit actress in a film, a compulsive act out of desperation due to the unattainability of an actress, or Sundararajan who acted in the intimate kissing scenes of his biopic—did not believe that film acting was a reputable profession for women. They never encouraged their family members, especially women, to take up a career in films. However, the medium of film could topple the strategies adopted by caste society to curtail the entry of women into public space, by disseminating the image of women via and through the filmic medium into the restricted spaces of caste-ridden forbidden spaces. The entry of women into the performative space simultaneously made possible the entry of women into the intangible social and public spaces and facilitated their entry as spectators. The cinematic (virtual) image of women became an effective device to enter into all areas hitherto restricted to women. The corporeal body of the actress Rosy with caste identifications, the 'untouchable', an agent of pollution as per the Hindu moral code, thus actualised her entry into the restricted public and private spaces through the medium of film, as a cinematic image, which ultimately made the caste society riposte back by attacking the real corporeal Rosy. As part of the film screening, the cinematic image became a vehicle, which made possible the entry of the 'untouchable' into such restricted spaces. Thus, film as a medium had a vital role and became an agent to mobilise democratisation through popular art forms, which eventually led to the entry of women into the social and cultural streams of the early twentieth century Kerala society.

Though Malayalam cinema revolves within a self-made casteless trajectory, detouring into the 93-year-old history of Malayalam cinema unfolds another tale. The life of P. K. Rosy represents the complicit relationship Malayalam cinema has with caste; the harrowing narrative of Rosy repeats even today, both in cinema and in Kerala's social life. The lower-caste actress' scant representation and the absence of a Dalit heroine eventually point to the reality of the hidden apartheid and the existing social exclusion in Malayalam cinema. Fair-skinned upper-caste actresses enact the Dalit characters in Malayalam cinema. In films that discuss caste, like *Neelakuyil* (P. Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat, 1954), *Kuttiyedathi* (P. N. Menon, 1971), *Papilio Buddha* (Jayan K. Cherian, 2013), and *Ozhivu Divasathe Kali* (Sanalkumar Sasidharan, 2015), the lower-caste characters either commit suicide, or are murdered, and ostracised. Two questions need to be addressed, who should be represented as an actress in terms of labour in Malayalam cinema? Is it only the upper-caste artist? Why should the Dalit characters in cinema be killed, murdered, or commit suicide and are ostracised, insulted, and dehumanised?

Notes

1 Until the end of the eighteenth century, the temple's performance art solely depended on *Koothu* and *Koodiyattam* (ancient Sanskrit drama). Both were conducted inside the temple, and only upper-caste were allowed to perform, watch, and appreciate it. These were performed only by artists belonging to Chakyaar caste (upper caste in the Hindu caste order), *Mizhavu*, a musical instrument which is part of the performance will be played by the Nambiar caste (upper caste). The female role in *Koodiyaatam* is performed by the women belonging to the Nangyaar caste and they play the musical instrument *Kuzhithaalam*. The caste structure is so complex that even the caste of the performer's spouse can determine her eligibility to perform 'inside' the temple. There was only a limited number of characters a woman could act in an art form like *Koodiyattom*. Usha Nangyar says if 'a Nagyar woman marries outside her caste (within upper caste also), she cannot perform in the Koothambalam inside the temple. Still, a Chakyaar can perform in Koothambalam even if he marries outside his caste. . . . Though Koothu and Koodiyattom came out of the temple's rigid walls, I dream of a day when women can perform the characters that men enact on stage'. For details, see Geetha, *Kalakathakalicharitram,* 16–17.

2 Kerala witnessed a large number of anti-caste struggles as part of the nationalist movement. The temple entry proclamation in November 1936 by the Travancore kings gave the right to the lower castes to enter the temples in the Travancore region. Vaikom Satyagraha was a historical struggle in 1924–1925 initiated for asserting the rights of the lower caste to use the public road near the Vaikom Mahadeva Temple in Vaikom and Guruvayoor Satyagraha sought the entry of the lower caste to the temple in 1931.

3 The artists who perform the classical art form, *Kathakali*, belonged to the upper caste Namboothiri, Moosathu, Karthaavu, Nambidi, Nambeeshan, Pothuvaal, Pisharadi, Warrier, Nambiar, Kuruppu, and Kiriyathu Nair. And men enacted the female roles. K.P.S. Menon's *Kathakalirangam* mentions a transgender Karthiyayani, who fainted when one of the characters screamed at her. Only in the twentieth century, a few women dancers like Mrinalini Sarabhai, Menaka, Raginidevi, and Thara Chaudhari came to Kerala to study Kathakali. It was Velayudha Panikkar who started the Kathakali group for the lower caste. But to perform Kathakali, he had to seek permission from the then Divan, T. Madhavarao. Though the Diwan gave permission, some upper-caste men filed a case in the court challenging the lower-caste's right to wear the crown during the performance. But many of the ritualistic performances still avoid women, rituals like Theyyam and Thira are performed by men from the lower caste, Mannan and Malayan. For more details, see *Kathakalirangam,* 80, 379.

4 The early nineteenth century witnessed the birth of Malayalam novels, *Kundalata* (1887) by Appu Nedungadi, *Indulekha* (1889) by Chandu Menon, a Dalit novel, *Saraswateevijayam* (1892) by Pothery Kunhambu, and the first women's magazine *Keraleeya Suguna Bodhini* in 1886. The twentieth century saw the birth of women's magazines like *Sharada* (1905), *Lekshmibai* (1906), *Bhasha Sarada* (1914), and *Mahila Ratnam* (1914). Women wrote short stories, novels, autobiographies, and also translated western works. Women discussed the need for English education, issues of modernity, equality, and women's rights in the magazines through stories, articles, and letters. The literary movements like 'Jeeval Sahithya Sangham' were formed in 1937; it was restructured and renamed as 'Purogamana Sahithya Sanghatana' in 1944.

5 Nagavally S. Kurup, in his memoir, mentions about the women participation in the Tamil musical play 'I used to see the Tamil plays in Alappuzha. The actors were Kuyil NadamVelu Nair, S. G Kittappa, S. V. Subhaya Bhagavathar, they acted in the role of Raja (role of King or Man). Anandanarayanayar, K. B. Sundrambal plays the role of three (woman role)'. For details, see *Onnum Oliykkathulla Ormakal*, 9.

6 All translations from Malayalam are mine, unless otherwise stated.

7 The controversy over the year of release of the film *Vigathakumaran* rages on even today. S. Gopalakrishnan, photographer cum archivist, argues the screening year as 1930. In his recently published book *Nastaswapnal* (2020), Gopalakrishnan posts the film's advertisement published in the newspapers, *The Hindu* and *Nasrani Deepika* of the 1930s as evidence. Film scholars like *Vijayakrishnan* refutes this argument and claim that the film was first screened in 1928; they came up with the below-mentioned articles and interviews with Dr J. C. Daniel published in the 1970s mainstream journals to substantiate their standpoint. Article of Chelangad, Gopalakrishnan, 'Kerala Industry—a False Dawn: Making of the First Production, *Vigathakumaran*'. *Screen 19* (October, 1973).

https://oldmalayalamcinema.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/Chelangadtu-gopalakrishnans-article-for-the-screen-film-magazine-oct-19-1973.jpg. Accessed on November 20, 2019. Interview with J.C. Daniel by Manarkadu Mathew, 'Malayala Cinemayude Balyakalasmaranakal', 1973. Interview by

A. Rajagopal. 'Malayala Cinemayude Pithavinodothu', 5. Article by Kunnukuzhi. S. Mani. 'Malayalacinemayude Srishtavaya', 53. For more information, see the post by *Cinematters*, "The Debate of 1928 vs 1930, Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan's Meticulous Research Weighed against a Handbill". In *Old Malayalam Cinema*. https://oldmalayalamcinema.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/the-debate-of-1928-vs-1930-chelangatt-gopalakrishnans-meticulous-research-weighed-against-a-handbill/. Accessed on March 15, 2019.

8 The anti-caste struggles and the reform movements, *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangam* under the Dalit leader Ayyankali, *Sreenarayana Movement* initiated by Sree Narayana Guru, *Sahodaraprasthanam* by Sahodaranayyappan, mobilised popular consciousness against untouchability and the caste system. The *Yogashekma Sabha* of Malayalam Brahmins, the *Nair Service Society* of the Nair community, the Nationalist movement, and the growth of the Communist Party had pivotal roles in the social, political and cultural changes of Kerala.

9 In the late nineteenth century, the term Dalit was used by Mahatma Jotiba Phule, and it means oppressed or broken. It's the caste defined under Article 341 as schedule caste in the Indian constitution. The Dalit Panthers party formed in Maharashtra defines the term Dalit in the organization's manifesto launched in 1973, as 'Dalits are members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion'. For more details, see www.firstpost.com/india/short-history-of-word-dalit-advisory-to-scrap-use-of-term-has-roots-in-history-ruling-party-always-tried-to-label-community-with-alternative-names-5108311.html, https://seekingbegumpura.wordpress.com/2012/07/08/Dalit-or-scheduled-caste-a-terminological-choice/, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit. Accessed on March 15, 2021.

10 For further reading, see Jayanthy, *Father of Malayalam Cinema*, 2014, and Gopalakrishnan, *J. C. Danielinte Jeevitha Kadha*, 2011.

11 Kakkarishi Nadakkam is a folk art form that has been performed by people belonging to different castes like Nair, Ezhava, and Paanan and there will be an Ashaan (teacher) to train the art form. Men do the women's role. For further reading, Pillai. G, *Kakkarisshi Nadakam: A Study*, 19.

Sunil R. finds that Rosy was an actress of the Cheramar Sangham's (Dalit group) Kakkarishi Nadaka; for details, see 'J. C. Daniel: Malayala Cinemayude Vigathakumaran', 119.

12 Another account of the violence that substantiates the narration of K. P. Panthalam is of Chelangad Gopalakrishnan. See *J.C. Danielinte Jeevitha Kadha*, 40.

13 For details, see the memoirs of Kurup, *Onnum Oliykkathulla Ormakal*, 26, and John, *Cinemayumjanum, 70 Varshangal,* 9.

14 Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, in a telephonic conversation, recalls that the incident happened on the third day of the screening of the film and he had put it as on November 10, 1928. He also published an interview with J. C. Daniel in *Kalapremi* an evening daily, but it is irrecoverably lost.

15 J. Devika put it as 'Breast-Cloth struggle' and identifies it as 'not only the issue of feminine modesty but also the struggle around Jati (caste). And the proclamation of 1865 allowed all classes to use blouse but not the upper clothe'. For further reading, see 'The Aesthetic Woman: Re-Forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early Twentieth-Century Keralam'. *Modern Asian Studies* 39.2 (2005): 461–487. https://oldmalayalamcinema.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/the-debate-of-1928-vs-1930-chelangatt-gopalakrishnans-meticulous-research-weighed-against-a-handbill/. Accessed on September 19, 2020.

16 Ayyankali violated the diktat in 1893 and wore clothes as a Maharaja and travelled in a bullock cart, which was forbidden to Dalits. Riots broke out in Chaliyar street as a result of the assertion of the right to travel, and it's called the Chaliyar riots. For further reading, see Nisar and Kandaswamy, *Ayyankali*, 70.

17 Ayyankali and the Dalit girl Panchami went to take admission at the school, the headmaster was not willing to admit her due to her lower-caste status, and this led to clashes between the Pulayas (sub-caste group among Dalits) and Nairs (Shudra according to the Hindu Varna system, but attained the upper-caste status, the Nair girls can have informal marriage (sambantham) with the younger male sons of a Brahmin family). Sambhandam was acknowledged as a regular marriage after passing the Madras Marumakkathayam Act only in 1933. For more reading on 'Pulaya Riots', see ibid., 80.

18 For more details, see K. P. Pandalam, 'First Film in Malayalam', 1.

19 For more details, see Thaikkattu Chandrasekharan, *Cinemamazika Onam Visheshal Prathi*, 80.

20 For more details, Mani, 'J.C. Daniyalum Aadya Naayika Rosiyum', 58.

21 The castes in Kerala are separated by 'endogamy, commensality, dialectal variation, and ritual pollution, but by spatial distance as well. A Nair, for example, traditionally may approach Nampoothiri but must

not touch him. An Ezhava must keep a distance of 36 feet, and a Pulaya must not approach him within 96 steps. There are even castes so defiling that their mere sight alone is polluting'. See, L. Hardgrave Jr. Robert. 'Caste in Kerala—A preface to the Elections'. *The Economic Weekly* XVI.47 (1964): 1841. www.epw.in/special-articles/caste-Kerala-preface-elections.html. Accessed on January 18, 2020.

22 The phrase 'Of Wayward girls and wicked Women' is adapted from the title of the article written by Mohan and Choudhari, 'Of Wayward Girls and Wicked Women', 4–14.

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13

Examining the Domain of Caste, Gender, and Sexuality Through Select Films of Jayan K. Cherian

Ved Prakash

Cinema has been an effective component concerning the construction of meaning in society. Cinema at times attempts to show a mirror to the common mass and highlight narratives that are often left out. Moreover, cinema is perceived as one of the essential components when it comes to the production of knowledge through visuals and images. Perhaps it is the visual nature of cinema that leads to its consumption by the mass. James Monaco in his seminal work *How to Make a Film: The World of Movies, Media and Multimedia* talks about the domain of art and its relevance concerning society. Monaco begins with Raymond Williams and his observation on art made in *Culture and Society*. The meaning of art and what all it encompasses has gone through a major transmogrification over time covering fine arts, as well as visual arts, music, and literature. Monaco, while discussing recording arts which primarily flourished in the 20th century, talks about how the language of recording arts is conspicuous and direct in comparison to written or pictorial language. Moreover, the recording art with the arrival of sound and colour has progressed in its ability to achieve far greater reality (Monaco 2000: 26). The proposed chapter will look into the conundrum of caste, gender, and sexuality concerning the policy and politics of resistance. The chapter will examine Jayan K. Cherian's *Shape of the Shapeless* (2010), *Papilio Buddha* (2013), and *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016) while highlighting the oppressive nature of the dominant groups of society. The chapter will also explore the question of body, agency, and mobility keeping in mind the discourse of surveillance. Cherian is a New York-based Indian film-maker hailing from the Southern state Kerala. Cherian has been addressing the oppressive social structure and its belligerent policy of silencing the supposed 'vulnerable other'. Cherian attempts to intersect various issues such as subjectivity, sexuality, caste, freedom, and identity.

Caste and Queer Desire

Even though the Supreme Court has ruled out Section 377[1] of the Indian Penal Code, India largely remains to be a heteronormative space. Discussions around queer issues do take place in both academic and non-academic spaces; however, the space of discussion is confined because many still perceive queer love and desire as non-normal, an act of deviation and violation. India has had a rich history of queer love in terms of literature, paintings, and architecture, and yet there is an enormous amount of uncomfortability with reference to individuals who do not

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subscribe to the policy of heteronormativity. Michal Warner in his book *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* talks about the notion of concealment and privacy when it comes to sex. Moreover, hetero sex is seen as normal and natural while people preferring homosexual conduct have been subjected to state intervention and oppression (Warner 2000: 6). Warner goes on to argue that the domain of sex and sexuality is shaped by historical conditions (2000: 10). Cherian through his work attempts to circumvent with the power structures to be able to change the course of history. Beyond the lens of morality, Cherian documents lives which are embedded within the complexity of everyday struggle. The resentment towards *Ka Bodyscapes* by moralistic forces is a sign that an open dialogue around the issue of homosexual relations may not be an immediate possibility in India. Furthermore, Cherian is aiming to highlight the issue of 'sexual autonomy' irrespective of heterosexuality or homosexuality. The discourse of shame that is often built around homosexuality is a method to exercise power over all those who want to break away from the conventional pattern of normalised sexual behaviour. While discussing the issue of sexuality from a caste perspective, the chapter will examine how the spectrums of caste and sexuality intersect with each other in Cherian's *Papilio Buddha*. The latter part of the chapter will be discussing gender fluidity and identity with reference to *Shape of the Shapeless*.

Dominantly, caste has been studied by many scholars as a phenomenon placed within the ambit of hierarchy, power struggle, agency, identity, and representation. However, when it comes to caste and sexuality, there are barely any narratives that engage with caste in relation to homosexuality. What happens when two different discourses long rooted within the historicity of struggle and humiliation intersect? Can dominant heteronormative power structures accept such an intermingling? The question of caste concerning sexuality often gets left out. For a doubly marginalised person, it is a twofold struggle to deal with homophobia and casteism in a similar capacity. Marginality as a concept is not that easy to understand, it can be amorphous depending upon one's location. Therefore, location becomes an integral component to understand an individual in his or her totality. Locations define people in both abstraction and unison. Locations become a point of reference to understand people concerning both society and identity. However, what happens when locations, more than defining individuality, become a site of alienation? It is observed that cinema has helped extend visibility to all those who have been in shadows. Talking about the queer community in India, many films have been made to represent the same, such as *Fire* (1996), *Tamanna* (1998), *Gulabi Aaina* (2003), *Sancharram* (2004), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *68 Pages* (2007), *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), *Chitrangada: The Crowing Wish* (2012), *Aligarh* (2015), and *Sisak* (2017), but one issue which has been struggling for consideration is caste within the domain of sexuality or sexuality within the domain of caste. Even though caste as a concept need not be confined to the Varna system of India alone, at present one needs to understand caste keeping in mind the policy and politics of violence and humiliation. Gopal Guru in his article 'Dalits from Margin to Margin' talks about how the process of marginalisation takes place on multiple levels when it comes to Dalits. Apart from economic and political, there is cultural marginalisation too. Dalits remain absent from the mainstream narratives. Guru states that Dalit lives hardly find any representation in Hindi cinema. The everyday struggle of Dalits is completely overlooked. No one wants to make a film on atrocities faced by Dalits (Guru 2000: 112). India has seen far too many deaths of Dalits who dare to question the rigid boundaries of caste differentiation. The risk of death is far more when a Dalit boy/girl dares to cross the lines of segregation, for example, marrying outside his/her caste, drinking water from a resource that belongs to an upper-caste family, and entering inside a temple. The documentary titled *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) by Anand Patwardhan is a significant contribution to the whole debate of Dalit politics. Based in the city of Mumbai, the

film documents the Ramabai Killings of 1997 which was a result of garlanding the statue of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar with a string of shoes. The statue was located at the Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar Colony. When the Dalits protested the defaming of the statue, the State Reserve Police Force opened fire on the protestors. Ten people died on the spot. It seems the state's assertive response to the protest was more of a message to the Dalit community that the right to protest is only limited to the members of the upper caste(s). The question that becomes pertinent at this point is when the body of a Dalit is so vulnerable that it can be attacked and assaulted by the dominant apparatuses, then where do we place the body of a queer Dalit in this conundrum of power and violence?

There are films such as *Sujata* (1959), *Ankur* (1974), *Sadgati* (1981), *Bandit Queen* (1994), *Samar* (1999), *Fandry* (2013), *Chauranga* (2016), and *Article 15* (2019) that take up the cause of the Dalit lives and community but when it comes to the queer rights of Dalits or queer Dalits, there is no representation as such. *Papilio Buddha* attempts to merge the issues of caste identity and queer sexuality while underlining the fluid nature of sexuality without having to create a spectacle. While there is a body of work on both Dalit and queer lives,[2] when it comes to a queer Dalit, the representation remains peripheral. As far as a canon and the modules of its formulation are concerned, then one can point out that the canon to do with queer Dalits is yet to be formed. What is the reason that subjectivities which are marginalised on various levels are further disregarded by the policy of non-engagement? Should there be an attempt to bring doubly marginalised individuals to the forefront? One reason for such ignorance could be that both queer and Dalit as independent phenomenon are still struggling to seek unbiased visibility. In such a scenario, many may have missed the thought of bringing these two independent discourses together. Perhaps, the reason why no such attempt has been made so far may indicate that such a mingling may create havoc in a society that is already intolerant, casteist, oppressive, violent, and homophobic.

Papilio Buddha deals with the plight of displaced Dalits of Meppara located in the Western Ghats of India and their struggle for the land where they have lived for generations. Made in Malayalam and English, the film explores the life of a young Dalit man Shankaran and his American friend Jack who is a lepidopterist. There is a conspicuous undercurrent of romance about Shankaran and Jack's relationship. Shankaran, a Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi) drop out, has been struggling against the caste-based atrocities and yet he is the one who has to face the onslaught by the state for being a politically conscious Dalit. The film takes up the issue of the 'Queer Dalit' in a restrained manner. The question that becomes pertinent is how to engage with resistance when marginalisation takes place on multiple levels? What happens when on top of caste, sexuality too becomes a site of conflict? What happens to the ideas of social justice and equality when the state machinery doesn't support the historically disadvantaged communities? *Papilio Buddha* is inspired by various events that took place in numerous Dalit localities in Kerala such as Chengara, Meppadi, and Muthanga. The film also talks about the struggle of the Dalit community for the land. Land ownership could be one of the ways to climb the ladder of upliftment in terms of caste rank. However, many Dalits could not occupy land, as wealth was mostly confined to the upper-caste groups. *Papilio Buddha* is located in post-independent India wherein Kerala goes through a process of change because of the Land Reform Bill in 1957 and the Kerala Land Reforms Act in 1963. The primary aim of the act was to erase the feudal system in Kerala. This generated an utter sense of panic within the landowners. However, the significant step towards the land reform was the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act in 1969 that ensured the right of the tenants on land on which they had been working for centuries. As far as the issue of land ownership was concerned, the Dalits have been pushed to the periphery because of the caste system. C. R. Yadu and C. K. Vijayasuryan in the article 'Triple

Exclusion of Dalits in Land Ownership in Kerala' postulate that the pattern of land ownership in Kerala has been a disappointment. There is a rampant inequality concerning the Dalits and Adivasis. The article goes on to state that 60 percent of Dalit population in Kerala lives in Dalit ghettos in poor living conditions (Yadu & Vijayasuryan 2016: 393–394). While discussing the triple exclusion of Dalits concerning land ownership, the article states the historical exclusion of Dalits and Adivasis, exclusion after the Land Reforms Act in 1969 and exclusion at present, keeping in mind the land market. A large population of Dalits continue to remain landless in Kerala. To accommodate people located at the lower strata of the social order, the Kerala government had initiated 'One Lakh Houses Scheme' in 1972. However, the houses constructed under the scheme are in a dilapidated condition because of the lack of maintenance. Moreover, a huge section of Dalits still has not been accommodated by the Kerala government. The economic depravity of Dalits further assisted the caste immobility. Surinder S. Jodhka in his book *Caste* mentions that caste represents 'naturalised inequality' approved by the Hindu religious beliefs (Jodhka 2012: 16). It is this normalisation of inequality that has pushed millions of Dalits to poverty and thus vulnerability. Jayan K. Cherian in one of his interviews states that if one is to examine social segregation then Dalit colonies in Kerala may be a suitable example. The marginalised status of these colonies may represent the long struggle that lies ahead of the Dalit community for fighting for their rights. Cherian also talks about the kind of oppression the 'Dalit Human Rights Movement' Activists had to face in Kerala. The movement was ostracised by the dominant groups on fictional grounds to assert their power and control (Misrahi-Barak & Thiara 2019: 98). How can a marginalised community rise if it has to face resistance at every step that leads towards social, economic, and cultural mobility?

Jayan Cherian through *Papilio Buddha* attempts to destabilise the rigid notions attached to caste and desire. *Papilio Buddha* begins with Jack and Shankaran catching butterflies for research. They both not only accompany each other in their endeavour but also share a queer space of bonding. While Cherian highlights the queer side of Shankaran in the very beginning of the film, the primary concern of the film is to take up the collective struggle of Dalits of the Pulaya caste in Kerala who have been struggling for their existence. The film takes up the issue of land reform and how the Dalit community of Pulaya caste remained at the margin without any land to their credit. Just like many Dalits, Shankaran's life, as well as his name, is caught up in limbo. Named after the upper-caste communist leader of Kerala, Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad, the protagonist Shankaran says that a Dalit remains a Dalit even with an upper-caste name. Shankaran wants to go to America for further studies, or assuming to stay close to Jack, however, his father Kariyettan does not want him to leave the Dalit struggle in the middle. While the images of Buddha and B. R. Ambedkar keep appearing on the screen at multiple points, the film highlights the caste atrocities which take place in the name of silencing the Dalit community. *Papilio Buddha* also brings up the name of Mahatma Ayyankali, a social reformer from Kerala, who worked for the betterment of Dalits. Born in a lower caste, in the princely state of Travancore, Ayyankali saw discrimination in the worst form. In the princely state, Pulayans and Parayars were considered to be at the lowest rung in terms of hierarchy. This hierarchy remains even if one would like to move out of the fold of Hinduism. Many Dalits embraced Christianity to evade casteism. However, caste hierarchy remains even after conversion. Prakash Louis in his article 'Dalit Christians: Betrayed by State and Church' talks about the incarceration and prejudice Dalits have to face even after conversion, within as well as outside the Christian community. Despite the homogenous nature of the Christian community, the Church as well as the state have failed to identify and address the discrimination the Dalit Christian face. Louis goes on to highlight that a huge section of Dalit Christians still remain landless (Louis 2007: 1410). In fact, in *Papilio Buddha*, the reference to hierarchy amongst the Christians

comes up when an acquaintance of Shankaran opines that Pulaya Christians can never think of being at par with Brahmin Christians. The terminology of 'Brahmin Christian' is a social construction to exercise power over the ones who convert to Christianity from lower castes.

Moreover, the film documents the ecological destruction of the Western Ghats by the capitalist forces which disrupt the peaceful cohabitation of Dalits and Adivasis. It is also a tribute to the legacy of Kallen Pokkudan, a Dalit and environment activist. Ranjith Thankappan in his chapter 'Life, History and Politics: Kallen Pokkudan's Two Autobiographies and the Dalit Print Imagination in Keralam' talks about Dalit subjectivity through Pokkudan's autobiographies; *Kandalkaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitam* (2002) and *Ente Jeevitam* (2010). Thankappan postulates that with the arrival of the Communist Party in Kerala in 1957, Communism promised a change in the living conditions of the Dalits. Pokkudan along with many Dalits joined the Communist Party. Furthermore, Pokkudan remained with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after the split in 1964. Because of caste-based cases of discrimination and violations, Pokkudan started to maintain a distance from the party. This conundrum reflected the hollow commitment of the CPI(M) towards the Dalit cause. The chapter goes on to mention the land reforms projected as the Kerala model of development. However, being a member of the party and associated with the land distribution, Pokkudan highlights the issue of corruption and exclusion of the Dalit community from the land reforms (Thankappan 2018: 212–213). Land and its location certainly play a crucial role concerning the identity of an individual. Land defines the historicity of a community. Talking about land and the question of Dalit identity, Carmel Christy K. J. in her chapter 'Janu and Saleena Narrating Life: Subjects and Spaces'[3] talks about how land and its texture and nature translate into Dalit identity. In *Papilio Buddha*, the arid land is juxtaposed with Dalits and their existence. The politics of pushing Dalits and Adivasis away from the fertile land is another way to exercise power over the marginalised communities. As far as Saleena Prakkanam and C. K. Janu are concerned, they are prominent Dalit and Adivasi activists who have contributed immensely towards the struggle for land. Pertaining to the issue of land and ownership, Christy K. J. states:

> The relationship between land, power and caste as narrated by Saleena and Janu is in contrast with the euphemistic descriptions about the exceptional developmental advancement of the state. Their narratives centralise the question of landlessness which has been one of the sites that was instrumental in the stigmatisation of Dalits and the sustenance of the caste system. Landlessness and bonded labour for the upper-caste landlords have been crucial in the stigmatisation of Dalits.
>
> *(111–112)*

Papilio Buddha documents Pokkudan's struggle for land. In the film, he plays the role of Shankaran's father named Kandal Kariyan. In the very beginning, the film mentions the disappearance of a Dalit man, arrested by the police but no one knows where he was taken. The complete disregard from the media and politicians conveys how much, or how little, Dalit lives and bodies matter. While discussing the matter, Kariyan proposes that we must highlight our rights mentioned in the constitution by B. R. Ambedkar, and through peaceful protests, Dalits may get justice. He further goes on to say in our journey of resistance we may be shot, killed, beaten up, and arrested and no media or politician will come to represent our struggle, therefore, the need for a massive movement. The end of the discussion mentions the right to education, right to jobs, and right to speak. *Papilio Buddha* comments upon the culture of silencing the marginalised section of society. Kariyan in one of his speeches in the film states that acres of land are being given to multinational companies and religious institutions, but when it comes to

Dalits there is no support. The people of Meppara are afraid that they may be displaced if they keep quiet against such a distribution of land. One banner that is used by the Dalit protestors against the network of injustice reads 'give us land or shoot us'. What is the reason that an entire community is dehumanised? Does it have to do with the politics of hate? Anand Teltumbde in his book *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders & India's Hidden Apartheid* writes it is difficult to decipher what precipitates caste atrocities. The dominant groups who perform such atrocities believe their actions are justified keeping in mind caste hierarchy and the culture and tradition of silencing the Dalits (Teltumbde 2010: 29).

This culture of silencing can be observed both within the realm of cinema and the everyday lives of Dalits. In *Papilio Buddha*, a speech is muted by the Censor Board in which B. R. Ambedkar criticises Mahatma Gandhi and his ambiguous approach towards the empowerment of Dalits. Many are critical of Gandhi's role when it comes to the Dalit and their lives. The Poona pact in which Gandhi forced Ambedkar to let go of the idea of a separate constituency for Dalits is an example that raises questions about what Gandhi did for Dalit upliftment. The whole Dalit struggle is against the Savarna politics of caste hierarchy which Ambedkar was extremely critical of. In his *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar writes that casteism in India will remain relevant as long as there is Hindu religion. Moreover, he goes on to say that caste is 'a state of mind' (286). The silencing of Dalit gets further validated through police brutality. For instance, when Shankaran is arrested by the police on imaginary grounds of terrorism, then it becomes important to understand the context of intimidation. When Shankaran expresses his disregard against the police brutality in English, which is considered to be the language of power in India, then it becomes a question of superiority for the police to teach Shankaran a lesson, he is tied and a condom filled with chilli powder is put on his penis. Before this practice of torture, he is stripped naked. The idea of nudity in this context is to take away the pride of a Dalit.

Another incident that could be mentioned in the same thread is the gang rape of Manjusree, a Dalit activist as well as a teacher, by the upper-caste(s) men just because she questioned their hyper-masculine nature. Manjusree, apart from riding an auto to make a living, teaches at the makeshift school to the Dalit children of Meppara. The act of raping Manjusree and afterwards setting her auto on fire is another example of curbing the economic resources of the Dalits. The act of urinating on Manjusree's face after raping her projects how deep the caste hatred is ingrained within the caste Hindus. Bringing in the cinematographic analysis, the way the rape scene has been filmed adds layers to the discourse of caste violence. It is late evening when the abhorrent act of sexual violence takes place. A middle-aged man boards Manjusree's auto and asks her to drop him at an undisclosed location in the hills, away from the main town. As time passes, the camera shows the anxiety and fear on Manjusree's face. In between, the male passenger makes a call to his friend Sudhi and informs that he has started. After some time, several autos start to follow Manjusree. A high-angle shot shows that Manjusree has been stopped and she is being surrounded by several other autos that had followed her. The circle around Manjusree may symbolise how the Dalits have been incarcerated for centuries and how Dalit women have often been targeted by the caste Hindus. While Manjusree attempts to save herself by running away, she is chased, caught, and dragged and finally disrobed. The sight of unclothed Manjusree invokes laughter amongst the violators. At last, the camera pauses on the abandoned, assaulted, and bruised body of Manjusree. What is even more shocking is that Manjusree is further assaulted by the police for speaking up for Dalits and their right to land. Both Shankaran and Manjusree do not want to act like neo-Gandhians[4] in their quest to fight for equality, probably because they have realised that one has to speak up to claim justice. Moreover, the struggle that Manjusree has to face is threefold: she is a Dalit, a woman in a patriarchal casteist social order, and she dares to enter the professional dominion that is controlled by men primarily, that is, riding a public

vehicle (auto). The presence of Manjusree as an auto driver causes a sense of disruption amongst other male auto drivers. It seems their masculinity comes under threat, and violence (rape) is the only way through which they can restore the fragile institution of masculinity.

The Dalits remain invisible in many states in India and the question of queer Dalit is largely non-existent as the need to resist caste oppression often becomes the primary battle for those who belong to the lower caste. There is no time to invest in individual fights; first, one may have to support the community against the larger challenges like education, equality, jobs, and caste atrocities, thereafter, one may think over the right to assert one's sexuality. Jayan Cherian, however, prefers to identify with the term 'caste queer'. Cherian elaborates, an individual who doesn't share any affiliation with caste identity or social identity is 'caste queer'. Cherian rejects the caste system as he finds the institution of caste oppressive (Misrahi-Barak & Thiara 2019: 103). While Indian cinema is taking its own time to represent caste issues and the queer Dalit community with some sense of visibility, some cannot wait to rely on other mediums to seek recognition. V. Angayarkanni in her article 'Queer, Dalit and Not Yet Proud: This is my Story' writes that love doesn't come with labels attached to bodies.[5] Angayarkanni loves both men and women without any bias. For a society steeped in morality and convention, this cannot be the norm. If anything, love that is non-binary doesn't qualify as love. Apart from being queer, Angayarkanni is also a Dalit. She accepts that she is not wanted as a queer in her family and political spaces do not acknowledge her. She cannot decide which identity is acceptable in the public domain and which one is not. Which identity invites more scrutiny? Being a queer Dalit is like being caught up in a constant state of negotiation between the caste and the sexual identity. The struggle for a queer Dalit is much more laborious as s/he can never be at ease. One has to constantly oscillate across spectrums and one may never know where to draw a line and how much to assert to fight for one's visibility. There are queer spaces that can be highly elitist while caste-friendly spaces that can be extremely homophobic. If such is the struggle, then one has to shed all labels to exist. The task to engage with this dual marginality can be challenging. Rishi Raj in his article 'Life as an Out and Proud Queer, Dalit Teenager' writes that he had to come out as gay because his neighbours were far too intrigued about his life. However, Raj says that being gay in the public domain was far more comfortable for him than being a Dalit. Metropolitan cities that are considered to be cosmopolitan practice casteism; in such a scenario one doesn't know where to go and which identity to carry along. Raj opines that there are very few people who come out as both queer and Dalit, and this does not help the cause; he says he had to come out as a Dalit too because the queer movement in India is controlled by the people from the upper caste(s);[6] therefore, it becomes all the more essential to let the queer world know that there are Dalits too and they should be allowed to speak for themselves.

The struggle of a queer Dalit can vary from someone who is either a queer or a Dalit. Another reason why very few Dalits decide to come out is also because of the violent history of the atrocities towards the Dalit community. The ghost of casteism haunts Dalits even now. D. R. Nagaraj in his collection of essays, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*, talks about various aspects of the Dalit Identity. In the article 'Violence on Dalits and the Disappearance of the Village' Nagaraj talks about the spectre of violence against the Dalit community, which takes place on two levels. First, violence towards Dalits is exercised because of the caste hierarchy, and second, further violence is exercised upon Dalits if they attempt to resist the caste-based brutality (Nagaraj 2010: 126). It seems the Dalits are reminded of their past in every act of cruelty that is practiced by the upper-caste Hindus. Sagarika Ghosh in her article 'The Dalit in India' writes that the Dalits have always been the desired target of caste-centric crimes that are performed by the caste Hindus, and the constant attacks on the Dalits have to do with the body of a Dalit that is seen as impure (86). It is noteworthy that both Dalit and queer bodies

are seen as some form of deviation, a threat to the harmonious social structure. The question that becomes pertinent is, what are the parameters of marginalising a particular body? When one talks about the identity of a queer Dalit, then one has to point out that separating queer from Dalit or vice versa is not possible. The two facets of the identity are separate and yet they are together.[7] Another question that is often raised is that if one is a Dalit then what is the need to identify as a queer? And being queer, what is the need to come out as a Dalit?

Gender and Sexuality

The dominion of gender and sexuality remain flexible and open to all kinds of possibilities. As Cherian's *Ka Bodyscapes* and *Shape of the Shapeless* show, one cannot understand the issue of sexuality and gender from a rigid perspective. *Ka Bodyscapes* documents the lives of Haris, a painter, his partner Vishnu, who hails from a conservative Hindu family, and Sia, who is an activist from a conformist Muslim family. The film deals with the issues of homosexuality, freedom of expression, activism, and violence performed by the oppressive forces. Cherian picks up characters that are often located at the centre of conflicts and his work incorporates visuals that not only provide a space for discussion when it comes to the existence of the subalterns but the depiction that Cherian engages with is fearless. The film begins with Vishu playing Kabbadi with a group of men, while Haris is clicking his photos. The lens of the camera tries to focus on different parts of Vishnu's bare body. The way camera lingers on somehow indicates that there is no shame in highlighting the queer body of Vishnu. Cherian uses close-up shots to bring in the element of intimacy while filming Vishu. Film-makers often use close-up shots to establish a link between the viewers and the subject by highlighting the details about the character in focus, which otherwise does not happen with the wide shot or long shot. In the next scene, Cherian uses a deep focus and high-angle shot to document the private intimate space of love, desire, and belonging concerning both Haris and Vishnu. Perhaps it is this nature of conveying the message and visuals without mincing words that has got Cherian under the gaze of censorious apparatuses. The landscape of sex and desire may remain tolerable as long as it is confined to heteronormativity. However, there is a high possibility that the issue of queer desire may be seen as an act of abhorrence when it comes to films that highlight queer lives and desires. Perhaps that's the reason why *Ka Bodyscapes* was censored as it dealt with queer love and freedom concerning the queer body. During the 2018 International Film Festival of Kerala, Cherian opined that it is the British Empire that introduced censorship to keep an eye on political dissent, but its continuation in postcolonial India is an example of how colonial legacy has thrived in India in multiple domains even now.[8] It is interesting to notice that the tool of censorship more than having a discussion/dialogue rather believes in the policy of silencing the artists in the name of problematic content, issues against national interest, controversial subject matters, etc. Nandana Bose in the article 'We do not certify backwards: Film Censorship in Postcolonial India' talks about the nature of censorship and how it stems from the elite bodies who think it is up to them to decide the content that is to be consumed by the masses (Bose 2013: 191).[9] Censor Board of Film Certification has been condemned on multiple occasions for exercising censorship. Many believe that the institution of censorship doesn't deserve a place in a democracy. Someswar Bhowmik in his book *Cinema and Censorship: The Politics of Control in India* talks about how the mechanism of censorship works in India and what role the state plays in it. In the chapter 'Politics of Film Censorship', Bhowmik mentions that in postcolonial India, Indian film censorship mostly revolved around the subjects of nudity, sexuality, sensuality, etc. (26) and not much has changed even today. Why is it that queer lives and bodies are constantly censored by the power structures? Why is there a disparity in treating the queer and non-queer bodies? Why are queer

bodies demonised time and again under the garb of morality and virtue? Haris' landlord named Hamsikka keeps reiterating that decent people live in this area, indicating that Haris may be an artist/painter but his talent doesn't count because his art questions the status quo. The element of non-conformism embedded in his paintings is enough of a sign for authoritarian Hindutva forces that Haris and the mobility of his ideas need to be curtailed.

Cherian through his films introduces bodies that conflict with society, state, past, moral code of behaviour, desire, and freedom. Like *Papilio Buddha*, Cherian's *Ka Bodyscapes* too engages with individuals who question the status quo to break away from the historicity of violence and control. The supposed docile bodies (women/queer) attempt to break away from the dominion of docility to raise issues that do not find any representation in the mainstream. The body of a Dalit or the body of a queer man or the body of a woman is often stared upon by the members of a social order who believe in the practice of asserting a 'hierarchical heteronormative upper-caste patriarchal male-centric code' of behaviour. Any attempt to destabilise such a guarded institution may invite a conflict.

In *Ka Bodyscapes*, one of the friends of Haris says that 'we aren't just bodies and this should be proven by our bodies'. When the agency of a particular body is attacked time and again, then it is the body itself that becomes a site of resistance. *Ka Bodyscapes* was subjected to a huge resentment by the Censor Board as it dealt with the bodies that destabilise the common compartmentalisation of bodies in binaries such as masculine versus feminine, manly versus non-manly, muscular versus non-muscular, pure versus profane, and ideal versus problematic. In the film, Vishnu, who is muscular, is asked to pose for the camera by Haris as he captures portraits of Vishnu's body before he paints the same on canvas. Haris is working on a painting series called 'Ka Bodyscapes' that seems to cover the relationship of both Vishnu and Haris. Some of the paintings are of the two of them having sex. The erected penis in his paintings symbolises or rather mocks the society that is phallic-centric. Vishnu who is a firm believer of the Lord *Hanuman*[10] hangs the portrait of God next to the paintings by Haris, somehow bringing in the idea that one must not mix religion with sexuality. Moreover, this act brings up the idea of pure (God) and profane (paintings of queer love and desire) together. It is also interesting to see Vishnu who works with Bharatavarsha is busy designing posters of *Ghar Vapsi* (homecoming), while on the other hand, Haris is busy painting ideas that can pose questions to the idea of rigidity and conventionalism. That may be the reason why the painting exhibition of Haris is vandalised.

The practice of attacking artists for exhibiting their ideas in public is not uncommon. The mention of Perumal Murugan's name in the film is a continuation of the same debate. Murugan was attacked for writing *One Part Woman*. The threats got so severe that Murugan announced his death as a writer. It is significant to observe that towards the end of *Ka Bodyscapes*, Haris is seen carrying a painting to the beach. He is upset by the regressive forces that attacked his work. He finds a pole and hangs the painting in public. After a while, a group of men gather around and are in utter disbelief. This is when Haris is hit on his forehead by a stone. The painting appears to be of Vishnu resembling God. Moreover, Vishnu is painted naked. On the other hand, Haris can be lynched at any moment by the men who have come with sticks and rods. To everyone's surprise, Haris takes off all his clothes and starts walking towards the sea. This act of undressing could be a way to revolt against the obsession which society shares with body, morality, and codes of conduct. The nude art of Haris comes alive when he becomes a part of the resistance by embracing nudity in public as a site of protest. Moreover, the nude body of Haris asserts its presence without any shame. Marginal bodies are often scrutinised by the mainstream social order. In the film, the demand for queer rights as well as rights concerning the female body and agency intersect. For example, when Sia protests to normalise the discourse around menstruation, one of the posters at the site of protest reads 'I am gay, I am Indian, Am

I a criminal?' The police tell the protestors that they have a right to protest but end up arresting them citing the reason of safety. This may indicate how the space to voice protest and dissent is getting curbed. While the protestors are shoved inside the police vehicle, the group across the road carrying sticks to vandalise the peaceful protest is ignored by the police altogether. Historian Romila Thapar in her book *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* writes:

> There should always be, invariably, in every modern society, the right of the citizen to dissent as part of the right to free speech. This right has been contentious yet crucial to the continuity of societies. However much we may wish otherwise, Indian Society—as indeed every other society—has not been a seamless harmonious entity, with little or no contradictions.
>
> *(Thapar 2020: 4)*

Thapar talks about the issue of visibility concerning all those who remain marginal in their locations, and dissent may be a device to bring about an affirmative change keeping in mind the politics of visibility. The incident of Haris and his friends thrown out of his apartment in the middle of the night is a reality that many non-conformist people live with. The phrase, 'they all are faggots' is used to define Haris and his friends, indicating that rebel bodies must be confined by the moral system. The French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault has shown how the body is a political field and politics of power cannot be separated from it. In his article 'The Political Investment of the Body' Foucault postulates: 'The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (Foucault 2005: 100).

Shape of the Shapeless (2010), a documentary by Cherian, peeps into the fragile nature of body and gender. The multiple names/signifiers of the central character question the notion of body, gender, and identity as finished products; Jon Corey, a businessman in New York, Premdas, a yogi, and Rose Wood, the performer, are fragments of the same person. The film is a critique of 'privileged normative hegemonic bodies'. Jon Corey in the documentary talks about the prejudice and bias he had to face while growing up for being a Jew in America. This troubling experience of the past may have led Corey to question the futile binary of superior versus inferior bodies. It raises the larger question of why certain bodies are targeted and vandalised time and again. When Rose Wood performs on stage, there is an amalgamation of the male and female body subverting the traditional notion of the 'normal body'. It is significant to mention that Rose Wood does not believe in the binary of male versus female. For Rose Wood, the body is a costume that can be used in multiple ways challenging the entire debate of pure versus profane bodies. For Rose Wood, gender, sexuality, and identity are all constructs and Rose Wood writes and rewrites gender as per her/his wish. Corey remarks that 'I love the act of painting on a gender . . . the character and gender is something that we can create and recreate'. The dilemma in addressing/placing Corey/Rose Wood/Premdas in one particular gender indicates the futility of the phenomenon of gender. Corey further goes on to state that 'gender can be erased and it can be re-written'. *Shape of the Shapeless* is an intimate account of a person who wants to break away from all kind of tags and labels. Corey is well aware that he can be assaulted for what he does as a performer. That may be the reason why Corey as Rose Wood never wants to explore the streets of New York city at night alone. Rose Wood gets to hear often phrases like 'death to homosexuals', 'burn the fags', and 'kill the fag'. She goes on to mention that 'if friends of mine found out that I have been murdered, they would be upset, but still not so surprised because they know that everyday carries an element of risk for me'. It is this same risk that Dalit and queer bodies carry when they attempt to map their routes/

roots in society. The point here is not to draw a comparison amidst these bodies concerning the risk but to assert that these bodies are perceived as non-normal, therefore, subject to violence and humiliation. Corey postulates that there is a lot of hate in the world and people are full of ignorance, which further signifies the hollowness and emptiness of life. After getting breast augmentation surgery, Corey feels that he is one step closer to the image he has of himself as he remarks, 'I don't have a strong identity on one side with my body'.

As far as the 'body' is concerned, it cannot be defined within a fixed framework because the body itself denounces the parameters of fixity as it is not a fixed entity and yet bodies are divided into normative and non-normative. Dalit bodies have always been perceived as the 'other', the non-normative. However, the spectrum of non-normativity is quite wide as it includes queer bodies too. Cherian's characters try to exist outside the binary of normal and non-normal, but the regressive forces of society continue to survive by separating bodies on the basis of caste, location, sexuality, language, food, etc. Even though, the body is more of a process that is always in the progression of becoming. The body shows more than what one can perceive because it has abundant layers attached to it. When one talks about the body, one does not have to confine the analytical scope of it within the literal sense of the term because the body itself has the ability to break away from the models within which it is often viewed or analysed. The body can be viewed beyond conventional perspectives and definitions which are associated with it. Furthermore, Jon Corey, Rose Wood, Haris, Vishnu, Shankaran, and Sia attempt to assert the everyday movement of their body without submitting and surrendering to oppressive power structures.

Notes

1 Indian Penal Code (IPC) was introduced by the British colonisers in India in 1860. Section 377 of the IPC was imagined after The Buggery Act of 16th century. The Act was passed by the British Parliament in 1533 under the reign of Henry VIII. Section 377 was drafted by Thomas Macaulay around 1838, but it was brought into effect only in 1860. The first resistance to Section 377 came in 1994 when an NGO named 'AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Abhiyan' (ABVA) had filed a petition in the Supreme Court demanding its removal. After ABVA, it was the Naz Foundation that filed a petition in the Delhi High Court in 2001 demanding the decriminalization of homosexuality. The Delhi High Court dismissed the petition in 2004. The Naz Foundation challenged the Delhi High Court in the Supreme Court. In 2006, The National AIDS Control Organisation too joined the fight against Section 377. On July 2, 2009, the Delhi Court overturned Section 377 but the judgement was challenged in the Supreme Court. In 2012, the Supreme Court questioned the verdict of Delhi High Court on 377. Following this, a review petition was filed in 2014 and a long fight against the Section 377 came to an end on September 6, 2018.

2 Some of the noteworthy works on Dalit studies are as follows: *Towards and Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) by Sharankumar Limbale, *Dalits in India* (2009) by Sukhadeo Thorat, *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (2009) by Gopal Guru, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (2010) by Anupama Rao, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (2016) by Charu Gupta, and *Dalit: Past, Present, and Future* (2016) by Anand Teltumbde. However, some pertinent works on Queer Studies are as follows: *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (2001) by Ruth Vanita, *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National Projects* (2004), by Suparna Bhaskaran, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (2012) by Naisargi N. Dave, *Digital Queer Cultures in India* (2017) by Rohit K. Dasgupta, and *Queer Politics in India—Towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects* (2018) by Shraddha Chatterjee.

3 The chapter looks at C. K. *Januvinte Aathmakatha* (2001) and Saleena Prakkanam's *Chengara Samaravum Ente Jeevithavum* (2013)

4 The passive act of using 'fast' as a tool to resistance by the neo-Gandhians is questioned by the Dalit protestors.

5 www.youthkiawaaz.com/2017/11/queer-dalit-and-not-yet-proud-this-is-my-story/. Accessed on January 14, 2020.

6 https://feminisminindia.com/2018/07/04/queer-dalit-teenager/. Accessed on February 12, 2020.

7 In October 2019, a group of 30 people, who are from the Dalit community and also identify as queer, came together to collaborate on The Dalit Queer Project to combat the hate and violence that is exercised against queer Dalits. The group also aimed to politicize LGBTQIA+ movement from the perspective of caste. The project aims to make use of social media to ensure wider representation. There is a community page on Instagram titled 'Dalit Queer Project' which reads 'Breaking hetero norms & caste shackles one post at a time: A collaborative space for all people Dalit & queer'.
www.hindustantimes.com/cities/project-to-salute-and-support-dalit-queers/story-K0kluMv7AAQAPZytp8d80H.html. Accessed on January 25, 2020.
8 www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/no-space-for-censorship-in-democracy-filmmaker/article25700254.ece. Accessed on February 10, 2020.
9 After the independence of India, the censorship laws, which were introduced by British colonialism, remained in practice after a few modifications. Bose underlines how censorship operates not only from top to bottom but also the other way around. The Cinematograph Act of 1918 regulated the content which was deemed suitable for public consumption; however, no major changes took place in the guidelines till the Cinematograph Act (II) of 1949, which established the Board of Film Censors changed into the Central Board of Film Certification in 1983 (Bose 2013: 192).
10 Lord Hanuman appears as one of the key figures in the *Ramayana*. When Ram had gone for an exile of 14 years, Hanuman had been by his side. In the battle between Ram and Ravan, the King of Lanka, Hanuman had played a major role in helping Ram win over Ravan. Lord Hanuman is also seen as a symbol of power in India by many of his devotees.

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14

Dalit Subjectivity, Democracy, and Radical Equality, or What Bollywood Could Learn From Ambedkar

Chinmaya Lal Thakur

Introduction

In his incisive critique of the grossly inadequate representation that Dalits have had in Indian cinema, Suraj Yengde rightly accuses popular Hindi cinema or Bollywood of eliding caste as a theme. He suggests that caste has been subsumed within categories such as 'the poor', 'the common man', the hard-toiling Indian masses, and even the orphan in mainstream films like *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978). And, even in slightly 'off-beat' features such as *Awaara* (1951), *Naya Daur* (1957), *Hum Hindustani* (1960), *Roti Kapada Aur Makaan* (1974), *Khoon Pasina* (1977), and *Kaala Patthar* (1979), caste remains a subterranean index of subalternity enmeshed, along with other such catalogues, in the overt metanarrative of the struggles of the downtrodden (Yengde 2018: 3).

This chapter, in its reading of a trio of recent Bollywood films—*Rajneeti: Politics and Beyond* (2010), *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (2015), and *Article 15* (2019)—not only provides evidence supporting Yengde's contention but also pushes the argument in a hitherto unexplored direction. It suggests that these three feature films, despite attempting to portray Dalit subjectivity in a progressive light, end up marginalising it. Consequently, in their narratives, the Dalit subject emerges as being unable to adjust with the (majoritarian) workings of India's parliamentary democracy. Therefore, the chapter understands the three films as unconsciously challenging their viewers into producing an alternate imagination of the relationship between the Dalit subject and democracy—a relationship in which the subject does not have to necessarily depend on parliamentary or constitutionally guaranteed provisions and procedures to enjoy the same status as other non-Dalit citizens of the country. To this end, it reads Ambedkar's writings and views on democracy as enabling the conception of a certain radical equality that exceeds the regulatory and deterministic aspirations and actions of India's nationalist discourse. In conclusion, the chapter suggests that realisation of this radical equality on the screens of popular Hindi cinema is indeed possible if the latter goes beyond the simplistic logic of numerical majority and minority and emphasises the distinctive, contingent, and yet powerful way in which Dalits express and thereby consolidate their selfhood and identity.

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Manjhi: The Mountain Man

The Ketan Mehta-directed *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (hereafter referred to as *Manjhi*) is a biographical take on the life of Dasrath Manjhi, a Dalit labourer from Gehlaur village in the Indian state of Bihar. The village presented in the film is a den of atrocious exploitation of the so-called lower castes by a wide assortment of characters including landlords, local administration, and police. The landlords, for instance, get nails hammered into the feet of Dalits who cannot pay their debts. When Dalits work at brick-kilns belonging to the landlords, it is not uncommon for them to get burnt alive for want of even the most minimal protective apparatus or strategy.

The story of *Manjhi* begins in the 1950s, immediately after India's independence from colonial British rule. A young Dasrath marries the child-bride Phagunia. However, instead of there being any investment in the future of these young children, he is expected to work as a bonded labourer in the landlord's house much like his father did. Somehow, he manages to escape from the clutches of the landlord and returns to Gehlaur after seven years. On his return, he settles down with the now grown-up Phagunia. Pregnant with their second child, Phagunia falls down from the mountain that constitutes the 70-kilometre-long boundary between Gehlaur and its neighbouring town Wazirganj while trying to fetch some water for the family. Even as the child is saved, Phagunia loses her life. Dasrath rues over the delay the mountain caused in the journey from the village to the health centre in Wazirganj. Armed with a hammer and chisel, he resolves to carve a path through the mountain. It takes him 22 years, from 1960 to 1982, to complete the arduous task and he finally manages to substantially reduce the travelling time between Gehlaur and the town.

In the light of Yengde's argument outlined earlier, it is not surprising to find that most critical commentary on *Manjhi* subsumes the pathetic living conditions of Dasrath's and other families under the umbrella discourse of poverty in rural India. Instead of appreciating the fact that such circumstances arise out of caste-determined socio-economic inequality in the village, critics like Meena Iyer allude to the depiction of 'abject poverty' and 'lack of privilege' in their analysis of the film. In Iyer's case, this criticism is especially appropriate as she pays no regard to the 'caste-location' of Dasrath's family when observing that they survive by 'eating dead rats' (Iyer 2015). As a result, she ignores the fact that poverty and lower-caste status almost went hand in glove within India. There could be poor among the upper caste, but they still retained their 'superior' caste status, whereas the rich among the lower caste remained as Dalits despite acquiring some economic affluence. However, as indicated previously, this chapter is interested in highlighting as to how *Manjhi*, despite its apparent attempts to address the question of caste inequity in rural India, ends up further consolidating the marginalisation of the Dalit subject from the mainstream of the country's democratic polity.

The film indeed shows promise as far as its representation of caste politics and Dalit subjectivity is concerned as it casts a sharp eye on the exploitation of the populace by the landlords. It portrays the landlords as working in collusion with local officials and police to take advantage of 'innocent' villagers like Dasrath. The landlord's son, who had attempted to molest Phagunia in the village market once, for instance, informs Dasrath that the central government has sanctioned a significant amount of money to aid the latter's efforts of carving a path through the mountain. Later, he along with the official looking after their village block siphons off the whole amount and Dasrath is left with virtually nothing. Poor Dasrath believes that the central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi will listen to him and pay heed to his precarious situation. Sadly, he is not even able to manage an audience with the prime minister and returns to Gehlaur from New Delhi empty-handed. He is dejected, disheartened, and feels like giving up on his project. Even as such strenuous circumstances prevail, the landlord's son, colluding with officials of the forest

department, gets him arrested and sent to prison on the ground that he had been undertaking illegal demolition activity on land that belongs to the department.

As stated earlier, Dasrath is able to carve a path to Wazirganj despite all the difficulties he faces. Yet, instead of positing that his triumph occurs notwithstanding the horrible exploitation he endures on account of his 'caste-location', the film reduces its significance by portraying the struggle as the expression of a husband's love for his dead wife.[1] So, instead of underlining the fact that Dasrath successfully completes his task despite not receiving any support from anyone including the local administration and the government, it shows the mountain and Dasrath engaged in some sort of a personal game—a deadly combat reminiscent of the one between Goliath and David. *Manjhi*, in other words, reduces the question of caste discrimination and exploitation in rural India to a personal issue between its eponymous hero and the mountain that apparently caused the death of his beloved wife. Consequently, the film elides the truth that thousands of lower-caste men and women in India have to undertake strenuous and life-threatening labour on account of their vulnerable caste-class location.

The impression about there being a personal tiff between Dasrath and the mountain becomes certain and concrete when the film's narrative makes Phagunia's spirit appear to him as he is in a condition of tired stupor. Disappointed as he is after returning from New Delhi, the spirit reminds him that he had taken a vow to carve a path through the mountain and that it would not be satisfied till the vow achieves fruition. Clearly, then, instead of showing the Dalit subject the path ahead in the circumstance where the postcolonial nation state and its apparatuses fail him completely, the film's narrative is interested in presenting him as the relentless eternal lover—as one who does not fail his beloved regardless of what the situation may be. Put differently, *Manjhi* elides the inability of postcolonial India to fulfil the most basic needs and requirements of even its most vulnerable populations. This fact, as Akhil Gupta astutely reminds us, establishes the violence that the Dalit subject has endured in postcolonial India even as he has struggled to carve a niche for himself in the nation's democratic set-up (Gupta 2012).

Rajneeti: Politics and Beyond

Prakash Jha's directorial feature film *Rajneeti: Politics and Beyond* (hereafter referred to as *Rajneeti*) presents the story of two warring factions led by cousins and half-brothers. The fight is over political inheritance as the patriarch of a powerful regional party in India, Bhanu Pratap Singh, suffers a sudden paralytic attack. His younger brother, Chandra Pratap Singh, becomes the nominal head of the party as real power comes to be in the hands of the family elder and party member Brij Gopal. The new chief, with his sons Prithvi Pratap Singh and Samar Pratap Singh, enjoys Gopal's blessings. On the other hand, Veerendra Pratap Singh, the son of the ailing patriarch, finds himself out of favour. Veerendra's fluctuating fortunes turn for the brighter, however, when he skilfully acquires the support of the young Dalit leader Suraj. Unknown to him, Suraj is actually the eldest son of the Pratap Singh clan and half-brother to Prithvi and Samar.

Amidst much dirty politicking, scheming, and violence from both sides, the new party chief, his son Prithvi, Veerendra, and Suraj lose their lives. Samar, having played a Michael-Corleone-like role in the whole conflict, returns to New York to continue his research while Prithvi's widow Indu comes to not only lead the party but also the state as its chief minister.[2] Apart from the fact that shades of Samar's character along with some scenes in the film like the one with the car-bomb blast are drawn from the universe of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (trilogy, 1972–1990), Indian viewers are unlikely to miss the resonances its narrative shares with the world of the epic *Mahabharata*. Indeed, the characters of Brij Gopal, Prithvi, Samar, Veerendra, and Suraj are based on Krishna, Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Duryodhana, and Karna, respectively.

As far as the representation of Suraj in *Rajneeti* is concerned, it is clear that the film's narrative falters on various levels. He is presented as the brightest among the Dalit youth—as someone who is a great athlete as well as a very nuanced political thinker—even as there is poignant irony in the fact that he is not actually Dalit and has been born in the most powerful upper-caste household of the state. Moreover, the film makes it seem as if there is no one among Dalit young men and women who could even attempt to lead their community. Consequently, it appears to go with the logic that an upper-caste man should lead the Dalits though he obviously might not be one of them. The absence of a character who could mirror or parallel Eklavya from the *Mahabharata* is thus felt badly in *Rajneeti* as the forest-dwelling youth had excelled in archery in the epic though he did not belong to the ruling Kuru clan. Had the Brahmin teacher Dronacharya not asked for the thumb of his right hand as *dakshina* (gift or token of gratitude), he would have certainly gone on to compete with Arjuna who was not only a great archer but also the teacher's favourite pupil.

The other major issue with Suraj's role in the film is that his actions provide, at best, an inconsistent parallel with Karna's in the *Mahabharata*. Karna in the epic is not a schemer; he just happens to be Duryodhana's best friend as it is only the eldest Kaurava prince who gives him any respect 'despite' his background. Moreover, as he relates to Krishna and his biological mother Kunti before the battle at Kurukshetra, he is aware of the fact that the Pandavas, in that they are the 'righteous' ones, will inevitably emerge victorious. In *Rajneeti*, however, Suraj is the one who conceives evil schemes against the new party president and his son Prithvi. They are killed on his orders as he decides to turn a blind eye towards questions of ethics and morality. Once he participates in the activities of the party on account of Veerendra's insistence, he does not refrain from using the power of muscle and money to turn things to his dear friend's advantage.

Here, it would be interesting to note that *Rajneeti* achieves the said negative portrayal of Suraj as it actually combines the characters of Shakuni, the uncle of the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata*, and Karna in him. Shakuni, as is well-known to most Indians, is the evil schemer in the epic. His partial and biased actions against the Pandavas lead to the terrible bloodshed at Kurukshetra. Thus, it seems that since the film makes Brij Gopal the uncle of Prithvi and Samar, it had no option but to give the character of Suraj the shades of the 'real' evil uncle from the *Mahabharata*. Put differently, Suraj in the film is the perpetual outsider—someone who is first discriminated on account of his familial background and then, when he enters the electoral battlefield, because he is the most potent force working against the protagonist Samar. Towards the end of *Rajneeti*'s narrative, as Samar shoots the unarmed Suraj to death on Brij Gopal's suggestion, it is clear that his emergence as the victorious survivor is only possible thus.

Samar's rise as the triumphant party in *Rajneeti* is clearly not just a circumstantial consequence. The film's narrative aesthetics is thoroughly invested in presenting him as an 'upper-caste' anti-hero, a cosmopolitan individual who is plunged into the (caste) politics of the province almost unwillingly. As a result, Samar's actions come across to the viewers as 'necessary' *revenge* against the vicious plotting of Suraj and Veerendra, however violent and destructive they may be. The arc of Suraj's character in the film's narrative, in contrast, makes it clear that the Dalit subject finds it extremely difficult to carve a niche for himself in the nationalist imaginary even as he gathers the confidence to take part in democratic or legislative politics. Suraj is not only taken advantage of by his half-brothers Prithvi and Samar but Veerendra also uses him to get all of his desired dirty work done. Even for the latter, ultimately, he is a pawn in the whole game whose only job is to follow the orders given to him. The friendship and respect that he receives from Veerendra are means for a particular selfish end. *Rajneeti*'s narrative, therefore, betrays a pessimistic view of the friendship between Duryodhana and Karna as represented in the *Mahabharata*.

While the epic paints a poignant picture of the Kaurava prince grieving over the corpse of his slain friend, the film robs Suraj of even the honour of sacrifice as Veerendra dies in his arms.

Much like Dasrath in *Manjhi* then, Suraj too appears to be caught in a vicious cycle—a cycle that does not let him live peacefully and happily irrespective of whatever he may choose to do. Dasrath is neglected by the postcolonial nation state even as he requires the bare minimum while Suraj comes to suffer the same fate even as he aims to have a piece of the pie called democratic representational politics. Politics, then, remains a game of the powerful, played by the powerful for the powerful and appears to have no space at all for outsiders like Suraj who demand caste and socio-political equity.

Article 15

Article 15, directed by Anubhav Sinha, is an investigative presented in noir shades. The University of Delhi-educated and foreign-returned Ayan Ranjan joins the Indian Police Service as Upper Police Superintendent and gets posted at Lalgaon, a nondescript rural outback, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. In a series of events inspired by the real-life incidents that occurred in Badaun and Una a few years ago, his term begins on a rocky note as the bodies of two Dalit girls are found hanging from a tree on the outskirts of the village.[3] The task expected of his team and him is thus to not only find what happened with the dead girls but also track the third one who is supposed to be missing.

In contrast to the Brahmin Ayan, *Article 15* presents the Dalit revolutionary leader Nishad who is not only aware of local socio-political realities in and around Lalgaon but also acutely conscious of the pathetic conditions in which Dalits and other 'lower' castes find themselves even after seven decades of the country's independence. Nishad makes Ayan aware of the deprivation and discrimination that mark Dalit lives since the very beginning, of how there are a set number of 'occupations' like manual scavenging that they are likely to have and how they are not even allowed to function on terms equal to non-Dalits even if they come to occupy materially prosperous positions in society. Moreover, Ayan and other upper-caste people in Lalgaon get a real 'taste' of Nishad's resistance when the Dalits not only refuse to collect the village's garbage and dispose the same but also refrain from clearing the drains and tanks of the dirty sewage.

Nishad's powerful arguments, in fact, lend an ironical tinge to Ayan's symbolic gesture of putting up a copy of Article 15 from the Constitution of India on the noticeboard of his police station. The Article, which also gives the film its name, prohibits any discrimination in the country on grounds of caste, creed, region, religion, gender, etc. Regardless, as the revolutionary reminds everyone, the reality in Lalgaon and other parts of India seems to be the opposite. Despite the provision of equality enshrined in the constitution and recognised by law, Dalits and other minorities become the victims of majoritarian atrocities committed almost on an everyday basis.

Yet, as Nishad loses his life to the notorious nexus of caste, bureaucracy, and crime in Lalgaon and thus cannot fulfil his promise of finding the missing girl, the film comes to give up on any hopes of Dalit resistance standing up and triumphing against upper-caste fiefdoms. Unsurprisingly, the mantel then falls on Ayan who till then has been struggling to understand the socio-economic equations in the village. He indeed seems to be the representative of the majority among urban-educated and privileged Indians who think that with the abolition of Untouchability in the country, caste inequality has also ceased to exist. It is news to him, for instance, that not all Brahmins enjoy the same status in society (so, Kanyakubj are 'better' than Saryuparin), or that all Dalits are not equal even to each other (so, apparently, the condition of Chamars is 'better' than that of Pasis), or, for that matter, that he cannot just buy a bottle of water from the village of Pasis that he crosses by on the way to Lalgaon.

Put differently, *Article 15* comes to be a narrative that serves as the rights of passage for individuals like Ayan at the cost of those such as Nishad whose actions and ideas remain marginal(ised) throughout. Ayan's coming of age then must happen at the cost of Nishad's side-lining. Unsurprisingly, in accordance with the film's liberal and ostensibly egalitarian politics, Ayan not only rescues the missing girl but also ensures that those who raped and killed the two girls, including some of his colleagues from the police department, are brought to book. He thus becomes the messiah, the saviour who brings about gender and caste justice in Lalgaon. That *Article 15*'s interests also rest in perpetuating politics in which a Brahmin man serves as the protector and deliverer for Dalits becomes clear from the fact that Ayan, literally, lifts the girl after finding her in the forests on the outskirts of Lalgaon and puts her onto an ambulance. And, as if to acknowledge that he has therefore gone out of the bounds of 'duty' to secure justice, the girl's sister (and Nishad's beloved) folds her hands in gratitude towards him.

The narrative arc of Ayan's character in *Article 15* thus appears to speak with that of Samar in *Rajneeti*. Much like the viewers are supposed to be sympathetic towards the latter in that he is 'forced' to participate in politics even as his interests rest in academic work, they are to feel strongly towards the former's 'ill-luck' too. Ayan, in this sense, is almost a tragic figure—someone who gets caught in the muck of caste and gender politics in Lalgaon despite being a city-bred, cosmopolitan figure. He is too innocent, naïve, and conscientious, it would seem, to be handling 'difficult' situations at least in his very first job with the government of India.

It would not be unfair, in the light of the above, to suggest that *Article 15* ultimately compromises the agency and resistance of the Dalit revolutionary subject by positing the Brahmin hero as the messiah who brings about socio-political justice in society. Thus, it appears to complete the vicious cycle of the representation of his alienation from the popular and majoritarian democratic process in the country. Irrespective of how hard the Dalit subject tries; it seems that the said process is omnipotent and impenetrable as it gives space neither to the likes of Suraj who want to participate in it nor to those like Nishad who attempt to fight against it by standing outside it.

However, as suggested earlier, such representations of the 'essential' alienation of the Dalit subject from the processes of parliamentary democracy in India need not set the tone for the future as Dalit discourse, in itself, is very much capable of imagining citizenship in radical terms. And, such imagination does not have to depend on the whims and fancies of the majority community for recognition, approval, or acceptance. The following section of the present chapter, in reading Ambedkar's writings on democracy, tries to bring forth the framework for conceiving Dalit subjectivity and its placement in democratic set-ups in fresh ways that do not entail the sacrifice of its equality with other citizen-subjects. Therefore, instead of imagining Dalit and non-Dalit peoples as constituting the national body-politic through ties dependent on numerical majorities and minorities in the parliament, the attempt will be to bring about a sense of ethical justice and fraternity between them which will, in a sense, even make the question of parliamentary majority and minority redundant.

Ambedkar was always conscious of the limitations of the workings of parliamentary democracy. He understood that it was a system that inevitably had the tendency to be of benefit to a privileged few at the cost of the socially and politically marginalised populations in any country such as the poor, the labour class, and the downtrodden. To check such a development, in a speech delivered at the concluding session of the All India Trade Union Workers' Study Camp held in

Delhi on September 17, 1943, he suggested that only labour can make parliamentary democracies work. As labour dissociates from capitalist and communal alliances, it needs to take charge of the government. The following are relevant excerpts from the speech:

> The idea [of Parliamentary Democracy] became sanctified and was upheld in the name of liberty. Parliamentary Democracy took no notice of economic inequalities and did not care to examine the result of freedom of contract on the parties to the contract, should they happen to be unequal. It did not mind if the freedom of contract gave the strong the opportunity to defraud the weak. The result is that Parliamentary Democracy in standing out as protagonist of Liberty has continuously added to the economic wrongs of the poor, the downtrodden, and the dis-inherited class. The second wrong ideology which has vitiated Parliamentary Democracy is the failure to realise that political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy. Some may question this proposition. To those who are disposed to question it, I will ask a counter question. Why Parliamentary Democracy collapsed so easily in Italy, Germany and Russia? Why did it not collapse so easily in England and the U.S.A.? To my mind there is only one answer—namely, there was a greater degree of economic and social democracy in the latter countries than it existed in the former. Social and economic democracy are the tissues and fibre of a Political Democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fibre, the greater the strength of the body. Democracy is another name for equality. Parliamentary Democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never even made a nodding acquaintance with equality. It failed to realise the significance of equality, and did not even endeavour to strike a balance between Liberty and Equality, with the result that liberty swallowed equality and has left a progeny of inequities.
>
> *(Ambedkar 2018a: 101–102)*

The other important feature of Ambedkar's critique of parliamentary democracy is his unshakeable belief that it may reflect and function according to the 'inherently' communal character of Indian polity. In such a scenario, the political majority in parliament may actually be the expression of a communal majority. To explain this point further, he draws a useful distinction between political majority and communal majority. He suggests that communal majority is born and not made. It is permanently fixed in a particular attitude and cannot be transformed. Political majority, on the other hand, is not fixed as it is not a permanent majority—it is majority that is always unmade and remade. Ambedkar further argues for the need to beware of majoritarian nationalism; in that it is the expression of communal majority to monopolise all the power in a democratic set-up (Ambedkar 2018b: 120).

Given Ambedkar's reservations regarding parliamentary democracy on the grounds that it neither addresses the socio-economic needs of society's most vulnerable groups nor does it check the expression of communal majoritarianism in the form of nationalism, it is not a surprise to note that the alternative he proposes has an ethical and spiritual core. As enunciated by Lenat Skof in the essay 'Pragmatism and Deepened Democracy: Ambedkar between Dewey and Unger', Ambedkar's vision of democracy can be outlined in the following four points:

a. the progress of each member *has worth* for the experience of other members;
b. all people, regardless of their socioeconomic status, must have a chance to develop individual talents and interests;
c. each individual must be able to proceed both with compassion and care for others;

d. democracy is a spiritual need, inherent in humans as embodied beings, developed through *maitri* [friendship/fraternity] and *karuna* [compassion] towards equality.

(Skof 2011: 134)

Aishwary Kumar helpfully parses these four key tenets of Ambedkar's view of democracy in the masterly study *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy*. He suggests that by refusing to cede to parliamentary democracy as the only possible form of democracy, Ambedkar takes a great intellectual and political risk and puts the wager on the citizens of any social set-up to work towards democracy that is yet to come. That democracy yet to come would be a democracy that would be irreducible to mere political representation, universal adult franchise, and rule of the majority. Instead, it would be uncompromising on the fellowship and fraternity between equals and therefore will not be contained by narrow nationalistic imaginations and considerations of citizenship and subjecthood (Kumar 2015: 337–340).

