Caste and Rajasthan-Based Hindi Cinema: Depicting Dalit Realities in the Cinematic World

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contributes to the ongoing discourse on the representation of Dalit subjectivity in Indian cinema. It critically examines the portrayal of Dalits in Rajasthan-based Hindi films, focusing on how caste is depicted through a Savarna sociopsychological lens that marginalizes Dalit experiences. By employing Dr B.R. Ambedkar's pragmatic understanding of caste as the central theoretical framework, this research aims to address a significant gap in Indian film studies, where Ambedkar's contributions have been largely ignored or erased in favour of a Gandhian reformist gaze.

Through a close textual analysis of selected Hindi films set in Rajasthan, this study explores the visual, auditory, and narrative strategies used to depict caste hierarchies. It situates these cinematic texts within broader socio-political and cultural contexts through critical discourse analysis, ensuring a comprehensive examination of how films reflect and reinforce societal ideologies. In doing so, the research challenges the dominant 'Brahmanical gaze' and applies the concept of the 'Ambedkarite gaze,' a counter-narrative that seeks to center Dalit agency, dignity, and humanity in cinematic representations. Drawing from anti-caste scholarship and integrating Western theories alongside Ambedkar's writings, this thesis critiques the (mis)representation, wrongful inclusion, and appropriation of Dalit identities in mainstream cinema. The research reveals that Dalits are often portrayed through the lens of victimisation or as secondary characters in feudal-family narratives, reinforcing caste hierarchies rather than addressing caste as a critical social issue.

This study introduces the concept of 'Ambedkarite spectatorship,' inspired by Black spectatorship theories from scholars like bell hooks and Manthia Diawara, to articulate an

oppositional viewing experience for Dalit spectators. It critically engages with intersectional portrayals of Dalit women, emphasizing the need for more nuanced narratives in Hindi cinema.

In conclusion, this thesis pioneers a critical Ambedkarite approach to film analysis, offering a framework to (de)construct the Brahmanical gaze and examine the ideological influence of filmmakers' caste locations on their cinematic representations. It advances Indian cinema studies by proposing a new methodology that recognizes the importance of accurately and dynamically representing Dalit identities and realities on screen, providing a foundation for future research into caste and/in cinema.

In memory of my beloved grandfather, Mr. Pratap Meghwanshi.

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Growing up in a small Rajasthani village, despite the barriers of caste and class that defined much of my childhood, the magic of cinema persisted, becoming a portal to worlds beyond my own. Watching films through half-open windows or imagining endings for stories I couldn’t finish ignited my fascination with storytelling. This later evolved into a deeper

inquiry into representation and identity when I joined the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai. Exposure to films by Dalit filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule and Pa. Ranjith, and the revelation of Neeraj Ghaywan's Dalit identity, profoundly influenced my academic focus. This thesis is rooted in those formative experiences, combining my personal and intellectual journey to question the absence and presence of Dalit voices in Indian cinema.

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Introduction

Cinema possesses a unique capacity to shape perceptions, evoke empathy, and introduce audiences to diverse lived experiences. However, when a substantial section of society—in this case, approximately 200 million Dalits—finds little to no representation on screen, it prompts critical questions regarding the inclusivity and ideological scope of mainstream cinema. Historically marginalized and formerly labelled as 'untouchables', Dalits occupy a social position outside of India's traditional caste hierarchy, enduring systemic discrimination and exclusion for centuries. Despite their demographic significance, their presence within Hindi cinema remains minimal. When Dalit characters do appear, they are frequently portrayed through reductive stereotypes—typically as impoverished, submissive, and confined to menial roles—narrowing the complex spectrum of Dalit life and reinforcing limiting archetypes.[1] The recurring lack of nuanced representation in Hindi cinema raises urgent questions about the role of media in shaping public consciousness and the risks of such selective portrayals, which obscure the resilience, complexity, and agency within Dalit community.

Rajasthan, my home state, has a unique social fabric, and its history of caste dynamics is intricate. While it often serves as an aesthetic backdrop for many Hindi films—with its grand palaces, deserts, and colourful festivals—the harsh reality of caste discrimination and the Dalit experience is almost entirely ignored on screen. This lack of representation is more than just an oversight; it is a form of erasure which results in audiences being presented with a one-dimensional view of Rajasthan, one where the voices and stories of Dalits are completely

[1] Harish Wankhede, 'Dalit Representation in Hindi Cinema', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp.17-31; Vishal Chauhan, 'From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit representation in popular Hindi cinema', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 17:3 (2019), 327-336 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2019.1673544> [accessed 07th October 2024].

missing. It is this gap that drew me towards this research project. I wondered how such a significant part of our population could be absent from our screens. And when they are included, why are they portrayed in ways that don't reflect their stories, struggles, and resilience? To fill this void, I decided to examine the portrayal of Dalits in Hindi films set in Rajasthan, exploring how these cinematic narratives reinforce or challenge caste-based stereotypes.

While prior scholarship has explored issues of caste and representation, these studies are often led by 'upper caste' scholars, offering an external and sometimes detached perspective on Dalit narratives. Few researchers from Dalit backgrounds have examined these representational dynamics, especially from an Ambedkarite perspective. This theoretical lens, grounded in Dr B.R. Ambedkar's anti-caste ideology, is critical for understanding Dalit representation from an *insider's perspective*—prioritizing the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of Dalit communities. Recent works by filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, Neeraj Ghaywan, Vetrimaaran, and Mari Selvaraj have introduced a significant counter-narrative within Indian cinema, foregrounding Dalit stories in ways that resist stereotypical depictions. These Ambedkarite filmmakers interrogate and de-construct caste-based hierarchies on screen, challenging dominant frameworks and creating space for Dalit characters as resilient, assertive, and complex protagonists. This emergence marks a vital shift in Indian cinema, as it empowers Ambedkarite spectatorship and fosters a resistant cinematic discourse that amplifies Dalit voices while disrupting the entrenched 'upper caste' male gaze, constructing an 'Ambedkarite gaze' that re-defines representation. Despite this progress in certain regional cinemas, Hindi cinema has yet to fully embrace such transformative storytelling, particularly within Rajasthani narratives.

Growing up as a Dalit in a Rajasthani village, I witnessed firsthand how cinema served as both a shared cultural experience and a space that subtly excluded marginalized voices. In a community with limited access to media, films were treasured windows to the world but were also reflections that rarely mirrored the Dalit experience. These early interactions with cinema underscored a gap—a noticeable absence of narratives reflecting my community's lives, values, and challenges. This formative awareness forms the foundation of my research, which seeks to explore the role of cinema in constructing and perpetuating narratives of caste, identity, and belonging.

Through an Ambedkarite lens, this study, therefore, engages with Hindi films set in Rajasthan to interrogate how these cinematic texts construct, obscure, or problematize Dalit representation. These central research questions guide this inquiry: How do these films shape public understanding of Dalit identities and experiences? Do they perpetuate or disrupt existing caste stereotypes? And how does the limited presence of Dalit filmmakers and storytellers within the industry, with only a few notable examples, impact the representation of Dalit experiences on screen? This investigation goes beyond mere academic interest; it is a critical engagement with the politics of presence and absence within one of India's most influential cultural institutions. By situating Dalit representation within the socio-political landscape of Hindi cinema, this research seeks not only to challenge the marginalization of Dalit narratives but also to advocate for a more inclusive cinematic discourse that genuinely reflects India's social diversity.

Kaushik Bhaumik posits that the representation of Rajasthan within Hindi cinema functions as a profound cultural microcosm. This perspective reveals how examining the region through its cinematic portrayal allows filmmakers to engage in a persistent interrogation of Indian identity and its core 'truths'. The arid landscape and intricate socio-cultural dynamics

of Rajasthan are employed as a symbolic canvas upon which the broader fate of the nation is projected and interpreted. This cinematic portrayal suggests that Rajasthan serves as a foundational archetype from which a comprehensive understanding of India can be derived, operating as a metonymic representation of the nation as a whole.[2] However, while I agree with Bhaumik's argument, I also want to accentuate that the imagery of Rajasthan presented as a national identity is problematic. This representation often obscures the rich cultural and oral histories of the region, particularly the narratives and experiences of Dalits and other marginalized communities. Such exclusions in popular culture not only undermine the complexities of Rajasthan's socio-cultural fabric but also perpetuate a narrow understanding of Indian identity. Through its cinematic construction, the region is elevated to a position of paramount importance in shaping and reflecting the national identity, yet this portrayal inadvertently marginalizes voices that are essential to a comprehensive understanding of India's diverse heritage.

The historical significance of Rajasthan has long captivated filmmakers aiming to explore India's past, often framing narratives around the Mughals as invaders and the Rajputs as warriors.[3] This cinematic fascination with Rajasthan extends into developmentalist films by state agencies and NGOs, which use the visual medium to address social issues in the region.[4] In this context, Nikkhil Advani's recent film, *Vedaa* (2024), offers a compelling, yet flawed

[2] Kaushik Bhaumik, 'The Persistence of Rajasthan in Indian Cinema: One Region, so Many Views', *Journal of the Moving Image*, 10:10 (2011), 13-39 <https://jmionline.org/article/the_persistence_of_rajasthan_in_indian_cinema_one_region_so_many_views> [accessed 12 August 2024].

[3] Films such as *Amar Singh Rathod* (1956, Jaswant Javeri), *Veer Amarsingh Rathod* (1981, Radhakant), *Rajput* (1982, Vijay Anand) *Padmaavat* (2018, Sanjay Leela Bhansali), *Kshatriya* (1993, J. P. Dutta) exemplify this trend. However, in *Jodha Akbar* (2008), director Ashutosh Gowariker seeks to reinterpret Rajput-Mughal history by emphasizing harmony and solidarity between Hindus and Muslims.

[4] Films such as *I am Kalam* (2011, Nila Madhab Panda), *Rudaali* (1993, Kalpana Lajmi), *Nanhe Jaisalmer: A Dream Come True* (2007, Samir Karnik), *Maya Darpan* (1972, Kumar Shahani), *Tarpan* (1994, K. Bikram Singh), *Parinati* (1986, Prakash Jha), *Haat: The Weekly Bazaar* (2011, Seema Kapoor), *Do Boond Pani* (1971, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas), and *Duvidha* (1973, Mani Kaul).

portrayal of caste-based oppression in Rajasthan, reflecting longstanding cinematic trends that simultaneously attempt to raise awareness while (in)advertently perpetuating stereotypes. *Vedaa* endeavours to foreground the Dalit experience through its titular character, a Dalit woman, and brings caste oppression to the forefront of mainstream cinema. However, despite its ostensibly progressive intention, the film ultimately privileges the perspective of Abhimanyu Kanwar, an 'upper caste' male protagonist. This narrative choice undermines the potential of the film to authentically centre the Dalit experience, instead reinforcing an 'upper caste' gaze that has historically dominated Bollywood's portrayal of marginalized groups. Although the character of Vedaa could offer a nuanced exploration of caste discrimination, her story is mediated through a 'saviour' archetype embodied by Abhimanyu, thereby reducing the Dalit narrative to a backdrop for his heroism. While *Vedaa* marks a significant attempt to engage with the issue of caste on screen, it relies heavily on conventional Bollywood tropes—such as stylized action and the redemptive role of an 'upper caste' hero—that dilute its message. Rather than challenging dominant perspectives, the film risks perpetuating a simplistic, consumable narrative that sidelines the complexities of caste discrimination.[5] This tendency reflects a broader pattern in Hindi cinema's treatment of Rajasthan and Dalits: films often aim to address social issues but end up reinforcing existing narratives, underscoring the need for more critical representations.

While this thesis primarily focuses on Rajasthan, and not specifically on Rajasthani films, a brief discussion of the regional film industry is included here due to its connections with the wider Hindi film industry, highlighting its cultural influence.[6] The Rajasthani film

[5] Neeraj Bunkar, 'When a film has a Dalit protagonist named Vedaa and defends the Vedas', *Forward Press*, 07 September 2023 <https://www.forwardpress.in/2024/09/when-a-film-has-a-dalit-protagonist-named-vedaa-and-defends-the-vedas/> [accessed 07 October 2024].

[6] Films are made in the Rajasthani language, which is a group of Indo-Aryan dialects spoken primarily in Rajasthan, India. The major dialects include Marwari, Mewari, Dhundhari, and Shekhawati, among others. Rajasthani films focus on themes, dialects, and settings relevant to the region, often depicting local customs, rural lifestyles, and traditional narratives specific to Rajasthani culture. While Rajasthani does not have official

industry, with its origins tracing back to *Nazrana* (1942, G.P. Kapoor), has produced approximately 148 films as of 2024. These films are predominantly mythological, drawing on local deities, historical legends, and regional customs. However, the industry's most notable success remains *Bai Chali Sasariye* (1988, Mohansingh Rathod), which portrayed the emotional and social challenges of a woman adjusting to life in her in-laws' home.[7] The impact of the film extended beyond Rajasthan, inspiring remakes in Marathi (*Meherchi Sadi*, 1991, Vijay Kondke) and Hindi (*Saajan Ka Ghar*, 1994, Surendra Bohra), highlighting its widespread influence. During this period, popular actor Govinda, along with other Hindi cinema actors, appeared in Rajasthani films such as *Bira Bego Aaije Re* (1993, Mohan Rathor). The Rajasthani film industry has struggled to expand, facing challenges such as limited government support, inadequate infrastructure, and a scarcity of skilled professionals. Often, this has led to a dependence on other film industries for scripts and resources, hindering the development of original content.[8]

In the early 1980s, Rajasthani cinema began making cautious forays into social themes such as inter-caste relationships, as seen in *Mhari Payari Chanana* (1983, Jatin Kumar). These films had the potential to spark meaningful conversations; however, they often fell short, frequently reinforcing traditional norms rather than challenging them. Although they depicted social issues, these early productions largely upheld dominant societal values, inadvertently validating the very hierarchies they sought to portray. In contrast, recent advancements in digital technology, particularly the rise of over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms, have significantly broadened the reach and scope of regional cinema. Unlike traditional media,

recognition as a separate language in the Indian Constitution, there are ongoing efforts to standardize and promote it.

[7] Rakesh Kumar Goswami, *Rajasthani Cinema A Critical Study* (Jaipur, University Book House, 2018).

[8] Anil Sharma, 'The lights dim on Rajasthan film industry', *India glitz*, 1st October 2005 <https://web.archive.org/web/20110613212109/http://www.indiaglitz.com/channels/telugu/article/17119.html> [accessed 16 August 2024].

which often caters to broader audiences with generalized narratives, niche OTT platforms like 'STAGE' now cater specifically to dialect-based and culturally distinct audiences. This allows filmmakers greater freedom to address complex social issues directly. Contemporary films such as *Bindori* (2023, Anil Saini) and *Rees* (2024, Pankaz Singh Tanwar) have leveraged these platforms to engage in the critiques of caste-based discrimination and "honour" killings—topics traditionally glossed over or treated cautiously.[9] By tapping into the power of OTT platforms, these modern productions provide a critical lens on social injustices, challenging the cultural status quo in ways that were often impossible in early Rajasthani (regional) cinema.

Through my study of the depiction of Dalits in cinema, I found that they are present on screen but only through the lens of Savarna socio-psychology and ideological imagination.[10] This perspective does not view 'caste as a social issue' that needs to be addressed.[11] Instead, caste is portrayed as a neutral or even 'natural' aspect of society. The issue deepens when we look at the filmmakers, writers, actors, and other creative professionals behind these films. Most come from 'upper caste' backgrounds, and they bring their own limited understanding of caste dynamics to their work. For many of them, the idea of 'castelessness' is an assumed or imagined state, which they believe exists in their social circles. To them, caste isn't something that affects their daily lives. For instance, when they look at their own community of filmmakers, actors, or artists, they see people who, despite having different last names (like Kapoor, and Chopra), seem to belong to a unified group where caste isn't a barrier.[12] However,

[9] 'STAGE OTT Platform – Rajasthani', <https://www.stage.in/rajasthani> [accessed 16 August 2024].
[10] 'Savarna' refers to individuals belonging to the dominant or 'upper' castes in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy, which includes Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and sometimes certain upper-level Shudras. In this context, the term implies a perspective shaped by the cultural, social, and ideological frameworks associated with these castes, which often influences how marginalized groups, like Dalits, are represented in media and literature.
[11] Rachel Dwyer, *Bollywood's India.* pp.97-103.
[12] In India, surnames traditionally indicate caste and historical occupation. For example, Sharma and Iyer signify Brahmins (priests), Singh is common among Kshatriyas (warriors), Gupta for Vaishyas (merchants), and Patel for agrarian castes. Bunkar, like my surname, is associated with the weaver caste, reflecting its origins in textile craftsmanship. Although modern usage in some ways transcends these original meanings, surnames still reflect historical social roles.

this is an illusion because they all belong to relatively privileged, dominant-caste backgrounds. These surnames might suggest diversity on the surface, but they all belong to a confined, 'upper caste' reality. It creates a kind of echo chamber where they imagine their world to be casteless because, within their own circles, caste discrimination doesn't appear to exist. They believe they have transcended caste because they see others like them everywhere—in schools, workplaces, and in the film industry itself.

In films created within this echo chamber, Dalit characters often appear as mere props to support and uplift the 'upper caste' protagonists. For instance, Dalit characters are shown as loyal servants or background figures who exist to highlight the compassion, heroism, or nobility of the 'upper caste' characters. They might serve as a backdrop against which 'upper caste' characters demonstrate their kindness, courage, or morality. This serves to protect the 'altruistic' image of 'upper caste' characters while erasing the struggles and agency of Dalit characters. When filmmakers from dominant 'upper caste' backgrounds assign a variety of surnames to their characters—like Khan, Khanna, Kapoor, Sharma, Verma, Shukla, Saxena, Singh, Singhania, Dubey, Dwivedi, Trivedi, Chaturvedi, Malhotra, Pandey, Bhargava, Iyer, Bajaj, Mehta, Gupta, Agarwal, Agnihotri, Awasthi, Batra, Bajpai, Bharadwaj, Dixit, Reddy, Rathore, Chopra, Oberoi, and D'Souza—they may believe they are creating an image of a united, diverse society. However, all these surnames still belong to dominant 'upper castes'. This gives filmmakers the false sense of inclusivity, as they are unaware that their social and professional circles do not truly include Dalits or other marginalized groups. In their films, this illusion continues—creating a fantasy where India seems united, where caste is either an invisible or irrelevant factor. The reality is that this 'unity in diversity' excludes the vast majority of marginalized communities. It remains an (en)closed bubble where 'upper caste' voices dominate, and the stories of Dalits and other 'lower caste' groups are left out, misrepresented, or, at best, only lightly touched upon. These filmmakers fail to understand that

the world they uphold and thrive in represents only 10 to 15% of India's total population, excluding the majority from their imaginary 'perfect' world. Consequently, their environment does not compel them to think critically about caste in either their 'real' or 'reel' worlds.[13]

Over the past decade, anti-caste directors have adeptly articulated the intricate narratives of Dalit life on screen, challenging the historically 'upper caste' dominated realm of Indian cinema. Their films transcend mere mass entertainment, serving as potent social commentaries that confront and critique the entrenched status quo of Indian society. Furthermore, these filmmakers interrogate and (de)construct the structural and ideological foundations of cinema, transforming it into a space for marginalized voices and perspectives. The influence of filmmakers from the Dalit community extends beyond cinema, contributing to the education about, and awareness of, the diverse lived experiences of Dalits. This has fostered a heightened consciousness and cinematic literacy among Dalit audiences, transforming them into active and critical spectators of both Dalit and 'upper caste' filmmakers' works.[14] Within this context of growing awareness regarding the political economy of films, 'upper caste' filmmakers have recognized the commercial potential of producing films addressing caste and Dalit issues. Consequently, the past decade has seen a surge in such films. Despite being criticized by Dalits for their problematic portrayals and superficial narratives, these films have significantly occupied the cinematic space that can be termed as 'caste films'.[15] Moreover, it has been observed that during promotional activities, including interviews, actors and creators occasionally reference and commend Dr B.R. Ambedkar. While some interpret this as a public relations strategy aimed at attracting 'lower

[13] Rachel Dwyer, *Bollywood's India.* pp. 97-99.
[14] Dickens Leonard and Manju Edachira, 'Magizhchi! 'The Casteless Collective' and the Sensorial Exscription Films', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 63-74.
[15] I have compiled a comprehensive list of Hindi films that address caste and Dalit subjectivity from the inception of Indian cinema to the present day. I refer to this collection as 'caste films'. See Appendix 1 for the complete list.

caste' audiences, others view it as a sincere effort to integrate Ambedkarite discourse into the mainstream narrative.[16]

This rise in anti-caste cinema can be seen as a contemporary extension of the ongoing evolution of Indian cinema, which began in the late 19th century with the advent of motion pictures. The seeds of Indian cinema were sown with the arrival of the Lumière brothers' films, and this initial fascination with the technology culminated in the production of *The Wrestlers* (1899, H.S. Bhatavdekar), marking the birth of documented Indian motion pictures. However, it was Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, popularly known as Dadasaheb Phalke, with his mythological feature film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), that laid the foundation for the burgeoning Indian film industry.[17] The 1930s ushered in a new era with the arrival of sound films. Ardeshir Irani is credited with revolutionizing Indian cinema with his 1931 film, *Alam Ara*, which is hailed as the country's first talkie, marking a pivotal moment in the industry's evolution. Irani's innovative spirit extended beyond sound; he also directed *Kisan Kanya* (1937), India's first colour film, which depicted the peasantry's struggle and revolt against oppressive feudal landlords. This period also witnessed the flourishing of studios and the blossoming of regional cinema, with films being produced in languages like Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu. Following India's independence, the period from the 1950s to the 1960s is often referred to as the 'Golden Age' of Indian cinema, characterized by a confluence of social commentary and mythological narratives. Films like *Awara* (1951, Raj Kapoor) and *Mother India* (1957, Mehboob Khan) garnered international acclaim, showcasing the emerging 'Marxist

[16] 'Janhvi Kapoor surprises fans with deep insights on Gandhi, Ambedkar, and casteism: 'This issue that we have in our society', *The Economic Times*, 25th May 2024 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/janhvi-kapoor-surprises-fans-with-deep-insights-on-gandhi-ambedkar-and-casteism-this-issue-that-we-have-in-oursociety/articleshow/110417504.cms?from=mdr#> [accessed 03 August 2024].

[17] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.1; Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Introduction: Shifting the Gaze', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp.7-13.

consciousness' within the industry.[18] Simultaneously, Hindi cinema, often dubbed 'Bollywood', established itself as a dominant force, churning out larger-than-life musicals, romances, and melodramas. The 1970s witnessed the rise of Parallel Cinema, a movement that championed realistic storytelling and social themes, offering a counterpoint to the mainstream. In recent decades, Indian cinema has experienced significant diversification. Regional films are flourishing, while Bollywood creates movies across various genres, appealing to a global audience. This era has also seen an increase in independent productions, adding further depth and variety to the landscape of Indian cinema.[19]

The socio-cultural, political, and historical dimensions of Indian cinema reveal a conspicuous absence of Dalit narratives and stories that challenge the caste system from the perspective of the oppressed. While these narratives could provide agency to Dalit communities, mainstream Indian cinema has predominantly aligned with a reformist mindset that avoids disrupting the social fabric and seeks to maintain equilibrium among various castes. This selective omission is further underscored by the designation of Dadasaheb Phalke as the 'father of Indian cinema', despite the existence of other significant figures from diverse regions who could equally merit such recognition. A pertinent example is Ramachandra Gopal Torne, also known as Dadasaheb Torne, whose film *Shree Pundalik* was released on 18 May 1912, a year before Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*. Despite this, Phalke is widely regarded as the founder and father of Indian cinema, whereas Torne is not. This discrepancy can be attributed to Phalke's Brahmin status as opposed to Torne's non-Brahmin background. This exemplifies

[18] Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desires* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.76-87.
[19] Sudha Tiwari, 'From New Cinema to New Indie Cinema: The Story of NFDC and Film Bazaar', in *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood The New Independent Cinema Revolution*, ed. by Ashvin Immanuel Devasundaram (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp.25-43.

how Indian cinema has been dominated by Brahmin 'upper caste' individuals since its inception, a bias that is reflected in the thematic content of its films.[20]

The depiction of caste inequality and the conditions of Dalits in society in Hindi cinema starts with early films that explicitly highlight these issues. One of the pioneering films in this genre is *Khuda Ki Shaan* (1931, R.S. Choudhury), which critiques the caste system through the story of Ramaki, a Dalit girl who has an illegitimate child with Manekchand, the son of a wealthy man. This drama lays bare the societal prejudices and challenges faced by Dalits. In 1935, V. Shantharam's bilingual Hindi-Marathi film *Dharmatma* depicts the story of Sant Eknath (1533–1599), a historical figure who defied the 'rigid caste system by breaking traditional customs and eating with Dalits'.[21] This film highlights the struggles against caste discrimination and the efforts of social reformers to promote equality. Following this, *Achhut Kanya* (1936), directed by Franz Osten, further explored the theme of caste inequality. The film tells the poignant love story of a Brahmin boy and an 'untouchable' girl, bringing to the forefront the deep-seated prejudices and societal barriers that defined relationships and social interactions in that era. The 1940 film *Achhut*, directed by Chandulal Shah, similarly reflects on the issue of untouchability but does so in the context of M. K. Gandhi's ongoing campaign against the practice. *Achhut* highlights the plight of marginalized communities, depicting their struggles and the social stigma they faced.[22]

Later, in the 1950s, the film *Sujata* (1959, Bimal Roy) sparked widespread discussion for its nuanced yet restrained portrayal of caste-based notions of 'purity' and 'pollution', which are foundational to the caste system. The story explores caste inequality by centring on the experiences of Sujata, a Dalit character raised by a Brahmin family. Through her life, we

[20] Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Introduction'.
[21] Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Introduction'.
[22] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, 2nd edn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 283.

witness how deeply ingrained caste biases shape perceptions and limit personal freedoms. However, the film's narrative approach stops short of actively challenging these societal norms or advocating for structural transformation. Instead, *Sujata* presents Dalit subjectivity in a constrained, almost submissive manner, reflecting a subtle, likely intentional hesitancy by the filmmakers to confront caste's deeply embedded role directly, perhaps to avoid backlash in a society resistant to such critiques. Moreover, the title itself, Sujata—meaning 'noble born'—underscores the film's complicated stance. Given by her adoptive Brahmin parents, the name suggests that Sujata is, in their view, ready to be accepted into the Savarna world. This naming subtly implies an aspiration for her acceptance yet paradoxically confines her worth within the boundaries of Brahminical standards, insinuating that her 'nobility' is something bestowed upon her by these standards, rather than an inherent part of her identity. Through this, *Sujata* gestures toward inclusion but does so within the constraints of an existing caste hierarchy, leaving the broader structures of caste untouched. In essence, while it gives visibility to Dalit experiences, the film refrains from an outright rejection of caste, focusing instead on an individual's journey to acceptance within a limited social framework.[23]

The 1970s was a pivotal decade for Hindi cinema, marked by a rich blend of genres, influential filmmakers, and iconic stars. This era witnessed the rise of Amitabh Bachchan as the 'Angry Young Man', a character that resonated deeply with audiences grappling with societal frustrations. Films like *Zanjeer* (1973, Prakash Mehra), *Deewaar* (1975, Yash Chopra), and *Sholay* (1975, Ramesh Sippy) epitomized this persona, reflecting the socio-political climate of the time, characterized by unemployment, corruption, and a growing sense of disillusionment. The decade also saw a surge in action and crime dramas, alongside the emergence of the quintessential 'masala' film—a genre blending drama, action, romance, and

[23] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia,* p. 361.

comedy. Manmohan Desai became synonymous with this style, delivering hits like *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), which, despite its light-hearted approach, touched on themes of religious and social division. Simultaneously, social and family dramas remained popular, with directors like Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee offering heartwarming stories in films such as *Anand* (1971) and *Chhoti Si Baat* (1976). These films focused on human relationships rather than overtly political themes. However, the decade also subtly engaged with caste issues, often presenting 'lower caste' characters either as victims of societal injustice or as marginalized figures struggling against oppressive systems. Additionally, the rise of characters like Bachchan's 'Angry Young Man' symbolized a rebellion against the established order—an order shaped not only by class exploitation but also deeply entrenched caste hierarchies. While the films rarely named caste explicitly, their portrayal of systemic injustice and power imbalance often resonated with Dalit and subaltern audiences, who recognized in these stories a parallel to their own structural marginalization.[24]

The Parallel Cinema movement in India gained significant momentum during the 1970s, characterized by its focus on 'realistic', socially relevant, and issue-based narratives. This cinematic movement emerged as a distinct alternative to the mainstream Bollywood films, which were often criticized for their formulaic and escapist content. Pioneering directors such as Shyam Benegal and Mrinal Sen were instrumental in shaping this movement, bringing a fresh, and 'realistic' perspective to Indian filmmaking. Shyam Benegal's oeuvre during this period exemplifies the ethos of Parallel Cinema. His debut feature, *Ankur* (1974), is a seminal work that examines the socio-economic disparities and caste dynamics in rural India. This was followed by *Nishant* (1975), which continued to explore themes of social injustice and the abuse of power. *Manthan* (1976), funded by over half a million farmers, depicted the

[24] Alaka Sahani, 'The Cinema of the Big Four: Manmohan Desai, Prakash Mehra, Yash Chopra, Ramesh Sippy', in *The Swinging 70s: The Stars, Style, and Substance in Hindi Cinema,* ed. by Nirupama Kotru, Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2024), pp.144-53.

cooperative movement in Gujarat and highlighted the potential for grassroots organization and empowerment. *Bhumika* (1977) offered a complex portrayal of a woman's search for identity and autonomy within the confines of traditional societal structures, specifically highlighting the Devadasi system. Mrinal Sen's *Mrigayaa* (1976) is another cornerstone of this period, reflecting the struggles of indigenous communities against colonial exploitation. Sen's narrative style and thematic concerns were deeply rooted in the socio-political realities of contemporary India, adding depth and nuance to the Parallel Cinema movement.[25]

These films categorized as 'art house' or non-commercial in India, primarily funded by the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC), are designed to raise awareness of socially relevant issues such as poverty, child marriage, education, caste, and employment.[26] This cinematic movement, often referred to as 'India's avant-garde cinema', or more recently described by the term 'Prayog,' has emerged as a space for experimentation and innovation within Indian cinema.[27] The period, particularly the 1980s, is regarded as a critical phase for Indian cinema due to its production of films that engage deeply with the social consciousness of Indian society. Despite the progressive and liberating themes these films explore, they exhibit a significant limitation: the exclusion of Dalit perspectives and the lack of sensitivity in addressing caste issues. Rather than directly engaging with caste, these films often subsume it under broader narratives of class struggle, poverty, and feudal oppression. This tendency reflects an avoidance of addressing the specific and structural nature of caste discrimination, thereby diminishing its presence within the discourse of Indian avant-garde cinema.

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[25] Maithili Rao, 'Conjuring a Different Beat: Parallel Cinema's High Noon', in *The Swinging 70s: The Stars, Style, and Substance in Hindi Cinema,* ed. by Nirupama Kotru and Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2024), pp.441-49.
[26] Sudha Tiwari, 'From New Cinema to New Indie Cinema'.
[27] Ira Bhaskar, 'The Indian New Wave', in *Routledge Handbook Of Indian Cinemas,* ed. by K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2013), p 30; Amrit Gangar, 'The Cinema of Prayoga', in *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913*–2006, ed. by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler (London: Wallflower Press, 2006).

As Parallel Cinema progressed into the 1980s, it evolved to reflect India's changing socio-political landscape, adapting its themes and style accordingly. Although the movement declined towards the late 1980s, its influence on Indian cinema remains significant, especially in the realm of socially conscious storytelling. By the 1980s, the term 'social films' had emerged as a broad category for works that tackled themes relevant to Indian society, with 537 films officially classified as such in 1988 alone.[28] However, even within this context, mainstream cinema has often been critiqued for its treatment of social themes, particularly through the lens of caste. Purnachandra Naik's critique of Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001) exemplifies this. Naik argues that the character of Kachra, the Dalit outcast, is symbolically named after 'garbage' or 'waste,' reinforcing the character's position at the lowest rung of the village's Brahminical hierarchy.[29] The passive portrayal of Kachra, devoid of agency, mirrors the Dalit experience under the caste system, where marginalized individuals are often depicted as subservient symbols of impurity. Similarly, *Swades* (2004), while lauded for its social messaging, still operates within a Savarna framework, with an 'upper caste' protagonist embodying the 'saviour complex' to uplift rural India, without meaningfully engaging with Dalit realities. This reflects how mainstream cinema often presents solutions to caste issues through external, 'upper caste' intervention, rather than addressing the structural inequalities themselves.

In the broader context of my thesis, these films, while engaging with social themes, reveal the limitations of mainstream Hindi cinema in authentically portraying Dalit characters and their lived experiences. Even when caste issues are presented, the perspective often remains deeply rooted in a Savarna framework, ultimately reinforcing rather than challenging caste

[28] Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema*, p.13.
[29] Purnachandra Naik, 'Screening Caste: 'Untouchable' Body, Labour, and Remuneration in Lagaan', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), p. 332.

hierarchies. This analysis highlights how, when 'upper caste' filmmakers address Dalit issues in Hindi cinema, they often approach it through a lens of 'charity' or 'service' (Seva) rather than empowerment. This perspective aligns closely with M.K. Gandhi's ideological emphasis on 'Seva', which tends to position Dalits as passive recipients rather than active agents of change.[30] Throughout the thesis, I explore this 'upper caste' gaze in contrast to the 'Ambedkarite gaze' employed by Dalit filmmakers. The latter approach engages with caste issues and the lived realities of Dalits from a position of empowerment and authenticity, offering a different, more nuanced perspective that challenges the prevailing narratives in mainstream cinema.

A predominant characteristic of Hindi cinema is its pervasive 'Bollywoodization' of content through an 'upper caste' lens, which can be described as the 'Brahmanization of Bollywood'. This thesis critically examines and challenges the prevailing, established representations of marginalized subjects in Hindi cinema, which are often unequal, hierarchical, stereotypical, and unjust. This counter-narrative, which calls for the 'Ambedkarization of Indian cinema,' signifies a critical framework that challenges and aims to transform these entrenched depictions within the Indian film industry. The 'Brahmanization of Bollywood' is manifested in a consistent portrayal of romantic relationships confined to homogenous social strata, a nostalgic yearning for a traditional, Hindu-centric ethos, and a preponderance of 'upper caste' characters occupying positions of dominance. Historical narratives frequently romanticize feudal eras and familial dynamics, reinforcing a hierarchical worldview. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued, Bollywood films often function as a 'nostalgia industry' catering to the desires of the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) diaspora for a

[30] R. Srivatsan, 'Concept of 'Seva' and the 'Sevak' in the Freedom Movement', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41:05 (2006), 427-438 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4417766> [accessed 10th October 2024].

romanticized India.[31] Hindi cinema's approach to caste discrimination and untouchability tends to be one-dimensional, often adopting a Gandhian and Brahmanical gaze that oversimplifies caste dynamics. Films by Dalit filmmakers provide rare exceptions, offering deeper engagement with these issues. Consequently, films by 'upper caste' filmmakers often overlook Dr B.R. Ambedkar's critical contributions and pragmatic ideas. By neglecting Ambedkar's perspective, the cinematic portrayal of Indian society remains incomplete, failing to recognize its multifaceted nature, and the integral presence of Dalits within it. Building on the critique of the 'Brahmanization of Bollywood' in this section, the following section expands the discussion by highlighting a critical gap in Indian cinema scholarship, particularly the lack of attention to the marginalized voices of Dalits and the absence of Dr Ambedkar's anti-caste perspective in mainstream film analysis.[32]

The scholarship on Indian cinema is vast and diverse, with significant contributions exploring themes like nationalism, religion, gender, and the socio-political evolution of India. However, a critical gap remains in addressing caste, particularly in terms of Dalit representation and marginalization. My analysis of Hindi films seeks to expand on this area, drawing on both Western theories and Dr Ambedkar's writings to provide a critique grounded in anti-caste perspectives. This approach addresses a significant oversight in the works of prominent academics and Indian film theorists, who have largely neglected Dr Ambedkar's contributions and perspectives.

To begin, Ashish Rajadhyaksha's *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, co-authored with Paul Willemen, serves as a foundational text that provides a comprehensive history of Indian

[31] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian cinema: cultural nationalism in a global arena', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4:1 (2003), 25–39 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464937032000060195> [accessed 05th August 2024].

[32] I purposefully use Ambedkar's name with the prefix Dr throughout the thesis, since it has a different meaning in Ambedkarite politics and its movement. It is an assertion as well as a statement that a community that has long been denied education has achieved this position and produced people like Ambedkar, who received two PhDs from overseas and became India's most educated person of his time.

cinema from the colonial period to contemporary times. Rajadhyaksha examines cinema's intersections with nationalism, religion, and gender, highlighting how films both shape and mirror dominant social norms and values. By providing this historical backdrop, Rajadhyaksha sets the stage for a nuanced understanding of the socio-political dynamics at play within Indian cinema.[33]

Focusing on psychological and cultural dimensions, Ashis Nandy's works, *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* (ed.) and *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, examine how cinema reinforces dominant ideologies influenced by colonialism and nationalism. Nandy critiques the ways in which films engage with themes of innocence, culpability, and identity under these pressures, offering an in-depth analysis of the psychological impact of cinema on both individual and collective identities.[34]

Following Nandy's cultural critiques, Ravi Vasudevan's *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* offers an analysis of Bollywood through the lens of melodrama. Vasudevan argues that melodrama provides a unique framework for articulating social tensions and ethical dilemmas, underscoring the participatory relationship between audiences and cinema. His work highlights the genre's role in reflecting collective aspirations and moral conflicts within society, thus contributing to our understanding of Bollywood's societal impact.[35]

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[33] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, 2nd edn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[34] Ashis Nandy, *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
[35] Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010).

In an alternative approach, Madhava Prasad's *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* applies a Marxist lens to analyse cinema's ideological function. Prasad examines how popular cinema serves as a mediator between the state and civil society, suggesting that it operates as a vehicle for ideological narratives that align with state interests and maintain social cohesion. His structural analysis differs from Vasudevan's genre-based exploration by focusing on the ways cinema reinforces socio-political hierarchies and state ideologies.[36]

Transitioning to identity and religion, Rachel Dwyer's *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India* and *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* explore Bollywood's role in shaping Indian identity. Dwyer examines how contemporary cinema reflects and influences the national consciousness, engaging with religious and political symbols to reveal Bollywood's negotiation of identity politics and social values.[37]

Building on Dwyer's cultural analysis, attention shifts to an industry-centred perspective with Tejaswini Ganti's *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*, which investigates Bollywood's socio-economic framework. Ganti analyses industry practices, economic structures, and the impact of globalization on Bollywood.[38] Similarly, Anustup Basu's *Bollywood in the Age of New Media: The Geo-televisual Aesthetic* focuses on the influence of new media and digital technologies on Bollywood, exploring how these changes reshape narrative styles and audience interaction in a globalized context.[39]

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[36] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of The Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[37] Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006); Rachel Dwyer, *Bollywood's India.*
[38] Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
[39] Anustup Basu, *Bollywood in the Age of New Media: The Geo-televisual Aesthetic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2010).

More recently, in *Contested Representation: Dalits, Popular Hindi Cinema, and Public Sphere*, Dhananjay Rai examines the complex dynamics of Dalit representation in Hindi cinema, highlighting how mainstream narratives have historically marginalized Dalit voices. Rooted in political theory, Rai's analysis critiques Hindi cinema's 'social language'—the frameworks used to convey societal values on-screen. By drawing on concepts like the 'public sphere', Rai offers a theoretical lens to explain why Dalits are often relegated to peripheral roles. However, his reliance on pre-established frameworks has been critiqued for sometimes overlooking the subtleties within individual films. For example, Rai's sociopolitical analysis tends to focus more on interpreting ideological frameworks than on closely examining cinematic shifts or nuanced portrayals within the films themselves.[40]

Rai's work is significant in addressing representational politics in popular Hindi films, yet it largely focuses on older films like *Sujata* (1959, Bimal Roy), *Sholay* (1975, Ramesh Sippy), and *Swades* (2004, Ashutosh Gowariker). As a result, it overlooks recent shifts in Dalit representation, including emerging portrayals by Dalit filmmakers. Contemporary films like *Article 15* (2019, Anubhav Sinha) or those directed by anti-caste filmmakers like *Jhund* (2022, Nagraj Manjule), *Karnan* (2021, Mari Selvaraj) indicate a more complex and evolving landscape of Dalit visibility—one that Rai's framework does not fully capture. Consequently, while *Contested Representation* provides a robust theoretical foundation, its relevance may be limited in addressing the increasingly layered and diverse depictions of Dalit characters in today's Indian cinema.[41]

While Dhananjay Rai's *Contested Representation* brings critical attention to Dalit representation in Hindi cinema, its limitations highlight a broader gap in Indian cinema studies:

[40] Dhananjay Rai, *Contested Representation: Dalits, Popular Hindi Cinema, and Public Sphere* (London: Lexington Books, 2022).
[41] Dhananjay Rai, *Contested Representation*.

the lack of sustained, anti-caste analyses rooted in Ambedkarite perspectives. Building on this gap, my research offers an anti-caste critique, drawing from Dr. Ambedkar's work to examine how caste hierarchies influence cinematic representation and restrict Dalit visibility. By centring caste within the analysis, this approach expands current discourse on Indian cinema and addresses an often-overlooked dimension of socio-political influence within Hindi film narratives.

In contrast, anti-caste scholars from the Dalit community have made significant contributions to Indian cinema studies from an Ambedkarite perspective. Scholars such as Harish Wankhede, Vishal Chauhan, Jyoti Nisha, Suraj Yengde, Rajesh Rajamani, and Manju Edachira are particularly noteworthy for filling this gap in existing scholarship. Their work not only addresses the absence in conventional Indian cinema studies but also provides a fresh and critical lens for analysing films. Their explorations are characterized by a richness, originality, and distinctiveness that challenges and expands traditional approaches to the field.

Harish Wankhede's research on the evolution of Dalit representation in Indian cinema offers a valuable contribution to the field. He highlights the historical tendency to depict Dalits as marginalized, submissive, and stereotypical characters. However, Wankhede also acknowledges the recent emergence of more nuanced and positive portrayals, suggesting a potential shift towards the creation of 'Dalit hero' figures on the silver screen.[42] Jyoti Nisha's work complements Wankhede's analysis by introducing the concept of a 'Bahujan spectatorship'.[43] Nisha argues that this critical gaze challenges the dominant Brahmanical and

[42] Harish Wankhede, 'A New Dalit Hero', *The Indian Express*, 05th October 2017 <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-new-dalit-hero-hindi-cinema-bollywood-newton-caste-social-identity-dalit-character-4874709/> [accessed 20 August 2024].

[43] *Bahujan:* a compound word in Hindi and Sanskrit derived from *Bahu* ('many') and *Jan* ('people') literally translates to 'majority'. It also carries deeper social and historical connotations in India. As noted by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his Pali-English Dictionary, the term can signify 'most people, the multitude, the world, mass of people, crowd'. However, within the context of social justice movements, it specifically refers to the historically marginalized and oppressed social groups that constitute the majority of the population. B. R. Ambedkar, 'Pali-

casteist ideologies prevalent in Indian cinema. Her research offers a significant intervention, as it questions the stereotypical depictions of Bahujan communities and invites viewers to consider alternative perspectives.[44] Manju Edachira's analysis of the films *Kaala* and *Kabali* along with other anti-caste films further enriches the discussion on Dalit representation. Edachira contends that these films transcend the conventional autobiographical narratives of Dalit suffering and pain. Instead, they celebrate joy, happiness, and success, articulating an anti-caste aesthetic that moves beyond the limitations of pity and humiliation.[45]

In this thesis, my aim is to utilize Dr Ambedkar's pragmatic understanding of caste, society, and people in my film analysis. Firstly, I have noticed that Dr Ambedkar and his teachings do not find space in the cinematic imagination of the Savarna-dominated film world. Secondly, in the analysis and discussion of films, Dr Ambedkar has been erased and made irrelevant by Savarna scholars. Films that address the sociology of Indian society through narratives around the feudal-family, and the poor-rich binary often do so through a 'Gandhian reformist gaze.' This perspective can be critiqued and countered through an 'Ambedkarite gaze,' inspired by anti-caste theorists from the Dalit community. This counter-gaze incorporates elements necessary to establish a humanitarian society based on liberty, equality,

English Dictionary' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 16, ed. by Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 68.

[44] Jyoti Nisha, 'Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship, *EPW Engage*, 15:20 (2020), 2349-8846 <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/indian-cinema-and-bahujan-spectatorship> [accessed 20 August 2024].

[45] Manju Edachira, 'Anti-Caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 55.38 (2020), 47-53 <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/38/special-articles/anti-caste-aesthetics-and-dalit-interventions.html> [accessed 20 August 2024].

and fraternity.[46] It integrates a feminist perspective, creates space for marginalized voices, and emphasizes the importance of respecting and recognizing all individuals as humans.[47]

This study approaches the selected films through an Ambedkarite lens, contextualizing the representation of caste and Dalits from an insider perspective rooted in lived experiences. By framing the analysis within the socio-political and historical context surrounding these films, as argued by Tejaswini Niranjana, the examination extends beyond the 'filmic text' alone, integrating the larger ideological discourses that shape both the films and their interpretations.[48]

I have predominantly used narrative analysis, which offers rich insights into storytelling structures and ideological framing, but it also has its limitations. Its focus on plot, dialogue, and character arcs can overlook how cinematic meaning is co-produced through sound, mise-en-scène, visual composition, and editing. A multimodal approach that includes visual semiotics or sound analysis might reveal subtleties of caste representation encoded in lighting, camera movement, or diegetic sound. Nonetheless, narrative remains a powerful entry point

[46] I incorporate these three Buddhist mantras, which Dr B.R. Ambedkar used in his political and ideological work. They are central to the Ambedkarite movement and ideology and are echoed in the preamble of the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar, B. R., 'Riddles in Hinduism: An Exposition To Enlighten the Masses' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 04, ed. by Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 283; Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Which Ambedkar?', *The Indian Express,* 26th December 2015 <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/which-ambedkar-in-parliament-and-for-rss/> [accessed 10 November 2024].

[47] Sharmila Rege, 'Education as 'Trutiya Ratna': Towards Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45:44 (2010), 88–98 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20787534> [accessed 10 November 2024]; Meenakshi Sharma, 'Ambedkar's Feminism: Debunking the Myths of Manu in a Quest for Gender Equality', *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 11:1 (2019), 17-24 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X18819899> [accessed 10 November 2024]; Prachi Patil, 'Reclaiming Ambedkar Within the Feminist Legacy', *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 10:1(2022),1-11<https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221098290> [accessed 10 November 2024]; Harsha Senanayake and Samarth Trigunayat, 'Brahmanical Patriarchy and Voices from Below: Ambedkar's Characterization of Women's Emancipation', *Open Political Science*, 3:1(2020), 175-182 <https://doi.org/10.1515/openps-2020-0014> [accessed 10 November 2024]; Smita M. Patil, 'Listening to the Call for Social Justice: On Ambedkarite Women's Songs and Poetic Expressions from Maharashtra, India', *Revista Científica Arbitrada de la Fundación Mente Clara*, 8: 336 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.32351/rca.v8.336> [accessed 10 November 2024].

[48] Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Introduction', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 32: 3 (1999), pp.3-8.

for understanding ideology in Hindi cinema—particularly when studying how stories of Dalit marginality are told, modified, or erased.

To ensure a representative analysis, a purposive sample of 75 Hindi-language films set in Rajasthan has been identified, broadly aligning with Kaushik Bhaumik's concept of 'Cinema Rajasthan' (see Appendix 02).[49] From this corpus, six films were selected for in-depth analysis based on thematic and aesthetic relevance. Additionally, the film *Sairat* (2016, Nagraj Popatrao Manjule) was included in a comparative analysis with its remake, *Dhadak* (2018, Shashank Khaitan), which is set in Rajasthan. Finally, Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala*, set in Maharashtra/Mumbai, is the primary focus of the concluding chapter. This chapter examines the distinct narrative and aesthetic strategies of Dalit filmmakers, contrasting them with those of 'upper caste' filmmakers. Drawing on Harish Wankhede's observations, it identifies this as the 'nascent phase of the Dalit genre,' which seeks to democratize the cinematic landscape.[50]

To support the critical arguments presented in this thesis, I compiled two appendices: Caste Films and Cinema Rajasthan. These were developed through purposive sampling and extensive online research. Drawing on Kaushik Bhaumik's article that identifies Hindi films set in Rajasthan as 'Cinema Rajasthan' and using Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen's Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema to uncover lesser-known titles, I also consulted internet sources like IMDb and Wikipedia to identify Hindi-language films that either explicitly or implicitly engage with caste or are geographically and thematically rooted in Rajasthan. The lists are not exhaustive but aim to serve as a starting point for mapping caste consciousness and regional aesthetics in mainstream and marginal cinema. Each entry was evaluated based on

[49] Kaushik Bhaumik, 'The Persistence of Rajasthan.
[50] Wankhede, Harish S., 'From the margins to the mainstream: how films are elevating marginalised voices', *The Hindu*, 19th September 2024 <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/from-the-margins-to-the mainstream-how-films-are-elevating-marginalised-voices/article68634063.ece> [accessed 10 October 2024]

thematic relevance, narrative treatment of caste, filmmaker's positionality, and audience reception.

This thesis combines film analysis with cultural and sociological perspectives, examining films by both 'upper caste' and Dalit (Ambedkarite) filmmakers. Each chapter explores specific themes, such as the portrayal of Rajasthan, contrasts in caste-related storytelling and the 'gaze' of Dalit versus 'upper caste' filmmakers, the representation of 'lower caste' women, and Ambedkarite spectatorship. Influenced by concepts from Black spectatorship, particularly the work of bell hooks and Manthia Diawara, my research interrogates the complex burden of representation, moving beyond conventional frameworks of 'absence-presence' and exclusion-inclusion.

In Chapter One, 'The Portrayal of Rajasthan in Bollywood Films', I discuss the cinematic representation of Rajasthan in Bollywood through a critical analysis of two films: Vijay Anand's *Guide* (1965) and J.P. Dutta's *Ghulami* (1985). My goal is to assess how these films either reinforce or challenge prevailing narratives about mythology, secularism, national unity, and feudalism in both pre- and post-independence India. *Guide* is analysed through a developmentalist lens, reflecting the era's emphasis on nation-building and modernization. Set in Udaipur, the film presents Rajasthan through a touristic gaze that aligns with Nehruvian ideals, emphasizing secularism, unity, and progress while marginalizing Dalit issues. Conversely, *Ghulami* depicts entrenched feudal and caste dynamics, portraying the struggles of post-independence peasants against oppressive landlords. Although the film highlights the harsh realities faced by 'lower castes', particularly tenant farmers, I argue it oversimplifies the intersectional aspects of caste and class by merging their struggles with those of farmers, leading to a limited exploration of systemic issues. I argue that both films engage with Gandhian perspectives but in contrasting ways. *Guide* embodies the Nehruvian vision of

modernity and unity in diversity, while *Ghulami* critiques the Gandhian ideal of a self-reliant village economy by exposing ongoing social stratification and injustice. Through this comparison, I reveal how Bollywood's portrayal of Rajasthan navigates complex themes of caste, feudalism, and socio-economic realities, often obscuring or oversimplifying the experiences of the Dalit community.

In Chapter Two, 'Bollywood and the Culture of Caste Blindness: A Critical Analysis of *Dhadak* and *Sairat*', I examine how filmmakers' perspectives shape the portrayal of caste in Hindi cinema, focusing on the concept of 'gaze'. This chapter compares *Dhadak* (2018, Shashank Khaitan) with its Marathi source film, *Sairat* (2016, Nagraj Popatrao Manjule), which, set in rural Maharashtra, directly addresses caste discrimination. I argue that Khaitan, like many 'upper caste' filmmakers, adopts a 'caste-blind' approach due to his privileged background, downplaying the significance of caste and reframing it as an issue of class or urban-rural divide. By relocating the story from Maharashtra to Rajasthan, *Dhadak* diminishes the original film's critical engagement with caste, reflecting the 'Brahmanical gaze,' a selective view that sidesteps caste realities in favour of less contentious themes. This selective focus, common among 'upper caste' filmmakers, enables them to depict class and gender tensions without confronting the complexities of caste discrimination. As a result, *Dhadak* has been widely criticized for diluting the core issue in *Sairat*. Even *Dhadak*'s producer, Karan Johar, recently acknowledged this oversight, expressing an intention to rectify it in *Dhadak 2* (2024, Shazia Iqbal), a remake of the Tamil film *Pariyerum Perumal* (2019), directed by Dalit filmmaker Mari Selvaraj. Set for release in 2025, Dhadak 2 promises a more authentic portrayal of caste, signalling a possible shift in Bollywood's approach.[51]

[51] The Hollywood Reporter India, 'Off Script with The Hollywood Reporter India | Filmmakers Roundtable', online video recording, *YouTube,* 23rd September 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPECvsyAuC8&t=352s> [accessed 11 October 2024].

In Chapter Three, 'Resisting and Unveiling Voices in *Bawandar, Lajwanti*, and *Kaanchli*', I examine the portrayal of Dalit women through critical issues of gaze, spectatorship, and caste dynamics. Set against the backdrop of Rajasthan, these films address the objectification and commodification of Dalit women, exploring this theme in distinct and thought-provoking ways. *Bawandar* presents Sanwari's fierce resistance to systemic injustice after surviving sexual violence. While her courage is evident, the film raises the pressing question: can a Dalit woman find justice within a society structured by caste and gendered legal and social norms? In contrast, *Lajwanti* and *Kaanchli* follow women who, despite being objectified by the 'upper caste' male gaze, begin to reclaim their autonomy and resist the constraints imposed by caste and gender. Central to these films is the theme of 'honour' (*Izzat*), a concept deeply intertwined with caste identity. Far from being a mere social construct, 'honour' serves as a tool for enforcing dominance and control over women's bodies and choices.