Ambedkar's republic of equals founded on uncompromising moral principles, argues Kumar, demands its subjects to pursue freedom without interest or prejudice. Unfettered by rules of nationalist fidelity, they are to sustain a radical autonomy that promotes interminable dissidence against any and every structure that attempts to withhold their pursuit. Such autonomy is radical precisely because it resists immoral laws and reclaims the city-space for itself. In fact, it is only in the city that the vertical relations of privilege and inequality characteristic of the countryside can be overcome and evolve into radical and new associations of community and language. These contingent formations will never aim to do away with or eradicate differences but shall always be conscious of the incommensurability of the precarious other that nation states, parliamentary democracies, and welfare-ist set-ups ostensibly aim to 'provide' for. Kumar thus reads the popular representation of Ambedkar in statues and images as not signifying satisfaction with the process that gives India's Dalits and marginalised the constitution enshrining their rights but as issuing the following insurrectionary warning:

> It is as if his raised hand is resisting illegitimate powers from corrupting the constitution. It is as if the architect of the constitution is cautioning that the republic, for all its impatience, is not ready for a true constitution. It seems he is signalling that even the constitution is not enough to save the republic yet. Or perhaps the image, in all its revolutionary and messianic intensity, captures an Ambedkar who must remind the citizens of the republic that the virtues of true gift—here, the constitution that a people gives itself—remain incomplete without a shared love of truth; that justice, which is by its very nature insurrectionary (especially when it is thought through in an annihilative, indestructible, and anarchic autonomy), remains inadequate without force; that the constitution is rendered quickly immoral—and in turn renders itself thoroughly deserving of being burned—if it does not secure the freedom of the republic's incommensurable equals, who become equal only through a shared resistance against unjust laws.
>
> *(Kumar 2015: 340–343)*

A quick glance at the exegesis of Ambedkar's critique of parliamentary democracy and his espousal of deep or meaningful democracy characterised by radical equality in the writings of Skof and Kumar may give someone the impression that the views are not only idealistic but also unrealisable in cinematic representation. That, in other words, it would be incredibly difficult for them to manifest in the real, everyday lives of Dalits and other marginalised groups in India and, subsequently, on cinema screens. Such an understanding, to say the least, would be

misplaced. In fact, as recently argued by Amit Ahuja, Dalit politics in contemporary India can be understood as manifesting in two broad ways—electoral and movement-based. Ahuja suggests that states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where Dalits usually make their electoral choices by 'uniting' into a loose collective, are marked by the backwardness of their marginalised populations in almost all development indicators. In states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, where there is no great incidence of voting by Dalits as a coherent unit, but which have a living tradition of socio-cultural resistance and movement by marginalised groups, the deprived sections seem to do much better in terms of achieving socio-economic parity (Ahuja 2019: 2–6). The latter model of education, agitation, and organisation, in other words, is much closer to Ambedkar's radical imagination of democracy that does not depend on ethically deficient parliamentary conventions to manifest themselves. Voting as blocks, therefore, might lead to only transient gains while creating and sustaining politico-cultural movements is bound to be greatly beneficial to the Dalits.

In the light of Ahuja's explanation, the crucial question before us is this: how can Bollywood broaden its horizons and not limit itself into conceiving and representing Dalit subjectivity as being the consequence of identity formation that manifests as vote banks in electoral contests? How can it not fetishise a conventional and typical understanding of political achievement that manifests in the form of parliamentary election wins, tokenistic representation in legislative and other governmental bodies, and which draws approval from the majoritarian nationalist discourse? If popular Hindi cinema were indeed to reimagine Dalit subjectivity and politics, it would need to turn towards mobilisation and political performance that is far from the ordinary and usual. As Ahuja explains, Dalit mobilisation does not possess a typically well-organised and strict structure. It does not perform through organisations with manifestos and lists of members. Almost always, it is practiced in households and semi-urban localities, in tales that elders tell the young children, in shared protests, musical, and theatrical performances, and during prayer meetings and festivals (Ahuja 2019: xvi–xvii).

If, in the light of Ahuja's suggestion, popular Hindi cinema were to begin to present realistic narratives about Dalit lives—their music, art, protest, literature, and food—there is indeed a possibility that it will become an important avenue for the expression of what Yengde calls the 'Dalit counter-public sphere'. Unlike the Brahminical public sphere which not only is dominant but also does not allow the unfettered articulation of the sentiments of other communities and groups, the Dalit counter-public sphere is marked by the unrestricted performance of art forms such as *tamasha* (as folk drama), *pawada* (panegyric poetry), *lawani* (ballads), and *jalsa* (musical play). It is the site where Dalits consolidate an identity for themselves, beyond and against the confines set up by upper-caste citizenry. Yengde argues that Nagraj Manjule's cinematography, that includes Marathi-language films like *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), is an example of the thriving of this Dalit counter-public sphere as it does not pay heed to any 'upper-caste' 'expectations' of cinema. Among others, some of these are that the male lead should belong to an elite and rich family, that the heroine should be 'coy and docile', that Dalit young men must not be conventionally 'good looking and fair-skinned', and that they should not have white-collared jobs (Yengde 2018: 6–8).[4]

Representation of the Dalit counter-public sphere in Bollywood will concomitantly reflect and further consolidate the awareness that citizenship, especially in democratic nations like India, loses all meaning if all citizens are not treated equally. And, if parliamentary democracy can and must only lead to such unequal citizenship then, there is the most urgent need to envision and move towards an Ambedkarite radical equality—an equality yet to come that will ensure that India's suffering minorities of caste, religion, and gender do not have to depend on the patronage of the country's majority citizenry to have access to what is rightfully theirs as well.

Conclusion

It is telling, of course, that the reimagination of Dalit subjectivity and the representation of the Dalit counter-public sphere in popular Hindi cinema are referred to, throughout the present chapter, as belonging to the domain of the *possible*, to that which is yet to happen, and to that of the 'if'. And, if that is a possibility that may indeed be realisable in the future, the suggestion itself becomes a prescription, almost a directive. One readily submits to the fact that (cinematic) art never sits easily with prescriptions of any kind, but one would like to assert, in the same breath as it were, that the imperative mode being adopted here is actually a necessity, a sad consequence of the truth that Bollywood lacks an Ambedkarite consciousness. Popular culture itself is a commercial as well as a cultural product. Hence, if popular Hindi cinema has to become progressive in its representation of caste in general and Dalit subjectivity in particular, it also needs to pay attention to the systems of capital and commerce that constitute it in the first place. Otherwise, directors such as Ketan Mehta and Prakash Jha, who made politically conscious and progressive films like *Bhavni Bhavai* and *Damul* in the 1970s and 1980s, would be forced to compromise their aesthetics and politics and present stories such as *Manjhi* and *Rajneeti*, respectively, to their audience.

Given the current state of dissenting expression or the lack thereof in contemporary India, Bollywood has unsurprisingly failed radical equality as envisioned by Ambedkar twice over. When it adapts films from the Dalit counter-public sphere into Hindi, it sanitises their politics to such an extent that the originals themselves appear to get lost in the depiction. When Manjule's *Sairat* made its way into popular Hindi cinema as *Dhadak* (2018), for example, the presentation gave into commercial temptations and glossed over almost all references to caste that were an integral part of the original. The Shashank Khaitan directorial thus ended up being nothing more than a glamorous launch pad for the careers of Ishan Khatter and Janhvi Kapoor who anyway belong to two of the most powerful families in the Hindi film industry. On the other hand, when Bollywood makes films of its own, it is busy belting out nationalist blockbusters like *Half-Girlfriend* and *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017); *Padman* (2018); *Kesari*, *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*, and *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019); and *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020). These films present the heady cocktail of jingoistic and majoritarian nationalism and obedience to the powers that be and thus aim at quelling any dissent or opposition that may demand socio-political equality for India's long-suffering masses, especially Dalits and religious minorities.

Notes

1 In fact, positing of Manjhi's work in the film's narrative as a personal triumph is itself problematic as the gesture ignores the fact that carving roads through mountains, whether that be for Indian railways or highways, has mostly been possible through the cheap labor extracted from among the lower caste.

2 In Francis Ford Coppola's trilogy *Godfather* (1972–1990), Michael Corleone is the youngest son of Vito Corleone, a powerful mafioso. After his father's death, he succeeds him to take over the control of the mafia empire.

3 On May 27, 2014, murder of two teenage girls was reported from Katra Shahadatganj village of Badaun district in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The girls had allegedly been gang-raped, and their bodies were found hanging from a tree.
On July 18, 2016, seven members of a Dalit family were beaten by a group of cow vigilantes in Mota Samadhiyala village of Gir Somnath district in the Indian state of Gujarat. Four of the seven members were taken to the nearby town, Una, where they were paraded and flogged in public view.

4 Though Yengde's argument is centered around the films of Manjule, it is important to mention here that Pa. Ranjith's films such as *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018) also undo such expectations as they subject the nexus of upper-caste 'superiority' and majoritarian nationalism to trenchant political and aesthetic critique.

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15

The Constitution of/and Caste

Portrayal of Caste and Legal Justice in Three Contemporary Indian Films by Savarna Film-makers

Rituparna Sengupta

Introduction

Whether they have explicitly engaged with caste as identity or ignored the social reality of caste altogether, films made by dominant-caste film-makers (interchangeably referred to as 'Savarna' throughout this chapter) have attracted a range of strong criticism.[1] This has included the criticism that they obscure caste identities and/or represent Dalit characters as dependent, submissive, or espousing Brahminical socio-cultural values[2] and that they ignore narratives featuring Dalit rejection of caste oppression and the search for emancipation from it.[3] They have also been accused of portraying 'unrelieved victimhood' as the fundamental condition of Dalit existence, such that Dalit characters stand robbed of voice and agency[4]—the men are 'meek, docile, shabby, and underconfident' (Chauhan 2019: 327) and the women are alluring, desirable, and attract violence.[5] This question of depiction has been linked to the question of lack of Dalit/Bahujan representation in the Indian film industry, and resultantly, Indian cinema has been thoroughly informed by a Savarna gaze that has systematically overlooked the history of *lowered*-caste resistance against caste oppression and actively excluded their voices.

While expanding on the 'Savarna gaze' along the lines of the 'male gaze' theorised by John Berger or Laura Mulvey is outside the scope of this chapter, I would like to retain the term as a conceptual lens to indicate two related aspects, which I will also analyse in the course of this chapter. Firstly and most obviously, the term serves to distinguish films made by Savarna directors from those made by Dalit directors. Secondly and resultantly, films with a Savarna gaze are distinct from the consciousness that has been identified as 'Dalit chetna',[6] which in turn animates 'Dalit aesthetics' (Limbale 2004)[7] and 'Dalit realism' (Gajarawala 2013). Lately, there has been a disruptive emergence of Dalit film-makers like Nagraj Manjule in Marathi cinema, Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj in Tamil cinema, Neeraj Ghaywan in Hindi cinema, and Somnath Waghmare and Pratik Parmar in the documentary sphere, initiating discussions on a Dalit New Wave in Indian films, comparable to, but also distinct from, Dalit literature.[8] Suraj Yengde has defined Dalit cinema as 'a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, relating to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism' (2018: 503). Film-maker Somnath Waghmare has described such cinema as being made by the Dalit community, based on

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Constitutional and Buddhist values, articulating both suffering and assertion, and the potential for a new society.[9]

Babasaheb Ambedkar was keenly aware of the limitations of Constitutional law in supplanting the social law of Caste and the importance of cultivating 'Constitutional morality' in the protection of minority life and liberty (Narain 2017). Today, 'the opposition between the consensus-enforcing and consensus-breaking aspects of democracy indicates to us that democracy as part of the secular modern does not automatically guarantee the space for stigmatized identities such as caste' (Pandian 2018: 42); equally it is important to note that 'caste, however oppressive, is essentially a self-regulatory system designed to elicit compliance with its laws' (Teltumbde 2010: 45). In this light, how do films that engage explicitly with caste-based discrimination, harassment, and atrocity through the prism of Constitutional law portray its relationship with the religious law of Caste? Moreover, in the context of the assertive new Dalit cinema, how do Savarna caste-conscious films fare? Towards this end, this chapter analyses three contemporary films made by Savarna film-makers: Chaitanya Tamhane's multilingual film *Court* (2014), Pawan Shrivastava's Hindi film *Life of an Outcast* (2018), and Anubhav Sinha's Bollywood film *Article 15* (2019). I trace the location of casteism and caste hierarchies in these films, the construction of Dalit subjectivities and abjectness as well as Savarna agency and complicity. I also examine what these films offer to a varied audience—do they carry the possibility of a 'Bahujan spectatorship' with an oppositional consciousness (Nisha 2020) or allow for the formation of a critical anti-caste public sphere despite their Savarna gaze?[10] If 'Dalit cinema' is aimed at consciousness-raising and dignified resistance to casteist discrimination, then what might be the aim and function of its Savarna counterpart as contemporary anti-caste cinema? Finally, how does the Savarna gaze manifest itself in each film? Here, I would like to declare that this chapter is not a Dalit/Bahujan critique but instead is a Savarna interrogation of Savarna-made films and their proclaimed anti-caste politics.

Court

Chaitanya Tamhane's critically acclaimed debut feature film *Court* (2014) was made with international funding support and toured many international film festivals before getting a theatrical release in India in 2015. The film subverts the conventions of the courtroom drama—organised and timely court proceedings, good oration, trailblazing arguments, and eventual justice—by casting a naturalist gaze on a legal case in progression at a Mumbai lower court, in the process revealing the complicity of law in the harassment of the caste-oppressed. The central plot revolves around a court case against Narayan Kamble, a 65-year-old protest singer, teacher, writer, and activist, who is accused of 'abetment of suicide' of 23-year-old Vasudev Pawar, an employee of the Bruhanmumbai Municipal Corporation, found dead in the sewer he is employed to clean. As the film progresses and we learn that Pawar died of exposure to the toxic fumes released in the sewer in the absence of access to protective gear that he was entitled to by law, we realise that the judicial machinery is more invested in upholding the law of Caste than the Constitutional law of the land. The film's protagonist is the omniscient gaze of the law, presenting the court both as an institution with its own manner of functioning, absurd and sinister by turns, and also as a machinery kept in motion by individuals with layered intersectional identities. Specifically, the characters in focus are defence lawyer Vinay Vora, prosecution lawyer Nutan, and Judge Sadavarte.

The court proceedings move at an irregular pace, alternating between unnecessary delay and unseemly haste, displaying a seemingly sterile institutional imagination still dictated by colonial-era law. The rigidity of the (Savarna) legal gaze is captured by the static camera, its monotony portrayed by long cuts and wide takes, and its imperviousness to status-quoist violence

suggested by locating all acts of physical violence off-screen. Thus, we never see Pawar's corpse even though its disembodied presence haunts the courtroom and the physical attack on Vora by an offended religious sect visually takes place off-camera, only depicted through sound. The court is evidently instrumental in the continual harassment of Muslims, Dalits, and dissenters, and caste-based violence under its unmoved gaze becomes understated, routine, and unremarkable. In this particular case, the efficiency of the court lies not in its impartial dispensation of justice as per the law but in a double act of erasure—deliberately misreading the death of a public employee by state negligence as 'suicide' and then deploying his death against the liberty of a dissenting and thus dangerous citizen. That both are Dalits is evident from their very surnames, besides the portrayal of Pawar's profession and Kamble's activism. The court, ultimately, becomes a means of providing legal sanction to that which already has social sanction—the caste system—and it is here that the film's quietly devastating critique of the institutional failures of the Indian judiciary lies. The film is an apt illustration of the argument that '[i]nstitutions . . . tend to reflect a trans-individual, dominant-class character. Those out of step with the institutional character come under immense pressure to fall in line' (Teltumbde 2010: 53).[11] Hence, institutions like the court reward compliance and punish defiance, of the casteist common sense of public morality that is based on both institutional and everyday violence.

The everydayness of this violence is communicated by several devices, one of which is the casting of non-professional and Dalit actors in roles resembling their real-life experiences; this is true of Vasudev Pawar's widow, Sharmila Pawar played by Usha Bane drawing upon her similar courtroom experiences following her husband's death,[12] and Narayan Kamble, modelled on Dalit activist and revolutionary balladeer Shambhaji Bhagat, played by the late Marxist Ambedkarite cultural activist and editor, Vira Sathidar.[13] This aura of simulated reality is enhanced by the film's pointed focus on its key characters in their relevant social habitats outside the court. Far from being extraneous to the plot, these details add depth to our understanding of the characters, the spaces they occupy in the social hierarchy, their motivations, sympathies, and antipathies. For instance, we learn that despite being farthest away from each other in terms of class, Kamble and Vora share similar political ideologies evident through their respective involvements in protest poetry and legal activism. Similarly, Nutan and Sadavarte, despite their obvious disparity in terms of class, both subscribe to the conservative gender and caste values of a broad upwardly-mobile middle class. Judge Sadavarte's refusal to hear a case because a woman wears a sleeveless top to court, and his faith in astrology and numerology, emphasises the human prejudice and irrationality underlying the supposed rationality and objectivity associated with his profession. Vora's cultural exposure to jazz is set up in contrast to Nutan's consumption of a jingoistic Marathi play, further revealing their different cultural environments; this is also a self-reflexive gesture of the film, drawing attention to its own aesthetic politics.

The deeply stratified worlds that come into collision at the court are represented in the film through a layered multilingualism. At a literal level, there is the disparity between the sophisticated English that Vora uses and the Marathi that Nutan and Sadavarte fluently converse in, but which eludes Vora. At another level, it is the dry, obfuscating legalese that judge and lawyers use for communication, such that the law emerges through violence, making 'unreadability, obscurity a constitutive element of its existence' (Bargi 2018: 2). This language is also based on misreadings—of Pawar's death as suicide and Kamble's activism as incitement, transferring negligence and culpability from state to Dalit subject, wresting away real agency in one case and investing false agency in another. Initially, it seems as though this is a case of miscommunication and of the court's lack of appreciation of the workings of satire, such that Kamble's bitter address to fellow Dalits to give up their lives in protest to their daily indignities is read literally as exhortation to suicide. But this misreading of Dalit death as wish fulfilment is *deliberate*, based

on both apathy and unceasing suspicion, holding the Dalit subject responsible for his own death, or that of another. In Bargi's astute reading of the film, which builds upon Foucault's theory of the 'biopolitic',

> [l]egal activism . . . whether benevolent or punitive, relies on this specific act of linguistic violence that makes the victim speak a language or idiom that s/he does not share. . . . [This] is a language of the majority and it partakes in a biopolitical discourse of health and safety.
>
> *(2018: 1)*

Indeed, it is through this biopolitical framework that the Dalit subject is formed and framed in the eyes of law, a threat equally in life and death. Then there is the reluctant language of Sharmila Pawar, the widow who never appeals for legal justice for her dead husband, but is summoned to give testimony in a state of obvious intimidation, the crucial witness who exposes the truth of her husband's 'accidental' death (Bargi 2018: 7). Both she and Kamble can only speak in court when called upon to do so, their speech conspicuous for its silence: the Dalit is allowed to speak, but not out of free will or in conditions of their own choosing.

The court mistrusts the language of protest as a dialect of 'extremists' who allegedly speak in a cipher that needs to be decoded. All use of language by such a dissenting subject is suspect and requires silencing, thereby necessitating constant vigilance and censorship. The summation of the charges against Kamble towards the end (including alleged conspiracy against the unity, integrity, and sovereignty of the nation) is revealing of the way the educated and aware Dalit subject is framed as an enemy of the nation and tracked by the eye of the law. The current case becomes one in a series of litigations creating a history of harassment of the Dalit subject with the help of irrelevant and outdated law, and stock witnesses. Such a suspicious subject has no right to privacy—everything from the books he reads to the letters he exchanges to his very thoughts, becomes a basis for indictment. Such indictment is also pre-emptive—Kamble is asked whether, even if he did not recall singing an inciteful song in *this* instance, he *might* do so *in future*. Ultimately, both Vasudev Pawar and Narayan Kamble are oppressed by the system and pitted against each other—one lives a life of indignity and dies without knowing his legal rights and the other is more aware and is thus made to undergo the punishment that is the very procedure of the law.

It is in the *absence* of any explicit mention of caste, whether Pawar's death as an institutionally sanctioned caste atrocity or Kamble's harassment as an outcome of his rebellion against caste domination (amongst other injustices), that the spectre of caste pervades the film, reflective of its similarly deep-rooted, unacknowledged presence in middle-class ethos. Importantly, here caste discrimination is linked with the upwardly-mobile middle class, irrespective of gender (Nutan and Sadavarte) and delinked from the Savarna-elite liberal (Vora). This also means, of course, that the film's most authentic reading in terms of content is only available to an audience already in agreement with its politics, even as its form remains accessible to an international audience that is unlikely to bring an awareness of caste to their viewing of the film. By presenting the court as an institutional tool of harassment, the film reveals the absurdity of legal recourse as an alternative for justice available to the caste-oppressed.

Life of an Outcast

Life of an Outcast (2018), directed by Pawan Shrivastava, is an independent, crowdfunded Hindi feature film that found a limited theatrical release in India. It is now available on Netflix, with the director declaring his intention of subtitling the film in different Indian languages and

screening it across rural India.[14] The film declares its politics in the very beginning, with a dedication to 'all proletariats of the world and the people working against the caste system'. The narrative is an intergenerational story of caste oppression primarily focussed on a son and father in an unspecified north-Indian village, who despite their different struggles with caste-based discrimination equally remain social outcasts. Most of the characters are not identified by name but by their status and profession, thereby underscoring the centrality of caste to identity in rural India. Adopting a semi-biographical tone, the film's movement across time is non-linear and is woven instead by interlinked memories of oppression, travelling between the experiences of son and father, showing how little things have changed across generations.

In the first scene of the film, a man (the father) is shown casting his fishing net into a pond, while the sound of schoolchildren singing the national anthem drifts in from the background. This segues into the next scene, where another man (the son), a schoolteacher, is shown teaching mathematics to his class. We learn that he has refused to comply with dominant-caste religiosity with his unwillingness to write the symbol 'Om' on the blackboard and that he is accused of 'provoking' students against the *Ramayana*. These sins of omission and commission are sufficient for the dominant-caste school Principal Mishra to get the recently employed Dalit schoolteacher arrested. In a series of disconnected flashbacks, we learn that the schoolteacher's family has a history of social boycott—his parents chose excommunication from the village over submitting to the law of Caste authority when the mother refused to be 'deflowered' by the village landlord on her wedding night, as per the custom of caste hierarchy. It is important to note that this defiance of Caste law came from her, not her husband, and was elucidated clearly and firmly in terms of ownership of her own body, thus challenging the dominant-caste patriarchal order that performs 'control by humiliating women of another caste . . . (as) a certain way of reducing the "manhood" of those castes' (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2003: 254). This assertion of bodily integrity and dignity by the Dalit woman distinguishes it from most Savarna-made films with their depiction of the female Dalit body in its sexualised abjectness.

Both son and father struggle differently with caste oppression and respond differently to it as well; where the son feels emboldened by his education to question tradition and resist the caste hierarchy, his father is more concerned with survival over resistance and cannot comprehend the need for his son's criticism of the *Ramayana*.[15] For the son, in whom we find the figure of the Dalit intellectual, the contestation is between two texts—the Constitution that enshrines the principles of a secular democracy which he believes safeguards his rights as an equal citizen and the *Ramayana* that represents the values of religiously sanctioned caste hierarchy that demands his unquestioning obedience and submission. His rejoinder in a later scene that 'I have Babasaheb's Constitution with me, I will not be trapped in your stories for too long'[16] makes this conflict explicit and also aligns him with the spirit of Ambedkarism. But in a dialogue reminiscent of the reality of the judicial machinery depicted in *Court*, the police constable also warns him, 'The Constitution that you flaunt so—you will see its condition in the court'.[17]

The police who are supposed to be upholders of Constitutional law are revealed to be deeply mired in the caste order themselves and personally invested in protecting it. The dominant-caste police inspector resents a Dalit sitting on the chair across the table as his equal, and reminds him of his literal and metaphorical place. Here, the film gestures towards the chair as a symbol of human dignity long denied to Dalits and still resentfully resisted by Savarnas, especially in rural India (see Sainath 2003 for an exploration of this theme). In turn, the schoolteacher reminds the inspector of Constitutional principles and his rights as an equal citizen, as he tells him, 'This nation functions neither by the might of your uniform nor your whims, but by the Constitution'.[18] The inspector's sarcastic query whether *he* (the schoolteacher) had written the Constitution is ironic here, given Babasaheb Ambedkar's contribution to the composition

of the Constitution and also the schoolteacher's faint visual resemblance to him. The inspector's offer to imprint *his* idea of the Constitution on the backside of the schoolteacher attests to the existence of the constitution of Caste, a parallel law that is inscribed on Dalit bodies. This is strikingly reminiscent of Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki's childhood experience of asking aloud in class why the epic *Ramayana* did not include the stories of his people and attracting the teacher's wrath in the form of thrashings inscribing an epic 'composed out of feudalistic mentality' on his back and his mind (Valmiki 2003: 27).

The relative nature of caste hierarchy where everyone's place in it is delicately balanced is most clearly visible through the character of the police constable. Lower in the caste ladder from the inspector, but higher than the schoolteacher, he identifies with both at different occasions and accordingly his loyalties shift. Thus, he pulls the chair from underneath the teacher in one scene (symbolic of compradors participating in the oppression of their own cohort) and in another, expresses sympathy towards the teacher privately, advising him to 'adjust' to the caste ladder, where everyone's position is firmly fixed and immovable; his words to the schoolteacher that 'You may have quit caste, caste has certainly not quit you'[19] demonstrate the inescapability of caste for the caste-oppressed. Two ways in which Savarna supremacy is consolidated and preserved find space in the film: land and education. The film depicts the north-Indian village as a site of the dominant-caste zamindar's consolidation of property, pushing the *lowered* castes to the margins and continuing the cycle of poverty and economic dependence. Education, which the son considers a right, not a favour, is revealed to be limiting in its potential as a means of social mobility. In a flashback (again reminiscent of Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*), we are shown how the son had been discouraged by his teacher from attending English lessons and was instead asked to sweep the school grounds. Hence, education, meant to dissolve caste boundaries, itself becomes a tool for consolidating caste privilege and continuing earlier forms of social exclusion. The son's experience of discrimination continues even after becoming a schoolteacher, struggling to assert rationality over faith, mathematics over religion, and pride over indignity. In the last flashback of the film, we learn that the schoolteacher had been urged by his mother to leave the village for the city, as a means of leaving his caste-bound fate behind, which he had refused, probably knowing too well that the spectre of caste would haunt him wherever he went, just as had happened with his parents even after leaving the village when they found themselves more bonded labour than tenants.

Through its use of long takes of the camera and long spells of silence, the film conveys monotony and incessant waiting, fatigue and resignation, as the Dalit condition. The long shots of the father riding his bicycle to the city to join the teeming crowds waiting their turn to be picked for a day's hard labour serve to show the Dalit individual as dispensable labour in oversupply, with the cycle acting as a deceptive symbol promising social mobility. In its apparent choice to depict not the physical/sexual but psychological violence of caste (for instance, in contrast to *Article 15*), this understated film portrays the wounded psyche that the Dalit subject carries everywhere. This is particularly represented in a repetitive sequence, where the father stops by a teashop each evening on his return from the city. This shop functions as the microcosm of a world replete with misogyny, xenophobia, and stringent caste purity, where the father listens to the shopkeeper's bigoted rants silently, in resignation. But the only other customer there—an eccentric mime artist—may be read as his alter ego. The man sits and plays a board game with himself and at the end declares that he has lost and will try again the following day (a metaphor for the daily struggle for survival); in between his games, he keeps reaching out for an elusive, imaginary butterfly—a symbol of the spirit of liberty that entices and evades the father's grasp. The two customers depart, and the film's inconclusive ending shows the father riding off into the thickets, gesturing towards the long, arduous journey ahead on the path of justice for the caste-oppressed.

Article 15

Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019) is a big-budget Hindi film deploying the tropes and conventions of popular Bollywood cinema and in this sense, stands in contrast to the previous two films. It loosely draws upon the 2014 Badaun gang-rape and murder case of two teenaged girls that led to widespread media attention and public outrage to present a harrowing portrait of caste atrocity in rural India. The film drew criticism from different quarters—from Brahmins, alleging that it portrayed Brahmins in poor light,[20] and from Dalits, contending that it appropriated Dalit struggles by 'brahminising anti-caste struggles'.[21] Sinha, in his defence, stated that the film was made to initiate a conversation around caste-based discrimination and violence amongst an unaware, apolitical Savarna audience; accordingly its protagonist is urban, Anglophone, and Savarna, and not Dalit.[22] The film begins on a dark, rainy evening, with a group of villagers, led by a woman, singing a protest song among themselves; in parallel, we see the forms of two girls in a dark bus, crouching and whimpering in fear as a predatory male hand assaults one of them. The narrative jumps to a bright, sunny morning, with the protagonist Ayaan Ranjan's entry by car into rural India, with Bob Dylan's 'Blowing in the Wind' playing in the background. Ayaan is a second-generation civil servant, a St Stephens-educated and foreign-return Indian Police Service officer who has been posted to Lalgaon, a village in Uttar Pradesh. His liberal and secular credentials are established with the copy of Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India* in his hand and his amused incredulity at his subordinates' caste-based prejudices.

Ayaan soon finds himself amidst a social order of a rigidly maintained caste hierarchy, where everybody is unapologetically aware of their relative position in it. This is a world run by a powerful nexus among economic, political, and institutional authorities, each consolidating caste capital, and where the police are not only indifferent to, but complicit in, caste-based crimes that are considered unremarkable. These crimes, he will learn, are part of the everyday humiliation, silencing, and dehumanisation of Bahujan voices, such that asking for a meagre raise in wages (economic right) can translate into the most horrific violence (abduction, gang-rape, or murder). But even as he helps the victimised in their quest for procedural justice, his own caste entitlement remains undiminished and uncomfortable in accommodating Dalit leadership. Although the charismatic Nishad, leader of the Dalit Sangharsh Sena, enters the film after the interval, his voice-over takes us into the narrative spaces inaccessible to Ayaan, where we are introduced to the larger Dalit anti-caste revolution taking place. Modelled on the real-life Dalit figures, Nishad could have been the film's protagonist, but it is Ayaan with his caste blindness born of caste privilege, followed by his growth into awareness and a righteous pursuit of justice, who is the point of identification for the audience.

Police constable Jatav is shown to be a *shunya* or 'neutral' *lowered*-caste character who has internalised the Savarna language of caste inferiority, and resultantly, his relationship to his own caste is one of dissonance. Having ascended the social ladder from sweeper to government officer, he participates in the othering of his own community, by declaring them as morally suspect and complicit in their own oppression. Remarkably, it is not Jatav's long association with Nishad that disrupts this dissonance in favour of a new consciousness, but the performance of his official duty under Ayaan's supervision. He is finally able to break his identification with this self-destructive discourse when he slaps his violent, dominant-caste superior Brahmdutt, demanding to know, 'How long will you have us sweep, Brahmduttji?'[23] In its effort to establish its sympathy with the suffering of oppressed castes, the film trains its gaze on the Dalit body as victim of violence and exploitative labour, rendered mute or overwhelmed by pain and humiliation, here eschewing the grammar of popular cinema for the realism of the documentary. It imitates the newspaper with its realist aesthetics in the visual portrayal of Dalit

atrocity and oppression—the girls hanging from the tree (Badaun), the men tied to a vehicle and flogged (Una), and the manual scavenger emerging bare-bodied from the sewer, filth in hand—each of which portrays Dalits captured in crouching and grovelling postures, cowering in fear and obsequious before authority, not poised to retaliate in rage. The film cannot invest the abducted and dead girls with independent subjectivity and instead portrays them in a state of abject victimhood through a Savarna gaze—whether that of perpetrator or saviour—and interpolates the third girl, Pooja (not present in the Badaun case), to grant heightened agency to the Savarna hero who can then rescue her. Here, the Dalit characters are instrumentalised 'to idolise the hero, to act as a contrast to the elite protagonist or as the poor helpless victims who offer the protagonist an opportunity to display his heroism' (Raj et al. 2016: 3). On the shoulders of these dependent *lowered*-caste characters, the exemplary male Savarna character stands tall—not a predator, but a trustworthy saviour, for whom Dalit characters may be useful but disposable allies.

Ultimately, the film's reluctance in entering *lowered-caste* subjectivity and its transference of agency from Dalit victim to outraged Brahmin spectator is born of its failure of empathy. For instance, it displays an overall discomfort with caste as a basis of political mobilisation and electoral politics. Moreover, the film invests Nishad with a flawed subjectivity when it shows him equating the categories of 'Harijan' (Gandhi's patronising term for 'untouchables') and 'Bahujan' (an expansive political identity that exceeds Dalits to include other disenfranchised people, and carrying a history of assertion behind it), ruing the fact that neither is sufficient for their integration into the *gana* (collective citizenry) mentioned in the national anthem. Elsewhere, Ayaan's tirade against the dehumanisation of Dalits includes the allegation that the community has been marginalised by being accorded minority status. These are instances of a Savarna gaze, with their 'alleged disavowal of caste . . . at the very moment when Dalits effectively assert caste as a political subjectivity into the social formation' (Bhatt et al. 2010: 139). The film's ambivalent politics around caste is reflected by the fact that the only self-confessedly Dalit actor in it is the manual scavenger who plays himself[24] and also by the director's open letter in response to Brahmins' protesting against the film, where he anxiously hastens to establish the film's Brahmin connections as well as his own;[25] elsewhere in an interview he remarks that consciously employing Dalits in his crew and cast would in itself be a casteist measure.[26] Hence, in this worldview, casteism emerges as a law-and-order problem and a social corruption to be redressed by Constitutional law and not a system that the law itself sustains and is designed to uphold.

Overall, there are three discourses around caste visible in the film. One is the commonsensical understanding of caste hierarchy as social balance, where everyone's relative but fixed position determines their social worth and moral credibility—this is the world of Lalgaon that unsettles Ayaan and introduces him to his own caste privilege. In this framework, the Dalit is ascribed false agency (the girls have run away and will return on their own) or can be read as victim only if another Dalit can be framed as perpetrator (the fathers killed their daughters in an instance of 'honour killing'). At its most aggressive, this discourse is articulated by Brahmdutt, the Circle Officer, through his threats and obstruction of police procedure, and at its less insidious, it is uttered by constable/driver Chandrabhan's 'ageless' truisms that are narrated as traditional, dominant-caste wisdom. The second discourse is the organised Bahujan resistance led by Nishad that believes in civil disobedience, strike, and boycott as the only way to make the political voice of the caste-oppressed heard. And the third is the legal and Constitutional discourse that Ayaan subscribes to, where the idea of the nation as enshrined in the Constitution has only to be invoked, to stimulate an egalitarian consciousness. Hence, Ayaan pins a copy of Article 15 from the Constitution—which prohibits discrimination on grounds of various identities including caste—at the police station, as a constant visual reminder to his men; it is the

language of Constitution, with its key phrases floating across the screen, that is meant to disrupt the discourse of caste.

For the film's premise of Article 15 to be effective, it has to demonstrate the triumph of this third discourse over both the others. For this, there are two narrative requirements—that the person who most vehemently defends the first discourse (Brahmdutt) is revealed to be the perpetrator of the crime and is punished for it. And that despite Ayaan's reliance on his assistance, Nishad dies and the Bahujan revolution recedes into the background. Hence the film which earlier established a narrative resemblance between the political resistance of Nishad with those of Dalit-Bahujan leaders Chandrashekhar Azad Ravan and Jignesh Mewani ends his trajectory with the late Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula's dying words and a violent death by police encounter.[27] This is important because neither can the narrative sustain Nishad's voice that often challenges and threatens to supersede Ayaan's nor can it resolve Ayaan's envy of Nishad's heroism that he confesses to his partner. This narrative choice of sacrificing Nishad is an instance of the Savarna gaze shifting focus to itself while 'grant[ing] agency and power to the oppressed subject on the oppressor's terms'.[28] Following this, Ayaan can enter the pig swamp symbolic of the bog of casteism, discover and rescue Pooja, and become the sole authoritative voice that provides us narrative closure on a self-congratulatory note. Like *Court*, *Article 15* locates Savarna allyship in the liberal, secular discourse; however, Ayaan Ranjan is no Vinay Vora or Newton (*Newton* 2017) to be punished by the system for believing in it and fighting for Constitutional principles. By the end of the film, all Dalit voices have disappeared—even that of Pooja, the recovered girl, whose testimony we never hear. In the end credits, the rousing song *shuru karein kya* (shall we begin?) is Ayaan's invitation to the viewer to participate in a resistance that is yet to begin, ignoring the long history of Bahujan resistance already under way that was signalled by the film's opening song.

Conclusion

In the three films studied in this chapter, the law of Caste is depicted as rigid and overwhelmingly resilient in the face of Constitutional law, the failures of which are probed with varying emphases. *Court* demonstrates how Constitutional provisions are themselves full of contradictions (see Galanter 1963) that bestow a shifting character upon caste as a juridical entity; in contrast, *Article 15*'s discussion of caste in terms of one Constitutional provision ignores these internal incongruities and silences of law. The conspiracy of caste is shown thriving through a mostly silent, invisibilised common sense, with the complicity of law-enforcement agencies, towards the continued consolidation of resources like land and education, together with the exploitation of the *lowered* castes. Relatedly, the picture of a delicately balanced social order of relational caste identities emerges, which resists disturbance and restricts socio-economic mobility. These films resist the hegemonic interpretation of blaming the *lowered* castes for their own oppression and death by foregrounding Savarna moral, legal, and criminal culpability instead. However, they differ in their resolution or refusal of resolution. While *Court* demonstrates the impossibility of institutionalised legal justice for the caste-oppressed and *Life of an Outcast* stresses the cyclical nature of intergenerational suffering firmly entrenched in a rural setting, *Article 15* emphatically posits a secular-democratic resolution to the 'atrocity' of caste, dissociating it from urbanised modernity. In fact, *Court* and *Article 15* between themselves create a spectrum: from conviction in the bias of the legal machinery itself to a faith in its inherent capacity for justice despite corrupting aberrations.

Cinematically, each of the three films employs different audio-visual grammar and is intended for different primary audiences (rural, urban, and global). Although I do not wish to distil my analysis of them to a simplistic conclusion regarding how they measure up to the conventions of

Dalit cinema, I will nevertheless draw three brief points of comparison/contrast here. Firstly, in contrast to Dalit cinema's powerful Dalit protagonist, here only *Life of an Outcast* features Dalit protagonists who are invested with subjectivity of some depth, whereas *Court*, given that its protagonist is the legal, Savarna gaze itself, chooses to focus on the social-and-moral Constitution of its Savarna characters and *Article 15* introduces a strong Dalit character yet is unable to sustain his presence in the narrative. Secondly, the Dalit subject is shown as being at the receiving end of various kinds of violence—physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional—but where the first two films restrain themselves from depicting the abject Dalit subject, *Article 15* conveys different forms of caste violence by reproducing it in graphic detail. However, despite the limited agency granted to them, in each of these instances, the Dalit intellectual/activist figure emerges as morally triumphant in his own way. Thirdly, the importance of 'community' as a site and source of resistance and solidarity is missing from these films and although a history of oppression is laid out by them, the possibility of Dalit characters being able to disrupt that history seems remote.

With their withholding of an utopic resolution and/or their foregrounding of Savarna agency, these films are unlikely to speak to a Bahujan spectatorship and infuse a spirit of hopeful Bahujan-led revolution.[29] They are equally unlikely to provoke the Savarna spectator to question their caste privilege and recognise or challenge their own complicity in maintaining the status quo of caste, either because of the subtleties of their narrative and aesthetic cinematic grammar (*Court*, *Life of an Outcast*) or because of the constraints of popular cinema's demand of a Savarna saviour protagonist (*Article 15*). In that sense, despite their varying degrees of rigour in capturing caste realities on screen, their contribution to the formation of an anti-caste public sphere driven by Savarna allyship to complement an ascendant Bahujan public sphere seems implausible. Where they *do* succeed, however, is in their establishing of the inescapability of caste identity, and its attendant privileges and discriminations in contemporary India, even as they diverge in their faith in Constitutional morality as a legal-social reality that ensures justice to the most oppressed citizens of the nation.

Notes

1 I thank the anonymous reviewers of this chapter for their encouraging comments and helpful suggestions that helped in revising an early version of this chapter.
2 www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4161.html. Accessed 22 December, 2020.
3 www.roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9614:in-india-there-is-no-film-which-is-casteless-pratik-parmar&catid=129:events-and-activism&Itemid=195. Accessed 20 December, 2020.
4 www.firstpost.com/india/dalit-portrayal-in-cinema-brahminical-ideology-has-caused-filmmakers-to-present-a-limited-view-of-the-community-5670771.html. Accessed on December 20, 2020.
5 www.academia.edu/25943972/The_Representation_of_the_Dalit_Body_in_Popular_Hindi_Cinema. Accessed on December 22, 2020.
6 www.//india-seminar.com/2006/558/558%20laura%20r.%20brueck.htm. Accessed on December 21, 2020.
7 'By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus' (Limbale 2004: 19).
8 This is also complemented by an intensifying Dalit scrutiny and overturning of the Savarna gaze, through films such as *Kaala* (2018; see Rajamani 2018), *The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas* (2020), and books of cultural criticism (Maitreya 2020).
9 www.vice.com/en_in/article/neqybm/somnath-waghmare-wants-to-revolutionise-dalit-cinema. Accessed on December 23, 2020.
10 See Jyoti Nisha's chapter on 'Bahujan Oppositional Agency' in this volume.
11 Anand Teltumde's insightful formulation has since been darkly mirrored by his own booking and subsequent arrest—along with several other activists, lawyers, and academics—under the controversial

Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, for his alleged involvement in 'fomenting violence' in the Bhima Koregaon-Elgaar Parishad events of December 2017. Teltumbde stands accused of giving 'lectures on Dalit issues in order to give traction to domestic chaos'. https://livelaw.in/news-updates/anand-teltumbde-nia-bhima-koregaon-elgaar-parishad-170909. Accessed on April 1, 2021.

12 www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/A-mirror-unto-her-own-life/article16194293.ece. Accessed on December 20, 2020.

13 Caravanmagazine.in/vantage/journey-sambhaji-bhagat-man-who-inspired-making-and-composed-music-film-court, indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/court-lead-actor-says-film-gave-his-activism-a-boost-will-continue-fight-against-justice-delivery-system/. Accessed on December 20, 2020.

14 www.youthkiawaaz.com/2017/06/we-become-what-we-read-and-watchlife-of-an-outcast/. Accessed on July 20, 2020.

15 The father's inability to understand his son's opposition to the *Ramayana* is an echo of Babasaheb Ambedkar's own disagreement on the Hindu epics with his father and his scathing criticism of it. https://drambedkarbooks.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/selected-work-of-dr-b-r-ambedkar.pdf. Accessed on December 22, 2020.

16 *Babasahab ka samvidhan hai humaare paas, hum tumhaare is jaal mein bahut din phasne wale nahi hai*. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

17 *Jis samvidhan pe aap itna uchhal rahe the, haalat dekhiyega uski adaalat mein*.

18 *Yeh desh aapki vardi aur aapke soch se nahi chalta hai, samvidhan se chalta hai*.

19 *Tumne jaat chhoda hai, jaat ne tumhe nahi chhoda hai*.

20 www.indiatoday.in/movies/bollywood/story/article-15-ayushmann-khurrana-s-film-angers-brahmin-community-in-uttar-pradesh-1543035-2019-06-05. Accessed on December 20, 2020.

21 www.firstpost.com/entertainment/in-article-15-anubhav-sinha-continues-the-upper-caste-project-of-brahminising-anti-caste-struggles-6917121.html. Accessed on December 20, 2020.

22 economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/article-15-anubhav-sinha-on-brahmin-hero-caste-privilege-and-discrimination/articleshow/70107762.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst\. Accessed on December 22, 2020.

23 *Kab tak jhaadu lagvaaiyega, Brahmdutt ji*?

24 www.scroll.in/reel/928925/anubhav-sinha-on-why-article-15-has-a-brahmin-hero-the-privileged-should-challenge-privilege. Accessed on December 20, 2020.

25 twitter.com/anubhavsinha/status/1143827931854020608/photo/1. Accessed on December 20, 2020.

26 www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/article-15-anubhav-sinha-interview_in_5d1f2ce8e4b01b834734ca59. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

27 The film has established these allusions by depicting Nishad variously as the Dalit chief of a youth-led Bahujan rights organisation who has a history of being booked under the National Security Act, as a Dalit leader who appeals to the Bahujan population to go on strike following an incident of Dalit atrocity, and as a man whose dying words reveal how he had dreamt of being a science writer but was prevented from pursuing it by the 'terrible accident of his birth'.

28 /www.criticalcollective.in/SearchResult.aspx?search=suraj%20yengde. Accessed on July 25, 2020.

29 In fact, *Court* has been criticised for 'dragging away attention from the semiotics of caste' (Maitreya 2020: 55).

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16

Beyond Violence and Non-Violence

A Study of Dalit Resistance and Accommodation in Cinematic Popular Justice

Ram Kumar Thakur

Introduction

The technology of cinema offers us with a visual spectacle of both meaningful art and elated entertainment. It makes the audience, the underdog feel powerful, loved, it titillates, inspires, caricatures, and it also demoralises. At the same time, cinema offers an egalitarian promise of storytelling, which could encompass plural representations of societies and state of affairs. It might equally carry the tendency to freeze life and lived experiences and become a victim of conscious/subconscious image trap. Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* rightly points out that, '[i]n societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation' (1983: 2).

This multiplicity of representations jostles for space and time, social meanings and fair representation. The contemporary popular representations mainly encompassing depiction of Dalits in popular cinema have been part of two important processes. Firstly, cinema has been tied to the logistics of legitimisation within the nation-building project, imagined through the limited 'social reform' agenda, whereby Dalit life and characters are seen to be subjects of reform of coercive/repentant state and society. Secondly, film-makers have exercised cinematic liberty to frame the experiences and challenges of 'free and equal' Dalits to charter their own democratic destiny. Both the processes have to confront the pitfalls of poor democratic consolidation and unjust social experiences governing marginalised sections of society. In such scenarios, the people from the margins have limited institutional means to voice their preference for substantive changes within the system (Khosla 2019: 159). Cinema provides an interesting avenue to communicate such intricate forms of contradiction and storytelling. It creates populist modes of visual experiences of social change, encompassing both reformist and revolutionary paradigms.

Caste as a social marker finds curious representation, in terms of a hegemonic effacement, by being represented as 'moral problem' rather than as a structural problem. For example, the

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Hindi movie *Aarakshan* (2011), although supposed to frame its storytelling around affirmative action, takes a leap of faith to tell the tale of an 'upper-caste' philanthropist. The script and the act revolve around his commitment towards the poor, Backward and Brahmin students. Even when reservation comes into discussion, it is shown to propagate upper-caste stereotypes of the 'poor' suffering Brahmin losing out on 'meritorious' seat. The popular folklore of virtuous and poor Brahmin Sudama, deserving justice and respect, occupies a hegemonic space in Hindu psyche, through devotional songs and moral science literature. The representation of the poor as both virtuous and suffering is only available to the Brahmin 'poor'. Even the constitutional safeguards of affirmative action measures for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes are seen with contempt and mistrust-based gaze defined by the casteist common sense. The Dalit-Bahujan social world and rationale is inadequately explored; they are shown to be in need of enlightenment through the mentorship of the upper-caste principal. The Dalit-Bahujan leaders are shown to be emotional, selfish, and corrupt, while, like Gandhi, the philanthropist stands outside the fold of 'politics', claiming a 'higher moral plane'. All this imagery has much to do with manufacturing a 'feel-good' narrative of cultural success of Indian democracy, that is, the countries' strength to survive and reconcile with all its wealth of diversity, including caste. In such manifestations, the social ills of untouchability/caste atrocity, communalism, and patriarchy are represented as 'problems' operating in some 'republican village',[1] some locality, or some household. Such depictions shrewdly individualise social problems. In the sphere of cultural production and representation, these dominant narratives are led by Savarna film-makers and their commitment towards the hegemonic paradigm of the nation state.

The birth of the unencumbered poor 'without caste' was one of the most typical inventions of post-independence cinema. Most of the societal contradictions were exposed and presented largely through class-driven narratives, with rare instances of stories depicting inter-caste love, caste violence, and untouchability. Even when caste-based experiences were depicted, they were mere restatements of the 'problem' of inter-caste love or the exploitation of forced labour, where the 'upper-caste' protagonist used to shine through the crisis. The virtue of sacrifice rooted in the Gandhian ethos of the 'change of heart' propelled the storytelling. The preoccupation of social reform agenda with reconciliation of societal contradiction led by Savarna heroes was seen to be the most standardised trope. It rarely involved self-assertions from the Dalits themselves. There was always an 'upper-caste' hero, a well-wisher, or a casteless class hero to defend the rights or fight on behalf of the 'Harijans', to save and show 'them' the best path. The public sphere in India being caste-ridden paves the way for upper-caste representations as the quintessential Indian marker. In my reading of select Bollywood films, even the nomenclature Dalit finds usage only in 1990s. I found the usage of the word Dalit in the Hindi film *Yeshwant* (1997). The Gandhian coinage of 'Harijans' continued to hold sway over the Savarna film-makers. Savarna heroes are presented as the true subjects of modernity and nation-building who desire 'common good' and 'unity'. Any deviation from this narrative is seen as a challenge to the explicit and implicit consensus of the 'Indian cultural legacy' and considered controversial, anti-national, and undesirable.

For the sake of analytical convenience, this chapter makes a selection of popular Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, and Malayalam films to specifically look at the representation of structural, direct, and cultural violence involving the question of caste. It tries to interrogate and expose the stereotypes which have riddled such representations from an anti-caste perspective. By analysing the selective visuals as a text, the chapter will explore the trends and tensions inherent within 'Indian' cinema.

From Censoring Culture to Culturing Representation

The Cinematographer Act of 1952 provides for the Central Board of Film Certification to certify films and suggest cuts to the final print for the broader public's sensibility. The history of governing principles of cinema is replete with enabling acts of censoring certain forms of cultural and political representation. While the state in principle seeks to uphold the values of freedom of speech and expression, it also has riders, which give the state the power to control and shape the destiny of any form of art. Similarly, the judiciary, which examines and decides the constitutionality of the actions of state and non-state actors, has been rather inconsistent in setting coherent frameworks of freedom of speech and expression. In one of the landmark judgements governing the specificity of films, i.e., *K. A. Abbas v The Union of India*, Justice Hidayatullah justified the importance of film censorship on the ground that the motion picture is able to stir up emotions more deeply than any other product of art. The fickleness of the medium to influence the people and structure their judgements makes for the possibility of censorship. Gautam Bhatia, rightly points out that '[p]olitical memory, and more particularly, the freedom to shape political history, is made subservient to an officially sanctioned narrative of the event, whether that is government-imposed *or* judicially imagined' (2016: 187).[2]

In other landmark judgements of *Ranjith Udheshi v. State of Maharashtra* and *S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram*, the court fell back on discourses of vague public morality and civilisational culture to articulate the broad principles of what is legitimate viewing for the 'naïve' audience. In *Ranjit Udheshi*, the interests of society were supposed to be protected from corrupting and degrading influences. However, in the *Rangarajan* case the court upheld the articulation of 'different views', not necessarily because they are correct but because there is freedom of expression in India. Similarly, the artistic projections and characterisation of violence of caste-based oppression and exploitation was found to be legitimate as part of cultural dissent to promote social messages. Interestingly the case revolved around movie scenes which involved a critique of state-reservation policy along caste lines by an upper-caste character who advocated reservation along economic lines, for supposedly greater national integration. Such zigzag jurisprudence on censorship in India assumes a level playing field of competing cultures where both dominant and alternative cultural forms can be equally relayed and consumed in the free market. Even when films are cleared for viewership and circulation, the power of state to browbeat select art by delay, cuts, police action and inaction, and being lenient to an unofficial constituency of hecklers becomes the dominant norm of policed exhibition.[3] The registration of FIRs against actors, directors, and producers over supposedly hurt sentiments has gained new grounds, with even over the top (OTT) platforms succumbing to state regulations.[4] The power of the dominant culture thus finds ways to constrain the freedom of speech and expression of alternative art forms. As such, film-makers succumb either to docile storytelling or to serious loss of viewership. In such scenarios, even the imagination of alternative forms of cultural representation gets strangulated. The dominant national imageries, symbols, and culture get institutionalised and even territorialised. Art gets caged within the existing and familiar tropes of culture and politics (Misrahi-Barak and Thiara 2019).

Take the case of *Papilio Buddha*, an award-winning film concerning the Dalit land rights struggle in Kerala. It was screened at different national and international film festivals across the world. It had to go through the trials and tribulations of certification, its screening was regulated, and the film was dropped from the 17th International Film Festival of Kerala (2013) on account of political pressure. The film challenges the supposed progressiveness of the Kerala model of development by exploring the social experiences of Dalits, the political hypocrisy of Savarna socio-political elites, and the functioning of an equally repressive state. It captures the

contempt of Savarna society towards any movements of self-assertion led by Dalits, be it the redistribution and ownership of forest land, independent teaching and learning initiatives or assertion of Dalit women. All such exercises are trampled upon by the repressive state and caste-Hindu polity and society, which use the trope of Dalits as 'Maoist terrorists' to arrest, assault, and commit sexual violence against Dalit women and men with impunity.[5] While the movie shows the challenges of the land struggles led by Dalits, it also shows the intimate connection of Dalit labour *vis-à-vis* nature. They are seen as both subject and object, an exotic outsider of 'civil society'. The film thus captures the orientalist and the casteist gaze. The public and private world of casteist belief system and the contempt towards the marginalised are exposed in the scene of self-congratulatory celebration event to commemorate the work of a non-government organisation (NGO) working amongst Dalits. The NGO workers express their contempt and biases against the Dalits in the private social event. The dubious political sensibility and commitment of Savarna social elites to social emancipation is laid bare. Similarly, a Gandhian leader's *Satyagraha*[6] facilitates the state machinery to destroy the entire Dalit neighbourhood with police repression. The displacement of hundreds of Dalit people from the locality suggests the contradiction between stated constitutional commitments and the preponderance of violence and injustice as norm. Caste society and even proponents of non-violence come together to discipline and punish any kind of transgression from set narratives of nation-building and 'doing politics'. The images of anti-caste thinkers and Gandhi/Gandhians cast as opposites shows the dominant arc around which the state and caste society operates.

If we take the example of two Oscar selections from India, *Lagaan* (2001) and *Newton* (2017), both movies provide for the 'nationally' acceptable Dalit subjectivity in a very different way. *Lagaan* typifies the Indian nation and nation-building exercise. The film is set in a colonial era where a group of villagers challenge the British colonial rulers to a cricket match, the result of which would either mean an exponential rise of taxes or no taxes at all, i.e. freedom from servitude. However, the problem with the heroic victory of the village team is the problematic depiction and framing of the lone Dalit character, Kachra, meaning waste, without any peek into his community life. He is presented as a Harijan character whose personhood is characterised with instrumental necessity. His dis/ability by birth is in fact presented as a boon for the building up of the village team, by default a nation in making. By accident, his skill of spinning the ball is recognised by the village hero who exhibits his prized catch, and ignites love and acceptance through individual radicalism by touching the 'untouchable' and thus integrating him within the team. The caste-Hindu reformer hero discourses around Hindu religious sensibility by narrating an account from *Ramayana*, on how Ram is worshipped even when he has tasted leftover food by Sabri, an 'untouchable'. Kachra carries the burden of the nation with his caste-Hindu captain into the final winning moments of the game. However, 'luckily' he gets a 'no-ball' and Aamir Khan, the popular Hindi film hero, hits the final shot to victory and freedom while Kachra remains a forever 'necessary' sidekick, a lesser hero in the national memory. The cricket match, a symbol of colonial modernity, provides us with a moment of popular justice, whereby the village people overcome prejudice against an 'untouchable'. Such tropes of symbolic inclusion reiterate the casteist underpinnings of modernity and *swaraj*. The Gandhian sensibility of village harmony based on *varnashrama dharma*[7] holds sway, where every caste has a spiritual calling within the division of labour. Gandhi's Harijans, the children of God, were supposed to perform a materially unclean bur morally superior service to the society. This idea is replicated in *Lagaan* through the truncated inclusion of Kachra along subsidised dignity. Also, the accidental discovery of 'talent' by a benevolent caste-Hindu fits into the discourses dominating the national movement and thereafter nation-building.[8] The voiceless, instrumental, and essentialised discourses represent the ideal cultural subject, whereby untouchability is

seen as a problem but not the *varnashrama dharma*. Even with such an implicit and explicit 'caste problem', the films are presented as the pride of national culture and also meant for international consumption and distribution.

Newton, on the other hand, presents the contemporary story of a new modern Dalit subject, a government servant, who is committed to the constitutional principles and duties. He acts as a bridge to conduct elections in a constituency dominated by Maoist influence/violence and state violence. Even in the face of mortal threat he conducts the election, suffers physical violence from the state, and still continues to work as a government servant, maintaining his belief in the constitutional principles. Harish S. Wankhede rightly argues that,

> Newton offers a new Dalit hero—he is born into caste society but remains unaffected by its exploitative order. Newton's caste identity is not a restriction in fulfilling his social or professional duties. He is like any other lead hero of mainstream Hindi films.
>
> *(Wankhede 2017)*

To the extent that the marginalised embodies hegemonic notions of nation and nation-building, regards the system as an ideal, suffers and bears the onus of duty, these tropes become nationally and internationally representative. The Oscar selections make for an interesting space for understanding the preferred political and cultural frames of Indianness. The Gandhian preponderance with conceptions of duty and service is crucial in framing such characters. The discussion surrounding the jurisprudence of censorship, political will, and hegemonic social and national sensibility shows us the contingencies which shape the fate of film releases, screening and distribution, even before the actual film reaches the 'naive' audience.

My contention lies in the fact that, even when cinematic liberty is being exercised by filmmakers, the characters either carry a pathological sense of non-violent servitude or largely carry a rebellious heroism of triumph, through popular justice. I argue that the cinematic 'plight' and 'justice' surrounding Dalits has so far essentialised and contained the multitude of imaginings and articulations of lived reality. Both the ideas of violence and non-violence have played a very important role in capturing the 'politics' of Dalit characters. The violence of both the state and caste-Hindus has been a dominant theme around which Dalit characters have responded in multifaceted ways. The response again needs interrogation considering the fact that the nation state is the repository of 'legitimate violence' and also an influential censoring agency. As I hope to have made evident in my discussion, there is an absence of any principled position on censorship and freedom of speech and expression. What if the depiction of the triumphant articulation of resistance or even guilt-ridden social reform were simply a feel-good narrative absorbed within the system of legitimate consumption? What if it were a form of symbolic containment?

The Tropes of Epistemic Injustice: To Rebel or Not to Rebel?

Anti-colonial nationalism created the possibility of defining political and social freedom in newer terms. The non-Brahmin movement and Dalit-Bahujan movement added a democratic imperative to the possible redefinition of social and political freedom (Guru 2011b). However, the hegemony of Gandhi, Hindutva parties and the moral politics of non-violence have played a very important role in constraining various streams of anti-caste movement within the Hindu cultural frame of religion. The ability of the anti-caste movement to articulate a new episteme of resistance and rights becomes a very important tool to defy the graded inequality of caste-based service and duty. As seen in the previous section, the dominant cultural disposition to include Dalits in terms of subsidised dignity as Harijans has been historically exercised.

The tradition of Dalit-Bahujan thinkers like Buddha, Ayyankali, Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar allows to both expose and unmask the Brahminical oppressive traditions and to offer a new episteme. Even with the existence of alternative cultural democratic resources, it is very rare to see and visualise such epistemic frameworks within film-making. The Brahminical-Harijan framework has largely defined the dominant paradigm of Dalit accommodation in Indian cinema. Dalit film-makers on most occasions have defied such frameworks to represent Dalit self and lifeworld challenging the Brahminical gaze. Also, they have proactively captured the cultural symbols, music, paintings, food habits, and households with texture of a 'lived reality' rather than servile exotic prop.

In the popular cinema, there are important strains of Dalit representation. One dominant strain of Dalit politics calls for accommodation within the existing order of constitutionalism. It advocates the state and civil society to 'take suffering seriously' and argues for the implementation of law in letter and spirit. *Newton*, *Article 15*, and *Aakrosh* represent the optimism of law. On the contrary, the lived experiences of caste-ridden democracy call for radical resistance against injustice embedded in the caste-ridden state and societal asymmetry. *Kaala* (2018), *Kabali* (2016), and *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) interestingly represent the curious absence of law and justice. I argue that a careful reading of Indian films suggests that there is a clarion call for a new culture of Dalit politics emerging within Indian cinema which goes 'beyond' stereotypical depiction. By subversively interpreting constitutionalism arising from Ambedkar's appeal to 'educate, agitate, and organize', there is a constant struggle to navigate and challenge the hegemonic framework of the nation state and Savarna gaze. While the tension to identify with one or the other form of violent/non-violent alternate politics and popular justice remains, I argue that the script and the performance of Dalit identity portrayed in the movies try to break free from the containment framework of feel-good consumptive violence and non-violence.

The assertions of the Dalit-Bahujan movement in the field of culture, literature, and parliamentary politics have opened up a way for shifting the burden of caste to the 'upper caste'. The unmarked politics of benevolent inclusion has become contested. In such a scenario, films too were forced to accommodate these contestations albeit nominally and symbolically. As mentioned in the introduction, the Brahminical-Harijan depiction of Dalit lives continued within the paradigm of nation-building, but two qualitative changes occurred: one is the rise of the angry subaltern and other one was the rise of existentialist cinema, which took up the concerns of marginalised by depicting the claims and contradiction of subalterns. The rise of angry subaltern especially *represented through Bollywood hero Amitabh Bacchan* in the 1970s movies like *Deewar, Zanjeer*, and *Muqaddar Ka Sikander* coincided with the populist turn of Indian politics.[9] The popular justice imagined outside the fold of the state, through a messianic hero, became a convenient trope to show all the societal contradictions of the nation.[10] The emergence of the hero from a class divide, the rags to riches story, and the single-handed beating up of groups of wrongdoers, the rich, powerful politicians, gangsters and businessmen, all of these drove home an elated feeling of fulfilment within entertainment, allowing mass gratification.

On the other hand, the alternative cinema led by film-makers like Govind Nihalani (*Aakrosh*, Party) and Shyam Benegal (*Ankur, Manthan*, and *Mandi*) among many others, took to 'realistic' depictions of the class divide, caste atrocity, state authoritarianism, and revolutionary movements. These cinemas consciously negated the heroism of popular cinema. There was always an expansive social text which focused on the brutality and subtlety of oppression. The politics of such films operated within the paradigm of organising the marginalised to fight against injustice and reclaim rights. While the marginalised played a very important role in organising, the overbearing role of the 'Savarna leader' as the guiding light was largely present. Both *Aakrosh* (1980) and *Paar* (1984) dealt with structural violence of caste and class. *Aakrosh* in a way

celebrates the commitment of a Brahmin lawyer ready to give up caste privilege to fight against injustice, while his mentor, a Dalit lawyer, is reluctant to lead the fight. On the other hand, the anger and helplessness of a Dalit forest dweller in his failed attempt to find meaning in the 'system' is laid bare through the killing of his own sister as he knows she would be exploited by the feudal lords and contractors. *Paar* is based on caste massacres in Bihar. It was made at a time when 'upper-caste' militiamen used to lead caste massacres against Dalits, whenever demands for a dignified living, for an increase in wages, or protests against exploitation were raised. This led to Dalits associating with Naxalite groups to fight the caste atrocity and violence. The movie shows us three pathways of politics being practiced: the first within the Gandhian and Marxist mould, whereby an upper-caste reformer and activist tries to generate consciousness among Dalits for equal rights and representation. The second is exemplified by the Dalit *sarpanch*[11] who takes the path of constitutionalism to affirm dignity and self-respect. While the *sarpanch* sticks to a non-violent path, relying on the state and constitution to realise justice, a section of the youth refuses to tolerate injustice anymore. They take to retribution to affirm their self-respect. The fallout of popular justice is the caste massacre of Dalits. The last and third pathway is represented by a Dalit couple who escape death on the day of the massacre, leaving for the city, Calcutta. They represent the vulnerability and challenges of a displaced social underclass, that of the urban-poor, who operate outside the framework of organised politics. What becomes interesting in such films is the layered understanding of oppression and resistance. All three tropes of doing politics challenge any simplistic reading of social reality and leave the spectators to frame and imagine the politics of the oppressed in its myriad forms.

As for *Kaala*, it offers a fascinating tale of the people of 'political society' who dwell on the margins of civic existence (Chatterjee 2004).[12] Their only opportunity towards staking a claim onto the state comes via voting. A new moral community of slum-dwellers resists the might of a pro-corporate communal developmental state, reminiscent of real-time present. The Pure Mumbai project which seeks to displace the slum-dwellers with high-rise buildings, through either force or fraud, shows the contempt against any form of Dalit self-assertion or resistance. While the might of the state machinery and anti-social forces are seen to be at play against the assertion of a collectivised struggle of the slum leader Kaala, the symbol of Hindu mythology and violence attached to it is used metaphorically to depict the slum-dwellers as *rakshashas*, meaning demons, who are anti-thesis of purity. Kaala is able to collectivise the struggle of the people in the margins, whereby Dalits, Muslims, working class groups, and different linguistic identities come together to fight against the corporate communal state machinery. It tells the tale of rebellion and popular justice led by 'political society' with its own contextual assertion and negotiation to fight against injustice. Kaala is explicitly political in the use of symbolism and assertion against the Brahminical value system, which feeds on hatred and contempt for the poor. The juxtaposition of white and black re-signifies the dignity of labour and the moral and ethical bankruptcy of the puritan imagination which feeds on hatred. The scene of Hindu religious festivals being contrasted with rioting and the killing of slum-dwellers in the background challenges the religious ethics and content of belief system defined by Hari Dada, the communal politician. Pa. Ranjith, the director himself, espouses the belief in the use of political and cultural symbols to amplify Dalit self-assertion against the Brahminical value system. He creatively uses Ambedkar's clarion call to agitate, educate, and organise to build up a performative unity of self-assertion. His visuals tell the tale of a democratic unity of the oppressed (Rajamani 2020).[13]

In a very different film genre, *Sairat* (2016) tells a tale of inter-caste romance and tragedy. Unlike Kachra in *Lagaan*, the Dalit youth is shown to be a cricket champion, a match winner in his own right, and a supremely confident youth. *Sairat* shows the grit of the new generation; the

Dalit youth and the 'upper-caste' girl run away from the local context of their village to the big city to fight the caste system, the patriarchal order and poverty, and to make a new beginning. *Sairat* begins with the promise of modernity, a new possibility of being able to exercise one's voluntary choices in life, but ends in tragedy. Both the young rebels are hacked to death by the upper-caste family of the girl. The upper-caste violence is unleashed not only upon the young couple but also upon the family of the youth. The sanctions of the caste-panchayat[14] shows the feudal and patriarchal sensibility that enforces caste endogamy by force or through the pretence of familial love. The scene of the blood-soaked child in the climax shows the tragedy inherent within the idioms of 'free choices'; the exercise of nation-building as such is riddled with caste contradiction. Even in *Pariyerum Perumal*, associational friendship and love is seen as taboo, deserving cold-blooded death or public humiliation. In all the movies analysed earlier, both the existential plight of Dalits and resistance in its myriad forms are presented. This shows us how Dalit representation has undergone phenomenal changes with the changing notions of politics defined by self-assertion and self-fashioning.

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to critically examine the limits and possibilities inherent to the pedagogy of Indian cinema as it strives for transformative political socialisation.[15] The story of Indian cinema can be defined by Brahminical control and hegemony over the mass consumption and circulation of cinema, and a recent, reluctant embrace of 'self-assertion' by Dalits. In the films studied here, the epistemic and instrumental value of cultural representation and misrepresentation becomes an interesting ground of democratic contestation (Rajagopal 2009). While the Savarna film-makers along with the state, judiciary, and hecklers have reinforced and tried to contain multitude imagination of Dalits within the paradigm of Brahminical-Harijan as a frozen subject, Dalit film-makers have forced open a democratic conversation by questioning the Brahminical-Harijan gaze and laid the grounds for a new and plural political subjectivity. Interestingly, unlike the echo-chamber of art and parallel cinema which pathologically dwells on existential oppression and finds few takers outside educated elites, the new wave of contemporary cinema coming from the metropoles of regional cinema amplifies self-assertion, is politically loaded and subversive, and confronts caste on its own terms as it explores the contradiction of a hideous nation-building exercise which denies caste. It offers explicit political symbolism, agency, and robust tales of socially embedded storytelling as well as a model for social solidarity. These new cinemas offer us a promise and constitution of a counter-public space.[16] It interrogates the compromises made by art and entertainment to Brahminical values; it revisits history to revitalise the present through the invocation of anti-caste discourses of non-Brahmin, Dalit-Bahujan narratives. The new cinema offers a more embedded imagery of the spectacle of social diversity, rooted in lived experiences. Indian cinema is symptomatic of the constraints and possibilities inherent to the social relations: '[t]he Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, *mediated by images*' (Debord 1983: 4). The peripheral characterisation of Dalit characters as simply an additive prop to put forward the moral story of 'common good' has been challenged in the contemporary films. The self-assertions of Dalits in popular cinema have breached the frontiers of sectional audience to mass consumption. However, Bollywood films continue to be conservative in frontally articulating self-assertion of Dalits. The commercial success of films explicitly dealing with inter-caste love, violence, state and developmental violence, and representation of life world of Dalits in cities and villages has inaugurated space for plural storytelling. Both *Sairat* and *Pariyerum Perumal* depict the tale of inter-caste love, which poses difficult questions to caste-based endogamy in explicit ways. Similarly, there is a

dogged portrayal of defiance against humiliation[17] by talking back and fighting the oppressors in *Fandry* (2013), *Asuran* (2019), and *Kaala* (2018). Rajesh Rajamani rightly remarks that in times when the politics of confrontation and assertion has found a new voice, whether politics of appeal towards Savarnas to re-think their Brahminical disposition is really a meaningful portrayal to make.[18] Mari Selvaraj, the director of *Pariyerum Perumal,* interestingly uses the tropes of Gandhian suffering, love, self-realisation, and also creatively uses self-defence to fight the series of caste atrocities to challenge the Brahminical public sphere to submit to equality. Unlike the monotony of heroes as Brahminical saviour, the Dalit hero forgives the oppressor and forces them to change their 'heart of darkness' by winning both the moral and physical battle. Like the Habermassian public sphere, where rational dialogue is possible in coffee houses, the scene at the end of the film portraying adversaries sitting together in a college canteen and drinking coffee reflects the beginning of a new democratic discourse. Unlike any forms of epistemic charity of the Brahminical discourse, which dwells on double standards of love and practices casteist violence and (dis-)honour killing, the Dalit characters stand tall like Ambedkar to reflect moral stamina, and value dignity and self-respect to inaugurate a possibility of associational friendship and a new subaltern public sphere.

In the quest for fair representation and caste annihilation, many young film-makers and producers from Pa. Ranjith to Neeraj Ghaywan have taken up the mantle to democratise cinema and film-making by promoting Dalit-Bahujan actors, artists, and storytellers through the production and promotion of anti-caste ideas. Such initiatives have generated reactions ranging from applause to contempt by casteist elements. Such attempts typify the commitment of Dalit film-makers to create the moral and political resources for a new Democratic Revolution.[19] In times when social contradiction and atrocities against Dalits have increased, there is a corresponding resistance which is shaping up both as a cultural and political movement. Be it the 'Justice for Rohith' movement against the institutional discrimination and murder of Dalit research scholar and student activist Rohith Vemula or the *Bharat Bandh* (all India strike) call to oppose changes in the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocity Act, these changes are the product of heightened Dalit-Bahujan consciousness which has created the scope for self-assertion(s) and possibility for meaningful political, social, and cultural collaboration for social change.

Notes

1 Gandhi's ideal of village Swaraj celebrates the conception of 'social harmony' in villages. It does not question the structural graded inequality and violence emerging from caste-based hierarchy and division of labourers.

2 For extensive discussion on censorship, see Gautam Bhatia. *Offend, Shock, or Disturb: Free Speech Under the Indian Constitution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

3 *Padmaavat* (2018) is one such representative movie directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, which faced violent protests by sections of Rajput community from attack on sets and cinema halls to bounty of physical violence on lead actress and director. Interestingly even after judiciary cleared the movie, four BJP ruled states refused to screen the movie. Time and again different caste and religious groups file cases against screening of movies based on perceived misrepresentations and hurt sentiments. Both central and state governments fail to uphold the principles of freedom of speech and expression and often bow down to hecklers.

4 https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bangalore/bengaluru-fir-against-tandav-makers-actors-for-hurting-religious-sentiments-7159700/. Accessed on March 10, 2021.

5 To understand the nuances of state repression and limits of revolutionary violence, see K. Balgopal. https://kafila.online/2009/01/23/beyond-violence-and-non-violence-k-balgopal/. Accessed on July 18, 2020.

6 *Satyagraha* meaning appeal and insistence on truthful non-violent resistance, usually identified with the politics of Gandhi.