Lajwanti, subtitled *The Honor Keeper*, challenges conventional notions by depicting a woman who chooses to reject the social expectations tied to honour. On the other hand, *Bawandar* starkly reveals how a rape survivor is shamed more than her attackers, exposing the brutal reality of a society that upholds oppressive norms. The films' cinematic language plays a key role in reinforcing or subverting these themes. Through camera angles, character arcs, and narrative framing, the films invite us to question who controls the gaze and the narrative. Are we, as spectators, complicit in the male gaze, or do the films challenge it? This chapter explores how these cinematic elements contribute to the portrayal of Dalit women's struggles and resilience, illustrating both the amplification and silencing of their voices within the socio-cultural fabric of Rajasthan. By incorporating an intersectional approach to the portrayal of Dalit women, I acknowledge the overlapping systems of oppression they face due to their caste, gender, and often class. This approach highlights that Dalit women's experiences cannot be

understood solely through the lens of caste discrimination or gender inequality in isolation. Instead, it examines how these factors interact to create unique challenges, such as systemic violence, exclusion from social and economic opportunities, and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms both within and outside their communities.[52]

In Chapter Four, 'Resistance from Real to Reel: Examining Select Anti-Caste Films', I provide a critical analysis of anti-caste cinema, focusing on the film *Kaala* (2019) directed by Pa. Ranjith, with references to other notable films such as *Karnan* (2021, Mari Selvaraj), *Asuran* (2019, Vetrimaaran), and *Kabali* (2016, Pa. Ranjith). In this chapter, I explore the interplay between spectatorship and resistance, examining how these films serve as vehicles for societal transformation by challenging dominant caste narratives. I explore the convergence of the 'real' and the 'reel,' where cinema becomes a battleground for anti-caste ideology, particularly through the Ambedkarite gaze. *Kaala* is highlighted as a seminal work that encapsulates the spirit of anti-caste struggle, integrating Bahujan ideals, political symbolism, and community resistance. Through this chapter, I examine how these films engage audiences on emotional, intellectual, and ideological levels, encouraging a form of spectatorship that transcends passive observation.

Overall, this thesis makes a contribution to the field of Indian cinema studies by employing a critical Ambedkarite mode of inquiry, positioning it as a pioneering study that traces the representation of Dalits within the historic context of Rajasthan as depicted in Hindi cinema. The terms Ambedkarite gaze and Ambedkarite spectatorship are used to critically analyse film form, style, and content, challenging the prevailing 'upper caste' or

[52] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1: 8 (1989), 139-166 <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8> [accessed 23 December 2024]; Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 33.44 (1998), 39-46 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4407323>[accessed 23 December 2024].

‘Savarna/Brahmanical gaze’. This study explores the ideological and caste location of directors and its influence on cinematic representation, emphasizing the importance of accurately and dynamically representing Dalits on screen. Additionally, it investigates the emergence of an oppositional spectatorship among Dalit audiences as a response to their portrayal in cinema. The thesis also critically examines the representation of Dalit women, focusing on the gaze employed by filmmakers and underscoring the significance of intersectionality in these portrayals.

Chapter One: The Portrayal of Rajasthan in Bollywood Films

The monumental landscapes of Rajasthan, particularly the vast Thar Desert, have long captivated filmmakers seeking evocative backdrops for their narratives. This cinematic love affair with the region can be traced back to Vijay Anand's 1965 film *Guide*, which pioneered the use of Rajputana's majestic palaces as settings for mainstream Hindi cinema.[1] While earlier films, such as *Prem Sanyas/The Light of Asia* (1925, Franz Osten & Himanshu Rai), *Neel Kamal* (1947, Kidar Sharma), *Amar Singh Rathod* (1957, Jaswant Zaveri), *Railway Platform* (1955, Ramesh Saigal), and *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960, K. Asif), explored Rajasthan's historical and architectural grandeur, Anand's work marked a shift. *Guide* effectively positioned Rajasthan as a gateway to modern cinematic storytelling, where the interplay of tradition and modernity unfolded against the dramatic landscapes of the region. Satyajit Ray's 1974 Bengali film *Sonar Kella* also made memorable use of Jaisalmer's desert vistas. However, the film's impact remained largely regional due to its language. Ray was drawn to Jaisalmer not only for the way its striking landscapes complemented his story but also because the location, relatively untouched by prior cinematic treatment, offered him a fresh and authentic visual palette. This allowed him to craft a narrative unburdened by the conventions that often accompany well-worn settings in film.[2]

Guide, however, with its Hindi language and carefully selected landscape, not only resonated with audiences across India but also paved the way for future filmmakers to explore the region's cinematic potential. The Thar Desert offers more than just breathtaking scenery; its distinctive customs, vibrant costumes, captivating dance and music, and richly layered cultural symbols provide a mise-en-scène that, as film scholar Shalini Ayyagari notes, '[serves]

[1] R.K. Narayan's 1958 novel *The Guide* inspired the 1965 film of the same name, starring Dev Anand and Waheeda Rehman in a story of love, loss, and spiritual redemption.
[2] Satyajit Ray, *Our Films Their Films* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 1976), p. 73.

as a tool to represent the whole nation in the Indian imagination'.[3] Rajasthan's combination of tradition, spectacle, and striking visual aesthetics evokes a sense of timelessness and cultural heritage that filmmakers use to construct an idealized vision of India. This ability to represent broader national themes enables Rajasthan, traditionally situated on the geographical and economic periphery of India's main urban and cultural centres, to play a central role in cinematic narratives. Through its portrayal in Bollywood cinema, Rajasthan offers insights into complex issues of national identity, cultural evolution, and the enduring appeal of the exotic in the public mind.

This chapter examines how Rajasthan is portrayed in Bollywood cinema, exploring its role in reinforcing or questioning dominant narratives of mythology, secularism, national unity, and feudalism in both pre- and post-independence India. My examination rests upon two key films: Vijay Anand's *Guide* (1965), and J.P. Dutta's *Ghulami* (1985). I will approach each film through a distinct critical mode, revealing the varied aspects of Rajasthan woven into the cinematic imagination. Firstly, *Guide* serves as a crucial text for understanding the Nehruvian ideals and developmentalist gaze applied to Rajasthan. Set amidst the nascent years of independent India, the film unfolds in Rajasthan, showcasing the city of Udaipur and the desert in unprecedented cinematic detail. It exemplifies the hallmarks of popular Hindi cinema during this era, tackling themes of secularism, national unity, religious practices, and mythological narratives. Although the issue of caste is sometimes acknowledged, it is often addressed superficially, ultimately reinforcing the marginalization of Dalits as second-class citizens in society. Secondly, *Ghulami* shifts our focus to the stark realities of Rajasthan's feudal and caste-ridden society. It delves into the struggles of post-independence peasantry, their battle against the oppressive 'upper caste' Thakur landlords, and the enduring weight of caste hierarchies. By

[3] Shalini Ayyagari, 'Film Frontiers: Imagining Rajasthan in Contemporary Bollywood Film', in *Music in Contemporary Indian Film: Memory, Voice, Identity*, ed. by Jayson Beaster-Jones and Natalie Sarrazin (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 48-49.

situating the narrative within both colonial and post-colonial contexts, the film exposes the complexities of life for tenant farmers, particularly those from the 'lower castes', who are bound to land owned by a Thakur landlord. *Ghulami* thus stands as a unique and unflinching portrayal of Rajasthan's social landscape, a facet rarely explored in other cinematic representations of the region during that period.

By analysing these diverse cinematic representations, this chapter will unveil the multifaceted and often contested construction of Rajasthan in Bollywood.[4] It moves beyond the picturesque landscapes and romanticized depiction of Rajasthan to explore the labyrinthine interplay of myth, modernity, and marginalized voices that shape the region's cinematic landscape.

Nehruvian ideals and early depictions of Rajasthan

This section will argue that, although *Guide* ostensibly promotes the government's welfare-oriented development schemes and the concept of 'unity in diversity,' a closer examination reveals a significant omission: caste as an issue, particularly concerning Dalits, is overlooked like other social evils. By foregrounding caste as a missing element, I aim to provide a more critical understanding of how *Guide* serves as an exemplar for understanding the intricate interplay between cultural mythology, post-colonial identity, and social realities in 1960s India. In the cinematic adaptation of R.K. Narayan's seminal novel *The Guide* (1958),

[4] The cinematic oeuvres referenced in this context encompass J. P. Dutta's *Kshatriya* (1993), Samir Karnik's *Nanhe Jaisalmer: A Dream Come True (2007),* Anurag Kashyap's *Gulaal (2009)* Anil Sharma's *Veer* (2010), Nila Madhab Panda's *I Am Kalam* (2011), Sooraj Barjatya's *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo* (2015), Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dhanak* (2015), and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat* (2018). These cinematic works, collectively, delve into the portrayal of Rajput pride and historical narratives, utilizing the Thar desert as a poignant symbol to represent the state of Rajasthan in the cinematic realm.

director Vijay Anand orchestrates a nuanced exploration of human relationships, societal dynamics, and the intricacies of faith.

Initially, Dev Anand, the lead actor and producer of the film, decided to make the film simultaneously in English and Hindi. He appointed Tad Danielewski, an American filmmaker of Polish origin, to direct the English version, while Chetan Anand was to direct the Hindi version. However, due to differences in the directors' approaches to shooting scenes, Dev Anand ultimately decided to complete the project sequentially—first filming the English version, followed by the Hindi version. The English version premiered at the Lincoln Art Theatre in New York but failed miserably, primarily because the context did not resonate with the audience and due to Waheeda Rahman's unconvincing English diction.[5]

Consequently, Dev Anand shifted his focus entirely to the Hindi version. Vijay Anand introduced several significant changes to the Hindi adaptation, beginning with the title, which was shortened to *Guide*. Although both versions of the film are adaptations of R. K. Narayan's novel, Vijay Anand took considerable creative liberties to alter significant elements, making the film more palatable to a broader socio-cultural base. There were several major changes introduced in the Hindi screenplay: the extramarital affair had to be handled with subtlety, as opposed to its explicit portrayal in the English version. Rosie's character needed to be portrayed as innocent and distressed, to make her more likable and acceptable as a heroine, even within the context of an extramarital relationship—an aspect challenging to accept within the Indian ethos of that time. Raju's character was transformed into a lovable and innocent young man with flaws. Songs were incorporated to advance the narrative, particularly in addressing the uncomfortable aspects of marital and extramarital relationships, allowing the story to progress smoothly. The Hindi version required a positive conclusion, eliminating any ambiguity at the

[5] Lata Jagtiani, 'Guide: A Perspective', in *Guide The Film: Perspectives*, ed. by Lata Jagtiani & Other writers (New Delhi: Blue Pencil, 2019), pp.20-88.

end. Raju's heroic fast had to result in the rains coming, turning his death into the victory of faith over disbelief.[6]

The film's geographical shift from the fictional town of Malgudi to Udaipur is indicative of a broader strategy to appeal to a wider audience. Rajasthan, with its iconic landscapes, has become a symbolic shorthand for India, offering a romanticized and exoticized representation of the nation. This choice, while aesthetically pleasing, obscures the regional specificity of Narayan's original text. Despite these significant changes to make the film more acceptable to a wider audience and reflecting the progressive ideals of Nehruvian secularism, Gandhian solidarity, and nationalism, the film conspicuously obscures the issue of caste. Addressing caste was crucial for a broader agenda of establishing a harmonious society within the political context of that time. This omission raises questions about the film's engagement with the socio-political realities of India, especially considering the pivotal role caste plays in the nation's social fabric.

Against the backdrop of post-independent India, the narrative intricately weaves together the lives of its central characters — the charming tour guide Raju, the discontented Rosie, and the aloof archaeologist Marco. Through their interwoven destinies, the film navigates themes of love, loss, morality, and the clash between superstition and science. Their paths cross when Raju becomes Rosie's guide. A bond forms, leading them to flee their old lives. As Raju and Rosie's bond blossoms amidst the evocative settings of Rajasthan's urban allure and rural struggles, the film provocatively examines the socio-economic disparities between urban prosperity, epitomized by Udaipur's tourism, and rural hardships exacerbated by drought and famine. An integral facet of the narrative unfolds in the villagers' unwavering

[6] Lata Jagtiani, 'Guide: A Perspective'.

faith in Raju as a holy man (Swami), juxtaposing the palpable realities of a world driven by rationality and scientific inquiry.

Guide serves as a platform to unveil a previously unexplored portrayal of Rajasthan to a nationwide audience, presenting the region in a multi-dimensional manner that encompasses its aesthetic beauty and profound religious significance. It assumes a welfare-centric approach, shedding light on the economic significance of Udaipur within Rajasthan and on a broader scale, within the tourism industry of India. The narrative arc of Raju's life, depicted as a tourist guide, serves as a conduit through which audiences are led to explore various dimensions of Rajasthan. Through Raju's journey, viewers are introduced to a wide array of tourist attractions such as forts, palaces, lakes, mountains, and hills, offering an extensive depiction of the region's cultural and natural heritage. The visual and narrative techniques employed in the film create a promotional tone, highlighting its role as a tool for advancing the government's agenda of establishing Udaipur as a premier tourist destination, both domestically and internationally.

In *Guide,* various editing techniques manipulate time and narrative flow to highlight the duality of Raju's character. Flashbacks provide essential backstory, often tied to the protagonist's voiceover, blending past and present. Dissolves create seamless transitions between these temporal planes, maintaining continuity and emphasizing the connection between Raju's former life and his current transformation. This technique visually integrates flashbacks, suggesting the coexistence of Raju's identities. However, jump cuts disrupt this flow, fragmenting the timeline and creating a sense of disorientation. The tension between the smooth continuity of dissolves and the jarring effect of jump cuts mirrors Raju's internal struggle, highlighting the instability and unresolved nature of his transformation. Together, these techniques are crucial in visually encoding the film's central theme of duality and conflict.

Furthermore, *Guide* plays a crucial role in shaping the film's visual and thematic impact. It fully utilizes the 'vibrant primary colours and imposing monuments of the Rajasthani landscape in technicolour', creating a rich and visually striking backdrop that complements the narrative.[7] This cinematic style not only enhances the setting but also imbues the characters and their actions with symbolic meaning, reinforcing the themes of the film. The film's use of music functions as a significant narrative device, contributing to character development. Song lyrics, penned by Shailendra, serve a dual purpose.[8] On the one hand, they reflect the characters' internal and external conflicts within the broader narrative. For instance, the soothing and meaningful song '*Aaj Phir Jeene Ki Tamanna Hai* (Once again, I have a desire to live)' lays bare Rosie's yearning for a new life as a dancer, a path to freedom and self-expression. On the other hand, songs like '*Rama Mere, Allah Mere Pani De Re* (O Lord Rama, O Allah, Please Bring Rain)' underscore the film's thematic exploration of religious unity by referencing deities from both Hinduism (Rama) and Islam (Allah).

Moreover, the film subtly conveys the ideological stance of the governing body and its developmental policies within the political landscape. This is evident in the portrayal of Raju's linguistic proficiency, facilitating communication with tourist groups hailing from diverse regions across India. Raju's ability to converse in multiple regional languages symbolizes the government's emphasis on celebrating diversity while fostering a sense of national unity. For instance, the scene wherein a paan vendor extols the virtues of his product by enumerating the varied origins of its ingredients—ranging from Mysuru to Calcutta, Mumbai, and Bikaner—

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[7] Philip Lutgendorf, 'Guide', *The University of Iowa, Indian Cinema,* 09 July 2014 <https://indiancinema.sites.uiowa.edu/guide> [accessed 18 May 2024].

[8] Shailendra, a lyricist who penned close to 900 timeless songs for Bollywood films in the 1950s and 60s, belonged to the Dalit community. Though he never publicly acknowledged or revealed his caste identity, his background is believed to have influenced his poignant lyrics that often touched on themes of social struggles and the experience of common people. See Amit Khanna, 'Remembering Shailendra, the Balladeer of Hindi Cinema', *The Wire*, 14 December 2018 < https://thewire.in/film/remembering-lyricist-shailendra> [accessed 02 June 2024]; Fiza Jha, 'Shailendra — the Leftist poet and Dalit genius whose lyrics define beauty of simplicity', *The Print*, 14 December 2019 <https://theprint.in/theprint-profile/shailendra-the-leftist-poet-and-dalit-genius-whose-lyrics-define-beauty-of-simplicity/335262/> [accessed 02 June 2024].

serves as a metaphorical representation of the cultural and geographical diversity inherent within the nation. Raju's observation that the paan vendor's spiel resembles a discourse on national unity rather than a mere promotion of paan underscores the intertwined interplay between cultural representation and ideological messaging within the film.

The film emphasizes the concept of religious and social unity through the reference to Saint Kabir, and the character of Gaffoor.[9] Gaffoor, a Muslim who is a friend of the protagonist Raju (now Swami), is initially barred from entering the temple by a devotee. However, Swami intervenes, proclaiming 'love is my religion', and allows Gaffoor to enter. The act of Gaffoor offering prayers inside the temple reinforces a message of harmony among faiths (see figure 01).

Figure 01: Gaffoor, a Muslim friend of Raju, praying inside a temple.

This can be interpreted as a reflection of the desired unity between Hindus and Muslims following the partition of India. Scholars like Raita Merivirta argue that films of this era contributed to nation-building by promoting Nehruvian ideals of 'unity in diversity'.[10] During

[9] Kabir was a spiritual saint in Indian history known for his radical work for establishing an egalitarian and casteless society.

[10] Raita Merivirta, 'Historical Film and Hindu–Muslim Relations in Post-Hindutva India: The Case of Jodha Akbar', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 33: 5 (2016), 456-477 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2015.1094331> [accessed 8 March 2022].

the Nehruvian era, cinema frequently conveyed a message of secularism and social unity among religious groups.[11] Tejaswini Ganti echoes this sentiment, highlighting how post-colonial Indian films 'emphasized the unity of the Indian nation despite its tremendous religious, linguistic, ethnic, and regional diversity'.[12] This era also witnessed the rise of Parallel Cinema, which focused on social issues like poverty, rural society, corruption, domination, and feudal oppression.[13] Films like *Shree 420*, directed by and starring Raj Kapoor, characterized Nehru's socialist and community-oriented approach by depicting problems of migration, poverty, and unemployment. The film's progressive themes were recognized by Prime Minister Nehru himself, and it was awarded a certificate of merit for the second-best feature film in Hindi.[14]

Gender, caste and *Izzat*

In its portrayal of national unity and communal harmony among diverse groups, *Guide* notably excludes the representation of Dalits, and the complex social stratification rooted in caste that shapes life in rural Rajasthan. The narrative fails to engage with the caste system, neglecting the discrimination and marginalization that Dalits have historically faced, particularly in terms of social status and opportunities. By disregarding this aspect, the film presents an idealized version of unity that does not account for the systemic

[11] The Nehruvian era (1950-1964) refers to the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his planning for development-building dams, industries, initiating job-oriented schemes.
[12] See Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 32.
[13] Parallel Cinema also known as 'New cinema' refers to an Indian film movement that emerged in West Bengal in the 1950s as an alternative to mainstream commercial cinema. This movement is characterized by its focus on realism, social commentary, and artistic expression, prioritizing these elements over commercial appeal. Notable figures associated with Parallel Cinema include Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak.
[14] Partha S. Ghosh, 'Nehruvian' Cinema And Politics', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 46:2 (2019), 90–99 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26856500> [accessed 16 November 2024]; Avijit Ghosh, 'Nehru's vision shaped many Bollywood golden oldies', *The Times of India*, 16th November 2009 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/nehrus-vision-shaped-many-bollywood goldenoldies/articleshow/5233286.cms> [accessed 16 November 2024]; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, *State Awards for Films: Films in India, 1956* (New Delhi: Directorate of Advertising & Visual Publicity, 1957).

inequalities present in rural communities. Instead, it offers a generalized portrayal of rural society, focusing primarily on representations of Baniyas (merchants), Brahmins (priests), and peasants, while omitting the experiences and struggles of marginalized Dalit communities. This absence of Dalits within the filmic narrative is highlighted by Harish Wankhede, asserting that even during the era of 'meaningful cinema' characterized by the 'progressive-socialist' movement between 1950 and 1965, commonly referred to as the 'Golden Age of Hindi Cinema', issues such as exploitative urban conditions, unemployment, and poverty were addressed while the Dalit and caste-related concerns were bluntly neglected.[15] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, in his *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, discusses the film *Guide* but neglects to address the subaltern caste-centric concerns present in the film. This omission further contributes to the invisibility of Dalits in popular discourse.[16]

Furthermore, the cinematic treatment of Dalit and Adivasi (tribal) communities in *Guide* reflects a broader trend within Bollywood, where such communities are either marginalized or depicted through stereotypical lenses.[17] The film perpetuates these stereotypes, notably through the portrayal of a tribal girl as the mistress of Marco, reinforcing common Bollywood tropes. Additionally, the depiction of the Kalbelia community, a Dalit group in Rajasthan, as solely engaged in playing the pungi (a folk music instrument) and performing the Nagin dance highlights the problematic 'upper caste' gaze that often shapes portrayals of Dalit

[15] Harish S Wankhede, 'OTT Platforms and The New Dalit Characters in Indian Cinema', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 57:26 (2022), 48-54 <https://www.epw.in/journal/2022/26-27/insight/ott-platforms-and-new-dalit%C2%A0characters-indian.html> [accessed 12 July 2022].
[16] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, 2nd edn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.373.
[17] 'Adivasi' derives from the Hindi word 'adi' meaning 'of earliest times' or 'from the beginning', and 'vasi' meaning 'inhabitant' or 'resident'. The term emerged in the 1930s, primarily as a result of a 'political movement' that sought to create a unified identity among the diverse indigenous communities of India. Adivasi communities, often referred to as 'tribal' or 'indigenous', have historically lived in the country's forests and rural areas, maintaining distinct cultural, linguistic, and social practices. These communities are frequently marginalized socially, economically, and politically, and have faced significant exploitation and displacement due to colonial and post-colonial state policies. see Ratnakar Bhangra, C.R. Bijoy And Shimreichon Luithui, *The Adivasis of India* (UK: Minority Rights Group Publications,1999).

communities.[18] This reductive representation reflects the marginalization of these groups, portraying them through a lens of Otherness and reinforcing their status on the periphery. Other artistic communities of Rajasthan, including the Manganiyars, Langas, Nuts, and Qalandars, similarly suffer from being ignored or stereotyped within the cinematic representation of their cultural practices and identities.[19]

Figure 02: Marco enjoying a drink while a tribal girl massages his legs.

The representation of the tribal girl in the film is a prime example of the male gaze in operation. Laura Mulvey's seminal work on visual pleasure and narrative cinema provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the film positions the female body as an 'object of desire' for both the male character and the spectator.[20] Marco's 'predatory' gaze establishes

[18] The Kalbelia community, known as snake charmers of Rajasthan, engage in folk songs and dance, and are well known globally for their traditional dance 'Kalbelia Dance', also listed under the UNESCO cultural heritage list. They also known as *Sapera* who play *pungi* to catch cobras.

[19] Manganiyar, Langa, Nut, and Qalandar are Rajasthan's artistic and nomadic communities who are performance artists singing folk songs, performing magic, and performing plays with bears. But in the last few years and with the introduction of laws related to the protection of animals, their activities have been restricted, hence, they started settling down.

[20] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan,1989), p.16.

a dynamic where he is the active subject, and the tribal girl is reduced to a passive object for his consumption. This is reinforced by the physical positioning of the characters—Marco, positioned comfortably with a drink, while the tribal girl is at his feet, physically engaging with him in a subservient manner. The focus of Marco's attention on her, without any indication of reciprocal interaction or communication, further underscores his dominant position (see figure 02).

Marco's invasive physicality, reflected through his body language and his proximity to the girl, constructs her as an object of his pleasure. The tribal girl's role is largely instrumentalized: she is there to serve Marco's needs, both through the physical act of massaging his legs and by fulfilling the visual and sexual role imposed on her by his gaze. In this scene, her body and actions are separated from any sense of subjectivity or autonomy, presenting her solely as an instrument to satisfy Marco's desires. The portrayal of the tribal girl in the scene taps into the longstanding colonial and cultural stereotype of indigenous women as 'exotic' and 'available'. These women are often depicted in a manner that emphasizes their perceived wildness, Otherness, and inherent connection to nature, which, in turn, marks them as objects for the enjoyment of outsiders. By showing the tribal girl in this servile and submissive position, the image reinforces the harmful notion that Adivasi women exist for the consumption of others—whether sexually, visually, or through labour.

Marco's expressed attitudes towards women further illuminate the film's complicity in perpetuating patriarchal power dynamics. His character articulates a misogynistic worldview that reduces women to mere objects of possession and control. His marriage to Rosie is presented as a transactional arrangement, with her elevated social status serving as a marker of his own success. This narrative reinforces the notion of women as property, their value determined by their ability to enhance the man's status. The film thus participates in a broader cultural discourse that reinforces the 'upper caste' male gaze. By positioning the Adivasi

woman as an object of desire and control, it not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also reinforces the power imbalances inherent in patriarchal societies.

In a pivotal monologue, Raju exhorts Rosie to recognize her dreams and self-worth, stating, 'The times have changed, Rosie. Gone are the days when women were considered mere servants of the household, weeping, suffering, enduring, yet unable to voice their pain. Similarly, the era has passed when someone was deemed inferior solely because they were born into a lower social class or caste. If it were up to me, I would prove to Marco the true nobility of your caste, Rosie'.[21] Startled, Rosie responds, 'Mine?' Raju continues, 'Artists are not *Bhānd*; today, even those with *Izzat* (honour) and respect hold them in high regard'.[22] This dialogue is crucial in its (re)production of caste stereotypes and the linking of *Izzat* with caste. By referencing the *Bhānd* community, a Dalit group categorized as Scheduled Caste in Rajasthan and known as traditional entertainers, Raju's comments reflect the caste-blindness of the director.[23] By differentiating the *Bhānd* from other artists, the dialogue suggests that the *Bhānd* are not deemed worthy of receiving *Izzat* from those inherently endowed with it, likely due to their 'upper caste' status. As a result, the *Bhānd* are referred to as *Izzat*-less.

Furthermore, the narrative explores the concept of *Izzat* in relation to Rosie, highlighting how societal perceptions of her are shaped by her mother's past as a former Devadasi. In this context, Rosie is seen as lacking honour due to the stigma attached to her mother's profession, which forces her to marry Marco, a man of high social standing, in an attempt to regain *Izzat.* Marco's derogatory reference to Rosie as *Badachalan* (indecent) and

[21] The translation is mine.
[22] The translation is mine.
[23] John Emigh with Ulrike Emigh, 'GUIDE: Hajari Band of Rajasthan', *Documentary Educational Resources*, <http://www.der.org/resources/guides/hajari-bhand-of-rajasthan-study-guide.pdf> [accessed 21 June 2024]; 'Scheduled Castes in Rajasthan', <https://sje.rajasthan.gov.in/Default.aspx?PageID=65> [accessed 21 June 2024].

his self-identification as *Sharif* (gentry) further emphasizes the social hierarchies, and the judgement of moral character based on class and background.

This theme of honour is also deeply tied to religion, as shown when Raju introduces Rosie to his mother. His mother hesitates upon hearing Rosie's name, revealing the religious prejudices embedded in the family's worldview. Raju tries to reassure his mother by clarifying that Rosie's name is associated with love, not with her religious background. This distinction indicates that, while his mother can accept a friend of a different religion (Gaffoor), she cannot easily accept a woman from another religious community, showing how religious prejudices intersect with gender and social expectations. Raju's reassurance that Rosie is not from another religion alleviates his mother's concerns, underscoring the deep-seated biases present in society.