7 Varnashrama Dharma believes in the divine order of caste-based distinctions as the natural order of things. The *Manusmriti*, a Brahminical text, sanctions the *varnashrama dharma* as the Brahminical code of Hindu religion.
8 An interesting parallel can be drawn from the Gandhian insistence of B. R. Ambedkar's as representative choice as chairman of drafting committee of constitution.
9 See Sudipta Kaviraj. 'Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics'. *Economic and Political Weekly* (1986): 1697–1708.
10 For a rich discussion on popular justice, see Michel Foucault. 'On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists'. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977,* Colin Gordon, ed. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
11 Village head, known as *sarpanch* in the Hindi Belt of North India.
12 Partha Chatterjee. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
13 Rajesh Rajamani. www.thenewsminute.com/article/dharavi-story-tamil-cinema-how-kaala-inverts-nayakan-gaze-87512. Accessed on July 23, 2020.
14 Unlike the elected Panchayat of the state, caste Panchayats are represented by elders from dominant caste communities.
15 For discussion on Revolutionary Pedagogy of the oppressed, see Freire, P. 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. 1970. Re-print 2017.
16 The rich alternative cultural and political tradition of anti-caste thinkers and their philosophy offer a new space for moral, social, and political resources to those committed to the annihilation of caste.
17 For an incisive account of the philosophy of humiliation, see Gopal Guru. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
18 Rajesh Rajamani. www.newslaundry.com/2018/10/06/the-passive-voice-of-pariyerum-perumal. Accessed on July 18, 2020.
19 See *The Wire*, Neeraj Ghaywan Interview. https://thewire.in/caste/neeraj-ghaywan-interview-job-call-diversity-bollywood. Accessed on July 23, 2020. Also, see *The Wire*, Pa. Ranjith Interview. https://thewire.in/film/pa-ranjith-interview-social-justice-films. Accessed on July 23, 2020.

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The Caste of Nature

Wholesome Bodies and Parasites in Bimal Roy's *Sujata* and Gogu Shyamala's 'A Beauteous Light'

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> dalits . . . are thought to be closer to nature
>
> (Jaaware 2019: 121).

This chapter compares the representation of nature and its relationship to caste in Bimal Roy's Hindi film *Sujata* (1959) and Gogu Shyamala's Telugu short story 'A Beauteous Light' (in English translation, 2012).[1] Both texts interrogate caste, caste discrimination, and the hierarchical relationship between 'lower' castes and 'upper' castes, but they could not be more different at first glance: *Sujata* is a popular film displaying some optimism that caste relations can be improved if upper castes have a Gandhian change of heart and follow the rules of Nehruvian modernity, and 'A Beauteous Light' is a short story by Dalit writer Gogu Shyamala from her collection *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But* . . . (Navayana 2012), which critiques caste fundamentally from a Dalit standpoint. Both texts are different in medium, style, and reach; however, they also exhibit some remarkable similarities and I propose that the short story can be read as a parody of the film in ways that shed light on the limitations of the film's critique of caste.

In both texts, children from one caste are adopted by a family from the other end of the caste spectrum. In the film, the 'Untouchable' baby Sujata is reluctantly adopted by a modern, progressive Brahmin family who provide her with a comfortable home but treat her as lesser than her 'sister', the biological offspring of the Brahmin family, until reason and love triumph after Sujata saves her adoptive mother through a blood transfusion. In the short story, an adolescent Brahmin boy is less reluctantly adopted by the Madiga wada, a Dalit colony outside the village, after the upper-caste village exiled him once he declared his love for the Dalit girl Ellamma.

The representation of nature and the way in which nature is aligned with the two female Dalit protagonists is striking, and nature's partiality towards Roy's Sujata and Shyamala's Ellamma complicates the already complex caste politics of both texts. Nature's affiliation with the Dalit female characters also plays a crucial role in turning them into the love interest of male Brahmin

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characters but the film follows the script of romance (and approves of the relationship) and the short story that of realism and satire (and lambasts the Brahmin's infatuation). The concept of nature encompasses a wide range of meanings, of course, and intersects in intricate ways with the caste system. Mukul Sharma in his extensive study *Caste and Nature* puts emphasis on the sheer 'diversity, multiplicity, durability, and elasticity in the meaning of nature and environment and the historicity, complexity, peculiarity and disparity in theory and practice of caste in India' (2017: xvii). I draw on his nuanced analysis of what is at stake in conceptualising nature and its relation to caste in such diverse ways as the concepts of nature and caste are 'bound together by the power and authority they have had in shaping human destiny. Power, traditional and modern, often works through nature. Caste becomes an important constitutive element in creating and consolidating the "natural" and social power structure' (Sharma 2017: xvii). In the following, I will analyse how *Sujata* was 'A Beauteous Light' negotiate this dense and thorny terrain of nature's malleable relation to caste's power to shape lives.

Bimal Roy's feature film *Sujata* was exceptional in its explicit and extended engagement with caste and untouchability when it was released in 1959. There are not many Bollywood films which tackle caste in such an overt and direct way as this film does. Often caste is subsumed under class, communal, and regional differences and its existence is not explicitly acknowledged, even as it is always present in various ways, to which many of the chapters in this volume testify. As such, *Sujata* is on quite new territory for a mainstream feature film at the time and according to the 'post-caste' logic of the modern, independent Indian nation state seeks to provide a solution to the caste problem, which is often cast as an 'Untouchable' problem.[2]

Sujata is marked by a wishful form of anti-caste thinking that presents the advocacy of a Gandhian change of heart in uneasy combination with Nehru's trust in scientific modernity and technological progress to eradicate caste discrimination as a thing of the past (Nehru 1985: 520). The film begins with an ambitious construction project that is overseen by Sujata's soon-to-be adoptive Brahmin father, the engineer and champion of modernity Upendra Chowdhry who takes Sujata in after her Dalit parents, employed on the construction site, die in a cholera outbreak among the workforce, which puts his more traditional and caste-conscious wife Charu on a testing journey that is not resolved until the end of the film. *Sujata* emphatically champions a Gandhian critique of caste discrimination which relies on upper castes seeing the errors of their ways and desisting from discriminating against Dalits; according to the Gandhian 'solution', caste and caste occupations should remain in place but without any stigma attached to it. However, *Sujata* appears subtly to advocate more persistently for a modernity that casts itself as incompatible with caste and pleads for the need of caste to disappear altogether in modern India since the film condones, if not explicitly promotes, inter-caste marriage, which wreaks havoc with caste. The film nevertheless prominently employs Gandhi as a figure who teaches upper castes the need for a change of heart, putting the agency firmly in the hands of upper castes who kindly ought to abstain from humiliating lower castes. The 'untouchable' castes would patiently have to wait until this more benevolent treatment for the same work is bestowed on them; they should not protest or demand it, which would also not occur to the adult Sujata (played by Nutan). Child Sujata, in contrast, is vehemently opposed to being treated as inferior in her family—she 'naturally' resists. However, only when equality of treatment is given to her but not demanded by her, does she achieve her happy ending. The film is silent about the most prominent Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar yet proposes intermarriage as a radical solution, which echoes Ambedkar's strategy for annihilating caste (2014: 285). Ultimately, however, the upper-caste characters pull the strings and the adoptive mother eventually has a Gandhian change of heart (due to Sujata's virtue, solicitude, and sacrifice). Much of the film's radicalism of its caste critique is disguised as transgressions sanctioned by Gandhi but Ambedkar's influence

appears nevertheless to loom large. It may not be a coincidence that the film was released after Ambedkar converted to Buddhism with hundreds of thousands of Dalits to escape Hinduism's caste system in 1956 (Zelliot 2013: 168–173); *Sujata* after all draws on Buddhism in its critique of caste when Sujata's sister Rama plays an 'Untouchable' in Tagore's *Chandalika* who is overwhelmed when Buddha's disciple accepts water she touched. However, the film also undercuts both the Gandhian and Nehruvian approaches to caste in crucial ways: nature is represented as being on Sujata's side and nature does not need a change of heart or a lesson in modernity to embrace her. Nature is, therefore, presented as inherently superior to human-made rules of exclusion and inclusion.

In Shyamala's short story 'A Beauteous Light', nature is perceived in incompatible ways through the lens of the love-struck Brahmin boy Somasekhara Sharma, on the one hand, and the Dalit girl Ellamma, who is at home in nature and accomplished in looking after domesticated buffalos, on the other hand. Apart from the infatuated Brahmin boy, both upper-caste and Dalit caste groups in the short story see nature as linked to labour and produce, whereas the hapless Brahmin boy sees beauty and spirituality in nature that transcends caste; ironically, however, he is depicted as oddly removed from nature and barely capable of surviving in it. The short story is keenly aware that the conceptualisation of nature can be bent in all kinds of ways and that a more substantial critique of caste needs to rely on other strategies than declaring caste at odds with nature.

Mukul Sharma's important study of Dalit and non-Dalit Indian environmental discourses explores how 'Dalit experiences and narratives constantly underline their everyday ecological burdens in a marked hierarchical order. Images of land animate caste anxieties around labour, blood and bondage' (Sharma 2017: xiv). Similar to film studies' reluctance to engage with caste, in academic studies, 'nature and its social history have rarely been seen from a caste angle. The politics of caste in India in the realm of nature, and its implications and meanings for Dalits, have been a blind spot' (Sharma 2017: xix). Sharma emphasises the multiplicity of Dalit voices in literature, folk art, and activism that represents 'an attempt to produce a new conception of environmental thought' that is opposed to Brahminical eco-casteism (xv):

> the interrelationship between environment and caste—what I call 'eco-casteism'—has a long trajectory in India, which is closely connected to the nature and history of Brahminical Hinduism. . . . caste created a concept of natural and social order where people, place, occupation, and knowledge are characterized by pollution and ritual cleanliness; where bodies, behaviours, situations, and actions are isolated, 'out of place', and 'untouched', because of deep-down hierarchical boundaries. . . . caste made it possible for Brahmins to appropriate and exploit natural resources by segregating and subordinating certain sections of population.
>
> *(2017: xix)*

Ambedkar and Dalit voices in general insist on disclosing the power imbalance and lack of justice in Dalits' access to nature and natural resources.

Gogu Shyamala's short story collection represents a wide range of topics relating to environmental concerns which both celebrate Dalit resilience, culture, and dignified communal life and condemn the ruthless and brutal exploitation and expropriation of Dalits by upper castes (Satyanarayana 2019: 18).[3] The collection can be read as both exposing hegemonic Brahminical eco-casteism at work, and creative and effective Dalit responses to it. The last story in the collection, 'A Beauteous Light', is unusually long and, unlike the other stories in the collection, employs different perspectives by focalising the narrative through a range of characters and

including long passages of dialogue; it also includes the voices of different caste communities and contains some of the most directly political statements and also some of the most lyrical and playful passages of the collection. Nature, land and its cultivation play a key role in these debates and passages.

An interesting feature of 'Beauteous Light' is the fact that the reader never quite knows where the story will go; potential for comedy and tragedy sit cheek-by-jowl, held together by realist narration. The reader's lack of guidance on whether this story is going to end tragically or comically performs a critique of caste and caste discrimination in itself: the fact that the reader does not know how this story will continue mirrors the precarity of the Dalit characters who are at the mercy of the upper castes, who could expel and punish Ellamma's community on a whim. The India it depicts is neither ideal nor modern; it is represented as an archaic realm where some caste groups control the ownership of the land and therefore call the shots for purely exploitative reasons as they readily admit themselves and administer what is explicitly portrayed as a parody of justice. The short story is on the side of the Dalits, and from that perspective the story can end in all kind of ways depending on the will of the upper castes who are depicted as so merciless even with one of their own that it leaves the Dalits amazed and confounded.

In the short story, the Brahmin characters have nothing to teach about love in contrast to the film where the Brahmin character Adhir educates Sujata on self-worth and Gandhi's love for 'harijans'. In the following, I would like to explore the usefulness of reading the short story as a parody of the film, without implying that this specific parody was deliberately created by Shyamala or that the short story can be reduced to a parody of the film. It goes without saying that, between the release of *Sujata* and the publication of the short story, Dalit resistance and literature developed and grew in pace and scope along with Dalit environmental thought. My comparative analysis relies on the premise that both texts set out to criticise caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability and are part of India's long tradition of caste critique.[4] It is indeed remarkable that both texts have hardly been analysed in critical literature despite the fact that they offer intriguing answers to the question on how to cast nature in the critique of caste.[5]

Wholesome Female Bodies and its Parasites

In both *Sujata* and 'A Beauteous Light', the female protagonists are depicted as extraordinarily wholesome figures, but the narrative perspectives that create these impressions of wholesomeness are similarly suspect. In the film, the entire strategy of casting Sujata as an example of wholesome beauty depicts her as a singular figure, elevated in a Brahmin surrounding but treated akin to a servant, which further accentuates her wholesomeness because this simplicity suits her and makes her attractive to the modern Brahmin suitor Adhir. The film evades any critique of Sujata's treatment in her family as 'second-class' daughter by demonstrating that this very treatment brought out the best in Sujata. Her sister Rama is represented as lovable but pampered, and the film implicitly suggests that this kind of treatment may have yielded less desirable results with Sujata due to her caste background (since several characters warn the Brahmin family against harbouring such an uncultivated low-caste figure in their midst). The film's perspective is critical of caste discrimination but always with a high-caste, 'modern' outlook. The many close-ups of Sujata's beautiful face invite the viewer to accept that this elevated position could be granted to this exceptional Dalit girl while leaving it largely up to the viewer whether they wish to question caste hierarchies more radically (as the film also encourages) or prefer getting lost in close-ups marketing desire, in the reassuring knowledge of Nutan's non-Dalit background. Nevertheless, the film goes further in its caste critique than any other film of equal popularity at the time and does so without causing outrage, quite the contrary.[6] The fact

that the film was favourably received must mean that it was successful in its 'acceptable' packaging of its critique of caste despite the fact that it advocates for inter-caste marriages indirectly; its success allows the conclusion that mainstream audiences were open to the film's modern castigating of caste discrimination without feeling unduly scandalised and chastised. A prerequisite for granting Dalits a more dignified position, at least for this exceptional individual, is not only the lack of aggression on the part of Sujata but also her willingness to adapt to the superior habits of the upper castes around her. Sujata 'naturally' grows up clean and sophisticated because she was raised in an enlightened Brahmin household; the only other Dalit figures whom the film shows are exaggeratedly unattractive or drunk, which could be read as suggesting that they are beyond the pale. The message in the film is clear: Dalits are in need of Sanskritisation/civilising. Without their upliftment by upper castes, they will not be able to reach the lofty heights of Sujata's development. However, on the whole, the film's stance on 'nature versus nurture' is muddled and remains unresolved since the film also suggests that Sujata's wholesomeness is inherent in her character and body. She is in many ways depicted as naturally more 'useful' and handy than her idle and spoilt sister, who is given over to the less palatable side of Indian modern living and is rarely seen doing any work at all. Sujata is the earth-bound one who delights in nature and around whom nature flourishes. She appears perfectly at home surrounded by plants and the natural environment.

In order to align Shyamala's character Ellamma with her natural surroundings, the story appears to focalise this central part of the story through the Brahmin boy in a dream. He makes the connection of Ellamma with nature in a dream in which he romanticises her as ideal female figure, like a youthful earth mother, who is in perfect communion with animals that appear to communicate with her as they watch the sunset together: 'A parrot flew down, perched on her shoulder and gazed at the sky' (206). She is lovingly embraced by the tank's surrounding creatures as he pictures her 'sitting right between the sun and the moon' (207). This scene's tone is different to the initial scene in which Ellamma saves the Brahmin boy from drowning by dragging him unceremoniously out of the water by his sacred thread and tuft of hair. In that first episode, Ellamma is depicted as accomplished in animal husbandry with a friendly relationship with the buffalos that she tends and takes to the tank for 'a morning mouthful of water' (187). Her movements are depicted as deft and assured as she does not hesitate to save a fellow human from drowning but still remains pragmatic ('What is the way of pulling him out without getting my hair wet?', 189). Only in the eyes of the Brahmin boy does she acquire this aura of extraordinary wholesomeness that aligns her in a supernatural way with nature:

> in my dream too, she was luminous like lighting when she extended her hand to pull me onto the buffalo, moving along with the birds, the animals, the sun and the moon. She is Nature's own beauty. Only the very fortunate may see or talk to her.
>
> *(209)*

This vision of Ellamma's spiritual communion with nature is interrogated by the rest of the short story that does not allow this idealised representation of nature and Ellamma to acquire validity. Nevertheless, the fact that this dream sequence is only disclosed as a being dream after he wakes up encourages the reader to test their own willingness to read Ellamma in this idealised way that imbues her with a connection to nature that the rest of the story would hardly acknowledge as 'natural'. This scene is further complicated by the way in which the dream sequence starts, namely in a way that makes it difficult to identify as a dream; all the buffalos' names are listed, including Ellamma's favourite buffalo Dopati, and it is impossible for the Brahmin boy Sharma

to know these names. Therefore, this dream is both a dream and not quite a dream; the short story appears playful here and unwilling to offer an unequivocal way of reading this passage.

The short story nevertheless insists on gently mocking the Brahmin boy's idyllic and at times absurdly idealised vision of nature as problematic. This can be read as reflecting parodically on the film where Sujata's frolicking in the garden with dancing leaves and drumming foliage in a song sequence is an apparently sweet spectacle of a healthy communion with nature. In this central scene in particular, nature appears to validate Sujata's feelings as she falls in love with Adhir and allows her to believe that she deserves to be happy. The fact that Adhir was supposed to marry her sister Rama only distracts from the subversive nature of this inter-caste love story, perhaps in order to make it more palatable for mainstream audiences, and Sujata will subsequently have to suffer a lot before she is allowed a happy ending. Only nature immediately gives her its blessing when no one else would. In fact, nature is almost depicted as a seamless extension of Sujata and her emotions; nature's connection to Sujata at times feels primordial and is therefore aligned with neither Gandhian nor modern critiques of caste. The film's idealisation of Sujata is a powerful and moving strategy as it makes all the other characters look lacklustre and lacking vigour in their seeming incompetence in being able to engage with the natural world in a nurturing way. Yet it is precisely Ellamma's idealised wholesomeness in the Brahmin boy's eyes that makes Sujata's emphatic wholesomeness more suspect. Comparative readings can shed a different light on texts; in this case, it casts a harsh spotlight on the upper-caste slant of the film. The very image of Sujata as happily immersed in her gardening duties is intrinsically upper-caste as it only allows the Dalit a space in this modern upper-caste dwelling if she lives up to the ideal of perfect earth-bound maid and green-fingered cultivator.

In another parodic inversion of the film, it is the Brahmin boy who needs work in 'A Beauteous Light'. The Dalit elders know that they need to train the boy to become a useful member of their community and they doubt that he has any knowledge that will be of any use to them at all—he has to be cultivated (in a mock civilising mission) to become a useful person who can work the land and take care of himself. Whereas Sujata turns out to be the perfect adoptee, everyone in the short story assumes that training the Brahmin boy will be hard work with only limited chances of success; he is already too spoilt by the Brahmins and will have to re-learn almost everything. If their efforts fail, they suggest, he could become a beggar.

The short story appears to suggest that the Brahmin boy falling in love with Ellamma in a natural environment is also an indication that he is closer to a natural state of being because he has not yet been ideologically polluted by caste prejudice and a strong belief in untouchability due to his youth and is therefore able to listen to nature's lesson that caste does not determine a person's worth and right to dignity and happiness. The boy may be out of place in nature, but he still understands that caste is a human-made construct. This may explain why the story does not appear to condemn the boy or even blame him. He is just a passive but absorptive figure ('He is as soft as a dung worm', 195), who gets handled by everyone—he is touched by everyone, even a Dalit elder who had just skinned an animal and has blood on his fingers when he feeds the boy. And the boy does not seem to mind. He is portrayed as less animated than Ellamma's favourite buffalo. The view of nature that the Brahmin boy represents is Brahminical up to a point, namely one that idealises nature as 'divine, cosmic', and spiritual (Sharma 2017: 17). Yet the Brahmin boy does not perceive the strict upholding of the caste system as integral to this view of nature. In hegemonic Hindu-centred environmental discourses, it is precisely the caste hierarchy and division of labour that keeps this natural balance intact (Sharma 2017: 9–16). However, the short story negates this view by aligning Ellamma so closely with nature in the boy's mind that caste hierarchies are suspended for him. The short story further dismantles the validity of the upper-caste Hindu view of nature that sees the caste system perfectly aligned with

nature and the natural order by having the Dalit figures dismiss it summarily; the Dalit elders are the figures that hold credibility and authority in the texts. Their relationship with nature is characterised by their expert labour that they understand as dignified and essential. They know that the upper castes abuse their labour and feed parasitically off it while they 'would be relaxing on chairs in their front yards, playing with their sacred threads, taking care not to disturb the food in their bellies' (192). This parasitical relationship is only possible by the upper castes threatening extreme violence when lower castes resist, hence the merciless upholding of caste rules by the upper-caste figures, even if it involves casting out one of their own.

A comparative reading of the significance of blood also yields a 'revised' reading of *Sujata*. Blood is conventionally understood as a potential source of pollution; the short story turns this almost into a joke when the Brahmin boy is revived by being force-fed honey with bloody fingers from a Dalit elder—the joke invites the reader to picture the horror on the other Brahmins' faces when they hear about it and are comically thrown in to a frenzy of cleansing rituals. The film acknowledges the potential monstrosity of the pollution by blood when it makes the scene of the blood transfusion central in ending Sujata's discrimination and thus 'solving' the caste conflict in the film. In a modern reading, Sujata's low-caste status gets neutralised by the fact that blood naturally means life in this scene. The blood transfusion proves that there is no basis in assuming that 'Untouchables' are of a biologically different nature, contradicting the Brahmin priest at the beginning of the film who warned against 'Untouchables' emitting a harmful 'gas'. This climactic scene is the final plank in the film's strategy to show that Sujata is just as much human as her mother and cements her equal worth, proving that caste is 'unnatural'. However, in a comparative reading of both texts, the short story's clear and authoritative presentation of upper castes as parasites on Dalit labour prompts a more sinister reading of Sujata donating blood to her adoptive mother. The figure of the parasite is initially associated with Sujata in the film when her adoptive mother accuses Sujata of being parasitical on her adoptive family's goodwill in an outburst that sends the mother tumbling down the stairs. However, when Sujata is the only one who can donate blood to her injured mother and thus save her life, the mother is arguably the parasitical figure, feeding off the lifeblood of her adopted daughter, as she had been all her life by using her as something in between daughter and servant. In the short story, the whole upper-caste village is explicitly described as parasitical on the labour of the Dalits, and the Brahmin boy is no less so; in order to be part of the Dalit wada, he needs to be transformed from parasite to provider of wealth and nourishment. In fact, he has to become a host, like Sujata, and learn to nourish, not suck the life out of others. The reading of Sujata's adoptive mother as parasite is almost only possible when the film's analysis is refracted by 'A Beauteous Light'. The film itself hardly allows for such a grim reading of the blood donation scene (since Sujata's expression is positively beatific while donating blood), but comparative analysis can disclose unpalatable readings, no matter how ostensibly disavowed they are. As mentioned previously, I am not arguing that Shyamala's short story is a deliberate parody of the film but that such a comparative reading is productive in bringing into starker relief the fault lines in the film's critique of caste, irrespective of how well-meaning the film's criticism of caste discrimination and untouchability is.

Cast(e)ing Nature

In both texts, the female characters are aligned with nature, and this strategy is used in *Sujata* to demonstrate that caste is 'unnatural' whereas Ellamma's alignment with nature in 'A Beauteous Light' is largely in the eyes of the Brahmin beholder. The Brahmin boy's perception of Ellamma could be read as evidence that nature is casteless as it bestows its bounty irrespective of caste.

However, it is precisely his upper-caste perception of nature which reveals that nature is irrevocably 'casteized' in India (Sharma 2017: xvi), and the fact that Dalits are perceived as more akin to nature is parodied as Brahminical misperception of nature. In the process, the short story exposes the anti-caste strategy that Roy's film adopts as patronising. As mentioned previously, even in the film, the anti-caste message of the film is embedded in complex and contradictory discourses, which do not fall in line neatly at the end. The association of Sujata with nature is relied on less and less as soon as the blood transfusion takes centre-stage and constitutes the logical culmination of the film's insight that 'caste is not natural' in a way that evades rather than resolves the film's contradictions in its treatment of caste.

I put emphasis on the similarities of both texts but a striking difference is, of course, that in the film, one orphaned Dalit ends up in a Brahmin household (the all but impossible scenario), which entails an upbringing full of humiliation and rejection, whereas the short story depicts the opposite (more typical) scenario: the outcast Brahmin is stranded in the Dalit colony who will have to train him in the life skills that he so sorely lacks. He will be literally taught the ways of nature through labour until he is ready not to equate a romanticised image of an earth mother with a young woman who looks after domesticated animals. The short story discloses the pitfalls inherent in the strategy of depicting Dalits as closer to nature. It almost appears as if the short story shakes its head at the possibly naïve but potentially pernicious logic of the film that reserves salvation for only exceptionally wholesome Dalits as long as they accept the roles upper-caste figures allow them to occupy. The film's muddled strategies of advocating a Gandhian 'change of heart', Nehruvian modernity, and even Ambedkarite inter-caste marriage can be frustrating, especially when contrasted with the short story's unequivocal and radical critique of the caste system. The exasperation with tortuous upper-caste logic is palpable in Shyamala's short story as is evident in the discussions among the Dalit elders in particular.

The epigraph of this chapter quotes a brief passage from Aniket Jaaware's *Practicing Caste*. Jaaware presents the alignment of Dalits with nature as evoking the idea that Dalits might be in a state of 'perpetual becoming', with a tenuous relationship to history:

> With people who had nothing to invest in the past, and whose memories were not arranged along preservative lines, there was no felt need to leave records of the past or even to narrate the past. . . . Then, are dalits to be considered to be in a process of perpetual becoming? On the assumption that becoming can never catch up with itself to be able to remember itself and preserve a specific moment of becoming, in memory, or in some other form like writing, it would seem that dalits (and women, tribal people, and most illiterate people) might be understood to be in a continual, elusive process of becoming. It is through this that we might find an explanation of how women, dalits, most tribal people, and most illiterate people are thought to be closer to nature. . .. The question that begs to be asked is, are dalits then without history?
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> *(2019: 121)*

The fact that Shyamala's short story can be read as a parody and critique of the film suggests that 'A Beauteous Light' is keen to interrogate past representations of Dalit figures as 'closer to nature' and the corollary that they are seen as bereft of history. The short story does not offer a 'history' of Dalits that mimics the conventions of historiography, Western or upper-caste Indian, as it does not offer specific dates or locations for its narrative. In fact, it is hard to date this short story because caste discrimination is represented as almost timeless. Like much of Dalit literature, this short story insists on narrating Dalit lives and their history differently (Gajarawala 2013: 168–196). A film that was produced before this radical lineage of Dalit literature was

established can probably not help looking reactionary in comparison. However, the short story can also be read as acknowledging a certain kinship with the film's attempt to present Sujata in terms that cannot be uncritically and completely subsumed under an upper-caste script that casts Dalits as successfully 'narrated'; Sujata's life is largely shown as deprived of opportunities to have a say in the way in which she wants to script her own life. Sujata's life history is shown as bent out of shape by her family's discriminatory behaviour; her husband promises to bend it to his putatively progressive will even further until there is little chance that Sujata can produce a narrative of her life that will ever feel like her own, and the film cannot but acknowledge this violent scripting of Sujata as acceptable 'Untouchable'. Sujata's becoming as Dalit is deliberately stunted, and her history is withheld from her since she only learns about her caste background when she is a young adult, but that does not preclude that a more meaningful history would have been possible.

The short story and, to some extent, the film acknowledge that the argument that 'caste is unnatural' is insufficient since conceptualisations of nature are always open to re-negotiation and contestation; being perceived as closer to nature has rarely served Dalits well. The short story abandons this notion in favour of a democratic process, epitomised by the Dalit elders' lengthy discussions, that takes what is currently possible and desired in the future into account while remaining compassionate; the story favours pragmatism and solidarity among the oppressed in contrast to *Sujata*'s wishful upper-caste thinking that reserves agency largely for the upper-caste characters. The short story makes a mockery of the Brahmin boy's behaviour towards Ellamma relentlessly but not mercilessly, and therein lies the key to its effective critique of caste: the Dalits in 'A Beauteous Light' never entirely lack compassion in stark contrast to the boy's own parents and fellow Brahmins. The short story acknowledges the need for a constant struggle for equality, dignity, and the eradication of caste. It is clear and unequivocal in its depiction of the history of caste discrimination and the limited spaces for agency that it opens up for Dalits. 'A Beauteous Light' shows that a novel historiography of acts of solidarity and compassion among the downtrodden is necessary in contrast to the singular success story that Sujata represents. *Sujata* offers a cautionary tale about the fact that the caste of nature will be aligned with upper-caste interests as long as upper castes have the power to dictate how nature is perceived and celebrated. However, even in the film, there are indications that the alignment of Sujata with nature loses persuasiveness since she is only really welcomed into the family once she is more closely integrated into the domestic, interior space of the house rather than forced to make the garden her home.

Notes

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2 Interestingly, there were more films dealing explicitly with caste in pre-independent India in order to educate the masses on becoming a better, more unified nation under the tutelage of Gandhian nationalism, see Srinivas and Yengde. In post-independence India, 'It is often inter-caste romantic love which has been the subject of Bollywood films involving Dalit protagonists. Whilst such films work to create sympathy for especially "worthy" Dalit individuals [such as Sujata], they tend to promote narratives of individuals, deserving of (exceptional) social mobility, rather than truly advocating social revolution' (Vidushi 2015: 133).

3 On Gogu Shyamala's activism, see K. Satyanarayana and S. Tharu 2013: 710–715.

4 In contrast, Chauhan's analysis of *Sujata* places the film exclusively in the tradition of cultural representations of Dalits in which they are 'objectified as self-hating individuals who disparage their Dalit identity' (2019: 332); the 'guilt of being a Dalit is phenomenally highlighted in the cinematic narrative and Sujata is the epitome of it' (328).
5 Parama Roy (2009) offers an excellent analysis of *Sujata* but does not discuss its representation of nature.
6 I draw here on Chauhan's brief survey of positive reviews of *Sujata* in Indian film magazines and newspapers in English (2019: 329).

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18

The Pig, the Black Sparrow, and the Sheep

Human–Animal Entanglements in *Fandry* and *Khwada*

Shalmali Jadhav

A horse with water in the background. Sheep and goat lying, standing, sitting inside a netted enclosure, with men bending and squatting, preoccupied with feeding and grooming the animals. A woman and a child squabble over who will milk the lamb and get milk for tea the woman finally goes to the animal and milks it herself. It is early morning. The camera closes in and we only see the sheep in the frame, against the sound of the men fretting over the question of keeping the animals alive amidst a food shortage and the need to keep moving for the survival of the sheep. The woman's husband complains about the poor condition of the sheep and yells at the children, accusing them of 'Patilki', that is of behaving arrogantly like the Patil landowners. Balya, their grown-up son who has been exercising, is unaffected by this fuss. He looks at the skies where a plane is flying, and then dives into the water. All the while, one hears the bleating of the sheep intermingled with these human voices.

A Black Sparrow sits high up on a leafless tree, fluttering from one branch to another as its chirps pierce the surroundings. It is early morning. It flies off and disappears, and the camera now shows us clusters of bare trees in a rocky, barren, brown landscape. An adolescent boy appears in the landscape and looks around for the sparrow, which has now flown off to a greener patch. The boy, armed with a sling, carefully scrutinises the tops of the sparsely green trees, and then conceals himself behind a fallen trunk. The bird eludes him again but he smiles good-naturedly. The hunt continues as cattle appear on the screen. The boy takes an aim and misses, and a man squatting near the cattle to finish his morning business gets up with a start. The hunt has ended unsuccessfully—the boy gives up and walks away into an increasingly barren landscape. Picking up a plough he has hidden carefully on the way, he conceals his sling now and reaches home to the sounds of sheep and goat that flitter in the background.

These are the opening scenes of the Marathi films *Khwada* (2014) and *Fandry* (2013), which immediately draw attention to the rhythms of daily life in the drought-affected rural regions of the Deccan plateau, home of the Dalit-Bahujan communities whose stories the films show. What becomes immediately noticeable when these scenes are presented alongside one another is the importance given to animals in the quotidian movements of the men, women, elderly, and children. These opening scenes set the stage for what follows in the films, where animals occupy

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crucial places in the plot as well as the images the films offer. *Khwada*, directed by Bhaurao Karhade, is the story of the nomadic Karhe family that has been fighting a court case for over a decade to get back the land confiscated from them by the forest department. Displaced from their village, their lives revolve around wandering from village to village across the Deccan plateau with their sheep, mules, and all of their belongings, with their social position as displaced Dhangars making them vulnerable to the aggressions of the Maratha politician Ashokrao Patil, whose whims they are forced to bear as they graze and sell their sheep to survive.[1] Balu, the younger son of the family, fantasises about getting married and aspires to buy land and settle into agriculture so that he would not have to spend his life always preoccupied with the 'need to graze the sheep' despite the 'scarcity of pasture' (Sontheimer 1975: 161). Since Balu is forced to spend his days grazing the sheep and tending to them, most of what he does is in the presence of sheep—whether it be daydreaming, getting married, eating, or engaging in sexual activities—the sheep are always there. *Fandry*, directed by Nagraj Manjule, follows the exploits of Jabya, who juggles school life and the turbulence of adolescence with the necessity to work to help his family survive while also struggling to make time for chasing the elusive Black Sparrow. He and his friend Pirya together strive to make Jabya's dreams come true, which consist of wooing Shalu, the dominant caste girl with whom he is infatuated, and owning a pair of jeans, all while Jabya's aging father Kachru and later his whole family are pressured by Patil to catch a group of rabid 'impure' pigs that have been wreaking havoc in the village. Jabya chases after the Black Sparrow with increasing desperation and urgency, but for nearly half the film, viewers are not let in on the reason for his chase.

Khwada has been situated in the genre of drought/farmers' suicides and migration films and *Fandry* as heralding the category of Dalit cinema (Yengde 2018: 14). Although these films narrate the stories of communities whose allyship in the anti-caste struggle has been problematised, they converge in their respective critiques of Maratha caste power in rural Maharashtra from non-Brahmin perspectives, through the aperture of the animal–human divide.[2] They put forth a sharp analysis of Maratha caste violence, previously attempted in Marathi films like *Samna* (1974) and *Mukta* (1994), at a time when 'the discourse of victimhood amongst Marathas'—which revolves around 'the use of violence and the need for reservations' through demands for Maratha reservations on the one hand, and the scrapping of the SC-ST Atrocities Act on the other—has become 'shriller' (Waghmore 2020). As Yengde has demonstrated, mainstream Indian cinema has largely 'been responsible for sustaining a dominant caste hegemony' through its tendency to 'dutifully genuflect to an Indian Brahminical order' thereby producing 'blatant casteist sensibilities' (2018: 1–2) and 'obscuring Dalit-Bahujan narratives' (2018: 4). *Khwada* and *Fandry* defy this tendency and gesture to what Edachira has called an 'enabling anti-caste aesthetics' (2020: 47) that go 'beyond the narratives of "pain" and "humiliation"' (2020: 49) to a 'generative discourse' (2020: 48) where the term aesthetics 'has more to do with the questions of experience, which find beauty in emancipatory struggles rather than dominant perceptions' (2020: 48–49), thereby drawing from but going 'beyond the already available category of Dalit aesthetics' (2020: 51).

This chapter looks at and with certain moments in *Khwada* and *Fandry* when caste boundaries intersect with the animal–human divide, and it considers what they reveal about the determination of the category 'human' in a caste society. The first section discusses the significance of the recruitment of animals by the Maratha characters in both the films in the caste and gender violence they commit, arguing that their configuration of space and their use of abuses rivet around destroying the animal–human divide by placing certain humans and animals in proximity. For the Dalit-Bahujan characters in the films, this means that their 'human' status is at risk in the implementation of caste boundaries. Conversely, for the dominant castes, unsettling the

animal–human divide in this manner becomes a mode to reinscribe—in their own terms—their exclusive position as 'human'. A larger question that then emerges is, what are the complications that a caste society poses to scholarly projects of de-centering the 'human' in intellectual inquiries? Taking cue from Edachira's conception of anti-caste aesthetics as affect, expression and celebration that make room for both the poetic and the political, the second section of this chapter demonstrates that these films also re-imagine more liberatory notions of 'human' and 'animal' that open up grounds for 'interspecies alliances' (Boisseron 2018: 36). This symbolic reimagination and the ensuing opening of such alliances is crucial in the light of the criticism of Dalit assertions for reduplicating and re-enacting the symbolic logic of Hindutva in the attempt to oppose it (Sunder 2019) and the perception that animal and Dalit liberation movements are 'seemingly irreconcilable' (Narayanan 2018: 349).

Dalit-Bahujans have long been either situated as the exclusive threat to animals or identified with certain animals through both secular laws and Brahminic injunctions that precede and supplement rather than oppose these laws (Bargi 2018). The *Manusmriti*, the most authoritative code of Hindu laws, places Dalits-Bahujans, pigs, and dogs (among others like menstruating women) in affinity (1991: 86) since their very gaze and touch threaten the purity of the priests and kings—the 'twice-born' men. Simultaneously, animal protection in post-colonial India has become the prerogative of the caste privileged who usually operate through a nexus of NGOs and judicial and administrative systems in urban centres, at a convenient distance from the animals they love and protect, with access to more resources and infrastructure than those from whom the animals are being 'protected' (Pawar 2015: 150–151). The passage of laws like the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, the Wildlife Protection Act, (Pawar 2015: 148), and more recently, laws banning cow slaughter in several states following the provisions in Article 48 of the Constitution that have wrecked the lives and livelihoods of Dalit-Bahujans (Pawar 2015: 148) have been accompanied by mob lynchings of Dalits and Muslims under the pretext of 'cow protection' with the tacit support of the state apparatus and the explicit support of Hindu organisations (Jodhka and Dhar 2003). In the wake of the 2002 lynching of five Dalit men in Haryana, the VHP as well as 'the local "gaushallas" and "gurukuls" issued statements that amounted to saying that the life of a cow was more valuable than that of humans' (Jodhka and Dhar 2003: 175). Perhaps it is this state of affairs—at the heart of which is the construction of the 'sacred cow' which only faces violence from the consumption of beef attributed exclusively to Dalits,[3] but not from the dairy industry which benefits certain dominant castes, since providing milk and related products is portrayed as the 'holy' cow peacefully fulfilling its duty (Narayanan 2018: 343)—that has resulted in increasing scholarship on the entanglements of Hindu nationalism and animal protection.[4] However, the animal has long accompanied the anti-caste question in India, perhaps starting with B. R. Ambedkar, who located the root of untouchability in the taboo on beef-eating that was created when Brahmins—who formerly slaughtered cows and consumed its meat with impunity—declared the cow a 'sacred' animal to repress the rising popularity of Buddhism (1990b). It becomes clear then that what is at work in the framing of human–animal relationships I mentioned earlier is Brahminism's attempt to acquire absolute authority to make meaning of the relations between humans and animals and their places in the world as well its recruitment of animals to 'other' Dalit-Bahujans.

Caste violence and the animal–human divide

In her critical take on the Marathi film *Court*, where the deceased worker Narayan Kamble's wife attests that he would throw pebbles into the sewers and only deem it safe to enter if a cockroach or a bug would come out, Bargi argues that at stake in this 'everyday communication

between the human and the insect' is 'the very definition of the human and the Dalit's precarious positioning in the category' (2018). She further points out that 'trope of the animal has been a favoured one in many representations of Dalit subjects', which has 'led to anger and protest on part of Dalit writers' (2018). Thus, the proximity in which animals and Dalit-Bahujans are placed in the *Manusmriti* was reinscribed in the guise of 'sympathy' when Premchand had deployed a stray dog called Tommy as a 'heavy-handed allegory for the desperate plight and ultimate helplessness of the untouchables' in his story 'Dudh Ka Daam' (Breuck 2014: 12). Premchand's positioning of Mangal, the Dalit protagonist of the story, and Tommy, as 'one' to illustrate the 'fraternity of discrimination and deprivation' (Upadhyaya: 59), makes no space for any resistance or disruption of the status quo, leading Hindi Dalit writers like Omprakash Valmiki and Ajay Navaria to rewrite it in a way that allows for 'an assertion of change and transformation of one's liminal status' (Bargi 2018). *Fandry* and *Khwada* unveil the continued undermining of the personhood of Dalit-Bahujans in the everyday violence of the caste system through the recruitment of animals by the dominant castes to assert caste boundaries. In doing this, both films carry forward to a new medium—alongside films like *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018)—a genealogy of literary and cultural production that has dwelt on the embroiling of the animal, both in its life and its death, in the caste system.[5]

In *Fandry*, the vertical and horizontal configuration of space critically reveals the hierarchical layers embedded in the animal–human divide and their relationship to caste hierarchies. In the scene where Patil orders Jabya to remove the piglet that is trapped in the underground sewer, Patil is physically positioned at a greater height than Jabya, who stands on the ground. Patil looks down at Jabya from above while also looking down at the piglet that is positioned underground, below Jabya. Patil's demand that Jabya descend even lower by going into the sewer and place himself near the piglet carries an ontological risk and threatens to displace Jabya from his very position as a human. This risk is visually translated in one of the most forceful scenes of *Fandry* shortly after this encounter—a dream sequence where Jabya has a nightmare that he is splashing about in water desperately, trapped at the bottom, while Shalu's voice cries, 'Don't touch her! A pig touched her!' referring to an earlier incident on the school ground, when Shalu's friend is touched by a pig and thus becomes 'polluted'. Patil's previously uttered words echo in Jabya's nightmare, 'The piglet is trapped. Take it out and let it go', but it is Jabya himself who is trapped—now it is *him* at the bottom of the sewer instead of the pig, suggesting his worst fears have come true and the animal–human divide itself has collapsed. What is distinctive to the 'grammar of animality' (Mbembe 2001: 182) in *Fandry* is that it recruits not just any animal but specifically the *pig,* which the film makes clear is a symbol of impurity and a threat to the 'purity' of the villagers. Unlike Shalu's friend who can be 'purified' from her temporary state of 'untouchability' after contact with the pig, by being sprinkled with cow urine, there is no such convenient mode of 'purification' for Jabya to fully reinstore his human position if he descends into the sewer next to the pig. That is why Jabya's refusal to follow Patil's command marks a crucial moment of resistance that reinstates his humanness.

Similarly, the horizontal spatial configuration in the film also critically evaluates the topography of caste and the imminent breakdown of the animal–human divide that the pig's entry into the village represents for the dominant caste villagers. Many writers like B. R. Ambedkar, Omprakash Valmiki, Kumud Pawde, and Sharankumar Limbale have mapped the complex geography of caste in India as 'village mohallas are settled along caste-lines' (Limbale 2004: 28) with Dalits—following Manu's injunction—living in 'settlements outside the village' (Ambedkar 1990b: 271).[6] Asking 'why untouchables live outside the village' Ambedkar had reasoned that Dalits had lived outside the village even before the imposition of untouchability, so what

'the stigma of untouchability' introduced was in fact a more regulated geographical estrangement in the form of a prohibition on living in the village and entering it for purposes other than serving the dominant castes (1990b: 272). This horizontal configuration supplements and complicates Fanon's renowned theorisation of 'the colonized world' being a 'compartmentalized world' that is 'divided in two' on the basis of 'race and species' (2004: 3–5). As a formerly 'criminalized' nomadic tribe, for the Kaikadis, 'there is neither a village nor a home; they are here today and elsewhere tomorrow' (Limbale 2004: 28)—not only is their entry inside the village conditional, but even their presence in the outskirts is at risk as they are often threatened with expulsion in the film. The major source of conflict in the film emerges from the presence of the pigs inside the village, which is seen as disruptive to the village order. As the scene where the pig collides with Shalu's friend on the school ground suggests the entry of the pigs can rupture this hierarchical horizontal arrangement and endanger the purity of the dominant castes. Therefore, there is a scramble to have the pigs removed *out* of the village and displaced to the sector in the outskirts, in proximity to the Mane family. It is no wonder that for Fanon, the logical consequence of the compartmentalisation of space is that the 'natives' are 'reduced to the state of an animal' and increasingly described in 'zoological terms' that make reference to their 'bestiary' (2004: 7).

In *Fandry*, the very title of the film problematises this zoological and bestial language. 'Fandry' means 'pig' in the Kaikadi language but, as Manjule recounts in an interview,[7] it was hurled as an abuse on those who belonged to the handful of castes that were compelled to catch pigs, so that the word came to terrify children from these communities in Karmala, where Manjule grew up. Jabya and his family are jeeringly called 'fandry' in the film as their chase for the pigs is turned into a spectacle captured for mass circulation on social media in the form of the 'fandry match', where inflicting humiliation becomes a form of entertainment that serves to bind the villagers together into a community. As Mel Chen has illustrated in their work on animacy,[8] 'de-animation' is at the heart of how insulting language functions (2012: 31). Consequently, 'Dehumanizing insults hinge on the salient invocation of the non-human animal', where '[t]he animal is relentlessly recruited as the presumed field of rejection of and for the "human"' (Chen 2012: 23–24, 35). Dehumanisation takes place through *animalisation*, pivoting around the idea that animals are less sentient. This is the 'grammar of animality' that is deployed as a 'cheer' by the villagers to dehumanise the Mane family (Mbembe 2001: 182). At the same time, the film visually spectacularises the mundane manifestations of caste violence through the 'fandry match' where the objectifying gaze of the villagers collectively focuses on the family. This scene recalls the 'racist spectacle' (Chen 2012: 33) in Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* when Fanon finds his body objectified and animalised by the white gaze through the exclamation, 'Look! A negro!' (2008: 89). The villagers are united in regarding the Mane family as 'objects among objects' (Fanon 2008: 89) and the family and pigs as fungible, simultaneously distinguishing their own non-fungibility with animals.

In *Khwada*, Ashokrao Patil—the Maratha sarpanch of the village where Balu's family has temporarily camped to graze their sheep—likewise constructs Bahujan women and sheep as fungible. The tensions between Patil and the family begin to mount, because Ashokrao thinks he is entitled to cheap if not free access to the family's sheep. During one such scene, when Ashokrao threatens them to sell him their sheep at a cheap price because he wants to prepare a feast of sheep meat, Balu's father protests. Enraged by his protests, Ashokrao, as he is forcibly taking away the sheep, taunts that he has only picked up the sheep, not his daughter. The message implied by Ashokrao is—I am kidnapping your animals, slaughtering and eating them, just like I could kidnap your women and rape them (and indeed Ashokrao is already known to have

raped another Bahujan woman in the past leading to her tragic suicide). Carol J. Adams has pointed out how animals are usually made an absent-referent in language, when they are used as a metaphor, for example, by women who narrate their experiences of sexual violence. She adds,

> As the absent referent becomes the metaphor, its meaning is lifted to a 'higher' or more imaginative function than its own existence might merit or reveal. An example of this is when rape victims or battered women say, 'I feel like a piece of meat.' In this example, meat's meaning does not refer to itself but to how a woman victimized by male violence felt. . . . The absent referent is both there and not there. It is there through inference, but its meaningfulness reflects only upon what it refers to because the originating, literal, experience that contributes the meaning is not there. We fail to accord this absent referent its own existence.
>
> *(1990: 67)*

Turning this formulation around, *Khwada* shows us that *the marginalised woman* is the absent-referent in the Maratha man's experience of meat-eating and perpetrating violence against animals, even as meat-eating and sexual violence are linked in the perpetrator's imaginary. That is, in Ashokrao's utterance, his presently *absent* actions on women serve the purpose of describing his present actions on animals. And by turning Bahujan women into an absent-referent, his threat-insult also resorts to the strategy of de-animation. His experience of violating marginalised women becomes a mere *vehicle* in language to describe the experience of violating animals. The result here, like in *Fandry*, is that he not only constructs the sheep and Bahujan women as fungible but as jointly *insentient*. And by usurping the power to impose insentience, the dominant castes are able to affirm caste domination and also determine themselves as absolute 'humans' in the caste order. What these moments from *Fandry* and *Khwada* reveal is the interdependency of the mechanisms through which the 'human' status of Dalit-Bahujans is jeopardised and that of the dominant castes is solidified in the caste system. The caste violence perpetrated by the Marathas in both films is predicated on the attempt to construe Dalit-Bahujans and animals as mutually fungible and themselves as non-fungible. At stake in this violence, as Bargi suggests, is the very definition of the 'human' (2018) which becomes grounded in the ontological and spatial distancing of the dominant castes from animals (especially those that are 'impure') and the simultaneous proximity in which these animals and Dalit-Bahujans are placed.

Re-imagining the 'animal' and the 'human'

Fandry and *Khwada* not only critically trace the dominant caste invocation of the animal as a means to de-animate and dehumanise Dalit-Bahujans and the ensuing conceptualisation of 'human' that is contingent on this violence, but they also lay the terrain to conceive of alternate conceptions of both the 'animal' and the 'human.' The animal is then recruited not to fix caste boundaries that produce both casteism and speciesism but to imagine the possibilities of unsettling them. In *Khwada*, the image of a passing small tractor tied to a near-identical larger tractor on the road is wittily imagined by the Karhe family to resemble a mother and her cub. Here, animalisation is not a means to de-animate and humiliate but to confer life and sentience. In the opening scene I described earlier, the audiences are invited to engage in an affective seeing of the sheep as the camera focuses on them in a close-up shot with Balu's father's voice talking about their poor health. The protagonist Balu's neglect of the sheep's well-being is framed by his father as an act of 'Patilki'[9], analogising it to the pompous egotism of Marathas. However, this accusation of 'Patilki' should not be seen simply as a kind of masculine Maratha sense of pride

and entitlement to which a Bahujan character dare not aspire, rather 'Patilki' here becomes a synonym for a masculinised dominant caste indifference and callousness towards animals. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, who added 'Shepherd' to his name Ilaiah, 'as a mark of my parental profession as it is a most respected profession globally' since the dominant castes 'abused my name Ilaiah as an unworthy name, my caste as not worthy of respect' (2019b: xi), also highlights dominant caste apathy to the animal other despite their veneration of the cow when he writes,

> The Dalit-Bahujans graze, bathe and clean the dung of . . . these animals. . . . How many children of the Sangh Parivar leaders are trained to graze cows in the fields as they are "sacred" animals? On the contrary one can find hundreds of Dalit-Bahujan children feeding and nurturing these animals.
>
> *(2019a: 144)*

Khwada suggests that the physical proximity of the agrarian-dominant castes like Marathas to certain animals—perhaps unlike the children of the Sangh Parivar—still does not free them from Ilaiah's charge, especially given their claims to the Kshatriya status.[10] Turning to Ilaiah's autobiography *From a Shepherd Boy to an Intellectual* is helpful here as he writes,

> There is a universally known character of a shepherd. When a shepherd sees a baby in the hands of a mother, whose life is in danger along with the baby, the shepherd knows how to mislead even the king who plans to kill that baby and the mother. That kind of misleading of the killer king is actually leading humanity on a proper course of survival: development. As a community the shepherd community is known as the most honest and hard working. It is this community, the world over, known as the community that knows the truth better and lives for taking care of lost sheep. In India for millennia this community has been seen as worthless, wretched and stupid. All my life I lived to change this narrative. When writing the story of an Indian shepherd, I do not need a certificate from the community of priests, who never loved a sheep, never taken care of one in the whole history of this nation.
>
> *(2019b: xv–xvi).*

Ilaiah's formulation of the 'killer king' resonates with the idea of 'Patilki' as cruelty towards animals. Relating heartlessness towards the animal other to Maratha landlordism in *Khwada* overturns the Brahminical meanings of disconnectedness and intimacy with animals. The nearness in which animals and Dalit-Bahujans are placed then signifies a relationship with the world that makes them more 'human' than those whose human status is reified through their caste position which distances them from the animals. Both Ilaiah and *Khwada* converge at the idea that it is the proximity of the sheep that brings shepherding communities closer to truth and gives them a deeper understanding of the world. John Berger perhaps suggests a similar idea when he argues that the 'middle and small peasant' in the West is the only class that has 'remained familiar with animals', which has enabled them to maintain 'the wisdom which accompanies that familiarity' (1992: 28).

However, one must be careful not to interpret the Karhe family's intimacy with the sheep in *Khwada* as simply nostalgic or romantic, since the film teases out the material aspects of their bond which makes their survival contingent on one another. Their intertwined vulnerability is heightened by the state's takeover of their grazing land under the claim that it is unproductive because the family has not cultivated it for agriculture. The state apparatus dominated by the 'upper' castes and their agrarian priorities deems them jointly unproductive and therefore dispensable. This nexus is presented through their tormentor Ashokrao Patil—shown to be an

emerging political leader and a farmer who owns vast terrains of land—whose arrival in every scene with the family and the sheep heralds a disruption and violence for both the sheep and the family. Is it then not the 'Patilki' of the state itself that leads to the displacement of both and the subsequent precarious condition of the sheep that is exposed in the opening scene? But unlike 'Dudh Ka Daam', the film does not highlight these intersections only to induce sympathy and proclaim the infallibility of the caste order. The confiscation and subsequent mass slaughter of the sheep by Patil to avenge the defeat of one of his wrestlers by Balu becomes the trigger that pushes the family to revolt by murdering Patil and freeing the sheep. This moment of violence marks a resistance of the caste hierarchy and offers a moment of liberation for both the sheep and the family from the control of the dominant castes. However, the film reminds us through visuals of newspaper reports of the incident that its narration in the apparatus dictated by the dominant castes will inevitably deny this liberatory moment, and Balu is 'framed' as a fugitive who flees with his wife to an uncertain future in the city.

In *Fandry*, Jabya's reluctance to catch the pigs not only signals his resistance to being dehumanised but also entails a refusal to do violence to the pigs, suggesting that animal liberation and Dalit struggles to 'live as full human beings' (Paik 2014: 74) are not antithetical and also making possible a liberating notion of 'human' that is grounded in undoing caste. The figure of the pig is contrasted by the figure of the Black Sparrow—a mythical bird that Jabya secretly chases right from the opening scenes. The bird seems visible only to his friend Pirya and is never seen by nor known to the other villagers, except an unknown old woman who suddenly appears in one scene and stops him from approaching the bird. She tells him that the bird is like a Brahmin woman, if you touch it then the flock will beak it to death. The reason for his mysterious chase is divulged only in the second half of the film—he plans to use the hustle of a village celebration to sprinkle the bird's ashes on Shalu, unnoticed. This trick, revealed to him by the bicycle mechanic-mystic Chankya, would allow his love for Shalu to be requited and succeed. However, to conclude this sacrifice as an act of violence against animals would be too literal, especially given that the film provides us with little reason to believe that the bird physically exists. The likening of the bird to a Brahmin woman whose touch is not just elusive but taboo rather suggests that the bird is a symbolic figure whose invention renders visible something unspoken and even unspeakable. Turning to John Berger helps unpack this symbolic significance of the sparrow. According to Berger, animals did not enter the human imagination in the form of meat and leather meant for human consumption; they 'first entered the imagination as messengers and promises' who sometimes even took on a 'magical function' in the form of sacrifice, and humans made use of 'animal-signs' to chart the experience of the world (1992: 4). The cultural marginalisation of animals was a complex phenomenon according to him, because dreams, sayings, superstitions, games, and stories, that is, language itself recalls them (1992: 15). Jabya's chase for the Black Sparrow enacts this poetic relationship as it charts his inner life and his aspirations that transgress the boundaries imposed on him by the caste order—aspirations that would be difficult to express in verbal language, which itself has long been implicated in the perpetuation of casteism. Unlike the chase for the pig, which is a violent material reality imposed on him, the chase for the bird is a young boy's fantasy and his desire to dream in a world that does not allow him even a childhood. The playful music score that accompanies his chase for the sparrow in the opening scene and the visual beauty of the landscape in the light of the rising sun, accompanied by his easy movements, assemble a sensory poetry that affords precious moments of humanness, away from the daily violence under the village hierarchies where his very senses are repressed through laws surrounding what he can and cannot see/taste/hear. The bird becomes a source of magic whose sacrifice can help Jabya articulate that which is strictly taboo—inter-caste love, which stands as a threat to the stability of the caste order itself

(Ambedkar 1990a). This symbolic killing of a mythical bird by a hunter as the only possibility for the sustenance of love and life by unsettling the caste hierarchy overturns the myth in *Ramayana* where the killing of a mating bird by a hunter is interpreted as an act of *adharma* that becomes the underlying logic for the hunter's condition of indignity.

In the opening scenes of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Valmiki and his disciple Bharadvaja are in a forest when they witness a hunter interrupting a bird-couple in the process of mating by killing one of the birds. Valmiki identifies the act of interrupting the mating process of the birds as *adharma* and thus curses the hunter that he will never have a place of respect in society. In her seminal 1981 autobiography *Antasphot* (*Outburst*), Sanskrit scholar Kumud Pawde suggests that Valmiki ends up promoting the *varnavyavashta* of his time since he is moved by the plight of the mating birds that are being hunted but not that of the poor nomadic hunter (representing the figure of the Dalit) who is forced—despite his understanding of the principle of the interconnectedness of all forms of life—by the same *varnavyavashta* to wander in the sun and hunt to stave off starvation (2013: 56). Pawde reasons that Valmiki, despite being a poet, has not grasped this principle as clearly as the hunter, since he curses the hunter without hesitation but elsewhere in the text celebrates the violence on animals committed by the ruling castes for pleasure (2013: 56–57). Through Jabya's character, the opposed figures of the poet and the hunter are perhaps united, and the myth is overturned and undone—this time the bird is not recruited by the poet-hunter as a means to validate the circular logic of a barbaric order that disrespects some for the very conditions it has imposed on them while also constructing them as the exclusive threat to the forces of life and love that it feigns to protect. Here, the poet-hunter's chase symbolises not the end of the cycle of love and life but a joyful poetry-magic that dares to disrupt the injunction of caste and dream of a radical love that is not contingent on dehumanisation.

Notes

1 Although the Dhangar community has been listed as a Nomadic Tribe under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category in Maharashtra, it has long led a contentious struggle to gain access to reservations under the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category while also opposing the inclusion of Marathas in the OBC category. While their struggle has been verbally supported by successive state governments, it has also been complicated by those currently listed under the ST category, who have argued that the overall quota allotted under the ST category needs to first be expanded before the numerically large Dhangar community can be absorbed into it.

2 As scholar Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd has pointed out, there are 'contradictions' among the many castes that comprise the category 'Dalitbahujan' despite the existence of certain commonalities, since the fear of Brahmins has led Shudras to commit atrocities against Dalits. Writing about the Kaikadi community in his celebrated autobiography *Upara*, Laxman Mane complicates its place in the anti-caste struggle. He describes how he and his family negotiated with the state apparatus of the time which did not recognise their suffering in that it refused them legal safeguards based on caste as well as the complex relationship of the Kaikadi community in his village to the other marginalised communities that surrounded them. The history of the struggles of both the Dhangar and Kaikadi communities, who have been and are travelling through different political and legal classifications across time and space, attests to the uneven and shifting terrain of both anti-caste movements and the categories that ground these movements.

3 An issue captured in the 2015 student documentary produced by the School of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS, called *Caste on the Menu Card:* www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQYRinzRGXU&feature=emb_logo. Accessed on December 30, 2020.

4 For instance, see Cassie Adcock. '"Preserving and Improving the Breeds": Cow Protection's Animal-Husbandry Connection'. *South Asia* 42.6 (2019): 1141–1155. Routledge; Shraddha Chigateri. '"Glory to the Cow": Cultural Difference and Social Justice in the Food Hierarchy in India'. *South Asia* 31.1 (2008): 10–35. Routledge; Radhika Govindrajan. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018; Yamini Narayanan. '"Cow Is a

Mother, Mothers Can Do Anything for Their Children!" Gaushalas as Landscapes of Anthropatriarchy and Hindu Patriarchy'. *Hypatia* 34.2 (2020): 195–221. Cambridge University Press.

5 A few examples of where the animal shows up (not just as a metaphor) in fiction/poetry by Dalit writers are: Omprakash Valmiki. *Amma and Other Stories*. Naresh K. Jain, trans. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2008; *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Arjun Dangle, ed. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992. For an account of the comparison of a Dalit woman to a cow in a case being judged by the caste Panchayat of the Kaikadi community, see Laxman Mane's celebrated autobiography *Upara: An Outsider*. A.K. Kamat, trans. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997.

6 Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* gives a detailed cartography of how settlements were organised along caste lines: Valmiki, Omaprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, trans. Kolkata: Stree Samya, 2004. The geography of caste shifts in urban locations where Dalits do not necessarily live in the outskirts. In her autobiography *Antasphot*, Kumud Pawde recalls how the 'Mahar vasti' where she grew up in Nagpur was locked by Savarna settlements on all sides, making them vulnerable to hatred and violence from all sides.

7 www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgvLPSZJH9o. Accessed on December 23, 2020.

8 The animacy hierarchy is a culturally shared taxonomy conceptualised by linguists, 'a conceptual structure and ordering that might possibly come out of understandings of lifeliness, sentience, agency, ability, and mobility' (Chen 2012: 29), a biopolitical hierarchy where humans are usually mapped as the most sentient, animals below them, and immobile/non-motile objects closer to the bottom. Chen reads this hierarchy as an ontology of affect, 'for animacy hierarchies are precisely about which things can or cannot affect—or be affected by—which other things within a specific scheme of possible action' (2012: 30).

9 'Patil'—a common Maratha last name—refers to the unelected administrative position of the village chief, which was usually occupied by Marathas.

10 Drawing from Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's work, Suraj Yengde places the Marathas as 'neo-Kshatriyas', observing that they have 'sought to leapfrog from the Shudra caste to a higher status in the caste hierarchy' (2018: 6).

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19

Landless, Homeless, and Nameless

Locating Caste in the Environmental In/Justice in *Perariyathavar*

P. Rajitha Venugopal

This chapter analyses the Malayalam film *Perariyathavar* (*Names Unknown*, 2015, directed by Dr Bijukumar Damodaran). The film depicts the lives of marginalised people in the underbelly of Kollam city and in remote areas in the city outskirts where wastes from the city are dumped. Such portrayal of spaces and peoples raises the issue of environmental justice, which in India cannot be separated from the question of caste. The film demands a critical enquiry into the apparently natural coincidence of such spaces that are inhabited by Dalits and Adivasis and also the chosen site for waste dumps. The complex intersection of space, environmental pollution, and caste is crucial to analyse as space is socially produced (Lefebvre 1974) as a 'product of interrelations' and is 'always under construction' (Massey 2005: 9). The chapter is broadly divided into three main sections. The first section deals with environmental discourses which serve as a theoretical framework for analysing the film. The second section analyses the film within the context of Kerala's modernity and its reflection in Malayalam cinema through the portrayals/undertones of caste, land relations, and city spaces. The third section traces the creation of the fringe through systemic processes of the state's social history, reforms, and policies. The chapter argues that environmental injustice faced by the marginalised people is an outcome of land relations and caste equations of Kerala and its modernity.

Theories of environmental justice

Environmental justice discourses, developed in the US in 1970s, refer to movements for environmental protection led by marginalised communities because environment is closely associated with their lives/livelihoods. Not In My BackYard (NIMBY) is an associated concept pertaining to toxic pollution in urban spaces and refers to the tendency of elite neighbourhoods to protest any move to set up a factory in their neighbourhoods. They demand that such sources of pollution be removed from their backyards and be shifted elsewhere. This 'elsewhere' is never an innocent deference but a deliberate choice of place by authorities and constitutes localities inhabited by working class, African-American/Mexican-American/Native American communities. Environmental regulations in these areas are made lenient, with the rationale that

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such enterprises offer employment opportunities to the needy people of the neighbourhood. Movements erupted in different parts of the US protesting against such 'environmental racism' that denied these communities access to clean air and water, and exposed them to toxic pollution.[1] While the elite, affluent people enjoy all benefits of clean air and water, the poor, ethnic minorities face the risks and burdens in the short term and long term.

Unlike the erstwhile dominant environmental discourse (in the US) on preservation of wilderness, environmental justice, thus, exposed aspects of livelihood, justice, the disproportionate distribution of benefits and risks, and the inherent racism. Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier have explored similar movements among poor communities in the Global South. They note that unlike people in the Global North, who have more of a post-materialist approach to nature and prefer conservation of nature for recreation and contemplation, people in the Global South, especially peasants and tribals, view the environment as a material and political matter as it intersects with their livelihood and human rights (1997: 16). The dichotomy of nature and culture, which has been universalised and dominated Western metaphysics, is rejected by Philippe Descola who points out the need to understand 'new multi-dimensional anthropological landscape' (1996: 99) wherein human and non-human interaction happens in multiple ways in different cultures across the world.

The environmental issues in India have to be studied within this wide spectrum of multi-dimensional anthropological landscape that constitutes a variety of concerns. There are several cases of environmental injustices, such as setting up of factories near Dalit settlements, mining activities in tribal areas, displacing people and acquiring lands for development, and complexities of human–animal interactions among indigenous communities. One of the most urgent and neglected issues of environmental crisis in post-liberalisation Indian cities is that of 'sanitation inequality' and 'malevolent urbanism' (McFarlane 2012: 1287). However, the predominant trend in Indian environmental discourses is the glorified readings of Gandhian views into modern environmental narratives (Sharma 2017: 114). Guha refers to Gandhi as 'the patron saint of Indian environmental movement' (2007: 112). However, as Martinez-Alier notes, indigenous communities have stood for 'resource conservation and clean environment, even when they themselves do not claim to be environmentalists' (2002: 7). The different approaches to environment between the state and that of the villagers or indigenous populations of a region are exemplified in Ambika Aiyadurai's study on the Mishmi people of Arunachal Pradesh and their fraternal association with tigers, and in Annu Jalais's work on the position of displaced and marginalised islanders of Sunderbans *vis-à-vis* the man-eating tigers that get the state's protection. Mann Barua's study, which unveils the complications in human–elephant interactions caused by the mediation of alcohol, brings out yet another nuanced case of political ecology in rural India. Given these different cases of environmental concerns, attributing Gandhi's name to organic struggles from tribal and peasant communities may mask the many critical aspects of Indian social history.

Critiquing the Gandhian environmental discourses, Mukul Sharma identifies in them, 'an implicit yearning for Brahmanical Hindu religion, tradition, and culture, (that) valorises community, social order, conservation, and unity' (2017: 115). Such discourses uncritically imply that social order is maintained by the practice of caste system, whereby every caste is assigned certain kinds of work. On top of the hierarchy, Brahmins assume the authority of learning, and in the lowest rung, menial jobs such as cleaning, removal of animal carcasses, and manual scavenging are assigned to lower castes. While Gandhi, a Vaishya, projected the Indian village as the abode of purity and innocence, Ambedkar exposed the caste atrocities against Dalits in Indian villages, as he, unlike Gandhi, had experienced discrimination, humiliation, and denial of equal access to natural spaces in the village (Sharma 2017: 118–121). Thus, the dominant narrative of Indian environmentalism, with emphasis on Gandhian ideas, overlooked the issue of caste.

The spatiality of a village economy and access to resources such as fresh air, drinking water, rivers, ponds, wells, and open spaces were/are demarcated by the caste quotient.[2] On the one hand, Dalits were integrally connected to the land on which they laboured, on the other, they were denied the fruit of their labour. The environmental imagery in Malayalam Dalit literature is evident in the life narratives of Kallen Pokkudan and C. K. Janu, and in the selections in *No Alphabet in Sight, The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* and in *Don't Want Caste*[3] among others. These narratives illustrate Dalit association with nature that bear the mark of their myths, labour, livelihoods, and generations of toil and torture. Yet, Dalits are denied access to certain areas in the village on account of casteist narratives of purity and pollution. The upper caste's attribution of pollution to both the lower castes as well as waste can be compared to Kristeva's idea of the abject. Kristeva defines the abject as the repulsive, the loathsome, and as something that the self-fears and hates to acknowledge, identify with, or assimilate even as an 'other' or an 'object'. The abject exists as a category that threatens and unsettles the self and therefore must be excluded (1982: 1–2). Thus, there is a spatial division in society wherein the upper castes claim 'natural' access to and exercise hegemony over the best spaces and natural resources. They define and demarcate the spatial location of those below them in hierarchy and their access to natural resources. They also assign the division of labour, thus, keeping all the 'noble' work for themselves and dirty work for Dalits. This is practiced everywhere in India. All kinds of waste management in urban and rural areas are invariably done only by Dalits. Perumal Murugan's poem 'Kaigal Malam Allalama' (Can the hands hold shit?) is a stark expression of the still prevalent practice of manual scavenging. Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey observe that:

> That some human beings are judged to be tainted and believed to transmit pollution merely by touch complicates India's confrontation with growing volumes of thrown-away things. It hinders cooperation and fosters feelings that removing noxious materials is someone else's job—even by virtue of birth.
>
> *(2018: 15)*

This caste angle is largely overshadowed in the environmental justice discourses in India. Guha and Martinez-Alier discuss the 'environmentalism of the poor' (1997: 3), thus highlighting only the class angle. Guha and Gadgil identify three categories of Indian population: ecosystem people, carnivores, and ecological refugees. Ecosystem people are the rural poor who live in/near spaces such as agricultural farmlands, coastal villages, river bodies, forest regions, or hilly areas. Carnivores are industrialists and corporates that exploit and make profit out of these spaces. This exploitation directly affects the ecosystem people, displaces them, and makes them ecological refugees (1995: 4). However, this creation of ecological refugees seems to be a linear and ahistorical process, as Guha and Gadgil overlook the role of caste in this process. Every region in the country has its social history that delineates differentials, which, in turn, can significantly inform the region's environmental history. Environmental degradation of a region may have close connections with its social history and social relations. It is in this context that Dr Biju's *Perariyathavar* stands out as a narrative that connects the dots and reveals the caste angle in some of the environmental problems of the state.

Locating *Perariyathavar*

Perariyathavar makes an indelible mark on the firmament of Malayalam cinema by raising the caste question in Kerala's history and society. On the surface level, it addresses issues of urban spaces, urban labour, the urban underbelly, waste management, landfills, livelihoods, displacement, and

homelessness. The urban wastes are collected and carried by lower-caste people, who constitute the urban labour, and are dumped far away from the city in settlements inhabited by lower-caste people. On a deeper level, the film is an epilogue to Kerala's casteist culture, laws, state policies, and the common sense of its civil society. The film unveils the casteist undercurrent in Kerala's society, film history, and the narratives of progress, development, and modernity. An enquiry into the question of homelessness and landlessness of marginalised in the urban underbelly provokes the question as to how these people became the fringe of the city.

This spatial displacement points towards the history of land relations, land reforms legislation, and the globally acknowledged Kerala Model Development.[4] The film can be placed in the context of Kerala's social history and some trends in mainstream Malayalam cinema in the past few decades. The point of departure may be roughly placed in the post-1980s Kerala society and Malayalam cinema. The latter reflects the former and both together provide the background for analysing the film.

Modernity and Malayalam cinema

The first Malayalam feature film *Vigathakumaran* (1928) directed by J.C. Daniel had a Dalit Christian actor P. K. Rosy playing the role of a Nair woman. The casteist mentality of Kerala surfaced in the vitriolic reaction of the audience to such a casting/casteing, which was perceived as social transgression. The society ensured that such transgression never repeats, by bullying Rosy to the extent that her career ended as soon as it started, and she was pushed into oblivion.[5] Ironically, it is around these times that *Kerala Navothanam* or Kerala Renaissance was happening in the form of social reform movements against conservative thinking and unjust practices within different communities. The case of *Vigathakumaran* and P. K. Rosy at once illustrates the onset of modernity and progress on the one hand and the coeval presence of reactionaries who sought to define the extent of modernity that can be allowed. This paradox was always present in Kerala society and manifested itself whenever a new dimension of modernity set in.[6] The presence of modernity and revivalism in society was reflected in mainstream cinema too, in a cyclic relation of feeding out of and feeding into popular imagination. Meena T. Pillai notes,

> Regional cinemas in India have to be read as a product of modernity and a speculation on it. The cultural anxieties, ideological vacillations, changes in socio-demographic patterns and paradigm shifts in socioeconomic practices—all characteristic of societies undergoing the historical sensation of modernity . . . Thus, cinema has a heavy responsibility of shoring up a sense of new identity in the face of the cultural fragmentation and loss of moral cohesion that modernity had engendered.
>
> *(2017)*

Though Pillai writes so about the early twentieth century, this idea explains the response of cinema to any stage of modernity. For the present analysis, this quote can be read in the context of post-1980s Kerala society and cinema in the wake of new waves of modernity—a) the aftermath of land reforms introduced by the communist government and b) the rise of caste politics—both of which, in different ways, have influenced the socio-political and economic scenario of the state. *Perariyathavar* can be read within a matrix of modernity portrayed in mainstream Malayalam cinema through a) a cinematic re-creation of the Savarna self and b) a portrayal of city spaces. References to land and caste figure as the unspoken subconscious or the normalised, given scenario of mainstream Malayalam narrative psyche and that of its audience. This is evident from the then popularity of films like *Aryan*, *Bhoomiyile Rajakkanmaar*,

and *Devasuram* among others which showed rampant tendencies to create a Savarna superstar steeped in reviving feudal, casteist, and hegemonic Hindu culture. Thus, the response to communist-initiative of land reforms and the rising caste politics was meted through such a revivalist/regressive tendency on-screen. The towering centrality of the Savarna self in cinema is indicated by attributing great importance to his name and pedigree.