Additionally, Raju's uncle disparages Rosie by calling her a Tawaif (courtesan) due to her dancing, once again signifying a lack of 'honour'. Raju's attempts to elevate Rosie's image from a 'Nāchne Vaalī' (dancer) to a respectable classical dancer involve changing her name from Rosie to Miss Nalini, thereby concealing her true identity, social background, and past in order to gain *Izzat* and achieve success.[24] The film also includes a scene with newspaper matrimonial advertisements, which play a significant role in showcasing the rigid social structure of society. These advertisements serve as a reflection of the deeply entrenched caste and class distinctions, as they exclusively feature surnames associated with the 'upper castes' seeking brides from the same social strata. This highlights the societal expectation of maintaining purity of lineage and status through marriage, and it reinforces the idea that people like Rosie, with a history deemed 'dishonourable', would be excluded from such opportunities. Thus, the scene functions as a critique of social stratification and the limitations imposed on

[24] This theme of *Izzat*, particularly in relation to the resistance of Dalit women in films, is explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

individuals based on their background. Despite prevailing caste distinctions that prohibit inter-caste marriages, Marco, an 'upper caste' individual, marries Rosie not out of a rejection of caste stratification but due to his desire for control. As an older (compared to Rosie), wealthy 'upper caste' man, he seeks a subordinate partner rather than an equal life companion. Marrying Rosie, a woman of 'lower' social standing, allows him to dominate and take her for granted, framing the marriage as a benevolent act of rescuing her from the traditional oppressive Devadasi system.

The film stresses the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding the institution of marriage by delineating the dichotomy between agency and constraint in the selection of life partners. This thematic exploration is presented through contrasting narratives involving key characters. Firstly, Rosie's predicament, stemming from her mother's status as a former Devadasi—a tradition that literally translates to 'female slave of God'—emphasizes the societal pressure to enter into matrimony as a means of liberation from the constricting confines of this tradition.[25] However, Rosie's marriage to Marco, an archaeologist, proves stifling as her aspirations for artistic expression are curtailed by her husband's conservative outlook on dance, which he perceives as 'dishonourable'. Rosie's subsequent encounter with Raju during a trip to Udaipur catalyses her emancipation, as Raju empowers her pursuit of dance, thereby imbuing her life with a newfound sense of liberation and self-actualization. This narrative trajectory epitomizes a feminist paradigm, wherein Rosie's quest for autonomy and self-respect transcends the confines of conventional marital norms. Her yearning for independence and the freedom to

[25] Devadasi is a tradition that literally translates as a 'female slave of God' and considered as lower in the social hierarchy. They live on the temple premises and are not allowed to go outside the designated premises. It is their duty to dance for the 'God' and dedicate their body to the 'God'. Here the 'God' is represented by the priests of the temples. See K. B. Saxena, 'Dalits and the Devdasi System: A Dignified Form of Sexual Slavery', in *Dalits, Subalternity and Social Change in India,* ed. by Ashok K. Pankaj and Ajit K. Pandey (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 181-204.

pursue her passion emphasizes the imperative of agency in marital partnerships, positing that fulfilment lies not in conformity but in the assertion of individuality and self-determination.[26]

Conversely, later in the film, Raju, mistaken as a holy figure by villagers, espouses the sanctity of marriage, thereby endorsing its role as a cornerstone of societal order. This is symbolised in his counsel to a reluctant village girl, wherein he invokes her name Maya in a divine context, framing marriage as a conduit for emotional fulfilment and societal validation.[27] This ideological stance reflects prevailing cultural norms that valorise marriage as a sacrosanct institution, integral to the attainment of dignity and social acceptance, particularly for women. Thus, the film delineates a dialectic between the emancipatory ethos embodied by Rosie's pursuit of autonomy and self-expression, and the traditionalist ethos embodied by Raju's (Swami) advocacy for the sanctity of marriage. This juxtaposition indicates the intricate interaction between individual agency and societal expectations within the context of marital unions, emblematic of broader socio-cultural tensions surrounding gender roles and autonomy in Indian society.

In this film, the narrative initially positions Marco as a saviour figure who rescues Rosie from the Devadasi system. However, as the story unfolds, Raju steps into the role of another saviour, intervening when Rosie attempts suicide and encouraging her to pursue her passion for dance. This evolving saviour dynamic exemplifies the 'upper caste' male saviour complex,

[26] The film's progressive theme, centring on a married woman cohabiting with an unmarried man in a seemingly 'live-in relationship', proved controversial for its time (1965). This unconventional portrayal likely contributed to initial distribution difficulties, compounded by the poor box office performance of Dev Anand's earlier English version of it. Additionally, the film's thematic exploration of adultery may have necessitated censorship intervention, with reports suggesting the personal involvement of Indira Gandhi in securing its release. See Nandini Ramnath, 'The Guide' in English: The story of Dev Anand's abortive attempt to storm Hollywood, *Scroll,* 3rd February 2019 <https://scroll.in/reel/911745/dev-anands-guide-the-back-story-of-the-english-version-is-far-more-interesting-than-the-movie> [accessed 16 May 2024].

[27] *Mayā*, in Hinduism, embodies the illusory nature of the material world, a veil that hides the underlying divine reality. It relates to the supernatural power of Gods and demons. And taking the reference from it, Raju (Swami) persuades Maya to marry; he says, 'Maya of God, everything in this world is because of Maya, and the truth is that the love a husband can provide surpasses that which can be offered by a hundred stepbrothers and five hundred stepsisters' (the translation is mine). Following this, the girl (Maya) smiles and consents to the marriage.

which is deeply ingrained in Bollywood narratives. Both Marco and Raju act as agents of change for Rosie, yet their motivations are not purely altruistic. Marco's desire to control and possess Rosie reflects the patriarchal and caste-based power structures at play, while Raju's guidance, although seemingly more empathetic, ultimately follows a similar trajectory of male intervention in a woman's life. This dynamic underscores the pervasive portrayal of 'upper caste' men as rescuers of 'lower caste' women, reinforcing traditional power imbalances and perpetuating the stereotype of women as passive recipients of male protection and direction.

Faith and rationality: the duality of Raju

The final sequence of *Guide* exposes the harsh realities of life in Rajasthan's desert and rural regions. Through Raju's mistaken identity as a holy man, the film explores the concept of 'validity of faith' as Sumita S. Chakravarty posits. Her argument highlights the role of religion and faith in miracles, reflecting the villagers' dependence and helplessness during the drought.[28] The film's second half centres on the drought and the villagers' belief in a Swami (Raju as holy man) who could bring rain through divine intervention. This narrative device emphasizes drought as a recurring and critical issue in Rajasthan. The film further explores the state's response to drought as visible through the presence of a government medical van and other departments distributing essentials like food and milk, which demonstrate the state's intervention in alleviating the crisis.

Similar to the film's portrayal of women working with government-provided tools, various NGOs collaborate with the government to implement long-term and short-term solutions to combat the drought's impact on hunger, malnutrition, and water scarcity.

[28] Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema*, *1947-1987* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011), p.47-52.

Displacement of people and livestock, as depicted in the film, is another consequence of drought.[29] Raju's anecdotal recounting of historical drought episodes to the villagers serves as a poignant reminder of the persistent resonance of this perennial plight, underscoring its contemporary relevance amidst the ongoing struggle for sustenance and survival within the Rajasthan region.

Guide presents a compelling juxtaposition of rural and urban life in India, highlighting the stark differences in their developmental trajectories. In the early 1950s and 1960s, Indian cinema frequently explored the contrasting lifestyles and moral values of village and city life.[30] The narrative revolves around Raju in two contrasting roles: Swami, mistaken as a holy man by villagers, and Raju, a city dweller representing modern ideals. The film portrays the rural setting as one characterized by poverty, limited resources, and a deep-seated faith in religion. The villagers, clad in traditional attire and residing in rudimentary mud houses, rely heavily on agriculture and lack access to basic amenities like education and healthcare. This is exemplified by the scene where Swami encounters a young boy with no opportunity for schooling due to the village's lack of educational infrastructure.

In contrast, the urban space in *Guide* is depicted as a symbol of progress and advancement. Raju in the opening shot, upon his release from prison, is shown dressed in a modern black suit with a suitcase, a stark contrast to the traditional garb of the villagers. The scene utilizes a voice-over narration, a recurring stylistic choice by the director in the film, to depict the protagonist's internal conflict. A roadside sign displaying 'City' (referring to Udaipur) and 'Anjanpur' (signifying the unknown) presents a cinematic dilemma. The protagonist must decide between returning to his hometown (Udaipur), his mother, and Rosie

[29] Milind Bokil, 'Drought in Rajasthan: In Search of a Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35: 48 (2000), 4171-4175 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4409995 > [accessed 17 February 2022].
[30] Vikas Pathe, 'Communication, Development and Hindi Cinema: Reading of Naya Daur', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 19:3 (2021), 277-287 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2021.1965313> [accessed 20 February 2022].

(with whom he supposedly committed fraud on bank paper and served jail time) or venturing towards the uncertain Anjanpur. This scene also functions as an exposition, employing flashbacks to reveal the protagonist's past for the first time. Ultimately, he rejects the established path and embarks on an unknown journey. Then opening credits roll accompanied by the song *Wahan Kaun Hai Tera* (who is there for you), whose lyrics resonate with the Kabir-inspired theme of devotion to the formless divine (*Nirgūn*).

The montage sequence showcasing the protagonist's travels—by horse cart, taxi, luxury car (presumably Rosie's), bus, and train—emphasize the diverse modes of transportation connecting individuals from various locations to the tourist destination of Udaipur. This sequence, featuring a bridge over a river and a canal, highlights the city's development after independence. The presence of tourists dressed in contemporary fashion highlights the city's association with current trends. This visual representation reinforces the notion of the city as a space where development and modernization flourish. The film introduces a fascinating paradox by integrating a temple and a school within the same physical space. While this seemingly represents an attempt to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, it also creates a tension between rationality and religiosity. Raju's advocacy for education through the establishment of the school signifies his belief in progress and reason along with the promotion of the government's policy of setting up basic infrastructure in rural India with schools, hospitals and post-offices.

The film *Guide* explores the tension between faith and modernity, portraying a society grappling with change while remaining deeply rooted in religious belief. Raju's (Swami) participation in the fast for rain embodies this tension, reflecting the villagers' unwavering faith in divine intervention despite the potential for rational solutions. The eventual arrival of rain, perceived as a result of Raju's sacrifice, affirms their belief in spiritual power, overshadowing the efficacy of scientific reasoning. This resolution underscores the film's prioritization of faith

as a transformative and unifying force, even amidst the broader disparities between rural and urban development. Raju's duality is central to this narrative. As both a spiritual guide and a proponent of progressive reforms—advocating for education and better amenities through governmental means—he embodies the coexistence of contradictory ideals. His spiritual role ultimately eclipses his rational advocacy, revealing the film's thematic focus on the supremacy of belief in the face of adversity. This duality underscores a broader commentary on societal values, where survival and hope are often anchored in tradition rather than modern rationality.

The climactic sequence of Raju's self-imposed fast employs powerful visual metaphors and symbolism, marking a distinctive moment in Bollywood cinema. As Raju nears death, the film navigates his internal conflict, using the conversation between his 'Atma' (Real Self) and 'Ahankar' (Ego Self) to depict his spiritual awakening. This moment signifies the dissolution of his ego and the convergence of his roles as a worldly and spiritual guide. Lata Jagtiani's analysis of this inner conflict highlights the psychological and spiritual transformation at the heart of the narrative, emphasizing Raju's transcendence through sacrifice.[31]

This spiritual journey, however, comes at a significant cost. The rain, attributed to Raju's fast, resolves the villagers' plight but reinforces the primacy of faith over rational problem-solving. By portraying the drought's resolution as a miraculous event, the film aligns itself with an endorsement of religious belief as a source of hope and survival. Raju's death symbolizes the tragic consequences of his internal duality, caught between progressive ideals and traditional spirituality. The editing choices in the concluding scenes amplify the emotional and thematic depth of Raju's transformation. Through its resolution, *Guide* affirms the enduring power of faith as central to the villagers' lives, celebrating its role as a catalyst for

[31] Lata Jagtiani, 'Guide: A perspective', in *Guide The Film: Perspectives* (New Delhi: Blue Pencil, 2019), p. 50.

resilience and communal harmony while simultaneously critiquing the limitations of modernity in addressing deeply ingrained cultural and existential challenges.

Media, modernity, and language

Here I explore the influence of media on the perception of modernity, drawing on the film's representation and John B. Thompson's concept of 'development' in media and communication. He argues that early forms of media, like newspapers, exposed individuals to events beyond their immediate surroundings, fostering a sense of a broader 'world of events'.[32] Journalism as a symbolic device highlights the emerging phenomenon of modernity in the 1960s and people's engagement with the rest of the world. In the film, the references to Europe, and London in particular, symbolize a sense of movement—reflecting the international mobility that represents modernity. A scene depicting the jailer's excitement about Rosie's tour of Europe and media coverage exemplifies the transformative power of print media in shaping worldviews during a time with limited access to the West.

This depiction also mirrors the vision of modernity espoused by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, whose tenure was marked by a pronounced emphasis on foreign relations and international diplomacy. Nehru's vision was fundamentally intertwined with the notion of modernity, seeking to position India as a pivotal player on the global stage. His foreign policy initiatives were geared towards establishing robust relationships with Western nations, promoting international cooperation, and fostering a progressive, outward-looking national identity. The media's role in disseminating information about the West and facilitating a broader understanding of global affairs can be seen as a direct reflection of Nehru's

[32] John B Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (UK: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp.3-10.

aspirations for India. Through the lens of print media, the film not only captures the zeitgeist of the 1960s but also highlights Nehru's strategic efforts to integrate India within the global community, thereby reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between modernity, media, and international diplomacy during his administration.

Furthermore, the film highlights the role of media in connecting people globally. News of Raju's (Swami) fast for rain reaches international media, attracting a television reporter from America. This event showcases how media bridges geographical distances, allowing Rosie, a stranger to the area, to learn about Raju through the news, as well as the American reporter. The news reporter asks Raju whether he believes in fasting or not, to which he replies, 'If forty crore people fast for one day, then forty crore hungry stomachs can eat food for one day'.[33] This reflects the condition during that period, and it also refers to the speech by the second Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri, when he urged people to skip a meal at least once a week, following the heavy food shortage in India. [34] Another aspect explores the role of religion in a modern, rational world. Raju's response, emphasizing the foundation of science in religion, reinforces the film's central conflict between faith and reason. While sometimes advocating against rigid religious practices, Raju himself perpetuates certain superstitions. This portrayal suggests that Raju navigates a dynamic space between rational and mythological narratives.

The film utilizes language as a contextual device to emphasize the contrasting complexities of Sanskrit and English. A scene depicts Raju encountering Brahmin priests who, upon chanting a Sanskrit shloka, deride him for his inability to interpret its meaning. In response, Raju delivers a scathing retort in English, accusing them of being 'a pair of fake

[33] The translation is mine.
[34] Shalu Singh, 'When Lal Bahadur Shastri Asked His Family to Skip Dinner; Stories of India's Most Humble PM', *Indiatvnews.Com*, 2017 <https://www.indiatvnews.com/buzz/news-when-lal-bahadur-shastri-asked-his-family-to-skip-dinner-stories-of-india-s-most-humble-pm-404384> [Accessed 20 February 2022].

boats' who have exploited the populace for generations. This episode highlights the association of Sanskrit knowledge with wisdom, a resource previously monopolized by a select group. The Brahmins' proficiency in this 'coded language', inaccessible due to its complexity, facilitated manipulation of the commoners. However, the introduction of English disrupts this dynamic.[35] As S. Anand observes, English lacks the inherent sanctity associated with Sanskrit. Its accessibility transcends social and religious boundaries, unlike Sanskrit, which had become a relic of the past. Therefore, the film suggests that English, unlike the 'secret' language of Sanskrit, empowers individuals through expanded knowledge and removes the power previously held by the Brahmins.[36]

In my analysis of the film *Guide*, I have demonstrated that while the film ostensibly promotes the government's welfare-oriented development schemes and the concept of 'unity in diversity', a closer examination exposes a privileging of religious sanctity over rationality. Furthermore, the inclusion of Dalit and Adivasi characters remains peripheral, ultimately serving the narrative arc of the central, 'upper caste' protagonists and catering to the spectators' pleasure. For instance, the portrayal of an Adivasi girl as Mr. Marco's mistress reinforces existing social hierarchies rather than challenging them. Rosie's character in the film is depicted as the daughter of a woman historically linked to the Devadasi tradition, a practice associated with the non-Brahmin caste and Dalit community.[37]This connection further marginalizes her, placing her at the lowest strata of the social hierarchy, even within the 'lower castes'. The filmmaker missed a significant opportunity to address the complexities of social stratification and the pervasive societal differences that Rosie's background embodies. The film

[35] S Anand, 'Sanskrit, English and Dalits', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 34: 30 (1999), 2053-2056 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4408224> [accessed 17 February 2022].
[36] S Anand, 'Sanskrit, English and Dalits'.
[37] K. A. Geetha, 'Entrenched Fissures: Caste and Social Differences among the Devadasis', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22: 4 (2021), 87-96 <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss4/7> [accessed 07 August 2024]. *Shyam Singha Roy* (2021, Rahul Sankrityan) depicts the plight of Devadasi women and the consequences of defying societal norms.

notably neglects to explore this aspect of her identity, failing to portray it as an impediment to her progress and personal development. Instead, *Guide* bypasses these critical socio-cultural dynamics, opting not to engage with the systemic barriers that such a background would realistically present. This omission reflects a broader tendency in cinema to overlook the intricacies of caste and marginalization, thus simplifying the narrative arc of characters with such profound socio-cultural histories.

Portraying Rajasthan's feudal and caste society in *Ghulami*

This section examines the thematic engagement with caste in the film *Ghulami*, exploring its portrayal of a transitional feudal society in pre- and post-independent India. *Ghulami* exposes the oppressive nature of the feudal system in Rajasthan, particularly highlighting the plight of the 'lower castes' who face double marginalization—both by caste and as tenants to the feudal landlords. I argue that *Ghulami*, like many films, perpetuates the stereotype of 'lower caste' characters as criminals (dacoits) and social outcasts. Their acts of rebellion against oppression result in the destruction of their families and ultimately, their own deaths. The trope of annihilating 'lower caste' characters because of their resistance raises critical questions about Bollywood's portrayal of caste. Why is it that Dalit or 'lower caste' characters often meet a tragic end in films? *Article 15* (2019, Anubhav Sinha) serves as a recent example, depicting a bold and assertive Dalit youth leader who is ultimately killed by police in an 'encounter'.[38]

[38] The term 'encounter' used in the Indian context stands for police action where police or armed forces kill the criminals supposedly in self-defence. Sometimes police also misuse it and target the oppressed communities who fight against the system for their rights and speak against the government. As Hannah writes, "Lawyers and families of victims describe an atmosphere of terror in Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims and lower-caste men are picked up on the streets and killed with alleged impunity by police, either in what are known as 'encounter killings', in which officers fatally shoot their captives and claim it was in self-defence, or in police custody, where they are beaten or tortured to death." See Hannah Ellis Petersen, 'Shoot Them': Indian State Police Accused Of

Furthermore, this section examines *Ghulami's* critique of the Gandhian gaze on caste issues, proposing a subtle acknowledgement of the growing Ambedkarite movement gaining momentum after Dr Ambedkar's death in 1956. This acknowledgement is particularly relevant considering the rise of the Dalit Panther movement in Mumbai (Bombay), the centre of the Hindi film industry. However, I argue that *Ghulami's* engagement with the Ambedkarite gaze remains superficial. Despite its shortcomings, *Ghulami's* explicit portrayal of the caste-ridden and feudalistic nature of Rajasthani society during the 1980s stands as an uncommon yet significant trend in Hindi cinema.

The cinematic tradition of depicting feudal society finds its genesis in *Mother India* (1957, Mehboob Khan), which chronicles the struggles of farmers facing exploitation by Zamindars (landlords) in newly independent India. The film explores the resilience of the rural spirit during this transitional period from feudal to capitalist, and traditional to modern.[39] However, the most significant contribution in terms of critiquing the feudal system starts with Shyam Benegal's films *Ankur* (1974) and *Nishant* (1975). These films situate themselves within the context of feudalism, serving as crucial representations of a realistic societal setting.[40] As M. Madhava Prasad argues, despite India's independence and the constitutional

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Murdering Muslims And Dalits', *The Guardian*, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/feb/22/uttar-pradesh-elections-hindu-nationalist-yogi-adityanath-police-accused-unlawful-deaths-muslims-dalits> [accessed 06 July 2022].

[39] In a landmark achievement for Indian cinema, *Mother India* became the country's first-ever submission for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1958, even going on to be nominated among the final five contenders. 'The 30th Academy Awards', 1958 <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1958> [accessed 23 May 2024].

[40] Feudalism in the context of Rajasthan holds a distinct significance, deviating from its conventional interpretation in various societies worldwide. In this context, feudalism is intimately intertwined with the caste system, where the ruling class comprising kings and zamindars predominantly belonged to the 'upper caste', wielding significant power, and enforcing oppressive measures upon the Dalit community. Members of the Dalit community were coerced into engaging in *begar*, a form of forced labour, by the 'upper caste' zamindars (landlords). A noteworthy incident occurred in Uniara Thikana, Rajasthan, where the *Chamār* (Dalit) community chose to emancipate themselves from this system of forced labour and adopted agriculture and animal husbandry as their primary occupations. This act of assertion and the abandonment of menial tasks by the Dalit community was perceived as an affront by the zamindars. Consequently, a joint meeting was convened among the zamindars, leading to a collective decision to restrict the *Chamār* farmers from adorning themselves with fine clothing, consuming nutritious food, and depriving their women of wearing ornaments. See Vijay Kumar Vashishtha,

safeguards aimed at eradicating unlawful and inhumane practices, feudal oppression persisted. In post-independence India, narratives surrounding feudalism became integral to the emerging new cinema.[41] In *Ankur*, the nature of feudalism is meticulously portrayed, culminating in a symbolic act of defiance wherein a young boy throws a stone at the landlord's house, representing the peasants' revolt against feudal oppression.[42] Similarly, *Nishant* depicts the comprehensive mobilization and rebellion of peasants against the landlord, a movement that gains momentum following the awakening led by two pivotal figures.[43]

Caste, railways, and resistance

The term 'Ghulami', literally translating to 'slavery' in Hindi, serves as a powerful indictment of the hardships endured by farmers within the feudal social structure. This designation throughout in the film implicitly connects the plight of these farmers with the 'lower caste' community, who face a double burden due to their caste status and occupation. The protagonist, Ranjit Singh Choudhary, embodies the struggle for liberation from two forms of subjugation: colonialism imposed by the British Raj, a shared experience for all Indians, and the exploitative feudal system that enriches the Thakur landlords.

The film predominantly features the struggle of landless farmers, portraying their plight within a rigid feudal system. At the same time, it associates Ranjit and his family with the Dalit community by deploying imagery and experiences rooted in untouchability and caste-based discrimination. Ranjit and the people from his caste endure social exclusion, humiliation, and

'Struggle of The Chamar Peasants for The Removal of Social Disabilities in A Feudal Estate (Uniara Thikana) In Rajasthan, 1946-47', *Indian History Congress,* 45(1984), 717-728 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44140265> [accessed 6 July 2022].

[41] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of The Hindi Film*, p. 196-7.
[42] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of The Hindi Film*, p. 198.
[43] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of The Hindi Film*, p. 203.

systemic violence, characteristic of the Dalit experience in Indian society. However, an apparent contradiction arises as Ranjit is also associated with the Jat caste—a touchable community categorized under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) rather than as Dalits.

This ambiguity in Ranjit's caste identity is particularly striking when contextualized within the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan, where the film is set. Historically, the Shekhawati region has been dominated by Jat landowners, a community known for their large landholdings and socio-economic clout. The choice to depict Ranjit as part of a community that, in reality, often held significant agrarian power complicates the narrative's focus on landlessness and subaltern oppression. By situating Ranjit within a feudal structure where *Jats* typically occupied a higher socio-economic tier, the film blurs the lines between caste-based and class-based struggles. This duality, while inconsistent at first glance, serves a broader purpose. It highlights the intersectionality of caste and class exploitation in the region, where not only Dalits but also landless individuals from so-called higher castes faced brutal oppression under the feudal landlords. I argue that the portrayal of Ranjit as both a victim of untouchability and a landless farmer positions his struggle as a unifying symbol of resistance for all marginalized groups, transcending caste lines.[44]

Ghulami employs spatial segregation, demonstrated through classroom seating and segregated drinking vessels, to visually represent the fixed caste hierarchy. Protagonist Ranjit, from a young age, questions this discriminatory system. Disillusioned by the pervasive injustice, Ranjit migrates to the city, returning only upon news of his father's death. The railway serves as a potent metaphor in the film, symbolizing both escape from and eventual return to one's roots as a catalyst for societal transformation. Ranjit's journey from a rural area to the

[44] Vikas Rawal, 'Peasant Struggles in Shekhawati in the Early Twentieth Century', *Statistics of Indian Economy and Society*, 13th September 2017 <https://www.indianstatistics.org/2017/09/13/peasant-struggles-in-shekhawati.html> [accessed 16th November 2024].

city in pursuit of educational and occupational opportunities is significantly facilitated by the accessibility of the local railway line, underscoring the railway's role as a catalyst for economic mobility. A pertinent example is Shailendra, a Dalit lyricist who contributed to the film *Guide* discussed in this chapter. Shailendra began his career as an apprentice at the Indian Railway workshop in Mumbai in 1947, which afforded him a degree of economic independence to pursue his passion for writing. Additionally, Mumbai's vibrant film industry provided him with the opportunity to develop his career in cinema. This correlation is historically significant; Dr Ambedkar's extensive use of the Indian railway network to mobilize and address marginalized communities was instrumental in the expansion of his social and political movement. The emergence of railway *Bastis*—settlements adjacent to railway tracks predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes—is indicative of a complex relationship between the railway and these communities. Individuals from these communities often work in lower-tier positions such as sweepers, track maintenance staff, and guards.[45]

While railway employment offered a means of escape from rural hardships and a degree of geographic mobility, the occupations available were often low-skilled and precarious. Nevertheless, this workforce formed a crucial support base for the post-Ambedkar movement led by Manyawar Kanshiram, culminating in the formation of 'The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation' (BAMCEF) and then the 'Bahujan Samaj Party' (BSP). Additionally, the 'All India SC/ST Railway Employees Association,' predominantly supported by Ambedkarite individuals, plays a crucial role in providing financial support to the

[45] These are officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged communities in India, recognized under the Constitution. SCs primarily include groups subjected to caste-based discrimination and untouchability, while STs comprise indigenous populations who have traditionally lived in remote and resource-dependent areas. The Constitution provides them with special safeguards, affirmative action, and reservation policies to promote their social, educational, and economic empowerment. SCs are defined under Article 341, which allows the President of India, in consultation with the Governor of a state, to notify certain castes as Scheduled Castes. Similarly, STs are defined under Article 342, which permits the President, in consultation with the Governor of a state, to specify tribes or tribal communities as Scheduled Tribes in a particular state or union territory. 'The Constitution of India 2024', *Ministry of Law And Justice, Government of India,* May 2024 <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/> [accessed 16 November 2024].

Ambedkarite movement, highlighting the persistent connection between the railway and the struggle for social justice.

By examining the film closely, we see how his return reveals the persistence of oppression in postcolonial India. The film argues that the 'lower castes' and farmers haven't benefited from independence, and their marginalization continues. Significantly, Ranjit becomes a catalyst for consciousness-raising.[46] His presence awakens the oppressed – 'lower castes' and farmers – to their shared suffering, fostering a sense of solidarity and inspiring resistance against their oppressors. *Ghulami* offers a glimpse of Dr B.R. Ambedkar's strategic approach to combating discrimination, encapsulated in his slogan: 'Educate, Agitate, and Organise'.[47] This representation is particularly notable as it emerged during a period when anti-caste cinema had not yet gained significant traction in Bollywood. The ideological and political divergences between M. K. Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar have been widely discussed; however, this film adeptly brings these differences to the fore.

In a pivotal scene, Ranjit tells a constable from the 'lower caste', 'Only these books will teach our people how to live', emphasizing the role of education in enlightening 'lower castes' about the various forms of oppression and the means to overcome them.[48] Ranjit's commitment to education and his vision of dismantling the landlord's monopoly through structural change are evident in his actions and interventions. Later in the film, during a conversation with a 'lower caste' gang leader who has killed the landlord and a moneylender, Ranjit asserts that merely killing oppressors will not end systemic oppression; rather, the abolition of the oppressive system itself is necessary to achieve true equality. This dialogue

[46] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of The Hindi Film*, p.206.
[47] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 17, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), p. 305.
[48] The translation is mine.

stresses Ranjit's belief in structural transformation as the path to social justice, reflecting Ambedkarite principles.

Contrasting visions of village life: Ambedkar vs. Gandhi

To fully grasp the divergent perspectives on the village and city in the Indian context, it is essential to consider the thoughts of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi. Dr Ambedkar critiqued the Indian village as a bastion for preserving the Hindu social order, which starkly divided the population into 'touchables' and 'untouchables'. He perceived villages as loci of oppression, where untouchables were forced into dependence on caste Hindus, typically as landless labourers or servants. In contrast, Gandhi idealized village life, viewing it as the true essence of India.[49] The debate between these viewpoints is depicted in *Ghulami* that juxtaposes Gandhi's idealized village with Ambedkar's vision of seeking solace in cities. The film predominantly focuses on the Gandhian village, illustrating how Gandhi's philosophy can be detrimental to Dalits, who face daily discrimination and oppression. This film serves as a critique of Gandhi's concept of the village, where he espoused 'Swaraj' to describe the essence of democracy—founded on freedom and sustained by autonomous, self-sufficient communities. [50] However, within the Indian societal framework, this ideal is unattainable due to the pervasive caste system, which enforces graded inequality and restricts inter-caste association. As Dr Ambedkar contends:

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[49] Surinder S. Jodhka, 'Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37: 32 (2002), 3343-3353 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4412466> [accessed 1 March 2022]. M.K. Gandhi was very optimistic about the village democracy. See M. K. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj*, (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Trust, 1962), p.71. Gandhi referred to the village as a true basis for the 'republic' society. See M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, 7 July 1942, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.77, pp. 308–09. Ambedkar was very sceptical about the village and its social structure, which only maintains the status quo and restricts social mobility in the society. See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They Why They Became Untouchables?* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 21–22.

[50] See Ramshray Roy, *Self and Society: A study in Gandhian Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1984), p. 123.

> [Indian villages] represent a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the Untouchables. The Untouchables have no rights. They are there only to wait, serve and submit. They are there to do or to die. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called republic, they are outside the Hindu fold. This is a vicious circle. But this is a fact which cannot be gainsaid.[51]

In this scenario, the film critiques the Gandhian village ideal by highlighting the inherent discrimination and systemic oppression faced by Dalits. This points out the limitations of applying Gandhi's vision of 'Swaraj' within a caste-ridden society. The scene where Ranjit's mother enters the manor, and Thakur confronts her for wearing jewellery and shoes highlights the rigid social stratification within the feudal system. This act signifies the denial of basic sartorial choices to 'lower caste' women, who were expected to maintain a distinct appearance separate from that of 'upper caste' women.[52] The forced placement of the *Jutī* (shoes) on Ranjit's mother's head, witnessed by both her husband and son, serves as a public humiliation that reinforces her subordinate status (see Figure 03).

Ranjit's defiance in this pivotal scene is powerfully conveyed through his unwavering gaze fixed firmly on the Thakur, marking a direct challenge to the caste authority that has long oppressed his family. His confrontation represents a generational shift from the passive submission of his parents to an active rebellion against the system. In contrast, his mother's act of holding the shoes atop her head — rather than letting them fall — symbolizes the deep

[51] See B.R. Ambedkar, 'Outside the Fold', in *The Essential Writings of BR Ambedkar*, ed. by Valerian Rodrigues (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 331.
[52] Dr. Ambedkar drew attention to a discriminatory practice in his writings, particularly emphasizing the plight of the Balai community in the state of Indore. B. R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste with A Reply to Mahatma Gandhi' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 01, ed. by Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 40.

psychological hold of the caste system. This act of humiliation, performed despite her suffering, highlights the internalized fear and compliance ingrained by decades of subjugation. The weight of the shoes becomes a poignant symbol of the historical burden of caste oppression.

This symbolism of footwear deepens the critique of caste-based degradation, as placing shoes on someone's head is a degrading act that marks an individual as beneath the lowest of the low. The contrast between the mother's compliance and Ranjit's defiance underscores the tension between internalized submission and the desire for rebellion, reflecting the shifting attitudes toward caste-based roles across generations. The father's posture, with folded hands, further illustrates how caste-based power operates not only through physical violence but also through psychological submission, perpetuating the system's control.

The director critiques the broader societal hypocrisy that venerates Hindu goddesses while permitting the degradation of Dalit women. Ranjit's accusatory gesture toward the goddess's picture disrupts the notion of divine benevolence, exposing the contradiction of a system that reveres female deities while enabling caste-based subjugation. The Thakur's public humiliation of Ranjit's mother further reveals the dual exploitation of women — both through violence and systemic control. Ultimately, Ranjit's act of rebellion offers a vision of hope, sharply contrasting with the suffocating submission of his parents, and critiques the oppressive caste hierarchies that sustain such systems.

Figure 03: A young Ranjit, visibly angry, points towards the Hindu goddesses while speaking to Thakur. His mother stands beside him holding the shoes atop her head.

Voice of the oppressed

This film portrays the exploitation of the caste system in rural India. One of the sequences in the film revolves around the forced subjugation of a 'lower caste' schoolmaster and his daughter Tulsi by 'upper caste' Thakurs. The Thakurs, wielding their privileged status, coerce the schoolmaster into sending Tulsi to their mansion as a condition for their continued residence in the village school compound. Here the mansion itself becomes a symbol of oppression, functioning as a space where the Thakurs can perpetuate their feudalistic control over the 'lower castes' who transgress 'upper caste' norms, such as riding a horse or wearing shoes near the mansion. The film portrays a scenario where the son of the Thakur attempts to commit sexual assault on Tulsi. She manages to evade his advances and is subsequently rescued by Ranjit.

However, the narrative depicts a further instance where the Thakur's son endeavours to rape her. During the ensuing pursuit, Tulsi is tragically cornered and killed by the Thakur's son as she attempts to flee once more. This incident emphasizes the vulnerability of 'lower caste' women to sexual violence at the hands of 'upper castes', regardless of the victim's educational

background. The schoolmaster's plight heightens this point— education offers no protection from such atrocities. The film contrasts this stark reality with the potential for education to empower individuals to challenge feudal structures. This duality reflects the stratified social dynamics in Indian society.

In *Ghulami*, a significant scene portrays the 'lower caste' struggling to access water from a well owned by the Thakur, symbolizing the entrenched caste-based discrimination in rural India. They are brutally beaten for attempting to draw water from the well, highlighting the violent enforcement of social hierarchies. Ranjit, the assertive, city-educated youth from a 'lower caste', confronts the Thakur's authority by carrying a gun to the manor and drawing water from the well. This behaviour seems contradictory given his prior admonishment of another 'lower caste' gangster, advocating for education over violence as a means to resolve conflicts. However, he later justifies his stance by arguing that the Thakurs only comprehend the language of violence, thus necessitating his resorting to armed resistance. As he is about to drink, he is violently interrupted by one of the Thakur's men, who reprimands him, stating, 'You're upsetting a long-standing custom, which isn't right'.[53]

This cinematic moment echoes the historic event of March 20, 1927, when Dr B.R. Ambedkar led a significant protest at the Chowdar Tank, Mahad. Dr Ambedkar, along with thousands of supporters, drank from the tank, asserting the rights of ex-untouchables to access public water sources, a privilege previously denied to them.[54] This act of defiance was a pivotal moment in the Dalit civil rights movement. The ongoing struggle of Dalits to access public

[53] The translation is mine.
[54] Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 2016), p. 69-71.

spaces and resources reveals the persistent nature of caste-based inequalities in contemporary society.[55]

The film incisively addresses the omnipresent issue of caste-based discrimination in Rajasthan, specifically highlighting the prohibition against Dalits riding horses in wedding processions—a privilege traditionally reserved for caste Hindus. This social stratification exposes the deep-seated feudalistic norms that continue to perpetuate caste hierarchies. Within this context, Ranjit advises the 'lower caste' police constable Gopi against allowing his son Mohan to ride a horse during his wedding procession. Ranjit's counsel, 'Gopi Dada, you will make Mohan sit on a horse, while you have been ruling in a police uniform for years, you have forgotten Gopi Dada that you too belong to our caste, this ride is made only for the "upper caste" people, not for us', illustrates the internalized acceptance of caste-based restrictions even among educated and vocal 'lower caste' people.[56] This dialogue is significant as it reflects the pervasive influence of caste oppression, suggesting that the struggle for rights is often tempered by a pragmatic awareness of the risks involved. Despite Ranjit's warnings, Gopi, demonstrating considerable bravery, permits his son to ride a horse in the procession.

This act of defiance reaches a critical juncture when Thakur's men, supported by police officers, confront the procession. The confrontation escalates when Gopi is instructed to order his son to dismount and proceed on foot, highlighting the clash between legal principles and prevalent social customs. The police, rather than upholding the law and supporting the rights of the 'lower castes', reinforce discriminatory traditions, thereby positioning themselves as enforcers of social hierarchy rather than agents of justice. The tension escalates, culminating in a violent crackdown on the procession, resulting in the tragic death of the groom. In the

[55] Neeraj Bunkar, 'Atrocities against the Meghwals in Rajasthan: A sociohistorical perspective', *Forward Press*, 29 August 2022 <https://www.forwardpress.in/2022/08/atrocities-against-the-meghwals-in-rajasthan-a-sociohistorical-perspective/>[accessed 29 May 2024].
[56] The translation is mine.

aftermath of the incident, Gopi and Ranjit engage in a poignant dialogue. Together, they mourn the loss and envision a society free from such entrenched inequalities.

An examination of contemporary realities in Rajasthan reveals the persistence of feudal behaviours, particularly evidenced by the fact that Dalit wedding processions often necessitate police presence for protection. In the Bundi district of Rajasthan, the local police and district administration have initiated a programme titled 'Operation Samata' (Operation Equality) to ensure that Dalit bridal and groom processions can proceed without hindrance. [57] This initiative demonstrates the ongoing societal challenges faced by Dalits, even those who have ascended to prominent positions, such as Sunil Kumar, an IPS (Indian Police Service) officer from the Dalit community. Kumar's wedding procession, conducted under police protection, exemplifies the persistent threats from caste Hindus and the societal restrictions imposed on Dalits, including prohibitions against horse riding during weddings. The film highlights the lengths to which caste Hindus go to maintain their dominance and discrimination against Dalits, using marriage rituals as a tool of cultural hegemony. This practice illustrates the hierarchical distribution of power within society, which remains deeply entrenched along caste lines. As Ashok Bharti, chairman of the National Confederation of Dalit Organisations, articulates, this conflict is not merely a struggle between the rich and the poor but a battle for '*samman*' (respect) and dignity.[58]

In *Ghulami,* the narrative begins with the protagonist, Ranjit, challenging unjust practices in his village rooted in the caste system through education, awareness, and legal means. However, the story later shifts towards illegal and unconstitutional methods to achieve

[57] ANI, 'Rajasthan: Bundi administration helps Dalit groom sit atop a horse during wedding ceremony', *ANI*, 26 January 2022 <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/rajasthan-bundi-administration-helps-dalit-groom-sit-atop-a-horse-during-wedding-ceremony20220126184505/.> [accessed 02 March 2022].
[58] Himanshi Dhawan and Amarjeet Singh, 'Why Dalits Are Fighting for The Right to Ride A Horse', *The Times of India*, 09 April 2018 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/when-the-marriage-mare-becomes-a-nightmare/articleshow/63660253.cms> [accessed 7 July 2022].

justice, underscoring the systemic exclusion of 'lower castes' from the legal system which perpetuates their marginalization. This is poignantly captured in a pivotal monologue by Ranjit, where he expresses his disillusionment with the law and constitution, stating: 'Which law are you talking about? The law, which is mortgaged for a piece of silver, that law which is being used to crush the heads of the farmers who raised their voices against the tyranny of the landlords, which is being used to maintain the discrimination between rich and poor, upper caste and lower caste, which is used to save those who rob our land, property, and the honour of our daughters-in-law'.[59]

Shades of rebellion: caste dynamics in *Ghulami*

Through its visual and narrative techniques, the film addresses the underlying theme of caste-based issues intertwined with the central conflict between farmers and feudal lords. The 'lower caste' farmers, residing on the outskirts of the village in a *Bāsti* (hamlet) are continuously referred to in terms of dichotomies such as 'them' versus 'us' and 'lower' versus 'upper' caste. Although the film ostensibly centres on the farmers' struggles, it implicitly highlights how caste exacerbates their vulnerability. The sartorial choices of the director are notably unique, particularly in relation to the protagonist, who is depicted wearing a black *kurta* throughout the film. In contrast, the Thakur and his son are clad in white (see Figure 04). Additionally, Ranjit's mother is seen wearing a black sari during the mourning period following his father's death, accompanied by other 'lower caste' women in black dress. This attire adheres to the tradition wherein women from the 'lower caste' groups don black uniforms and perform the role of *Rudaali*, professional weepers or mourners, for their 'upper caste' patrons (see

[59] The translation is mine.

Figure 05).[60] The colour black in this context not only signifies grief but also reflects Ranjit's rebellious nature. This highlights the significance of colour in the sartorial choices of the director. I contend that *Ghulami* employs the colour black to symbolize the rebellious nature of the 'lower caste' protagonist.[61]

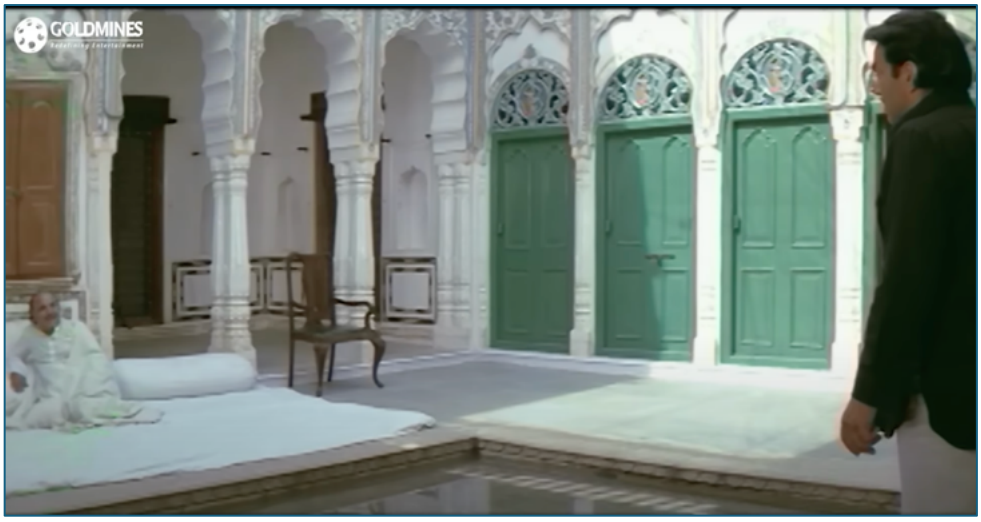

Figure 04: Ranjit, dressed in a black kurta, angrily converses with Thakur, who is clad in white, in his haveli.

Figure 05: Ranjit and his mother mourning over his father's deceased body.

[60] The Hindi film *Rudaali* (1993, Kalpana Lajmi) focuses on the issue of social marginalization and the commodification of grief, capturing the film's exploration of caste prejudice and the unusual profession of professional mourners.

[61] In the final chapter of my thesis, I will examine Pa. Ranjith's use of colour in *Kaala*, highlighting its symbolic role as a marker of subjectivity and identity. While *Ghulami* employs the colour black to represent caste identity and the protagonist's outlaw activities, *Kaala* transcends these associations. It engages with the historical and mythological connotations of black within an Ambedkarite framework, reflecting broader themes of identity and resistance against oppressive structures.

In the climax of *Ghulami*, Ranjit and Jabbar, along with their supporters, launch a retaliatory attack against the oppressive landlords. In a symbolic act of retribution, Ranjit compels the Thakur to place his shoes on his head, echoing a past humiliation inflicted on his mother (see Figure 06). Despite the police intervening to protect the Thakur and his records (on farmers' debts), Ranjit successfully burns all the accounting files, thereby dismantling a key instrument of oppression (see Figure 07). In the context of social reform and the fight against caste-based discrimination in India, the act of 'burning' carries significant historical connotations, particularly in relation to Dr B.R. Ambedkar and his movement. Dr Ambedkar conducted extensive research on the caste system and Hindu religious texts. His scholarly investigations, coupled with his personal experiences and insights gained from fieldwork, led him to a profound conclusion: the religious scriptures and texts that underpin and perpetuate the caste system must be destroyed and uprooted to pave the way for a truly egalitarian society.

Figure 06: Thakur, in the middle, with his accounting files and shoes on his head.

Figure 07: Ranjit burning the accounting files.

Dr Ambedkar identified the 'Manusmriti'—an ancient legal text attributed to the mythological figure Manu—as a foundational document that codifies and legitimizes the varna system, a hierarchical social order based on caste. Recognizing the Manusmriti as a major source of social injustice and inequality, Dr Ambedkar decided to take a radical step to challenge its authority and the oppressive social order it upheld. In a symbolic act of defiance and as a means to galvanize support for his cause, Dr Ambedkar, along with his followers, publicly burned copies of the Manusmriti on 25th December 1927. This act was not merely a protest against a religious text, but a powerful statement against the deeply entrenched caste system that dictated social, economic, and political life in India. The public burning of the Manusmriti was intended to signify the rejection of its authority and the repudiation of the social norms it enshrined.[62]

The files in the film represent the means by which the landlords perpetuate a cycle of debt and subjugation over the marginalized communities, ensuring their continued exploitation

[62] According to Dr. Ambedkar, 'The bonfire of Manusmriti was quite intentional. We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries. Because of its teaching, we have been ground down under despicable poverty and so we made the clash, staked all, took our lives in our hands and performed the deed'. B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 17.1, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), p. 25.

across generations. During the 1970s, popular Indian cinema rarely featured narratives with a pro- 'lower caste' perspective, and 'lower caste' characters seldom occupied lead roles. *Ghulami* breaks new ground by centring a 'lower caste' protagonist who is portrayed as assertive, educated, and rebellious. However, the character's need to resort to extra-legal measures to assert his rights, and his ultimate death, exhibit the persistent societal constraints and systemic violence faced by the 'lower caste'. Despite the film's progressive narrative regarding empowerment of the marginalised communities, it adheres to the conventions of mainstream Hindi cinema and reflects the fortified social hierarchies of Indian society. The film implies that when 'lower caste' men challenge their subjugation, they are met with severe repercussions, such as imprisonment or death. Thus, *Ghulami* both critiques and reinforces the marginalization of 'lower castes' within the broader socio-cultural context.

Dharmendra's star persona played a pivotal role in shaping the reception of many of his films. By the 1970s and 1980s, he had reached superstardom with box office hits like *Mera Gaon Mera Desh* (1971, Raj Khosla), which cemented his image as an action hero, followed by *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972, Ramesh Sippy) and the landmark *Sholay* (1975, Ramesh Sippy). A Punjabi Jat by caste in real life, Dharmendra came to be known as Bollywood's 'He-Man'—his rugged, hypermasculine image reinforcing the ideal of the righteous protector, often rooted in rural, morally grounded masculinity. But in several films within the bandit or rural rebellion genre, Dharmendra's characters take on more ambiguous identities, often aligning with the rural poor or oppressed castes. *Ghulami* (1985) is a key example—it departs from the romanticized feudal narratives of earlier rural cinema and instead foregrounds resistance, particularly against caste-based oppression. Reading such films through a Dalit emancipatory lens highlights how Dharmendra's stardom was not just symbolic—it gave visibility and emotional weight to social struggles that mainstream Hindi cinema often ignored or softened.

His stature in Bollywood lent power and reach to stories that directly engaged with caste, justice, and rebellion.

Ghulami, while an entertainment-focused mainstream film incorporating typical Bollywood masala elements like fights, drama, dance, and songs, ultimately fails to delve deeply into the systemic oppression and injustice faced by 'lower castes' and, particularly, Dalits. By merging their struggles with those of the farmers, the film avoids exploring the intersectional dimensions of society. Instead, it focuses its narrative on themes of rape, revenge, killing, and sacrifice, thus bypassing a thorough exploration of the structural issues at play. The marginalized communities depicted in cinema are frequently portrayed in a state of perpetual crisis, struggling to find a place, a 'home' where they can lead respectable lives. These characters are typically required to sacrifice their own education, advancement, and personal aspirations for the perceived greater good. Their attempts to claim their rightful place often force them to resort to unconstitutional means, branding them as outlaws or rebellious figures. Though the film starts with a compelling idea – achieving justice through non-violent legal channels – it loses its way by presenting gun violence as a viable solution.

Conclusion

This chapter examined early depictions of Rajasthan in Bollywood films, focusing on the visual representation of various dimensions, including caste issues, the feudal system, and the societal transitions during this period in Indian history. *Guide* reflects the Nehruvian era's optimism and the Gandhian emphasis on moral and ethical reform. The film's portrayal of Rajasthan and its people is rooted in a Gandhian perspective, where the village community is idealized as a space for the harmonization of traditional Indian values with modern development initiatives. Gandhi's idea of 'Swaraj'—a self-sufficient and self-reliant village—

is central to this vision. The film aligns this with Nehru's secular and developmental agenda, stressing education, healthcare, and infrastructure while fostering unity in diversity. The tourist industry's growth and the preservation of the Indian rural ethos suggest a harmonious blend of modernity and tradition, consistent with Gandhian ideals of balancing spiritual and material well-being. However, Gandhi's model, as depicted in *Guide*, can also be seen as promoting a somewhat utopian and homogenizing vision that overlooks the deep-seated inequalities and power dynamics, especially around caste, that characterize rural India. By highlighting religious and moral reform, *Guide* emphasizes the importance of maintaining social harmony but does not delve deeply into the structural hierarchies that disrupt this harmony, as Gandhi's philosophy often prioritized gradual, ethical transformations over radical systemic changes.

On the other hand, *Ghulami* presents a more critical perspective by invoking the philosophy and ideals of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, even if subtly and indirectly. Dr Ambedkar, a fierce critic of Gandhian reformism, particularly in relation to the varna/caste system, argued for uprooting the system rather than reforming it. He emphasized the need for structural and systemic changes over mere moral persuasion, asserting that true liberation for marginalized communities, especially Dalits, could not be achieved within the confines of a village economy rooted in caste. This difference in vision is central to understanding the film's narrative.

In *Ghulami*, Ranjit represents the layered struggles of the oppressed, bridging caste-based discrimination and the broader exploitation of landless farmers under feudalism. His ambiguous identity—as both a victim of untouchability and a member of the touchable Jat community—symbolizes the shared resistance of marginalized groups. The film uses this duality to critique systemic oppression while suggesting solidarity across caste and class lines in the fight against entrenched hierarchies, moving beyond individual identities to emphasize collective struggle.

The contrast between the Gandhian and Ambedkarite visions in these films underscores a deeper ideological clash that has been present throughout Indian socio-political history. While Gandhi envisioned a harmonious and self-reliant rural society where caste divisions could be reconciled through moral reform and unity, Dr Ambedkar critiqued this as a superficial solution that left the power structures and hierarchies of caste intact. For Dr Ambedkar, social justice and emancipation required direct action, legal reform, and dismantling the foundations of the caste system, rather than an idealized moral transformation that Gandhi advocated. In *Ghulami*, this contrast is evident as the film explores the realities of rural caste oppression and challenges the viability of Gandhian solutions. The film's critique of the Gandhian model and its subtle alignment with Ambedkar's ideology is noteworthy, as it highlights the limitations of the 'Swaraj' concept in the face of persistent caste-based hierarchies. By depicting Ranjit's journey from a socially conscious, Gandhian-influenced approach to one that adopts extralegal means, the film shows a shift from ethical persuasion to direct confrontation—reflecting the historical evolution of Ambedkar's own political strategy and the rising Dalit movements such as the Dalit Panthers in the aftermath of Dr Ambedkar's death.

This chapter explored how both *Guide* and *Ghulami* engage with the hierarchical social system shaped by caste, examining its intersections with religion, rural realities, regional dynamics, and elements like science and feudalism. These themes are marked by a deliberate obscurity regarding caste identities and an ambiguous treatment of Dalit-specific concerns, which are subsumed under broader struggles faced by 'lower caste' individuals and marginalized farmers. By reframing these issues in general terms, the texts—particularly *Ghulami*—risk sidelining Dalit experiences and voices within their socio-political narratives, even as they highlight solidarity among the oppressed. Building on this discussion, the next chapter investigates the concept of the 'Brahmanical gaze' in cinematic storytelling, particularly by 'upper caste' filmmakers. Through an analysis of the Marathi film *Sairat* and

its Hindi adaptation *Dhadak*, the chapter examines how transposing the story from Maharashtra to Rajasthan reshapes its engagement with caste. This analysis will explore how such shifts in narrative framing impact the representation of sensitive social issues, and what they reveal about the limitations of mainstream cinema when addressing caste.

Chapter Two: Bollywood and the Culture of Caste Blindness: A Critical Analysis of *Dhadak* and *Sairat*

This chapter explores critically the extent to which casteist ideologies shape cinematic representations of Dalit identities. Furthermore, this chapter also aims to critique the relations of cinematic gaze that 'upper caste' filmmakers use in their filmmaking practices when representing Dalit identity. Gaze and ideology are often employed either to undermine Dalit identity or to present Dalits in a biased manner; their presence in the film is to foster the personae of the 'upper caste' protagonists. My analysis will focus on two films in particular, *Dhadak* (2018, Shashank Khaitan) and *Sairat* (2016, Nagraj Popatrao Manjule). The presentation of caste on screen by 'upper caste' cineastes is portrayed through their dominant privileged gaze, which is examined in relation to *Dhadak*, a remake of *Sairat* directed by 'upper caste' filmmaker Shashank Khaitan. This chapter examines how 'upper caste' filmmakers often employ a 'caste-blind' attitude in their films, obscuring the very real influence of caste and masking it by focusing on other binaries like class division or urban-rural divides. The term 'caste blindness' refers to the inability or unwillingness to recognize or acknowledge the existence and impact of caste-based discrimination and inequalities in society. As Rachel Dwyer argues, the absence of 'lower castes' in Hindi cinema isn't a sign of caste neutrality, but rather a symptom of caste blindness.[1] This failure to acknowledge caste disparities perpetuates a social sphere dominated by 'upper castes', crafting an illusion of a caste-free society through their Brahmanical gaze, and presenting their own skewed interpretation of what a caste-free social order would look like. Moreover, Dickens Leonard and Manju Edachira note:

[1] Rachel Dwyer, *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) p.103; see Dhamma Darshan Nigam, 'To Your Caste Blindness', *Round Table India: For an Informed Ambedkar Age*, 09 March 2019 <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/to-your-caste-blindness/> [accessed 15 July 2023].