Significance of names and the title of *Perariyathavar*

The significance of names in India is best explained by a character in N. S. Madhavan's short story, 'Mumbai':[7] 'My name is my history and my geography: Prameela Gokhale, a Hindu, Maharashtran, Chitpawan Bhrahmin. If anyone questions my identity, I will just tell my name' (2008: 124). As she explains who or what she is, she also implies what the other is not, or what it is to not have a name and a pedigree. Such has been the case of most protagonists in mainstream Malayalam cinema, particularly those played by 'megastars' Mohanlal and Mammootty. These characters usually have the family name or/and caste name, are rarely referred to with the first name, and are often called *Tampuran* (Lord). The hefty, long name is meant to indicate the social status, caste, and identity of the protagonist and the entire plot revolves around him. For instance, Mohanlal's Devanarayanan Namboothiri (*Aryan*), Mahendra Varma Ilaya Raja (*Bhoomiyile Rajakanmar*), Mangalashery Neelakanthan (*Devasuram*), Jagannathan or the eponymous *Aaram Tampuran*, Devaraja Pratapa Varma (*Twenty Twenty*); Mammooty's Iyer characters (*Sethurama Iyer CBI* and *Iyer the Great*), Nandagopal Marar (*Narasimham*), Nandakumar Varma (*Mazhayethum Munpe*), Ravi Varma Tampuran (*Megham*), Ramesh Nambiar (*Twenty Twenty*). Thus, Namboothiri, Nair, Menon, Varma, Marar, Nambiar, Iyer[8] are among the Savarna surnames of their popular characters. Lower-caste characters have only their first names and thereby are shown as lacking, being the 'other' of the protagonist, the laughing stock, sidekick, and the aberration, whose presence is meant to heighten the heroism of the Savarna protagonist.

In contrast to such ostentatious name-play, *Perariyathavar's* title literally means people whose names we do not know. The perariyathavar, or the unknown people in this film, are the faceless mass of labour force and labourless lot in the underbelly of the city. The character played by actor Suraaj Venjaramoodu does not have a name. Or rather, he has a name, which is never uttered anywhere in the film. He is not called by anybody by his name or by anything else. This signifies the insignificance the society attributes to his presence, which is only marked by his job/labour as a daily wage, temporary sweeper of the municipality. His body, or Dalit body considered polluted by caste Hindu society, is ironically among many such bodies that sweep the city clean. He is also marked by his continuous displacement as the city develops. He does not have a 'history and a geography' as N. S. Madhavan's character claims for herself. His history has been wiped out, or, is misrepresented in the mainstream cinematic narratives, as belonging to the 'benefited' groups. His geography has been obliterated in the sweeps of social history of Kerala, and presently his shifting location is determined by the needs of the city. His daily routine is timed so as to supplement the busy routine of the elite, urban populace. He is awake when the city is asleep. The sprawling city thrives on the backbone of such innumerable nameless people. While the films discussed earlier show the construction of the Savarna self through their names, *Perariyathavar*, in the title and the narrative shows a different aspect of identity in modern Kerala which has seldom been discussed in Malayalam cinema. Apart from the creation of the Savarna self, another context for the present analysis is the portrayal of cityscapes, as *Perariyathavar* is also a narrative in the city.

The city in Malayalam cinema since 1980s

The films of late 1980s (such as *Bhoomiyile Rajakkanmar* and *Aryan*) and through the 1990s (ranging from *Vietnam Colony* to *Aaram Tampuran*) are a response to Kerala's socio-political and economic situation of the time such as the aftermath of implementation of land reforms, strong communist politics, emerging Dalit identity politics, gulf migration, unemployment, and Mandal Commission report. The early portrayals of the city in Malayalam cinema, most commonly Bombay, Madras, or Ernakulam, symbolised modernity, dreams, ambition and freedom. The city was portrayed as a transient space of anonymity for the protagonist to re/gain a name and fame for oneself, either in the city or back in the village. It was also conceived as a binary of the village which was portrayed as embodying goodness, nostalgia, tradition, and purity. The village was invariably picturised in cliched frames of panoramic green fields, temple, pond/river, a pious mother, and with the acoustic accompaniment of flute and *edekka* (a small drum played in the temples outside the sanctum sanctorum while the *puja* is performed, that is to say, a Savarna instrument). Thus, the village was always portrayed in the upper-caste nostalgic imagination.

One of the classic portrayals of the city/village binary can be seen in *Toovanathumbikal* (1987). The city is portrayed as the place for exploring all kinds of adventures that are not possible in the village because of its inherent 'goodness and purity', which can also be tied to the image of the Savarna hero and his family honour. The semblance of 'goodness and purity' is maintained in the projection of the village by keeping away the 'polluting elements' out of the Savarna spaces—in the *Porambokke*.[9] Evidently, the picturesque, nostalgic portrayal of the village is marked by the absence of Dalit characters or ostracisation of lower-caste characters. This is remarkably depicted in this movie in what can be considered one of the cruellest comedy scenes in Malayalam cinema. It entails the eviction of a lower-caste tenant living on the protagonist's land, which according to Land Reforms Act is supposed to be owned by the tenant. From the outset of the film, the tenant is threatened to evacuate the space, which the protagonist finally accomplishes with his rich friends by abducting and threatening to kill him. This scene is supposedly meant to be comic and heroic.

Other urban narratives of the time include *Nadodikatt* (1987), *Pattanapravesham* (1988), *Akkare, Akkare, Akkare* (1990), and *Nagarangalil Chennu Raparkam* (1990), which portray the job-hunting of the upper-caste protagonist and his sidekick in the city, and their exploits and adventures. They show the dire jobless situation and poverty of the educated upper-caste hero and the 'undeserving, not-so-educated' sidekick, whose presence is meant for comedy or ridicule. These popular narratives reflect the anti-Mandal sentiment intending to invoke mockery at the sidekick and sympathy for the protagonist.

Another response to the rising identity politics is the depiction of upper-caste families as deprived and living in pathetic condition. In *Aryan* (1988), the unemployed protagonist belongs to an impoverished Namboothiri family submerged in debt and apparent deceit by history—through land reforms, caste politics, and reservations. Forced to migrate to Bombay, he eventually grows into a rich gangman and finally returns to his village to reclaim all that had been lost. He bribes a communist politician to make him declare that Namboothiris are the downtrodden caste now. In a blatant admonition of assertive caste politics, the film misappropriates Changampuzha's 'Vazhakkula'[10] to evoke sympathy for the impoverished Namboothiri family. In *Bhoomiyile Rajakkanmar* (1987), the protagonist Prince Mahendra Varma Ilayaraja from an erstwhile Travancore royal family enters state politics, now that regal power has been replaced by state power—nevertheless he wants to retain power by making a farce of democracy. In *Kizhakkunarum Pakshi* (1991) and *Vietnam Colony* (1992), the Brahmin protagonists hail from

impoverished family represented by dark corridors of *illam* and *agraharam* (names of Brahmin households). These narratives seek to show the plight of the upper castes, and the protagonists seek to reclaim their lost glory.

The heights of such reclamatory narratives is *Aaram Tampuran* (1997), in which the protagonist, a gang man from Bombay and a globetrotting businessman, returns to his village to reclaim the *kovilakam* (palatial house) and to restore the traditional rituals of the temple. One of his famous dialogues is about his success in evicting people from Dharavi slums over a single night. He implies that he is an 'evictor' and a gangster from a big city like Bombay and can easily do the same to regain his family's lost property and prosperity. Interestingly, the eviction referred to here is that of an upper-caste family and not Dalits or lower castes. The film hardly has any lower-caste presence at all but is centred around the property duels between two *Thampuran* families. The glorification of tradition and feudalism in these narratives, and the popularity of these films in the 1990s resonate with an unconscious upper-caste, landed sentiment of the majority, which cannot imagine the Dalit perspective or the experience of being outcasted.

In these narratives, the socio-economic position of the protagonist, his arrival in the city, and his reminiscences of or return to the village together fit into a jigsaw puzzle that lays bare the unconscious of the narrative: the response to communist government's implementation of land reforms laws and also to the rise of Dalit identity assertion through the 1980s. These films portray the upper-caste protagonist and his family as deprived and bereft of their past glory, because their lands have been seized and redistributed to the landless. They echo and anticipate the sentiments of upper-caste reactionaries against the Mandal Commission report and reservation issue. These films portray scenarios where the upper-caste protagonist seeks to regain the lost glory and emerge as the preserver of tradition. Or they are already rich with ancestral property and reign as the unquestioned feudal lord, as in *Devasuram* (1993) and its sequel *Ravanaprabhu* (2001), in which case, too, they are portrayed as the preserver of tradition. Thus, these films represent a period in mainstream Malayalam film history marked by upper-caste pride or the loss, revival, and consolidation of it and the preservation of tradition from 'defilement'. These films tried to create a new feudal structure in democracy based on the glory and privilege of the past, which had been based on exploitation of Dalits and other lower castes. The cultural capital of upper castes in modern Kerala is a product of the leisure they had enjoyed in the feudal past of agrarian slavery. Mainstream Malayalam cinema has firmly held on to that cultural capital and sought to represent, celebrate, and re-establish such a hierarchical, undemocratic, feudal structure till recently when alternative narrations began to democratise the cinematic space. While such was the raging trend till late 1990s, the next decade, especially the latter half, saw a shift from the fascination with feudalism to an interest in negotiating the new modernity in the neoliberal globalised spaces of the city.

The neoliberal globalised city post 2000

Reflecting the post-globalisation, neoliberal milieu, cities began to be portrayed in Malayalam cinema as sites of crime and corruption, as land became property of real-estate value. Like the Bombay of the 1980s in Malayalam cinema, Kochi emerged as the new Bombay of Kerala, where modernity, luxury, glamour, alienation, anonymity, crime, and squalor prevailed. While Kochi was portrayed in many film songs in cliched shots with the lagoon in the background, around 2010 and after there is remarkably different portrayal of Kochi, validating the now-proverbial dialogue from *Big B* (2007), 'Kochi is not the same old Kochi anymore'. *Black* (2004) and *City of God* (2011) are some narratives that portray crime in the city and the presence of 'quotation gangs'[11] who work for real-estate mafia. The origin of crime was supposed

to be from the underbelly of the city. As if to invert such a narrative, *Chota Mumbai* (2007) is a comical take with a few men dreaming to be dons of Kochi when Kochi becomes a big city like Mumbai. *Chapa Kurish*, meaning Head Tail, depicts the city in the simultaneity of its two faces, as if two sides of the same coin—a rich, urban, upper-class Kochi, and a poor, suburban, marginalised Kochi existing side by side, the former feeding on the latter. This spatial segregation of the rich/poor, urban/suburban follows the same pattern of exclusion of Dalits and other lower castes in villages where they are treated as social outcastes.

Post 2010s, films were focused on telling the story of a particular locality,[12] each of them showing a different face of Kochi. *Annayum Rasoolum* (2013) set around Vypeen island, off the coasts of Kochi, portrays people traversing the waters to work in the city; *Charile* (2015) portrays Kochi as a dreamy, vibrant carnival; *Kammattipadam* (2016) traces the urbanisation and modernisation of the city; *Parava* (2017) portrays a locality inhabited by Muslim community; *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) frames the lives of people in the eponymous island; and *Valiyaperunnal* (2019) paints the lives of an array of characters in the labyrinthine alleys of Fort Kochi. These films focus on lives in a certain locality in a more close-up way than the bird's eye manner in which the city used to be depicted earlier. The sharp shift from an up-close portrayal of the protagonist's heroics to the portrayal of spatiality and lives in their plurality and horizontality is remarkable in these films.

Among these, *Kammattipadam* deals most directly with the social and spatial margins of Kochi, as it visually and narratively traces the transformation of Ernakulam of the 1980s from a town with sprawling green, open spaces to a sprawling big city with shrinking spaces. The film depicts the spatial marginalisation of Dalits into the narrow, dark alleys amidst the prosperity of the city. It charts the transformation of land into real estate and the rise of land mafia. It traces how Dalits are hired as the mafia's henchmen to evict their own kind, little realising then that they too will be evicted from their spaces. The climax scene in the skyscraper apartment overlooks the city carved out by uprooting many Dalit neighbourhoods. This narrative finds its logical continuation in *Perariyathavar*, as if answering the question: when the city expands, where do these evicted people go?[13]

Perariyathavar and the margins of the city

Perariyathavar begins and ends in the streets of the city. The film does not reveal anything about most of the characters in terms of their names or caste. It only reveals where they stay and what work they do. These people include a sweeper (Suraaj), a washerwoman, a mechanic, a bandmaster, migrant labourers among many other unknown people. This ghetto consists of different grades of marginalised people. Some of them own the little piece of land on which their shanties stand. Suraj's character does not own the land or the house but lives in a makeshift set-up made of tin sheets and roof which leaks when it rains. Many families live alongside the railway track and under trees with no roof above their heads. In one instance, a girl from one such family is found bleeding and unconscious in the foliage, suggesting that she was raped. Scores of migrant labourers collectively called 'Bengali' workers live 'herded' together in cramped rooms. The film portrays these people living in the shadow of a prosperous, green, and beauteous city.

The film depicts the city either at the crack of dawn or in the dead of the night. The sweepers remove the stinking waste from the city in the wee hours of the morning before the city wakes up and the morning walkers step out to have a breath of fresh air. In some frames where the city is portrayed in broad daylight, the camera pans the pavements with a row of street vendors, a row of temporary dwellings along the railway track, a flyover and speeding vehicles, and Suraaj walking through the city as a *flaneur*[14] of the margins, mapping the city that is inaccessible

to him. In other instances, the city is shown in the background, and the foreground focuses on the sweeping labour, garbage van, or garbage hills in the city outskirts. The factory is referred to twice: when the laundrywoman washes hospital bedsheets in the water body polluted by factory effluents and when the authorities visit the ghetto with a government order to evacuate them to construct an approach road to the factory. These images of industrial pollution correspond to the many environmental protests that have been going on in the state. For instance, protests against industrial pollution in the Eloor-Edayar industrial area near Aluva have been going on since 1972,[15] as wastes from around 250 chemical manufacturing factories are dumped into the Periyar river. This region is the third most polluted region in India (Haridas 2017: 15–17).

Another space shown is the outskirts of the city where garbage is dumped and piled at a waste treatment plant. This space is also the site of protest by a group of women in the neighbourhood, demanding the plant to be shut down. This instance corresponds to many such real protests such as Vilappilshala in Trivandrum, Brahmapuram in Kochi, and Njeliamparamb in Kozhikode among others. The protest raises the issue of toxic pollution and health risks people suffer due to the proximity to the dump yard. The air, water, and soil get polluted, and therefore these people are denied access to clean natural resources. It is to be noted that the site of waste treatment plant is not an empty space. For the 'imagined community' of the green and clean city, there has to be a binary locality that is supposedly 'uninhabited' by an 'unimagined community'. Rob Nixon defines the 'unimagined communities' as those people who are imaginatively evacuated before being physically evacuated. That is, these people are assumed to be invisible and dispensable, as their lives and existence never matter to authorities. They are always put into peril to facilitate developmental projects (2011: 115).

Perariyathavar portrays the two ends of a spectrum from the margins of the city to the periphery beyond the city. Though the protest is against the authorities, the garbage-pickers who dump waste there are the ones who have to face the protesters. In effect, the faceless authorities are not held accountable or do not care, and the garbage-pickers, most of them temporary workers, lose their job when the plant is shut. By pitting these two groups against each other, the authorities wash their hands off a major ecological and health crime they facilitate. The narrative does not show the consequence of the strike except that the character of Suraaj loses his job, and he loses his home in the slum to the evacuation process. He is once again doubly displaced and moves to another part of the city to work at a construction site along with many migrant workers.

A scene in the film entails Suraaj carrying sacks of cement at the construction site, which is the skeleton of a new high-rise apartment. The frame constitutes a view from the under-construction flat with two large window-spaces overlooking the vast water body and equally vast green spaces of the city. This shot is in contrast to the usual panoramic views of the cityscape, seen in many Kochi films, with the protagonist sipping coffee and enjoying the view of the rains or sunset from the balcony of an opulent flat. This single frame of the city from a high-rise construction site shows the making of the city through displacement and exploitation.

While the issue of waste management is left unresolved, the possible outcomes of the strike would have been as follows: if the garbage of the city is not cleaned, it will accumulate in the different dark corners of the city, inhabited by landless, homeless people. Or it will be dumped in the water bodies and washed away to the city outskirts. Or the authorities will suppress the protest and continue with the garbage dumping as earlier. If the plant in that locality is shut down, the municipality might identify another site, in which case a new set of people would be made to suffer. This is the cycle from which the authorities want to evade and thereby neglect the question of environmental and social justice to Dalits and lower-caste communities who live in these spaces and conditions.

The film deals with different spaces that seem like disconnected dots which, if joined together, unfolds the narrative of displacement and environmental injustice in the state. Apart from the spaces discussed so far, the most significant one is in the forest, at a site of protest by Adivasis for their land rights. The film begins and ends at this protest site in the forest, and the narrative in between is told as a flashback story. Logically, the site of protest for land rights is the actual flashback story of the margins and slums of the city. These protests correspond to the Muthanga and Chengara land struggles[16] where Adivasis and Dalits protested for their land rights.[17] The climax of the film, in the forest and then back in the city with Suraaj losing his son to the police firing at the protest site, signifies state brutality, personal loss, loss of the struggle, and the return to the invisible existence amidst the indifference of city life. The struggle for land rights thus remains unanswered and incomplete, which is then trumped by the needs for daily existential survival.

The film demands the question: how did the fringe come into being or where did these people come from? It directly connects the displacement and environmental injustice to the question of land rights. It is impossible to ignore the social reality of the urban underbelly and the swarming slums tucked away from the vista of the beautiful city in 'God's own country', which is shown in the film as an outcome of denial of land ownership. The film thus shows the condition of the marginalised people, socially and spatially displaced, and living through recurring displacement to make space for the casteist society and state.

Modernity and making of the margins

The spatial and environmental condition of Kerala should be contextualised in the historical and systemic processes related to land and caste, i.e. Land Reforms and Kerala Model Development. In his critique of Kerala Model Development, Sunny M. Kapikkad notes that a mere class analysis 'obscure(s) the decisive relationship between property ownership and caste' (Kappikad 2011b: 465). Land reforms have not 'disturb(ed) the foundations of traditional caste hierarchies', as a major share of Kerala's land holdings are owned by upper and middle castes. Further, plantation estates and trusts were exempted from the purview of the Land Reforms Act (Kappikad 2011b: 468–469). The delay in the implementation of the act and the political instability of over a decade worked in favour of landed upper-caste families to save their lands. The middle castes who were tenants on the landlord's property got entitlements through land reforms. But Dalits and Adivasis were excluded, as they had been social outcastes and could never work as tenants on the landlord's property.

To accommodate them, The Hutment Dwellers Act[18] and the One Lakh Housing Colony scheme were passed (Kappikad 2011a: 478), and these settlements are referred to as colonies: '60 percent of Scheduled Caste population in Kerala lives in 26,109 Dalit colonies spread across the state, all in abysmally poor living conditions' (Yadu and Vijayasuryan 2016: 2); '[t]ens of thousands of people live in huts beside roads, canals, and other unoccupied marginal lands' (Kappikad 2011a: 480). Thus, Land Reforms Act's proclaimed slogan of 'land to the tillers' did not materialise for the Dalits though they were the real tillers of the land. Yadu and Vijayasuryan observe three exclusionary processes through which Dalits have been deprived of land ownership possibilities: (1) the historical *janmi* or feudal system, (2) Land Reforms laws, and (3) land market (2016: 1). With meagre resources, Dalits could neither afford to sell their land, for want of another place to go, nor could they cultivate and be self-sustained as they were denied cultivable land. Thus, they remained in their colonies which were spaces of invisibility with poor conditions for survival.

Though excluded from the land market, their spaces are often infringed upon by land mafia who want to buy their lands at cheap prices for development projects, as exemplified in

Kammattipadam. People in the colonies are at the receiving end of the excesses of development, as (a) they are evicted and robbed off their lands and (b) they suffer toxic industrial pollution or their localities are treated as dump yards—all these cases are shown in *Perariyathavar*. They are thus, doubly affected, as neither are able to voluntarily sell their land and move to a 'healthier environment' (as people with resources could/would do) nor are they spared of the perpetual state of displacement. While development happens for the sake of an imagined community of people who will be its consumers and beneficiaries, the 'unimagined communities' (Nixon) are forced to make way for it and bear the brunt of it. For development/displacement projects such as sand mining, quarrying, construction of highways, metro rails, airports, harbours, laying gas pipelines, and for other kinds of industrial and infrastructural developments, their localities are often targeted first, as depicted in *Perariyathavar*. Anybody with money and clout can influence authorities, appropriate laws, evacuate people, and seize their lands. Thus, the two sides of the development story are: on the one hand the narrative is that there is no land for redistribution, on the other, lands are greedily grabbed for such development projects. Thus, it can be seen that landlessness and homelessness is a condition constructed and perpetuated by Kerala's developmental modernity governed by inherent casteist attitudes.

Conclusion

This social/spatial marginalisation notwithstanding, Ravi Raman observes that Kerala has had an 'environmental modernity' (Raman 2012) wherein subaltern groups have protested against environmental degradation, raised public awareness, and demanded action against social injustice and exploitation by authorities. He cites three cases of environmental modernity pertaining to livelihood and environment between 2001 and 2010: (1) against the Birla Grasim Rayon Factory in Mavoor (2001), (2) anti-CocaCola struggle in Plachimada (2002), and (3) anti-Endosulfan struggle in Kasargod (2010).[19] Interestingly, he does not discuss Muthanga (2003) and Chengara (2008) land struggles among the instances of 'livelihood-environmental activism'. The former three struggles are not related to redistribution of land and perhaps therefore were 'successful', while the latter two are cases of Adivasi and Dalit land rights, respectively, which hit the nail on the casteist mindset and laws regarding land ownership. By briefly depicting Adivasi land struggle, *Perariyathavar* shows the extent of displacement and environmental injustice caused by the denial of land rights.

The fact that land reforms were undertaken in Kerala while in most states it was not is a great first step towards implementing socio-economic equity. Such progressive steps have indeed had repercussions in generating a socio-politically conscious public sphere in Kerala, more than in any other state in the country. This consciousness has been visible in the appreciation of literature, film, and aesthetics, not only of the region but of beyond, and even the international. However, the celebration of Kerala's progressiveness should not camouflage the urgent discussion of the perpetration of casteist politics that is still prevalent in the spatial and social sphere of Kerala.

The marginalised people in *Perariyathavar* are a cross-section of not only the margins of the city but the margins of Kerala's modernity and developmental experience. They have not only been excluded and alienated by the modernisation process or the developmental experience, but their systemic and structural marginalisation is reinforced each time they interact with 'modern' Kerala. The film thus reveals the casteist attitude of state and society towards Dalits as well as toxic environmental waste, which constitute the idea of NIMBY, but in the *Porambokke* (beyond the bounds of 'civilized' spaces). This condition can be compared

to environmental racism in the US, as non-Dalit and non-Adivasi people enjoy the benefits of clean environment and ample space, while the risks and dirt are relegated to the margins. Thus, the film speaks back to the film history and social history of Kerala that has celebrated the pride and achievements of the landed castes and have cast a blind eye to the lives in the social/spatial margins.

Notes

1 See Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of Environment Justice Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2001; Eduardo Lao Rhodes. *Environmental Justice in America: A New Paradigm. Bloomington*: Indiana University Press, 2003

2 The situation in cities also reflects the same kind of spatial politics. See Nikhil Anand's study 'Municipal Disconnect: On Abject Water and Its Urban Infrastructures' for a detailed analysis of the spatial politics and systemic inaction of municipal authorities that 'disconnects' the people of a Muslim settlement in Mumbai by denying their right to clean municipal water supply.

3 Kallen Pokkudan was a Dalit and an environmental activist who passionately worked for the preservation and regeneration of mangrove forests in Kerala. His life narratives are *Ende Jeevitham* and *Kandalkaadugalkidayil Ende Jeevitham*. See Ranjith Thankappan. 'Life, History, and Politics: Kallen Pokkudan's Two Autobiographies and the Dalit Print Imaginations in Keralam'. In *Dalit Literatures in India*, Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, eds. New Delhi: Routledge, 2016; 204–215. C. K. Janu is an Adivasi activist and political leader who has led some of the historic struggles for land rights of Adivasis in Kerala. Her life narrative is *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu*. See Carmel Christy K. J. 'Janu and Saleena Narrating Lives: Subjects and Spaces'. In *Dalit Texts and Politics Re-imagined*, Judith Misrahi-Barak, K. Satyanarayana, and Nicole Thiara, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2020; 105–120.

4 This model refers to the idea that Kerala enjoys standards of living comparable to developed countries in Europe in terms of literacy, life expectancy, health care, infant mortality rate, and equity; despite the fact that, unlike European countries, Kerala is not a fully industrialised economy, the credits for this development are often attributed to the Land Reforms legislation introduced by the communist government in 1957 and implemented in 1970.

5 See Jenny Rowena. 'Locating P. K. Rosy: Can a Dalit Woman Play a Nair Role in Malayalam Cinema Today?'. *Round Table India*, February 24, 2013; Bindu Menon. 'Affective Returns: Biopics as Life Narratives'. In *Caste and Life Narratives*, Charu Gupta and Subramanian Shankar, eds. Primus, 2019; 140–169. See the chapter on P. K. Rosy in this volume.

6 One of the recent instances being the responses to the 2018 Supreme Court verdict allowing the entry of women into Sabarimala temple

7 N. S. Madhavan is a Malayalam writer. 'Mumbai' problematises the idea of citizenship based on documents and the consequent exclusions it entails.

8 This is also an observation made by a character played by Soubin Shahir in *Mahesinte Pratikaram* (2016), directed by Dileesh Pothan. The observation is that Mohanlal plays only 'top class' characters, but Mammooty's characters are more diverse. However, Mammooty, though not as much as Mohanlal, has had his share of upper-caste characters.

9 *Porambokke* in colloquial terms refers to the commons or lands that are unwanted or not owned by anybody. Such lands are taken over by the government and are meant to be redistributed to landless people, which mostly constitute Dalits and lower-caste communities.

10 'Vazhakkula' meaning 'plantain bunch' is a poem written by Changampuzha Krishna Pillai in 1937. The poem is a narrative about a Dalit family that plants a plantain tree and waits for months for it to bear fruit. As the children in the family are starving, and the parents take good care of tree hoping to have its fruit, the landlord cuts and takes away the plantain bunch which is literally the fruit of Dalit labour and rightfully due to the Dalit. The film inverts the scenario and shows the Namboothiri family starving and the Dalit family enjoying the fruit of labour from the Namboothiri's land.

11 'Quotation gangs' in local parlance refers to goons who are hired to commit crimes such as murder, kidnapping, and extortion.

12 Saraswathy Nagarajan. 'In Malayalam Cinema, the Small Town is the New Star'. *The Hindu*. June 6, 2019.

www.thehindu.com/entertainment/films/many-critically-acclaimed-films-in-malayalam-are-firmly-roted-in-small-towns-and-villages-in-kerala/article27555054.ece

13 Lakshmi Pradeep in her article titled 'Companions and Co-actors: The Role of Non-human in Malayalam Cinema' analyses the film *Parava* for the portrayal of human–non-human interaction. She observes *Parava* as one among recent Malayalam films like *Carbon*, *Virus*, *Ottal*, and *Jallikattu* which focus on ecological and non-human aspects.

14 See Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin's idea of the *flaneur* as an epitome of the modern man strolling the city as an observer in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century European cityscapes.

15 In a recent interview, M. K. Prasad, a renowned environmentalist associated with the Save Silent Valley Movement, mentioned that, interestingly the widespread support received for Mavoor protest and the Silent Valley movement did not reflect in the case of Eloor protests. Also, in the light of some of the recent development projects, the floods of 2018 and 2019, and reports on Western Ghats, he urges the need for a second wave of Environmental Modernity in Kerala. See 'Silent Valleyude Sahodara Margam'. *Mathrubhoomi Weekly,* March 22, 2020; 32.

16 Muthanga land struggle was a major movement of Adivasis of Wayanad, led by C. K. Janu in 2003. Chengara land struggle was led by many groups of Dalits, Adivasis, Dalit Christians and Muslims in Chengara in 2008. See C. K. Janu's interview and Sunny M. Kappikad's article in *No Alphabet in Sight*.

17 *Papilio Buddha* (2013) directed by Jayan K. Cherian pointedly depicts the atrocities faced by Dalits and Adivasis from the society and the state as well as the injustice with respect to their land and environmental rights.

18 According to this act, lands (three cents in city corporations, five cents in municipalities, and ten cents in panchayats) were granted to Dalits and Adivasis. See Sunny M. Kappikad. 'Kerala Model: A Dalit Critique' in *No Alphabet in Sight*.

19 See Ravi Ravin's article 'Environmental Modernity'. From the early 1960s onwards there have been protests to shut down Birla Grasim Rayon factory in Mavoor, Calicut, against the toxic pollution of Chaliyar river. After decades of persistent protest, the factory was closed down in 2001. The anti-Coca Cola Struggle was led by a group of Dalits and Adivasis in Plachimada against the contamination of water bodies in the vicinity; the anti-Endosulfan struggle was against Plantation Corpoation of Kerala's spraying of Endosulfan pesticide in the cashew plantations of Kasargod.

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20

Framing Local Legends and the Caste Matrix in the Tamil Cinema of the Late 1980s[1]

Stalin Rajangam

Significant changes in the political, socio-cultural sphere affected Tamil cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s. With Backward Castes gaining political authority, the contribution of the artists in the field of cinema hailing from these castes found natural access to the film industry.[2] Local personalities became characters; local stories and landscapes became narratives in films. As such, village narratives became the predominant theme in the 1980s. Though village-centred stories were released earlier, in film after film, a narrative move to locate the native or the rustic as the inside is discernible (Kaali 2000: 175).[3] In Tamil Nadu, there are numerous local deities (Ponni Amman, Chennammaal, Raakayi, Mari Amman, and Palichi Amman to name a few) related to the ones killed on the account of inter-caste marriage(s). By adapting those stories into screenplays, these films attributed love as a tool to overpower caste and religion.

By tracing the films dealing with caste and worship, this chapter tries to show how along with the emergence of the local narratives, Tamil films of the period expressed faith in modernity that gets represented in the 'love beyond caste' battling for social change. The history of the Tamil cinema is well documented by film historians such as S. Theodore Bhaskaran and Arandtai Narayanan. Karthigesu Sivathambi in *Thamizh Panpaatil Cinema* focused on caste and other aspects of films such as songs and actors. His critical work was a pioneering contribution that led to M. S. S. Pandian's significant work, *The Image Trap*. Venkatesh Chakravarthy (essays collected later as *Suvadugal—Thirai Vimarsana Thoguppu*) was seminal as he discussed the nativity cinema of the 1980s and Bharathiraja's films in particular. His work placed nativity cinema in the history of Tamil cinema along the socio-political changes that occurred in India and Tamil Nadu. Sundar Kaali in 'Narrating Seduction: Vicissitudes of the Sexed Subject in Tamil Nativity Film' proposed different waves of nativity cinema. He propounded that the films between the 1950s and 1970s belong to what he termed 'Old Nativity Film' as they were 'characterised by an ideological investment centred on the rurality of its plot events and roles' (Kaali 2000: 170) and Barathiraja's films being the harbinger of the second wave.

This chapter, however, by discussing the traditional stories and local legends meeting the traits of a modern discourse while being adapted as screenplays in cinema, attempts to make a fresh contribution to the hitherto scholarship on Tamil cinema. While nativity, modernism, caste, and gender have been discussed previously, this chapter shows how tradition and

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modernity meet and how Dalits, in spite of not being represented consciously, made it into the narratives through the depiction of love—the love stories taken from local legends and set in a Dalit form of cinema. The first section deals with the narration of films with such stories and the various strands with which they came into being. The second section argues in detail how (and in what ways) caste was the fulcrum of all the narratives, how film-makers scripted the modern discourse of love using the local/regional legends and why. It also touches upon the trajectory of this trend in the middle of the 1990s. Hence the movies discussed here are the ones which were released in the threshold time, that is, the last few years of the 1980s and the movies in the early 1990s.

Caste of romance, deifying victims

Tamil cinema underwent a sea change during the 1970s. Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai in his essay, 'The 1970s Tamil cinema and the postclassical turn' delineates that during this post-classical period, movies were marked by weak and ambiguous protagonists, traditions were ambivalent, dialogues were realistic, shootings done on locations instead of studios and sets, and melodramas were subtler (Pillai 2015: 12). Subsequent to this, by the 1980s, the village acquired centrality in the cinematic representations and began to emerge generically. As a result, there was a discernible depiction of village terrains, people, stories, and customs. Films that were critical of social injustices featured the struggles of agrarian workers who took on feudal landlords and their moments of triumph. Such films constituted a category in themselves which Sundar Kaali terms 'Neo-nativity' films that were 'characterised by an ideological investment centred on the rurality of its plot-events and roles' (Kaali 2000: 169, 70). Other kinds of films were based on tales of Robin Hood-like local and folk heroes which is a discussion in itself.[4] Yet another kind comprised 'love stories' (romance narratives) where a feudal lord's/rich man's sister or daughter falls in love with the poor and diligent worker-hero. Her love would ensue against status or caste. The hero struggles to realise his love and his eventual victory transpires to signify not only love's triumph but also suggests that love has the potential to challenge social inequality.

There are two ways in which the village-centred romantic narratives unfold: either the 'scent of the soil' (Chakravarthy 2018: 29) assumes importance and eventually, the film ends up as a narrative of caste pride, or love transcends the barriers imposed by social inequality. In this line of village-centred stories, local legends of women who had become goddesses were turned into powerful film narratives. Tamil cinema narratives have always favoured the theme of love and the courage required to realise it, and these village tales fitted well into this existing structure. Each local story was turned into a film against the backdrop of a particular landscape.

'This film, set in the village of Mallingapuram, in the Western Ghats, in Madurai district depicts the real story of a woman who lived a historical life and died an eventful death': the movie *Aatha Un Kovilile* (In Your Temple, Mother, 1991) commences with the director's voice-over. The film starts with a couple, holding a baby, getting off a bullock cart at a temple. They are a couple married across castes (Kasturi-Nayakkar and Veeran-Arundhatiyar), and they left the village to live elsewhere but have now returned to name their child after the goddess in gratitude, for she has helped them survive. The child is named Kasturi. The plot goes on to deal with why those who married across castes pray to this goddess.[5] In films of this genre, the mentioned events are always proclaimed to be certain and real and in order to mark the tale in sharp relief, it is set in a specifically sketched landscape. This way, the land, the village and the true story are interlaced. Kasturi is the daughter of a Pannaiyar (landlord or landowner) Ramaya who belongs to the Nayakkar caste.[6] The family betroths Kasturi to her *muraimaman*[7] though he is a man of ill-repute. Kasturi is in love with (Madurai) Veeran who belongs to an oppressed

caste.[8] She compares his virtuous nature with that of her *maman* and decides to marry him. Not finding it easy to say no to her, her parents agree to the marriage. However, the village pressurises the family to uphold village and caste honour. The villagers insist on killing the lovers as well. They suggest that they should be poisoned to death before they consummate their marriage, thereby preventing the 'adulteration' of blood lineage. Kasturi's uncle, that is, Ramaya's brother, poisons her food. In spite of Veeran's pleading, none come forward to help, leading to Kasturi's death. Later, the villagers mark her grave as a temple and start praying to her. A devotional lamp of undying flame is lit in the temple's niche. Since that time, we learn, lovers have sought her blessings for the success of their courtship. However, it ends with the suggestion that love abides over caste.

The film *Raakayi Koyil* (The Temple of Raakayi), similar in its theme, was released in 1993, but it deals with yet another characteristic feature that has to do with magical disappearances. The landlord Bommu Nayakkar's daughter falls in love with Sinnaraasu, an agrarian worker, with whom she elopes. Bommu Nayakkar responds in a similar manner as was done in his father's time: the eloped couples are captured, tied to a withering palm tree, and burnt alive. While in other respects this is a usual love story, its narrative limits are extended by the portrayal of a specific punishment meted out to lovers who dare to transgress the caste limits. Interestingly, *Raakayi Koyil* doesn't depict the story of Raakayi but alludes to an earlier film *Namma Ooru Poovatha(l)* (1990) where it features as a secondary narrative. Raakayi's lover Ramadurai leaves her waiting while he goes to fetch the *thaali*.[9] While crossing the river, a sudden deluge washes him away, and Raakayi, not knowing this, waits for his arrival through sun and rain and eventually is transformed into a statue. This 'magic disappearance' and turning into a statue is, however, actually perjury of an act of killing.

The film *Thulasi* released in 1987 was perhaps the first of this genre of films we have been discussing so far, and while it invokes folklore content, it also subtly subverts the same. This film's narrative threads together local tales of caste transgression with the idea of equality, fostered by modern value systems. The village Pannaiyar and temple priest Thirunavukkarasu is the father of two children, Selvam and Thulasi. He is also devoted to his caste. When his son Selvam falls in love with a Dalit girl, Ponni, Thirunavukkarasu reluctantly agrees to the proposed wedding. But the next day Ponni's dead body floats in the well. Though he had murdered her, he spins the tale as if she had brought about her own death. At this juncture, Thulasi falls in love with Sivalingam, the graduate son of the cobbler who makes shoes for Thirunavukkarasu. Thirunavukkarasu concedes the match in front of the village assembly but contrives a plan to ensure that this marriage across castes does not materialise. Sivalingam goes away for further studies. During that time, in her father's absence, Thulasi is in the temple and offers *vibuthi* (sacred ash) to a child that is sick and has been brought to be healed, as was her father's wont. The child recovers and the villagers assume it was Thulasi's doing and throng to the temple to get *vibuthi* from her hands. Her father wonders if he should not turn this situation to his advantage. As luck would have it, the pox spreads through the village and Thirunavukkarasu suggests Thulasi engage in the ritual of 'fetching the milk pot to the goddess' in order to heal the pox-stricken. Thulasi who had been wearing a half-saree till then turns up in a yellow saree in which the Amman deity is dressed. She wears a big round of saffron on her forehead and speaks very few words. In this event, Thulasi 'becomes' Amman (a generic name for the goddess), even without quite knowing it. The villagers too begin to view her as divine.[10]

Now that she is a goddess, Thulasi is freed from 'being human' and hence has to shed human qualities such as romantic love. And by that same token, it is made clear that none can marry her. She is thus separated from Sivalingam, the lower-caste man. Thus, her father's plan is executed perfectly. As we have seen, to kill a woman and transform her into a goddess represents a form

of atonement for murders that take place on account of caste feeling. This is what we find in many narratives. This particular narrative though digresses a little: she becomes Amman while she is still alive and is placed beyond the pale of what is human. This is an interface between the ordinary and the extraordinary. In the denouement, a special *pooja* is conducted for the (alive) Amman. Sivalingam attends the ceremony and sings of their love, rekindling Thulasi's emotions. Eventually, she remembers what it was to love and rediscovers her past self. Released from her extraordinary status, she becomes human again and leaves the village with Sivalingam. Love is thus made out to be more powerful than what we might consider 'divine'.[11]

Similarly in *Deiva Vaakku* (1992), the Amman story is linked to a Dalit character. People in a village pray to Amman as rain has been scarce. An orphan girl, Amsavalli (unmarked by caste), turns up in the village and points out a place to dig a well. The well yields water and the girl comes to be viewed as a soothsayer and goddess. The Pannaiyar of the village offers her refuge and by the same token makes sure she retains her goddess-like character while he makes money off her soothsaying. Thus, it becomes important to him that she remains an Amman, and people continue to see her as such. But Amsavalli wants to be liberated from this burden and be a normal human being. This brings her into a conflict with the Pannaiyar and in effect this translates into a conflict between the state of human-hood and the state of Amman-hood. At this point she decides to seek out a good-hearted orphan who dances in death processions, the Vettiyan (the term is derogatory and refers to those who are traditionally associated with death rituals, and are from formerly 'untouchable' castes). This pits the Pannaiyar against the Vettiyan. Eventually, the lowly placed man rescues the highly placed girl by breaking the prohibition against inter-caste love and marriage. She is also rescued from her godly status and returned to a human one (we return to discussing other aspects of this film below). Both in *Thulasi* and in *Deiva Vaaku*, it is the oppressed-caste men who rescue these women.[12]

Except for a few narratives, in many of the local tales, women who are turned into deities on account of what are clearly caste-honour killings[13] are from the so-called upper castes, while the men are from the so-called lower castes.[14] And, in the film narratives that reflect these stories, lower-caste men are rendered coeval with the goddesses that they 'rescue' and also attain the status of their husbands. If we are to offer a political reading of these narratives, the question that we need to address is this: why does the Amman desire lower-caste men? The male lovers in these narratives are mostly Parayars and a smaller number of them are Arundhatiyars and Vannaars (all placed low in the caste order),[15] for instance, Parayar (*Deiva Vaaku*), Arundhatiyars (*Aatha Un Kovililae* and *Thulasi*), Vannaars (*Mudhal Seedhanam* (1992)). Films point to these identities both subtly and emphatically. The traditional relationship between these communities and folklore associated with the goddess Mariamman is underscored. Mariamman is believed to be from a Parayar household, and a Parayar priest ties a *thaali* around her neck and this is how she is worshipped. In the Mariamman legend, where she becomes Renugambal, it is believed that the latter has the head of a Brahmin woman to which a Parayar woman's body is attached; in some stories, she is believed to have the body of an Arundhatiyar woman (Pazhani 2015: 31–33 and Meyer 1986: 55–66).[16]

Amman worship, especially the worship of Mariamman, includes spirit dances, spirit possession, and the fulfilment of vows. The worshippers solicit predictions. Soothsaying is considered to be an important part of the worship, and it is widely believed that Amman speaks through the soothsayer. To augur the future is viewed as a form of knowledge and in local traditions this is associated chiefly with marginalised people. Music plays an important role in this process, beckoning the goddess, as it were, to shower her grace through possession and to make her manifest herself. Musical instruments such as the *parai* and *udukkai*[17] figure in this music and

hence whoever is associated with these also get linked to the power that brings forth Amman.[18] The fact that Amman arrives when they beseech her puts them in close relationship to her.

Tuning for the dynamics of caste

The above relationship is foregrounded in the films in which music plays a crucial role and the singer or the musician is portrayed to be from an oppressed caste and class. As with other films, a girl from a rich upper-caste family falls in love with this poor, lower-caste, good-natured man, and the man sings to remind her of her love, and the two of them sing in front of Amman to seek her help in realising their romance: in a sense, these have become standard tropes in this genre of cinema, with Amman manifesting herself to shower her grace on the lovers.

Deiva Vaaku, discussed earlier, is a good example of this sort of film. As we saw, Amsavalli soothsays on behalf of Mariamman. She is hailed as *Aatha* (Mariamman is often hailed thus, as a mother), and this, one could say, references her Amman-hood. She however wants to live as a normal human being and seeks out Thambidurai who is an orphan. Though his origins are mystified, he is marked as a Vettiyan and his mother is represented as a *dasi*. Amsavalli's love for him makes her leave her godly self behind and embrace a human self, that is, Amman 'comes down' to wed the Vettiyan, that is to say, from 'godly' to humanly.

There is an interesting scene in the film where a snake bites a child and is brought to *Aatha* for her intercession. Since the Pannaiyar had forbidden Amsavalli to intercede, she hesitates to go to the temple. Nevertheless, the villagers place the child on the altar and wait for *Aatha's* arrival but she does not turn up. At this point the Vettiyan Thambidurai says, 'If at all the God present in this stone is truly powerful, she will surely come, after listening to me sing. She will offer grace and save the child'. He then asks his compatriots to bring on the *melam* (drums). He begins to sing, while others dance around, playing the *parai*:

> Through a song I beseech thee
> Awakened, I seek a wish
> Adi athadi, I think of you
> And your love makes me hold a tune
> My song is a feast
> To help me forget the pain (of our separation)
> My song heals, makes me forget
> Be with me, it is all I want
> Your sorrow is my misery.

The song seeks Amman's grace but is also a love song. Grace here is a symbol of the love. As his singing hits a crescendo, his lover arrives adorned in the sari used to drape Amman: that is, she manifests herself. In local ritual, when Amman's priest or the soothsayer beats the *parai* and *udukkai*, the goddess 'comes down' to earth. Here, drumming literally makes love show itself. This is what we find in the film *Thulasi* as well (see earlier): the oppressed-caste hero in that film does not sing to seek the grace of his lover who has become Amman, rather he sings to help her relive her memories of love and eventually, as we saw, she leaves behind her Amman self and, and in her human self, returns to her lover.

Singers and songsters are featured in other ways as well, as those who belong to particular castes. *Aatha Un Kovilile*—the first film that we discussed in this chapter—also features a songster. He is the father of one of the two female protagonists. He is a cobbler and clearly from an

oppressed community, and the film portrays the latter as essentially ‘good’. The cobbler, played by the famous comedian Janagaraj, is not mocked, as is sometimes done. He is shown to be not only the local singer but also a composer who combines idea, verse, and tune meticulously. He sings of ‘treating women with respect’, and this marks him out to be a thinker, if not an intellectual. The narrative also shows him countering abuses thrown at him by the Pannaiyar with dignity.[19]

In the movies of the 1980s and the 1990s, music served as the fulcrum of the narrative. In the early 1980s, music troupes and singers came to be featured in films. The songs were full of love’s longing and love’s loss. Gradually, local tales associated with songs, like the ones discussed earlier, emerged in cinema. Significantly, narratives based on local legends and associated songs had to do with the advent of Ilayaraja, a music director from a characteristically local context into cinema and they had as much to do with his music as anything else.[20]

Ballads, brothers, and honouring the killing

Caste was the framework within which story and song featured in all the films that we have discussed so far but was not always referenced as such. Instead, it was invoked through referring to work/identity/notions of honour. Caste also featured in through the depiction of kinship as in films depicting affection between brothers and sisters. There are two types of brothers in Tamil cinema. The first type comprises loving brothers. They adore their sister and do all they can to sustain her and to deliver her from her troubles. This does not mean that they make way for their sisters to love and marry persons of their choice.[21] Rather, they are brothers who prevent their sisters from the ‘evil’ men who love them or purport to love them. In such films, the brother is the protagonist of the film. The second type has brothers who stand in the way of their sisters’ love, as we see in some of the films discussed earlier, particularly *Siraiyil Pooththa Sinnamalar*, *Deiva Vaaku*, and in a different sense, *Chinnathambi*.

The films in which brothers obstruct their sisters’ love are based on local legends as well and we see how they have been displaced from public memory into film narratives. In the legend of Thoondimuthu, a girl who has seven brothers is killed on the account of her love for a man from another caste and she is later worshipped as a goddess (Pazhani 2015). The story of Poochiyammal speaks of the love between a Thevar and Thevaendhirar couple (two conflicted castes, the former being an Other Backward Caste [OBC] and the latter, a Scheduled Caste from Southern Tamil Nadu), where again the girl is killed by six of her seven brothers. All the six brothers die one after another. Brothers also feature in stories where a man is killed to uphold caste honour. For instance, in the famous Muthupatan story, he is eventually killed and it is not clear whether he is killed by thieves or by his six brothers (as noted earlier, he marries outside his caste).[22]

This set of film narratives, where caste is present even if not openly referred to, contrasts with those in which love is thwarted because of class differences that exist within a particular caste and on account of strained familial relationships. Yet these narratives are generically the same as other stories of conflicted love and are shaped by these latter and may be viewed as variations. With reference to the film narratives that we have discussed so far, we do not claim that those who wrote the film scripts heard these stories and developed the narratives. Instead, true to the nature of cultural forms, these tales whether they circulate either directly or otherwise remain embedded and alive in social memory and also remain alive in the language itself.

Shifting the frame of caste and romance

All the aforesaid films were produced during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The films of the 1990s continued a trend that was set in the 1980s. By the 1980s, film-makers who were from

the villages entered the industry and were the last of a generation of idealists.[23] They were of the generation that had been shaped by modern technology, positive discrimination concerning education and state employment, and modern education. They believed in questioning social reality and in one way or another accepted the necessity of bringing about 'social change'. Traditional values that weighed down on village life were interrogated. At the same time, the films also engaged critically with modern political issues, to do with corruption, unemployment, poverty, legal compromise, and the stories of folk heroes who plundered and killed village Pannaiyars, and the wealthy were, as we saw, turned into screenplays.

Though love has been the primary motif in Tamil cinema, it acquired a certain emphasis in the 1980s. Accordingly, it could be argued that the class and caste struggles were conveyed expressions pertaining to love. The struggle of the hero against the rich man/Pannaiyar was a struggle about conflicted love, concerning the girl in the house. The fight for love was a fight against social hegemony as well, and the Tamil cinema of the 1980s clearly foregrounded love as a tool for social change. Love was interpreted to mean something that sustained itself beyond the boundaries of caste, class, and status. It was projected to be the common identity of (Tamil) life.

From the hitherto discussions, it is clear that caste was the predominant undercurrent in Tamil cinema of the 1980s. It was referred to directly in some instances and allusively in others. The films might not have criticised caste directly. Caste might remain the great unsaid, but in the course of the narrative, aspects of caste were criticised. In that sense, in no other decade do we find caste being spoken of, in this manner, as in the 1980s. The social and cultural understanding of the period made this possible. It was a time when traditional customs were starting to feel burdensome, and existing social values were questioned. In this context, narratives that looked to transgress caste differences and hierarchy emerged, albeit in myriad ways and drawing on diverse vocabularies. On most occasions, film-makers weren't even aware of this, and they did not set out to talk about caste deliberately.

There are two features to these stories. They have traditionally circulated in local contexts, but even so, many of us imagine caste transgression to be an aspect of, in fact a gift of, modernity. We also consider opposition to caste boundaries as emerging out of changes that unfolded in the modern period. Transgressions, understood in political terms, might be a twentieth-century phenomenon. The annihilation of caste is clearly an ideal that belongs to modern-thought worlds. However, it wouldn't be true to say that prior to the modern age, caste was unquestionably accepted or that there was no struggle against caste. Caste is a defining line and one that is against the movement of life itself. Such transgressions have been retained in lore and legends. Being cultural markers, they remain invisible.

The local instances of caste ruptures are what we get to see in the form of Amman stories, rituals, and practices. Those who killed in order to keep caste boundaries intact ended up preserving these transgressions in the form of worship. This is of course a fundamental contradiction. Those who murdered go on to entreat the dead, now deified, that they ought not to be dealt with badly and that they should be protected: here is a novel form of surrender that worships the very person murdered for better and for worse. However, this does not mean that the worshippers have given up caste. Rather, they ask those they have killed and oppressed to grant them the gift of life. This interplay between caste definitions and caste transgressions takes place within the tradition. In order to deal with their own wrong-doing, they thus seek out a psychological balm.

Thus, maintaining tradition as well as transgression unfolds within the terms of tradition itself. Tradition, clearly, is not inflexible. It remains open or stays rigid and based on what needs to be done, reconstructs itself. Consequently, local transgressions of caste boundaries became the stuff of legends, contexts for the emergence of gods.

Scripting the social change, reinventing caste

Now the question why did folk tales become screenplays? arises. Why were these traditional stories recollected at a time when, burdened by traditional identities and beliefs, new narratives that asked for these to be put away were emerging? The interesting observation is that it is because of the impact of modern (anti-caste) ideologies that such tales were recovered.[24] These stories, while they contained purely local elements, were also 'modern' in their understanding and this is what made it possible for them to be recollected as tales of caste transgressions and made into films. They spoke of the rigidity of tradition as well as of its flexibility in a modern sort of way, informed by new modes of understanding (made possible by Dalit politics). If it were not for the latter, these traditional anecdotes could not have been renewed. In the films about caste transgressions, then, the traditional elements are not left out entirely, but neither is everything constituted from within the space of modernity.

This pattern of legends transforming into screenplays continued in the 1990s, but things also began to change. Within the terms of the tradition, there was an interplay, as we have seen, between caste definitions and caste transgressions. Slowly and gradually, the transgressive aspects beat a retreat and definitional aspects began to emerge. In fact, this tendency was immanent in the moment when the village became central to film narratives. It became prominent in the 1990s and pushed itself forward. Further, political developments created the conditions for caste identities to be defined rather than transgressed.

In the 1980s, the hegemony wielded by castes that traditionally had held land suffered a retreat, and in its place, the political hegemony that was vested in regionally dominant caste groups came into the forefront. These communities which had been socially powerful now possessed political power as well and thus emerged as the new hegemonic castes. They used their new-found authority to violently suppress upwardly mobile Dalit communities. This emerged as the primary contradiction in many a local context.

To retain their recently acquired authority, these castes attempted to construct viable cultural attributes for themselves. Thus, violence became synonymous with courage, and the moustache and scythe became its markers (Rajangam 2016a: 25). This period was also witness to Dalit assertion in the social realm. This pushed the newly hegemonic caste communities to further project themselves as 'ruling' castes rather than 'traditional' elites. In this context, even filmmakers who were until then making movies to do with social change turned around to produce films that strove to speak of 'cultural' values.

The conflicts of this period were evident in not only the film narratives to do with love that we have discussed but also in other films. These may be viewed as constituting the first two types of films that we referred to at the beginning of this chapter, i.e., films that challenged the social order through defiant heroes. But there was also a third type, which sought to push back the conflicted themes we find in these films. 'New' was the term that figured in film titles, and it signified a desire to do away with older ways of life and values and beckon in the new world.[25] The capitalist/landlord, the rich classes, the upper castes: these identities and those who bore them were portrayed as negative characters and the films usually had the hero take them on and win his case. These films criticised graft, corruption of the ruling class, and loopholes in the law. On the whole, the existing order was critiqued and the adventurous hero became the representative of the collective. This was why the word 'red', associated with left politics, acquired wider circulation. Words such as 'justice', 'just', and 'dawn' were also in dissemination. These films need to be viewed as occupying the same time-scape as the love stories that we have discussed thus far in that they represent the hopes as well as anxieties of a

particular moment in history. They translated into a vital moment in Tamil cinema. In order to comprehend their uniqueness, all we need to do is contrast them with a set of films that emerged thereafter.

The names of some of the films that were made in the late 1990s and their titles make it evident that an emergent genre of film narratives was in the making and one that was bound to be different from those that foregrounded justice and change. All these titles feature dominant caste names. Wealthy classes and the propertied—such as the 'Zamindars'—are referred to, and so are blood kin and 'ancestry'. Pasumbon or Paanjalakurichi are names of places that connote (caste) pride and are deliberately rendered celebratory. Thus, it was that traditional identities and values were identified and drawn upon.[26]

Three significant changes are to be noted in this context. Firstly, the villains of the 1980s—the Pannaiyars and the rich men—became heroes in the films of the 1990s.[27] This flip pointed to an important change which was not merely a change in characterisation but also reflected the changing social scenario. To support or oppose these characters meant that one was taking a stand for or against their socio-political roles and views. Hence, by rendering these former villains the heroes, the film narratives of the 1990s celebrated the social values they stood for.

Secondly, note the emphasis on the role of *muraimaman* in films such as *Muraimaman*, *Ejamaan*, *Kizhakku Seemaiyilae*, *Enga Muthalaali*, and *Pasumpon*. In the Tamil cinema of the 1980s, they were depicted as vengeful characters brimming with caste pride, and the heroine ignored her *muraimaman* and chose to love the poor but good man outside the family fold and this, as we have seen, constitutes the central conflict in these films. Therefore, the *muraimaman* emerged as the villain. The love depicted in the mentioned films thus transgressed kin boundaries and became an instance of caste transgression as well. The hero, from his 'lowly' origins took on not only the muraimaman but also caste power and economic exploitation, and arose victorious. The narratives of the 1990s, on the other hand, reiterated the importance of blood kinship.

Thirdly, there was a shift in the portrayal of comic characters. These characters have always been associated with irony and wit, but in films from this period, they were portrayed as those who performed service labour. In the caste order, different castes are assigned different forms of service, and those who perform the latter are usually from castes placed low in the caste order or those who are powerless. When comic characters are shown playing these roles, the service tasks as well as those who perform them become the targets of mockery. Washermen, barbers, cobblers, household 'servants'—the comic duo, Goundamani and Senthil—played these characters (Kaali and Srinivas 1999: 220). In the 1980s films, heroes belonged to this class of workers and were portrayed with dignity. Moreover, the heroines fell in love only with such men. But around the late 1980s and from the 1990s, these occupations were taken over by comedians, which offers scope for another study.

Though the local legends exhibit consistency in showing caste conflict and tension between the dominant and oppressed castes, they were stripped of it when adapted into film narratives. The chapter, as the reader would have discerned by now, approaching from the perspectives of Cultural Studies has attempted to show how caste was the actual fulcrum of the tales. These narratives remained as portrayals of divinity and/or love. It is then reflected in the popular imagination as well. Thus, the chapter has shown how local characters—Pannaiyars and rich men, their sisters, poor songsters, orphans, low-class workers, who constitute the conflicted caste positions—were adapted into film narratives that were heretofore part of the local myths, tales, lore, and legends.

Notes

1 Translated from Tamil by Aadhavan. The author and the translator thank the feminist scholar and historian V. Geetha for her invaluable help in this translation.
2 Bharathi Raja, Sangili Murugan, and Manjoj Kumar—Thevar, and Manivaasagam and R. V. Udhayakumar—Gounder. However, the chapter wants to be careful not to reduce that the directors came to depict the castes they belonged to. A majority of the film-makers came from Madurai and Theni districts and some from the western districts such as Coimbatore and Pollachi.
3 See also Chakravarthy (2018), Rajangam (2016a, 2019) for further elucidation on the shift to rural narratives and the evolution of nativity cinema in Tamil.
4 For further discussion, see Rajangam (2016a: 18).
5 Kasturi Raja, who made *Aatha Un Kovilile,* had made an earlier film *En Raasavin Manasilae* (1991), in which the protagonist Mayandi looks upon his dead wife Solaiyamma as a goddess. When his sister-in-law's love is thwarted, on account of '(low) status', he intervenes and unites the lovers. In the opening scene of this film too, we are told that the film 'is based on a true story that happened at a small village near Pannayapuram in the district of Madurai'.
6 Kasturi is the name of the woman killed by her own family owing to her inter-caste love and later worshipped by the same ones. We do not know whether Kasturi's myth exists in real or they adopted the myth and changed the name alone according to a film narrative. But the very name is not significant as this myth exists all over Tamil Nadu. For instance, there is the similar story in the Kodaikaari Amman lore at Natham Colony in Dharmapuri district. One may find similar myths in the book edited by Ko. Pazhani. The film has adopted such a myth as the film begins with the aforementioned voice-over. It mentions 'story of a woman' rather than a particular name. So, they might have made up the name, but the story is real.
7 A kinsman who has a marital claim upon her in Tamil Nadu. Mother's brothers and aunt's sons are the usual ones who could put a claim. Most importantly, it is a cultural position, a preserver of not only one's own masculine pride/right but also caste pride through endogamy. Hence, he becomes the opposing figure to love between castes.
8 In the film's narrative, Madhurai Veeran is a worker in Kasturi family's farm. He plays *Kottu* (a form of drum). Madhurai Veeran is a Sakkiliar (a Dalit Community) worshipped as God. Arundahtiyars too play *Kottu*. The film includes characters who make chappals.
9 *Thaali* is the sacred thread that the man ties around a woman's neck while marrying her. Though it is a traditionally Hindu patriarchal practice (honouring the wife's duty to her master), it has now percolated into other religions in south India. Only in self-respect marriages is this avoided.
10 In *Aatha Un Kovililae*, Kasturi always wears the saree as if anticipating her transformation into Amman. Madhurai Veeran who stays humble towards the Pannaiyar behaves the same to Kasturi as well. In *Deiva Vaaku*, Theivaanai soothsays. While she wears different dresses (casual) on other occasions, she wears a saree while she is soothsaying.
11 Thulasi is made divine. A state above/beyond humanhood, thus she should be treated as someone who does not have mere human qualities. Hence, she cannot belong to any particular person. So once she becomes a deity belonging to everyone, Sivalingam could not claim her. Moreover, love, sex, family, and children should not be associated with her anymore. Now, if Sivalingam attempts to reach her, even if Thulasi's father doesn't object, the villagers would no longer agree. This is exactly how her father wanted it to be, and achieved it. To attain that, he used people's belief of a human becoming a deity and their worship. That is, a priest manipulates people's belief for his own interest.
12 Love across castes is usually problematised only if the girl is upper caste. But even today, Dalit girls are killed by upper-caste men but contradictorily, they don't go on to become goddesses (see also, Note 15).
13 See Stalin Rajangam's *Aanava Kolaigalin Kaalam* (In times of Honour Killing, 2016) where the cultural confluence between caste, inter-caste love, and gender is discussed in detail.
14 Caste purity is guarded through the woman's body and virginity. So by keeping the woman's body 'pure', 'caste purity' could be sustained. That is why the upper castes are careful in 'protecting' the woman's body, which is treated as a cultural marker. Preserving it becomes equivalent to preserving culture itself. In inter-caste love, if the woman belongs to a lower caste, it doesn't bring much attention. It is because the upper-caste sperm can reach anywhere. It could be a lower-caste woman's body as well, and in a way, it would entail the upper-castes' victory, courage, and culture. However, if it is the other way around, the upper castes grow anxious. The sperm of the lower caste male is a dishonour.

It disturbs the upper-caste pride. Hence, they kill the woman and even both if they can. They could even cook other reasons and escape legal prosecution. Since it is caste pride, even relatives and villagers might help them. Thus, most killings occur concerning the upper-caste women.

15 Among these castes, Parayars are spread all over Tamil Nadu. Arundhatiyars live as a majority in some places and minority at others. A Vanaars family or two live in every village as they are a servile caste. Parayars are also related to music (*Kottu*, *Aattam*, and *Kuri*) and occasionally Arundhatiyars too. Since the film narratives we discuss are related to song and music, some of the characters from these castes appear.

16 Ko Pazhani discusses the myth in detail in his *Makkal Theivangal* (People's Deities). One might also look at Evelin Meyer's work, *Ankalaparamecuvari: A Goddess of Tamil Nadu, Her Myths and Cult*, where she talks about the theme of chaste goddess, union and separation, and the goddess function.

17 *Parai* is mostly played by Parayars. In some places, it is played by Arundhathiyars. Both are Dalit communities. This is especially the case in cultural spaces such as village festivals and marriages. In the films discussed, these instruments happen to be played only around these spaces. *Udukkai* is more elaborate yet connected to the above relationship. It is played by Parayars and other lower, numerically smaller caste communities (Poosaris, Valluvars, and Velar in southern districts) which hold *poosari* position. (*Poosari* is the priestly position in local temples where minor gods of the Hindu pantheon and/or folk gods are worshipped.)

18 Songs and music comply with the characters. Accordingly, the characters don't sing Carnatic music. Rather, the music, ragas, and the tone are of the local musical instruments. Since these are set in villages, the songs and music too comply with the local communities. The hero figure in *Kizhakku Vaasal* and *Deiva Vaaku* plays the *melam*. In *Aatha Un Kovililae*, the hero sings and plays *Kottu* during the village festival. *Koothu* and *Saamiaaduthal* (bringing the Goddess) singing during festivals occur in these narratives. The songs are folklore in nature, e.g., in *Aatha Un Kovililae*, a cobbler composes a simple song *Pombalayai Mathika Vendum* (women should be respected).

19 See Stalin Rajangam for further discussions on *Barathi Kannamma* (2016a: 105–128) and *Chinnathambi* (2020: 28).

20 Ilayaraja composed for most of the films. Even in the films for which he didn't compose, one can see his influence (e.g., *Aatha Un Kovililae*—Deva). We cannot claim that Ilayaraja had 'Dalit music' in mind while he composed. Rather, he provided music for the characters and setting. In that way, they become crucial. Ilayaraja, though a Dalit himself, refused, even opposed, any interpretations of his music based on caste. For Instance, when K. A. Gunesakaran, the Dalit novelist of *Vadu* (The Scar) wrote for his music, Ilayaraja took exception to the parts where his music was argued to be associated with his caste identity and asked for a ban on its distribution and even filed a lawsuit.

21 The role of these brothers is similar to brothers in the balladic/folk context of the stories that the films refer to. One may also find the trace in these films of the incestuous nature of brothers in ballads. See Stalin Rajangam (2019: 69–77) for further discussions on the equation of brothers and their affiliations to caste and love for sisters.

22 One might take a look at the works of Vanamamalai, a pioneer in folklore whose extensive study may help in understanding the relationship between folklore and caste.

23 See Note 2.

24 In general, debates on caste are believed to have begun since the first quarter of the twentieth century. The anti-caste movements seem to have treated tradition and modernity in dichotomy. But after the insurgence of Dalit politics in the 1990s, different questions have been raised on the relationship between the two. For instance, this chapter observes that when traditional stories were seen as conservative and inter-caste love as a move towards modernity, movie plots turned towards inter-caste love in myths and lore. This liminality offers new readings.

25 *Pudhumaipen* (The New Woman, 1983), *Vedham Pudhidhu* (A New Gospel, 1987), *Kan Sivandhal Man Sivakkum* (When Eyes Redden the Earth Turns Red, 1983), *Sivandha Kangal* (Red Eyes, 1982), *Varumaiyin Niram Sivappu* (The colour of Poverty is Red, 1980), *Sattam Oru Vilayaatu* (The Law is a game, 1987), *Sattam Oru Iruttarai* (The Law is a dark Room, 1981), *Idhu Engal Needhi* (This is our Justice, 1988), *Nyayatharaasu* (Just Balance, 1989), *Nan Sivappu Manidhan* (I am a Red Man, 1985), *Needhiku Thandanai* (Justice is Punished, 1987), *Saadhikoru Needhi* (Caste Justice, 1981), *Naanum Oru Thozhilaali* (I am also a Worker, 1986), and *Unnaal Mudiyum Thambi* (You can do it, Brother, 1988).

26 *Chinna Gounder* (Younger Gounder, 1991), *Thevar Magan* (Son of Thevar, 1992), *Ejamaan* (Landlord, 1993), *Periya Gounder Ponnu* (Daughter of the Elder Gounder, 1992), *Chinna Zamin* (Younger Zamin,

1993), *Enga Muthalali* (Our Boss, 1993), *Sakara Thevan* (1993), *Muraimaman* (1995), *Thaaimaman* (1994), *Naatamai* (1994), and *Sooriyavamsam* (1997).

27 When villages became film settings, it is the castes (dominant intermediate) that found the place in the narratives. Thus, the castes that are placed against them came to be narrated as well. The rise of Dalit movements in the socio-political realm only sharpened this difference in narratives. The Brahmins were portrayed as auditors, lawyers, and advisors for heroes/villains. Mostly, they were portrayed as minor characters who are naïve, positive, and good people.

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21

Alienation of the Other

Examining Marginal Narratives in Select Punjabi Films

Amandeep Kaur and Sahil Sharma

The history of Punjabi cinema, in 90 years of its evolution and development, is the history of exclusion of Dalit narratives.[1] Just as the contradictions of caste in Punjab, despite a general decrying of its presence, have proceeded through a complex dynamics of interplay between religion, the dominant presence of Jats, and constant othering and alienation of the other communities, the cinematic sphere also appears to reinforce the same divisions (Jodhka 2004; Judge 2002; Puri 2003).[2] It creates an essentialised image of Punjabiyat with Jats as the prototypes of this identity, thereby evoking an imagined reality that seemingly deny 'Dalits lives in their entirety and subtlety' (Valmiki 2003: vii).[3] The presence of caste alienates the subject itself, and cinema with its power of maintaining dominant cultural hegemony also contributes to invisibilising Dalit experiences from the cultural sphere. This othering manifests itself in various ways; it forces the subject to accept the highly unjust social order to be natural and seemingly endless, hence alienating them from participation in the public sphere. This chapter explores the alienation of the Other and its unfolding in the Punjabi cinematic space. It takes up three different representations of caste in Punjabi cinema to unravel different aspects of alienation that Dalits are subjected to. *Anhey Ghore da Daan* (2011) through cinematic techniques encompassing the Deleuzian idea of 'time-image' and treating space as a character represents socio-cultural alienation of the marginalised. The movie *Chamm* (2017) places their alienation within the larger domain of social and economic exclusion. The third film *Landless* (2018) explores the changing dynamics of caste and land relations in Punjab.

Alienation understood in a general and abstract manner connotes 'a surrender of control through separation from an essential attribute of the self',[4] and in more concrete terms, the detachment of the subject from the material conditions in the absence of meaningful agency. Marx defines alienation of the labour in a capitalist society in four different ways, namely alienation from the products of labour; alienation from the activity of labour; alienation from the self's own humanity, and alienation from the society (2007). While Marx specifies different aspects of alienation in relation to the capitalist mode of production, we contend about alienation experienced by Dalits suffering under caste hierarchy in a feudal structure and neoliberal mode of production. To understand the complexities of alienation, we take cognisance of the

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relationship between power and othering and how it affects the lives of Dalits, often alienated from society as a whole. Alienation is not just limited to subjective experience but it also entails objective structures that the mainstream Punjabi cinema often chooses to ignore. We argue that the rural and urban continuum of alienation, while its nature can be different in these films, not only conveys the notion of exclusion but also allows the existing status quo of caste hierarchy to remain in a state of permanence. The state of liminality that the characters live through, does not remain transient but becomes a permanent part of their existence. Finally, in considering the question of alienation and othering, we assert the need to locate it within the construction of 'Punjabi' identity in Punjabi cinema.

Anhey Ghorey Da Daan: Spatial and Temporal Alienation

Anhey Ghorey Da Daan (hereafter, *AGDD*) foregrounds the temporal and spatial alienation of the marginalised.[5] Directed by Gurvinder Singh and based on the eponymous novel by Gurdial Singh, the film uses the ancient myth, which can be understood as an allegory of the Marxist idea of alienation of the individuals from the fruitions of one's labour.[6] Just as the Asuras were forced to be dependent upon the Devtas, Dalits had to remain dependent on the upper castes for compensation. The mythical and the Marxist ideas run in a parallel manner; both reach out to the pressing concern of spatial alienation through the story of a Dalit father, who lives in the village, and his son, Melu who lives in the city. The father struggles to join other men of his community to seek justice for Dharma, a Dalit tenant forcibly evicted and arrested for occupying a house that has been sold by the landlord. Melu, a rickshaw-puller, wanders around in the city but failing to find any repose, returns to the village at the end of the film. In the absence of chronological temporality, events occur often with no allusion to a particular time frame and at the same time manage to complete a diurnal incessant cycle. The film starts with the call for alms in the name of blind horse and almost ends with the same call. The mundane cycle is completed, portraying the lives of the characters to be stuck within this one day which they have to re-live countless times.

Following Mani Kaul, Singh proceeds by problematising the conventional understanding of cinematic form and meaning; he focuses his attention on 'a flow of duration seeping through an ellipsis between image and sounds', in turn conveying the experience of human subjectivity through an exploration of time (Kaul 2018: 46).[7] His focus on 'duration' through a usage of exceedingly long shots taken through a wide-angle lens running over a span of a few minutes also resonates with what Gilles Deleuze calls 'time-image'. Building upon Henri Bergson's time and duration, Deleuze conceptualises duration as a metric to understand the new founded subjectivity inherent to post-World War II cinema. Bergson distinguishes between two different types of time: spatialised time and the real time or duration. While spatialised time is divisible, immobile, and abstract, duration is defined as 'lived experience as a variation of internal psychical states' (1989: 37). Extrapolating this concept, Deleuze understands duration as a whole which cannot be divided into separate moments. He 'reconceptualizes the immobile sections in cinema as the objects in the frame and this allows him to show that cinema can indeed produce movement as a mobile section of duration' (Poell 2004: 7). Its objective is not to show a linear progression of events; rather it rebukes the cause-and-effect paradigm. Deleuze contends that through montage and mobility of the camera, the shot can show the relationship between the object and the whole. Maintaining this, Deleuze distinguishes cinema into two types: 'movement image' and 'time image'. He argues that if movement is not directed towards a centre which creates a whole, and this centre is not able to capture action and reaction, then time image emerges, in which time is presented directly. However, this time is not 'real time' but

'duration'. This understanding of cinematic aesthetics in terms of duration and 'qualitative space-time variant' in *AGDD* helps to heighten the spatial alienation that all the characters experience at different levels (Kaul 2013: 13). For instance, the long shots of the befuddled father standing in the empty-cobbled street, the father silently witnessing the arrest of his friend, frantic Melu wandering aimlessly in his rickshaw, and his sister, Dayalo, restlessly running away in the streets at night make use of the experience of duration, which captures the essence of alienation, promulgated by the objective conditions within the space they are inhabiting.

Dalit houses in rural Punjab are often situated geographically at the margins of the villages and people living in them are often labelled as *Vehre aale* (outskirts dwellers). This marginalisation comes with an economic brunt of being landless and a sociological brunt of being the 'other'. It is further extrapolated in the urban areas where the same dictum of marginalisation is followed, albeit not through the consent of people sharing the limited space but by the economic status of landless Dalits who leave their villages with hopes of having a space of their own in the cities. The absence of belongingness in both urban and rural spaces catapults them in a vortex of alienation where they seek escape by running from one space to the other. In the film, the first ever shot of the city is placed during a protest by the local Rickshaw Union, which provides a sense of purgation from the long-withheld agony of the characters but only to realise that it is later dispersed by the police. All the protesters in the city are linked by their labour, unlike villages where the community shares the space because of caste-based housing. Cityscape gives a sense of freedom from feudal oppression at the cost of one's anonymity. The anonymous nature of countless workers protesting in the middle of the city gives a momentary hope for the disempowered. However, the characters experience restlessness, failing to gain a sense of repose. It has to be lived, in both the city and the village alike. Singh foregrounds this alienation in the cityscape through adroit tropes such as Melu never finding a place to rest, people living in close proximity to the railway tracks, slum settlements in the suburbs, and Melu and his friends scrounging from one place to other to sit and drink. At the end of the film, Melu returns to his village, while his father sets out for the city, thereby affirming both the city and the village as what David Sibley calls 'geographies of exclusion' for the marginalised and creating a pattern of their exclusion.[8]

At the village as well, all characters experience a crisis of their own which they fail to resolve. For instance, the close-up shots of Melu's father in which he is either contemplating about the unrest around him or grappling with his own position in his home as the patriarch meticulously rendering the rupture of his sense of identity. His movements are unhurried and imperceptive, often providing the stillness of being, bereft of any social and cultural security (see Figure 21.1). Other characters fail to gain a sense of subjecthood due to constant undermining of their being by discrimination, impoverishment, and emasculation.[9] The superimposition of caste strictures on different aspects of their lives to subjugate them produce what Foucault calls, 'docile bodies' (1977: 136). There is an erosion of agency, a loss of self-worth. For instance, Melu, his father, and other people of their community, out of anxiety to save their bodies, wrap their shawls and *khes* (cotton blanket) even more tightly around their bodies, when challenged by the oppressive environment as if they have nothing else to belong to other than their bodies. A calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of their bodies. Often marked by the violence of constant degradation and humiliation, their 'docile bodies' are completely dissociated from power, turning their relation—with the village and its environment—to strict subjection.

Time in the film does not seem a gradual and encompassing moment but acts as a medium which entails past, present, and future together in a permanent stasis of being. This state of permanence lets the audience feel the liminality of the characters as is discernible in the case of Dayalo. Her attempt at purgation by running away aimlessly in the middle of the night is an

Figure 21.1 Melu's father from the film *AGDD*.
Source: National Film Development Corporation of India.

act of the whole community to gain freedom from this endless cycle. She becomes the proxy of the microcosm she inhabits and her internal psychical states are rendered by the usage of time as 'duration'. Singh draws out the concluding scene using a frame-within-frame sequence to bring into focus the narrow-cobbled pathways and mist-covered constricting space to highlight how limiting the open streets are for the two protagonists when they are forced to face each other and end their little voyage. In the process, duration becomes a veritable medium of space. The act of Melu coming back to his village is not a grand gesture of the lost hero coming back to his roots but is a marker of acceptance of not only his present state of vulnerability but also the future that does not hold any promise.

The relationship with space influences the way the marginalised communities resist against the societal structures. In the village, Dalits fail to rise against the oppressors despite their shared grievances. When the whole congregation marches to the Sarpanch's house (the village head), their yomp is seen through the perspective of other villagers, supposedly upper caste. This exceedingly long shot exemplifies how Singh uses temporal sensitivity in a Deleuzian manner; he actively fixes the frame such that the congregation becomes a medium to convey the inherent subjectivity of the village populace. People busy with their work, heavy background noise speaking for their taciturn demeanour, and their direct gaze at the collective march signify their position in this matter. Singh questions the collective consciousness of people cohabitating the same space but prioritising their personal gratification in the face of a travesty of the Dalit populace. Upon their arrival at the Sarpanch's house, the congregation stands at the dome-shaped entrance and converses across the hypothetical border which Dalits are not supposed to cross. While the group is shown as a whole, with all the members in the frame (Figure 21.2), the shot of the Sarpanch is shown as a close-up, as if to contrast the helplessness of the collective in the face of a powerful individual. Through a wide-angle shot, we see the full view of the Sarpanch's house with all the amenities the congregation could only dream of. There is a rather dry exchange of spats between the two parties through which Singh conveys the alienation of the oppressed as the power equations distinctively favour the upper caste.

Figure 21.2 'Dalit congregation at Sarpanch's house' from the film *AGDD*.
Source: National Film Development Corporation of India.

Chamm: Alienation and Social Exclusion

Directed by Rajeev Kumar, who was influenced by the alternative theatre of late Gursharan Singh,[10] the film *Chamm* relies on the theatrical mode to unfold alienation through social exclusion and oppression. Since its first screening at Barnala in 2017, it has been shown at 400 different places including some of the protest sites.[11] It narrates the story of Keepa, whose job involves removing skin from the dead animals. Failing to use Dalits as a vote bank in their enlarged political plans, the Sarpanch, who belongs to the Jat caste, imposes a condition to raise INR 45,000 to retain the space to skin animals. The film provides insights into caste equations as it follows Keepa's struggle with raising money and handling his family's economic woes. A veterinary doctor rents out a room at his house and pushes to mobilise Dalits towards claiming their share in the common land of the village.[12] The film ends with collective farming as a possible solution to their problems.

The film opens with a song titled 'Begumpura', a term coined by Sant Ravidas, envisioning the utopian ideal of a casteless and classless society where there is no fear, sorrow, suffering, or discrimination.[13] Utopia is a major motif in the film, and Kumar plays with the binary of utopia and lived reality. The lyrics describe Begumpura as a land with no taxes, terror, or wrongdoing, where there is no hierarchy but all are equal. The film locates itself in the midst of the huge gap between the Dalit aspiration for a casteless society and their lived reality in the contemporary Punjabi society, which entails caste oppression, social and political exclusion, violation and humiliation of women, underscoring of their vulnerability, apathy of the political and feudal representatives. The lived reality is still very distant from the utopian vision of Begumpura.

Chamm is emblematic for capturing the aspirations of the marginal lives which are not rooted in the traditional occupation. In fact, in the tension between two brothers—Keepa and Mewi—one senses this anxiety in the younger brother to dissociate himself from the ancestral occupation of dealing with the cattle and move to the city for alternative sources of livelihood. However,

this experience of mobility for Mewi is not an easy process. The film places him between the market economy as a possible flight from the village and equally powerful forces that tend to maintain him in a subjugated state. The city is shown as a new escape route, where the mall, with its multiple amenities and social privileges, becomes an allegory of power that enraptures Mewi. But his existence, like most others of his community in the village, remains a constant struggle between anger and powerlessness. The possibility that Mewi can aspire to a good life in the city with a capacity to spend and visit malls does not subdue or end his marginal status, rather it hints towards his alienation despite a spatial shift. This anxiety to distance himself from the village economy is further exacerbated by the political marginalisation of Keepa and other members of his caste, treated merely as a vote bank by the upper-caste political representatives.

Kumar foregrounds one particular aspect of Punjab, a state which can be seen as an outlier in terms of the practice of caste since it lacks the epistemological basis for stratification of the social order.[14] The consistent belief in two contradictory realities, one where Sikhism is propagated as the harbinger of the oppressed and as an anti-caste sect, where the welfare of the community is supreme and only humanism persists, and the other an objective reality marked by the clear demarcation of caste roles and concrete caste-based structures such as landholding, political power, and cultural hegemony mark the distinctiveness of contemporary Punjab. In one of the key scenes, the Sarpanch vehemently denies the presence of caste and quotes Guru Gobind Singh, 'Manas ki jaat, sabh ek pehchanbo' (Recognise the whole human race as of one caste). The Sarpanch firmly believes in the tenets of Sikhism as he proclaims while lamenting that caste is an illusion and all are created equal, 'I make sure to visit gurudwara twice every day' (*Chamm* 00:9:16–00:9:24). Harish Puri argues that the popular image of Sikhism tends to deny the presence of caste 'purely on the basis of scriptural ideology' (2003: 2695). However, social relations in the village economy are closely structured around caste, which never 'function as pure ideological systems' (Jodhka 2004: 189). Every time the question of caste arises in Punjab, long poetic verses are dug out to delegitimise the persistence of caste as exemplified by the Sarpanch. Envisioning Sikhism as a casteless sect is nullified by the struggles of Dalits who, having been ousted by Hinduism in medieval Hindu society, are denied dignity in modern Punjab. This raises another problem, the problem of reformist theological legitimacy and fluidity of caste-based oppressive structures in Indian society. Almost all reformist sects in one way or the other start pandering to modified versions of Brahmanism. Sikhism is one of the many contemporary examples which embodies the failure of caste-abolitionist reformist sects of Indian society. This failure, however, is yet to be recognised in Punjab.

Chamm is placed in this spatial and temporal context where characters cannot make any sense of the rampant exploitation they are subjected to. The contradictory realities and their perceptions by the individuals alienate the Dalits in their own sphere where any path towards emancipation seems desolate. This haunting sense of misery generated by being ousted from different spheres lurks throughout the film. The doctor, whose caste is never specified in the film, tries to mobilise Dalits to claim their share in the common land; however, the way she proposes and executes this transformation by obliterating the social boycott and other forms of violence seems simplistic and trivial in nature. In her conversation with Keepa's wife, she asseverates caste as an idea rather than placing it in material conditions with no acknowledgement of caste-complexities in Punjab. Her efforts to mobilise the Dalits speak volumes about her own belief in morality than about the actual collective action of Dalits. The doctor's constant belief that it is her individual responsibility to make Dalits conscious of their rights places her in the position of a saviour. Her categorisation of Dalits as 'eh lok' (these people) marks this binary, where the self and the other are distinctly demarcated. This upper-caste ignorance marks one deterrent that Kumar fails to acknowledge. The portrayal of Dalits as naive folks who cannot speak up

for themselves and the need that some other powerful figure must speak for them marks the distinctive Savarna understanding of Dalit cinema in the Indian subcontinent (Dwyer 2006; Vidushi 2015; Yengde 2018). The way the film presents naivety and the almost total absence of consciousness on their part despite the village life being ensconced in changing economic reality marked by laptops, social media, phones and other consumerist goods is where the film falters in its intent. The agency of Dalit voices is subsumed under the garb of intellectualism of the upper-caste saviour who changes the narrative of the film from misery-filled melancholic images towards hope-resurrecting narrative only to culminate in the adaptation of the utopian idea of Begumpura. The motif of Begumpura, which Ravidas imagined to be a city is imposed on a village struggling under a neoliberal economy. The Dalit populace is organised magically and one acre of land is acquired by Keepa. The politics of social boycott, internal settlements, and bureaucratic corruption are lost from the narrative to restore Begumpura as a filmic imagination.

Landless: Alienation and the Paradox of Prosperity

Landless presents a 'landless hold of the lens' and turns the spotlight on the issues which remain absent in *Chamm*. Directed by Randeep Maddoke, it opens with a metaphorical question: 'Do the scarecrows have their own land?' followed by wide-angle shots of the lush green fields and landscapes of Punjab, thereby focusing on the paradox of prosperity, which, when probed at deeper, reveals massive faultlines of Punjab's rural economy (*Landless* 00:01:34–00:01:44).[15] It places the scarecrow as representing the potential of Dalit lives that have lost all semblance of dignity through the constraints of caste discrimination, landlessness, and poverty. The scarecrow, a quasi-human object draped in ragged clothes and set up in the fields, becomes synonymous with the *seeri* (bonded labour) (Figure 21.3). Maddoke uses the same metaphor in verses recited

Figure 21.3 'Do the scarecrows have their own land?' from the film *Landless*.
Source: Randeep Maddoke.

later in the film, 'that are crucified on the land belonging to others/ where, their ancestors were smouldered to ashes and/ these fields never embraced them as their own', thereby locating their alienation in the political economy of Punjab, which provides the context for the changing social dynamics along class and caste lines (*Landless* 00:31:14–00:31:49). By situating the question of caste in the land relations of Punjab, the documentary chronicles the struggles of landless Dalit labourers in a society fraught with their systematic oppression.

The Green Revolution, while on the one hand, built the notion of 'prosperous Punjab' and consolidated the position of Jat landowners, and on the other hand, pulverised the ability of Dalits to gain control over the land, which further escalated their vulnerabilities as they became dependent on the upper-caste landholders for their sustenance and employment. Dalits in Punjab constitute 32% of the total population, but they hold just 3.5 % of the total agricultural land (Padhi 2012; Singh 2017). The ideological underpinnings of this dichotomy became even more complicated in the mid-1980s and later in the post-liberal economy, when the gains of technology and mechanisation had already dissipated, thrusting Punjab agriculture into a major crisis. Further, as agriculture became unfeasible, a large number of Dalit labourers were forced to migrate to the cities where their conditions turned even more abysmal. The connection with the village economy and the land, however, did not break for the local agricultural labour. At this juncture, it is particularly significant to recall Dr B. R. Ambedkar's views on land, who argued how land is not simply a matter of economics but also of social status and hence advocated the need to distribute the land to Dalits because 'they must be settled on land so that they might obtain independent means of livelihood, cease to be afraid of anybody, walk with their heads erect and live fearlessly and courageously' (2014: 913). In his writings, Ambedkar asserted that the landlessness of Dalits is 'a product of their alienation from access to land by Hindu society in the pre-colonial period and deprivation from land in the colonial period which was again dominated by caste Hindus' (2014: 909). The overall effect of this process results in the subjugation and landlessness of Dalits who remain at the mercy of their upper-caste landowners. Maddoke, both as part of the farm struggles and understanding the long history of land relations in Punjab, also posits that the caste system and its practice systematically alienate landless farm labour from all the material resources and denies them a dignified existence. However, unlike *Chamm*, it is not a simplistic portrayal of their struggles; rather, the film-maker presents apprehensions and consternation of their condition through photographs, narratives, poetry, and music. He is determined to subvert the same symbols and allusions that popular Punjabi pop music and the mainstream cinematic sphere have used for years to project a picture of prosperity, but the scenes do not miss out the ironies of everyday existence. Maddoke puts the issue of class struggle at the fore while carrying caste alongside. For instance, the song 'Mr. Singh' playing on a tractor, categorically praising the material possession of Jat landowners and celebrating their status as 'regal heirs' of affluent families, and as 'owners of the land and sons of sardars', is juxtaposed with a man riding the bullock cart in the same frame. It not only punctures the notion of boisterous and masculine image of Punjabis that popular cinema has tried to project but also exposes the binaries of possession and dispossession (*Landless* 00:24:22–00:25:10). The performance of the hegemonic control of Jats is typified by their ability to perpetuate their upper-caste identity as synonymous with Punjabi cultural identity through 'strategies of autophony, laying claims to land and landscapes and social value attached to land ownership' (Mooney 2008: 104).

The film consists of loosely related but tightly strung narratives, which, like the French New Wave cinema, follows the principles of time image as expounded by Deleuze. The different images do not subscribe to one coherent account but present multiple facets of Dalit life in Punjab. Maddoke incorporates multiple cinematic techniques to highlight a sense of Dalit subjectivity which has largely been missing from the Indian cinema. He lets his camera move

Figure 21.4 'Landless labourer' from the film *Landless*.
Source: Randeep Maddoke.

closer, often taking tight close-ups which highlight the facial features of the subjects. In one shot, he focuses on the verbal account of a man fixing the camera at his face, while his monologue plays in the background. His sweating face, twitching eyebrows, and straining body make up for this dissociation between the dialogue in the background and the intimate portrait in the foreground (Figure 21.4). The film is skewered with many such conversations. This focus on the bodies of subjects juxtaposed with wide-angle shots of lush green fields bespeaks the precariousness of their existence, which gravitates towards physical and psychological collapse and suicides. The liminal status of Dalits in Punjab has been portrayed in a nuanced manner, which surpasses the emotive and melodramatic tropes that are employed sumptuously in *Chamm*. The objective of *Landless* is not to evoke pity and see Dalits as passive subjects who need a saviour but bring to the forefront the socio-political resistance which has been growing over the last few years.

This resistance is weaved into the hitherto unexplored subject of indebtedness and suicides among the farm labourers, a subject which has largely been understood as the crises of upper-caste farmers.[16] In the process, one notices how women also bear insurmountable agony and distress in this intrinsic relationship between land and caste. This is accomplished through the use of small sequences concentrating on their daily chores and living conditions, their hard labour in the fields, and the sexual violence that comes with it. The film-maker shows acute sensitivity in portraying not only how 'ideas about gendered respectability are also caste-marked' but also how the women cope as they dwindle between resistance and helplessness (Rao 2009: 217). Over the years, protest sites have rendered a strong presence of women, who have been fusing personal agony with the political. Multiple stories of women describing the suicide cases of men of their families, juxtaposed with the shots of the same women attending protests, carrying the photographs of the deceased, pave a new tenor of resistance. However, the deep anxieties of widows and mothers who have to face the brunt of economic and social distress are palpable, which creates an even heightened sense of alienation among them. The growing rage against the oppressive system challenges the might of Jat landowners who, in an attempt to save

the *status quo*, resort to the social boycott of Dalits. Two segments of this film demonstrate how social boycott exacerbates the spaces of vulnerability and alienation. In the first, while historically tracing the presence of caste in Punjab, a lawyer recounts:

> My forefathers adopted Sikhism and were its staunch campaigners but even after 10 generations in Sikhism, I could not get rid of my caste identity. I felt that the contradiction lies somewhere else. When they are requested to announce from Gurudwara's speakers that the fishing pond is available for lease, they refuse to do it on the grounds that a religious place cannot take part in an act of violence towards animals. But on the day of social boycott, all the announcements are made from the speakers at Gurudwara.
>
> (Landless *00:55:03–00:55:40)*

This is an extension of the 'contradictory reality' that we have argued earlier in the case of *Chamm*, in terms of how religious spaces become the carrier of morality, which they contradict very easily when vested interests of Jats are brought to the equation. In the second segment, an old woman narrates the agony of the entire community living under the dread of social boycott. *Landless* elucidates very clearly that in a society bound by graded hierarchies and asymmetries of power, hegemony can be exercised in such a way as to discipline and subjugate the voices of resistance through the politics of exclusion. Hence, social boycott becomes the epitome of wielding authority.

The film ends on a crucial note. An empty cardboard box of pesticides, tied to a string, is whirling in a circle, putting a question mark on the future of agriculture in the state in general and on the plight of Dalits in particular. It proposes collective farming as a solution but, unlike *Chamm*, it also stipulates caste as a matter of eternal vigilance. Its significance lies in exploring Dalit psyche *vis-à-vis* the neoliberal market and consumer culture through a deep understanding of aesthetics and art.

In conclusion, the three films bring out a rather unexplored phenomenon of alienation. How Dalits are subjugated in Punjab can be understood from these three films which built their universes often overlapping with each other, though unknowingly. One major thread that we can delineate to understand how alienation unfolds is the relation of land with the subjects. Land still holds a significant value to the Dalit population, as it resonates in all the stories. Even after moving to an urban landscape, subjects could not abdicate their relation to the village economy which is directly linked with the land. One common solution that functions is redistribution of land; a cause traditionally configured as a Marxist solution in the subcontinent, which even Dr B. R. Ambedkar prophesised. However, Maddoke presents apprehensions to the cause and puts forward the idea of witnessing caste through the lens of 'eternal vigilance'. These three films become powerful markers of the politico-historically engendered rural-urban alienation and the traps of the political economy underpinning rapid economic growth in post-green revolution in Punjab. *AGDD* punctures the idea of how urban spaces are often projected as places of prosperity and affluence, whereas *Chamm* stands at a juncture where the migration to cities still holds promise. The absence of Ambedkar as an icon looms throughout the space and can be sensed with the iconography and sloganeering of protests for land rights in Punjab[17]. As we have argued earlier how Punjab has a liminal state of 'contradictory realities', this unique predicament is one of the many reasons why Ambedkar or any other major Dalit icon is still missing from the space and Dalit identity is struggling to assert itself.

All three films have their niche audiences which respond to the underlying philosophical frameworks upon which the directors built their works. *AGDD*, with influences from the New wave cinema of India, was lauded in International film festivals, claiming to present the story of

the marginalised communities. But it was marginalised in Punjab where the audience remains aloof to the oeuvre of Gurvinder Singh. *Landless* was the staple of university students and Marxist film festivals who debated amongst themselves the importance of land or lack thereof. Maddoke could not get the same response from the Punjabi audience who, for reasons known only to them, chose to ignore the gut-wrenching and bitter reality of landlessness in Punjab. *Chamm* with its agitprop mode was shown in protest sites throughout Punjab. These films raise important questions to their respective audiences. Yet, one cannot help but question the strict demarcation of cinema in the larger framework of art and its function to understand the ever-lasting conundrum of caste and its relation with space.

Notes

1 Since its inception in the early 1930s with *Sheila: Pind ki Kudi* (1935), Punjabi cinema has gone through different phases, in which the filmic imagination has conceded various influences, from adapting myths and love legends onto the screen to strengthening the notion of Nehruvian socialism (1940–1950s), from celebrating the religious beliefs to creating slapstick comedies (1960–1970s), from Jatt-centric narratives to films focusing on the diaspora (1980s–2000s), to name a few (Parmar 2013; Garg 2019; Kaur and Singh 2019). In its long history, *Chann Pardesi* (1981) and *Marhi Da Deeva* (1989) are the only exceptions that broach the subject of caste for the first time in films.

2 The Jats, with 35 percent of the total population of Punjab, dominate the socio-political spheres of the state. Traditionally considered as a low-caste group, the Jats entered into the fold of Sikhism during the time of Guru Arjun in great numbers and rose to the position of a land-owning aristocracy during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the British rule. Their hegemony weakened the position of other castes in Punjab (Puri 2003; Sharma 2012).

3 Most of the films in the 1980s and 1990s were centred around the character of Jats and valorised their hegemonic masculinity in terms of both their caste identity and ownership of land, clearly visible from the titles of a large majority of films like *Putt Jattan De* (1982)*, Yaari Jatt Di* (1987)*, Jatt te Zameen* (1987) *Anakh Jattan Di* (1990)*, Jor Jatt Da* (1991), and *Jatt Jeyona Morh* (1992) (Gill 2012; Sevea 2014)

4 Horowitz, Asher. 'Marx's Theory of Alienation'. www.yorku.ca/horowitz/courses/lectures/35_marx_alienation.html. Accessed on October 12, 2020.

5 Jaaware argues that understanding of caste 'fuses together spatial and temporal metaphors', wherein the spatial connotes a belief in hierarchical social system and temporality is conveyed through different segmentations of backward and forward castes (2019: 214).

6 The myth states that the Asuras and Devtas churned out the holy nectar from the sea only for the Hindu God Vishnu to dispense it solely to the Devtas keeping Asuras estranged from their labour. In revolt, one particular Asura disguised himself as a Devta and consumed the nectar. Upon finding this, Vishnu beheaded him and thus 'Rahu' and 'Ketu' emerged from his head and torso. On every solar and lunar eclipse Rahu and Ketu run amok on their chariot, pulled by blind horses to avenge the unfair dispensation provided to them on that inequitable day, and thus, on days of eclipses, Dalits in Punjab go around and ask for alms in the name of the blind horse (Nayar 2016: xiv).

7 One of the key figures of the New Wave Cinema in India, Mani Kaul set a new benchmark with his innovative film-making techniques in films like *Uski Roti* (1969)*, Duvidha* (1973), and *Satah se Uthata Adami* (1980). For him, the process of making a film is embedded in time and a certain quality of attention as he says, 'I wish to place myself in a particular sense of *time* and let *space* be, grow' (2013: 18). He was a mentor to Gurvinder Singh and also a creative producer of *AGDD*.

8 Emerging in the mid-1990s, the term 'geographies of exclusion' 'refers to the subtle and not so subtle signals that some social groups are not welcome in urban and rural spaces and thus experience socio-spatial exclusion' (Tchoukaleyska 2017: 1).

9 Iqbal Sevea has written extensively on how Jat-centric masculinity prevails by 'demonstrating its superiority not only over women but also over "other" men', resulting in either other caste groups forced to exhibit their ability to match hegemonic masculinity or in emasculation (2014: 131).

10 Gursharan Singh (1929–2011) was a progressive director of Punjabi plays, who worked towards bringing an alternative form of theatre in Punjab.

11 Rajeev Kumar, inspired by the notion of Third cinema, started Sangat Screenings in 2017 to create a space for an alternative viewing for the common people (personal conversation with the director). The

film has been screened at various protests organised by the *Zameen Prapati Sangarsh Committee* (ZPSC) from 2018 to 2020 in the Malwa region of Punjab and the ongoing farmers agitation at Delhi against the three farm bills.

12 In the Punjab Village Commons Land (Regulation) Act of 1961, one-third of the total common land in village is reserved for the scheduled castes. However, upper-caste Jatt landholders subvert the rules by bidding for the land through their dummy candidates. Over the last few years, Dalits have raised their voice in a few districts of Malwa region of Punjab to get their share of the common land.

13 The bhakti poet, Sant Ravidas (1450–1520), first formulated a utopian vision of society in his song 'Begumpura'. Begumpura, the city without sorrow, is a modern society free from the entanglements of class and caste. Gail Omvedt in her book, *Seeking Begumpura*, writes, '[the poem] was an expression, in the early modern age of a utopia. In some ways, it seems to stand alone, yet it was a harbinger of the kind of social vision that would underline all the later struggles and theorizing of anti-caste intellectuals. Begumpura was, for Ravidas, an imagined city, without geographical location, without a history: it was to be a later task to build in space and time' (Omvedt 2011: 7).

14 Paramjit Judge, in his paper 'Religion, Caste, and Communalism in Punjab', has argued in detail on how the caste stratification among the non-Hindus is qualitatively distinct from that of the Hindus (2002). Surinder S. Jodhka also calls attention to the fact that caste has invariably been 'seen in unitary terms, as a pan-Indian reality without any significant variations in its structure and ideology' (2004: 165).

15 'Paradox of Prosperity' is the title of the still-photography project for which Maddoke received Sohan Qadri Fellowship by Chandigarh Lalit Kala Akademi in 2013 and which later became the basis for *Landless*.

16 Only a few studies are available on the indebtedness and suicides among the farm labourers in Punjab. A survey report published by Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union in 2017 brought to light the increasing burden of debt on the agricultural labour, role of banks and cooperative societies, private moneylenders, and microfinance agencies as some of the reasons for the same.

17 Based on conversations with Prof. Paramjit Judge, Prof. Jatinder Singh (Assistant Professor, Punjabi University, Patiala), and Mukesh Malaud (ZPSC).

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22

Caste, Voyeurism and Kannada New Wave Cinema

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An interpretive understanding of 'caste' in the matrices of the Kannada cinematic traditions is best illustrated through a dialectical approach. The approach would help bridge the opposing rationales of the 'parallel cinema' and its cinematic structures, with that of the 'popular cinema' entrenched in and constitutive of its socio-cultural productions. Parallel cinema is situated in the neglected and ill-conceived traditions of popular cinema. It is in these spaces of narrative dysfunctionalities that the former stands in opposition to and an answer to the latter. However, it would be unfair not to subject parallel cinema to the modes of scrutiny that are usual accompaniments of popular cinema. In short, if parallel cinema is hailed for addressing the lacks in popular cinema, then it should be brought to task on impairment over narrative structures or strategies, inadequate understanding of the category of 'audience' or 'spectator', treatment of subject and directorial techniques, all of which are traditional tropes for critical treatment of popular cinema. Thus, the chapter uses this juxtaposition of the 'parallel' and the 'popular' in its historicity, as a point of departure to critically investigate the conventions and structures of Kannada New Wave cinema.

For the constructive view of the theoretical departures that this chapter entails, a critical outline of certain significant conventions of Kannada New Wave cinema over the years becomes necessary. While caste has been a central theme of some of the early filmic endeavours such as *Samskara* (Funeral Rites, 1970), *Vamsha Vriksha* (The Genealogy Tree, 1972), *Chomana Dudi*[1] (Choma's Drum, 1975), *Ghatashraddha* (The Ritual of Excommunication, 1977), and *Grahana* (Eclipse, 1978), other social and cultural aspects seeped into the fabric of the New Wave rather gradually. M. K. Raghavendra's criticism upon the same tracing New Wave cinematic practices in Kannada points at the discrepancy between the pioneering ideologies of the film-makers and their production of discourses through these films. The movies, beginning from *Samskara* to the recently well-received *Harikatha Prasanga* (Chronicles of Hari, 2016) by Ananya Kasaravalli, oscillate between the axioms of a radical narrative of unattended socio-cultural themes and those that are compelled into the rationale of national awards. The filmic ventures of the 1970s were marked by their concerns over orthodox society and caste hierarchy. While some narrative strategies were structured around the ambiguities of identities of the bodies, the others maintained a critical distance from the content on the screen. Films that came later, such as *Arivu* (Awareness, 1979), *Phaniyamma* (1983), *December-1* (2014), and others, marginally adopted a

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documentary style of narrativisation that could be interpreted as embodying a directorial/subjective distance from the screen. Similar to M. K. Raghavendra's comments about the absence of the 'Muslim social' in Kannada popular cinema, Kannada New Wave cinema also suffered a similar fate until P. Sheshadri's *Munnudi* (The Preface, 2000) by the turn of the century, followed by *Hasina* and *Gulabi Talkies* released in 2004 and 2008, respectively. Once again, the drift of these films was partial in that it represented the conditions of Muslim women alone, thus lacking in the balanced construction of the 'Muslim social' discourse. However, B. Suresh's 2003 film titled *Artha* (Meaning) presents itself as an exception, by focussing on the dialogical relationship of religious identities within the society. With the turn of the millennium, directors like Girish Kasaravalli revived their initial engagement with orthodoxy and women's sexuality in *Naayi Neralu* (Shadow of a Dog, 2006). Similarly, B. S. Lingadevaru's 2015 film titled *Nanu Avanalla . . . Avalu* (I am not a he . . . I am a she) was a radical unravelling of the understanding of gender in the non-binary sense, followed by Ananya Kasaravalli's *Harikatha Prasanga*. While recent critics of Kannada cinema in general recognise some films such as *Thithi* (Funeral, 2015) and *Rama Rama Re . . .* (2016) as having both popular and New Wave tenets of movie-making imbedded in them, the specific discourse on the 'New' New Wave Cinema is yet to be constructed, especially locating as its centre the emergence of the 'new audience' from the digital platforms.

The above outline presents itself as an extensive accommodation, from the part of the Kannada New Wave, of subjects unaccommodated by the popular cinematic productions. Consequently, the inference points at Kannada popular cinema's acute amnesia in essaying the subjects of caste and the corresponding subjectivity emerging from the questions of caste and thus the efforts of the New Wave cinema may appear sufficient. It is important to note that the usage of the term 'caste' in the current modes of cinematic production could be partial in its scope, reflecting the nature of pictorial content in Kannada cinema itself. The popular cinematic representation of caste is often restricted to portrayal of upper-caste identities or their corresponding 'hypervisible' normatives, which is diametrically opposite to the parallel cinema's treatment of caste. As a practice, parallel cinema is known to have posited unilateral focus on the portrayal of the lower caste or the underprivileged or having produced a critical discourse of caste in the general sense of the term. Quite interestingly, although Kannada parallel cinema does push the spotlight in the direction of the lower caste, its treatment of these characters and their lived experiences is still dependent on and draws from the overarching, hegemonic presences of the upper-caste characters, thus limiting their potential as alternative cinema. The structural limitations that the chapter may pose are anatomically connected to Kannada New Wave cinema's comprehension of the subject of caste and its representations.

The absence of a critical discourse on caste beyond the 1970s as a socio-cultural entity constituting everyday life experiences also serves as the locus of this critical enterprise for which the chapter primarily focuses on the following films: *Samskara* by Pattabhi Rama Reddy, *Chomana Dudi* by B. V. Karanth, *Ghatashraddha* by Girish Kasaravalli, and *Grahana* by T. S. Nagabharana. Beginning with the films of the 1970s, *Samskara* by Pattabhi Rama Reddy followed by Girish Kasaravalli's *Ghatashraddha* fall under the rubric of critiquing the caste-oriented customs and questioning Brahminical patriarchy. This was coupled with the further emergence of a lower-caste character as occupying the narratorial lead in films such as *Chomana Dudi* and partially in *Grahana*. The dilemmas or contradictions of Brahminal orthodoxy presented in the initial films were treated on a personal level and their digressions were perceived as a subject of retrospection in the comprehension of their systems. The conundrum of the characters in these films centred upon the subject of caste also presented with certain limitations. The narrative strain constituting the lower-caste characters appeared rather insubstantial or inarticulate. *Chomana Dudi* and *Grahana* are films with narratives that revolve around the subject of caste, where subjectivities of

the lower-caste characters in the given social context assume a central position. However, the chapter would deal with characters that are marked by their caste identities both at the centre and the periphery and aims to extrapolate its theorisations through a comparative approach. The aforesaid films have presented caste as a 'system' with clearly marked hierarchy and segregation of spaces while sociologists like M. N. Srinivas in his 2003 article bid adieu to such an understanding in the societies of the latter half of the 20th century. Srinivas propounded that 'individual castes are thriving' than the efforts towards maintaining the hierarchical structure intact (2003: 456). Within the context of such a transformation of the society and changing apparatuses in reinforcing the caste structure, the films under investigation have a rather restrictive understanding of caste as a 'system'. Therefore, the narratives conceived since the emergence of New Wave movement in Kannada cinema pose the problem of contemporary relatability and identification of the self with the characters on the screen. From this perspective, caste as a subject remains to be explored in other dimension that needs to be ascertained as contemporary in its approach. Having lacked such a proposition even since the initial endeavours of the movement, the question of identification and association relies entirely upon a narrower understanding of caste and its manifestations in the given society.

The question of identification or association is crucial to the experience of watching cinema, be it popular or parallel. The assumed or imagined audience are expected to find themselves participating, be it closely or remotely within the fabric of the narrative or the action. Such identification is explained by Laura Mulvey in her theory on the concept of 'visual pleasure' (1999: 58). She highlights the relationship between the audience and the screen image, especially the notion of the male gaze in the act of looking and the dimension of having-looked-at-ness that deteriorates everything by objectifying the screen image. Critics like Tom Gunning who perceive it as visual 'attractions' (2006: 31–40) instead of the deriving pleasure principle yet do not completely disprove the arguments laid down by Mulvey. He effectively builds on it with slight departures in terms of perspectives between Mulvey's secret pleasure and cinema's tendency to ignite such pleasures by ward of exhibitionism. Nevertheless, the aspect of pleasure is still primarily attached to the exhibition of skin/body on the big screen along with the process of association or identification of the audience with the images or characters on the screen. On the other hand, neurocinematics maps the level of engagement of one's brain simulated by the images/action on the screen. This technique of assessing cinematic practices was first coined by Uri Hasson and was further employed by film critics who adopted an interdisciplinary approach imbibing psychology and cognition into film studies. Similarly, Torben Grodal's study postulates upon the techniques of neurocinematics and evolutionary psychology in understanding the emotional responses of cinema viewers. The study focuses primarily upon the audience's fascination with melodramas and tragedies, which fall according to him within the 'expressions of acceptance and attachment' (2007: 95). The study also outlines the differential responses of the audience, categorising them as first-person perspective and third-person perspective. However, the study fails to take it further in this direction thus invalidating the element of association of the audience with the characters/body images on the screen. It is at this point that Mulvey's aspect of self-screen association or identification schema must be brought into the theoretical framework which diversifies the proportions and categories of audiences' emotional responses. In addition, the understandings drawn from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* primarily making a stark distinction in terms of simulation/attraction induced by the idea of the exhibition of the desirable bodies also posit a key axis in the chapter's categorisation of the Dalit and the non-Dalit bodies as treated by the films chosen for the critical investigation. Deploying this proposition as a premise of the study into the cinemas of Kannada New Wave movement, it is crucial to also add into the framework the process or concept of 'dis-identification' or 'dissociation' (Nagaraj 2011: 61).

Neurocinematic studies centre on the subject of pleasure derived by the audience from the object or image on the screen. The inference drawn is that the tendency to derive positive pleasure is exponential in connection with watching a happy-go-lucky movie or a pleasant movie, especially the ones which involve exhibiting the characters with an intention to capture the pleasantness or the sexually charged. This is a direct result of the audience associating or identifying oneself with the characters/action on the screen. On the other hand, there also exists something that I would like to call 'negative pleasure' or 'pleasure of relief', much different from the ideas of catharsis which is derived from watching a depressing movie or in other words a movie filled with elements of unpleasantness. The difficulty of the audience in self-screen identification process results in the dissociation of the self, leading towards the 'voyeurism of the undesirable'. In other words, it generates reverse voyeurism that springs from not associating something as your own or as happening to oneself or being part of the action or the narrative. In this manner, the audience is able to achieve a distance constructed from methods of generating the dissociative tendencies by putting up on the screen the 'depressing', the 'unpleasant', and the 'undesirable'. Thus, it could be termed as the 'voyeurism of the undesirable', the kind that reminds oneself of what they hate, dislike, cringe, or never desire to locate themselves in. However, this tendency of dissociation does not simply spiral from every depressing film ever made rather by the treatment of the subject and the construction of images which eventually leads to the aspect of cognitive reception.

Representing the above delineated proposition in the chosen films, Choma in *Chomana Dudi*, Chandri in *Samskara*, and Chikkahanuma and Gooda in *Grahana* are designed to foster a screen presence majorly with the images of their bodies. The caste narratives of Kannada New Wave cinema have continued to demonstrate a sense of predilection towards a mere screen presence rather than an articulative screen presence. A mere screen presence could be defined as the positioning of characters within a given scene or a shot wherein the characters are not required to contribute to the progression of the narrative action. Sometimes they function as ritualistic or customary objects. The opening scene of *Chomana Dudi* foregrounds the character of the landlord Sankappayya who, from a distance, gives orders to Choma on agricultural matters. Choma and his family, who are gathered around the fire with Choma beating his drum, are placed in a terribly lit corner at the background. Choma stops beating the drum and the landlord continues his homebound journey followed by a close shot of Choma and his upper-bare body. This particular scene lays the foundation for the narrative as well as directorial tendency to treat and juxtapose the difference between the concepts of mere screen presence and articulative screen presence. Similar is the screen presence of Chandri in *Samskara*, where scenes that harbour Praneshacharya and other Brahmin members are showered ample lighting while Chandri recedes into the background as a blotch in the image. The cinematic narrative denies an articulative/enunciatory perspective to Chandri's character throughout the film. She becomes a shadowy presence, an unacknowledged body. In the scene where the scholarly Brahmins gather to decide upon the cremation of Naranappa, the audience does not get an opportunity to view the action from Chandri's perspective but is rather looked at by the characters in the film as well as the audience. In *Grahana*, Chikkahanuma and Gooda are also sketched out as characters that choose silence over voice and throughout the film; Puttaswamy, the upper-caste headman's son, performs most of the articulation both for himself and for other Dalit characters in the narrative. Consequently, the absence of articulation or enunciation renders characters belonging to the Dalit community in the cinematic narratives moot especially in films dealing with the subject of caste. Therefore, the focus shifts solely to the presentation of their bodies.

The films under investigation also exuberantly embrace the exhibition of half-naked bodies, and there lies a gross distinction in its treatment as well. Choma, in almost all the scenes, is seen

wearing a dhoti alone with a towel thrown on his shoulder or sometimes wrapped around his head. Some of the crucial juxtapositions may be considered for the analysis. The scenes where Sankappayya, the landlord, and Choma interact are designed to demonstrate the hierarchy of these two bodies. Sankappayya is fair-skinned and healthy, while Choma's image speaks of his body having gone through a great deal of labour. The shot where Choma is working in the field, Sankappayya appears from behind Choma and is always shown to emerge from the higher ground, looking down upon Choma. A similar shot structure which indicates power relations is also played out in *Samskara*, where the angle keeps Chandri in the foreground with her back facing the camera and the view of Acharya in the background facing the camera, his body is seen till his knees while he hands down the begotten jewellery back to Chandri. However, even after the moral high ground of Acharya had been questioned and tested by Naranappa on various occasions before, Acharya still seemed to be positioned higher solely based on his caste and his scholarly knowledge. Nonetheless, Chandri is the only one to have stayed by the side of Naranappa, giving up her jewellery to aid the Brahmins in Naranappa's cremation. The question of moral high ground or authority is not problematised at this stage of the film. The directorial decisions in terms of executing the scenes that construct the encounter between the Brahmins and the Dalit characters in both films fall short of actively engaging in the structural subversions of the hierarchy. The Dalit characters in the film *Ghatashraddha* are marginal to the narrative weaved around Yamunakka and Nani. However, instances where Kateera and other toddy shop visitors in the latter part of the film are captured negate their appearances within the ordered spaces of domesticity or spaces that characterise the involvement of human endeavour in its design. Kateera and other Dalit characters who barely aid the narrative aesthetic with their presence alone are presented in the dark wilderness devoid of the assumed notion of civilisation to their bodies.

Grahana, on the other hand, displays the half-naked bodies of the Dalit characters both as a focal point as well as mere exhibition providing the context for the action. One of the crucial aspects of *Grahana* is its malignant and intrepid treatment of the Dalit bodies, both dead and alive.[2] According to the customs of the village, the chosen set of Dalits are ordained as Brahmin for a period of 15 days during which these fellows are made to live within the vicinity of the local deity's temple along with restrictions of mobility and muteness. It is accounted as a ritual that has come into being with the appearance of Hebbaramma in the village. Since Hebbaramma's attire failed to confirm to the Brahmin's appearance, she was misunderstood as a Dalit and shewed off from the *agrahara* (Brahmin residential quarters). Hebbaramma being thirsty resorted to seek water from Dalit households, and the Dalits of the village treated her with water and refreshments after which she disappeared. This disappearance is believed to be the act of the Goddess herself, and to mark this incident, the villagers decided to hold an annual village fair and the male members of the families which treated the vagrant Hebbaramma historically have been ordained as Brahmin for a short period. This ordainment is termed as temporary Brahmin in the village. Chikkahanuma was one such ordained/temporary Brahmin for the village fair during which he dies, lying bare-bodied in the middle of the village. The narrative action takes off from this point on and commences the proliferation of unpleasant images of Dalit bodies. The montage showing select parts of Chikkahanuma's dead body accelerates the notion of the neurocinematic experience of categorising 'attractive' and 'non-attractive' body rhetoric. The paradigm of screen experience between the audience's self-image and the exhibited screen-body image cannot be altogether ignored when the process of drawing or withdrawing from pleasure is directed towards the presentation of the 'attractive' and the 'non-attractive'.

Samskara's narrative is also pinned around the death of Naranappa, with a similar conundrum such as the one present in *Grahana*, which throws into thin air the scriptural basis of religious

practices. Having placed at the centre the dead bodies of Naranappa, a Brahmin in *Samskara*, and Chikkahanuma, a Dalit in *Grahana*, the treatment of these two bodies vary exponentially. Naranappa's body is never shown entirely except for the shot when he dies, that is a close shot of his face with eyes wide open. The film maintains a distance from juxtaposing the images of Naranappa's dead body while the subject is repeatedly mentioned and argued about throughout the narrative. The possible angle of grotesqueness to the Brahmin body is not granted by the film-maker. However, *Grahana* runs wild in its arbitrary juxtapositions of shots of Chikkahanuma's degenerating body images. The point at which these two practices of exhibiting the dead bodies are concerned, an unbalanced treatment becomes conspicuous.

Developing from this perspective, Choma's sons on the contrary are tall and well built. They are asked to fill in for Choma himself as bonded labourers at the plantation sites to pay back the dues incurred by the father. On their journey to the work site, strangers who are also part of this collective journey comment about the bodies of Guruva and Chaniya. The perception brought out by the comment of the stranger once again retreats to what qualifies as attractive or unattractive. Guruva and Chaniya possess the bodies that are clearly not expected from children belonging to the Dalit community. The observation of the stranger regarding the bodies of Choma's sons also implies that they are solely fit to work as slaves. The body images of Puttaswamy in *Grahana* is fashioned in a similar way when he is being excommunicated from his caste for visiting and mingling with the Dalit members of the village. Puttaswamy's sister-in-law visits him during the night to deliver dinner and she graces her hand on his body indicating how unattractive he has become. She expresses that Puttaswamy's appearance resembled that of a prince, and since the excommunication, he has lost his charm, implying that he is imbibing the qualities of the Dalit characters by living and mingling with them. In addition, Puttaswamy's appearance in the film after the event of excommunication is kept in conjunction with the presentations of Dalit body images such as Gooda, Chikkahanuma's son, and Gooda's friends. On the other hand, Praneshacharya's body images in *Samskara* tell an altogether different story. The opening scene of the film presents the close-up shots of parts of Praneshacharya's body performing his morning ablution in the river. A similar presentation of his body is paraded in the latter part of the film, but the contexts of these presentations have direly changed. Conjoining these two similar presentations of body images, the attitude needs to be considered. The initial trajectory functions to create the perspective of the character as a religious being, one who is untouched by the sins of the world. However, the latter trajectory which presents Praneshacharya as a sinner for having had sexual intercourse with Chandri, a Dalit woman, deviates from the manner in which Naranappa is depicted for similar 'sins'. The disenchantment that Praneshacharya's mind and body exhibited before the scriptural sin disappears post the sinful act. He is shown to have hurled himself into the river and splash the water around completely aware of the pleasures of human–nature relationship. This particular structure of presenting his body as having found connection with the natural world due to his sexual exploration with Chandri becomes problematic when taken in tandem with the presentation of Chandri in the same film.

From a gendered perspective, aspects of body image construction, for the most parts in *Samskara*, *Chomana Dudi* and *Grahana* constrict themselves to the phenomenon of sexualising the bodies of Dalit women. Although the process could be partially justified as reflecting the fabric of a hierarchical society, it yet again succumbs to the previously generated notions of desexualised—upper caste women in films such as *Samskara* and *Ghatashraddha*. The absence or the exclusion of narratorial significance to the self and bodies of upper-caste women in both these narratives reiterate such a proposition. Reverting to the body images of Praneshacharya from the previous section, the body of Chandri receives an altogether different and unwarranted camera attention. As discussed earlier, the post-sin presentation of Praneshacharya resides in

the realm of the unsexualised or the desexualised although his sin is of a sexual nature. He is presented as a body which is seeking liberation from the scriptural basis of his community and moving to establish a relationship with nature. Chandri on the other hand is denied a desexualised framing of her body such as is designed for Praneshacharya. The close-up shots of Chandri drying her saree tied to the branch of a tree are the images chosen to be shown for the audience and not as seen by Praneshacharya himself. The sexualisation of Chandri's body also extends to her touch. The scene in the vicinity of Hanuman temple is a manifestation of the toxic touch of Chandri that possesses the power of exorcising Praneshacharya's Brahminism. The idea that the touch of a Dalit woman turns an entity into an object of sexual pleasure is highlighted reducing her to a sexualised being that showcases the fragility of Praneshacharya's Brahminism, one that collapses with the touch of a Dalit woman indicating the undesirability of a Dalit woman's touch. Similarly, the accountant who oversees the bonded labourers visits Choma and stops for a second, with the camera panning a point-of-direction look at Belli, Choma's daughter working beside the hut. As the narrative develops, Belli ends up having an affair with the accountant. The point of contestation emerges here due to the recurrent mode of presenting the dichotomy of the sexualised and the desexualised between lower-caste and upper-caste bodies of women. Antithetical to sexualisation of female Dalit bodies exists the desexualisation of female Brahmin bodies in the said films. Characters like Praneshacharya's sick wife and many other Brahmin female characters in *Samskara* are elements simply adding a subject position devoid of expressions of sexuality. Yamunakka in *Ghatashraddha*, a Brahmin widow who must deal with her pregnancy that is a result of her relationship with the village school master, is one such example. Yamunakka most often is presented within domestic spaces, and the chances of a sexual tension within this space is nullified with the presence of Nani, the kid whose loss of innocence lies at the centre of the narrative. Her body is never closely shot except when she is excommunicated, and the shot of her long hair is juxtaposed with the scene of her crying under the tree where her tonsured head is presented, which functions in the process of desexualisation. The illegal relationship with the village school master is picturised to manifest only the social anxiety eliminating her bodily desires. Such being the trajectory, the sexualisation of female Dalit bodies and desexualisation of female Brahmin bodies culminates in the absence of pluralistic discourses on caste/female bodies. Nonetheless, the sexualisation contributes to mere objectification of Dalit bodies which remain distant from self-screen association for their bodies are presented as to be looked at than to be associated with.

To expand the proposition on the exhibition of the 'undesirable', the element of grotesqueness and death has accentuated the screen presence of Dalit bodies more literally than figuratively. The scene that doctors Nani's fear in the forest when he ventures out to find Yamunakka is shown by the grotesque facial upshots of Kateera in *Ghatashraddha* that completely lacks sound narrative significance. Characters like Choma and his sons Chaniya and Kaala all succumb into the caste fabric of the society at different stages of the narrative. Kaala drowns in the river while others debate on the shore over whether a Brahmin can save the boy. Chaniya's body yields to the disease prevalent amongst the working section of the population. His body was earlier referred to as well-built among the Dalit men. Choma breathes his last while playing the drum infuriated by his daughter's affair with the accountant. On the other hand, *Grahana* as a narrative begins with the death of Chikkahanuma and in the concluding section the death of Puttaswamy is witnessed. The close-up cut shots of parts of Chikkahanuma's dead body lying bare on the ground is placed in a sequence that appears twice in the narrative. Both the presentations accrue towards the construction of the 'undesirable'. On the other hand, Puttaswamy's death, that takes place by the end of the narrative, is superimposed by the image of fire indicating that he received a proper burial. The shot lasts barely for a couple of seconds on the screen and

the implication of him having received the same end as Chikkahanuma is primarily ruled out. Chikkahanuma's dead body is deprived of a proper burial and the gruesome shots of his body parts are employed to generate displeasure while Puttaswamy, who died as an excommunicated member of his caste, is shown to indicate a desirable end. Naranappa in *Samskara* is denied a religious burial due to his unbrahminical way of living, which also involves him having Chandri as his mistress, while in the end, Praneshacharya's resolution to deliver a proper burial is an indication of the distinction between the disposal of upper-caste and lower-caste bodies. The directors of *Chomana Dudi* and *Grahana* embark upon the construction of a 'narrative mortality' that dissolves into the images of dead bodies of its prominent characters. The employed idea of 'narrative mortality' (Russell 1995: 02) in these filmic texts execute a double bind functionality. On the one hand, they are manufactured to sound as a logical conclusion to the represented lives, while on the other it superimposes the tragic component that was built from the beginning of the narratives collectively. The factor of desirability conjoined with the process of association faces a problem especially when characters are denied a decent and a dignified end to their bodies. The absence of desirable elements projected unto these Dalit bodies solidifies the paradoxical attitude prevalent in Kannada New Wave cinematic practices. The paradox resides between the ideological and the symbolic representation of Dalit bodies. Even though the narratives accommodating Dalit characters serve the ideological rubric of the New Wave, it fails to enumerate a critique of caste bodies at the symbolic level. As demonstrated, the body images of Choma, Chandri, Kateera, Gooda, and Chikkahanuma form an essential part of the New Wave theoretical framework in its production of a discourse on caste, while the characters themselves are merely 'contained' (Ramakrishnan 2010: 142) for their corporeality.

All things considered, New Wave cinema's conceptualisation of the term 'caste' appears gravely problematic since the subject of 'caste' in these films is represented as a system rather than as an organic entity pervading the socio-cultural reality of the society. The idea of caste as a system finds minimal space within the contemporary fabric of the society and thus feeds into the sense of the 'undesirable' due to its gross unrelatability or lack of self-screen associational techniques. In addition, the linearity of these 'caste' narratives encompasses tremendous efforts of the movie-makers in rendering the solely tragic rather than the critical. Keeping in view the theory of Bertolt Brecht's 'alienation effect' (2019: 143), or as otherwise understood as the 'critical distance', the narratives lure the audience into effectuating a sense of pleasure ensued by the dissociation of the unmitigated projections of 'undesirable' body images. The 'undesirable' aspect of Dalit bodies, both male and female, in these narratives also necessitates to view them in the popular medium that present bodies devoid of religious or caste markers. Habituated into such presentations of body images on screen for both Dalit and non-Dalit viewers, caste markers or explicit recognition with one's caste identity poses a serious problem of association. Even so with the Dalit bodies, the films discussed saturate upon the presentation of these bodies within the realm of the unsightly. The incessant arraying of such images as part of the narratives, both close-up and long shots, caters to the development of 'voyeurism of the undesirable' especially in relation to Dalit bodies than any other. Taking these narratives as a critical reference point, the films on caste or the general conceptualisations on the life and narratives of caste may also conjecture the presentation of the 'undesirable' as the social and the cinematic normative. The narratives are also set in the past largely beyond the comprehension of contemporary audiences that reduce these narratives to mere historical documentation. The aspect of the screen establishing a dialogical relationship with the audience structurally fails when the narratives foster a distance from reality with techniques such as black/white imaging, and locational and chronological remoteness. These factors contribute to the historical and contextual dissociation or dis-identification of the audience with the screen images. Thus, films discussed in the chapter

fall short of inducting the supposed critical thinking as part of New Wave cinematic endeavour while it leans on to the enumeration of emotional responses with its immense employment of the idea of 'narrative mortality'. If art cinema is to capture the narratives and characters true to life, the depiction of the Dalit characters highlights certain major flaws in terms of representation of everyday living experiences. One such major flaw is the absence of humour. While inherently gripped with the projections of 'voyeurism of the undesirable', the motive somehow directs at the involuntary attraction towards the employment of Glauber Rocha's 'aesthetics of hunger', within the paradigms of New Wave cinematic productions (2014: 218–220). Although minimalist movie-making was the motif of Rocha's theoretical conceptualisation, the structures of caste and their depiction focus singularly upon the representation of the 'undesirable' that are highly incongruent in terms of audience association/ identification. Therefore, if ideas and movement of realism has indeed paved the way for New Wave cinematic movement in Kannada, somehow down the line, the movie-makers have fallen prey to the traps of rendering it depressing throughout, which diverts from its own motif of keeping it true to life. As to its contemporariness, the emotional response of a sigh of relief is more likely to be the after-effect of the movie-watching experience rather than inducing a critical inquisitiveness in the minds of the audience.

Notes

1 See the chapter on *Chomana Dudi* in this volume.
2 See the chapter employing Achille Mbembe's necropolitics for a further deliberation along this line of thought.

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23

Exploring Caste on Screen and Beyond

A Study of *Chomana Dudi*

Jaishree Kapur

Cinema has the ability to frame, visualise, and narrate the human reality on screen by employing the moving images. While dialogues play a crucial role in communicating thematic concerns of the film, the language of cinema comprises other elements such as lighting, make-up, costume, camera angles, character arrangement, spatial configuration, props, landscape, sound and the cultural world inhabited by its characters. Written by the Jnanpith award-winner Kota Shivaram Karanth, *Chomana Dudi* (1932) became the first literary work to highlight, what Sisir Kumar Das calls, '. . . the emergence of a Harijan hero' (2003: 166) as it unmistakably acceded to the Gandhian ideals of amalgamating national struggle against the colonial regime with the struggle against the traditional caste hierarchies. Made after a gap of 42 years in a radically altered socio-political and cultural landscape with the collaboration of the novelist turned screenplay writer, the film largely retained the basic structure, plot, characterisation, location, and thematic concerns of the literary narrative. The purpose of this chapter is not to fall into the framework of fidelity critics who analyse the cinematic adaptation on the basis of how well it has replicated the former but to consider the film as an independent work of art that requires an exclusive reading. The film not only was conferred with several national and state accolades but also won the prestigious Golden Lotus (*Swarna Kamal*) award.[1] As a theatre luminary trained by the maestro Gubbi Veeranna and a teacher at Sardar Patel Vidyalaya, B. V. Karanth excelled in the art of creating distinct sound and visual patterns in his plays, a technique that came to his aid during film direction as well. Being quite innocent of film-making skills himself, Karanth also relied on Girish Kasaravalli's[2] knowledge of the cinematic medium. With the assistance of Girish Kasaravalli as the associate director and S. Ramachandra as the cinematographer, the film resorts to what Jacques Rancière calls the 'sayable'[3] dimension of cinematic language that enables the film-maker to communicate the issue of caste on screen without solely depending upon the dialogues. Divided into three sections, the chapter begins by briefly tracing the larger socio-political framework within which the film is situated. It follows up with an attempt to understand how cinematic language is employed to explore the issue of caste on screen through a close reading of the film; and finally, the chapter moves beyond the exploration on screen by analysing how the location of the director impinges his treatment of the subject of caste. Intriguingly, an attempt will be made to briefly trace out the film's contemporary relevance while concluding the chapter.

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I

Akin to other Indian cinematic traditions, Kannada cinema too has been rooted in mythological tales, family melodramas and historical films until the late nineteen sixties and seventies witnessed a qualitative revival in terms of both aesthetics and thematic concerns with the emergence of what has been considered as the New Wave, Artistic or Experimental cinema.[4] The film-makers who belonged to this school sought to depict on screen a cinema replete with technical finesse and socially committed themes such as the interior mindscape of women, questioning the mindless conformity to religion, the caste hierarchies and the inequality among different groups. According to N. Manu Chakravarthy,

> one can comprehend a new modern consciousness entering into it, quite intensely, from the spheres of politics and literature. Films such as *Samskara* (1970), *Sankalpa* (1973), *Kaadu* (1974), *Chomana Dudi* (1975), *Ghatashraddha* (1977), *Chandamaaruta* (1977), *Grahana* (1981), *Bara* (1982), *Tabarana Kathe* (1988) made middle-class society confront issues, problems and challenges
>
> *(2005: 64).*

This modern consciousness was also a reflection of the departure from the concerns raised by the 'Navodaya' towards the 'Navya' literary movement.[5] During the same time, the question of land too became increasingly significant giving impetus to the leftist ideology. While on a national level, the populist grand narrative created by Indira Gandhi had rendered India a fairly radicalised space, the Chief Minister of Mysore Devraj Urs also undertook various measures to liberate debtors from pawnbrokers while simultaneously arranging shelter for the poor. According to M. K. Raghvendra, 'His [Devraj Urs'] most important contribution was perhaps the amended land reforms Act which was passed in 1973 and came into effect in 1974' (2013: 125). Within this burgeoning new sensibility, a film that depicted the desire of a Moolada Holeya, an Untouchable hereditary servitor of the Brahmin landowner, to independently till a piece of land became increasingly relevant to be presented on screen, especially when Kannada cinema tended to largely focus on Brahmin self-critique[6]. *Chomana Dudi* is set against the backdrop of traditional chaturvarna caste hierarchies that prohibits Choma (M. V. Vasudeva Rao[7]) from becoming a farmer while being born as an Untouchable bonded labourer. It depicts the changing family dynamics as his two elder sons, Chania (M. Jayarajan) and Guruva (Sunder Raj), followed by daughter Belli (Padma Kumta) and son Neela (Nagendra) visit the plantation site to pay back their father's loan to the British plantation owner while another son Kaala (M. V. Nagaraj) loses his life as an upper-caste Brahmin is warned against saving him from drowning for fear of pollution. Though Christianity offers the charm of tenancy, the tradition-bound Choma adheres to his religion because of the fear of evoking the wrath of local deities. Ultimately, he renounces the world rather than succumbing to an alternative religion.

II

In the opening shot, an interplay of light and darkness is depicted as a procession of half-asleep people return from a festival holding burning torches along with the radiant Brahmin landlord who orders completion of canal work to the physically/socially distanced family of Choma, which is enveloped in darkness. It is a scene inspired from the director's earlier stage play, 'The story of Prahalada', employed here to suggest the hierarchically defined caste relation through the contrast between light and darkness. Besides laying bare the servitude of Choma, his long

cherished unfulfilled aspiration to till a piece of land, which is his own, and his faith in the local worshipping deity Panjurli to fulfil his dream through dialogues, the sequence also unfolds motifs in the film—the screeching sounds of night birds, the barking of the dog Baadu, the traditional family song *e le la lela* . . .[8] accompanied by the incessant drum beats. The beginning clearly foreshadows how the film will employ visual and aural images to underline the subject of caste on screen.

Visual attributes are artificially created in cinema through make-up as in the case of M. V. Vasudeva Rao whose skin was coloured by the make-up artist Ramakrishna after the inflamed Shivaram Karanth declared that Choma of his literary creation was 'dark' due to his caste position as Untouchable. This insistence on depicting Choma as dark and thus inferior clearly underlines how upper-caste authors imagine Untouchable characters from a distanced, privileged position. Similarly, all the Untouchable bonded labourers working on the coastal farmland can be easily spotted with their skeletonised bodies, black arms and neck bands made from wool, and a small cap made of dried areca leaves lending them a uniform inferior status. While particular gestures of Holeyas are traced as they customarily bend down to pay respect to the well-built high-caste Brahmin landlord, the latter can be identified through his regalia—dhoti, *janeyu* (the sacred thread), *tilak* (vermillion mark), and *paan* (betel leaf). The British estate owner wears a crisp white shirt with trousers, holds a cigar, and all the converts wear a cross—these obvious visual markers not merely denote the caste status of different characters on screen but are also suggestive of their economic and social status.

The meagre diet of two spoonful of thin rice gruel that the family swallows sitting around Belli, the lack of clothes over the body of Kala and Neela, the dripping roof of the hut, all indicate the dearth of basic amenities such as food, clothing, and shelter, highlighting the state of abject poverty of Choma's family. The social marginalisation and economic exploitation of Choma's family at the hands of the Brahmin landlord, the toddy supplier, and the British estate owner is made visible without resorting to the use of harsh words. Exploitation of the two brothers at the plantation site is again depicted suggestively through the despicable working conditions marked by the lack of hygiene, medical negligence and dark, ill-lit rooms. However, when Belli visits the same site, exploitation is not merely economic and physical in nature but also sexual. This is made apparent by portraying her unwillingness to go inside the bungalow of the estate owner, followed by the visual markers of her sexual assault in the form of dishevelled hair, bruises on the face, blackened eyes, ripped clothes and physical exhaustion. The film in a very realistic manner depicts her inability to participate in any event due to the trauma that she has been subjected to as a ramification of the sexual assault.

The physical landscape also becomes a means to portray caste distinctions as the location of Pattumundi—Nujibail is selected to capture the socially secluded hut of Choma characterised by its thatched roof, rugged floor, barren tree trunks, and lack of any source of electric light. In sharp contrast stands the concrete house with an open courtyard of the Brahmin landlord Sankappaya and the magnificent bungalow of the estate owner Mingela. Interestingly, the simple prop of a door is employed to underline the caste differences on screen. While Choma's hut has a makeshift door made out of dried straw that has to be constantly readjusted, the landlord's courtyard has a specially constructed backdoor for the entry of the Untouchables in order to maintain the prerequisite social distance, and behind the majestic door of the estate owner, Untouchable women like Belli are sexually assaulted. The contemporary Indian society has confirmed and reinforced the practice of social distancing as well as territorial segregation in the era of Covid 19.

The arrangement of the protagonist within the meticulously designed frames is such that the caste hierarchies are accentuated on screen. The mere use of a prop like the lantern between

George (the convert), who is spatially placed higher on a stool, and Choma, who sits on the rough floor, functions both literally and metaphorically to throw light on their location as a provider and seeker against the dark background. Similarly, the character placement in the scene where the workers are informed about their wages at the plantation site is such that the estate owner sits above, the clerk stands, while the plantation workers sit on the ground. The spatially defined hierarchies are enhanced as the camera zooms out from the estate owner to a wider composition in order to direct the attention of the spectators towards the well-defined caste distinctions.

Realism in cinema engages with the idea of showing 'the world as it really is', but as studies in realism have proved, the representational strategies employed are not innocent.[9] The cinematic techniques incorporated here picturise the protagonist as bereft of any active agency on screen. Choma is deliberately positioned in each frame below the landlord, both while sitting to 'receive' his daily share of paddy (from a safe distance for fear of pollution) or even while standing in the coastal farmland where he is mostly captured from the point of view of the Brahmin landlord through high-angle shots. Interestingly, the point of view shots from the perspective of Choma capture the landlord at an elevated status barring a scene where both the Brahmin and the Untouchable appear on the same level ground. It is the only moment in the entire film where Choma confronts the landlord by refusing to follow his orders; the body language of his suddenly straightened back becomes symbolic of his resistance. But immediately, the three children of Choma again captured through the point of view shot of the landlord (Figure 23.1) come forward with bent down bodies, apologising for his misconduct, restoring the caste hierarchies.

Figure 23.1 Gesture of bowing down to pay respect. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

In another sequence, spectators are transported to the dream world of Choma where he caresses his self-nurtured crops in a moment of ecstasy, but suddenly, the camera cuts back to his present grim reality where he lies collapsed in the landlord's field. In order to create an overburdening impact of his surroundings on his psyche, S. Ramachandra's camera slowly moves farther away from him till it captures his miniscule, diminutive presence through an extremely long shot. More than the visual images, it is the stark difference in the sound track that allows the spectators to understand the contrast between illusion and reality. The sound track that appears in the background of his present condition is carried forward to several succeeding scenes until his nakedness becomes emblematic of his absolute vulnerability. His bare body too refuses to cast away the black thread stuck around his waist, insisting on his birth as a hereditary slave who is bereft of any possession, barring the drum. Without indulging him in a single dialogue, the entire journey of Choma's physical, psychological, and emotional state is traversed, rendering him a mute victim of his circumstances in the eyes of the spectators.

Sought as the sole alternative to the unjust practice of caste, conversion to Christianity reappears throughout the narrative. The film visually makes apparent how Untouchability is not a menace in Christianity as the priest touches the child of an Untouchable as soon as he is introduced on screen. It is pertinent to remember that preceding *Chomana Dudi's* release in 1975, instances of inter-caste romances had appeared in Kannada films such as *Nanda Gokula* (1972) by Y. R. Swamy, *Gandaha Gudi* (1973) by B. Vijaya Reddy, and *Bhoothayyana Maga Ayyu* (1974) by S. Siddalingaiah but the consequence of the over emphasis of depicting romance by the two couples, Guruva and Mary as well as Belli and the clerk Mingela in the film under study, de-emphasises the impact of Christianity *vis-à-vis* caste. The subsequent sections shall underline how it is communicated in the audio-visual medium of cinema.

The characterisation of Mary (Leena Goveas) who ironically belonged to the Mari caste of Holeyas before her conversion is depicted not only through the obvious visual marker of proselytisation, the cross that she wears, but also through the songs sung by her in praise of Yesu that catches the attention of both Guruva and the spectators. As Mary intones the song during the plantation journey, her words are introduced first before the source image is identified. The second time, her song appears off screen when Guruva yearns for the company of Choma and Belli. The appearance of her song at this point clearly reveals how she has gradually filled the lacuna in Guruva's life. Her final song appears off screen while the camera slowly moves forward to show the face of Guruva through a zoom-in shot indicating his literal and metaphorical enticement, not only towards Mary but also towards Christianity. The film incorporates several visuals that portray romance between the couple—close-up shots of Guruva's love stricken searching eyes, the background sound of the laughing couple and their eyes transfixed on each other in the wake of Guruva's illness (Figure 23.2). It culminates in the visuals where they appear as a married couple receiving blessings from the priest along with the land to till as a reward of conversion (Figure 23.3).

It is interesting to see how the two sons of Choma, Guruva and Chania, represent two opposing worldviews where the former gets the reward of conversion, while the latter is guided by the strong belief of adherence to one's religion and follows in the footsteps of his father. Conclusively, the initiation of Guruva into a new religion is contrastively juxtaposed with the death of Chania as a consequence of medical negligence during the plantation fever. Choma stands as a witness to both rebirth and death rites. The sequence gains greater resonance as the psychological impact of both the incidents on Choma is depicted through the contradictory aural imagery on screen. On the one hand, his benevolence and benignity are thanked by the couple through Christian prayers in front of the chapel, whereas on the other, Choma bemoans his own fate after the death of his son during the most moving musical scores of the film, the lamentation song. The loss of both the sons, one to another religion and the other

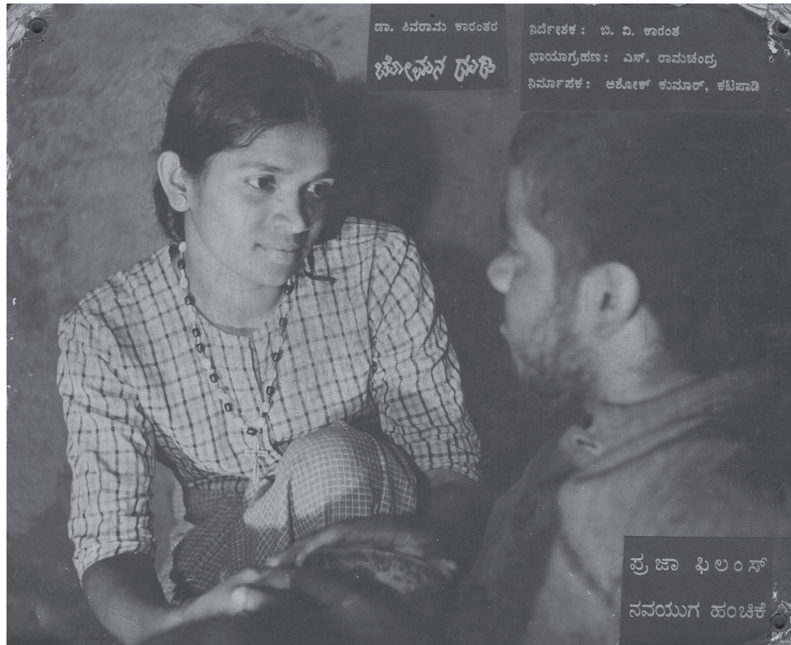

Figure 23.2 Romance between Mary and Guruva. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

Figure 23.3 Couple seeking the blessings of the priest. Photo courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

Figure 23.4 Choma bemoans the loss of his sons. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

to the destiny of being born as a Holeya, is captured on screen through extreme psychological turbulence in Choma. This is also emphasised through camera movements as the camera slowly comes in the front of his forlorn body to capture his intensely closed eyes in grief, as he beats the drum (Figure 23.4), and then zooms in towards his taut face with piercing unblinking eyes (Figure 23.5), underlining his emotional upheaval on screen.

The film-maker overtly emphasises the incorporation of realist tropes in the film as he explains the source of songs in his autobiography titled *Here I Cannot Stay; There, I cannot Go* in the following words:

> the song sung by the Holeya in Chomana Dudi: na na naa naa na—le lee le lee lele lelele lele . . . the song sung at the time of Chaniya's death: kadarvulee. . . . It came straight from the hearts of the Holeyas in my village. I didn't learn it; it was something that rang in my ears since my childhood
>
> *(2012: 191).*

In fact, one of the greatest strengths of the film is its lyrical quality[10] owing to the immense experience of the director in experimenting with myriad musical forms. The song that recurs throughout the cinematic narrative—*le lee le lee lele lelele lele* . . .—has synchronised physical movements, yet it encapsulates a different mood each time it is performed in the film. Instead of employing elite musical instruments, ordinary objects like a bamboo plant or a flute made from bamboo are utilised by the music director to prepare a distinct sound design in accordance with the caste position of his subjects. He further highlights his process of creating music in his autobiography, *Here I Cannot Stay; There, I Cannot Go*:

> Since Choma's ancestors were the original inhabitants of this place and since he too is a victim of exploitation, I stressed native elements in the film throughout. I used the varied

Figure 23.5 Zoom-in shot of his agonised state. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

> sounds of the village, especially those of a South Canara village, as music in the film: the distinctive sounds of birds and crickets, their varied sounds in groups and when they are alone, sound and silence—all these I used. In fact, my music was composed during the shooting of the film and hence was authentic. Finally, when the film was over, I felt I had had a rebirth.
>
> *(2012: 232)*

While native elements that create unique sound patterns and original folk songs of Holeyas become the hallmark of the film, Tulu dialect is also invoked especially during the journey of the two brothers to the plantation site, which further lends a local rustic flavour to the film. Furthermore, in an attempt to recreate the world of Holeyas, the film records the minute details of their body language, delves into their psychological world, highlights their skill of basket weaving, builds their deep affinity with the animal world, traces their ritual of cremating the deceased under a tree, imagines the food and marriage rituals during the feast among kinsmen of the same caste, and foregrounds their traditional belief towards their local deity Panjurli.

While deliberate efforts are made to represent the world of Holeyas as authentically as possible, the cinematic narrative delineates Untouchable characters as greed-ridden, gullible and politically skewed. Both Belli and Guruva are not triggered to find an alternative system of faith as a result of their disgust with the inequitable practice of caste that refuses them any sense of honour or dignity but are effortlessly allured by the gifts that conversion can offer them. Belli accepts the advances of the clerk as he offers her a saree, and claims that her father's loan shall be cleared indicating the transactional nature of their relationship. Momentarily charmed by the prospect of being a tenant himself instead of dying as a slave, Choma too considers taking refuge into Christianity. The sequence that depicts the event of Kola[11] (procession of the spirit) marks a turning point as Choma customarily stops in front of the shrine of Panjurli, while spectators witness his psychological turmoil. The incident underlines the dominant power of the

Figure 23.6 Fear of religious transgression in Choma. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India

deities through low-angle tilting shots and a wrathful speech by *paatri* (spirit impersonator) who admonishes Choma for leaving his religion during the last days of his life. The frenzied, rapid movements of hands and feet captured through close-up shots along with an all-encompassing voice are amalgamated not only to create a frightening experience or a sense of impending doom for Choma but also to communicate a warning message in case of any possible future religious transgression (Figure 23.6). The film clearly validates and overtly emphasises conforming to religion regardless of its oppressive nature. In fact, Choma's imitation of Brahminical gesture by taking a ritual bath after meeting the priest, Belli's explicit references to the notions of *paap/punya* (sin/virtue), and Choma's recurring image of supplication both during the beginning and towards the end of the film, become instances to explicate how religious framework structures their interiority and is valorised by the film.