> 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. 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.[2]

In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the power dynamics that operate in the cinematic representations of caste. The dominant privileged gaze of 'upper caste' filmmakers can undermine the Dalit identity or perpetuate stereotypes. Therefore, a more nuanced and sensitive portrayal of caste in Indian cinema that is mindful of the historical and structural inequalities faced by Dalits is necessary. Dalit filmmakers strive to bring attention to these critical issues in their films by portraying the Dalit identity and their ideological stance, which is rooted in the positive pursuit of anti-caste assertion.

In order to establish the necessary context for the argument put forth in this chapter regarding the prevalence of the 'upper caste' gaze and the emergence of the Ambedkarite gaze as a form of contestation, it is important to briefly discuss a selection of other Bollywood films. These films will serve as a foundation for understanding the broader narrative which surrounds issues of caste in Indian cinema, leading up to the main focus on *Sairat* and *Dhadak.*

The representation of caste has been a persistent thematic element in the trajectory of Indian cinema from its inception. Initially, these portrayals adopted a subtler approach, often serving

[2] Dickens Leonard and Manju Edachira, 'Magizhchi! 'The Casteless Collective' and the Sensorial Exscription Films', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), p.63.

to foreground the 'upper caste' narratives. The depiction of caste in Bollywood cinema has evolved over the years, reflecting changing societal perspectives and a growing willingness to address this complex issue. [3] This chronological progression is evident in films such as *Achhut Kannya* (1936, The Untouchable Girl, Franz Osten) which laid the groundwork for addressing caste in cinema by depicting a love story between a girl from a 'lower caste' and a boy from an 'upper caste'. It marked an early attempt to challenge caste-based norms and prejudices. *Sujata* (1959, The Noble Born, Bimal Roy), building on the foundations laid by *Achhut Kannya*, *Sujata* takes a deeper exploration into the issue of caste discrimination. It revolves around the life of the titular character Sujata, an orphaned girl from a 'lower caste', who grapples with social exclusion and marginalization due to her caste identity. The film introduces the theme of love defying caste boundaries when Adheer, a compassionate young man from an 'upper caste', falls in love with Sujata.

Ankur (1974, The Seedling, Shyam Benegal), moving further in time, explores the themes of power, privilege, and exploitation within the context of caste-based discrimination. The film provides a poignant portrayal of the struggles faced by 'lower caste' individuals in a deeply hierarchical, patriarchal, and feudal society. It signifies a shift towards a more profound examination of caste dynamics in Indian society. In recent years, Bollywood has altered its approach to depicting the reality of caste, often presenting Savarnas as saviours while articulating Dalits as miserable, servile, wretched, hopeless, voiceless, underconfident, and corrupt.[4] This shift in narrative raises important questions about the representation of caste in cinema and the power dynamics embedded within these portrayals.

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[3] For instance, films like *Neera,* (1926, R. S. Choudhary & Ramchandra Gopal Torney), a Malayalam film *Vigathakumaran* (1928, J. C. Daniel), *Khuda Ki Shaan* (1931, R.S. Choudhury), *Chandidas* (1934, Nitin Bose), and *Dharmatma* (1934, Nitin Bose) (1935, V. Shantaram) depicting caste in a relatively nuanced way.

[4] For instance, films such as *Neecha Nagar* (1946, Chetan Anand), *Sadgati* (1981, Satyajit Ray), *Bandit Queen* (1994, Shekhar Kapur), *Bawandar* (2000, Jag Mundhra), *Lagaan* (2001, Ashutosh Gowariker), *Eklavya: The Royal Guard (2007,* Vidhu Vinod Chopra), *Aakrosh* (2010, Priyadarshan), *Rajneeti* (2010, Prakash Jha), *Peepli Live* (2010, Anusha Rizvi & Mahmood Farooqui), *Aarakshan* (2011, Prakash Jha), *Guddu Rangeela* (2015,

Article 15 (2019, Anubhav Sinha), for instance, portrays the protagonist, Ayan Ranjan, belonging to the 'upper caste' Brahmin, who becomes the hero and saviour of Dalits despite being unaware of the reality of caste in the country. However, the Dalit activist fighting for rights throughout the film is ultimately killed in a police encounter. This film raises questions about why Dalits who fight for justice and rights have to die as victims or culprits. As a Dalit spectator, I would argue that although *Article 15* draws on real-life incidents of caste-based violence and discrimination, its portrayal fails to provoke a meaningful sense of shock, discomfort, or ethical urgency in the audience. Instead, it largely adheres to an 'upper caste' gaze that renders the Dalit body either as an object of pity or as a symbolic victim. In doing so, it reduces the structural complexity of caste to a digestible moral problem, simplifying deep-rooted social realities into individual acts of cruelty or benevolence. In this context, the Ambedkarite gaze intervenes to challenge the reductive and often stereotypical representations of Dalits, seeking instead to portray Dalit lives in their full complexity. It reorients cinematic narratives to reflect the multidimensional realities of Dalit existence, grounded in social, political, and historical contexts.

Another example of the Brahmanical gaze at work can be found in Serious Men (2020), directed by Sudhir Mishra and written by Manu Joseph, which portrays a Dalit family that indulges in deceitful acts to make their son a genius, implying that a Dalit child cannot become meritorious or a genius through ordinary means. This film suggests that even after working in a high position in a prestigious research institute, the Dalit family cannot afford to live in a

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Subhash Kapoor & Ishita Dave), *Manjhi- The Mountain Man* (2015, Ketan Mehta), *Mukabaaz* (2018, Anurag Kashyap), *Sonchirya* (2019, Abhishek Chaubey), *Article 15* (2019, Anubhav Sinha), and *Pareeksha* (2020, Prakash Jha). These films present the issue of caste in a conventional manner. All of the directors are from the 'upper caste' community, considered the highest in the caste hierarchy. As Vikrant Kishore posits, 'most of the films that capture the stories of Dalits are told through a Savarna gaze; thus, they tend to be highly superficial, do not delve deep into the complexities of caste/ism, do not assess the social structure and hierarchies, and mostly end up decontextualizing the story as per their narrow interpretations'. Vikrant Kishore, 'The Caste Blindness of Bollywood NRI Genre Films', *Senses of Cinema,* 27 May 2022 <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2022/bollywood/the-caste-blindness-of-bollywood-nri-genre-films/> [accessed 25 May 2023].

proper house or flat. The film also manifests the insensitivity of the filmmaker towards Dalits by portraying them as vulnerable through a stereotypical gaze. It demonstrates the caste-based tragic experience of Dalit individuals in a comical and negligible manner, adhering to the gaze that 'upper caste' filmmakers employ in their cinematic approach to (re)produce their Brahmanical ideology.

While Indian cinema has depicted the issue of caste in various films, the portrayal of Dalits as victims or culprits and the perpetuation of stereotypes remains problematic. The gaze that 'upper caste' filmmakers offer through the above-mentioned films is one of Brahmanical and casteist ideology, which doesn't attempt to explore the potentiality and agency of Dalit characters. 'Upper caste' filmmakers often embed their Brahminical ideological position to narrate the issue of caste and Dalits from their privileged gaze—revealing their imagination of the Dalit world, which diverges from the perceptions held by Dalits regarding their own lived experiences. A person exhibiting political and social consciousness aligned with Ambedkarite ideology would astutely perceive the noticeable divergence apparent in the films *Achhut Kanya, Sujata*, *Ankur, Article 15*, and *Serious Men* regarding their portrayal of the societal structure pertaining to Dalit communities. Sujata, being an untouchable girl, establishes her association with the realm of the 'upper caste' society through the Brahmanical gaze, which offers the 'Gandhian change of heart' and presents her as an inferior, subservient, and sacrificing body, while effectively suppressing the Ambedkarite critique of caste.[5] All the Dalit characters in these films are denied the opportunity to voice the concerns and experiences of the Dalit community. Instead, the presence and agency of Dalits are subordinated to empowering the Savarna characters, thus reinforcing the supremacy of the 'upper caste' gaze. To negate this 'upper caste'/Brahmanical gaze, the Ambedkarite gaze developed by Dalit

[5] Nicole Thiara, 'The Caste of Nature: Wholesome Bodies and Parasites in Bimal Roy's Sujata and Gogu Shyamala's 'A Beauteous Light', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), p.240.

filmmakers (re)defines and (re)constructs the portrayal of Dalit subjectivity beyond the romantic and abject tropes and presents a more nuanced and sensitive depiction of the complexities of caste relations in India.

Sairat is a critically acclaimed Marathi language film released in 2016, directed by Nagraj Manjule. The film is set in a rural area of Maharashtra, a state in western India. The story follows two young lovers, Prashant alias Parshya and Archana alias Archi, who come from different caste and class backgrounds. Parshya is a 'lower caste' boy from a poor family, while Archi is an 'upper caste' girl from a wealthy family. Despite their differences, they fall in love and end up facing the harsh reality of their class and caste differences. The film highlights the struggles of inter-caste relationships in India and the social and economic barriers that exist between different castes. *Dhadak* is a Hindi language remake of *Sairat,* released in 2018, directed by Shashank Khaitan and produced by Karan Johar.[6] The film is set in Rajasthan. The plot revolves around two college students Parthavi Singh Rathore and Madhukar Bhagla alias Madhu from different caste (or class) backgrounds who fall in love and face the challenges of family opposition. Even though it is a remake of a commercially successful film, it presents a 'filtered' version of the original story. The setting is portrayed through a more polished and urban style informed by a touristic gaze. The film showcases famous urban landmarks such as Udaipur's City Palace and Lake Pichola, Kolkata's Howrah Bridge and Victoria Memorial, CST Mumbai, and so on. In the adapted version, the issue of caste is veiled in such a manner that any attempt to scrutinize it would result in uncovering a void, devoid of any discernible

[6] Karan Johar is an Indian filmmaker, producer, and television personality. Johar started his career in the film industry as an assistant director to filmmaker Aditya Chopra on the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995). He made his directorial debut with the blockbuster film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). Karan Johar has directed and produced several successful films under his production company, Dharma Productions. Some of his notable directorial works include *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006), *My Name Is Khan* (2010), *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016), and *Student of the Year* (2012). All these films revolve around the idea of a happy ending and incorporate the love trope in some way. It seems that Karan Johar specializes in creating films centred on romantic love stories involving affluent individuals from 'higher' castes.

reference to caste. The context of caste appears to have been rendered inconspicuous, camouflaged beneath layers of subtlety. In addition to this, my analysis below will also explore in detail the issue of substituting caste with class in relation to the Brahmanical gaze that *Dhadak* employs in the process of narrativizing its love story.

The remake of films, such as the case of *Dhadak* as a remake of *Sairat,* requires an examination of the process and considerations undertaken by filmmakers. It becomes essential to explore the approach adopted by filmmakers when remaking films in order to address this aspect adequately. Remakes are occasionally thought of as films that recover, repair, or improve the source title, but in the case of *Dhadak*, there is nothing broken and in need of repair.[7] Instead, I argue that *Dhadak*, as a remake, harms the essential spirit of the story that *Sairat* is so passionate about. It offers a gentrified version of the film which lacks the 'realistic motivation' of the filmmaker.[8] It suggests that the original filmmaker had a specific vision or intention behind the film, and this motivation may have been compromised or diluted in the gentrified version. The result of gentrifying a film is often a version that feels more polished, conventional, or safe. While it may be intended to appeal to a wealthier (upper class/caste) or wider mainstream audience, it can lose the original filmmaker's intended impact, depth, and realism. The authentic and thought-provoking elements that the filmmaker initially sought to convey may be sacrificed in favour of broader appeal or commercial success.[9] Brian D. Johnson argues that one of the primary motivations for remaking successful films is to capitalize on their commercial viability, particularly by reaching audiences that may be unfamiliar with the original work due to linguistic or cultural barriers.[10] In the case of *Sairat,* the film's regional

[7] Lauren Rosewarne, *Why We Remake: The Politics, Economics and Emotions of Film and TV Remakes* (New York: Routledge,2020), p.185.
[8] *Sairat* thrived on the filmmaker's personal connection —his Dalit background— to the story, while *Dhadak* feels like a calculated commercial venture detached from the raw, 'real' motivations that powered the original.
[9] See Richard Misek, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p.19.
[10] Brian D. Johnson, 'why remake a perfectly good movie?', *Maclean,* 18 June, 2009 <https://macleans.ca/culture/why-remake-a-perfectly-good-movie/> [accessed 27 March 2023].

specificity limited its potential audience outside of Maharashtra, which its Hindi remake *Dhadak* fills with a big production in the widely spoken language in India. However, *Dhadak* not only takes economic benefit from the source title, but it also sanitizes it, thereby ensuring its alignment with the desired standards of Bollywood and the 'upper caste' gaze. As Todd McGowan's analysis of Americanized remakes suggests, these adaptations often compromise the raw and provocative qualities of the source material in an effort to cater to a broader, more conventional audience. This assertion holds true for *Dhadak*, which, as a remake of the Marathi film *Sairat*, has toned down the original's edgy and gritty elements to appeal to a wider audience. McGowan's argument underscores the tension between artistic integrity and commercial viability that often characterizes the production of remakes in contemporary cinema.[11]

Dhadak has been criticized for its prioritization of class over social nuances which in a way makes it a film that reflects the 'upper caste' gaze as Pawan Salwe asserts, 'Love alone can destroy the caste, and it is only by destroying lovers that caste can triumph'.[12] *Sairat* succeeds in demonstrating how caste dynamics work in Indian society, and how the upholder of the hierarchy and hegemony can go to any extent to preserve their 'ego' and 'honour' attached to their caste-nation.[13] *Dhadak* shifts its narrative focus from portraying love based on caste to highlighting love influenced by economic and social class. The film explores the dynamics of

[11] See Todd McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2012), p. 67.
[12] Jyoti Punwani, 'Why Sairat is such an important film', *Rediff.com,* 20 May 2016 <https://www.rediff.com/movies/special/why-sairat-is-such-an-important-film/20160520.htm> [accessed 19 May 2023].
[13] I consider the concept 'Caste-nation' in the context of Indian society as very important. I define this as the concept of India as a 'caste-nation' that highlights the enduring impact of the caste system on various facets of social life. This influence manifests in areas such as occupational choices, marriage practices, social mobility, and access to resources. That's why I, along with other Ambedkarite scholars, refer to the Indian nation as a 'caste nation' – a place where one cannot think and go beyond caste norms. Despite the constitutional safeguards provided by the Constitution of India to every citizen equally, the society and country are governed by the rules and regulations codified by the caste system. Similarly, Yogesh Maitreya in his memoir defines the 'caste-nation'. According to him, in this caste-nation, 'No superior caste can liberate the caste below it because the existence of the superior caste relies on keeping the caste below inferior', Yogesh Maitreya, *Water in a broken pot: A Memoir* (Gurugram: Penguin, 2023), p.67.

class-based relationships instead of emphasizing caste-based love. This is achieved through the transformation of rural elements into an urbanized lifestyle, ultimately conforming to the conventions of the Bollywood masala genre.[14] In examining the strategic shift of the prominent issue of caste in the film *Dhadak,* Hrishikesh Ingle argues that this shift has not only served as a 'narrative vehicle for Bollywood's appropriating structures', but also exemplifies the displacement of the 'regional significance' initially associated with *Sairat* by the overwhelming influence of the 'star system'.[15] While creative remakes allow filmmakers to (re)tell stories from their perspectives by utilizing camera techniques, sound design, colour schemes, and musical arrangements to add new dimensions to the original work, *Dhadak* is seen to have failed in this regard by stripping away the vitality and depth of *Sairat's* narrative.[16] The director's creative choices have been seen as compromising the political critique performed by the source material, resulting in a flattening of the socio-political commentary present in the original film. In terms of its creative aspects, it extinguishes *Sairat's* life rather than 'breathing new life' to the original work.[17]

Nagraj Manjule's filmmaking techniques and style offer a distinct Ambedkarite gaze that enables Dalit individuals to develop a unique form of spectatorship, resonating with Manthia Diawara's conceptualisation of 'resisting spectatorship', which is deeply connected to Dalit identity and space. In this chapter, I will primarily focus on the notion of gaze from an

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[14] Tejaswini Ganti delineates the concept of the Bollywood masala genre, characterizing it as a widely employed term within the film industry, Indian media, and among audiences to designate numerous popular Hindi films. The term 'masala', derived from Hindi and signifying a fusion of spices, is a commonplace expression in the vernacular of culinary discourse. Analogously, when applied to the realm of cinema, it connotes a specific category of films, not universally applicable to all Hindi productions, distinguished by the amalgamation of diverse cinematic elements such as 'music, romance, action, comedy, and drama – designed to impact the most pleasurable viewing experience'. See, Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), p.140.

[15] Hrishikesh Ingle, 'Fandry and Sairat: Regional Cinema and Marginality', *Economic & Political Weekly,* 53.45 (2018), 46-53 <https://www.epw.in/journal/2018/45/special-articles/fandry-and-sairat.html> [accessed 19 May 2023].

[16] "Dhadak' reviews: Critics give film a thumbs down', *Gulf News*, 21 July 2018 <https://gulfnews.com/leisure/movies/reviews/dhadak-reviews-critics-give-film-a-thumbs-down-1.2254597> [accessed 23 May 2023].

[17] Lauren Rosewarne, *Why We Remake*, p.195.

Ambedkarite perspective, drawing upon the scholarly works of bell hooks, Laura Mulvey, and Manthia Diawara. This chapter will not extensively engage with the aspects of spectatorship, as my final chapter of the thesis will comprehensively explore Ambedkarite spectatorship and resistance in relation to anti-caste films and filmmakers. In this chapter, I propose that the way a film narrates its story and presents its visual style is shaped by the gaze, which is influenced by a specific ideology, as well as various cinematic and non-cinematic elements. Furthermore, the director's socio-cultural position plays a pivotal role in shaping the portrayal of Dalits and their social, cultural, and political milieu.

The concept of gaze in film studies refers to the act of looking, specifically how viewers observe characters and how characters are presented to spectators on screen. Rooted in psychoanalytic theory, it suggests that our perceptions of the world are shaped by unconscious desires and fantasies, which are projected onto the screen and constructed through visual media.[18] However, the concept of gaze goes beyond the on-screen representation of characters. It also addresses how this representation is shaped by the particular institutions and cultural practices of the film industry. The film industry is shaped by various institutional and cultural practices, such as the production process, distribution, exhibition, and marketing of films. These practices are influenced by various factors, including economic and political pressures, historical contexts, and societal norms and values. For example, the 'male gaze' is a term coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey to describe how films are often constructed from a heterosexual male perspective, objectifying women as passive objects of male desire.[19] This dominant form of cinematic representation is reinforced by the institutional and cultural

[18] Alex Widdowson, 'The Gaze: Psychoanalysis, Ideology, and Representation', *Documentary Animation Discourse,* 26 February 2021 <https://documentaryanimationdiscourse.wordpress.com/tag/psychoanalysis/> [accessed 17 July 2023].

[19] Laura Mulvey employed the principles of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework to examine the asymmetry of sexual power structures manifested within the visual dynamics of classical Hollywood narratives. By appropriating these conceptual frameworks, Mulvey aimed to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of the 'gaze' as a political tool, thereby revealing the unequal distribution of power based on gender within cinematic representations. See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan,1989).

practices of the film industry, which are often male-dominated and patriarchal. However, alternative forms of representation have emerged that seek to challenge and subvert the dominant forms of representation. For example, black, feminist and queer cinema aims to disrupt traditional representations of gender and sexuality, challenging the dominant forms of representation and the institutional and cultural practices that reinforce them.[20] The concept of gaze is an important lens for understanding the complexities of representation in film, as well as the ways in which film both reflects and shapes our cultural norms and values.[21] bell hooks by analysing Mulvey's theory of 'male gaze' developed the concept of the 'oppositional gaze' as a way to challenge existing modes of looking and to create 'possibilities for resistance and agency'. The 'oppositional gaze' suggests a shift in perspective and a critical examination of the dominant ways of seeing and being seen.[22] hooks contends that black spectators were aware of the cinema's creation of 'white womanhood as an object of phallocentric gaze' and thus decided not to associate with either 'victim or perpetrator'. The dichotomy that Mulvey postulates of 'woman as image and man as bearer of the look' was constantly challenged and dismantled by black women. As critical observers, black women observe from a disruptive location.[23]

In her critique of Diawara and Mulvey, bell hooks identify a crucial blind spot in both theories: their failure to fully account for the complexity of Black female spectatorship. She

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[20] Halberstam discusses the concept of the gaze in relation to transgender bodies and subcultural lives. One argument that focuses on the gaze in his book is the idea that transgender bodies disrupt and challenge normative notions of gender and sexuality, consequently unsettling the conventional gaze. He argues that the transgender body disrupts the binary framework of the gaze by existing outside of traditional gender categories. This disruption can create discomfort or confusion for those who are accustomed to viewing bodies through a heteronormative lens. Through an analysis of transgender bodies and subcultures, Halberstam explores how the gaze can be a mechanism of power and control, but also a site of resistance and agency. See Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (NYU Press: New York, 2005); Jack Halberstam, *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (University of California Press: California, 2018).

[21] Daniel Chandler, 'Notes on 'The Gaze'', *WWW document,* 30 June 1998 <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel//Documents/gaze/gaze02.html> [accessed 10 May 2023]; Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1977).

[22] bell hooks, *Black looks*: *Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) p. 116.

[23] bell hooks, pp.122-123.

argues that Diawara's notion of 'resisting spectatorship' is too limited, as it frames Black women's viewing practices primarily in terms of rejection or negation. Instead, hooks emphasizes that Black women are not just resisting dominant texts—they are actively producing alternative ways of seeing. Their spectatorship involves invention, revision, and critical engagement that goes beyond opposition, creating new visual vocabularies and political meanings.[24] Building on hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze, the Ambedkarite gaze foregrounds the experiences and visual agency of Dalits. It does not merely resist Savarna representations—it reclaims cinematic space to assert the everyday humanity, dignity, and structural oppression of Dalit life. Films like *Sairat* become sites of this reclamation, projecting a Dalit world onto the screen in which caste is not background context but a central axis of power and identity.

Conceptualising the Ambedkarite and Brahmanical gaze

In this section, a critical analysis of *Sairat* and *Dhadak* is undertaken, with an emphasis on the ideologies that underlie these films. These films are situated within distinct ideological avenues, namely Ambedkarism and Brahmanism. The former is associated with the ideology of Dr B.R. Ambedkar while the latter pertains to the dominant Brahmanical ideology that upholds and (re)produces caste-based hierarchies. In the context of cinema, ideology can refer to the underlying set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape the way a film presents its themes, characters, and narrative. It can be implicit or explicit in a film and can reflect the political, social, cultural, and economic context in which it was made. It can manifest itself in various ways in cinema, including the choice of subject matter, the portrayal of characters and events, the use of language, symbols and metaphors, and the overall style and tone of the film.

[24] bell hooks, p.128.

Ideology can also be influenced by the filmmaker's personal beliefs and perspectives, as well as by the larger cultural and historical context of the time.

Feminist theorists have contributed to the study of ideology, arguing that gender and patriarchy play a crucial role in shaping ideologies of power and domination. For example, white supremacy and patriarchy, according to feminist scholar bell hooks, are interconnected ideologies that serve to maintain the power and privilege of dominant groups while oppressing marginalised groups.[25] Indian cinema, as a medium to propagate dominant ideology, operates as a mechanism to (re)construct, (re)imagine, and (re)produce the dominant values of the oppressive societal structure in visual culture. This not only perpetuates the existing hierarchy but also reinforces and normalizes the prevailing ideology in society. Nevertheless, the emergence of Dalit filmmakers has posed a significant challenge to this phenomenon and opened new avenues for alternative discourses in cinema shaped by the perspective of the oppressed. This has resulted in the creation of distinct narratives that define Dalit agency from the Ambedkarite gaze.

As Jyoti Nisha asserts, 'the ideological bent of a filmmaker that decides the socio-political view of a film', is relevant and very evident in the case of *Sairat.* [26] Nagraj Manjule's personal experiences and ideological perspective as an Ambedkarite filmmaker undoubtedly shape the film's socio-political commentary. His commitment to portraying the brutal realities of caste discrimination and his emphasis on anti-caste thought is evident throughout the narrative. The film's narrative revolves around societal tensions that impede love, rather than focusing solely on love and romance. As Harish Wankhede notes, 'Film allows the audience to reimagine the earlier mainstream narratives of romance critically. It half-heartedly breaks the

[25] bell, hooks, *Black looks.*
[26] Jyoti Nisha, 'Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship', *EPW engage,* 15 May, 2020 <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/indian-cinema-and-bahujan-spectatorship> [accessed 25 March 2023].

stereotypes about the Dalit self'. The possibility of a strong and assertive Dalit hero emerging from 'the crises' is not fully explored. Instead, the Dalit character is depicted with 'conventional cultural assumptions' and is portrayed as 'weak and escapist'. Parshya's commitment is solely to his 'love interest', distancing himself from other 'social commitments' and presenting him as a 'metrosexual, self-engaged hero'.[27] The argument put forth by Wankhede, in my opinion, lacks applicability and relevance due to the film's deviation from the conventional Bollywood masala genre, wherein the protagonist, originating from the lower socioeconomic strata (without specific caste identification), assumes the role of a saviour and champion of the masses. The protagonist, Parshya, a Dalit, does not conform to the typical 'upper caste' imaginary world. He is portrayed as a hardworking, honest individual with a passion for cricket and is a dedicated captain. Additionally, he excels in his studies. He does not exhibit a self-centred attitude, as evidenced by his active involvement with their social circle, including friends, parents, and the local community. Furthermore, he contributes to his family's livelihood by assisting them in their fishing activities. It is important to note that his decision to leave his current environment is not driven by a desire to sever familial ties or cause detriment to his loved ones. Rather, he possesses a profound understanding of the potential repercussions associated with remaining in the same village with his lover Archie, which leads him to choose to distance himself. His decision is conscious as well as circumstantial. Despite his awareness of his position and roots in society, he falls in love with Archie. Parshya's ambition to transcend caste boundaries is a testament to his character. As an individual, born in a poor fishermen community, he embodies the real sensibilities of society, diverging from the idealized portrayal often seen in Bollywood films associated with the 'upper caste'. Parshya's lack of resistance should not be interpreted as negligence on the filmmaker Manjule's part to

[27] Harish Wankhede, 'Sairat and the making of a Dalit Hero', *Tehelka Magazine*, 25 July 2016 <http://tehelka.com/> [accessed 29 March 2023].

explore the character's heroic qualities. Instead, Manjule deliberately opts for a more 'realistic' narrative, devoid of exaggerated dramatic elements, which are often unattainable for ordinary individuals in a society marked by feudalism and casteism. As the Dalit resistance movement gains momentum in the realms of social and political activism, the depiction of resistance through character development in visual media will inevitably have a more pronounced and explicit impact.