While several visual and aural cues are employed to highlight the issue of caste on screen, the most crucial element remains Choma's *dudi* or drum, the significance of which can be ascertained from the title of the film itself. In the opening sequence, it is the sound of the drum beats through which Choma is identified in dark by the landlord before he visually appears on the screen. Concurrently, the drum beats speak to us before he does. The drum is skilfully utilised to unravel both silence and sound, as it becomes a tool that allows Choma to temporarily evade his dismal reality. The spectators witness how his self-expression, repressed vocally due to his caste status, is revealed through the drum beats in the wake of the landlord's constant denial to allow him to till a piece of land. Beating the drum becomes a catharsis for the enraged Choma when his caste identity renders him mute in front of the tyrannical system which prohibits a Brahmin to save the life of Choma's drowning son, Kaala, because of the fear of pollution from a Holeya. In stark contrast, the drum is not merely a companion during his dark times but also becomes a source of entertainment and a means to examine the prospective bridegrooms who can rhythmically dance to the drum beats in the dream landscape of Choma. The drum occupies a central position, captured both visually and aurally at almost all the significant moments in the film. During

Figure 23.7 Belli stands adjacent to the drum. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

the course of the narrative, the drum and the protagonist almost become inseparable so much so that it becomes not only a means of self-expression but an extension of Choma's physical self. In fact, the drum beats are substituted for Choma's absence at all the crucial points in the life of his children. Whether it is Chania and Guruva's initiation into alcoholism during the plantation journey, Belli's sexual alliance with the clerk, or later her sexual assault by the plantation owner, drum beats perpetually act as a blunt reminder of Choma. The incident which acts as a final blow in Choma's life has a carefully designed frame: the drum is represented in metonymic terms wherein Belli and the drum are placed adjacent to each other (Figure 23.7), and as Belli leaves the drum to succumb to the clerk's invitation, by inference, she also takes her leave from the value system symbolised by Choma. Consequently, it is not the drum beats but the communion music that is played in the background which signals the already diminished relevance of Choma's role in her life. Later, the frame where Choma stands in the entrance of the hut, glowering at Belli for her transgression (Figure 23.8), is designed in such a way that both the cap (symbolic of his status as a bonded slave) and his drum are placed adjacent to him, indicating Belli's literal and metaphorical distance from him. Furthermore, the cinematic text is suffused with the close-up and extreme close-up shots of the drum along with the sound emanating from it, almost in an attempt to capture its all-pervasive literal, symbolic, and metonymic presence on screen.

The film ends by depicting how the defeated Choma prepares himself to renounce the world where his dream of becoming a farmer holds no relevance. It is significant to note that after setting his bullocks free and declaring that he has no children, not a single word is heard and the rest of the scenes draw attention towards the utter voicelessness of the marginalised characters on screen. In an attempt to delineate his final renunciation from the worldly affairs, the film shows Choma breaking his cart into pieces and covering its remains with a hand-woven basket (a product of the traditionally engendered skill of his family) made by his children. As he sets it on fire (Figure 23.9), spectators are reminded of the opening scene where people were carrying

Figure 23.8 Choma, cap, and drum in the same frame. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

Figure 23.9 Choma prepares to burn his belongings. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

burning torches while coming back from the festival. However, the fire here is no less than a spectacle of his own funeral. With his dream on a pyre, he is already dead, the body leaves him off screen as the incessant beats of the drum haunt the atmosphere. The story gains an indelible philosophical ending as the last image of the drum concludes the cinematic narrative.

III

Any attempt to understand a work of art remains incomplete without considering the location of its creators. While the novel has been considered an instance of upper-caste sympathetic treatment towards Harijans, the film has been critiqued for its skewed politics by T. G. Vaidyanathan in his book *Hours in the Dark: Essays on Cinema* in the following words:

> Neither Mingela (name suggests he is a convert but he's not here), the blond estate owner, nor Sankappaiah, the Brahmin landlord, are looked at from a class perspective. Manvela becomes the scapegoat for Mingela's sexual and economic exploitativeness, and Sankappaiah's ageing mother is used as a cover-up for Sankappaiah. But neither is judged for what he stands for. Christianity, generally, is the whipping boy for Choma's misfortunes, and he dies a martyr not of the politically oppressed Harijan class but of the sacred Hinduism. Better a dead landless Hindu than a live landowning Christian seems to be the message.
>
> *(1996: 218)*

By refraining from presenting a sharp critique of both caste and class hierarchy and simultaneously overtly emphasising mindless conformity to Hinduism, the film validates the practice in the garb of representing the world 'as it really is'. Interestingly, while the novel has been identified by Raj Kumar as one belonging to 'emotional literature' (2019: 50), B. V. Karanth claims that he has observed and recreated 'Dalit' subjects in his film. One of the most popular definition of Dalit, in the words of Arjun Dangle as the 'name of total revolution; it is revolution incarnate' (1992: 289), falls terribly short in the case of the film. In literature, the repercussions of the infamous speech titled 'Kannada literature as *bhusa* (cattle fodder) literature' on November 19, 1973, by Dalit minister B. Basavalingappa, gave impetus to public protests culminating in a new form of Dalit literature called Dalit-Bandaya. It was followed by the emergence of mass Dalit movements by Karnataka Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS) which asserted its quest for equality, dignity, and resource distribution. Yet, the film-maker refrains from lending any character with literal or metaphorical 'voice' against the unjust system. He makes an attempt to justify this by positing that:

> A few people had complained that the message of *Chomana Dudi* was vague. I too believe that a message must be clear. But it is my firm opinion that entertainment must be the primary goal of films, and that instruction, message, education and all such must be conveyed through entertainment.
>
> *(2012: 234)*

Cinema as an art form can be employed as a potent tool of social transformation. But with the aesthetic choice of creating 'entertainment' for the masses, made especially evident through the elaboration of romance on screen, the film-maker's location as an outsider to Dalit concerns becomes only too apparent. In the words of Ira Bhasker, 'The untouchable Choma plays the drum as the only resistance possible for him, and the memorable sequence of his last passionate drumming metaphorizes both his humanity and his helplessness against structures that he has no power to change' (2013: 25). This inability to change one's circumstances, a usual

trope employed by the upper-caste artists, has been strongly condemned by Dalit scholars and activists. Choma sets fire to his belongings but the same motif of fire ignites revolution in the words of the Dalit author, Kalyan Rao who, in his novel *Untouchable Spring* writes, 'Light the fire. Have to live. That's all. We've to live. Our children have to live. Light the fire' (2010: 35). Children here are imagined either as helplessly dying victims or as becoming mute observers of Choma's self-destruction and destruction of his surroundings.

It is not merely the distanced upper-caste location of the film-maker but his gendered position too that shapes his delineation of women characters on screen. They are either imagined as already dead as in the case of Choma's wife or used as a ploy to perpetuate hierarchies as Sankappayya assures lending Choma a piece of land after his mother's death. The plantation scenes that begin with the death of a girl are infused with the characters of women and children but they barely have a voice. While Mary's gait is similar to that of a fashion model, she is ultimately reduced to the songs she intones to entice Guruva. Belli is burdened by the notions of 'honour' and 'purity' laid down by Choma, a man who cannot imagine her to transgress the endogamous marital relations that sustain the caste hierarchies. Her succumbing in front of a convert is shown as a failure to abide by the patriarchal notions of purity and compliance. Her transgression inflames Choma to the extent that he almost stifles and metaphorically buries her under the tree. Consequently, the remarkably decisive and affirmative Belli also becomes an embodiment of passivity and silent suffering by the end of the film.

Irrespective of these gaps, the film's courage to present on screen the desires, hopes, aspirations, and a life-world of the Untouchables, especially at the time when they were limited to single shots in Kannada cinema, is commendable. Moreover, the film brought to light several concerns that remain part of the contemporary society till date. Choma has eventually become an iconic figure over the decades to mark the dispossessed, exploited, and underprivileged sections of the society. A recent documentary titled, *Chomana Dudi*[12] (2018), made by Kosha Odhu Desha Nodu, begins with the close-up shot of drum beats from the film and follows with a discussion regarding the novel by Kota Shivaram Karanth to underline the continuity of oppression from one generation to another. The documentary captures how a family belonging to Kogara tribe from the Belathangady Taluk of Dakshina Kannada struggles to survive without the basic amenities of water, sanitation, and housing even after more than seven decades of independence from the colonial rule. The film remains relevant till the present day as landlessness, lack of medical facilities, abject poverty, marginalisation, and unequal resource distribution, especially evident in the lower-caste groups have become more acute during the global pandemic. Caste hierarchies persist as a lived reality in the social fabric of modern Indian society, perhaps as a much more dangerous disease to be confronted.

Notes

1 The Golden Lotus (*Swarna Kamal*) is awarded annually to the best film under the category of National Film Awards presented by the Indian Government's Directorate of Film Festivals.

2 Girish Kasaravalli was in the final year at FTII when he was selected by B. V. Karanth as an associate director for *Chomana Dudi*. Though Kasaravalli's association with the film came at the cost of his film school diploma, it initiated him into the film industry. For understanding the role of Girish Kasaravalli in *Chomana Dudi*, see Shakti Sengupta's essay, 'Portrait of an Accidental Cineaste'. In *Discovering Indian Independent Cinema: The Films of Girish Kasaravalli*. Amazon: CreateSpace Publishing, 2015.

3 The word has been borrowed by the French theorist Jacques Rancière who theorises the image in terms of an interaction between the 'sayable' and the 'visible', negating the idea that verbal and visual are antithetical to each other to foreground that the visual has aspects of the verbal and the verbal has elements of the visual, when both are considered as signs of an image. He opines, 'Visual and textual elements are in effect conceived together, interlaced with one another, in this concept. There are signs

"among us". This means the visible forms speak and the words possess the weight of visible realities . . .' (2007: 35). For details, see his *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso, 2007.

4 For a detailed understanding of different stages in Kannada cinematic tradition, see N. Manu Chakravathy's essay, 'Plurality in Kannada Cinema'. In *Moving Images, Multiple Realities*. Bengaluru: Sampada Publications, 2005. See also the chapter on Kannada New Wave in this volume.

5 Kannada literary trends have been categorised as *Arundaya* (Dawn), *Navodaya* (New Dawn or Renaissance), and *Navya* (Modernist) based on the tendencies prevalent in the major writings. While most of the film-makers of Kannada New Wave Cinema adapted stories from *Navya* writings, *Chomana Dudi* was written in *Navodaya* phase by Shivaram Karanth.

6 Films such as P. Reddy's *Samskara* (1970), B. V. Karanth and Girish Karnad's *Vamsha Vriksha* (1972), and Girish Karsavalli's *Ghattashraddha* (1977) presented a sharp indictment on Brahminism that upheld and perpetuated caste hierarchies.

7 M. V. Vasudeva Rao famously called Baby, an actor whom B. V. Karanth met at the theatre company of Gubbi Veeranna, became his instant choice for the role of Choma. At the 23rd National Film awards, Rao won the Best Actor Award for his remarkable performance in the film.

8 These letters appear as the transcribed song in Chomana Dudi. In his autobiography, the film-maker refers to the song as *le lee le lee lele lelele lele*.

9 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to take into account the history and debates around realism in cinema. For details, refer to Chidananda das Gupta's essay, 'The Realist Imperative' in *Seeing Is Believing: Selected Writings on Cinema*. New Delhi: Penguin: 2008.

10 B. V. Karanth's music direction was categorically applauded by musicians like Ilayaraja, Pandit Ravishankar, and Vijaya Bhaskar. The film also established him as a music director as he later gave music to G. V. Iyer's *Humsageete* (1975), V. R. K. Prasad's *Rushyashrunga* (1975), Kasaravalli's *Ghatashraddha* (1977), and Mrinal Sen's *Kharij* (1982).

11 The presence of Buta Kola within the film serves the purpose of evoking traditional dance form of Tulu-speaking people, used as a trope to ground the film within the district of Dakshina Kannada in Karnataka. Shivaram Karanth has played one of the most significant roles in reviving Yakshagana folk theatre form that has been influenced by Buta Kola. For details, see his *Yakshagana*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1997.

12 *Chomana Dudi*, Presented by Kosha Desha Nodu. Karnataka: Madhyama Net, 2018. https://youtu.be/LEFu8WKTkSM. Accessed on May 28, 2020.

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24

Screening Caste

'Untouchable' Body, Labour, and Remuneration in *Lagaan*[1]

Purnachandra Naik

Cinema, particularly Hindi cinema, has been a predominant mode of cultural (re)production and mass consumption in the Indian subcontinent. In this influential industry, more often than not, caste informs culture while the latter, in turn, reinforces the former. Put differently, it constantly reproduces the culture of privileged castes and thereby portrays certain traits of caste *as* normative culture.[2] Wankhede (2013) argues, 'Hindi films are written, directed and produced by a dominant set of people that celebrate the tastes and values of upper class-caste sensitivities'. At the same time, Dwyer notes that there is no major Dalit star in the Hindi film industry, and 'Dalits are not known at any level of film-making' (2014: 99). On the one hand, caste remains 'blacked out' in Hindi cinema (Wankhede 2013), on the other, the 'absence of the low castes means that Hindi cinema is caste-blind, rather than caste-neutral -providing that everyone who mixes socially is upper caste': the latter's 'version of the caste-free society' (Dwyer 2014: 103). Therefore, when the question of caste as a thematic concern crops up occasionally, it occurs almost invariably in the context of 'untouchables', varyingly filtered through the Brahminical lens of pity, patronisation, the passive/wretched victim, and the self-appointed paternal/reformed 'upper-caste' crusader/saviour.[3] The cinematic 'blindness' to how the hierarchical caste system privileges the 'upper-castes' at the expense of the 'Other' outcastes is nothing but a reflection of self-serving functional ignorance in the Brahminical industry. My chapter is an attempt to critically read and unravel this craftiness of ('upper') caste in/and the cinematic art through a concrete example.

Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India was one of the nominees (up until then the third Indian film) for the Oscar in the 'Best Foreign Language Film' category for 2001. Although ultimately it didn't win the much coveted award, in the run-up to the nomination and afterwards, it has been successful in generating an impassioned debate beyond the confines of cinephiles and film theatres. Due to its interconnected thematic concerns touching upon the British Raj, cricket and the anti-imperial rhetoric, the Indian village and (cultural) nationalism, Hindu mythology and religious heterogeneity, sartorial habits, the subaltern peasant question, untouchability, etc., the period drama continues to be a subject of multidisciplinary discursive attention. This chapter, while engaging critically with the existing scholarship, aims to read the film 'against the grain' by focusing on Kachra, the 'untouchable' character.[4]

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Tentatively translated as 'revenue' or 'tax', the Bollywood sport drama, starring Aamir Khan, was directed by Ashutosh Gowariker.[5] It develops in a fictional village named Champaner in 1893, during the British Raj. The peasants in the village, in spite of scarce agricultural production due to persistent drought, are forced to pay tax (in grains) to the rapacious British Empire. However, with a twist of events at the beginning of the film, a ray of hope appears in the horizon. The British officer, Captain Andrew Russell of the Champaner cantonment, challenges Bhuvan (played by Aamir Khan) for a game of cricket with extraordinary terms and conditions. The captain offers to cancel the tax for three years, if the villagers manage to defeat his team in the proposed cricket match. The other side of the deal is that if the villagers loose the match, they will have to pay three times more of the current rate of tax. Bhuvan accepts the challenge, much to the chagrin of his fellow villagers. The game is to start in three months, and Bhuvan is faced with the arduous responsibility: not only to convince the villagers to join his team but also to learn the foreign game collectively so as to play against the already efficient British team in the upcoming match. The film heavily dramatises on the recruitment of players to form the team, the practice of the game, and the eventual victory of Bhuvan's team, which are weaved through the clichéd Bollywood songs, dance, amorous flourish and resultant jealousy as well as the generous sprinkling of suspense to the very end.

It must be noted that, from the very beginning, the film 'captured the imagination of the masses and classes alike' as the media 'lapped it up' and it earned 'encomiums from serious scholarship' (Mannathukkaren 2001: 4580) as well as a 'special screening' for the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (Vetticad 2001). In the print media, particularly, the film was hailed as 'the first modern epic' (Raval 2001), 'an epic' with the potential to 'become a landmark in Indian cinema', and was celebrated as 'the revenge of the proletariat' (Aiyar 2001).[6] From being touted as a 'must-see', 'Indian modern classic' (Singh 2001) and 'timeless classic' (Ghosh 2016), the film has also been studied from a varied range of perspectives with academic vigour.[7] Yet, so far the existing scholarship on the film has failed to engage adequately with the 'untouchable' character Kachra; the representation of his body (and its 'language'), the labour he performs, and most importantly, the subsequent appropriation of his labour, without any meaningful remuneration whatsoever. This chapter closely reads the particular scenes in which Kachra (played by Aditya Lakhia) performs his role in the film.

The 'Untouchable' Body as Language

A close reading of the visual projection of physical bodies of characters in the film makes it obvious beyond doubt that the visual presentation, particularly of the characters that constitute the cricket team, is pivotal. On one of the film posters, all the 11 players can be seen standing upright, closely next to each other in a line as they stare directly at the viewer, giving an impressively defiant gaze.[8] The protagonist Bhuvan stands in the middle as five players each spread out on his left and right, like two wings. On his extreme left stands Kachra, the 11th player, not only barefoot but also the upper-half of his body unclothed.[9] From the film poster to the very last scene featuring Kachra, the 'untouchable' body performs within the overall script(ure) of the caste system. In other words, although Kachra's lingual articulation is almost excised throughout the film, his 'untouchable' body (with attendant accoutrements and comportments) is made to speak the 'language' of caste in functional conformity with the existing caste order.[10]

In the very first scene, Kachra appears as a 'silent' background presence. While the focus of the camera lens is clearly upon Bhuvan and other villagers in this particular scene (as Bhuvan labours to recruit teammates), we notice Kachra sweeping the street with a broom and basket,

seemingly oblivious to the happenings in the surrounding. The next scene, however, is seminal as Kachra acquires more 'visible' (hence more legible) presence in it. Having successfully recruited ten players (including himself), Bhuvan still needs the 11th player to constitute a whole team. One day, when Bhuvan is practicing the game with his fellow players in the village, the cricket ball drifts towards Kachra, who is seen sitting entirely alone. In this particular scene, all the villagers who have gathered to watch the practice are shown to be sitting in large groups, far away from Kachra, on the opposite side of the field. Upon noticing the ball rolling towards Kachra, Bhuvan commands him—*Kachra, gend phek* (Kachra, pass the ball).[11] Initially hesitant but upon exhortation, Kachra picks the ball with his disabled right hand. It must be noted that his non-disabled left hand is seen holding a broom at this point. As he throws the ball towards Bhuvan with his disabled right hand, it drops right in front of Bhuvan, but instead of landing straight into the latter's hands, it spins past him. After noticing the spin, Bhuvan tells the visibly shaken Kachra to throw the ball again. But this time, when he is about to throw the ball with his non-disabled left hand, Bhuvan orders him to throw it with his disabled right hand instead. He does as told, and the ball spins past Bhuvan again. The visibly exulted Bhuvan announces to his fellow players/villagers that finally he has found his 11th player, the spinner. However, his announcement leaves the villagers aghast. Dissatisfied with the 'unthinkable' decision to recruit an *achhut* ('untouchable'), one by one, half of the players threaten to desert the team. One player announces, *hum ek achhut ke saath kandha nehin milayenge* (we won't play alongside an untouchable) and other players second him in agreement. The village headman joins in and rebukes Bhuvan *Goro ke saath ladna dharam hei, par ek achhut ka saath lekee pura dudh bhrasht honee nehin denge hum* (it is our pious duty to fight against the whites, but we won't let the sanctity of our duty to be polluted by recruiting an untouchable).[12] Meanwhile, Kachra stands mute with downcast eyes; his head and shoulders conspicuously drooping. Steadfast on his decision, Bhuvan slowly moves towards him and rests his hand on Kachra's shoulder, thereupon the villagers gasp in unison and whisper, 'He touched him'. Then, the morally upright Bhuvan, in an impassioned defence, launches a tirade against the scourge of untouchability; calls it a blot on humanity by drawing mythic examples from the *Ramayana* (e.g., the Ram-Shabari-jujube story) as he stresses the spiritual salvation of everyone by Ram *ji*.[13] He ends his monologue by asserting that whether anyone supports/joins him or not, Kachra will definitely play in the team. Subsequently, silence prevails and instantly a change of heart occurs in everyone as the village headman announces, *Kachra hamre saath khelega* (Kachra will play along with us). When the camera lens drifts and rests upon Kachra, we see him struggling to stifle his sobs as lips tremble and tears stream down his cheeks. Although Kachra does not even utter a 'word' on a situation that directly concerns him, he 'expresses' copiously.

The detailed description of this seminal scene is important as it proves catalysing for a host of reasons in the film; in fact, the very decisive winning of the match in the end hinges upon this particular scene. Laced with many layers of coded meanings, Kachra's hitherto repulsive 'untouchable' body mutates into a receptacle for moral concession and generosity in the scene. Yet, this abrupt shift occurs very much within the confines of caste; in fact, it is dictated by the dialect of caste, for the latter could be visibly carved onto human bodies. Drawing on the category of 'habitus' by Bourdieu, Gorringe and Irene (2007: 103) have coined what they call 'caste habitus'; as to how 'Historically, caste identities were inscribed upon individual bodies through process of socialization that still inform village life'.[14] They elaborate that:

> Caste is etched into the social fabric by codes of conduct governing modes of address, attire and physical positioning that carry most force in isolated villages. The discrimination faced by Dalits is manifold: they cannot wear shoes in higher caste streets, they must drink

> from separate receptacles, they are not allowed to wear clothes below the knee or above the waist . . . or sit on benches in the common areas of the village.
>
> *(Gorringe and Irene 2007: 103)*

Although the authors observe the above from their field work in contemporary South India, their reflections strongly resonate in the context of Kachra in the film. As mentioned earlier, Kachra always appears barefoot in the film. Also, in the two scenes described before, he is always naked above the waist—a telling bareness in the light of the conspicuous sartorial concerns of the film.[15] While other villagers huddle together to watch the practice, he sits entirely alone with a broom in hand—a visual code that signifies his outcaste-ness, along with his very name Kachra—the garbage, the rejected dregs of Brahminical village society. The pejorative 'Kachra' is a non-person metonymy for what he is ascribed to handle by the caste system, that is, the physical dirt. Kachra—the 'untouchable', is not just coterminous with 'dirt'—the 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966: 36); he himself *is* the indivisible 'matter out of place', even bereft of an individual name, let alone a decent one. In sum, Kachra—the social 'dirt'—is a thoroughly despised and detested accumulation, not only of visual (out)caste codes, but even in his very name. Thereby, Kachra is shorn of a 'personhood' in the film.

But it is not only the attendant accoutrements (broom, name, and the absence of clothes/footwear) of the 'untouchable' body, Kachra's bodily comportments also perform the caste habitus. Unwittingly caught in the charged argument amongst the villagers, Kachra is conspicuous *through* his sheepish eyes, stooped head and shoulders—a body visibly crumpled and moulded by the language of caste. It becomes even more legible upon the village headman's announcement ('Kachra will play along with us') as Kachra can be seen pitiably sobbing and stifling his overflowing tears. An 'untouchable' body can be seen literally shaking and sagging under the sudden burden of moral concession (touch by Bhuvan) and collective generosity (recruitment into the team). Although the caste habitus of Kachra obviates his consensus (as it is presupposed under caste propriety), the value of touch and its implications—who touches whom, why, and when—remain far from an innocuously unilateral, solely 'moral' transaction in the film.[16]

Yet, the question of caste remains conspicuous only in the context of Kachra and untouchability in the film. Although the village 'proper' (and the team) has a potter (Ismail), an ironsmith (Arjan), a village 'doctor' (Isar Chacha), a poultry farmer (Bhura) and, for that matter, Bhuvan who owns two cows, two oxen and three goats (and of course land), caste never crops up in their contexts. But Ambedkar reminds us 'that *caste in the singular number is an unreality. Castes exist only in the plural number.* There is no such thing as a caste: There are always castes' (2014a: 20) (italics in original). Further, Ilaih argues that 'the caste system itself represents a certain framework of power relations' (1996: 183), and elaborates that, 'The lower the caste of the person the higher will be the level of obedience, and the higher the caste the stronger the motivation to tell and command' (Ilaih 1996: 184). The protagonist-leader Bhuvan always tells and commands Kachra, unfailingly in a one-way fashion, throughout the film.

This elision of caste in the context of the village 'proper' can be dissected through what Pandian calls 'transcoding caste' (2002: 1735). Thus, he explains, 'Caste always belongs to someone else; it is somewhere else; it is of another time. The act of transcoding is an act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once' (Pandian 2002: 1735).[17] In the film, caste is always transcoded unto the very body—its accoutrements and comportments in the context of Kachra, by the village 'proper'. At the same time, it is acknowledged only in the abstract realm of morality and spirituality as the touch by Bhuvan instantiates, while its tangible relational materiality remains disavowed. For instance, the village 'proper' owns land (hence the fight against unjust tax). Yet, there is nothing, overt or implied, in the film to suggest that Kachra owns land as well. Could it

then be inferred that Kachra doesn't own land because he is an 'outcaste'; or tautologically, precisely because he is an 'outcaste', Kachra doesn't own land? In other words, the cause translates into tangible material effects, even if the cause is *not* the same as effect.[18] On the one hand, while caste remains conspicuously and negatively legible or 'transcoded' in the context of Kachra, on the other, it appears virtuously elided and 'encoded' (i.e., 'caste by other means', Pandian 2002: 1735) in ownership of land and livestock in the context of Bhuvan (and the village 'proper'). The 'absence' of caste in the latter is 'presence' by other means. Therefore, the absence and presence of caste, far from being antonyms, is a matter of 'screening' in the film; they are gradational 'dialects' of castes, correspondingly attributed in 'an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt' to the caste habitus of characters in the film.[19]

The Labour of Touch and Remuneration

As mentioned before, Kachra is recruited into the team as the 11th player. However, his recruitment is far from benevolent or nominal, 'when India needs to pull together' (Dwyer 2014: 99). It is amply clear in the film that Bhuvan recruits players on the basis of one sports trait or another that could strategically contribute to optimising the team and consequently maximise the chances of victory in the pivotal match.[20] In the catalysing scene described before, Bhuvan recruits Kachra after noticing the spin in Kachra's throw. Claims and counterclaims have been made as to whether the spin in Kachra's bowling is despite his disability (Deshpande 2003b: 29) or due to it (Anand 2003: 47). It is manifestly evident in the film that he never gets a chance to throw the ball with his non-disabled left hand. Also, a close reading suggests that Kachra himself is not conscious of his sporting 'craft', even until the very end of the match/film. Firstly, it is Bhuvan and then the 'coach' Elizabeth who notice the spin. Moreover, Bhuvan tells Kachra to start his second bowling spell *after* noticing the spin (once again, like the very first instance) in a throw *during* the match. It is worth bearing in mind though that bowling a spin in cricket is not just a conscious bodily act, it also involves cerebral calculations. It is an art in creative manipulation. Therefore, it is another instance of typecast(e)ing Kachra as a mute, bare, and disabled body alone, at the expense of his ability for agency in the film.

When Kachra starts his second spell, he not only takes a hat-trick, thereby demolishing the middle order batting of the British team, but also claims a total of four crucial wickets. Yet, it is his tenacity in batting that proves ultimately decisive. Kachra—the 11th player and *last* batsman—enters the cricket pitch when the team still needed 12 runs in 11 balls to win the match. It is at this stage in the film that the 'touch' of an 'untouchable' becomes absolutely indispensable. When Kachra faces the ball, Bhuvan, the non-striker, commands, *bas chhu ke daud le* (just touch [the ball with the bat] and run), *bas ekeibar chhu le* (just touch it once). Although Kachra could be seen visibly frightened and pitifully beaten by the speeding ball, he not only saves his crucial wicket but also manages to 'touch and run' (i.e., score one run) so that Bhuvan gets to be the striker and do the needful rest by hitting big shots. Yet again, in the dramatically decisive last over, when Kachra has to face the antepenultimate ball, Bhuvan orders, *chhu ke bhag* (touch and run), *Kachra, chhu ke daud* (Kachra, touch and run). This time though, Kachra couldn't touch and run neither the antepenultimate, nor the penultimate ball, but successfully saves his wicket. Finally, as he is burdened with the humongous task to face the last ball and score five runs (i.e., hit a six), Bhuvan reminds him, *hum sabki zindegi toree haat mein hei Kachra* (Kachra, all our lives are in your hands now). Whereupon, in conformity with his role, Kachra is verbally mute yet visibly expressive as he nods and stifles his sobs, while tears run down his cheeks. As it is implied in the very exhortation—'just touch and run' and, in keeping with the agenda of the film within the boundary of caste propriety, Kachra couldn't hit the ball, let alone

hit it hard/high enough to make it cross all the way 'over the boundary' (*seema paar*).[21] But this last ball is declared a front-foot no-ball by the British umpire. As the hero Bhuvan gets to face the next last ball, he successfully hits a six, perhaps very much in keeping with the well-trodden denouement of Bollywood.

From the above description, a set of interweaved question on caste, touch, *saath* (solidarity), labour, and remuneration emerge. As hinted earlier in this chapter, the value of 'touch' and its implications vary immensely *vis-à-vis* Kachra and Bhuvan. When Bhuvan notices the sporting 'potential' in Kachra's throw during the practice, he foresees the strategic value that Kachra's 'touch' could harvest in the match. Yet, owing to the caste system and untouchability, Kachra's potentially 'productive touch' remains degraded as a notionally 'polluting touch'. The protagonist-leader, caught between an invaluable strategic 'strength' and an intransigent caste Hindu order, decides to strike a delicate balance. He makes a moral concession, that is, 'touches' the 'untouchable' and justifies it by selectively drawing upon scriptural references from the *Ramayana*, thereby killing two birds with one stone. While Kachra's presupposed consent pours out through his grateful tears, the village 'proper' is awash in instantaneous repentance, 'convinced within the span of one scene that untouchability and caste difference are wrong' (Brown 2004: 79). Bhuvan's morally edited concessional touch, necessitated in the light of a pressing situation, levitates untouchability solely to the realm of spirituality and seeks to resolve it superficially therein, whereas its root cause, that is, the caste system and its tangible material manifestations (e.g., land), remains unaddressed. Yet, Bhuvan's touch is neither benevolent nor unilateral; it is unevenly transactional for it demands 'productive touch' in return from Kachra.

Although from the very beginning, Kachra is recruited into the team to perform an auxiliary role, his essential 'touch and run' towards the end makes him an indispensable auxiliary, if the agenda of the film were to be attended at all. After the suspense-laden six, the ensuing scene ostentatiously focuses upon Bhuvan, yet the rules of cricket clearly suggest that Kachra's '*saath*', 'touch,' and wicket were absolutely essential in winning the game, which, in all seriousness, was more than a mere game. Thus argues Bhuvan: *Ee khel hei hamre khet khalyan ke liye* (this game is for the sake of our land and harvest), (for the whites, it's just a game, but for us, it's our life) and furiously reminds everyone, 'it isn't a mere game meant for someone's fun or entertainment, it is a battle and we have to win it'. In other words, it was a unique opportunity to rightfully claim full ownership over the produce of one's hard labour ('it means our grains will be ours only'). And therein lays the substance of Kachra's 'touch'. His 'touch' (both as a bowler and as the *last* batsman) is essentially a performance of labour that decisively contributes in order that the village 'proper' can regain ownership over its own product of labour (i.e., grain). And therefrom arises, the hitherto unexplored yet pivotal question of remuneration due to Kachra's labour.

Towards the end of the film, the narrative voice informs us that not only Champaner but the entire province was exempted from paying tax for three years. We are also informed that Bhuvan and Gauri (the heroine) are married; the very *raja* (king) Puran Singh attends the marriage ceremony and further enhances 'the glory of Champaner'. It must be pointed out that the film studiously belabours to present Champaner as a self-contained, bucolic, and organic whole, involuntarily caught very much like between the devil (Captain Russell/British tax system) and the deep blue sea (unrelenting drought). Majumdar eulogises it as 'a pristine village community, untainted by the vices of industrial modernity' and *Lagaan* as 'a lore of Indian resistance to British imperialism' (2001: 3399). In a similar vein, yet from the subaltern vantage point, Chakraborty sees a 'strategic alliance' whereby 'the villagers come together as a community' of autonomous 'active historical agents', supposedly 'drawing upon their own profoundly moral, religious and political worldview' (2003: 1881), in the film. However, it is readable enough in

the film that power relations operate through multiple layers of hierarchies and it is far from a dichotomy in terms of a rapacious empire versus the uniformly exploited 'natives'.[22] When the very last scene in the film is about to blur and fade, Kachra's face could be seen partially as he stands behind Bhuvan, amidst the villagers, in the rain. What were we to infer from the last scene or the way the narrative voice brings the film to a closure *vis-à-vis* Kachra? In all probability, the village 'proper' slides back to the agrarian political economy sans the British tax system, that is, to the *status quo* ante. Since Kachra—the 'untouchable'—doesn't own land, and, as the closure is in conformity with the codes of Brahminical Hindu propriety, would he relapse into his birth-based 'calling', that is, go back to sweeping the street again?[23] In the light of this pressing inference, it becomes apparent that Kachra's substantial labour is bartered with cosmetic accommodation in the village 'proper' as he continues to remain 'a part apart' in the caste carved village structure.[24] His spatial drift from the periphery towards the village 'proper' is conditionally predicated upon 'selfless service', and therefore, he remains trapped in the time zone of caste. Tax is exempted; the rain finally falls down auguring a bumper harvest (better future) and the villagers *move on*, while time turns full circle for the 'untouchable' scavenger. The (past) time is constant in his context. In other words, Kachra is heavily short-changed within the immaterial economy of moral guilt and meaningless pity by the village 'proper'.[25] In effect, caste as a system in its totality not only underlies the very earthly heartbeat of the Champaner body politic, it permeates through the entire village organism, including its other-worldly conceptions. And 'Whether we interpret *Lagaan* as a nationalist or subaltern example. . ., it is not hard to see Champaner as being an allegory of India as a whole' (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 2008: 445). Therefore, the approach to the caste question and treatment of the same in the context of other thematic concerns is a telling reflection in the film.

As to the incomplete critique of erasures and 'silence' on 'the native collaborators' (e.g., the *raja*) (Mannathukkaren 2001: 4582), it is dismissed with such apologia as 'dismantling structures of indigenous oppression is beyond the scope of *Lagaan*' (Chakraborty 2003: 1881), and 'in spite of these erasures', *Lagaan* is 'secular', 'delightful' as well as 'progressive' (Deshpande 2003c: 2311).[26] Yet, how the caste system is inextricably weaved into those structures (the 'vegetarian' *raja*) or pervasively operates in the village structure not only remains transcoded/encoded in the film but also continued to be largely elided in the scholarship on the film. Such discernible aspects as 'Caste System is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers*' (Ambedkar 2014a: 47, italics in original) as well as a hierarchical regime of remuneration (or lack thereof), which have been (dis)ingenuously overlooked in the appreciations of the film thus far. Needless to say, it was very much within the scope of *Lagaan*, a film essentially dealing with labour and fight for ownership over the product of labour to ruminate and meaningfully remunerate Kachra for his cumulative labour.

Cinema on the subcontinent 'serves' as an Althusserian ideological state apparatus 'in accordance with Hindu dogma' (Nisha 2020), while Hindi film industry in particular 'performs in tandem with the caste Hindu ideology to establish the cultural hegemony' of the Brahminical castes (Chauhan 2019: 333). In this backdrop, *Lagaan* 'screens' caste selectively and within the ideological mould of the Brahminical Hinduism. It reproduces an 'untouchable' body, collapses caste solely to untouchability as a moral question, and strategically appropriates labour while short-changes the labourer in patronising hollow gestures. It invests Kachra with frozen casteist stereotypes and divests him of agency, personhood, and rightful wages. In essence, the portrayal of Kachra in *Lagaan* reflects the 'Gandhian visualisation of the "Harijan", that is, . . . suitable to the ethics of socio-cultural Brahmanical values' (Wankhede 2013). Like the subservient and selfless 'ideal Bhangi' that was fantasised with self-serving *Bania*-Brahminical chicanery by

M. K. Gandhi, Kachra ought to approach what he does as a ‘sacred duty’, ‘In other words, he would not dream of amassing wealth out of it’ (1976: 87). As Kachra, the ‘untouchable’ surplus labour(er), is not only expropriated on screen but also commodified and iterated off screen for sadistically casteist popular consumption and profit, the ‘taxes’ extracted from Kachra by the ideological traps of Brahminism continue unremittingly.[27]

Notes

1 I am thankful to Dr Nicole Thiara for reading the preliminary drafts and for giving incisive comments/suggestions at different stages of its evolution. It wouldn’t have been possible but for her constant support, encouragement and generosity. Thanks are also due to Dr Anna Ball for going through the draft and for her valuable comments and suggestions. However, I am solely responsible for the arguments and shortcomings in the chapter.

In a gesture of conscious remembrance against prejudiced ignorance and wilful forgetfulness, this chapter is dedicated to the great Dalit spin bowler Palwankar Baloo and his struggles.

2 Take, for example, endogamy, ‘the essence of Caste’ (Ambedkar 2014a: 8) and how it is strictly maintained on the silver screen. Rowena points out, ‘This is one fact that has not been recognized about Indian cinema even though it has been legitimizing this caste regulation for almost a century now’ (2012).

3 The paucity of space constricts dwelling upon particular films in detail here. *Achhut Kannya* (1936) was the first film while *Article 15* (2019) is the latest to fall into the category. In the latter film, a St. Stephen’s graduate Brahmin IPS officer is on an avowed mission to ‘un-mess’ the caste system in a rural area. (Perhaps not) So surprisingly, though, he is unaware of his own caste status or how it translates into all spheres of life. In the very last scene, the city-bred hero orders food from a makeshift eatery by the roadside for all the policemen and when they are eating the food, he asks the eatery owner (an old woman) what her caste is, but her reply is drowned out by the horn of a lorry passing by. Then the hero and all the policemen laugh away, suggesting that the reply is irrelevant or caste differences have withered away. But does not ‘hearing’ caste make it non-existent in its entirety? For example, isn’t St. Stephen’s, an elite Delhi University college, a giveaway on the ‘presence’ of Brahmin caste and the attendant privileges or the caste(s) exclusivity of social/educational spaces where birds of a feather flock together and don’t ‘hear’/‘see’ (the ‘Other’) ‘caste’? The film self-consciously tries to be ‘progressive’ yet, routinely collapses into the enumerated tropes.

4 The author does not, in any way whatsoever, believe or uphold the reduction and condemnation of human beings as ‘untouchables’. Being aware of the potentially degrading power of language as well as the agency in self-designation of the community in question as ‘Dalits’, the author has retained the term ‘untouchable’ in the light of the agenda of the film and for the sake of overall arguments in the chapter.

5 The director’s Brahminical lens is evident in another widely celebrated film *Swades* (2004).

6 The June 25, 2001, issue of the *India Today* magazine ran a cover story on the film with a picture of the protagonist Bhuvan from the film along with the headline ‘Lagaan, Creating History’ on its cover page. See www.indiatoday.in/magazine/25-06-2001. Accessed on March 9, 2020.

7 See, for example, Majumdar (2001), Mannathukkaren (2001), Dwyer (2002), Bhatkal (2002), Chakraborty (2003), Deshpande (2003a), (2003b), (2003c), Anand (2003), Gooptu (2004), Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay (2008), (Chauhan 2019).

8 See www.joblo.com/movie-posters/2001/lagaan/image-15321. Accessed on March 11, 2020.

9 The only other player who can be seen bare-foot in the film poster is Ismail, the potter. Also, the only other player whose upper half of the body happens to be bare is Bagha, the drummer. But the latter’s bare body with hairy chest and well-built muscles stands as a ‘positive’ signifier (virile, masculine) while the absence of upper garment and footwear in the case of Kachra conforms the tropes of outcaste-ness.

10 Aditya Lakhia on playing Kachra says ‘I hardly speak in the film but my presence is such that I had to live like a Harijan [*sic*] through temperatures varying from four to 40 degrees Celsius’ (Raval 2001). Elsewhere (Bhatkal 2002: 106), it is claimed that Lakhia ‘gets into character and sits alone, not speaking to anybody’ weeks before his first shot in the film was due.

11 All the translations of the ‘dialogues’ from the film into English that appear in the chapter are by the author.

12 Phrases used by the villagers during this particular sequence of scenes are semantically loaded. While *kandha milana* connotes solidarity as a pre-requisite in the means (cricket), the end (defeating the British) is conceived as and conflated with *dharam*, that is, religion or duty in conformity with religion. Both solidarity and conformity not only remain conditional and transactional (in moral denomination) in relation to Kachra but also operate within the frame of caste propriety and Brahminical Hinduism.
13 Apparently, in *Ramayana*, Rama eats the jujube fruit that is already 'tasted' (read 'touched' and 'polluted') by Shabari, a 'low-caste' woman.
14 Gorringe and Irene (2007: 100) define 'habitus dispositions' as 'social in origin, acquired in infancy, embodied, durable, transposable, hierarchical, and reproductive of the social context within which they originated'.
15 It bears mentioning here that, apparently, in the film, 'Khadi, the homespun cloth popularised by Gandhi as part of the freedom struggle, was used by the costumes designed by Bhanu Athaiya (who won the 'Oscar' for her designs for *Gandhi*)' (Dwyer 2002: 185). Sartorial habits of all the other characters in the film are equally important along 'native'/foreign, *raja* (king)/subjects, male/female, married/widowed, etc. lines. For example, Bhuvan's mother, a widow, always wears white *sari*. Ram Singh the translator/interpreter in the film wears a different, more 'native' set of clothes after falling out with Captain Russell.
16 It must be underlined that the very moral concession and generosity are premised upon the inegalitarian edicts of the caste system (that ascribes some bodies as 'touchable' and condemns others as 'untouchable') as a given, and therefore, the transaction, even at the level of morality, essentially remains hierarchical, with the former getting the 'upper' hand over the latter.
17 Pandian observes the phenomenon in the context of 'upper caste autobiographies' by writers like R. K. Narayan.
18 The author takes his cue from Frantz Fanon for this formulation. Fanon, in the particular context of race and colonialism, argues that 'The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich' (2004: 5). However, a cautionary note must be sounded in the context of caste: that the possession of 'riches' doesn't necessarily erase the 'contempt' harboured against the 'outcastes' neither would material dearth dilute the 'reverence' reserved for the Brahmin caste in the hierarchical social distribution of 'values'.
19 Describing Indian society as 'a gradation of Castes', Ambedkar argues so (2014b: 506).
20 For example, although Bhuvan desperately needs the 11th player, he still discounts some prospective suggestions by the village headman.
21 While the film presupposes through his body his ability to hit the ball hard enough and high enough to make it cross all the way over the cricket boundary, the socio-economic 'boundaries' between him and the village 'proper' also remain untraversed. For instance, at the end of day one's play, as opposed to all the players who huddle together in the midst of the family/villagers to relax, Kachra sits at such a distance from them that it is not implausible to read this distance as the persistence of caste demarcation.
22 The film projects the hubris of Captain Russell as primarily villainous. The higher echelons of the empire are livid with anger on the decision/transgression by the captain as regards the 'deal' and are anxious that it might result in a domino effect (subjects throughout the empire demanding to play cricket to settle tax issues). Also, the British umpires still professionally and impartially adhere to the existing rules of the game (e.g., the decisive no-ball). Elizabeth, in defiance of her very elder brother Captain Russell, not only 'coaches' the 'native' team but also defends it 'legally' when disputes arise on laws of cricket. On the other hand, the *raja* Puran Singh is in continuous war with his cousin king in the nearby neighbourhood. He feigns helplessness in the face of the empire when the villagers plead for a reduction of tax yet never hesitates to wallow in his royal indulgences (e.g., commissions portrait of himself and travels atop an elephant). More importantly, he refuses to eat a piece of (chicken) meat ('I cannot snap the thread of religion to don the thread of duty'), which results in 'double tax' and dramatically sets off the entire story of the film.
23 For instance, the narrative voice informs us that Elizabeth the 'other' heroine in love with Bhuvan in the film returns to England, never marries and 'remained Bhuvan's Radha all her life', thereby establishing a direct allegory with the *Radha-Krishna* Hindu mythology. Rowena notes in a different context that, the caste Hindu morality is 'based on notions of chastity, virginity and docile femininity' (2012).
24 Omvedt writes that, 'To Ambedkar, the Untouchables were not a part of the Hindus but "a part apart"' (2012).

25 'Meaningless' in this context does not necessarily mean the 'absence' of meaning, rather it implies the 'irrelevance' or 'lack of meaningful benefit' of pity.
26 Mannathukkaren critiques Majumdar's reading of *Lagaan* while Chakraborty critiques Mannathukkaren. Then Deshpande responds to Chakraborty and assesses the film so.
27 Gooptu notes that, 'during the ICC Champions Trophy in Sri Lanka (12–30 September 2002), Sony Entertainment Television, which held the television rights of the event, arranged, as part of its publicity campaign, for Rajesh Vivek and Aditya Lakhia who played Guran, the village godman, and Kachra, the untouchable, respectively in *Lagaan*, to be present in the grounds, costumed as in the film and featuring on television in the breaks between innings' (2004: 539).

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25

The Untouchable Rajputs of *Padmaavat* and Beyond

A Cas(t)e Study

Tanya Singh

'I want history to remember only me'. In a dramatic and an unintentionally self-reflexive scene in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Padmaavat* (2018)[1], the newly crowned sultan Alauddin Khilji says this to the court poet Amir Khusrao as he burns down the historical records preceding him. The scene was intended to build on the supposed villainous character of Khilji through a depiction of his obsession over territorialising boundaries and history to control the ways he is known and will be remembered. In a microcosmic way, this scene demonstrates the interrelation between identity construction, representations, and power structures. Taking this as a departure point, this chapter will focus on the representation of the Rajput caste in *Padmaavat* and the idea of 'nation'. Caste is a hierarchal division of people within Hindu *varnashrama*[2] corresponding with their occupations in which Rajputs belong to the Kshatriya varna which makes them the warrior and kingship community. *Padmaavat* celebrates Rajput caste identity, pushing it as a narrative of Indian cultural history.

The hold of Rajputs has been maintained not only on histories but also how the histories are told. Through the frameworks of representation, identity, and culture, this chapter examines the film *Padmaavat*, treating it as a case study to analyse some key ideas: (a) how caste functions in a modern, supposed casteless society, (b) the role of representation in enabling the sustenance of caste and cultural hegemony in the contemporary society, and (c) upper-caste culture as a commodity which is actively produced and consumed. In a time when untouchability is legally abolished and caste-based differentiation allegedly gone, culture becomes the site of contestation for the display and exercise of power. Caste hierarchies are often maintained through cultural hegemony achieved by a means of monopolisation of structures of knowledge and representation and thus formulating neo-casteism.

A discourse on caste is often pursued through Dalit studies but seldom critically engages with an exclusive cultural critique of the non-Dalits. Due to the immense social stigma, the nomenclature of caste has come to acquire a synonymity with the Dalits whereas the upper castes continue to define the more acceptable, generic identity of 'Indian'. A necessary probe into the cultural monoliths of upper castes will lead to an understanding of the establishment of metanarratives and subsequently the process of meaning making. 'Representation is the alphabet of

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culture', says Pramod K. Nayar, and it is through these cultural reinforcements the caste identities are maintained.

> Skilled in maneuver
> He flew past the spears
> Fearlessly facing the shields
> Galloped into the swords
> (Chetak Ki Veerta,
> Shyam Narayan Pandey,
> *translation mine*).[3]

Written by Shyam Narayan Pandey, these lines are from the poem *Chetak ki Veerta* (Courageous Chetak), an ode to the courage and bravery of the horse named Chetak which belonged to the Rajput King Maharana Pratap. Narayan, in his signature style, has written two epics in *veer rasa* (heroic style),[4] encompassing the bravery of the Rajput King Maharana Pratap and also, incidentally, the Rajput Queen Padmini (Padmavati),[5] the protagonist of *Padmaavat*. The notions of bravery, courage, and valour have over the years come to be associated with the Rajput caste. Such narratives are responsible for creating glorious stereotypes for them. The horse Chetak by the virtue of belonging to a Rajput king went on to become as famed as his rider, courtesy of the folklores and such literary and other representations. This poem was also a mandatory reading under the school curriculum of Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), a national level board of education regulated by Government of India. Through an institutionalised medium of school education and other sources of representation, such select narratives are naturalised into the public memory as the repository of Indian history and culture. This is also instrumental in establishing a supremacist caste cultural capital. The legend of the horse Chetak occupies a much larger mythic, historic, and literary space than the histories of many marginalised social groups in India.

Padmaavat is a Hindi epic drama film about the Rajput royal couple Ratan Singh and Padmavati, and the Muslim ruler Alauddin Khilji. Khilji's desire to capture the Rajputana kingdom Mewar and its Queen Padmavati forms the core of the film narrative. Progressively, it transforms into a tale of good versus evil, a classic Indian epic format whereby the Hindu Rajput king Ratan Singh and Queen Padmavati are presented as the epitome of righteousness and Khilji as the vicious villain. The cultural backlash and criticism towards the film revolves broadly around a bias in the representation of Hindu rulers, appropriation of history through the falsification of Queen Padmavati's character and socio-historical roles of myths. There is a dearth of criticism at the level of the legitimacy of Rajput caste and their cultural supremacy that the film reinforces. *Padmaavat* serves as a pivotal example of how, in the modern day, caste manifests through contemporary media and art forms, cinema being one of the most widely consumed mediums. It can be studied as an exposé on modern caste culture. The movie is claimed to be a fictionalised historical epic drama based on the eponymous work of Malik Muhammad Jayasi.[6] Such epic drama with its roots in history about royalty and warriors can only encompass upper-caste protagonists, Rajputs here to be specific. A non-upper caste is hardly seen as a likely subject for such a genre even in an imaginative discourse as a part of counter-cultural representation. Dalits are represented, if at all, through the frames of victimhood, poverty, or deprivation as in seen in the movies such as *Masaan*, *Article 15*, *Bandit Queen*, and others, with the exception of a few films like *Kala*, *Kabali*, and *Serious Men*, out of which the first two are written and directed by

Dalit film-maker Pa. Ranjith. Cinematic reproduction of selective history of the upper castes is pushed as 'Indian' culture, whereas the few films that centre on Dalit characters are marked as 'cinema on caste'.

Padmaavat is a unidimensional upper-caste narrative which goes on to construct a prototype image of Rajputs. A lot of ideas contribute towards the making of an exclusive upper-caste cultural identity codified through the depiction of food, elaborate clothing, fine jewellery, the use of language by them and for them, music and dance, etc. Harking on these ideas, the ruling and warrior caste of Rajputs continues to be etched in the public memory as opulent and grandiloquent. *Padmaavat* pedestalises Rajputs over the Muslims in the movie, and the rest, otherwise. The spectacularity of the Rajput King Ratan Singh's kingdom is shown to be even appreciated by his rival Alauddin Khilji as he says 'God has truly blessed Rajputs with abundance', upon his visit to Mewar.

A favourable depiction of Ratan Singh over Alauddin Khilji elicited heavy criticism towards the film.[7] Ratan Singh's Hindu belonging, the majority religion in India, was argued to be the reason behind this biased representation. However, a reading of his identity cannot be confined to Hinduism, it has been extended to the hierarchal division of caste within Hinduism. This chapter engages with the representation of Ratan Singh not only as a Hindu king but also as a Rajput king—a conflating identity which emerges consistently. Ratan Singh is portrayed as a morally upright and righteous king while Khilji is shown to be power greedy and obsessive who disavows loyalty and allegiance for his political ambitions. He kills his uncle, Jalaludin Khilji, to succeed to the throne. This sets the entire preamble for his character throughout the movie. He is purposefully shown to be insensitive and bankrupt of values in order to alleviate and highlight the righteousness of Ratan Singh. Khilji is the perfect villain who exists for Ratan Singh to shine. The movie continues to develop this dissimilitude between the two so as to treat this as an opportunity to illustrate valour, strength, courage, and principles as the qualities possessed by Ratan Singh by the virtue of being a Rajput. So these traits are not unique to an individual but to an entire caste. Ratan Singh is not shown to be an individual but only a representative of the entire community. In turn these characteristics are made exclusive to the Rajputs. As the movie progresses, one witnesses Ratan Singh being less and less a character and more as a stereotype. In a scene, after the threat of invasion by the Khilji army, Ratan Singh orders for a complete sealing of the fort. A worried Gora Singh, commander of his army, warns Ratan Singh of the depleting granaries in a lockdown which he dismisses at first. Gora Singh feels compelled to break silence over the impracticality of the non-cognizance of the matter. As he says to the king, 'This is a matter of worry', Ratan Singh breaks into an irrelevant monologue on Rajput courage:

> The one who keeps worries at the edge of one's sword, is a Rajput,
> The one who walks on embers yet continues stroking his moustache, is a Rajput,
> The one sailing in a boat of sand yet does not fear challenging the ocean, is a Rajput,
> And, the one who is decapitated yet continues to fight the enemy, is a Rajput.
>
> (Translation Mine)

As an answer to an urgent issue involving the entire kingdom, Ratan Singh goes on to literally define 'what is a Rajput' in a poetic speech full of metaphors all of which emphasise courage and fearlessness as a Rajput embodiment. It underlines heroic quality as a necessary trait of the entire community. In a seemingly hyperbolic description, the last line finds a visual illustration in the movie. As a part of Ratan Singh's rescue mission planned by Padmavati, Gora Singh and

other soldiers disguised as women go to meet Khilji to fulfil his demand of bringing Padmavati to him[8]. While fighting the Khilji army, an outnumbered Gora Singh is decapitated and yet he continues to fight the enemy. This is important as it sheds light on how the age-old caste stereotypes of hyperbolic nature are sustained in the imagination of public memory, making it more rigid through such representations in the contemporary forms of art. The film does not glorify the sacrifice of Gora Singh, but it glorifies the caste identity through which he is introduced. He ceases to be a warrior and is turned into an interlude on Rajput honour. Commenting on how objects come to acquire meaning, Paul du Gay says that 'Advertising is the cultural language which speaks on the behalf of the product' (1997: 25). *Padmaavat* is an advertisement for Rajput caste (the object), and through the reiteration of the features which have been traditionally used to define Rajputana in the film, its dominance is reinforced for the masses to consume. It naturalises the cultural hegemony of Rajputs which is passed on as the 'Indian' heritage and culture. The resplendence and grandness of Rajputana portrayed through the film functions in a twofold manner: it establishes it as distinct and unique while at the same time also makes it an identity to aspire for and subscribe to; alternately, it also creates shame amongst lower castes and Dalits by invoking a sense of lack thereof.

Padmaavat is paradigmatic in showing how narratives of glory and magnificence concerning heroism are constructed around Rajputs. Addressing his coup on the deaths of two of the warriors, Ratan Singh says, 'As long as Chittor exists, Gora and Badal's names will be remembered'.[9] And when Padmavati confided the death of Badal to his mother, the latter says, 'The Rajputs who lay down their lives in the battlefield never die. They become immortal'. They are immortalised in the memories of the public over the years through varying narratives, *Padmaavat* being one of them. It exemplifies how constructs of bravery and intrepidity around Rajputs are carried forward from cultural memory and translated into popular formats such as a film. This effectively contributes towards the creation of a stereotype image of the Rajput caste manufactured through the narratives of heroism and sacrifice which is consumed and reproduced. Paul du Gay et al. conceptualised 'circuit of culture' (1997: 3) using Sony walkman for a case study to analyse 'the establishment of cultural meaning through the practice of representation' (1997: 4).[10] Commenting on how meanings are culturally produced, he says 'meaning does not arise directly from the object, the "thing in itself", but from the way in which the object is represented in language, in discourse and in the concepts and ideas in our heads, in knowledge' (1997: 40), an idea expanded upon by Stuart Hall later in the text.[11] And even though caste is inherently loaded with concepts and meanings, it is interesting to observe forms of representation that continue to further contribute towards the creation and recreation of caste identity, encoding meanings and associations with it, and turning it into a 'cultural artefact' (1997: 10). *Padmaavat* illustrates that Rajput identity is translated into a cultural commodity that is produced, advertised, and consumed. It ascertains a monopoly over the traits of courage and valour, intentionally distinguishing it from others and at the same time generating a caste cultural capital.

To substantiate further the aforementioned argument, I would like to quote Ratan Singh's monologue again from the English subtitles provided in the movie:

> One who *braves* any situation, is a Rajput
> One who *dares* to walk on burning embers, is a Rajput
> One who accepts all *challenges* and emerges *victorious*, is a Rajput
> The one who *fights* the enemy, till his last breath, is a Rajput
> (Emphasis mine)

The subtitles retain the earlier argument of using a specific set of ideas to portray the Rajput identity. A comparison of the two translations reveals that the subtitles dilute the ferocity with which the supremacist caste notions are pushed perhaps to make it more palatable for a non-Indian, non-Hindi-speaking audience. It also effaces the cultural and caste-coded markers such as the sword or 'stroking of moustache'. Moustache has been turned into a cultural and caste marker of Rajput identity. It is also monopolised by the Rajputs to an extent that in 2017, a Dalit man was beaten and harassed by Rajputs for sporting a moustache (Bell 2017).[12] In another case, a Dalit man was forced by Rajputs to shave off his moustache (Ahmedabad Mirror 2019).[13] By choosing moustaches to represent them, Rajputs have imbued the notion of pride and honour with it. Suraj Yengde talks about Dalit identity as he says, 'Being a Dalit is being now, it is being urgent'. Conversely, being a Rajput is being the age-old past repositories; it is being an active relic. So moustaches may merely be facial hair but through a cultural reservation followed by corresponding representation it is given a caste-based meaning. Gora Singh exhibits two of the Rajput stereotypical features which are a part of the dialogue: fighting even when decapitated (valour) and sporting a big moustache (pride). Calling it a 'cultural propaganda', reviewer Tanul Thakur says that *Padmaavat* uses 'tradition as an excuse to advance disturbing notions of valour'.[14]

Ratan Singh, the patriarch and the Rajput king, is the archetype of Rajput identity in the film. His character exists in the movie to timely remind the audience of the greatness of Rajputs. He is the embodiment of Rajput principles, strength, determination, courage, and all the characteristics as discussed earlier. When released with the help of Mehrunisa, wife of Khilji, a hostage Ratan Singh insists on a doomed plan of meeting Khilji before escaping. He chooses to risk the failure of his rescue plan and putting everyone else in danger including his wife Padmavati by reasoning, 'I am a Rajput. We never leave with our backs turned', signifying episodes on Rajput principles forcefully incorporated to build the character of Rajput caste.

In the opening scene, Queen Padmavati is out in the woods hunting in her native place Singhal. Ratan Singh happens to be there as a part of his tour to the city to procure the pearls of Singhal as a way of remedying the wrong he committed by giving away his first wife's pearl necklace. Padmavati, aiming for the deer, accidentally shoots Ratan Singh with her arrow. As she rummages through the bushes to walk past them to see her exploit, she finds a wounded man. For a person who has been hit by an arrow, one does not hear even a shriek or a muffled scream as the most obvious response. He is also found standing still and only falls towards Padmavati when she pulls the arrow out of his body. It is important to underline here that an injured Ratan Singh is not shown to fall on the ground or kneel down. Even when he falls unconscious he is held by Padmavati and the scene cuts to him put on rest. Falling and kneeling are culturally connoted as signs of weakness, defeat, humiliation, and also a means of punishment. All these have been established as anti-Rajput. In the last battle scene of a combat between Ratan Singh and Khilji, the former is shown to be winning when he is unethically attacked from behind by the Khilji army twice with multiple arrows. Not only is this unfair war practice but attacking from behind is also seen as a sign of cowardice, a necessary idea to explain Ratan Singh's death and contrastingly establishes him as honourable. A dying Ratan Singh continues to fight and manages to utter the last reinforcement of caste honour as he says to Khilji, 'You could've at least fought this battle with integrity'. This is reminiscent of the erstwhile discussed Gora Singh's death. Just like only an outnumbered Gora Singh could be defeated in a fight, similarly Ratan Singh could only be defeated through deceit in warfare. And like a decapitated Gora Singh keeps on fighting the opponent, similarly, dying Ratan Singh continues to fight. Their defeats are deliberately qualified to match their caste moulds. Furthermore, like a wounded Ratan Singh isn't shown to kneel, likewise, a dead Ratan Singh is not shown to

have fallen flat on ground. A cultural triumph is invented in his death as well. He dies on his knees with his arrows-jabbed back supporting his body. The image of his death is evocative of the death imagery of the mythological character Bhishma, the most celebrated Kshatriya warrior from the epic *Mahabharata*. An undefeatable Bhishma was tricked on the battlefield as per the strategic plan of Krishna. Arjuna hid behind Shikandi. a male born as a female, on their chariot on the battlefield. Bhishma refrains from attacking a woman (Shikhandi) on the grounds of Kshatriya honour, while hidden Arjun attacks him with multiple arrows. The death bed of Bhishma is a bed of arrows stung to the back of his body as he lay on them. A parallel between the images of the death scene of the two Kshatriya warriors cannot go amiss. Through this suggested comparison, Ratan Singh's death is alleviated as more honourable than victory itself.

The notion of Rajput honour is also embodied through the character of the Rajput queen Padmavati. Positioned in a supremacist and patriarchal set-up, Padmavati becomes the guardian of honour and tradition. While the entire premise of the movie is the overarching desire of Khilji to possess Padmavati, there is not a single scene where they meet or see each other. Khilji's lust is based on the accounts of her beauty narrated to him by Raghav Chetan, a banished court guru of Ratan Singh's kingdom. However, there are three episodes where they both come close to meeting: first when Khilji comes to Mewar fort as a means of acknowledging truce after laying siege for six months outside the fort with his army for war. Admitting that force cannot be used to win Padmavati, Khilji offers a truce and self-invites himself to the fort. By the end of his visit, he asks Ratan Singh to introduce him to his family members as a way of meeting Padmavati. At the mention of Padmavati's name, a livid Ratan Singh screams at him calling it a 'disgraceful' request while the outraged soldiers around pull out their sword and place it on Khilji's neck. Padmavati volunteers to show herself to Khilji so as to protect the kingdom from him, an act rendered by Ratan Singh as 'humiliation'. He also goes on to say that she will be 'judged by the next generation for this decision'. For the meeting, Khilji is made to stay inside the fort and look out of the window in a distance to see Padmavati. She was handed a plate of *pooja* by Kunwar Baisa to protect her from the 'evil-eye'. When the curtain is lifted from the window, all Khilji could see was a silhouette of a woman in the distance, her face was obscured because of the smoke rising from the *thaali*. Second possible encounter is when Padmavati comes to Khilji's sultanate to rescue Ratan Singh in exchange for her own self. But, she flees with her husband without meeting Khilji. Third scene is the ending of the movie after Ratan Singh loses the battle and the Mewar fort is breached by Khilji and his soldiers. Before he could reach Padmavati, she self-immolates (referred to as *jauhar*) along with other women as a means of protecting them from any exploitation.

The film-makers carefully eliminated any possibility of a meeting between Khilji and Padmavati. Either through smoke, timing, or death, narrative techniques and plot lines are cleverly employed to shield her from even his gaze. Discussing the ideas of gaze and representation, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argues that in a conventional cinema 'active/male' looks at and seeks pleasure while 'passive/female' is looked at and is the source of pleasure. Padmavati's character complicates this binary. She is not a meek woman subservient to the gaze of men for their pleasure. Like her Rajput male counterparts, her character too is attributed with courage and fearlessness. She hunts and holds knowledge of warfare. She questions her husband Ratan Singh's decisions and asserts herself before Gora Singh. However, her character can afford such qualities as long as they do not trespass the Rajputana feminine code of conduct essentially laid down by a highly patriarchal normative social order of the Rajput caste dynamic. She can be projected and viewed only through the gaze of respect and reverence. Despite her famed beauty, she cannot be perceived as the source of pleasure or desire. Her inaccessibility to any male besides her husband is purposefully shown in order to adhere to the constructs of Rajput

women. Her identity as a Rajput woman makes it imperative to desexualise her. Therefore, an erasure of a meeting between Padmavati and Khilji earmarks that; like Khilji, no other man—film character or spectator—may dare to desire her or access her. Padmavati is tragically reduced to another idea of honour of Rajputs to protect and boast about.

Padmavati's *jauhar* is also an extension of the similar ideas of virtue and honour. It goes on to establish her devotedness to her husband as a chaste woman since she chooses death over facing Khilji. The notion of honour *vis-à-vis* Rajput women is shown to be circumscribed to chastity. Padmavati convinces other Rajput women to join her in the act as she says:

> If our brave-hearts attain martyrdom today, the enemy would still not be victorious. Chittor will witness another war, one that is unseen and unheard of. And that war will be fought by us women! Our enemies shall watch how we women turn our agony into victory. . . . Those who lust for our body would not even get their hands on our shadows! Our bodies will be reduced to ashes, but our pride and honour will remain immortal. And that will be the biggest defeat of Alauddin's life.

The translation provided in the subtitles sanitises some of the important caste-based terminology as given in the original speech where she specifically uses the word *Kshatraniya* meaning *Kshatriya*/Rajput women in place of 'us women'. Instead of a neutral 'we', *Rajput virangana* is used, which translates to brave Rajput women. A politics of such sanitisation and translation along with caste has already been discussed earlier. It is important to note that even though the movie issued a separate disclaimer stating that it does not promote the practices of *jauhar* or *sati*, this scene undermines it completely. It evidently glorifies, if not the practice in general, but then this act in particular, the *jauhar* committed by Padmavati and several of the other Rajput women, one of whom is shown to be with child. As seen in Padmavati's speech, their act of *jauhar* is compared with war, pride, honour, and victory. It is made to be the women's equivalent of raging a war on the enemy. Each Rajput character is a replica of another, reiterating the same ideas of pride and honour. Because of this deed of Padmavati, she has been hailed as a symbol of sacrifice and hence the reason for her veneration. She is turned into an example of righteous feminine conduct to be abided by Rajput women and by extension, Indian women.

A song from the movie *Jagriti* (1954) *Aao Bachon Tumhe Dikhayein Jhaanki Hindustan Ki*, loosely translated as 'Children, This is a Glance at Hindustan', aims to capture varying features of the country in a nationalistic spirit:

> This is Rajputana, proud at its swords
> Spent its entire life amongst spears, arrows and daggers
> This is Pratap's land, raised on spirit of freedom
> Here a thousand Padminis immolated themselves
> Revere this land made of sacrifice.
>
> (Translation mine)[15]

Padmavati's *jauhar* has been etched in the popular public imagination as a matter of national pride. All the actions but more importantly all the narratives on Rajputs capture them as a significant constituent of Indian identity founded on valour, sacrifice, and honour. It is also simultaneously built on the suppression and silencing of the lower castes. This song which is supposedly a ballad on national identity goes on to praise Rajputs (Rajputana, Pratap, and Padmini) extensively. Along with Rajputs, it also encompasses the vast geography of the country,

the Marathas, Sikhs, and Bengalis. The Rajputs and Marathas belong to the Kshatriya varna and are included here while there is no mention of the Dalit-Bahujans, a vast numerical majority. The core of the Indian identity has been constructed on glorious discourses of upper castes. The castes belonging to the three uppermost *varnas* have traditionally functioned in solidarity, interdependence, and through patronage. The Brahmins being the priestly class served as the teachers to the Kshatriyas and also as the socio-religious upkeeprs of the society. Likewise, the merchant class of Vaishyas aided with funds to the priestly and the ruling class, and with trade and commerce to the kingdom in general. As a result, this conglomerate of upper castes worked in cohesion while collectively side-lining the Shudras and the anti-Shudras. *Padmaavat* is just another reproduction of the same socio-cultural narrative and sentiments without challenging caste hierarchies. Instead, it strengthens and perpetuates the caste-centred notions for the contemporary audience to consume.

Before the movie was released, still in its making stage, it was met with severe backlash from Shri Rajput Karni Sena (SRKS), a small Rajput outfit that claims to protect Rajput identity. As part of their protest against the film, they vandalised the movie sets, harassed the director Sanjay Leela Bhansali, and publicly set a bounty for the actress Deepika Padukone who played the role of queen Padmavati. The alleged reason behind this was their belief that the movie shows a romantic scene between Khilji and Padmavati. All this was done because of their suspicion based on no knowledge since the movie was not complete yet. Their protests led to a significant delay in the release of the film and also a ban on the movie in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana, states with BJP, a right-wing party, in power. And despite several clarifications issued from the side of the film-makers, verbal, legal, and physical protest did not cease. They were based on the grounds of distortion of history, foiling Rajput honour, hurting sentiments of their community, and misrepresentation of Queen Padmavati. The film-makers were forced to comply with their demands and subsequently to change the title of the movie from *Padmavati* to *Padmaavat* to state that it is based on the fictional work of Malik Muhammad Jayasi and not be construed as having historical grounds. Under the pressure of SRKS, a special disclaimer was also added in the beginning of the movie stating:

> The film 'Padmaavat' is inspired from the epic poem Padmavat, written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, which is considered a work of fiction. This film does not infer or claim historical authenticity or accuracy in terms of the names of the places, characters, sequence of events, locations, spoken languages, dance forms, costumes and/or such other details. We do not intend to disrespect, impair or disparage the beliefs, feelings, sentiments of any person(s), community(ies), and their culture(s), Practice(s) and tradition(s).

This was done to discredit the movie as based on 'history' or local cultural myths and establish it as a work of fiction.[16] These protests are a substantiation of how caste cultural hierarchy actively operates through the means of violence and coercion.

An FIR was also filed against the director and the actors (Deepika Padukone and Ranveer Singh) which stated:

> Maharani Padmavati' was a pious historical icon whose courageous act of 'jauhar' was registered in the glorious annals of history of Rajasthan as well as the entire country, and thus by depicting the iconic character in songs, love scenes, etc. of the movie, the reputation and honour of 'Maharani Padmavati' was maligned and resultantly, feelings and sentiments of the 'Rajput Samaj' and the entire Hindu community were hurt because of such portrayal.[17]

The basis of this collective outrage is rooted in the disparity between culturally coded understanding of viewership whereby a cultural icon can only be seen through the lens of reverence, almost making them sacrosanct in its utmost rigidity, and the medium of cinema which humanises the revered icons and creates possibilities for interpretations. Bandyopadhyay and Modak call this 'a shift in the hierarchal position of Rani Padmavati, from the high pedestal of the "shared conceptual maps" of the masses, to that of a heroine of a commercial movie'.[18] Cinematic representation takes her out of the fixed domain of veneration and imbues her with a life full of ordinary moments. In response to SRKS's objection at the representation of Padmavati in the song *Ghoomar*, the actresses' stomach was digitally covered by extending her blouse. As discussed earlier, Padmavati remains untouched by the gaze of Khilji and at the same time she is also attempted to be rescued from the gaze of the movie-going audience. In the film, before Padmavati goes to dance, Kunwar Baisa says that 'no man except the King can be present during the queen's performance', which only goes on to establish that right from her *Ghoomar* to her *jauhar*, belongs to her husband. It acts as another disclaimer that this dance belongs only to her husband even if it is consumed by the film audience. Her isolation from any male gaze is thus ensured within and beyond the film. It strengthens the argument of this chapter on how the power structures of caste control the representation and discourses on them and how representation feeds onto those structures of power.

Commenting on the controversy surrounding the film, former Bhartiya Janata Party MP, Tarun Vijay in his article in *The Indian Express* says, 'The debate around the film Padmavati can never be confined to the honour of Rajputs or the people of Rajputana. It touches every Indian's sense of honour'.[19] By invoking the homogenous identity of 'Indian' and extending the sentiment of hurt, Vijay here effectively obliterates the complex structure of Indian society of which caste is a major constitutive part. This also goes on to show the ease with which Savarna histories, myths, and cultures are interchangeably used for a representative Indian identity. As discussed in the aforementioned song, the upper-caste ethos has been supplanted into the national consciousness and cultural history. In the guise of representative national identity and sensibility, identities of the minorities and marginalised communities are subsumed and subsequently silenced. The film depicts the idea of honour with respect to Rajputs, and the protests against the film were made by Rajput outfits. This detail is dismissed by Vijay as he appropriates Rajput with Indian. Shiv Shakti Nath Bakshi, executive editor of Kamal Sandesh (BJP's mouthpiece), on the subject of controversy regarding the film says:

> In any culture role of myth cannot be denied as shaping cultural selves while conceptions of professional history are themselves not infallible and are open to different interpretations. . . . Oral traditions, literature and folklore play an important role in the life of a community. Attempts to distort that understanding through a powerful medium like a film may hurt sensibilities, thus creating law and order problems.[20]

Here Bakshi condones the protests citing hurt sentiments, challenges the liberties of freedom of expression, and cites the importance of myths as cultural memory. He is responding towards the debate of myth and history as SRKS alleges that the film distorts history by misrepresenting Padmavati which consequentially sparked a debate on the authenticity of Padmavati as several historians have claimed that while Khilji's attack on Chittor is factual, there is no mention of Padmavati anywhere. Cultural myths inform history as much as historical documents, and hence their relevance cannot be denied. It is, however, important to implore the source of myths and how they are constructed. Roland Barthes says that 'myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an

inflexion' (1991: 128). Padmavati has been translated into a cultural icon of pride and honour as a result of a selective narrative that has been passed on over the years. The fictional character of Jayasi's poem is distorted and appropriated to suit a select narrative of Rajput honour. SRKS which claims that the film has distorted history forget that their knowledge of Padmavati is itself based on a distortion. However, it is not Padmavati who is a myth here, but it is the Rajput caste which becomes a myth. SRKS is not protecting Padmavati or their honour in her name, but they are so aggressively protecting the myth of Rajputana upon which their social and cultural identities thrive. Sreenivasan and Gururaja comments on the complexity of memory and history *vis-à-vis* the protests saying, 'For the protestors, the details don't matter, what matters is their 'belief', along with their 'right' to control the narrative'. The representation of Padmavati by any third party besides the Rajputs is conceived as a challenge to their authority on history and an undermining of their power structures. Hence, Sreenivasan et al. suggest an engagement with Rajput-centred histories in a twofold manner: (a) 'get a sense of counter-narratives of regional history from groups who were subordinated by the Rajputs' and (b) address the question 'why the accounts of Rajasthan's history that are most readily available to the English-language press, uniformly echo the official, Rajput perspective'. Through the means of power bestowed on them via caste supremacy, Rajputs have governed the historical and cultural discourses making themselves to be an exclusive representative of history itself. This is sustained through an active marginalisation of histories of non-Rajput communities achieved through a systematic sidelining of such histories in the name of 'vernacular', 'local', and 'less pertinent-knowledge' (Sreenivasan and Gururaja).[21]

Padmaavat is an example of how caste manifests in the contemporary socio-political order through popular art mediums which inadvertently colour national imagination. It showcases the production and reproduction of meaning through caste-codified representations and thereby strengthening and proliferating age-old caste stereotypes. The upper castes enjoy a cultural legitimacy through representation while the marginalised communities are left out of national consciousness. Hence it also makes it imperative to examine the implications of such representations in an already caste-ridden society. It is also to be noted that a film which glories in abundance the Rajput ecosystem is met with extreme protests, all verbal, legal, and physical in nature from Rajputs themselves and supported by members of other privileged castes. In which case, what scope does it leave for any reflection upon the intricacies of Indian social order through art? In such a climate, is it even possible to make a film which enjoys the creative freedom to tell the fictional story of upper castes without any fear?