Manjule unapologetically reflects his stance by portraying the complex and oppressive nature of casteist and feudal society in the film. For example, in a classroom scene, an English teacher discusses modern and revolutionary poets, including Dalit poet Namdev Dhasal. This highlights not only the significance of poets but also the history of the Dalit and the anti-caste movement. The English teacher recites the poem 'Nava Shipai' by Keshavsut, the first modern Marathi poet, which conveys the poet's defiance against caste:

I'm a brave soldier of the new world,

Let me see who can bring me to my knees,

I'm not a Brahmin, nor a Hindu

Nor do I belong to any other caste.[28]

This poem reflects Nagraj Manjule's ideology and underscores the importance of poets in building a casteless and inclusive society. The terms 'Social inequality' and 'African American poets' are written on the blackboard alongside the poem titled 'I Have Seen Black Hands' by Richard Wright, evoking a deep sense of the movement and struggle for equality on a global

[28] This translation of the poem is taken from the subtitle of the film.

scale. It reflects the shared historical fights of Blacks and Dalits against the oppressors (white and 'upper caste'). In the following scene, Prince, Archie's brother, slaps the Dalit teacher for scolding him for talking on the phone in class. This slap is a symbol of how the power hierarchy associated with caste is maintained in every sector of society. It also illustrates that the rise of the anti-caste movement is not accepted by the caste Hindus. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the inherent constraints that arise when asserting these narratives as the influence of caste power operates in such a way that these anti-caste establishments often encounter resistance and opposition. *Sairat* highlights the importance of the anti-caste movement in building a more inclusive society. The burgeoning anti-caste movement has exerted a significant impact on the recruitment of Dalit teachers within the educational sphere. This movement has been accompanied by the influence of the Ambedkarite discourse, which has created opportunities for Dalit individuals to enter these spaces and teach anti-caste history.

Moreover, it has empowered them to boldly reprimand students from the so-called upper castes. However, it is important to note that the current momentum of this shift has not yet gained a solid foothold within the intricate and inflexible feudal caste system. Consequently, Dalit teachers still face the potential for humiliation and do not possess the means to retaliate against such instances of humiliation by individuals belonging to the 'upper castes'. Through its depiction of the struggles of the Dalit community with the nuanced engagement aesthetically and narratively, the film serves as a call to action for the spectators to challenge social inequality and strive for equality.[29] The most important aspect of Nagraj

[29] The impact of the film extended beyond its cinematic influence, manifesting tangible effects in society. *Sairat's* portrayal of love and rebellion resonated so deeply with audiences that it prompted real-life transformations. Inspired by the film, parents began re-evaluating their traditional beliefs and practices, leading them to embrace their children's choices and approve marriages that defied societal norms. Even dedicated *Sairat* fans established the Sairat Marriage Group (SMG), an informal organization comprising approximately 100 volunteers spread across Maharashtra. The SMG aimed to assist and support runaway lovers, similar to the Love Commandos shelter in Delhi, which provides refuge for threatened mixed couples. See Meenakshi Shedde, 'Sairat effect: Looks like the underdog will have his day', *Forbes India,* 18 August, 2016 <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/think/sairat-effect-looks-like-the-underdog-will-have-his-day/44087/1> [accessed 20 May 2023].

Manjule is that he does not present his people and their truth with any myth and slander on the screen. The conventional narrative perpetuated by 'upper caste' filmmakers, wherein the protagonist triumphs over adversity, which is a mythic and symbolic assertion, is effectively challenged by Manjule through his 'realistic' portrayal of the caste dynamics prevalent in rural and rustic regions of India, particularly feudal rural Maharashtra. Manjule adeptly constructs a cinematic symphony that amalgamates intricate portrayals of geographical landscapes and human interconnections, resulting in a visually captivating spectacle and an emotionally profound encounter for marginalized communities who perceive a deep sense of engagement. In the first half of the film, Manjule captures the rustic rural Maharashtra using long and wide shots that emphasize the beauty of the landscape. The slow-motion shots in this part of the film contribute to a romantic atmosphere that evokes a sense of love and longing. The natural lighting and warm tones create a comfortable and inviting ambience that immerses the viewer in the setting. However, the complex nature of spatiality is not overlooked in this creation of visual pleasure. In *Sairat*, mise-en-scène functions not merely as backdrop but as a way to position caste within the visual field. Long wide shots of village and city slum spaces accentuate how caste hierarchies are spatially organized. By contrast, *Dhadak* reorients the camera away from these hierarchies, favouring tourist-friendly visuals that decontextualize caste. This shift marks a retreat from the Ambedkarite gaze into a Brahmanical aesthetic—one that privileges surface over structure.

This is how Manjule represents an 'oppositional gaze'[30] that bell hooks introduced to describe the critical, resistant, and subversive ways in which black women have looked at themselves and their world in order to challenge dominant power structures and resist objectification and marginalization. Similarly, Jyoti Nisha has proposed the idea of 'Bahujan spectatorship' to define the way in which members of oppressed and marginalized

[30] bell hooks, *Black looks*.

communities, collectively referred to as 'Bahujans', can adopt a critical and empowered stance towards media and cinematic representations that perpetuate stereotypes and dominant ideologies.[31] In addition to the two alternative stances mentioned above, I include the 'Ambedkarite gaze', which refers to the struggles, ideas, and teachings of Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

Ambedkarites believe in the principles of social equality, justice, and fraternity, and are focused on the emancipation of Dalits, who have historically been oppressed and marginalized in Indian society. The Ambedkarite gaze seeks to challenge the dominant narratives and power structures of Brahmanism and Hinduism and advocates for the creation of a just and egalitarian society. Nagraj Manjule, the director of *Sairat,* is himself associated with this ideological position and believes in the principles of Dr Ambedkar, which he tries to reflect in his films too. *Sairat* serves as an important contribution to the ongoing discourse on social justice and equality in India and highlights the urgent need for transformative social change. In an interview, Nagraj Manjule remarks, 'Caste is the foundation of our society. It's a reality that you need to have a special talent to avoid. Bollywood has that talent, I don't. The only divide there is in Bollywood — where love stories are material — is of class'.[32] The crucial point raised by Nagraj Manjule regarding the profound and oblivious nature of Bollywood's engagement with the topic of caste holds significant relevance. Like the earlier films by 'upper caste' filmmakers and their portrayal of Dalits, *Dhadak* exemplifies the continuation of the

[31] The term Bahujan means 'the majority of the people, it refers to present day Scheduled Castes (Dalits), Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis/indigenous) and Shudra (peasant) castes — cutting across religion, ethnicities and geographies. See Valliammal Karunakaran, 'The Dalit-Bahujan Guide to Understanding Caste in Hindu Scripture', *Medium*, 13 July 2016 <https://medium.com/@Bahujan_Power/the-dalit-bahujan-guide-to-understanding-caste-in-hindu-scripture-417db027fce6> [accessed 13 May 2023]; However, scholars like Kancha Ilaiah use Dalit and Bahujan separately, according to him, Bahujan means OBC. See 'DU Committee Wants the Word 'Dalit', Kancha Ilaiah's Books Dropped From Syllabus', *The Wire,* 25 October, 2018< https://thewire.in/education/du-committee-wants-the-word-dalit-kancha-ilaiahs-books-dropped-from-syllabus> [accessed 13 May 2023]; Jyoti Nisha, 'Indian Cinema'.

[32] Namrata Joshi, 'I want a break from this male-dominated world', *The Hindu*, 07 May 2016 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/%E2%80%98I-want-a-break-from-this-male-dominated-world%E2%80%99/article61451850.ece> [accessed 26 March 2023].

‘upper caste’ perspective. For the ‘upper caste’, caste is a matter of choice in term of whether they wish to address it or not. However, for Dalit filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule and individuals of similar backgrounds, the dynamics operate differently. Even if they attempt to evade caste as a subject, their harrowing encounters with discrimination, untouchability, and various other manifestations of caste-based oppression impede such avoidance. This gaze entails a critical examination of the mechanisms of caste-based oppression, as well as a commitment to social justice and equality, and it offers a cinematic anti-caste methodology.

For example, when Parshya and Archie seek refuge in a slum in Hyderabad, a woman takes them to her home and shares her own story of violence and migration from Maharashtra that she faced in her life. Another instance is when Pradeep—who is bowlegged and a friend of Parshya— while walking down the street in a melancholy state after being emotionally wounded by his romantic interest encounters another man with deformed limbs. Pradeep extends a warm smile and greets that person. The individual smiles in return, and in that moment, their shared struggle transcends personal suffering—hinting at a silent, profound empathy forged through caste-based marginalization. These instances reflect not just personal kindness but a deeper ethic of mutual recognition within the Dalit community—an emotional solidarity conspicuously absent in *Dhadak*. In *Sairat*, Nagraj Manjule also confronts the violent mechanisms of caste exclusion through the social boycott of Parshya’s family after he elopes with an ‘upper caste’ girl. The panchayat (Caste Council) compels Parshya’s father to publicly apologise and disown his son, forcing the family into exile. This scene offers an unflinching portrayal of the caste system’s punitive logic, where transgressing caste boundaries results in social death, not just for individuals but for entire families. By contrast, *Dhadak* reduces this systemic violence to a bureaucratic inconvenience—Madhu’s father being asked to visit a police station daily. The erasure of caste in *Dhadak* leads to a diluted narrative that fails to capture the stakes of caste transgression and the lived trauma of those who bear its brunt.

By contrast, the Brahmanical gaze is rooted in the dominant cultural and social ideology of Brahmanism, which is characterized by a hierarchical social order and the dominance of the 'upper castes'. It reinforces and perpetuates the existing power structures and tends to view social issues from the perspective of the dominant caste. Brahmanical ideology places a strong emphasis on ritual purity, caste hierarchy, and the maintenance of social norms and traditions. *Dhadak* in this way, makes a concerted effort to avoid explicit discussions of caste in order to avoid discomforting its predominantly privileged and 'upper caste' audience. This representation additionally serves as a translational and reflective manifestation of the ideological beliefs upheld by Shashank Khaitan. It is worth noting that Khaitan hails from a prosperous Marwari business lineage belonging to the 'upper caste', originating from Rajasthan, and later migrating to Kolkata before settling in Maharashtra. Although Khaitan has a connection with Rajasthan, he appears to be either unaware or uninterested in the feudal and casteist nature of the region and chose Udaipur and Kolkata as the film's setting primarily because his family lives there. As he confirms, 'I am a Marwari, a Rajasthani. Kolkata has a huge Rajasthani population. And I know Udaipur really well,' and he clarifies that '*Dhadak* is an adaptation and not a remake'.[33] What does that imply? Agreeing with Khaitan, I argue that it is a "convenient" adaptation, as it simply copies the original film frame-by-frame while avoiding the issue of caste.

Furthermore, the decision not to replicate this reference to caste essentially transforms it into a film about class rather than caste. As Priyanka Sundar emphasises, 'Shashank Khaitan has decided to keep the parts from the original in his film that are fine with typical Bollywood

[33] Devarshi Ghosh, 'Shashank Khaitan on making *'Dhadak'*: It's the most Sincere and honest tribute to Sairat possible', *Scroll.in,* 14 July 2018 <https://scroll.in/reel/886432/shashank-khaitan-on-making-dhadak-its-the-most-sincere-and-honest-tribute-to-sairat-possible> [accessed 30 March 2023].

viewers'.[34] Khaitan himself acknowledges that he chose Udaipur specifically because he finds it a 'pretty city'.[35] However, his main concern was to present a sanitized version of Rajasthan that would fit within the conventions of Bollywood filmmaking. Khaitan purports to possess an intricate understanding of Udaipur, focusing on various aspects that define the city's cultural and historical significance. His expertise encompasses an array of subjects, including the significance of camels within the local context, traditional Rajasthani attire, and delectable delicacies that exemplify the region's culinary heritage. Furthermore, his extensive knowledge extends to the architectural marvels of palaces, formidable forts, serene lakes, and revered temples that grace the cityscape of Udaipur. This raises a crucial question about Khaitan's understanding of Udaipur and Rajasthan as a whole. However, what is not 'pretty' about Rajasthan and Udaipur are the brutal feudal discriminatory practices that have pushed Rajasthan to the top of the list of states with the highest atrocities against Dalits in the country.[36] *Dhadak* reflects the director's preference for a palatable and marketable version of Rajasthan rather than an honest portrayal of the region's social realities. I argue that, while the director avoids directly engaging with the main storyline of *Sairat*, he could have woven in some appreciation for the essential contextual elements of Rajasthan to enhance the intricacies of the subject.

The film *Dhadak* romanticizes the cityscape through the couple's journey from Udaipur to Nagpur and finally to Kolkata, prominently showcasing touristic landmarks with techniques such as aerial and slow-motion shots. This picturesque portrayal obscures the rigid caste dynamics of these places, marginalizing the experiences of those facing caste-based

[34] Priyanka Sundar, 'Dhadak is shinier than Sairat and there lies the problem', *Hindustan Times,* 22 July 2018 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/dhadak-is-shinier-than-sairat-and-there-lies-the-problem/story-hks8YcTBaHoB0p1xCnVv7O.html> [accessed 30 March 2023].
[35] Devarshi Ghosh, 'Shashank Khaitan on making *'Dhadak'*.
[36] Sana Shakil, 'Dalits are worst-off in Rajasthan for last 3 years', *The New Indian Express,* 13 October 2020 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/oct/13/dalits-are-worst-off-in-rajasthan-for-last-3-yrs-2209521.html> [accessed 10 April 2023].

discrimination. Instead of addressing these struggles, the narrative glorifies the vibrancy of the cities, emphasizing Rajasthani festivals, traditional delicacies like 'Ghevar' and 'Churma', and elaborate attires. These elements, highlighted through artistic techniques, reflect a touristic and aesthetically driven perspective that aligns with an 'upper caste' gaze, ultimately perpetuating existing caste hierarchies.

Sairat explores themes such as humiliation, ostracization, migration, untouchability, and the idea of 'purity and pollution'. For illustration, 'upper caste' Archie asks for water from Parshya's mother. This scene in the film showcases the hierarchical nature of Indian society and the divide between 'upper caste' and 'lower caste' individuals. Parshya's mother's reaction to Archie's request for water reveals the entrenched caste discrimination in Indian society. Her initial pause—confirming whether Archie truly wants to drink from their household—captures the shock rooted in the taboo against 'upper caste' individuals sharing water with 'lower caste' homes. This moment highlights the deeply ingrained belief that water touched by 'lower caste' people is impure and unfit for consumption by caste Hindus. Yet, once confirmed, her joy in serving Archie reflects a complex mix of hope and pain: the rare affirmation that someone from the 'upper caste' acknowledges their equal humanity, even if only through a simple act like sharing water. As a Dalit, the notion of untouchability and the belief that water touched by 'lower caste' individuals is impure is relatable to many people like me. The experience of not being able to drink water from 'upper caste' households and not having 'upper caste' individuals drink water from our households, is a common occurrence for many Dalits. The film effectively portrays how water, a basic necessity, can become tainted with caste prejudice for the 'upper caste'.

However, *Dhadak* fails to explore this nuanced theme further. Instead, the scene is shifted to 'Bagla Exotic View Café' (owned by protagonist Madhu's family), a public space (open to all customers without any restrictions based on their position in society) driven by

commercial interests, lacking the social significance and contextual reality needed to effectively portray caste-based discrimination. Unlike *Sairat*, where the private space of the home and the simple act of drinking water serve as potent symbols of caste hierarchy and its intimate negotiations, *Dhadak* shifts this moment to a public, commercial setting, diluting its political charge. In *Sairat*, Archi drinking water in Parshya's home is quietly radical; the domestic setting becomes a site where caste boundaries are transgressed, and the camera lingers just long enough to let that transgression register. *Dhadak*, by contrast, flattens this symbolism—the Ambedkarite gaze is replaced with a sanitized aesthetic that avoids the material politics of space, touch, and caste.

Consequently, the film falls short of capturing the true essence of how spatial dynamics perpetuate caste-based discrimination in Indian society. By adopting a Brahmanical gaze, *Dhadak* softens the raw intensity of caste discrimination that *Sairat* presents so powerfully. Khaitan shifts the focus to a sanitized, commercial setting that avoids confronting the harsh realities and social tensions around caste. This narrative choice dilutes the urgency of the issue, masking the brutal and pervasive nature of caste prejudice that *Sairat* lays bare. The practice of untouchability especially around water and food, which involves the social exclusion and discrimination against individuals belonging to 'lower castes' or marginalized groups, is a pervasive phenomenon across India. Recently, a tragic incident occurred in Rajasthan wherein a young boy from the Dalit community was brutally beaten to death by his teacher, who belonged to an 'upper caste', for the purported transgression of 'touching' and drinking water from earthen pot reserved for 'upper caste' teachers.[37] This incident highlights how widespread

[37] 'Dalit boy dies after being assaulted by teacher in Rajasthan school', *The Hindu,* 14 August 2022 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/dalit-boy-dies-after-being-assaulted-by-teacher-in-rajasthan-school/article65766467.ece > [accessed 19 April 2023].

and deeply ingrained caste-based discrimination is in India, something that *Dhadak* chose not to translate onto the screen.

At its core, the Ambedkarite gaze, rooted in the legacy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Dalit activism, challenges dominant caste hierarchies and exposes social injustice. In contrast, the Brahmanical gaze reflects the worldview of 'upper caste' hegemony, reinforcing existing power structures and maintaining social inequality. These two opposing perspectives represent fundamentally different ways of seeing and representing caste in Indian society. While the Ambedkarite gaze seeks to question and subvert caste oppression, the Brahmanical gaze works to normalize and perpetuate it. As Nandini Ramnath argues, 'Shashank Khaitan's film (*Dhadak*) ultimately lacks the sense of a creator inserting himself steep into his narrative, watching over his creations with the mix of caution and foreboding that Manjule included in *Sairat*'.[38] Manjule appears in the film as a commentator, which allows him to establish a personal connection with the narrative in an organic and lively manner.[39] This role enables him to vividly convey his experiences and share his story with society in an engaging way. In contrast, Khaitan attempts to portray himself in the film through an inanimate object, specifically a table fan manufactured by the 'Khaitan' company. By employing this metaphorical representation, Khaitan aims to subtly insert his presence within the film's thematic discourse but not as actively and lively as Manjule inserted his presence in the film.[40]

[38] Nandini Ramnath, ''Sairat' versus 'Dhadak': What a director's cameo tells us about the problem with remakes', *Scroll,* 29 July 2018 <https://scroll.in/reel/888361/sairat-versus-dhadak-what-a-directors-cameo-tells-us-about-the-problem-with-remakes> [accessed 13 March 2023].
[39] Nagraj Manjule has played roles in all three of his feature-length directorial ventures: *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016), and *Jhund* (2022). In some of these, like *Sairat*, he has smaller roles like a cricket commentator, while in others like *Fandry*, he takes on a more substantial character.
[40] Ruhi Sinha, 'My Inspiration is My Life - Nagraj Manjule an Interview with National Award-winning Director of Fandry', *The Review Monk*, 22 April 2014 <http://thereviewmonk.com/article/fandry-interview-nagraj-manjule> [accessed 23 May 2022]; 'My film reflects my own struggle for education', *The Times of India*, 24 June 2011<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/My-film-reflects-my-own-struggle-for-education/articleshow/8968010.cms> [accessed 31 May 2022].

This ‘upper caste’ gaze is not a new phenomenon in Indian cinema: it is observed that the problematic gaze of portraying Dalits stereotypically has been very evident since its inception. Cinema, as Jyoti Nisha indicates, is ‘an institution and site of ideological production’.[41] *Dhadak* ‘glossed over many of the cultural nuances [and instead dressed] it up in designer clothes’, and it reduced ‘the socio-political subtext of the tale to a mere footnote’.[42] Bollywood’s high-budget productions, exemplified by Karan Johar’s work, frequently employ techniques that invoke feelings of fantasy and fairy tales to create a sense of escapism, thereby distancing themselves from the ‘realistic’ sensibilities of contemporary society. The narrative, stripped of its richness and intricacy, transforms as it shifts from the rustic setting of Bittergaon village in central Maharashtra to a picturesque portrayal of Udaipur resembling a glossy tourism pamphlet:[43] ‘Sairat teaches us that context is important. And in this context, *Dhadak* is a poor ode to Manjule’s masterpiece’.[44]

The state of Rajasthan has witnessed numerous incidents of caste-based violence, including ‘honour killings’, ostracization, and discrimination against Dalits. These incidents highlight the deeply entrenched feudal mindset that exists in this region, where inter-caste marriages and aspirations of ‘lower castes’ to lead a more luxurious lifestyle are met with extreme violence from the ‘upper caste’ community. One such incident is the murder of Pinki, an ‘upper caste’ girl, by her father for falling in love with Roshan, a boy from a ‘lower caste’.[45] Similarly, a couple was murdered for their inter-caste marriage, where the boy belonged to a tribal community and the girl to an ‘upper caste’ Rajput community. This place is very close to

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[41] Jyoti Nisha, ‘Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship’.
[42] ‘‘Dhadak’ reviews: critics give film a thumbs down’, *Gulf News*, 21 July,2018 <https://gulfnews.com/going-out/movie-reviews/dhadak-reviews-critics-give-film-a-thumbs-down-1.2254597> [accessed 03 April 2023].
[43] Rajeev Masand, ‘Caste away’, *Our Films, Their Films,* 20 July 2018 <http://rajeevmasand.com/admin/reviews/our-films/caste-away-2/> [accessed 15 April 2023].
[44] Tanika Godbole, ‘Dhadak Fails to Understand What Made Sairat Special’, *Feminism in India,* 25 July 2018 <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/07/25/dhadak-review-sairat-caste/> [accessed 17 May 2023].
[45] Tanushree Pandey, ‘Stolen glances to stolen lives: Stories behind the ‘honor killings’ of Rajasthan, Haryana’, *The Print,* 30 March, 2022<https://theprint.in/features/stolen-glances-to-stolen-lives-stories-behind-the-honour-killings-of-rajasthan-haryana/893651/> [accessed 17 April 2023].

the 'pretty' city of Udaipur.[46] Furthermore, the ostracization of an entire village of Dalits due to a dispute with the 'upper caste' community is another example of the pervasive caste-based discrimination in Rajasthan.[47] There are numerous instances of Dalit people being murdered by caste Hindus for aspiring to ride a horse at their wedding, sporting a moustache, and leading a stylish lifestyle.[48] Despite the authentic and compelling backdrop that Rajasthan provides for the portrayal of the story of *Sairat*, director Shashank Khaitan chooses to depict the region as an exotic and luxurious destination for his remake *Dhadak*, ignoring the harsh reality of caste-based violence that exists in the area. This disregard for the actual context of Rajasthan, in relation to the theme of *Sairat*, serves to force-fit the plotline of 'honour killing' into a glamorous and palatable setting in Udaipur. The prevalence of caste-based violence in Rajasthan highlights the deeply ingrained feudal mindset that persists in the region, making it an appropriate backdrop for portraying stories of 'honour killings' and other forms of caste-based violence. However, the tendency of filmmakers to showcase the state as a glamorous tourist destination instead of highlighting the underlying socio-political issues only serves to perpetuate the erasure of the realities faced by 'lower castes' in Rajasthan.

The 'Familiar template of love, caste and violence'[49]

Love poses a significant challenge to the caste-normative society in India as it disrupts the established oppressive hierarchies based on the sacred scriptures. As Yogesh Maitreya asserts

[46] Jaykishan Sharma, 'Mutilated bodies of couple found in Udaipur, police suspect honor killing', *India Today,* 18 November 2022 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/udaipur-couple-murder-police-say-duo-thrashed-with-stone-later-stabbed-honour-killing-suspected-2299038-2022-11-18?utm_source=twshare> [accessed 17 April 2023].
[47] 'Ostracized' by upper caste men, 70 Dalit families in Rajasthan village living in fear', *The Indian Express,* 23 August 2018 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ostracised-by-upper-caste-men-70-dalit-families-in-rajasthan-village-living-in-fear-5320094/> [accessed 17 April 2023].
[48] 'Rajasthan: Dalit man killed for his stylish moustache and lifestyle, earlier the accused had fought with him for making eye contact' *OpIndia,* 18 March, 2022<https://www.opindia.com/2022/03/rajasthan-dalit-man-jitendrapal-meghwal-killed-for-his-stylish-moustache/>[accessed 18 April 2023].
[49] Sudha G Tilak, 'Sairat: Why a doomed love story has become India's sleeper hit', *BBC News,* 07 June 2016 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-36457512> [accessed 15 March 2023].

'love is the biggest threat to caste. Because love resurrects'.[50] The pursuit of love, particularly in the context of inter-caste relationships, constitutes a form of resistance towards building a society based on love, as opposed to one rooted in hatred. It serves as a potent tool for dismantling the rigid hierarchical structures of Indian society, which has been responsible for perpetuating discriminatory practices and attitudes. In this regard, Dr Ambedkar argues that in the Indian context, the term 'caste' signifies a constructed division of the population into distinct and immutable groups, whereby prohibiting exogamy through the practice of endogamy means that each group is effectively banned from amalgamating with others. This practice restricts individuals from forming romantic relationships beyond the prescribed boundaries of their caste, as it poses a potential challenge to the established caste norms governing endogamous unions.[51] As Suraj Yengde asserts, 'to love in a casteist society is violence and a violation – of the judicial, moral, and sexual codes' that are well maintained in the public memories through 'religious dictions and sold as idealized tradition'.[52]

Yengde further explains the concept of love within the context of the Dalit community which he refers to as 'Dalit love', allowing Dalits to express empathy, pain, and joy with open hearts and without holding any grudges towards others. This expression of self-love is particularly significant in a society that is heteronormative, anti-love (which sees love as a threat to the social norms), and casteist. The acceptance of love from a non-Dalit individual is met with immediate violence, as evidenced in the case of *Sairat*. Despite facing numerous obstacles and inhumane treatment, the protagonist Parshya expresses his love for Archie, which she reciprocates with affection. This love is a threat to the caste-normative social fabric, and as

[50] Yogesh Maitreya, *Water in a broken pot: A Memoir* (Gurugram: Penguin, 2023), p. 275.
[51] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches,* Vol. 1, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 09.
[52] Suraj Yengde, *Caste Matters* (Penguin Random House India, 2019), p.46; Khushbu Sharma & Mahesh Choudhary, 'How Continuous Caste-Based 'Honour' Killings In India Prove That Mere Love Is Not Enough', *Feminism in India*, 25 May 2022 <https://feminisminindia.com/2022/05/25/how-continuous-caste-based-honour-killings-in-india-prove-that-mere-love-is-not-enough/> [accessed 20 May 2023].

a result, the couple's lives are put in danger due to their 'Dalit love'. The murder of the couple represents an attack on the idea of 'Dalit love', and such instances of 'caste killings' are often overlooked, with 'honour killings' taking precedence in popular cultural discourse. This is evident in the case of *Dhadak,* which focuses on a caste-neutral honour killing.[53] The films *Dhadak* and *Sairat* both explore the theme of love and romantic relationships. However, while *Dhadak* focuses primarily on the central couple's amorous relationship, *Sairat* delves deeper into the societal and cultural context that surrounds it. Specifically, while *Dhadak* lacks a sense of society as a unit that attempts to excommunicate the family of the male protagonist, *Sairat* portrays this aspect of the story in detail. For instance, when Madhu elopes with Parthavi, there is a notable absence of societal presence as his family is not subjected to the boycott from the caste association as observed in the film *Sairat*. The film *Sairat* depicts the cultural and social norms that contribute to the ostracization of the male protagonist and his family. The community's response to the relationship is portrayed in detail, with the film highlighting the ways in which the couple's love is met with resistance from the broader social group. It goes beyond love and the romantic element attached to the couple in the plot. In this sense, love is not a singular entity, but rather a multidimensional construct that involves various aspects such as family, neighbours, villagers, relatives, different caste and class groups, religions, and their nature of inhabiting a single larger geographical sphere, all of which shape the experience of love for individuals depending on their social location.