Notes

1 The film was originally named *Padmavati*; however, following the protests by several Rajput outfits it was renamed as *Padmaavat*. This is discussed at length later into the chapter.
2 According to Hindu Dharmsashtras (socio-religious texts), Varnashrama is a four-fold hierarchical organisation of society based on occupation and principle of birth.
3 To access the poem, originally written in Hindi, please visit the following webpage: https://www.bharatdarshan.co.nz/magazine/articles/744/chetak-poem-shyam-narayan-pandey.html Accessed on May 7, 2022.
4 Shyam Narayan Pandey is a notable Hindi Poet famous for his heroic style poetry. He has written two heroic epics namely *Haldighati* and *Jauhar* on Maharana Pratap and Queen Padmini, respectively. A common theme of the praise of Rajput courage and valour runs through both of them.
5 Queen Padmavati is also known by the name of Padmini.
6 Movies such as *Jodha Akbar, Bajirao Mastani, Tanhaji, Manikarnika: the Queen, Mangal Pandey,* etc. are a few examples of epic historical drama.

7 Some of the film reviews which note the vilification of Khilji and the glorification of Ratan Singh are: Sabah K.'s "Padmavati' Trailer Gives Legitimacy to Patriarchal Notions of Women's Bodies'. *The Print*, October 22, 2017, Rachel Saltz's "Padmavat' and All That Useless Beauty'. *The New York Times*, January 26, 2018, Krzysztof Iwanek's 'India's Padmavat: An Ode to Conservatism and Moral Victories'. *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2018, G. C. Shekhar's 'Padmavat Review: If Anyone Needs to Protest (Peacefully) It is the Descendants of Khilji, not Karni Sena'. *Outlook*, January 25, 2018.
8 The disguise is purposefully shown to be taken off by the Rajput soldiers right in front of the Khilji army before the fight ensues. This is done to distinguish the disguise as a clever war strategy followed by a fair fight and not to be confused as trickery. This also aligns with the larger theme of the film of maintaining the moral high ground of the Rajputs.
9 Hemratan's *Gora Badal Padmini Chaupai* and Pandit Narendra Mishra's Padmini *Gora Badal* are two examples of the literary contributions which commemorates them as heroes.
10 To access the PDF, please visit: www.academia.edu/21381380/Doing_Cultural_Studies_The_Story_of_the_Sony_Walkman. Accessed on May 6, 2020.
11 For a detailed study of this idea, please refer to Stuart Hall's *The Work of Representation*, Chapter 1, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.
12 The News article is available here: www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41497192. Accessed on May 25, 2020.
13 The news article is available here: https://ahmedabadmirror.indiatimes.com/ahmedabad/cover-story/mehsana-dalit-youth-forced-to-shave-off-moustache-then-thrashed/articleshow/72420754.html. Accessed on May 25, 2020.
14 Film review by Tanul Thakur is available here: https://thewire.in/film/padmaavat-opulent-combination-dazzling-technology-regressive-values Accessed on April 10, 2020
15 The poem was written by Pradeep originally in Hindi which was used in the film Jagriti as a song. This was published by Amar Ujala on the 70th independence day and can be read here: www.amarujala.com/kavya/kavya-charcha/70th-independence-day-aao-bachcho-tumhe-dikhayen-jhanki-hindustan-ki-song. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
16 While there are historical records that confirm Alauddin Khilji's siege of Chittor, Mewar, there is no account of Padmavati. The earliest mention of Padmavati is traced back to Malik Muhammad Jayasi's fictional epic poem *Padmavat* written in 1540. For a detailed account tracing the trajectory of the narrative of Padmini/Padmavati refer to Ramya Srinivasan's book *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India c. 1500–1900.*
17 The legal proceedings towards the FIR lodged by Virendra Singh and Nagpal Singh Rathore, both belonging to Rajput community, can be accessed here: https://indiankanoon.org/doc/62541523/. Accessed on February 6, 2020. Following the court hearing the said FIR was "quashed" citing the film to be a "glorious history of Rajputana culture" and the FIR to be "a gross abuse of process of law".
18 Mita Bandyopadhyay and Arindam Modak's paper addresses the tensions emerging from juxtaposition of cultural and visual representations with respect to Padmaavat. The paper is available here: https://postscriptum.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/pS5.iMita_.pdf. Accessed on February 15, 2020.
19 Tarun Vijay's article discusses the ideas of honour and national identity. The article is available here: https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/padmavati-controversy-sanjay-leela-bhansali-the-honour-of-padmavati-4948567/. Accessed on April 11, 2020.
20 Shiv Shakti Nath Bakshi's article discusses the relevance of cultural myths. The article is available here: www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/should-padmavati-be-screened/article21235873.ece
21 Ramya Sreenivasan and Samana Gururaj's article discusses the protests towards films in the recent past by upper castes. They highlight that these are also the means to control the retellings of history. At the same time, they also emphasise the need to look at counter-cultural narratives. The article can be accessed here: https://thewire.in/communalism/padmavati-rajput-protests-gujarat-rajastha. Accessed on April 3, 2020.

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26

Masaan, a Tale of Forbidden Love

Ravinder Singh Rana

Movies in India, more than books, have been at the forefront of creating controversies and spaces for arguments, largely because they are an 'entertaining' source and mainly due to the rate of illiteracy in India[1] that stands at 79.9% at the urban level, which translates into a better reach for cinema than literature. Despite the inconclusiveness of this study on the literacy rate—it takes into account anyone capable of reading and writing a few lines—it is nevertheless a confession of India's inability to provide an affordable comprehensive education system. Cinema plays a pivotal role in this context by underlining the importance of documenting historical discourses and forming narratives around them with experimental fictions. Movies like *Masaan* (2015), *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016), and more recently *Article 15* (2019), have treaded into the territory 'uncharted' to the Indian commercial cinema audiences: the caste dynamics and the paradox that it accommodates—the more it is visible in the society, even in its tacit form, the more it is camouflaged in cinema.

Sala ye dukh kahey khatam nahi hota bey (When does this grief ever end?) cries Deepak in a scene in *Masaan* and then starts weeping inconsolably. Even though his outburst is related to the recent tragedy of having lost his lover, the blend of pathos and tragic in his voice points to a larger context. Deepak's desperate cry echoes that of Pariyerum Perumal in the eponymous movie, that of Jambhuvant Kachru Mane in *Fandry*, and that of Prashant Kale in *Sairat*. The common denominator is that they are all from lower castes and are in love with someone from a higher caste. The caste system in India as portrayed in *Masaan* is a lethal assortment of religious and cultural heritage, social practices forbidden by the Indian constitution, and humiliation reserved for the ex-Untouchables. It is also a hierarchical set up, according to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, that led to the survival of the Hindu society:

> I believe that if Hindu society has been able to stand, it is because it is founded on the caste system. . . . To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system.[2]
>
> *(quoted in Roy 2016: 25–26)*

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The statement is not inaccurate especially when we consider the fact that the caste system has been interiorised by Indian society to such an extent that a discrimination based on one's birth is accepted as the norm. Caste thereby remains an undefeatable phenomenon; a Brahmin remains confined to their caste until their death. The only major exception being perhaps what Ambedkar mentioned, the Shudhras—the fourth and the last in the caste hierarchy—who could gain access to the Kshatriya caste—the second in the hierarchy—by the virtue of being anointed with a sacred thread by a Brahmin (Jaffrelot 2000: 63).

For an enhanced universal understanding, the caste system in India can also be analogically compared to capitalism in the United States; it is pervasive and entrenched in the society; it regulates the inflow and outflow of socio-political power; and it nearly regulates the economy and judiciary.[3] Indian cinema is not an exception to the rule, it has made some half-hearted but some sincere efforts too in making these caste narratives reach the urban audiences and the international ones. *Masaan* is an earnest effort by Neeraj Ghaywan, a film-maker belonging to the Dalit community, which portrays the caste issues in the backdrop of two love stories. It had its theatrical release simultaneously in France and in India. It is written by Varun Grover, a writer, stand-up comedian known for his anti-establishment comedy sketches and belonging to the Khatri/Kshatriya caste. The movie thereby has many political overtones—right from its creation to its content–that sum up the existence of an ordinary citizen in India alongside corruption, discrimination, and mental stress. Corruption and discrimination are usually the essential ingredients of any Indian movie, and a victory over these two evils usually form a perfect denouement. The story of *Masaan* revolves around a pair united by love and unevenly separated by an ambiguous mixture of caste and class, which also indicates taking Indian cinematographic devices head on in order to go beyond the class narratives.

This chapter postulates that Indian (mainstream) movies attempting to reveal the caste narratives in the society vacillate in underlining caste hierarchies and the darkness of failure that lies around the people who find themselves at the receiving end of this system. These characters almost appear to be lacking agency and are subordinate to a bigger sketch: the movie maker's narrative on the caste atrocities and other upper-caste characters in the movie who are either oblivious of these caste issues–as portrayed in *Article 15*–or they are invisible to them; caste is 'invisibilize[d] . . . if one is 'subjected' to a higher position in the hierarchy' (Gorringe 2017: 233). Additionally, these characters usually meet in a much-standardised environment: educational institutions, the workplace, etc. . ., where caste is purportedly imperceptible, and they are therefore unaware of the daily lives of the low castes. According to Andrew Dix, 'these films[4] come from filmmakers personally originating outside that social fraction than from directors or writers located within it' (Dix 2008: 228). Most of these movies, in spite of a considerate view on the lower-caste issues, end up revealing the limitations of the moviemakers and their projection of the caste system in an India that has been historically struggling to overcome the class difference and not essentially the caste difference. Movies like *Masaan*, unlike *Fandry*, appear to lack the radical approach that must be inherent to the understanding of caste dynamics. Dealing with this question of constraint in treating caste issues—both cinematographic and conceptual—will require an investigation into the role of portrayal(s) in the movie *Masaan*; portrayals understood in a wider sense that encompass people, place and other caste markers. I will then move on to delve into the notion of political alertness (Nelavala 2006: 66) that also underlines the lack of an unconditional acceptance of the lower castes in India: their acceptance in the society is mostly—portrayed as—dependant on other accessorial factors, mainly economic or socio-political, whereas it might not be the case with the castes that are considered as higher.

A Cinematographic Portrayal

Indian cinema has recurrently displayed its propensity to exploit spaces. Formerly, movies like *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) by Mira Nair and many other realist film-makers relied on the ultra-modern cityscape of Bombay to contrast it with ostracism of the people living on the margins of this society. Bombay's cityscape represents a perfect set-up for portraying the class discrimination that is one of the principal characteristics of India's major metros. Caste issues are often cloaked in these parts of India and not because they do not exist.[5] A semi-urban set-up like Varanasi offers a fertile terrain for caste issues. In this city, where people bring the dead for their last rites, a love story between two people takes place who are both young and innocent. The male protagonist, Deepak Kumar, comes from the family of pyre burners, a Dom caste,[6] which survives on the Hindu tradition of bringing the dead to the holy ghats of Varanasi for attaining *moksha* through incineration. Deepak's family, regardless of the smell of the dead bodies that surround it, has a relatively comfortable living, as compared to other ex-Untouchables, due to the incoming dead bodies for funeral. Deepak's father is ambitious for him and wants him to obtain higher education and join the mainstream; he himself and Deepak's elder brother are mostly involved in burning dead bodies.

The female protagonist, Shaalu Gupta, is from the Vaishya community, upper caste, and she belongs to a middle-class family representing a hybrid modern India within a semi-urban space. She is also portrayed as someone corroborating the narratives of women equality; she tumbles upon a man from a different and lower caste and stays firm in her conviction even after Deepak's real situation is divulged, which is a rare feat in a remote corner like Varanasi. Their love story has all the elements of an Indian romantic movie: songs, festivities, and secret meetings, before the story meets up with a tragic ending for which the audience is not prepared—the tragedy is not correlated to the caste of these protagonists. In a movie filled with caste markers, no big tragedy befalls due to the caste system. Yet, the movies rely very much on these caste markers for its continuity. One of the biggest factors is the glimpse that it provides through cinematographic means into the household and living of these characters. All characters carry the burden of their castes, right from the lower to the upper caste.

The very first scene of the movie shows a girl living in a *chawl*-like set-up—a type of housing where many people live together—going out to meet an online male friend with whom she checks into a dingy hotel room. The scene that follows is a mix of sensuality and violence as the police enter the scene. It underlines the sexual repression that is typical to South Asia: all sexual relations out of wedlock are considered illicit and thereby punishable by law. This repression by the State machinery is termed as 'indecent behaviour in public'.[7] The movie maker thereby suggests an incipit for the movie: oppression having different layers.

The major caste markers, as in any Indian movie, are the surnames. In this very first scene, we come to know the name of that male friend, Piyush Aggarwal, a Baniya (a merchant caste). The following scene appears like a pop up. The set-up changes and we see a traditional Varanasi house that appears to have remained untouched with modernity. Two women are seated at the hearth, cooking, and Deepak enters the house, takes water from a big basin that serves as water tank and washes his face. The house lacks basic amenities like a tap or a phone; the scene that has preceded this one made it clear that this is not a period movie. The absence of a stove or a telephone is the indicator of the absence of the superfluous, which is a clean break from movies like *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Salaam Bombay!*, and the epoch of Indian cinema that relied mainly on misery and hunger for captivating the national and international audiences towards caste issues.

The camera then leads us to the ghats where a man in his 50s is shown burning the pyres for others, certainly not for his own loss as there is no mourning and his gestures are very

professional. He belongs to the same household that was devoid of any marker of modernity. The boy taking the water from the basin in the previous scene addresses him in a very casual tone. This scene underlines the second caste marker: the occupation. The Hindu code book, *Manusmriti*,[8] prophesised occupations as something static, immobile, with an impossibility of inward labour mobility. The family occupation involves lighting funeral pyres for others, an economic tradition deep-rooted in the community of the Doms; the tradition that involves touching the dead bodies belonging to other families, an activity otherwise considered impure. The notion of impurity lies at the core of the caste system and untouchability.

In the following scene, at the same ghat, one can see a man giving some informal history lessons on Varanasi and its creation. The man has a ponytail—not uncommon in India—that portrays his caste, a Brahmin and a scholar as he knows the local history. This man happens to be the father of the girl from the first scene, who is in police custody in the present scene, and their surname is Pathak. These three scenes complete the portrayal of the families and underline the presence of the caste markers by laying stress on their surnames, their attires, or even their occupations. The rigid reality that the two families have remained loyal to their 'ancestral occupations' intertwines with their economic situation: both Brahmin and Dom families are on the margins of society in terms of their economic condition. The Brahmin family is certainly better off than their Dom counterpart, but it has also remained untouched by the economic progress of the country as much as the Dom family. The movie uses props in order to show that sense of marginality: houses that are barely shelters and occupation that is barely enough to earn a living. Sticking to the professions prescribed by their castes have led to the economic isolation for both families in the movie. Their hopes lie with the future generations represented by their young children.

Interestingly, these two families, or their offspring, never come across each other—except in the last scene of the movie—and the two young ones strive to break the shackles of the family occupation by choosing to pursue higher studies. On the surface, their education appears to enable them to have a common ground for bargaining their social and economic status, which would not necessarily translate into overcoming their caste barriers. These two youngsters, the Brahmin girl, and the Dalit boy are also easily identifiable through their body language, even in the absence of any oral narrative to it. The body language is a cinematographic device that falls in the category of movement and expression and that has particularly been exploited in Indian cinema for underlining the caste of the character. An analogy could be made with the commercial hits like *Dabangg* (2010) where the lead character, Chulbul Pandey, almost carries his Brahmin caste on his lapels due to a visibly flamboyant body language. This analogy serves us here with the movie *Masaan* as Deepak coming from the family of ex-Untouchable mostly appears to be complexed, and socio-politically very conscious, in relation to his situation in the society. Moreover, some scenes have a personal element to it as Ghaywan stated:

> Our place in the society has been grilled into us from a very age. There is a constant fear of being seen as lowly by one's friends and colleagues. The fear is so real and raw that, sometimes, I wonder what my upper-caste house help will think of me if she found out that I am a Dalit.[9]

Deepak is hardworking and studious and yet he lacks confidence in all his actions; he appears to be carrying the burden of his background to his college. Deepak's body language and the body language of Devi Pathak stand in sharp contrast; the latter being an audacious and independent woman, and a Brahmin. In the following scene, one can see his inability to muster enough courage to approach a girl for a conversation, in contrast to Devi Pathak's social

transgression in the first scene of the movie. Likewise, his elder brother carries the burden of a loss, of having failed in his life in spite of the reservation system put in place by Indian governments in order to allow the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes a supposedly easier access to education and jobs.

A Portrayal of Loss

Arundhati Roy, in her latest article on Covid-19 (2020), implicitly brings back our focus on the debate between the reservation system and meritocracy. She has earlier made the point in her book (2016: 20) that people advocating the idea of meritocracy usually perceive the caste-based reservation to be operating in 'an ahistorical social vacuum', thereby ignoring the atrocities or even the amount of struggle the Scheduled Castes have to endure to benefit from that reservation. Deepak's life puts on display the inside of Roy's ahistorical vacuum by bringing us face to face with the context: he has to participate in the family occupation of burning funeral pyres and simultaneously attend his Civil engineering classes, which, as we will see, would not be the same scenario for his lover, Shaalu Gupta. Furthermore, one of his pragmatic friends reminds him that the girl belongs to the upper caste so it is pointless to dream of anything beyond that (54: 27) and even suggests him to reveal everything about himself—about his caste—insinuating that concealing it might create problems in the future for their relation.

Deepak's elder brother Sikander–literally meaning Alexander, and used as a metaphor for emperor in Hindi, and thereby alluding to the hope that the father had with both children–is portrayed in a negative role in the movie. He robs his family of their livelihood and carries an even bigger affliction: poverty and manifestly illiteracy. He is the only member of the family who displays no hopes, neither for himself nor for anyone else. When the father makes a taunt on Deepak out of desperation: 'get educated and get away from this mess or you will forever be burning the pyres of others' (26: 58), he gets angry, insinuating that he has failed his education and vice versa. The onus thereby lies on these brothers to prove themselves in the society, and to be accepted by accepting the guilt related to their birth as ex-Untouchables. The caste system foments a sense of bitterness that permeates through generations. It also postulates in a certain manner the economic situation of the people: the profession of a priest exercised mandatorily by a Brahmin in spite of the Supreme Court Judgement against it (December 2015)[10] and that of a low-caste pyre burner could be seen as a common denominator over here assuming that neither of them is economically gainful.

Masaan, however, falls in the populist trap of equating two professions that have lost their sheen in this period of informatics-injected economic boom; the subtext is that a Brahmin is as poor—and helpless—as a lower caste and vice versa. This trap can only be breached through a perspective on caste. The profession of a Brahmin as shown mired in poverty in this movie has been a result of India moving towards a Western model of capital creation and yet the Brahmin never loses the respect that is due to him, there is a plethora of people shown paying him respect. A poor Brahmin, or a poor Kshatriya, can always take pride in their caste despite their poverty as they are entitled to what W. E. B Du Bois calls 'psychological wage. . .', which 'refers to advantages that even economically deprived members of the dominant castes accrue by virtue of their standing in the caste hierarchy' (Gorringe 2017: 233). Whereas an ex-Untouchable needs to merge voluntarily with the higher castes by giving up their living habits, the profession of the corpse-burner piggybacks on the notion of impurity; the Dom Raja–Deepak's father–does not take any pride in his occupation and wants his younger son to 'go away' from that environment and had wanted the same for his elder son: the perpetual burning ambers representing anger in the eyes of the elder son are a proof of it.

Arundhati Roy states that '71.3 per cent of Scheduled Caste students drop out before they matriculate–Tenth grade in India–which means that even for low-end government jobs, the reservation policy only applies to one in every four Dalits' (2016: 19). In the movie, the manner in which Deepak's father implicitly derides his elder brother for having failed in his life in front of the younger brother again puts the onus on him for not having embraced the success. The father's perception of success is mirrored by many people from the upper caste in Indian society; hard work is considered as a ladder to success, completely ignoring the fact that this ladder comes with the burden of humiliation of being an ex-Untouchable. Even at school, the pupils from the lowest caste are not allowed to mingle with other students; they are not allowed to share their food either. The schools become Michel Foucault's Heterotopia,[11] a place where there is no symmetry between people. They look at each other in a bizarre manner. These heterotopias are found not only at schools but also at the university level.[12] Acceding to the profession of a high caste appears comparatively facile in the movie, which equates it to the American dream for the Blacks.

There is no denying that some Dalits have made their way to the top rung of power; India has had two Dalit presidents till date which can be seen as a symbolic victory, but concurrently, the absence of any Dalit for the Prime Ministerial position[13]—a post that wields power—even after 70 years of India's independence calls into question the model of equality. The younger brother is thereby portrayed as refuting the situation of his elder brother. And this is another trap in which the movie makers have fallen by underlining the dichotomy between the situations of these two brothers. The assumed 'ahistorical social vacuum' that Roy tries to contest in her writings brings us to the fact that nothing emerges without a context: the elder brother is a socio-economic construct, the younger brother too, but there is also a generational gap; the latter belongs to the Facebook generation; he is more aware, unlike his elder brother who appears to be a product of darkness. Deepak–meaning 'source of light' in Hindi–belongs to that 'one in every four' Dalits that Roy refers to, and the elder brother evidently belongs to the rest of the three; in other words, the 75 per cent of the populace. The younger brother incarnates the hope that is radiated by what Roy cites as the creation of Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI), an institution 'praised and patronised by big business and given plenty of play on television and big media because it helps to give the impression that as long as you work hard, capitalism is intrinsically egalitarian' (2016: 36).

The scholarly profession of the Brahmins has been overtaken by other castes. In a scene where a university researcher approaches Pathak for his history paper on Varanasi, he is not clearly shown from any caste; the audience is left to assume that he could be of any caste. So as some people advocating hard work and equality paraphrase it, there might be some mobility within the profession reserved for the high caste, but there is no taker of the 'impure' jobs that were reserved in the past for the ex-Untouchables.[14] Similarly, even if the corpse-burner's profession is more lucrative than a Brahmin selling objects related to Hindu prayers at the ghats, Pathak would never adopt the profession of a Dom. According to a conversation in the movie, a person is interested in buying Dom Raja's stake in pyre burning for one million rupees (almost 14,000$) (36: 28). The latter cannot sell it as he has no other occupation and thereby no other source of survival for his family of five members. On the other hand, Pathak hardly finds any clients and it is apparent that the household is functioning due to the precarious employment of his daughter. His economic condition dwindles further due to a non-productive debt: he is required to pay a bribe of three hundred thousand rupees to the police because his daughter has allegedly pushed a man to suicide. The three hundred thousand rupees bribe will let him buy the cooperation of the investigating police officer. Through the unproductive expense Pathak comes full circle in these modern times; according to an economic study made on the

situation of the peasants in India in the past, most of them were indebted due to unproductive expenses: marriage ceremonies and the ceremonies to celebrate the birth of a (male) child. These unproductive expenses not only filled the coffers of the Brahmins–a religious ceremony is impossible without the blessing of a Brahmin priest–but it also implied borrowing loans from the upper-caste money lenders resulting in, on most of the occasions, surrendering one's land to the money lender for the non-payments of debt. So while the upper castes benefitted from this non-productive debt, the lower-caste farmers paid it with all their possessions.

A Necessity of being Politically Alert?

In her reading of Premchand's book *Kafan* (The Shroud, 1936),[15] Toral Gajarawala posits the notion of fictionalised Dalits: the Dalits that we come across in fiction, short stories, movies, etc. are indeed 'not realistic Dalits' but '[the] literary Dalits are most easily read as Ghisus and Madhavs' (2011: 6), the two drunk Dalit characters in the short story who also are the objects of 'disdain and pity'. This perspective of a high-caste (Kayastha) writer creates a certain ambiguity in the treatment of issues related to caste that Andrew Dix underlined by implying that the vision of a movie maker born outside a certain socio-cultural—and economic, as is the case of Ghaywan—spectrum tend to modify the reality. According to Gajarawala, it goes even beyond modifying that reality as it ends up creating a reality; it redefines the reality. There are at least three characters who are created as objects of 'disdain and pity': Deepak's father, Shambhu Chacha (36: 12) (both drunks), and his elder brother, all three from the Dom caste. Parallelly, Pathak father and daughter, both of them Brahmins, are also the object of pity. The source of the latter's infliction is State oppression and corruption, a problem that has created havoc on mainly all post-colonial societies. Whereas in the case of the three Dom characters, the oppression is rooted in their own lives and in their respective pasts. Deepak's father is a drunk, and his brother holds grudges against everyone. Shambhu Chacha has been a victim of another gangrenous problem that finds its victims among the illiterate and destitute: overpopulation. Primarily dependent on manual labour, the poor tend to produce more children as more hands bring more resources.[16]

Deepak's drunk father and his brother are the creation of (visual) perspectives. In the absence of any caste atrocity against them in the movie, the onus of their uplift supposedly lies in their own hands. Deepak is positioned as a counterpoint to their situation, educated and partially unmindful of his caste. Whereas for the father, even the expressions like 'educated and cultured' are an insult (36:38) and he 'jokingly' feels offended when his son is addressed with these words. In terms of practicality and political alertness, Deepak appears to be a 'good (ex)-Untouchable' in the upper-caste perspective as he plays by the rules laid by the society for everyone who wants to attain homogeneousness.

On the surface level, this arrangement appears to be promoting classlessness among all castes, as they need to all work hard in order to assimilate a socio-economic system. The movie attains success in clearly delineating the pragmatic issue of human relationships and their acceptance in Indian society. Deepak's love is easily reciprocated by his upper-caste girlfriend, Shaalu, and yet Deepak fails to introduce her to his parents and show her his home. He even gets angry and frustrated when Shaalu insists on 'seeing his house', which eventually means meeting his parents. He does not want to expose his living condition and his occupation to anyone outside his sphere and appears to be as guilt-ridden with his situation as the young schoolboy in *Fandry*. But in this fit of anger, Deepak reveals his invisible reality—caste, unlike race, is not visible—and Shaalu does not express any anger but one can notice in her expressions—accentuated by the darkness surrounding them—that the whole societal burden has befallen her. In a telephonic

conversation later, Shaalu assures him of her unreserved support in spite of the fact that 'her parents would never agree to their relationship' (1: 08: 08). In order to evade that caste issue, Shaalu proposes him to study hard 'and get a job' in order to be 'understood' and 'accepted' by her parents. She encourages him further by telling him that she would 'elope with him' if everything fails. By stating this, Shaalu has again imposed her presence as a strong woman—and yet bound somehow to her parents' traditions and beliefs—and she thereby appears to be the woman in possession of the agency bestowed upon her by the movie makers. Staying back and getting married to Deepak is not a solution; Shaalu has her own facet of political alertness that is similarly predisposed to the caste system.

Deepak brims with smile, even though he is suddenly made politically alert towards his own situation in the sense that he would not/never be recognised as a normal human being with his caste. The only way to circumvent it is to get into the system of success through education in which—except for his intelligence and perseverance—he clearly lags behind due to factors like equal opportunity. Is it not a perception that has been touted by governments in India one after another: education and jobs as markers of equality? The movie was released in 2015 to international audiences who easily confuse caste and class, and the devices that are exploited in the movie to bring equality may break into the class system but they are not sufficient for ending the caste system. Dix quotes Louis Althusser:

> The reproduction of unequal social orders is achieved not only at the point of a gun or policeman's baton [this element is indeed present in the movie and serves as the oppression tool for the high caste Brahmins] but, more subtly, by the operations of a wide range of institutions [that Althusser] calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as . . . the arts (including cinema).
>
> *(2008: 229)*

Althusser's statement may not completely be in tune with this movie as *Masaan* is not at all a State-sponsored movie; yet it appears to be echoing the State's perspective on the uplift of the ex-Untouchables post India's liberalisation in 1991. Christophe Jaffrelot draws the politico-economic map of an 'India Shining'[17] in *L'Inde contemporaine* (2014), post-economic liberalisation, and establishes the fact that the poverty rate has indeed increased among the poorest in India. His data draw a comparison between two decades before and after the liberalisation and shows that India has now one of the highest number of millionaires in Asia, which is clearly an outcome of the economic prosperity of the ex-middle class and the result of the impetus provided by the investment made by the multinationals. Not all middle-class people have become millionaires, but a majority have benefitted from this trickle-down effects of the Global Capitalism. Thus remains the most downtrodden, amply incarnated by Deepak's father and brother, and reticently incarnated by Deepak himself, which according to Jaffrelot have become even poorer and backward. The women in the Dom community are portrayed as deprived of any agency and nearly faceless—even after two decades of liberalisation—as opposed to Shaalu Gupta and Devi Pathak, which clearly points towards the inability of accessing higher education for the ex-Untouchables. This portrayal of women in the Dom community mirrors their commonplace reality as they take the brunt of simultaneously being women and belonging to the community of ex-Untouchables.

Tabish Khair advances a thesis (2015: 402) that in spite of the fact that the middle class also inhabits a bad situation, 'The Indians still mired in dire conditions are mostly from the lowest castes, the untouchable castes and, in some parts of India, aboriginal backgrounds'. He further notes, 'The fact that a working democracy has enabled some "middling" castes to move up

and even enabled a handful of low-caste leaders to gain power is misleading'. At 35'29", while drinking alcohol with a co-worker, Deepak's father is addressed as Dom Raja (the Dom king), to which he replies 'what kind of Raja am I'? This remark is clearly a reminder to him that he is earning better than other pyre burners–who are mired in dire condition–and it is in a stark contrast to his real status in the society.

According to Khair, the caste system is 'is a homeostatic system—it allows some mobility but maintains its nature intact, partly by allowing controlled mobility within the system' (2015: 403). Shaalu Gupta's statement that her parents would never agree to this relationship is the most accurate statement in the Indian context. And what she says later in the same conversation, that Deepak must get a job, and he might eventually be accepted in the family fold, is at best a wishful thinking of a lover in an Indian movie, and at its worst it is the State narrative, for which the movie appears to be falling for this aeonian conjecture, clearly failing to acknowledge the reality of untouchability that the ex-Untouchables have to live with in their daily lives.

Conclusion

In the course of the movie, both Deepak and Devi endure losses that are irreplaceable; the death of their near ones break them to the core, and they suffer the additional guilt of being responsible for it. The movie ends with a song *Bhor Bhor* (The dawn), pointing towards a new beginning for both these survivors of loss. They take a boat from a ghat in order to go to the Sangam (a confluence of Ganges and Jumna rivers at Allahabad), which points towards a reconciliation not just with their individual but also their collective pasts. The everlasting caste tragedy appears to put in a nutshell all human tragedies, and in a larger sense, the movie reconciles with the term Dalit that encapsulates all oppressed, downtrodden, and broken people, as are the principal characters in the movie. The message remains deliberately ambiguous: is it not the beauty of Art? The differences of their castes appear to be blurring, but not effacing, as Ambedkar would have desired, becoming marginally irrelevant in front of that vastness of the river Ganges, a symbol of paganism, and a satirical wink towards Hinduism in the movie.

Notes

1 According to the 2001 census: 'In urban population, the literacy rate is 79.9 % at the national level. Many States/UTs have achieved literacy rate higher than the national average. These are Kerala, Lakshadweep, Mizoram, Goa, and Delhi, which have achieved literacy rate in the range of 88 % to 96 %. Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh rank in the last five states'. http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/literacy_and_level_of_education.aspx. Accessed on March 10, 2020.
2 This statement refers to what M. K. Gandhi wrote in his Gujarati journal *Navajivan* in 1921.
3 This analogy refers to the position of Ambedkar towards Hinduism, which he considered as a system against the tenets of a universal religion: Christianity and Islam. These two religions allow proselytism, and as the colonial and American experience have shown, converting human being to a universal religion also catered to their exploitative economic needs, which Brahminism did not require. A system like Brahminism does not need proselytism, because it has Untouchability that comes with a hierarchy-based exploitation and oppression.
4 Dix is referring to the movies themed on the British working-class made by movie makers coming outside of the same socio-cultural spectrum and thereby unable to completely grasp the ground reality.
5 https://theprint.in/opinion/6-things-an-anti-caste-woke-must-be-mindful-of-in-ayushmann-khurranas-new-film-article-15/244422/: this article in *the Print* by Dilip Mandal summed up how in Modern India we are let to imagine that the caste issues are only confined to Indian villages and they have no relevance to the modernity that offers a city life. At its best, the caste issues are dealt with a well-positioned naivety as is the case of the movie *Article 15* on which this article is based: the

protagonist is shown to be unaware of his caste and the castes around him in spite of his good intentions. Accessed on March 6, 2020.

6 'Ḍom, also called Ḍomra, or Ḍomb, widespread and versatile caste of scavengers, musicians, vagabonds, traders, and, sometimes, weavers in northern India and the Himalayas. Some scholars regard the Ḍoms as originating from an aboriginal tribe. They list seven endogamous subcastes. The Ḍoms are completely outside Brahminic control. They have their own deities and an elaborate demonology'. www.britannica.com/topic/Dom-caste. Accessed on March 29, 2020.

7 www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/09/lust-in-translation-arrival-of-the-love-hotel-divides-india, according to this news report published in *the Guardian*, as late as in 2018 the police were raiding hotels to arrest unmarried college-going couples before calling their parents. Accessed on March 29, 2020.

8 'The second part of a Brahmin's name shall be a word implying happiness, of a Kshatriya's (a word) implying protection, of a Vaishya's a term expressive of thriving and of a Shudra's an expression denoting service'. (Manu II. 32.) https://velivada.com/2017/05/31/casteist-quotes-verses-manusmriti-law-book-hindus/ Accessed on the 27th of May 2020.

9 https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/when-dalit-filmmakers-embrace-their-identity-and-reclaim-their-stories-5209972/. Accessed on March 20, 2020.

10 'Non-Brahmins can also be temple priests, says SC' www.hindustantimes.com/india/non-brahmins-can-also-be-temple-priests-says-sc/story-w9YWkexQMpqzPvV2GD28dN.html. Accessed on May 29, 2020.

11 In his lecture delivered in 1967, Foucault posited the notion of Heterotopia as opposed to Utopia. 'In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, that is, there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women.' https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/. Accessed on November 27, 2020. This concept was used by Dickens Leonard in his article 'Spectacle spaces: Production of caste in recent Tamil films' in order to depict the notion of 'other; a deviation from the norms and who should be barricaded within the confines in order to protect the purity of other castes'.

12 Movies like *Pariyerum Perumal* deal with this otherness at the institutions of higher learning like a law school.

13 After the publication of the *God of Small Things* in 1997, it became a common knowledge that even among the Communist parties of India who took pride in their idea of social equality, there were no Dalits in the Politburo and no Communist party heads either; this article from *Scroll* confirms this reality: https://scroll.in/article/904775/continuing-indifference-of-communist-leaders-towards-caste-discrimination-in-india-is-worrisome: 'Communist leaders continue to harm India by claiming they recognise class but not caste.'

14 Roy quotes this information from a 2013 Indian Railway directorate report: in spite of 'it being illegal the Indian Railways is one of the biggest employers of manual scavengers. . . . This shit, which must amount to several tonnes a day, is cleaned by hand, without gloves or any protective equipment, exclusively by Dalits' (2016: 36).

15 Premchand, pseudonym of Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, is considered as a towering figure in Hindi literature. He wrote novels and short stories in the early twentieth century.

16 https://thewire.in/rights/population-explosion-rakesh-sinha-bill, In this article Sarojini, Nadimpally argues that the absence of better medical condition, contraceptives, and equal political and economic opportunities are the primary factors of having more children among the SC and ST women.

17 It is in reference to the poll campaign of the incumbent BJP government in India in 2004. In general terms, it refers to the economic optimism generated through a commotion surrounding the idea of a progressing India, an idea borrowed from the Nehruvian optimism of the 1950s.

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27

Beyond Narratives of Modernity, Pain, and Pathos

Dalit Aesthetic in *Kabali* and *Kaala*

Reju George Mathew

Introduction

Films enjoy an important status in the contemporary world, providing entertainment and occasions of social gathering and exchange. It has grown beyond a mere platform for propaganda, social transformation, and artistic expressions, making viewing a social and often a personal act with online streaming, like in the case of Netflix or Amazon Prime. The increase in the number of dedicated shows for online streaming along with custom-made films releasing exclusively on the online platforms can be understood as symptomatic of the increased smart viewership on the go. On the other hand, multiplexes and cinema halls with increased sophistications have revolutionised the cinema-going experience beyond acts of fandom or appreciation of art. The socialising experience that cinema-going provides, along with the comforts (reclining seats and even gourmet dining), has reconfigured to an extent the role of films as agents of social change.

Tamil films have always been explicit in their portrayal of caste hierarchy in the society. But, very often, especially after the 1990s, it has largely emphasised the caste differences, especially through its glorification of upper-caste identity, as in the classic case of *Thevar Magan*, a 1992 film written by Kamal Haasan,[1] who also dons the role of the protagonist, a Thevar[2] caste man, and who 'realises' his role as the sickle-wielding patron of the villagers. This could be understood as the filmic birth of the assumptions about and portrayals of Thevars as a martial community. It also began the Madurai formula films with 3Ms—murder, mayhem, and Madurai (Karthikeyan 2011). Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, explains the male gaze in classical films through her essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.

> The scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms, which this cinema has played on. The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form−illusionistic narrative film.
>
> *(2009: 721)*

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Mulvey talks of an alignment of the gazes of the camera, actors and audience, all performing the demands of a patriarchal order. Drawing parallels to this, one can argue that a 'caste gaze' evolved in Tamil films from the 1940s with mythological films like *Markandeya* (1935) and *Prahalada* (1939), through the 1970s with films like *En Magan* (1974), into the 1990s with films like *Thevar Magan* (1992) making it impossible for the characters, camera, and audience to break away from the caste norms of the society. At the same time, there were films like *Kizhakke Pogum Rail* (1978) directed by Bharathiraja[3] and *Alai Osai* (1985) directed by Sirumugai Ravi that had Dalit protagonists. While the former film shows how the protagonist and his lover struggle against caste violence and escape to the city with a scene where the protagonist remembers Ambedkar's struggles, the latter film has the protagonist and his friends violently retaliate against the atrocities of the upper-caste landlord and his associates. *Kaala* (2018) and *Kabali* (2016), both written and directed by Pa. Ranjith, on the other hand, are relatively recent films that engage with the caste question in more nuanced ways and from an Ambedkarite perspective, often claimed openly by the director. Before analysing Ranjith as an Ambedkarite film maker of our times, one needs to see how similar or dissimilar these two films are, and how Ranjith subverts the caste gaze using the star image of Rajinikanth. By deliberately portraying the protagonists as Dalits and using the mass-hero appeal and punch dialogues of Rajinikanth, the director attempts to align the audience in line with the Dalit struggles. The attempt is not to invoke pity or solidarity but to have the Dalit characters depicted in all their complexities, with action scenes as well as contemplations on various aspects of Dalit lives in different contexts. This is a departure from the earlier depiction of Dalit heroes in the M. G. R.[4] films which were acceptable to the caste society as those heroes sought justice within the moral and economic system of the upper castes, thereby legitimising the system (Pandian 1989: 65).[5] M. S. S. Pandian further distinguishes these M. G. R. heroes as attempts to replace the Dalit ballad heroes who have always been celebrated for their radical ways of challenging the caste and sexual norms of the society. Through portraying Rajinikanth as an assertive Dalit hero, Ranjith can be seen as attempting to reconstitute the Dalit hero image, breaking it away from the society's caste norms legitimised through films. Ranjith's films also take the struggles of the Dalit lives away from the rural setting as was the case in most of the films mentioned earlier and set them largely in the urban space, thereby questioning the depiction of a caste-free modern heaven in the earlier films.

Kabali, the Dalit Gangster Turned Philanthropist

In his introductory scene in the Malaysian prison, Kabali is shown as reading from Y. B. Satyanarayana's biographical book *My Father Baliah*, a book that talks of the struggles of three generations of Dalits from Telangana. Shyma talks of how this has increased the readership of this book, as accounted in the *Goodreads* website and how there is a recovery of the realm of the 'Dalit Literary' by mainstream reading public.[6] While in prison, Kabali coordinates the activities of his philanthropist organisation named 'Free Life Foundation', which works to 'free' the society of certain evils amongst the youth like drug abuse, gangsterism as well as dropping out from schools. These matured actions from the erstwhile violent man could be attributed to the knowledge and vision he developed reading about the struggles of the depressed communities. The notion of freedom and patronage is further challenged by Kabali, who frees a caged bird in a pet shop, with the assertion 'Let the bird decide whether to fly or fall dead. Your compassion is worse than its death'.[7] Kabali is of the opinion that one should not judge the merit of a bird and keep it imprisoned, even if

it is to protect it. This can also be understood as a criticism of the caste order that assigns roles for people based on their castes, denying equal opportunities for all, often based on the traditional casteist prejudice against one's merit. One could associate this assertion for agency and choice as an answer to M. K. Gandhi's dismissal of Dalit conversions as lacking in 'understanding' (qtd. in Barua 2009: 108),[8] because the Free Life Foundation displays the images of many social reformers including Ambedkar, Buddha, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Nelson Mandela, with a curious inclusion of Swami Vivekananda and an obvious omission of Gandhi. Gandhi, the half-naked fakir, is again invoked when Kabali says that 'there's a lot of politics in Gandhi going shirtless and Ambedkar donning a suit'. Kabali is shown to have developed a liking for suits through the course of the film. This probably raises the question of social capital, as to who can afford social respect in spite of the clothes they wear. Regardless of his meagre clothing, Gandhi's caste status and role in the Congress helped him to evolve as the 'Father of the Nation', while Ambedkar faced and fought various discriminations including in places like haircutting salons, hotels, temples, and offices (Junghare 1988: 94)[9] regardless of the superlative achievements he had had as an academic and economist. One should also remember the restrictions that were in place on the dressing of Dalits in India, and this would probably account for the expensive suits, sunglasses, watches, and cars for Kabali. The social and cultural capital enjoyed by an upper caste in spite of their economic standard or choice of lifestyle is what retains caste as an important aspect in discussions on dignity and rights.

Kabali is, thus, an obvious departure from the lower caste, who was always a subservient sidekick of the villain in old Tamil films, as his own punch dialogue claims in the early part of the film. He is one who asserts his identity as a Tamilian and fights for equal wages with the Chinese in the Malaysian plantations. The history of indentured labour is also invoked in the film when Kabali recollects how his grandfather came to Malaysia from Tindivanam in Tamil Nadu. Indian Tamil indentured labourers were recruited for the plantations in Malaysia (then Malaya) in the last decades of the nineteenth century under the provisions of India Act of 1877.

> The abject poverty and destitution caused by the famines in rural south India greatly facilitated the flow of emigrant labour to Malaya. The south Indian Adi Dravida labour force took to emigration, possibly as a substitute mechanism which granted them both security and maintenance under an ambience of captive patronage. The migration of south Indian lower castes became much more pronounced towards the end of the nineteenth century. Frequent occurrences of famines and epidemics resulting in wide scale devastation and loss of human lives forced greater miseries on the subordinate groups of rural south India. In such situations, the 'untouchables' and other marginal groups in the society felt that their only hope lay in emigration to distant lands.
>
> *(Basu 2004: 186–187)*[10]

The hope of emancipation in the foreign land is shown to have gone wrong for many in Malaysia. When Kabali leads an agitation to the white manager of the plantation, he declares, 'We are not slaves. We are employees.' This declaration is against the casteist societal norms that drove his grandfather and his people out of Tamil Nadu as indentured labourers and also against the manipulative management in the plantations. They have come to Malaysia (then Malaya) to escape slavery and untouchability and hence, will not succumb to any such threat in the foreign land.[11] One can hear Ranjith's call for action and solidarity through the words of Tamilnesan, Kabali's mentor.

> Cry! Lament aloud! Scream in the middle of the road. Let people hear it. He'll pretend not to hear. Die screaming if required. At one point, he'll have to listen and react. This protest is not for one man, not for one family. It is a voice of dissent for people belonging to an entire race.

Ranjith's attempt seems to call for a systemic change for the marginalised in the society. Kabali attempts to transform his immediate community and society through his philanthropic activities. Education is the means towards this end, an emancipatory project as celebrated from the colonial times. His insistence on progress through education and increased reluctance in violent engagements with opponents takes the trajectory as set by modernity. At the same time, the violence that Kabali and his group engages in to end the threat of Tony Lee and certain Tamils who go against the common good of the Tamils in Malaysia seems to underline the unruly nature of postmodern times where larger schemes of development and progress fail.

Kaala, the Dalit Social Leader

Kaala, on the other hand, highlights the need for unity and solidarity amongst the Muslims, Dalits, and the Left. Ranjith's use of various colours in the climax scene cannot but represent these plural identities. *Kaala* raises important questions about rights of people over land and governmental plans for development. One can easily hear the echoes of Dalit land struggles in the plot. Hari Dada, the villain of the film, represents everything that is conventionally accepted as good. Starting with the white clothes and dream of making a Pure Mumbai, he stands against the migrant Tamils and their slum in Dharavi. One cannot ignore the similarities between Hari Dada, his party and symbols, and certain political parties like the Shiv Sena,[12] a major political party in Maharashtra, that have acted in Mumbai against migrant workers, especially Tamils. Bal Thackeray, the founder of Shiv Sena, had used the unrest of the recession period in 1960s to promote anti-South Indian, primarily anti-Tamil sentiments in Mumbai (Weinstein 94).[13] The lion on Hari Dada's banners do remind one of the tiger on Shiv Sena banners. Thus, the resistance to the Tamil migrants in Dharavi as shown in the film is not merely imaginary but has strong historic and political relevance.

Ranjith's choice of Dharavi as the locale to unfold the Dalit struggle for land is not mere coincidence. As one of Asia's largest slums, Dharavi has witnessed large-scale migration of Tamil Dalits, as opposed to other areas of Mumbai like Matunga, which has had several Tamil and Kerala Brahmin settlers (Rao 2013: 173).[14] Interestingly, Nikhil Rao argues that when Bal Thackeray spoke against the South Indians and argued for jobs for Maharashtrians, who are the sons of the soil, he meant the upper caste and the educated middle class from Matunga who had monopolised the white-collar jobs (2013: 186). Rao finds historic evidence that many of the Tamilians who had settled in Dharavi were from the Tirunelveli district of the then-Madras Presidency (2013: 187). Thus, when Ranjith creates the character of Vengaiyan, Kaala's father who had migrated to Dharavi from Tirunelveli, it is not merely fictional but inspired from historic migrations of Tamils. While the Tamil Dalit migrants and their generations in Dharavi as shown in the film have historic roots, the violence as shown against them could be fictional, inspired by violence against Dalits by right-wing groups and parties in various parts of India. The main plot of the film includes the attempts by Hari Dada to occupy Dharavi and evict its residents for a development project named 'Pure Mumbai' and the ways in which Kaala, along with his followers, resists those attempts. When Kaala asserts that they have rights over Dharavi and that the place was made by their ancestors as well as them, one needs to understand it in the historic context of the efforts of the Tamil migrant labourers who toiled for developing

Matunga in the early decades of the twentieth century. These labourers were later moved to Dharavi, while Matunga developed into a middle-class locality (Rao 2013: 187–188). Thus, when Kaala and his supporters in Dharavi fight the displacement plans put forth by Hari Dada, it is a fight for dignity and rights over a land they have struggled to make their lives on. Kaala asserts the organic relation that people of Dharavi have with land by juxtaposing it against Hari Dada's notion of land as power.

Kaala also questions Hari Dada for his association of good-evil, pure-impure binaries with white-black colours and claims that black colour symbolises hard work. He further questions certain practices with feudal, casteist undertones that establish inequality, like touching another's feet in reverence. It is quite evident that Kaala wishes to promote the modern dictums like equality and dignity, as sanctioned by the constitution. But, he makes no mistake in asserting that while they follow the laws, they would not hesitate to protest against any law that oppresses them. What we witness here is the rise of the political Dalit who is vocal about the struggles for land, dignity, and equality.

Ranjith offers images of Buddha and Ambedkar in many frames and also brings forth the postmodern plurality of experiences and resistances through his depiction of a Dalit MLA who gets corrupt and a Dalit policeman who publicly announces his solidarity with the resistance in Dharavi. Thus, while calling for action and solidarity, Ranjith represents the plurality and ruptures within the narrative of modernity with his varied characters. Some of them are Kaala's son Lenin and his friend Puyal, who believe in the Left ideology and its revolutionary potential; a Muslim character, who seems communal in some instances; Zareena, another Muslim character from Dharavi whose notion of progress and development evolves despite the training and experience she has had; and Sivjai Rao Gaikwad, a policeman who expresses solidarity for the protests against Pure Mumbai project.

Pa. Ranjith, the Postmodern Ambedkarite Film Maker

With only six films to his credit as a director, Ranjith has already made his mark as a socially conscious film maker who is spirited about his portrayal of caste, anti-caste slogans, and images of Dalit social reformers in his films. Ranjith believes in bringing his Ambedkarite politics to mainstream Tamil films (Rajendran 2017),[15] thus creating a Dalit Popular.

> *Kaala* and the earlier films especially *Kabali* conceptualize a Dalit Popular which historicise Dalit memories and speak and visualize the language of a politicized Dalit. It is a popular that is imagined through/in cinema but goes beyond it.
>
> *(Shyma: 2)*[16]

In a large country like India, films play a crucial role in the culture industry to formulate, and hence, manipulate public opinion and the perception of the various social identities that contest each other to establish hegemonic power over the 'others'. The employment of Tamil films to this end has evolved as a privilege of the economically and socially powerful groups, who made films glorifying their own communities and castes, as mentioned in the cases of few films at the beginning of this chapter, or as ideological state apparatuses to aid the Dravidian ideology in the propagandist films of Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK) party. Thus, to make possible a shift from the familiar upper-caste locale in Tamil films and Dravidian propaganda, Ranjith adopts several tactics to bring to life Tamil Dalit lived experiences. The French Marxist theoretician Louis Althusser had identified several institutions as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), that may not be part of the public sphere, but private, and would contribute immensely to the spread

of the dominant/state ideology amongst people. He had identified the press, radio, television, etc. under the category of 'communications ISA' and literature, arts, sports, etc. under the category of 'cultural ISA' (Althusser 1971: 143). When we may add films and social media to the list of contemporary ISAs, it was an obvious attempt of subversion from the Dravidian leaders to employ films to facilitate the spread of their ideology. A classic example of such propagandist uses of films by DMK party leaders like C. N. Annadurai[17] and M. Karunanidhi[18] is *Parasakthi* (1952) that starred Sivaji Ganeshan and raised several questions in tandem with the politics of DMK. M. S. S. Pandian identifies even a regression in the politics of the early Dravidian movement when it gets represented in the film, 'from challenges to the retrograde cultural givens of the Tamil society to a compromise with such cultural givens' (1991: 769).[19] For Pandian, the shift of the Dravidian movement towards electoral politics could be attributed as largely responsible for this watering down of ideological stands against religion and their stand in favour of women's rights. The use of the notion of chastity of women in the film, though earlier dismissed by the movement, and several comments calling for 'piousness' in religious practice, as opposed to a dismissal of religion, are cited as examples of this regression in the film.

In *Kabali*, Ranjith brings to discussion the history of Tamils, especially Tamil Dalits, in the context of the rubber and palm plantations in Malaysia, whereas in *Kaala*, the history of Tamil Dalit migrants in Dharavi becomes the context. Ranjith's films under consideration in this chapter can be termed as creating a counter-hegemonic space, a Dalit Popular who effectively employs the stardom of Rajinikanth, taxing on his portrayals of the poor and the marginalised in films like *Annaamalai* (1992), *Muthu* (1995), and *Baashha* (1995). Rajinikanth, popularly known as Rajni, enjoys the title 'Super Star' in Tamil film industry, first given to him after *Bairavi* (1978), his first film as solo hero, and on the title card in *Annaamalai* (1992). Rajni is a 'mass hero', with the masses following him passionately, and his charisma and popularity has led to at least 70,000 fan clubs for him in 2012 (Gerritsen 2012: 15),[20] including the ones in Malaysia and Japan (Srivatsan 2018).[21] By having Rajni play Dalit heroes in his films, Ranjith has questioned the comic and villainous stereotypes about Dalits in Tamil films. On the other hand, unlike many other films with upper-caste heroes, Ranjith's heroes are not infallible. They make mistakes, learn from them, and aspire to social change through education as collaborative community activities. This is clear from both the films through the importance ascribed to community-based learning, service, and transformation, over single-handed acts of heroism.

Ranjith's films also attempt to break away from the modern, humanist notions about a linear development of communities and social roles. Thus, we have Dalit characters who are not merely present to invoke pity but who are active agents in their lives, who live as varied lives as lives can get. These Dalit characters are, hence, a departure, even from the celebrated 'realistic' portrayals of caste in films that generally invoke pity and call for a reformation of the assumed upper-caste viewer's mind, in tune with the Gandhian notion of fighting caste. At the outset, both *Kabali* and *Kaala* look like typical Rajinikanth films with his style and superhero-like performance. But these films are more likely to be remembered as Ranjith's films than that of Rajinikanth's because of the manner in which it has represented Dalit-Bahujan lives and politics. A closer look at some of the themes in the films would reveal this. Both Kabaleeshwaran aka Kabali and Karikalan aka. Kaala are names that speak of the Tamil origins of the characters, in spite of their nationality or location. Setting *Kabali* in Malaysia and *Kaala* in Dharavi, Ranjith reminds one of the numerous exoduses that Tamil Dalits have historically undertaken. At the same time, the characters in these films are not just portrayed with their regional, linguistic backgrounds. They are Dalits, Bahujans as well as Muslims, with a consciousness of their struggles. While Kabali's history is that of indentured labour in the rubber and palm plantations in Malaysia, Kaala's is that of struggles and establishment of the Dharavi slum. Ranjith brings forth

the historic consciousness of his characters, not just through dialogues and animated flashbacks but also through certain pauses and casual shots in cinematography. These include several scenes in *Kabali* that show the images of socio-political and religious leaders like Ambedkar, Buddha, Nelson Mandela, and Che Guevara in the background as well as those in *Kaala* that show tiles that mark streets in Dharavi with the images of Ambedkar and Buddha on them. Even when these images of the past leaders are not shown in close-up shots or explicitly engaged with, their presence in these scenes implies how important they are for the collective consciousness of the community.

Reimagining the Dalit Aesthetic in Films as Critique of Modernity

Ranjith's attempt is not to define precisely what 'Dalit Aesthetic' needs to be but to depict the plurality in the narratives, looking for intersections that make social reformation possible. He refuses to be subtle in his critique of the society but attempts to capture the popular using its own icons, Rajinikanth in this case. There are also suggestions and depictions of newer, contemporary forms of Dalit expressions like the hip-hop youth in both the films. It is the reluctance to have a black-and-white characterisation that allows Kaala to stay empathetic towards Zareena, his lost love, and Kabali to kill Lee, his Chinese rival.

Both the films witness the rise of the female characters as active agents who fight, kill, and hurl abuses. In addition to attempts to demystify the white-black binary and its association with the good-evil binary, Ranjith strategically portrays a 'fair' heroine, Zareena, who fails to understand the villainy of Hari Dada, and the dark-skinned Selvi, Kaala's wife who stands by his side in the struggles. The narrative of Ram-Ravana battle as the backdrop of the fight between Hari Dada's goons and Kaala's associates unsettles the viewer as it brings to contradiction the traditional hero-villain dichotomy with that of the good Ram–evil Ravana. Thus, Kaala threatening not to spare even the Gods of the upper castes if they take the land away is revolutionary to its core. Ranjith successfully establishes the need for the Dalit aesthetic to grow beyond the pain-pathos narrative as was traditionally represented in social realist and 'sympathetic' writings by those like Mulk Raj Anand[22] and represent the postmodern, politicised Dalit with varied histories, struggles, and aspirations. The attempt is to counter-hegemonise the popular in films and claim spaces not through sympathy but as a right. Moreover, this attempt is crucial for an informed Ambedkarite film maker like Ranjith.

> Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, Said and Chomsky have all addressed the role of the intellectual in reframing the society. Where they succumb to the laws of the market (and become, as Bourdieu puts it, *heteronomous*), or where they capitulate to the temptation of the media, they legitimise and sub-serve the prevailing hegemonic forces. But when they do not lend themselves to be co-opted by the market and position themselves, consciously and concertedly, against the current, they may well reverse it.
>
> *(Kumar 2011: 40)*[23]

Ranjith's endeavour is, thus, to reverse the caste hegemony that has been established in Tamil films in spite of the attempts by the Dravidian movement to counter-hegemonise it. Thus, employing the icons and tools provided to him by Tamil film industry, Ranjith ventures to redefine the figure of the filmic Dalit. In his interview with the *Wire*, Ranjith claims that his films are informed by the actions and politics of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. His notion of resistance against casteism and his portrayal of Dalit characters take inspiration from Ambedkar's struggles against M. K. Gandhi and the Congress.[24] Thus, Ranjith wishes to move radically away from

the stereotypes on Dalit characters in films—either as villains or as pitiable beings incapable of agency (Singaravel 2020).[25] The politically and socially vocal Dalit whom Ranjith portrays identifies with the contemporary struggles and realities of Dalit lives and even attempts solidarities across several marginalised ideologies, communities, and identities, symbolised by various colours in *Kaala*, blue (Ambedkarite), black (Periyarist),[26] and red (Left). Ranjith envisions a Dalit political and social struggle that goes hand in hand with the Periyarist and Left movements and focuses on education, sanitation, land rights, etc. for the marginalised communities (Singaravel 2020). Thus, the Dalit Popular he wishes is one which balances the private and the public, and the personal and the community concerns of the individual.

The portrayals of Rajni in most of his 1990s super-hit films relied largely on his larger-than-life image that evolved through his hard-hitting punch dialogues, style as well as his struggling, honest human image. Ranjith employs this backdrop of his star persona to remould the Dalit Popular as one with agency in the socio-political context of Dalit lives, thereby declaring aloud that the struggles are not merely personal but community related as well. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Ranjith explains why he uses commercial films by Rajni to put forth his criticism of casteism in the society instead of alternate films, as was the case traditionally. He claims that commercial films are better to reach the masses and asserts that the mainstream needs to be democratic, available to Dalits as well (Ramanujam 2019).[27] Ranjith's attempt to create the Dalit Popular is, thus, not merely based on the ideals of commercial films, but inspired by the writings of Ambedkar, Periyar, and Marx. This Dalit Popular can facilitate social change at various levels and is definitely not merely a pitiable symbol of pain and pathos. Ranjith attempts to tap the revolutionary potential of films to 'upset pre-existing cultural boundaries and to reallocate previously ghettoised cultural practices followed from the unprecedented ways in which it brought together the elites and the masses' (Pandian 1996: 950).[28] It is definitely this potential of films to challenge the social norms that had made the Tamil elite suspicious of Tamil films in its early years. Thus, by reworking the caste gaze, which was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Ranjith attempts to develop a subaltern or Dalit gaze to formulate a Dalit Popular that strategically employs even the fan *bhakti* towards Rajni as a mass hero, 'Tamil cinema's first unabashedly black-skinned star, a rude eruption of reality into an industry dominated by painted faces' (Prasad 2009: 68).[29] The scope of such a Dalit gaze and a subsequent Dalit Popular to transform the political and social equations in Tamil Nadu does not seem negligible given the role films have played in this region.

The Dalit Aesthetic as put forth through the films of Ranjith is also reflective of the ways in which Dalit politics, activists, and academicians have been attempting a critique of *The Hindu*, nationalist as well as communist understandings of modernity. It is against the promises of emancipation as proposed by the secular-modern with its overt emphasis on 'the abstract, unmarked citizen—Universal Man—or the equally abstract "working class", as the subject of history' (Nigam 2000: 4256).[30] This also questions the possibilities of an 'objective' history to be written by a scientist or a sympathiser from a distance. The crisis was also about the way in which traditions and modernity interacted in India to accommodate several aspects of tradition, especially of casteism. Nigam claims that Ambedkar's turn towards Buddhism was indeed an attempt to claim a modern subjectivity to institute a cultural memory that goes beyond the abstract universalism of the upper castes (2000: 4262). The universal claims of modernity in India, thus, remove specific histories and memories to sanitise the violence of casteism in the past as mere class struggles while staying oblivious to the privileges of the upper caste. Gopal Guru, on the other hand, talks of the need for Dalits doing theory in social sciences as 'a social necessity in order to become the subject of their own thinking rather than becoming the object

of somebody's else's thinking' (2002: 5007–5008).[31] He further argues that such attempts by Dalits to theorise would help 'remove the cultural hierarchies that tend to divide social science practice into theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras' (2002: 5009). Dalit lives and experiences are, hence, not to be mere subjects of enquiry in social sciences or films. Considering the negotiations of tradition and modernity as well as the museumisation of Dalit lives in Tamil films with narrations of pain and pathos in its rural settings, it is not surprising that a Dalit aesthetic can emerge only through deliberate retellings and ruptures, thus constituting a Dalit gaze.

Notes

1 Kamal Haasan is an award-winning actor who primarily works in Tamil films. He is also a director, screenplay writer, producer, singer, and lyricist. A left sympathiser for ages, he launched his political party *Makkal Needhi Maiam* in 2018.
2 Thevar and Mukkulathor are collective names given to *Agamudayar, Kallar*, and *Maravar* social groups in Tamil Nadu. Though categorised as Other Backward Castes (OBC), Thevars have traditionally been land-owning communities with a history of conflicts with the Dalits.
3 Bharathiraja is an Indian film director who is known primarily for his realistic Tamil films about rural life and complex interactions between various castes.
4 M. G. Ramachandran, popularly known as M. G. R., was a Tamil actor who later turned politician and served as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. His films have portrayed several lower-class and subaltern characters after the initial years of mythological characters.
5 www.jstor.org/stable/4395134. Accessed on December 14, 2020.
6 www.payyanurcollege.ac.in/shyma.pdf. Accessed on October 10, 2020.
7 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.
8 http://jhs.oxfordjournals.org/content/2/1/97.full.pdf+html. Accessed on March 13, 2020.
9 www.jstor.org/stable/1178254. Accessed on December 22, 2019.
10 http://hdl.handle.net/10603/155303. Accessed on December 24, 2019.
11 Indians were a major labour force in Malaysia in the nineteenth century as well as the first half of the twentieth century. Though indentured labourers in the rubber, coconut, oil-palm, tea estates, etc. formed the majority of the Indian population, it also included influential money lending and business communities like the Chettiars of South India.
12 Shiv Sena is a regional political party founded in 1966 by Bal Thackeray and operates primarily in the state of Maharashtra. The party is (in)famous for its right-wing and extreme nationalist stance, demand for preferential treatment of Maharashtrians in the state etc. The party broke its long-term association with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2019 to form the government in Maharashtra in alliance with the Indian National Congress (INC) and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).
13 www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt6wr7v5. Accessed on July 16, 2020.
14 www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt32bcz9. Accessed July 16, 2020.
15 www.thenewsminute.com/article/if-it-s-war-enemy-must-be-fought-pa-ranjith-politics-films-caste-and-rajini-72074. Accessed on December 15, 2019.
16 www.payyanurcollege.ac.in/shyma.pdf. Accessed on December 15, 2019.
17 Popularly known as 'Anna', Annadurai was a Dravidian leader and the first Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. He was initially associated with Periyar E. V. Ramasamy and Dravidar Kazhagam before launching Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party. A well-known writer and orator, he worked for social justice and against superstitions, often through literary works as well.
18 He was a DMK leader who served five times as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Prior to his entry in politics, he was a well-known screenwriter, popularly known as 'Kalaignar'(artist).
19 www.jstor.org/stable/4397433. Accessed on December 14, 2020.
20 https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2959768/view. Accessed on March 18, 2020.
21 www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/rajinikanth-birthday-special/article25723795.ece. Accessed on March 17, 2020.
22 Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) was a pioneer of Indian Writing in English and is known for his engagement with casteism and its effect on the 'poor'. His noted works include *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936).

23 www.jstor.com/stable/23076330. Accessed on March 13, 2020.
24 For a more elaborate understanding of Ambedkar's resistance to Gandhi's appropriation of Dalit concerns and the actions of the Congress, refer to Volume 9 of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches titled *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* available on the website of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. www.mea.gov.in/books-writings-of-ambedkar.htm.
25 https://thewire.in/film/pa-ranjith-interview-social-justice-films. Accessed on June 23, 2020.
26 Periyarists are followers of E.V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar. He was a radical social activist and politician, who founded the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. He is noted for his work against caste and gender inequalities in Tamil Nadu.
27 www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/caste-has-followed-me-from-childhood-pa-ranjith/article28199380.ece. Accessed on February 20, 2020.
28 www.jstor.com/stable/4404028. Accessed on December 14, 2020.
29 www.jstor.org/stable/40279290. Accessed on December 12, 2020.
30 www.jstor.org/stable/4410008. Accessed on December 12, 2020.
31 www.jstor.org/stable/26380327. Accessed on December 9, 2020.

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28

Caste, Coast, and Christianity in Kerala

Analysing the Visual Representation of Latin Catholics in *Ee.Ma.Yau*.

Grace Mariam Raju

Coastal villages in Kerala consist of fisherfolk communities that are dependent on fishing directly or indirectly. Although the state ensures the highest quality of life as measured by human development indicators, coastal communities remain disenchanted with development-induced change as they did not benefit from developmental policies (Punathil 2019: 164).[1] Disenchantment with state-sponsored development projects results in the systematic segregation of shore communities from other communities. In Kerala, the shore communities consist of people from the Araya, Velan, Mukkuvar, and Marakkar castes.[2] Since the fisherfolk was considered to be of the lowest status group, the coastal belt of Kerala was never occupied by the upper-caste Hindus. One of the earliest historical shreds of evidence can be found in the journal of Francis Day, who wrote about Cochin. While describing the topography of Cochin, he says that 'long sandy maritime territory' is occupied by fishermen and is attached to a road that is often used by 'low caste men.' This area is not inhabited by a Brahman or Namboodiri, unless attached to a palace (Day 1863: 2). The inherent caste system isolated coastal villages as places that were mainly occupied by people who were involved in fishing and other related occupations. Consequently, the shore communities were categorised as the lowest ranking group within social stratification groups.[3] Since shore communities are indigenous groups who have been traditionally associated with water, this social group possesses a distinct culture, language, value systems, and occupation that are different from agrarian societies. This chapter examines the contemporary Malayalam film *Ee.Ma.Yau.*, which depicts the life of Latin Catholics[4] who majorly belong to Mukkuvar caste, to understand the politics of caste mediated through the geographical space of coast in Kerala, especially among the Christian community.

The legacy of Malayalam cinema begins with the film *Vigathakumaran* (1928), which had P. K. Rosy as the first Dalit heroine of Malayalam film industry performing the role of a Nair woman. Rosy was not only criticised for essaying the character of an upper-caste woman but she was eventually ousted from the industry as well (Venkatesan and James 2017: 48). The mainstream films in Kerala focused on poignant depictions of Nair, Namboodiri, and Syrian Christian households that resulted in the projection of stories from an upper-caste

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perspective. Subsequently, the pervasive division of caste in Kerala's society was not touched by mainstream films:

> Malayalam cinema is not a foreign technology that came in from the West forcing us to deal with it from within our given postcolonial or pre-capitalist cultural complexities. But it was a Western technology that was seized and used by the powerful upper-caste community of Kerala, mainly the Nairs, who had to rise out of their Shudra status and gain hegemony in the Kerala region, for which they captured all modern categories and institutions like literature, cinema, etc.
>
> *(Rowena 2013)*

Mainstream Malayalam films have always been centred around traditional families who belong to upper-caste denominations. Since the time of *Marthanda Varma* (1933) onwards, films have religiously 'portrayed privileged class and caste communities so much that the affluent class/caste systematically mirrored themselves on screen and made Kerala mirror them in their food, dress, looks, and artistic and intellectual pursuits' (Venkatesan and James 2017: 48). Thus, subalternity based on caste, gender, and religion remains underrepresented in mainstream cinema in Kerala, which is not only a lamentable act of denial but also social ignorance towards grotesque realities. Eventually cinema becomes the mouthpiece of the dominant group and perpetuates absentia that distances marginalised people from its visual medium. In the year 1954, *Neelakuyil* was released that touched upon feudalism and untouchability through Neeli, a Dalit woman is who meets a tragic fate in the climax. Similarly, other films such as *Kallichellamma* (1969) and *Chemmeen* (1965) are some of the other films that have systematically 'killed' subaltern female characters:

> A host of other Malayalam films released after *Neelakuyil* reiterated the same logic of Dalit denial, irrespective of the art/commercial status of the film. Such continued absences not only signify the entrenched caste and gender biases in Malayalam cinema but also the interpellation by hegemonic structures within the film industry.
>
> *(Venkatesan and James 2017: 49)*

While films such as *Rarichan Enna Pouran* (1956) and *Ara Nazhika Neram* (1970) fall into the tradition of portraying subaltern characters whose community identities are ingrained in poverty and depravity, it is through off-centre film makers such as T. V. Chandran, Lenin Rajedran, P. N. Menon, and P. A. Backer that issues of marginalities became prominently visible in films such as *Meenamasathile Sooryan* (1986), *Sree Narayana Guru* (1986), and *Malamukalile Daivam* (1983), and these films tried to destabilise the conventions of subaltern stereotypes.[5] While films like *Swayamvarom* (1972), *Elippathayam* (1981), *Aalkkoottathil Thaniye* (1984), *Thinkalaazhcha Nalla Divasam* (1985), and *Oridathu* (1987) dealt with onslaught of modernity, decadency of feudal system and growth of community ideology in Kerala which had failed to capture the subaltern experience of marginalisation, mainstream films such as *Kireedam* (1989), *Godfather* (1991), *Chenkol* (1993), *Devaasuram* (1993), *Aksharam* (1995) Sallaapam (1996), and *Aaram Thamburan* (1997) were blockbuster movies that catered to upper-caste sensibilities. Films such as *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* (1999) and *My Dear Karadi* (1999) featured the Dalit hero Kalabhavan Mani in roles that ridiculed subaltern body as well as subaltern agency.[6] Even millennial films that were produced in the early 2000s were deeply entrenched in feudal value systems that rendered subaltern body as insignificant.[7]

However, with the arrival of 'new generation' movies in 2010, few contemporary Malayalam films began to engage with subaltern lives through their depiction of marginalised communities by their use of a visual language that was not in continuum with the accoutrements of mainstream cinematic culture. For instance, Soubin Shahir's *Parava* (2017) narrates the story of the Muslim community, based in Mattancherry, which is a multicultural space in Kochi, through their local culture of pigeon fight. Shanavas K. Bavakkutty's directorial debut *Kismath* (2016) portrays the inter-caste love story of a Dalit Hindu girl named Anita and an upper-caste Muslim boy named Irfan, where the female protagonist not only survives the loss of her lover but also emerges as an independent self-reliant woman. In *Kammattipaadam* (2016), although we see the reappearance of Dalit protagonists who mourn the loss of agricultural lands in Kochi and were displaced due to development projects, the agency in the film is given to the non-Dalit character named Krishnan, played by a popular mainstream actor. The return of the Dalit characters is a radical shift that the industry has witnessed. Such a radical shift within cinematic sensibilities is not merely limited to the Dalit communities as subalternity is now being explored by various writers and directors in novel ways. It is in this openness to experience reality through the idiosyncratic lens that Lijo Jose Pellissery has premised the Malayalam film *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (2018) in the pursuance of problematising caste from a Christian perspective. Through the depiction of Latin Catholics, the film offers a panoramic view of the lives of shore communities in Kerala. By their use of death as a major theme and burial as a matter of utmost concern, the film unravels the heterogeneity that exists in an otherwise assumed homogenous religious group as well as the triumphs and tribulations of fisherfolk communities while they traverse through the chaos that emerges due to natural and man-made forces. By introspecting the location of the film, the events, and the characters, this chapter argues that *Ee.Ma.Yau.* conceives the coast as an alternate space for projecting subaltern subjectivity through a continuous process of contestation.

Caste and the Coastal Village

The location of the film is Chellanam village, originally called Chellavanam, which roughly translates as a place where no one goes. The name of the place itself connotes a systematic marginalisation due to the popular conviction that classifies coastal villages, port towns, and harbours as fringe spaces since they are largely occupied by people of 'lower caste'. The village lies on a sliver of land, with the Arabian Sea to the west and Kerala's backwaters to the east, as a result, it is an ecologically challenging place, for the area is highly susceptible to coastal erosion, flooding, and cyclone. The protagonist of the film Vavachan Aasan belongs to the Latin Catholic fisherfolk community and is a carpenter by occupation besides being a *Chavittunatakam* actor.[8] The setting of the film consists of a densely populated village on the seashore and throughout, the screen is invaded by crashing waves and strong winds that suggest the fact that coastal villages are ecologically challenging habitats. The portrayal of nature as offered by *Ee.Ma.Yau.* becomes central to the analysis of the experience of marginalisation from an ecological perspective. The principle hierarchy of caste division is based on occupational practice which is believed to be an organic order as espoused by nature. This is because the Brahminical understanding of nature attributes the body to purity and pollution and tends to justify this belief by inferring it as the cosmic order of nature (Sharma 2017: 122). It has been observed that 'lower-caste' communities did not have equal access to natural resources and lived in ecologically segregated habitats. As coastal villages were very close to the sea, the upper-caste Hindus lived away from water because it was forbidden for them to cross the sea for the fear of losing their caste. So, people who ventured into the sea and who lived along the coastal belts belonged to lower-caste groups. It is this process of naturalisation of a social order based on occupation, food, habitat, and living

that was questioned by Ambedkar. He was critical of the natural world because the Hindu idea of creation was invested within the social order of caste wherein systematic depravity of natural resources was practiced. To destroy the natural order of sacredness and divinity that formed the crux of natural life, Ambedkar therefore, in his book *Annihilation of Caste*, argues for a new order of life wherein the authority of shastras is discarded and new life is embraced so that the old way of living ceases to exist. Central to Ambedkar's idea of a new order is to reject caste-based environmental determinism so that change becomes instrumental through a new order of the agency, especially for the 'untouchables' (Sharma 2017: 123).

In *Ee.Ma.Yau.*, nature holds an emphatic portrayal, tacitly tracing the process of historical segregation that was experienced and continues to be experienced only by specific communities. The fishing hamlet is shown as a vulnerable place to foretell the forthcoming doom of death but at the same time to emphasise the fact that people are affected by harsh and challenging ecologies. As a result, identities are not simple formulations of traits and characters but are deeply invested in nature while they are dynamically constructed by personal histories, complex memories, social discourses, cultural beliefs, and religious impetus. The popular convictions have designated the shore communities as 'barbaric' and 'uncouth,' especially by the higher caste communities because littoral societies are a storehouse of traditions, customs, and have a syncretic way of living which reflects differently, especially to the landed gentry. Their existence is defined by the geographical difference and governed by the cultural difference which is deeply rooted within the locale. It is this differential pattern of social existence that forms the base of the film as coastal belts of Kochi have a pre-history of accommodating cultural diversity.

The Mukkuvar community in Kochi strongly adheres to their ethnic identity, caste status, and to their Christian identity as Latin Catholics. This is shown in the film through the conversation between Vavachan and his son, wherein the father tells his son about his desire of having a grand funeral procession with traditional Latin Catholic rituals, songs, dress, and prayers. Notwithstanding their financial condition, Eeshi promises his father to do the same and during the entire course of the film Eeshi struggles to fulfil his promise that he made to his father. *Ee.Ma.Yau.*'s depiction of Kochi's Latin Catholic community comes with its set of flaws. However, the film is an important point of reference for fisherfolk communities who are otherwise shown as poor and pathetic. Mainstream cinema in Kerala has largely portrayed the Syrian Christian community as rich, land-owning people with Brahminical lineage who possess glorified *tharavadu* while the non-Syrian Christians such as the Latin Catholics were portrayed in films like *Godfather* (1991) and *Aniyathipraavu* (1997) as backward and poor with no cultural capital. The *tharavadu* is an ancestral house which is a symbol of power, lineage, and cultural capital. Unlike the protagonist of such mainstream cinema, none of the characters in *Ee.Ma.Yau.* adhere to the concept of *tharavadu*. The Syrian Christians largely premise their aristocracy upon their Brahminical lineage as well as on the idea of family as the backbone of Christian social life. The complementary connection between *tharavadu* and Christian social life is inevitable as *tharavadu* is considered to be a prestigious ideological institution that functions to maintain the Brahminical lineage. The Syrian Christians largely refrain from marrying outside the community due to caste differences and have established separate churches for themselves. The first phase of conversion of 'lower-caste' people into Christianity occurred during the Portuguese conquest of Malabar coast where a large number of fishermen from the coastal belts were converted as Catholics while the second phase of 'lower-caste' conversion into Christianity happened in the 19th century with the arrival of English Missionaries.[9] These conversions resulted in the formation of various denominations within the Christian religion in Kerala based on caste inequalities. Therefore, Christianity as a religion in Kerala failed to organise itself on the broader theme of Christian brotherhood because it adopted the pre-existing caste structures and

eventually became a land-oriented religion, even though the religion arrived via the sea. Thus, negating all kinds of fluid nature, the Syrian Christians segregated themselves as indigenous and upper-caste and did not let the religion reform the social institutions based on the Christian ethos of equality.[10]

The absence of *tharavadu* in *Ee.Ma.Yau*. and the presence of coastal village signifies the portrayal of non-Brahminical Christian order that originates in the 16th century with the establishment of the Portuguese church which brought a major divide between the Syrian Christians and the 'low caste converts' as the former could not accept the lower-caste converted Catholics as equals. So, in the film, the feudal Christian hero[11] has been replaced by a *Chavittunatakam* artist who does not have worldly possessions and is deeply connected to his natural habitat, instead of *tharavadu*. Vavachan belongs to a community that lives on the shore and is highly dependent on fishing and other related activities. Subsequently, he has been shown as having a unique relationship with nature, especially with the sea. The film opens with Vavachan's dream sequence of a grand funeral procession passing through the beach. This dream sequence is the character's deepest desire and eventually becomes the focal point in the film. The card sharpers who play at the beach predict the passage of time by observing the rising waves and wind in the sea. Also, the constant sound of waves and the hustling wind is a characteristic feature of the film to indicate that these communities share an inherent relationship with the sea and so the sea also acquires a prominent character in the film. When Vavachan asks his neighbour Naanu whether he had any catch for the day, Naanu replies by saying that the sea is very dry and so there has been no catch. On hearing this Vavachan becomes distressed and begins to ramble about his childhood days when they had plenty of catch in every three weeks. The sea in the film not only is depicted as a natural resource for the community but is a site of hope, prosperity, possibilities, faith, and dwelling. Unlike the film *Chemmeen* that showed the fishing community as poor and pathetic, this film characterises the social identity of shore communities as specifically invested within the coast and the sea. Consequently, the shore communities have been able to develop a distinctive ethos that is different from the agrarian space. This is reflected in the film in numerous ways such as the bond between Ayyappan and Eeshi; the portrayal of women characters such as Pennamma, Nisa, Sabeth, and the nurse who examines Vavachan's body are all outspoken, decisive, independent, and share a mutual concern for each other. Shore communities have been able to form social groups due to a shared sense of locality, occupation, and value system. For instance, the coastal communities refer to the sea as their mother, subsequently, they conceive their environment to be a compassionate source of resources, which is different from hunter-gatherer societies (Hoeppe 2008: 309). It is this relationship of benevolence between the subaltern and the environment that forms the premise of *Ee.Ma.Yau*.

Unlike other mainstream films which are based on feudal agrarian communities, *Ee.Ma.Yau*. has been able to invert power relations between characters and ecology. Malayalam films that have focused on land-owning families lack the portrayal of the compassionate relationship between people and nature. The feudal heroes are land-owning characters who perceive the land as a source of wealth and power. These feudal protagonists are defined by their land-owning status in society because they strongly adhere to patriarchal value systems and caste-based hierarchies. In contrast to such a conventional depiction of landed masculinities, Lijo Jose Pellissery portrays landless subaltern men. As opposed to popular cinema that has celebrated upper-caste Christian culture through its vivid display of plot lines that preoccupies land-oriented conflicts/interests, this film is deeply entrenched within the ecologies of the coast and engages with the serenity of life and death. The film, on the one hand, showcases poor conditions of shore communities but at the same time, it also transforms the peripheral space into a contemplative space wherein the tumultuous life invites deep considerations about the inevitability of death. Such a

transformation of the living habitat is only made possible due to the community's relationship with the natural world being reciprocal in nature instead of being hierarchical.

Death, the Body, and Caste

In their depiction of the Latin Catholic community of Chellanam village, the filmmakers take the audience through the rituals of mourning in a subaltern Christian community. After Vavachan dies, his wife Pennamma begins to sing the *kannokkupattu*, which is central to Latin Catholic death rituals. *Kannokupattu* is loud weeping in a rhythmic tune that discloses details about the demised and his/her relationship with other people who come as visitors. The cultural capital of the Catholic shore community is introduced through the public performance of grief which is an outburst of emotions in distinctive rhythm and dialect that is specific to Kochi. Further, the title of the film *Ee.Ma.Yau*. expands as *Eesho Mariam Youseppe*, which is a prayer that is whispered into the ears of the dead person and is very specific to the Latin Catholic community. This prayer, Jesus Mary Joseph, that is believed to protect the soul of the deceased is called *chevittorma* and is shown as being whispered into Vavachan's ears by other women. Such a depiction of community rituals on celluloid shatters the stereotypical images about the Christian community in Kerala. Interestingly, this film does not have a song and dance sequence, and the music is largely dominated by the ritualistic weeping of the women, especially by Pennamma. The bereavement signifies cultural assertion as well as the vulnerability of a community that has been majorly portrayed as savagely cruel in popular films. This public performance of grief in a dialect that is not spoken by upper-caste Christian, accompanied by wailing, is also a relatively new sight for the audience as films have predominately been eulogising the customs[12] of Syrian Christians.[13] The *kanokkupattu* is an heteroglossic[14] intervention in the film as it initiates a dialogue within and outside the film. Firstly, it celebrates the diversity of voices within the film and results from the struggle of opposing forces. For instance, Pennama begins the *kanokkupattu* by wailing about her insecurities, her son's intimate relationship with his father, her loneliness, and the subsequent betrayal committed by her husband, which is revealed in the climax of the film. While Nisa, Vavachan's daughter' in her *kannokupattu*, shares fears about her womanhood, she severs ties with her lover and questions her father for having left her alone in a world that is filled with misery. Secondly, it is through *kannokkupattu* that Pennama deciphers Vavachan for the audience while she acts as an interpreter between the dead body and the people. As a text, this film is the voice of an othered community and *kannokkupattu* is a dialogue that Pennamma tries to orchestrate with the audience. Thus, *chevittorma* and *kannokkupattu* are strong indicators of a cultural matrix that are unique to the social fabric of community living among Latin Catholics.

Interestingly, the film also celebrates subaltern labour in all forms. Vavacchan being a *Chavittunatakkam* artist, was also popular in his village for having built the altar in the church; the grave-digger carves a beautiful grave unaware of the fact that he will be buried in it; the local singer performs on the street to earn a living as well as to collect charity for the poor; the clarinet player gets to display his talent at Vavachan's funeral. Through these instances, we see that the film expresses the vigour of working-class labour in all its materiality so much that the artistic expression becomes central to the realism, as espoused in the film, that displays the social conditions of subaltern labour. It is in this struggle of caste and labour that Vavachan's dead body is located. What then follows is the transformation of the dead body into a site of contestation, revulsion, and eventually, resilience. Vavachan's desire for a grand funeral gets shattered when his son tells him that the hard-earned money that he had saved for his funeral does not possess any value due to the national event of demonetisation. Upon Vavachan's sudden demise Eeshi realises that he has not paid the annual tax to the church due to which the Parish will not

provide any monetary assistance for the burial. The chaos in the film is stretched further when the drunk doctor does not come on time to examine the dead body while the disinterested passive nurse refuses to give a death certificate because she suspects a foul play. The Parish vicar who has been dismissive of Eeshi and his family also follows the advice of the nurse and forbids Eeshi from burying his father in the church compound. It is around this chaos that Eeshi's desperation to give his father a decent funeral invigorates and his close friend Ayyappan comes to his rescue. He goes to the police station to request the Circle Inspector to intervene when the Parish priest Zachariah Parappurath refuses to conduct the burial. The passive state of the law, along with the church paralysing Vavachan's burial and the demonetised currency as the only asset owned by his family for the funeral, builds up the humiliation that is inflicted on a subaltern body by the structures of power. The money lender's mockery at Eeshi's poverty as well as the coffin maker's exploitative nature to extract money from a suffering poor man supplement to everyday battles that powerless people fight through to exist in corrupt societies. During the chaos, Ayyappan, the local Dalit leader, emerges as a true friend and consoler to Eeshi. Ayyappan's altruistic effort to help Eeshi conduct his father's burial forges a new subaltern friendship that emerges from shared histories of humiliation and oppression. Towards the second half of the film, we see the rise of three strong subaltern bodies in the film—Vavacchan's dead body, his son Eeshi, and Ayyapan.

Although the social universe of *Ee.Ma.Yau.* operates on asymmetrical power relations but both Eeshi and Ayyapan have not been portrayed as hapless human beings but as individuals who navigate through the power structures through constant negotiations and emotional outbursts. For instance, Ayyappan slaps the government employee who works for the electricity board when he refuses to fix power at Eeshi's house. On the other hand, Eeshi slaps the Parish vicar when he does not let them bury Vavachan's body in the cemetery owned by the church. And Vavacchan's lifeless body symbolically refers to a provocative slap on the audience as death is a miserable situation for people of the 'lower caste' due to power politics and discriminatory practices when death is an inevitable human condition. Ayyapan and Eeshi together struggle against oppression as subaltern men in a society where power is all-pervasive, invincible, undifferentiated, and exercised through ubiquitous systems. Vavacchan's body directs our attention towards mechanisms by which bodies are excluded from a political or religious organisation. Bodies are subjected to systematic regimes to ensure appropriate display of behaviour that has been sanctioned socially and politically while entitlements are denied to transgressive bodies (Brown and Gershon 2017: 1). During his lifetime, Vavachan did not succumb to any kind of authority nor did he lead a religiously sanctioned life, which makes him a transgressive body that has not been shaped by controlling practices. Further, the presence of a haggard, black, untouchable body not only satirises the idea of the perfect body that has been disseminated by films in general, but it also bombards the cinematic space and visual culture that has been oblivious to untouchability. Thus, Vavachan's body not only displaces the heroic figures of Malayalam cinema but also stands in tandem with the upper-caste heroic figures whose bodies are equally untouched by caste politics.

Locating *Ee.Ma.Yau.* in Malayalam Cinema

One of the distinguishing features of the film Ee.Ma.Yau is its location. Unlike films such as *Chemmeen* (1965), *Godfather* (1991), *Aniyathipravu* (1997), *Mahasamudram* (2006), and *Mosayile Kuthira Meenukal* (2014), where the coastal spaces are depicted as uncultured habitats that breed violent and uncouth communities, *Ee.Ma.Yau.* establishes the coastal village as a non-agrarian space that is not malevolent but is a distinct space that possess cultural, political, and social

potentialities. This radical shift from *tharavadu*, which is at the centre of an agrarian village, to a non-agrarian coastal village that is active and possess agency is a new portrayal of littoral space in Malayalam cinematic sensibilities as the film does not submit to the temporalities of the upper-caste communities, especially the Syrian Christians. Since coastal villages are primarily occupied by low-caste population due to its peripheral location, *Ee.Ma.Yau.* brings an alternative village space in Kochi, which stands in contrast to the urban spaces of Kochi[15] as well as the landed villages of Kerala. Thinkers such as Surinder Jodhka (2002), M. N. Srinivas (1955), and Gadgil and Guha (1992) have interpreted the village as the primary unit of social organisation, which is ideal, harmonious, self-sufficient, and interdependent in many ways. This romantic understanding of the Indian village as an alluringly ideal space has been imagined from a land-centric ecological perspective, which eludes esoteric habitats such as the coast. The coastal villages are also harmonious places with a defining culture and community living; however, it has always been perceived as an aberration because it remains spatially and politically removed from mainstream society for being a settlement area of the fisherfolk community by subjecting their language, occupation, food, dress, and bodies to contemptuous picturisation. The non-agrarian identity is an important aspect while assessing the marginal status of shore communities. Since they were not a part of the agrarian economy, they could never become a part of community mobilisation or political movements during the colonial period. Eventually, they have also remained in a disadvantaged position during the land reform movement in 1957 (Punathil 2019: 167).

Initially, the film industry in Kerala operated on Gulf money, plantation economy, money from the landed gentry, private financing companies, cooperative endeavours, along with state government's efforts to integrate Malayalam cinema into the new economy (Radhakrishnan 2009: 219–223). The economic backbone of the industry conditioned the textual narrative of the film, but it largely catered to the changing sensibilities of the burgeoning middle class and upper caste. Therefore, while imagining the regional identity through cinema, the visibility of development discourses began dominating the visual culture. Subsequently, subaltern communities who were outside the economic model became invisible within the narratives of the films that were being produced. It is against such economy-influenced industrial narrative that *Ee.Ma.Yau.* comes into the fore as a deviant film by appropriating Vavachan's dead body as a subaltern hero with no financial assets because he has never been a part of economic developments.

The problems faced by shore communities are infinite because they constantly face threats to their habitat, culture, and occupation. *Ee.Ma.Yau.* engages with some of the issues that are faced by shore communities in Kochi through its interpretation of the State, the Judiciary, and religious institutions as mute spectators to their problems that are both natural and man-made. Therefore, the film reflects on the everyday struggle of livelihood and their subsequent defiance against exploitation. Vavachan suffers humiliation from both the church and the state. He laments about the drying sea with no yield, his mere savings being the demonetised currency notes and his alienation from the church as it had decided to dispose of the traditional altar that he had carved out of wood by replacing it with 'modern art'. All these instances are shreds of evidence that display his estrangement, which is a result of changing sociological and ecological patterns of the coastal village. 'Technological intervention' as a part of development projects initiated in coastal villages with the purpose of modernisation through increased fish harvest brought in drastic changes especially in the livelihood patterns of traditional fishers, who were displaced from the 'consumption oriented' fishing practice by the commercial enterprises (Punathil 2019: 168).[16] The transformation of a natural resource from being a 'common property' to increasingly becoming a site of new capitalist ventures resulted in the pauperisation of coastal communities who considered the sea as a common property for community living.

The monopolisation of natural resources has resulted in creating the class difference between artisanal fishers, poor people living on the coast, and owners of motorised boast. This class conflict is also visible in the film through the exchange between Eeshi and the local money-lender, who tries to exploit Eeshi's poor condition during the time of crises. Chaos as seen in the film finds its source outside the community in the form of corruption and exploitation. It is because of this reason that Ayyappan towards the end of the film, at the police station, breaks down in front of a crowd that had gathered to bid farewell to a retired employee and makes a moving speech on the final journey of human beings to invoke compassion within the ignorant police officers towards Vavachan and his family. He makes a powerful statement to make the police realise their responsibility as safe guarders of law as well as human beings to come out from their passive state of indifference. Ayyappan's act to move the police from their inactive state is an example of Freire's concept of *conscientisation* or conscious raising where induvial and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through examining the root cause of oppression and eventually foster action-oriented change towards attaining liberation by adopting a critical consciousness (Friere 2005: 172–175). For Ayyappan, Vavachan was *aasan* or man of knowledge and so he laments for not being able to give a deserving farewell to his *aasan*. Eeshi laments about the cruelty and inconsiderate measures meted out by power structures towards his father's body. Eeshi's defiance and resilience are demonstrated when he buries his father near his house instead of burying him in the church cemetery. Eeshi's final act is an example of subaltern enunciation that surfaces due to the long trajectory of subjugation. It reflects greatly on subaltern communities' need to own natural resources such as land, water, forest, etc. The film ends with the dwelling of the spirits of Vavachan and other deceased characters, waiting for their boats to arrive so that they begin a new journey. The final scenes of the film offer glimpses into a subaltern community's beliefs and ecological vision. The film thus depicts the Mukkuvar community's relationship with the sea and how water worship holds a significant position in shaping the community's value systems. The sea not only becomes a part of sustenance and daily living but is deeply integrated into the community's epistemological position. The rituals and beliefs of Mukkuvars are not only rooted in institutionalised religion but also shaped by the natural world in which they live.

Due to its location in a coastal village, the film tries to demolish the popular image of coastal areas as spaces that breed violent, uncultured, and ignorant communities. Implicitly, it questions the paradoxes that prevail in Kerala's society, especially towards the shore communities. Despite being a coastal state that sustains a cosmopolitan culture due to colonial rule, sea trade, and Gulf migration, Kerala society dissociates itself from its coastal belt both socially and spatially. The littoral spaces are viewed as peripheral extensions of land-bound regions and are situated beyond the cultural imaginations of the mainstream. Kerala's geographical position has greatly impacted its culinary habit as fish is a staple food, but fisherfolk communities occupy the margins. Against the popular discourses that reaffirm the marginality of shore communities, *Ee.Ma.Yau.* draws our attention towards the syncretic culture of Christian fisherfolk by showing their reciprocal relationship with the sea as well as their resilience against natural and man-made calamities to reinstate the position of shore communities as a significant ethnic community with distinct culture and history. Hence, *Ee.Ma.Yau.* is not an ethnographic depiction of Catholic fisherfolk but offers ruminations about marginal lives that are caught in human predicaments.

Conclusion

The Malayalam film *Ee.Ma.Yau* is an iconoclastic film that exposes the compliant role of the state, religion, and the police in betraying the hopes of subaltern communities in Kerala. The

narrative of the film is built from an anti-caste perspective predicated on marginalised bodies with new political subjectivity. Subsequently, the film is a narration of cultural assertion, political emancipation, and intellectual projection of thoughts that are mediated through the realities of spatial and social marginality of shore communities. Through a diegetic frame, the film disputes the normative image of Kerala society that has promoted segregation based on caste. Vavachan, Eeshi, and Ayyappan are deviant heroes who are not Gandhi's 'harijans' and are not thoroughly integrated to the idea of Malayali as a citizen-subject of the state. Further, the film is a depiction of subaltern desire and its eventual transformation into a nightmare due to chaos that stems from social evils. However, the film also offers an important interpretation of coastal space that allows the proliferation of subaltern consciousness against caste. Vavachan's burial by his son then is a triumphalist act of liberation because Eeshi decides to overthrow the power structures and emerges as a valiant subaltern hero. While Vavachan emerges as a subaltern artist, Ayyappan surfaces as the consciousness-raising political leader who is shaped by the social practices and material conditions of caste and Pennamma, Nissa, Sabeth break, somewhat, the stereotyped characterisation of women from the fisherfolk community, especially as seen in *Chemmeen*. From an anti-caste perspective, the coastal village has not been interpreted as an outward space of anomalies but as a social space that has been subjected to a systemised denial of human rights. Hence the coast has been projected as an alternate space that has metamorphosed its 'Untouchables' into radicalized, emancipated subaltern subjects.

Notes

1 The land reform movement led by the first Communist government in 1957 did not benefit the weaker sections of the society. Even the celebrated Kerala Model Development did not uniformly distribute the developmental benefits to all sections of the society. Marginalised communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, and fisherfolks were strategically excluded from developmental projects. See Tharakan (2006), Oommen (1999), Devika (2014), Rammohan (2008).

2 The fisherfolks of Kerala belong to three different religious groups, namely Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The Hindu fisherfolk is mostly situated in central and north districts of Kasaragod, Alappuzha, Kollam, and Thrissur. The Christian fisherfolk are mostly found in central and south districts of Kerala while the Muslim fisherfolk are concentrated in the northern districts of Kerala. They can be broadly categorised into Dheevara caste community which consists of sub-caste namely Valas, Arayas, Mukkuvar, Marakkar, Nulayas, Mokayas, Mokaveeras, Arayavathis, Valinchiyars, Bovis-Mokayas, and Paniyakkals. While the Arayas, Mukkuvars, and Marakkars are Hindu, Christian, and Muslim marine fishing community, the other groups belong to the inland fishing groups. See Rose (2020).

3 The fishing communities were untouchables because their occupation involved handling of flesh and non-vegetarianism, which according to Sanskritic Hinduism was a degraded practice. According to M.N. Srinivas, Sanskritic and Non-Sanskritic are sub-categories of Hinduism which reflect caste, rituals, and beliefs of Hinduism. Sanskritic Hinduism featured the worship of Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva along with priesthood and vegetarianism. Non-Sanskritic Hinduism is a locally rooted religious system that involves the worship of local deities, especially by the lower-caste groups and finds no reference in the Sanskrit texts. See M. N. Srinivas*, Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1952); 212–227.

4 The Latin Christians of Kerala majorly consists of lower-caste fishing community who were converted to Christianity under the Portuguese rule in the sixteenth century (Ram 1992).

5 While Lenin Rajendran's *Meenamasathile Sooryan* (1986) portrayed subaltern issues, P.A Backer showed casteist nature of Kerala's society through his film *Sree Narayana Guru* (1986). And P.N. Menon engaged with tribal issues through his film *Malamukalile Daivam* (1983). See Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Rajesh James. 'Dalit Identity, *Papilio Buddha*, and Malayalam Cinema'. *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 2017): 48–52.

6 Cultural stereotypes were visually articulated through skin colour, names, body features, language, behaviour, etc. to validate the existing conditioned perceptions about subaltern characters. Actors such

as Salim Kumar, Chemban Vinod Jose, Vinayakan, and Kalabhavan Mani are considered as "black bodies" in the otherwise fair-skinned film industry whose cinematic representations are relegated to caste figures. See Sujit Kumar Parayil. 'Visual Perception and Cultural Memory: Typecaste and Typecast(e)ing in Malyalam Cinema'. *Synoptique: An Online Journal of Film and Moving Images Studies* 3.1 (2014): 67–98.

7 The blockbuster movies such as *Narasimham* (2000), *Ravanaprabhu* (2001), *Meesamadhavan* (2002), *Chronic Bachelor* (2004), *Natturajavu* (2004), *Bharathchandran IPS* (2005), Rajamanikyam (2005), *Rasathanthram* (2006), *Classmates* (2006), *Nasrani* (2007), *Chocolate* (2007), *Twenty:20* (2008), *Puthiya Mugham* (2009), and *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009) led to a creation of feudal space in Malayalam film industry that catered to upper-caste and middle-class families. The consumption of such films not only obscured the feudal past of Kerala society but also tried to portray a homogeneous Malayali culture which is deeply entrenched in common language, rituals, and customs, thereby obscuring the diversity that exists in Kerala's society based on region, religion, and caste.

8 Chavittunatakkam is a Christian folk theatre found among the shore communities that was introduced by the Portuguese. The word *chavittunatakam* means stamping ballad which, as the name suggest, consists of artists stamping the floor to produce resonating sounds while performing. For further reference, visit www.keralaculture.org/chavittu-natakam/20

9 For further reading, see Mohan 2015: 1–14.

10 The Christian belief of equality is based on the idea that all people are equal before God and Christ. All human beings are created alike in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–28). Biblical egalitarianism is premised on the second greatest commandment 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:31) where neighbour could be anyone irrespective of race, gender, class, or caste. However, the church has supported caste discrimination just the way it supported racism and slavery, although Christ in his teachings tried to reach out to different sections of the society. For instance, two of Christ's disciples Simon and Andrew were fishermen and met Christ when they were casting their nets in the sea.

11 The celluloid projection of Christian heroes began with K.G. George's portrayal of rich planter Christian family in his film *Irakal* (1985). This pattern of feudal men who are majorly Catholic alpha men was later popularised in films like *Sangham* (1988), *Kottayam Kunjachan* (1990), *No. 20 Madras Mail* (1990), *Koodikazhcha* (1991), *Ulladakkam* (1991) *Lelam* (1997), and *Nasrani* (2007) to name a few or even the recent *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* (2020).

12 In Latin Catholic funeral celebrations, the burial is accompanied by elaborate music, funeral rites, and processions. The celebratory procession and other rituals are bestowed upon the demised person to honour the new journey. In Syrian Christian funerals, rituals involve prayers, hymns, and chants but do not celebrate death the way Latin Catholics do.

13 The Syrian Christian male subjectivity has been appropriated through blockbuster films such as *Kottayam Kunjachan* (1990), *Lelam* (1997), *Natturajav*u (2004), *Nasrani* (2007), *Varnapakittu* (1997), *Christian Brothers* (2011), and *Evidum Swargamanu* (2009). These films valorised the Syrian Christian hero, popularly called as *achayan* (elder brother), as landowning/estate owning/ planter/businessman, driven by capitalist zeal and upper-caste lineage. Christian identities that are projected through popular films are premised on land, money, family honour, religiosity, and masculinity. Land and religion are two crucial themes on which the community's sense of belonging has been projected and this imagery was essentially homogeneous and casteist in nature that eluded all kinds of diversity that exists within the community, especially along the lines of caste and occupation.

14 Heteroglossia was coined by Mikhail Bakhtin and translates as other tongues or voices. Bakhtin introduces in his book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982) the concept of heteroglossia. He defines heteroglossia as another's speech in another's language, serving to express 'authorial intentions but in a refracted way' (324).

15 The mainstream Malayalam films that are based in Kochi have primarily focused on the urban space of Kochi. For instance, films like *Honey Bee* (2012) and *Chotta Mumbai* (2007) have focused on the youngsters and their subsequent relationship with the cityscapes. While films like *Big B* (2000) showcases Kochi as a place that espouses gang wars and *Anwar* (2010) demonstrated Kochi as a suburban place that camouflages religious extremism. Moving away from the underbellies of extortion, kidnapping, and gang wars as depicted in films like *Chaappa Kurishu* (2011), *Black* (2004), and *City of God* (2011), contemporary films such as *Kammattipaadam* (2016), *Parava* (2017), *Annayum Rasoolum* (2013), *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (2018), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), and *Valiyaperunnal* (2020) are few films that have moved away from the idea of Kochi being an urban jungle of conflicting interests by showcasing the community living in the archipelagos from class and caste perspective.

16 For further discussion on monopolising the fishing industry through mechanisation and the creation of capitalist enterprises, see Aerthayil (2000), Thomson (1989), Kurien and Achari (1990), and Subramaniam (2003).

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29

Ellā Manusanum inga onnu illa[1]

Imag(in)ing the Claustrophobia of Caste in *Pariyerum Perumal*[2]

B. Geetha

Introduction

Pariyerum Perumal (*PP* henceforth) is a 2018 Tamil film directed by Mari Selvaraj. The film is paradigmatic of the experiential reality of the Dalit community and their confrontation with questions of caste exclusivity and unscrupulous hierarchisation. This chapter investigates the film's ethical intervention in foregrounding the meaningful utterances of its Dalit protagonist Pariyan who questions the ontological restrictions imposed on the marginalised sections. Through a critical textual reading of the film, the chapter studies how *PP* deconstructs the process of knowledge production in the cinematic realm, which privileges the narratives of the upper caste(s) and conveniently silences the articulations of oppressed communities. The chapter also examines the visual significations, like the tea glass, cracked car shield, and the blue-hued apparition of Karuppi, the dog, who is a monumental presence in the film, to analyse their ideological underpinnings in the process of cultural meaning-making. It also explores several secondary sources such as film reviews, posters, and newspaper articles for a meticulous analysis of the filmic text.

As we will see, the 'Madurai formula films'[3] in the 1990s and the 2000s reinforce caste norms and consolidate the caste pride and social dominance of the intermediate castes like the Thevars and Vanniyars. However, Selvaraj's filmic imagination marks a departure as it contests the violent erasure of the Dalit community by offering a vitriolic critique of rigid caste structures. As this chapter argues, the film aims at destabilising 'the discursive hegemonies of caste society' (Srinivas and Kaali 1998: 222) through its cinematic reworking of the dominant caste assumptions. The film disrupts the caste-based hierarchies to resist the malady of caste violence and humiliation. Thus, *PP* represents a centripetal movement towards the principles of humanity and hope. Before offering an analysis of the film, a discussion on the Madurai films seems pertinent.

Madurai Films (Southern Tamil Nadu Films)

Rajan Krishnan, in his essay 'Imaginary Geographies', discusses the contrasting 'temporalities' (2008: 141) between the modern Chennai and the lawless 'south' in popular representations of

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Tamil films. He discusses the south 'as an entity of imaginary geography' (2008: 146) which undergoes a specific process of 'exteriorization and exoticization' (2008: 152) in the form of cinematic narratives, with Chennai as its 'enunciatory location' (2008: 152). Krishnan examines the place of the south during the colonial administration, where 'the south presented an administrative problem to the British' (2008: 148). It was when the Madras presidency was the seat of 'modern governance' (2008: 147). Firstly, the conflict between Chennai and its opposition south started with the Poligar wars and 'the recalcitrance of the Kallar dominions' (2008: 147). The Kallars were invested in protecting the wealth of the peasantry and the merchants as *kaavalkarars* (guards). However, the peasant group's discontent with the domination of the Kallars[4] 'in the guise of an anachronistic protectorate' (2008: 148) led to the anti-Kallar movement,[5] followed by the removal of their customary rights by the administrative state machinery. The colonial state also proclaimed the Piranmalai Kallars as a 'criminal tribe' (2008: 149), hence establishing the south as 'the domicile of the unlawful' (2008: 149). Secondly, the volatile caste conflicts in the years 1995–1998 between the backward castes (Thevars and Vanniyars) and Dalits (Pallars[6] and Parayars) led to excessive violence where the latter were brutally killed and their settlements were thoughtlessly burnt (2008: 150). We observe a persisting notion of the south as a site given to 'sickles and primordial violence' (2008: 150). Thirdly, the south was deployed as a place 'where "rural" attained new authenticity . . . positioned against the "modern" Chennai' (2008: 151). For instance, Krishnan analyses Balaji Sakthivel's *Kadhal* (Love, 2004) to demonstrate how Madurai as a narrative space becomes intertwined with caste identity: 'a place where caste determines one's identity . . . where anonymity is difficult' (2008: 141). The film's heroine belongs to the Thevar caste who decides to elope with her Dalit partner. As the couple leaves to Chennai, the film represents Chennai as an ideal haven with aspirations of freedom, anonymous co-existences, and diverse cultural identities. According to Krishnan, 'the geographical identity of Southern Tamil Nadu . . . serves as a metonymic extension of the caste identity of the Mukkulathor' (2008: 141). The 'pre-modern' (2008: 141) south embodies the hackneyed image of *kattai panchayathu*,[7] *aruval*,[8] extra-constitutional activities, and illegitimate adjudication. Similarly, the spaces of Tirunelveli in *Saamy* (Name of the Protagonist, 2003) and Madurai in *Gilli* (Adept, 2004) are depicted as 'sickle-bearing, country bomb-throwing men' (2008: 143), a group of aggressive hooligans operating under the central villain of the story.

M. S. S. Pandian explains in his essay 'Dalit Assertion in Tamil Nadu: An Exploratory Note', as Thevars 'carry the self-image of a martial community' (2000: 503), they distanced themselves from getting assimilated into the non-Brahmin Dravidian politics of Tamil Nadu. As noted by Pandian, the state always expresses its unwillingness towards the Dalit assertion of identity.[9] In order to secure votes from the Thevars, the AIADMK government led by J. Jayalalitha asserted the caste supremacy of the Thevars by 'officially canonising' (2000: 503) their caste leader, Muthuramalinga Thevar, through a commemorative act of his statue erection in the public domain. The members of these communities have engaged themselves in atrocious violence against the Dalits on matters such as temple festivals, playing songs, naming of the districts, and accordance of public honour among many others (2000: 506). It is important to note that the Dalits in Tamil Nadu are not a homogeneous category. The Arunthathiyars,[10] considered as the 'untouchables among the untouchables' (Pandian 2013b: 19), are at the bottom of the social hierarchy working as landless agricultural labourers, whereas the Pallars are considered as the most advanced section among the Scheduled Castes (Pandian 2013b: 20). The term 'Arunthathiyar' is also used as an overarching term to include scheduled castes such as Arunthathiyar, Chakkiliyar, Madari, Madiga, Pagadai, Thoti, and Adi Andhra (Adi Dravida) communities (Pandian 2013b: 19).

Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringe, in their essay 'Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema', investigate the relationship between caste-based politics and cultural sphere. Through a detailed analysis of films from 1985, they examine how cinematic representations of caste dominance strengthen caste identities of intermediate castes such as the Thevars and Vanniyars so much so that it becomes the accepted 'common sense' (2017: 2). Through a close reading of various films, they highlight how the thematic issues in the Madurai films lead to 'the naturalization of intermediate caste markers' (2017: 2). With the increasing pressure of the intermediate castes on the ruling government, the films in the 1990s magnified the caste pride of Thevars in a reverential fashion. M. S. S. Pandian's description of the 'cinephobic minority'[11] (1996: 951) documents the negotiation of the Tamil elite with the new medium of cinema, as it threatened to disrupt the artificially guarded boundaries between high culture and low culture. However, Damodaran and Gorringe refer to the 'new political elite' (2017: 8) from the backward castes emerging in the late 1980s as a post-MGR phenomenon. The neo-nativity[12] films offered them a kind of 'cultural legitimacy' (2017: 6) that equated their caste status with notions of *Veeram* (valour), *Maanam* (honour), and *Perumai* (pride) (2017: 6).

One of the repetitive tropes in the films of the late 1980s and early 1990s includes a filmic paean to Muthuramalinga Thevar as a signifier of caste pride. The All India Forward Bloc dominated by the Thevar community adopted the song lyrics of *Thevar Magan*'s (Son of Thevar, 1992) *Pōtri pādadi peṇṇē, Thevar kāladi maṇṇē* (Sing the praise of the soil touched by Thevar's feet) and played it in social gatherings (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017: 17). In Madurai films—*Murattu Kaalai* (Raging bull, 1980), *Mann Vaasanai* (The Scent of Soil, 1983), *Cheran Pandiyan* (Tamil Kings, 1991), and *Virumaandi* (Name of the Protagonist, 2004)—the traditional festival of *Jallikattu*, the martial act of bullfighting, is celebrated. As Stalin Rajangam describes, 'like the Balinese Cock Fight, bull-taming remains a metaphor for traditional masculinity' (qtd. in Damodaran 2012a). The other forms like 'cockfight and a sort of "weightlifting" that involves lifting a huge, spherical stone (*ilavatta kal*)' (qtd. in Damodaran 2012a) become the alternative ways of manifesting the heroic audacity[13] of the protagonists belonging to the intermediate caste community. The social construction of gender roles in Tamil society includes the performance of hegemonic masculinity[14] through a specific set of stylised practices like 'wearing of a moustache, physical prowess, authority, sexual virility and the capacity to control women' (Velayutham 2008: 8). This kind of a celebratory and immortalising idiom is the unmistakable rhetoric of caste glorification. Therefore, the assertion of caste identity is reflected and constituted through the cinematic narratives, which present the Thevars as both violent patriarchs and 'benevolent patrons' (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017: 18).

As Dickens Leonard argues in his essay 'Spectacle Spaces: Production of Caste in recent Tamil Films',[15] the caste narratives such as *Kadhal* (2004), *Paruthiveeran*[16] (2007), and *Subramaniapuram*[17] (2008) through the death of their central protagonists 'relocate the systemic casteist structure . . . thereby reproducing the caste spaces intact' (2015: 161). The violent treatment of the protagonists performing the transgressive acts are met with chastising disciplinary action; in this case, the loss of life. While Murugan in *Kadhal* becomes a victim of mental derangement, Azhagar in *Subramaniapuram* gets killed by local henchmen for his love affair with an upper-caste woman. The gendered notion of honour allows the male members to reinforce the cultural construct of 'purity' and perform the traditional masculine act of protecting the chastity of female protagonists (Chakravarthi 2003; Geetha 2009). As Leonard writes, 'Violence is inherently portrayed as the dominant caste's prerogative on screen . . . caste and patriarchal violence suppress [the woman's] individual aberration along with the suppressed hero' (2015: 162).

These legitimising caste articulations in films reiterate the 'failed, individual aspirations within the casteist, patriarchal paradigm' (2015: 162). The power of punishment evident through a cruel narrative closure is to silence these protagonists who intrude into the central precincts of social privilege. Lalitha Gopalan refers to these films of the 'Tamil New Wave' as 'cruel cinema' ('Cruel Cinema' 2011) marked by a

> startling removes from the star antics and high-gloss productions. . . . Entire new mise-en-scènes open up onscreen: butcher shops, pigsties, teashops, alleyways; freaks and misfits [as] the protagonists of these films. The intimate cruelty of family and the tortured narratives of heightened caste and class antagonisms [as] their narrative backbone'.
>
> *('Cruel Cinema' 2011)*[18]

Through these 'recurring narratives' (Leonard 2015: 165), the 'new Madurai genre' (Hariharan, qtd. in Leonard 2015) augments and fortifies normative caste standards even as it articulates those norms with a blatant matter-of-factness.

As we observe, the Madurai films help us navigate the construction of caste in Tamil cinema through a multi-pronged approach. While some films like *Kadhal* are critical of caste ideology, others like *Sandakozhi* (Fighter Cock, 2005) honour caste boundaries. Still others like *Thevar Magan* adopt a mixed approach in affirming caste superiority yet gesturing towards ending the cycle of violence in the conclusion. As a cinematic juxtaposition, *PP* (2018) undertakes a complete narrative disavowal of caste refusing to even reference caste names in the film. The film unambiguously stands as a cultural critique of the cinematic iterations of caste privilege in Tamil cinema. As an effective counterpoint to the celebration of violence in Madurai films, *PP*, despite subtly showing the cold-blooded designs of the upper-caste community, deliberately avoids the glorification and brutal perpetuation of violence in the diegetic heterocosm, as opposed to films that use sickles to display screen violence, and instead foregrounds the neglected narratives of Dalit oppression and resistance on celluloid. The film is perceptive of its cinematic worldview that employing the weapon of violence would mean adopting the language of the dominant castes that was previously used in the elimination of the Dalit community and calcifying the very structures of discrimination. The film further interrogates the saviour complex and selective silences of the upper-caste members in order to encapsulate the protagonist's dignified articulations transcending any circumscribed caste identity.

Pariyerum Perumal: A Discussion

PP becomes a cinematic site of resistance as we unravel the film's subaltern imagination through its countervailing narrative against the cultural hegemony of the dominant castes and their caste(ist) ideologies. The under-representation of Dalits can be attributed to the continual praise of the intermediate castes in the cultural sphere, state patronage, and the stereotypical treatment of the Dalits as comic[19] props. With the emergence of directors like Pa. Ranjith[20] and Mari Selvaraj in the 2010s, the unnoticed struggles of the Dalits and the unnoticed violence of the upper caste(s) receive centre-stage attention in Tamil cinematic narratives. *PP* ruptures the casteist paradigm of containment and submission by creating a protagonist with an assertive voice.

The film captures the journey of a law student Pariyerum Perumal aka Pariyan who is an inhabitant of Puliyankulam, a village near Tirunelveli. The title represents the God who is worshipped by people from all castes in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu.[21] As Selvaraj says, 'We consider Pariyerum Perumal to be a source of motivation. There are many in my family who

are named Pariyerum Perumal, as in my village. I've always felt it's a forceful name [*sic*]' (qtd. in Rajendran 2018). The title of the film could also be read as an allegory of the upper-caste members who refuse to get off their high horses maintaining a sanctimonious façade due to their overbearing caste entitlement. Right at the beginning, the film wreaks emotional havoc as the village's beloved dog Karuppi is brutally crushed on the railway track by the upper-caste members to assert their authority. The funeral song 'Karuppi' by Santosh Narayanan is a haunting evocation of the experience of marginalisation and disadvantage faced by the oppressed communities with its arresting visuals and lyrics. The mourning rituals show us that Karuppi is respected as an individual being with a textual agency in the film bound in a relation of reciprocal intimacy with the Dalit community. Through Karuppi's death, Mari Selvaraj allows the viewer to form judgements about the upper-caste characters and their behaviour towards the non-human being. The film depicts this vicious assault on Karuppi to reveal how, when Karuppi attempts to breach the constructs of caste boundaries, she is subjected to the inhumane cruelty of this exploitative structure. The lines *Odanju kidappathu neeyā illa naan-ā?* (Is it you or me who is broken?) graphically evokes the scene where Karuppi's body lies disintegrated on the railway track. The horrific evisceration of Karuppi is a strong visual cue that the film, in all probability, does not intend to articulate the horrors of the caste system through sugar-coated euphemisms. The cinematographer Sridhar uses drone-camera and extreme wide-angle shots to capture the vast expanse of the geographical land. The brownish-orange tint amplifies the hopelessness of the endless desiccated landscape. The usage of the gimbal equipment stylistically sustains the realism of the film without any visual gimmickry. Through the 'dissolve' technique, we see the living Karuppi transition to the scene of her burning in the crematorium. The double exposure superimposed image of Pariyan's face on Karuppi, which appears as both sharing the same eye, highlights the merging of their identities through this shared sensorial shot. The film continually blurs the seemingly sacrosanct human/animal binary and questions the reductionist anthropocentric understanding of animals as incapable of rational thought and individual consciousness. The song's mirroring of their subjectivities in the form of *neeyā/naanā/naanā/neeyā?* (Is it you/me/me/you?) reaches a synthesis where the narrative shows us that both the characters are unified in their experiences of pain by callous caste practices. During the funeral, the synchronous accompaniment of *oppari* (songs of mourning for the dead) creates a brooding acoustic construction in the film. The film also presents a *Therukoothu*[22] performance, a folksong capturing Pariyan's everyday life in his close-knit community, as Selvaraj attempts to sensitively acknowledge the traditional values and knowledge systems of his community. Karuppi's spirit animates the film at crucial junctures as her traces permeate the entire narrative. For Selvaraj, Karuppi's head stands as a metaphor for 'suffering and separation' (qtd. in Rajendran 2018). The ferocious voice in the song illustrates the terrible reality of social segregation by describing the diverse categories of people as *Karuppan, Sevappan, Sāmi, Sāthan, Adimai, Aandān* (dark and fair, God and Devil, slave and ruler).

The film highlights how an investment in education emboldens the youth towards self-determination and freedom of life. In a conspiratorial structure where the upper-caste members control knowledge, attaining intellectual leadership becomes a powerful tool for defending the rights of the oppressed. As Pariyan's grandfather cogently articulates, *nāmaḷum oru naaḷ adippōm* (One day, we will also hit back). He further adds that he is ready to get beaten up as many times as long as the new generation lives a life of dignity and courage. This genealogical intergenerational support plants the seed of resistance in Pariyan's mind to become a lawyer. Interestingly, the trailer of the film itself opens with Ambedkar's echoing talisman: 'Educate, Organise, Revolt'.[23] When Pariyan gets enrolled in the law college in Tirunelveli, he meets the principal for the first time; as he expresses his dream of becoming a doctor, the principal responds, 'This

is a law college, you cannot become a doctor, but an advocate'.[24] However, Pariyan corrects the principal's misunderstanding by telling him that his ambition is not to become a medical doctor, but like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. This vermilion-putting upper-caste Savarna can only see in Pariyan's statement the anomalous assertions of an offender who will incite trouble in future. This scene speaks about how 'Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace' (Roy 2014) for the privileged bureaucrats luxuriating in their glass palace.

In a palpable moment in the film, Pariyan's upper-caste Brahmin professor derogatorily refers to him as *quota-la vandha kōzhi kunju* (The one who got admitted through reservation). This bludgeoning remark against Pariyan stems from his insensitivity in realising that due to Pariyan's educational background in Tamil, he finds it difficult to write his notes during the English lecture. As Pariyan hastily interjects, he snatches the notebooks of all the students and throws them into a pile in front of the professor. Pariyan repeatedly tells the professor to comprehend their lecture notes in an agitated tone. As the professor realises that even the other students were aimlessly scribbling without understanding the professor's language, the scene scrapes the seemingly seamless fabric of the caste system and its graded hierarchy. Through Pariyan's amplified anger, the film questions the notion of meritocracy, appropriation of English by certain dominant groups,[25] and its pedagogical access to a select few. As Roy writes, 'The presumption is that "merit" exists in an ahistorical social vacuum' (2014). Therefore, this scene subtly criticises how the entitlements of a privileged background and the system's antipathy towards the subordinated castes are not generally foregrounded. As opposed to the sharp boundaries between *Ooru* (space inhabited by the non-Dalits) and *Cheri* (where the lower caste(s) live),[26] the film also emphatically questions whether universities remain as democratically discursive spaces that enable thoughtful contestation and exchange of ideas. In his *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar writes, 'In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared . . . varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endosmosis [*sic*]' (2014: sec. 14.2). However, Ambedkar's pronouncements on social permeability and mutual interaction remain unrealised aspirations in Pariyan's university, as his antagonists put him through worst forms of humiliation such as urinating on him due to Pariyan's developing proximity with Jo, his upper-caste classmate.

Pariyan's stigmatised position constantly precipitates into harrowing violence against his selfhood. On another day, when Pariyan takes Sankaralingam's (Jo's cousin and a fellow law student) seat, the revengeful man pushes him into the ladies' lavatory as a manifestation of his punitive punishment for Pariyan's supposedly 'transgressive' behaviour. We see Pariyan's gesture as he covers his face with trembling hands, shielding himself from the outside world. This act lands Pariyan into the new principal's office where his father is called for a meeting. As the new principal has seen the experiential reality of caste inequalities,[27] he has risen out of it through his educational achievements. This is evident when he tells Pariyan, 'They chased me like a pig. Did I hide? By understanding what was necessary, I studied rigorously. Those who wanted to silence me then, fold their hands in front of me now'.[28] From his anecdotal recounting, we see how the societal barricades crumble when the urgency for equality and self-determination makes the Dalits participate in an internal protest against coercive caste forces.

To make situations worse, when Pariyan's father, a *koothu* artiste who plays female roles, waits outside the office, Sankaralingam's group brutally humiliates him, pulls off his dhoti to see the 'proof' of his masculinity, and mocks his effeminacy. This scene painfully expresses his father's helpless vulnerability as he runs to save his honour, hurting himself in the chase. The film shows Pariyan's inability to accept his innocent 'effeminate father', as the latter departs from the conventional definition of paternal authority marked by aggressive masculinity. As Selvaraj recounts his personal experience, he describes how, like Pariyan, he wanted to 'protect' his father but did

not sufficiently appreciate his individual constitution and characteristics.[29] Selvaraj shows how discrimination can, sometimes, stem from within the marginalised community itself, when we alienate our people and preclude their presence due to the internalisation of cognitive biases. In the film, Pariyan undergoes the unlearning process to understand that he was hypocritical in expecting his father to lead a double life both inside and outside; when Pariyan returns to his village, he realises that his father has been the only innocent person with no superficial pretensions and covert intentions. Pariyan's coming to terms with his father's identity is when a psychic shift is effected in his mind. Through a series of such horrific incidents, as discussed earlier, the protagonist Pariyan proves that he is not a passive recipient devoid of agency but instead asserts himself as an 'Angry Young Man'[30] (Rangan 2018). *PP* documents how Pariyan transforms his Dalit[31] status from what Anupama Rao would refer to as a 'negative description' (2009: I) to a 'confrontational identity' (2009: I). As he moves from the back seat to the front bench, he challenges Sankaralingam that this will be his place from now on. In an interview, Mari Selvaraj says,

> Ranjith *annan's* films say that everyone's life stories can be brought into the mainstream, that there is celebration even in the lives of the oppressed. . . . Everyone thinks the life of a Dalit must be one of defeat, but he has changed that. He has shown that there can be victory.
>
> *(qtd. in Rajendran 2018)*

In the film, the process and the progress of his identity-formation are reflected as Pariyan continually reiterates *Pariyerum Perumal BA.BL. mēla oru kōdu* (Pariyerum Perumal BA. BL. Degree in progress). Analogously, the sartorial choices like wearing jeans and a shirt are exceptionally telling. As Rajangam mentions, 'Dalits see such dressing as a tool of modernity' (qtd. in Yamunan 2016).[32] The clothing patterns enable the revolutionary undoing of the societal stigma created by the denigrating discourses of the upper-caste members that treat Dalit bodies as repulsive.

The song *Naan Yaar* (Who am I?)[33] is loaded with potent signifiers as it depicts an introspective tale of survival in a rigidly stratified world and the process of reclaiming the Dalit individual's identity expressed through visual metaphors. The subtle cues of the framing choice in the song are particularly notable. For example, an emotional close-up eye shot of Pariyan becomes a mirror to his battered soul. The deep straight look pierces the camera with its fixed excruciating stare. It is as if the oppressed castes will no longer lower their eyes in shame. The incessant 'looked-at-ness' breaks our torpor like an ethical Barthesian 'punctum' that 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the viewer]' (Barthes 1980: 26). The blink of the eye also functions effectively as a graphic match cut as the break creatively transitions from one eye shot to the other. Through such a penetrative gaze/seeing, the song deconstructs what Roy refers to as the 'Project of Unseeing' (2014), of obliterating caste, sometimes 'a conscious political act, and sometimes comes from a place of such rarefied privilege that caste has not been stumbled upon, not even in the dark, and therefore it is presumed to have been eradicated' (Roy 2014). The shot is a painful reminder of the gut-wrenching reality of unbridled brutality and the deteriorating interiority of Dalit lives.

Through a quick-cut montage, the hanging bodies and floating corpses in the song are shown in a monochromatic tone, documenting the violent caste suicides and suggesting the apocalyptic bleakness of the entire caste situation. The song evokes in our minds the killings of 44 Dalit labourers by the landlords during the Keezhvenmani[34] massacre in Tamil Nadu in 1968, Kodiyankulam[35] firings in 1995, and the Melavalavu[36] local election violence among

many others. In the mise-en-scène, the song shows Pariyan in a claustrophobic red room with poisonous snakes, cockroaches, and scorpions signifying 'the chamber of horrors' (Roy 2014), or in other words, the menacing presence of the institutionalised caste structure. It also reminds us of the darkness of an inescapable nightmare faced by the Dalit lives. The physical violence of the dominant castes against Dalit lives reminds us of Ambedkar's outright denunciation of the caste system as 'an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt' (2014). The deeply saturated red colour palette in the song highlights violence, aggression, and anger. Pariyan's expression of fury and disgust is, as he is tied to a chair, a manifestation of a living soul trapped inside his bloody clothes of shame and humiliation. The sketches on the walls symbolically represent the externalisation of his internal thought processes. In one of the shots, the figure on the wall is tightly gripped by a snake as he struggles to catch the woman's hand. This moment signifies the impossibility of his relationship with Jo due to her caste background.[37] In such a difficult situation, we see the portrait of the dog trying to rescue him. The presence of the wounded Karuppi highlights the fact that her thoughts are always in Pariyan's mind. Through the lines *un kai padāma thaṇṇeer parugum naan yaar* (Who am I who consumes water without your touch?), he unambiguously reveals the discrimination of the two-tumbler system[38] where the upper caste(s) consume the beverage in steel tumblers whereas the glass tumblers are assigned for lower caste(s). What is evident here is a 'defamiliarising' process, that is, a simple act of drinking takes up monumental proportions if we see familiar activities outside of always already received categories. Thus, the song critiques the asymmetrical caste configuration fraught with deep social prejudice and differential treatment.

However, the song is not merely a narration of self-pity but carries a sense of hope for a gradual transformation. The deployment of blue colour reflects this anticipatory fervour. While the high-contrast red colour intensifies exasperation, the blue shade creates a sense of tranquillity. The song uses a discordant colour palette to make the blue colour 'pop' and stand out from the rest of the scene. The element of discordance is a deliberate choice to disturb the balanced equanimity of the scene, and in extension, the institutional inertia of the social order. The running shot of the blue-hued Karuppi stands for the spirit of Ambedkarite politics in all its revolutionary vibrancy. Similarly, before Pariyan gets beaten up by Jo's cousins in her family wedding, the gift box that Pariyan carries is also blue in colour. Against society's discrimination of the Dalit as the 'other', blue[39] as a leitmotif in the film becomes the colour of the 'other'. With the blue shade painted on his face, Pariyan wears the *salangai* (musical anklet) in the song, which reflects his fulfilled acceptance of his father and his cultural background. To convey the uneasy love relationship between the upper-caste Jo and the lower-caste Pariyan, the cinematographer uses the Dutch tilt. In such a shot, the horizon line of the frame is disrupted as it remains unparallel to the bottom of the frame. This visual strategy adds to the tension and disorientation of the enframed event. The shot stands as a testament to the field of power play and caste politics, which is unequally tilted to the privileged side. The unsteady camera movement is deliberately utilised to capture the restlessness and anxiety of the thematic tenor. As we see, the visual lexicon disorients our vision by making us aware of the vocabulary of violence perpetuated as 'normalcy'.

Meanwhile, an older man in the film performs violent caste killings of youngsters who involve themselves in inter-caste relationships. He follows a dictum wherein if he misses his kill, he will give his life. For him, killing people for protecting his caste honour means a 'sacrificial offering' to God. During a meeting between Jo and Pariyan, the film employs shallow focus to blur the older man's figure as a spectral presence behind them. From a visual standpoint, the viewer is given access to a field of vision that is inaccessible to the two characters, which adds to the heuristic value in the poetics of narration and creative structuration. As the narrative moves

towards the end, we see the confrontation between Pariyan and this murderous man, and as the latter waits for Pariyan to be hit by a train on a railway track, the spirit of Karuppi wakes him up. In this scene, Karuppi is treated as a spiritual presence existing on a metaphysical plane. Both Karuppi's death and Pariyan's plotted murder on the railway tracks magically merge them both on a common ground. This scene reiterates how their lives are continually intertwined in the narrative, hence further foregrounding the intersections between casteist and speciesist 'othering': *Naan illaiyā nee?* (Are you not me?).

Later, Pariyan hurls a stone on the windshield of Jo's father's car as it cracks open. In this scene, the diegetic and extra-diegetic point-of-view shots (POV shot) are interestingly deployed for conveying connotative meanings. The windshield acts as a glass curtain that has to be broken for a potential conversation between the members of the two communities. As we observe, the man inside the car is Jo's father, and it appears as if Pariyan has shattered his fragile caste pride and egotism, as he audaciously says, 'How am I inferior to you? Let me tell you my hand held the plough, just as it wielded the sword'.[40] For the first time, a member of the upper caste lowers down his eyes as Pariyan looks at him right in the eye. The reversal of gaze takes place, as previously it was Pariyan who was always looked down upon for his caste background and ways of being. From the perspective of Jo's father, the broken glass encircles Pariyan's face in a roughly framed iris shot. The low-angle shot pointing upwards towards Pariyan serves as a visual equivalent to his angry outburst implying that he is far superior in his actions due to the magnanimous composure he maintains despite the repeated blows from Jo's family. Through POV shots, the viewer seems to be oscillating between both the positions, within and without, as the film lets the viewer carry the ethical burden of deciding their stance. The film does not sermonise about what is right or wrong, neither does it demand any sympathy for the protagonist. Instead of framing a revenge narrative where the protagonist employs the vocabulary of *aditthal* (violence) to retaliate his oppressors, the film lays emphasis on collaborative dialogue as a way to reach a common understanding during moments of conflicts and contradictions between the two communities.

For Mari Selvaraj, Pariyan is an Ambedkarite representative who chooses education as a weapon to create an alternative paradigm for changing the *ulaviyal* (psychological thinking) of the upper-caste members.[41] According to Selvaraj, if we operate within the predetermined framework of revenge, there is a danger of being trapped into the vicious cycle of violence that the protagonist wishes to avoid in the first place. For this reason, Pariyan did not attack the older man in the narrative, neither did he exhibit hostility to Jo's cousins for urinating on him. The film-maker's objective is to make the dominant castes realise the cruel atrocities they have perpetrated on Dalit lives by exploiting the vulnerability of the Dalit community. For Selvaraj, since Pariyan is not merely fighting an individual injustice but an entrenched systemic problem, the thematic approach of personal revenge does not seem to be a fitting solution for the narrative. Pariyan's strength lies in fashioning his subjectivity through education that can bring a transformation in the deepest recesses of the oppressor's psyche.[42] In one of the scenes where Pariyan's father is admitted in the hospital, Pariyan's conviction for gaining knowledge strengthens, as he feels the pressing need to undo the social stigma surrounding his people. The film deliberately avoids the explicit mentioning of its characters' caste names, since the larger objective of the film is to annihilate caste by explaining the irrelevance of caste identity and dislodging the deeply entrenched caste consciousness. The film presents an experiential tale of Pariyan's fight for dignity and respect as it offers a compelling narrative of the existent caste prescriptions and proscriptions in a humane manner. Selvaraj's film gives primacy to *samarasam* (reconciliation) between the characters in the film without experiencing the fear of debasement and condescension.

Speaking of the narrative development in the film, a character arc involves the transformation of the character(s) with changes in their temperaments or attitudes for a fitting closure. Conventionally speaking, it is where the character(s) face a tragic downfall or rise to glory in a peripeteiac turn of events. In *PP*, it is not only Pariyan who undergoes the process of anagnorisis (recognition) of his existence, his destiny, and his psychological complexities but also the other characters who undergo noticeable changes in the conclusion. For example, Jo's father makes Sankaralingam apologise to Pariyan for his violent provocations and traumatic intimidations. We also see alterations in the psychological superiority of Jo's father as he signals a possible relationship between the two communities and an affirmation of Jo's friendship with Pariyan, perhaps conditional upon his professional success as a lawyer. The older man kills himself as he misses his target. The film constructs this older person as a symbolic character who represents the abstract notion of caste pride. Since the film aims towards a conversational exchange between Pariyan and Jo's father, the elimination of caste pride through the character's death deems this third person's intruding presence irrelevant. Furthermore, through Jo's character, the film highlights the structural intersection of caste and gender and how patriarchal codes perpetuate caste relations and regulate female sexuality (Chakravarti 2003). Throughout the film, Jo's innocence in the narrative as a *devadhai* (An angel) is foregrounded as the knowledge of Pariyan's caste oppression is withheld from her so that her father's casteist image does not get exposed. Selvaraj shows how the institutionalised family structure tries to control the daughter of the family in the name of honour and caste pride by selectively hiding the violent truths of caste animosity against Pariyan and constricting her growth within the ideological constructs of the caste structure under the garb of paternal love. For Selvaraj, this paternal affection is an example of toxic conditional love: *vishathanam* (poisonous love).[43] Jo's innocence coupled with her supreme faith on the family members reveal her internalisation of and subordination to the patriarchal norms. As Selvaraj describes, his character construction of Jo is intended to make the female viewers in front of the screen realise the scheming strategies that lie beneath the seemingly honest display of familial affection.

In terms of *syuzhet* arrangement,[44] in a three-act structure, the narrative is divided into three parts, namely setting, confrontation, and resolution. As the frame of the story is established, the plot progresses towards a plausible answering of a significant question in the end. *PP* disrupts this classic method of storytelling in two ways. Firstly, through the death of Karuppi, as discussed earlier, Selvaraj exposes the cruelty of caste as a sudden explosion violently intervening into the protagonist's life without necessarily following the structural movement of a beginning, middle, and end. Secondly, Selvaraj proceeds his narrative by framing an end which appears more like a beginning. Selvaraj does not give us easy answers in the end and withdraws a conventional happy ending. In a two-shot, the film ends with a peaceful conversation between Pariyan and Jo's father, which instead of providing closure rather appears as the 'beginning' of a serious discourse. Pariyan says, *neenga neengaḷa irukkara varaikkum, naan naaya thaan irukkaṇum-nu neenga ethir pārkkura varaikkum onnumē maarādhu* (As long as you are yourself, and expect me to be a dog, nothing will change).[45] The incandescence of his statement shows how the frontiers of privilege need to be erased for a just society. The societal performance of blessing and supplication, which sustains the social pyramid, only serves to ossify the institution of caste. Through a strikingly vivid tableau shot in the end exhibiting masterful framing, we see two empty glasses[46] with a little flower in the middle representing the ideal of a casteless society accompanied by social egalitarianism. Therefore, we can argue that this final scene becomes a visual metaphor for a humanist weltanschauung.

According to Selvaraj, as a socially responsible film, *PP* attempts to frame an anti-caste narrative without pulling back the societal functioning to a state of atavistic retrogression.[47] In the

film, the process of engaging in a public discourse to seek agreements and differences is the fundamental step towards imagining a humanist world. Through the juxtaposition of narrative, cinematic, gestural, and verbal storytelling, Mari Selvaraj probes into the 'regime of truth' (Foucault qtd. in Hall 1997: 49) that constructs and legitimises the toxicity of upper-caste dominance. It is the freedom to be vocal and to be able to interrogate, criticise, and challenge the institutionally sanctioned dominant narratives that enables the reconfiguration of the social and cinematic imaginary. By articulating a strong Dalit discourse, the film aims to debunk the debilitating casteist arsenals and regressive caste narratives of Tamil cinema that historically foregrounded the ensconced caste superiority of the dominant castes. The film drives home the importance of questioning cultural tropes and cinematic assertions that normalise the seething resentment of the upper caste(s) against the Dalit community. As Pariyan vigorously states, *naan enna ninaichēn-nu solradhukkē setthu thonga vēndiyirukku* (Even to express my thoughts, I am executed/hanged), Jo's father listens to him. In a desolate landscape where there are no signposts, we communicate not just to respond but to listen and learn. This act of listening allows us to inhabit a different episteme, a different experiential idiom (Pariyan's in this case), without asserting the incontrovertible supremacy of the authoritative word. However, maintaining well-orchestrated silences against caste atrocities only serves to bolster the cataclysmic workings of the caste system. Until that blissful rest is disturbed, the following line from the song 'Karuppi' still holds semantic significance: *Ellā Manusanum inga onnu illa* (Not all humans are equal here).

Notes

1 Not all humans are equal here. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine. The chapter attempts to use Roman script to transliterate Tamil dialogues and song lyrics into English, thus using vowels and consonants like ā, ē, ō, ḷ, and ṇ (ஆ, ஏ, ஓ, ள, and ண). For the transliteration of proper nouns/names in Tamil like place and people, I follow the general accepted usage in unitalicised font (e.g., Madurai/Tirunelveli and Pariyan), whereas for film names and Tamil terms, I follow the general usage in italicised font (e.g., *Murattu Kaalai* and *ilavatta kal*).

2 God who mounts a horse (translation mine).

3 See Damodaran and Gorringe 2017. https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4359. Accessed on August 5, 2019.

4 The term 'Thevar' represents the caste title of the 'Mukkulathor caste' that includes three distinct sub-castes, namely Kallar, Maravar, and Agamudaiyars.

5 For understanding the eviction of the Kallars by the peasantry, see Anand Pandian 2005. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946460504200101. Accessed on August 12, 2019.

6 They are also referred to as Devendra Kula Vellalars or Devendrars. As Pandian writes, 'the newly acquired self-definition [by the Pallars] mark out the Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars as caste inferiors' (2000: 514).

7 It is roughly translated as a 'kangaroo court' with no official standing where locally powerful dominant caste men settle issues through violently punitive measures.

8 The sickle-shaped machete (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017: 9).

9 With the organisations like Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) and Puthiya Tamilagam, there have been shifts in the dynamics of power relations through the 'new reality of Dalit mobility' (Pandian 2013a: 14). www.epw.in/journal/2013/04/commentary/caste-tamil-nadu-ii.html. Accessed on August 12, 2019.

10 For understanding the Arunthathiyars Special Reservation Act (2009) and its contestation by other scheduled castes, see Pandian 2013b. www.epw.in/journal/2013/08/commentary/caste-tamil-nadu-iii.html. Accessed on August 12, 2019.

11 See Pandian 1996. www.jstor.org/stable/4404028. Accessed on August 13, 2019.

12 For a detailed discussion of the Old Nativity and the Neo-Nativity film, see Kaali 2000.

13 The disintegration of the supposed masculine toughness can be seen in *Enga Ooru Paattukkaran* (Our Village Bard, Gangai Amaran, 1987) where the protagonist controls the bull not with his physical strength but through his singing, thus offering a reversal of the dominant systemic order.

See Damodaran 2012a. www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/In-films-jallikattu-showcases-masculinity/article13384627.ece. Accessed on August 10, 2019.

14 As Selvaraj Velayutham writes, 'Clean-shaven male Tamil actors on screen are an exception, as opposed to Hindi cinema where it is a norm' (Velayutham 2008: 8).

15 See Leonard 2015. https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2015.1088499. Accessed on August 11, 2019.

16 Name of a folk hero, Ameer, 2007 (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017).

17 Name of a locality in Madurai, Sasikumar, 2008 (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017).

18 See Vaidya and Gopalan 2011. https://handspuncinema.wordpress.com/2011/07/15/cruel-cinema-new-direction-in-tamil-film/. Accessed on August 14, 2019.

19 *Onna Irukka Kathukkanum* (We must learn to live together, V. Sekhar, 1992) is an exception in this regard. It deploys the mode of comedy to break the traditional narrative strategies and audaciously deals with the caste question. See Srinivas and Kaali 1998. Other significant films raising caste issues include *Bharathi Kannamma* (Bharathi's lover, Cheran, 1997) and *Vedam Pudithu* (a new Veda, Bharathiraja, 1987).

20 *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), and *Kaala* (2018).

21 See Rajendran 2018. www.thenewsminute.com/article/when-new-generation-creates-art-there-will-be-tremors-director-mari-selvaraj-82968. Accessed on August 12, 2019.

22 A folk art form in Tamil Nadu where artists incorporate song and dance in their performance of epic narratives.

23 For the 2018 trailer, see youtu.be/GMNsUxJe4R4. Accessed on January 17, 2019.

24 For this translation, see Damodaran 2018.

25 For a discussion on the language question during the nationalist phase and the 'collaborative' relationship between the sanskritised vernacular and the English language in the alienation of Dalit community, see Dash 2009.

26 John Abraham's *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (A Donkey in a Brahmin's Space, 1977) places the diegetic setting in the Agraharam, an area inhabited by the Brahmins. Also, see Pa. Ranjith 2019. youtu.be/yXmIPKOwnRE. Accessed on August 14, 2019.

27 Note the symbolism in this scene: the old principle's table with a portrait of Gandhi and his opinion on the Dalits as 'habitual offenders' and the new principal's table with a portrait of Ambedkar. See Damodaran 2018.

28 *Thingara panni māthiri enna adichu adichu verettinānuva, ōdiyā oḷinju poyittēn naan? Edhu avasiyam-nu therinjukittu pēi māthiri padichēn. Anikku enna adakkanum-nu ninaichavan-ellām inikku aiyya sāmi-nu kumbudurān* (spoken Tamil in Tirunelveli).

29 See Mari Selvaraj's interview 2020. https://youtu.be/yRUKVrqJux8. Accessed on December 15, 2020.

30 See Rangan 2018. www.filmcompanion.in/pariyerum-perumal-movie-review-baradwaj-rangan/. Accessed on August 6, 2019.

31 In a different context, Rao investigates the 'subject-formation' of a Dalit male and the articulation of Dalit masculinity by gender reform within Dalit households in Maharashtra in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Rao 2009.

32 See Yamunan 2016. scroll.in/reel/812882/kabali-film-is-a-response-to-the-2012-dharmapuri-caste-riots-says-dalit-scholar-stalin-rajangam. Accessed on August 13, 2019.

33 In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon speaks about how the structural violence and racial subjugation of the colonial regime negates the humanity of the colonised and makes them question their selfhood: 'In reality, who am I?' (1963: 250).

34 For a discussion on cinematic narratives and works of literature documented on this incident, see Muralidharan 2018. https://thewire.in/caste/keezhvenmani-massacre. Accessed on August 15, 2019.

35 For a report on the brutal attack on the Dalits of Kodiyankulam along with the controversial comments by the inquiry commission, see Viswanathan 1999. frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl1626/16260410.htm. Accessed on August 7, 2019.

36 For a report on the objections raised against the Dalits contesting local panchayat elections by the upper-caste people at Melavalavu, see Viswanathan 2000. frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl1719/17191150.htm. Accessed on August 13, 2019.

37 Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2014) serves as a notable precursor to *PP* exploring the triangulated relationship between inter-caste love, caste humiliation, and self-fashioning of Dalit identity.

38 See Damodaran 2012b. www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Madurai-villages-still-practising-the-two-tumbler-system/article12889113.ece. Accessed on August 4, 2019.

39 The film also shows a shot of Pariyan looking at a wall graffiti which reads 'Red has many meanings, youth can make it more meaningful', reflecting the spirit of communism and its ideals of a classless society.
40 *Edhula-yā naan ungaḷōda keezha poyittēn? . . . ippa solren, ēr pudicha kai-la naanum vaaḷ pudichavan thaan.*
41 See Mari Selvaraj's interview Part 1 2020. https://youtu.be/yRUKVrqJux8. Accessed on December 15, 2020.
42 Selvaraj uses the term *ethiraali* (oppressor). See Mari Selvaraj's interview Part 1 2020. https://youtu.be/yRUKVrqJux8. Accessed on December 15, 2020.
43 See Mari Selvaraj's interview Part 2 2020. https://youtu.be/w8wE2tUOnaQ. Accessed on December 15, 2020.
44 David Bordwell employs the term *syuzhet* borrowing from Russian formalists to refer to the narrative patterning and arrangement of events in the story: 'architectonics of the film presentation' (1985: 50). See Bordwell 1985.
45 In the context of race, Frantz Fanon, in *Wretched of the Earth*, speaks about the construction of a Manichean world in the colonial discourse that leads to the animalisation of the native population/colonised by the privileged anthropocentric gaze of the oppressor: 'When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary' (1963: 43).
46 While Jo's father drinks milk tea, Pariyan's drink is a glass of black tea. It beautifully captures the societal difference between the two.
47 See Mari Selvaraj's interview Part 2 2020. https://youtu.be/w8wE2tUOnaQ Accessed on December 15, 2020.

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