The concept of caste in India is a complex phenomenon that encompasses more than just a subjective state of mind. It is intricately intertwined with one's physical identity and

[53] In the context of India, honour killings are essentially the killing of a person or couple who defies societal norms. It is most often associated with religion, caste, and other forms of hierarchical social stratification, as well as sexuality. The concept of purity and the maintenance of family honour is closely tied to endogamy or marrying within one's own caste or community. See Manisha Gupte, 'The Concept of Honor: Caste Ideology and Patriarchy in Rural Maharashtra', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 48.18 (2013), 72-81 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23527311> [accessed 14 May 2023]; Suraj Yengde, *Caste Matters,* p.51.

bodily characteristics, whereby certain bodies are deemed 'superior' due to their association with an 'upper caste' identity, while others are considered 'inferior' based on their affiliation with a 'lower caste' identity. In this regard, the notion of body-based casteness not only portrays caste as a psychological construct but also recognizes its physiological manifestation, which consequently leads to the enforcement of caste boundaries through violent means. It is explored in *Sairat* explicitly. The significance attached to one's caste identity often results in the use of fear and intimidation to prevent individuals from transcending caste boundaries. In extreme cases, violence may also be employed, including the killing of an individual 'to teach a lesson' to others about the hierarchical division among castes, where some are deemed superior and others inferior. In the context of the films *Sairat* and *Dhadak*, the former portrays the use of violence as a means to uphold group identity and community sentiment, particularly in the case of inter-caste love and marriage. The act of killing serves to maintain the hierarchical division of castes and prevent any challenge to the established norms. In contrast, *Dhadak* presents killing as merely an act of 'honour', where it is used to preserve one's dignity and reputation. This represents a shift from the traditional use of violence as a means to uphold caste-based hierarchy, to violence as a tool to maintain individual 'honour' and 'self-respect'. As Dhrubo Jyoti posits, 'Caste dictum is not shown as shaping public and private lives, but only in the singular matter of Madhukar and Parthavi's love.[54]

While the use of violence to maintain caste-based hierarchies has been a prevalent practice in India, the portrayal of this phenomenon in *Sairat* and *Dhadak* highlights the complex interplay between caste, identity, and violence in contemporary Indian society. The manifestation of 'Dalit love' that challenges the established confines of social norms poses a significant threat to the hierarchical structure of caste-based societies. Within such societies,

[54] Dhrubo Jyoti, 'Dhadak differs from Sairat in gaze, not caste', *Hindustan Times,* 24 July 2018 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/dhadak-differs-from-sairat-in-gaze-not-caste/story-VBYJicOIDHAv7AN0nvDt1M.html> [accessed 19 May 2023].

individuals belonging to the Dalit community, often labelled as 'untouchables', are systematically assigned roles restricted to menial and devalued occupations that are stigmatized as being 'lowly' and 'unhygienic'. Despite the numerous societal obstacles faced by Dalits, instances arise where individuals from this marginalized community extend acts of love towards caste Hindus. However, it is distressingly observable that the response from the 'upper caste' often involves the mutilation of the Dalit body. This disturbing phenomenon can be observed in the film *Sairat* more explicitly. As V. Geetha posits, 'The untouchable body thus becomes a distinctive labouring body, whose work, unlike the work of the peasant and the artisan, does not secrete either material or symbolic value'.[55] This implies that Dalits are excluded from the expressions of love and joy in society. Any attempt by Dalits to pursue materialistic values and aspirations is met with violent retribution, as the forces of Brahminic hegemony aim to maintain their power and authority. The threat of violence against the physical bodies of Dalits is used to control and restrict their agency, leading to a situation where their lives are characterized by a lack of autonomy and agency: 'The body becomes a public realm where violence upon it defines society's control over it'.[56] In *Sairat,* the mutilated bodies of Parshya and Archie serve as a potent illustration of the strategic use of violence by the 'upper caste' to suppress those who defy caste norms, particularly when the victim, like Parshya, is a Dalit. This violence seeks to not only eliminate their physical presence but also erase their aspirations to transcend their designated social roles as mere 'labouring bodies'. To define how Bahujan body's existence works, Jyoti Nisha asserts that the 'Bahujan body' is more than just a body; it is the paradigmatic of society's marginalised communities who consistently endures sacrifice for the benefit of the 'superior caste'. The 'Bahujan body' serves as a reminder of the

[55] V. Geetha, 'Bereft of Being: The Humiliations of Untouchability', in *Humiliation Claims and Context*, ed. by Gopal Guru (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.97.

[56] Suraj Yengde, 'Dalit Cinema', *'South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies,* 03 Jun 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848> [accessed 20 May 2023].

power dynamic between marginalized and dominant groups, perpetuated by the latter's need to maintain their societal superiority.[57] The moment the 'Bahujan body' disturbs the well-maintained structure of the 'superior' caste Hindus, they encounter the various forms of violence, including murder.

The 'honour killing' in patriarchal-casteist societies cannot be attributed solely to the pursuit of honour and prestige, but rather to caste pride and codes attached to it. The belief that women are solely responsible for maintaining the honour of their community drives this practice. The restrictions imposed by society on daughters to love outside their caste create a sense of obligation on them to conform to the established norms. In cases where inter-caste marriages occur, the women involved are often subjected to murder. The observations of Dr B.R. Ambedkar regarding the caste system in India are highly relevant in this context. Ambedkar notes that 'Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy'.[58] This practice effectively places the burden of maintaining the community's 'honour' exclusively on women. In *Sairat,* the protagonist Archie transgresses the law of endogamy, which is a violation of the caste codes and an insult to her caste community's pride. According to this view, Archie deserves death for breaking the norms of the community. Within Ambedkar's framework, if Archie survives, there would be a risk that she might engage in widow-remarriage and continue to practice exogamy. This, in turn, would pose a threat to society's established order. Therefore, killing Archie would eliminate the fear of dishonouring the community's pride in the future and set an example for others. Furthermore, the survival of Parthavi, the daughter of 'upper caste' parents, in *Dhadak* poses a threat to the caste-based

[57] Jyoti Nisha, 'What demands the sacrifice of a Bahujan body in India?', *Round Table India,* 8 October 2018 <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/what-demands-a-sacrifice-of-a-bahujan-body-in-india/> [accessed 05 April 2023].
[58] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India'.

societal structure. The director's decision, in this case, may have the potential to break the caste norms, but it does not reflect the reality of the situation as envisioned by Manjule in *Sairat* in which the issue of endogamy is addressed in Ambedkar's sense.

After writing about caste in 1915, Dr Ambedkar wrote a speech in 1936 for *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal*, which was not delivered but was later published under the title *Annihilation of Caste*. In this piece, Dr Ambedkar argues that the caste system could not be eliminated through superficial measures such as inter-caste dinners or inter-caste marriages. Rather, the religious foundations upon which the caste system was built need to be eradicated.[59] The film *Sairat* does not depict any form of religious practices, unlike the film *Dhadak*. Specifically, the couple in *Sairat* is portrayed as not engaging in any religious rituals. They are depicted as free individuals who face the consequences of their inter-caste marriage and strive to build a new life for themselves. Despite facing difficult times, the couple in *Sairat* does not depend on any divine power or deities to assist them. The couple in *Dhadak*, however, is shown as adhering to religious norms, even during adverse situations. The film portrays the couple performing various rituals, such as inviting a Brahmin priest for a housewarming ceremony at their newly purchased home. It is evident that the two films present contrasting perspectives on the role of religion in people's lives. While *Sairat* portrays characters who do not rely on religion to navigate their challenges, *Dhadak* portrays characters who seek solace in religious practices. As shown in Figure 01, Parthavi is visible in the kitchen, while the materials for Hindu worship are kept in the hall. This ritual occurred during the housewarming ceremony, in which a Brahmin priest performed the puja for the new residence. All this takes place in a visual milieu created through a Brahmanical gaze, in which 'upper caste' religious practises are reproduced and reenacted. This portrayal demonstrates the director's endeavour to obscure the prevalent

[59] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches,* Vol. 1, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019).

issue of caste-centrism in the context of this religion, portraying the couple's assimilation into cultural practices associated with the 'upper caste'. This implies that adopting such practices may serve as a means for the couple to mitigate the caste-based crisis they face. These representations, characterized by their adherence to the specific Bollywood framework associated with the 'upper caste' community, effectively perpetuate the dominant influence of 'upper caste' ideologies, thus reinforcing their hegemonic presence.

Figure 01, A scene from Dhadak. Parthavi is in the kitchen, with religious items in the hall for a housewarming Hindu ritual in their new home.

Ending: killing love for caste 'pride'

Both films conclude with a brutal murder committed in the name of 'honour'. The scenes use shocking visuals of murder with no sound —to cinematically accentuate its impact. However, the survivors in these films are different from each other. In *Dhadak*, the wife survives while her husband and child are murdered. In the case of *Sairat*, the child survives while his mother and father are brutally slaughtered. If we scrutinize the final few minutes of

both films attentively, we can discern a significant contrast that exposes the complexity of society. In *Sairat,* Parshya and Archie's budding love story mirrors the unfinished edifice of the under-construction housing society they visit to secure their first home. This potent symbolism reflects the tumultuous journey of their inter-caste romance, defying societal norms and facing constant challenges. As they navigate their path together, they witness a stark reality: police and right-wing pro-Hindu groups brutally assaulting other couples in a similar predicament (see Figures 2 & 3). The root of this brutal opposition lies in the perceived threat Parshya and Archie's union poses to the established social order, where caste and religion dictate one's destiny, and the treatment they receive in the society. To delegitimize and demonize the inter-faith relationships, the oppressors weaponize the loaded term 'Love Jihad', falsely framing it as a deliberate strategy to convert Hindus to Islam. This insidious tactic is further bolstered using 'Caste Honour', serving as a convenient justification for their prejudice and violence. By juxtaposing the blossoming love of Parshya and Archie with the brutal persecution of the other couples, *Sairat* delivers a powerful indictment of societal bigotry and the devastating consequences it unleashes on individuals daring to challenge the status quo.

Figure 02, A scene from Sairat, showing an interfaith couple being assaulted by police.

Figure 03, A scene from Sairat depicting couples being assaulted by right-wing vigilantes.

Manjule's cinematic choices challenge the pervasive influence of right-wing politics and societal bigotry, presenting a ground-breaking perspective through the lens of the anti-casteist Ambedkarite gaze. This cinematic venture addresses the deep-rooted prejudices that have previously remained untouched on the silver screen. This is followed by another scene (see Figure 4) where Archie is shown drawing a Rangoli in front of her child's feet at her doorstep, representing the future that the eloping couple is striving to build. Cut to the next frame (see Figure 5), Archie is interrupted by the shadow and foot of her brother, as she is about to finish the Rangoli, symbolizing the past. This scene illustrates Manjule's portrayal of the inescapable nature of the lived reality of casteist violence and its impact on individuals. The depiction highlights how the past, shaped by caste-based divisions, continues to influence, and hinder the prospects of a better future for those trying to break free from its constraints. The Rangoli featured at the end is left incomplete, as it could have been adorned with an array of vibrant hues (see Figures 6 & 7). The child, a symbol of the future, is shown crying and crawling with a bloodied footprint, surrounded by a desolate and silent atmosphere that echoes emptiness. He embarks on a haphazard, perilous, and uncertain journey towards a caste-state

that is divided based on different caste groups. His shadow symbolizes the past, further emphasizing the lived reality of caste and its enduring influence on the prospects of those attempting to escape from its clutches.

Figure 04, A scene from Sairat depicts Archie drawing a Rangoli in front of her child's feet.

Figure 05, A scene from Sairat where Archie is suddenly interrupted by the looming shadow of her brother.

Figure 06, A scene from Sairat. The child is crying in front of an unfinished rangoli.

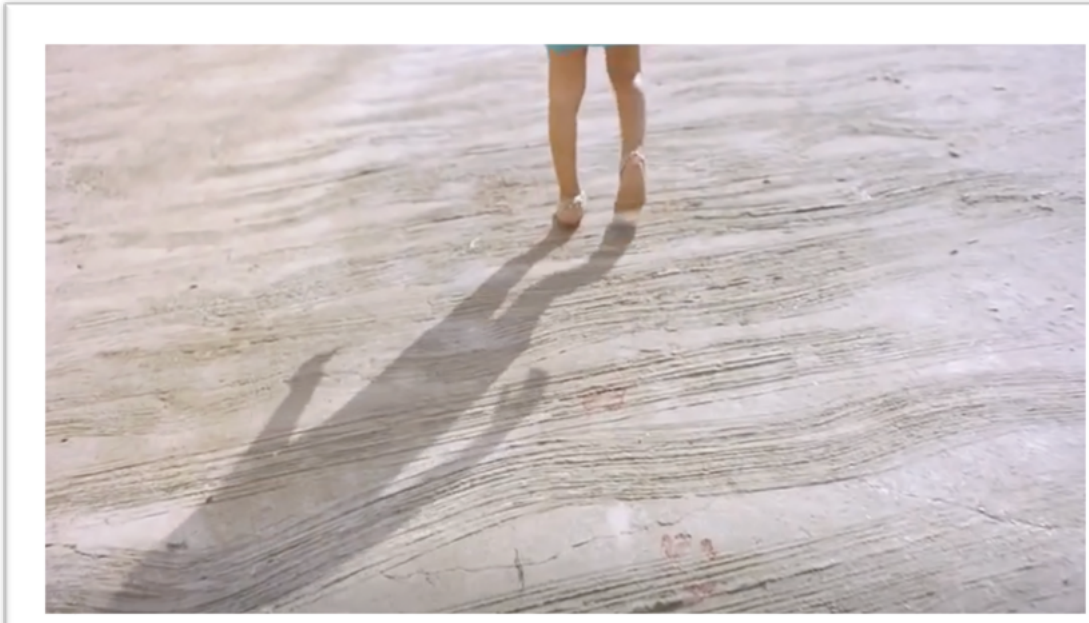

Figure 07, A scene from Sairat. The child is seen walking away, leaving behind bloodied footprints.

The director's use of silence in *Dhadak*, achieved by muting the sound, aims to emphasise the traumatic impact of the film's ending. As Manju Edachira suggests, silence can become a vessel

for ‘the unnameable, which cannot be brought into language and sound’.[60] While both visual and auditory elements contribute to storytelling, here silence is intended to amplify the emotional weight beyond what dialogue or music could convey. However, *Dhadak* ultimately falls short in creating the intended depth, lacking the narrative substance needed to fully harness this technique.

Figure 08, A scene from Dhadak where Parthavi, surrounded by people, is seen crying over the dead bodies of her husband and son.

The presence of caste-class networks and community support is easily discernible throughout the film, from moments of joy to moments of grief in *Dhadak*. Unlike in *Sairat,* where the child is abandoned in a desolate environment (see Figures 6 & 7), the protagonist Parthavi in *Dhadak* is surrounded by people from her society (see Figure 8). Parthavi wails beside the bodies of her murdered husband and child, who were killed in the name of family

[60] Manju Edachira, ‘Anti-Caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema’, *Economic and Political Weekly,* 55:38 (2020), 47-53 <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/38/special-articles/anti-caste-aesthetics-and-dalit-interventions.html> [accessed 11 December 2023].

'honour' by her brother and his friends for crossing caste boundaries. This tragedy unfolded when she went downstairs to buy sweets for her brothers, who had visited her under the guise of normalcy, pretending that everything was accepted within the family, when in reality, it was far from the truth. The 'empty frame' and the 'filled frame' serve as a representation of how the caste-based network operates. It represents the exclusionary nature of the system, where individuals are either included or excluded based on their caste identity. The 'empty frame' symbolizes the lack of support whether it is emotional, or material support available to those who are excluded, while the 'filled frame' represents the privileged few who receive support. A woman (Parthavi) who is confident and fluent in English along with other caste and class privileges has a better chance of survival in this caste-centric capitalist modern India. Nevertheless, the insurmountable adversities that an orphaned child belonging to the 'lower caste' encounters from as early as two years of age appear to be irreparable throughout his lifetime. The pain of the child—who becomes orphaned by a caste-based 'honour killing'—which Manjule expressed on screen, opens the door to another world of *Sairat*: a whole new narrative centred on the orphaned child as a survivor of caste-based violence.[61]

Dr Ambedkar proposes that 'the fusion of blood' through inter-caste marriage will be a 'real remedy' to abolish castes; in this sense, the child whose parents are murdered becomes pertinent as he sees them in a pool of blood and walks out with bloodied feet. It demonstrates how Ambedkar's proposed 'real remedy' poses a real threat to the caste Hindus who forbid 'fusion of blood' and kill the couple who committed the 'sin'.[62] Despite the tragic ending,

[61] The survival of Parthavi, portrayed by Jhanvi Kapoor in *Dhadak*, may have been a strategic decision on the part of the film's creators to leverage and evoke sympathy for the actress. Jhanvi Kapoor's mother, the renowned actress Sridevi, passed away just a few months prior to the completion of the film's shooting. I argue that the filmmakers may have attempted to capitalize on this tragic event to generate heightened interest and compassion for the young actress, potentially leading to increased commercial success for the film. However, without explicit evidence or statements from the filmmakers themselves, it is impossible to definitively confirm this hypothesis.

[62] However, Ambedkar did not view inter-caste marriage as the only solution or 'real remedy' to the problem of caste. But he goes on to declare that the caste system is deeply rooted in Hindu scriptures or shastras and that the

Manjule introduces the 'idea of blood' in the form of a child who has the potential of transferring the 'blood' which is now neither 'lower' nor 'upper'. Thus, his survival, despite the prospect of challenges and difficulties, becomes more vital than the survival of *Dhadak's* female protagonist. Because the child serves as a poignant reminder to the casteist society of the inhumanity it perpetuates. The impact of the traumatic experiences faced by individuals due to caste-based discrimination and violence is not limited to the immediate generation but extends to future generations as well. The cycle of violence and trauma perpetuated by the social hierarchy built on caste divisions leaves a lasting imprint on the psyche of the affected individuals and their families, which is carried forward to subsequent generations. Thus, the trauma and its consequences continue to shape the lived realities of those affected, reinforcing the need for sustained efforts towards dismantling the structures of caste-based oppression.

Conclusion

This chapter began by analysing select Bollywood films made by 'upper caste' filmmakers, focusing on how the 'upper caste' gaze shapes cinematic portrayals of caste and Dalit subjectivity. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Mulvey and hooks, it argued that Dhadak reflects a Brahmanical gaze, employing cinematographic techniques and mise-en-scène that reinforce upper-caste dominance and promote caste-blindness. These choices obscure the harsh realities of caste inequality, veiling the social dynamics at play. In contrast, *Sairat* disrupts the myth of a caste-neutral society often perpetuated by mainstream cinema. Its portrayal of a 'happy ending' and the saviour complex embodied by 'upper caste' characters is

only way to truly eradicate the caste system is to reject the authority and sanctity of the shastras themselves. See B. R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', p. 67.

critically examined, revealing and challenging stereotypes about Dalits.[63] The film's representation of Prashant, a Dalit man with fair skin, speaks directly to a Dalit female gaze, projecting an Ambedkarite perspective that affirms Dalit identity in its complexity.

*Sairat'*s cinematography embodies this Ambedkarite gaze, using long wide shots of lush fields, classrooms, and village landscapes to visually map caste locations and social positioning. This spatial framing reveals the entrenched caste hierarchies within the story's world. *Dhadak*, by contrast, operates through an 'upper caste' gaze that distances itself from these realities, resulting in a narrative that lacks the same critical engagement. The Ambedkarite gaze in *Sairat* remains consistent even through moments of comedy. For instance, a cricket ground scene blends humour with social commentary—the presence of Shahu Maharaj's images on trophies and references to Savitribai Phule root the light-heartedness in a strong historical and social context.[64]

Nagraj Manjule's character, a commentator, brings sharp, grounded humour to the film while navigating its layered social tensions. His narration during a local cricket match includes scenes like a mother scolding her son mid-game—eliciting roars of laughter—and the absurd, hilarious moment when Pradeep, a friend of the protagonist, tries to climb out of a village well in torn underwear, heckled by Archana and her friends. But this humour is not frivolous. Under an Ambedkarite gaze, these moments do more than entertain—they expose how caste, masculinity, and dignity are negotiated in everyday life. Pradeep's limp, occasionally referenced in jest, is treated with care: it becomes a part of his identity without ever being

[63] The ubiquitous 'happy ending' trope in Bollywood films is very popular, which offers audiences a potent escapist fantasy, where romantic desires find fulfillment and emotional resolutions blossom amidst dramatic struggles.

[64] Sahu Ji Maharaj and Savitri Bai Phule play a significant role in the anti-caste tradition. The former is the first Maharaja of Kolhapur, dedicated himself to the upliftment of the shudras (the lowest in varna system), and introduced early affirmative action measures (50% reservation to weaker section). While the latter is India's first female teacher, opened a progressive girls' school in Pune with her husband Jyotiba Phule, an influential social reformer recognized as one of Dr B.R. Ambedkar's gurus.

reduced to a punchline. The comedy, filtered through this lens, does not dilute the film's critique—it deepens it.

The blackened screen at the end for a few seconds before the credits roll reflects the spectator's uninformed world, i.e., how we tend to ignore the casteist violence that happens in front of our eyes every day but choose not to be affected by those harsh, unpleasant, and uncomfortable situations. Both films employ a similar technique of a blackened screen, but they differ in terms of duration and the addition of supplemental information. In *Sairat*, the blackened screen remains for a duration of ten seconds, whereas in *Dhadak*, it lasts only five seconds. Furthermore, *Dhadak* presents data on honor killings as evidence, stating that 'in the last 15 years, over 30000 men, women and children have been killed in the name of honour. Killing innocent love is not honourable. It is an act of cowardice and a crime against humanity'. This use of statistics highlights the gravity of the issue and tries to compensate for any potential shortcomings in the film's audio-visual impact. However, it is important to note that the figures presented in *Dhadak* only address 'caste-neutral' honor killings. As discussed in this chapter, the 'upper caste' director fails to directly confront the caste issue, instead diverting attention towards other aspects such as class, gender, and so on. This approach allows them to appear progressive without addressing the underlying caste-related problems, thereby reflecting their ideological position. The final black screen in *Sairat* is an audiovisual rupture—it forces the viewer into uncomfortable silence, compelling reflection. The Ambedkarite gaze here does not entertain but indicts. *Dhadak* adds an infographic to soften this rupture, steering viewers toward a human rights issue rather than caste horror. This is not just a change in narrative but in spectatorship: from political confrontation to liberal reassurance.

The next chapter will shift the analytical focus to the representation of Dalit women in Hindi cinema, with a particular emphasis on the films *Lajwanti*, *Kaanchli*, and *Bawandar*. This chapter will undertake a comprehensive examination of the formalist and stylistic elements

employed in these films to portray Dalit women's experiences. A key area of analysis will be the concept of *Izzat* (honor) in the context of sexual violence, exploring how the narrative and cinematic strategies of these films construct and interrogate notions of honor, especially in relation to the vulnerability of Dalit women to sexual exploitation. This chapter will also scrutinize the dynamics of the 'upper caste' male gaze and its role in depicting the bodies of 'lower caste' women. Through a critical lens, the discussion will reveal how cinematic representations often reinforce or challenge existing caste hierarchies through the manner in which they portray Dalit women. The analysis will extend to an intersectional framework, addressing the triadic oppression experienced by Dalit women, which encompasses the intersecting axes of caste, class, and gender. By engaging with these films, the chapter will illuminate the complex and layered forms of subjugation faced by Dalit women, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of their representation in Indian cinema.

Chapter Three: Resisting and Unveiling Voices in *Bawandar*, *Lajwanti* and *Kaanchli*

Portrayals of gender-based violence in cinematic narratives hold immense power to shape societal perceptions, challenge existing norms, and bring about transformative change. Analysing the portrayal of violence, specifically rape scenes in films, provides an opportunity to scrutinize the depiction of women and societal perceptions related to sexual violence. Uttara Manohar and Susan L. Kline contend that sexual assault and violence encompass a spectrum of behaviours that incorporate not only physical acts but also extend to include verbal forms of aggression.[1] Notably, empirical investigations within the context of North American media portrayals have unveiled intricate associations between the objectification of women, misconceptions concerning rape, and the conflation of violence with sexual arousal, all of which collectively contribute to the perpetuation of a cultural milieu that tolerates sexual violence.[2]

Investigations into films produced during the 1980s and early 1990s reveal some troubling trends. Approximately 56% of Hindi films depicted instances of sexual assault and harassment against women.[3] Moreover, analyses conducted in the late 1990s continued to identify instances of violence in approximately 40% of the sexual scenes portrayed in these

[1] Uttara Manohar and Susan L. Kline, 'Sexual Assault Portrayals in Hindi Cinema', *Sex Roles,* 71 (2014), 233–245 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0404-6> [accessed 10 September 2023].
[2] Victoria Simpson Beck, Stephanie Boys, Christopher Rose, and Eric Beck, 'Violence Against Women in Video Games: A Prequel or Sequel to Rape Myth Acceptance?', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence,* 27: 15 (2012), 3016–3031 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260512441078> [accessed 10 September 2023]; LeeAnn Kahlor & Dan Morrison, 'Television Viewing and Rape Myth Acceptance among College Women', *Sex Roles,* 56 (2007), 729–739 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9232-2> [accessed 10 September 2023].
[3] Shamita Das, 'Feminist consciousness', (1996); Steve Derne, 'Making sex violent: Love as force in recent Hindi films', *Violence Against Women*, 5: 5 (1999), 548–575 <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778019922181365>[accessed 12 September 2023].

films.[4] Furthermore, ethnographic research conducted by Steve Derne has indicated that Hindi cinema serves as a significant medium for acquiring scripts pertaining to socially acceptable sexual behaviour. Derne's study comprised an examination of widely popular Hindi films screened during the period from 1986 to 1991, complemented by participant observation and in-depth interviews. The findings of this research revealed that these films imbued notions of eroticism with elements of dominance and submission, portraying women's sexuality as subservient to male pleasure and representing love as a coercive force.[5] In essence, Derne's research foregrounds the problematic impact of Hindi cinema in shaping scripts that dictate 'acceptable' sexual behaviour. This demands a critical reflection on the existing narratives and a shift towards empowering depictions of women that provide them with dignified identities in films, rather than maintaining harmful stereotypes.

Conversely, research endeavours anchored in the framework of North American social learning theory contend that the propagation of rape myths hinges upon influential individuals who serve as conduits for the dissemination of such myths.[6] In tandem with these perspectives, script theory and sexual script theories offer an additional conceptual framework, shedding light on how portrayals of sexual violence in media may contribute to the formulation of cognitive scripts that legitimize sexually aggressive behaviour.[7] These scripts, fundamentally,

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[4] Srividya Ramasubramanian & Mary Beth Oliver, 'Portrayals of Sexual Violence in Popular Hindi Films', *Sex Roles,* 48: 8 (2003), 327–336 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1022938513819> [accessed 13 September 2023].

[5] See Steve Derne, *Culture in action: Family life, emotion and male dominance in Banaras*, *India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Steve Derne, 'Making sex violent' (1999).

[6] See Lee Ellis, *Theories of rape: Inquires into the causes of sexual Aggression* (Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1989); Tara M. Emmers-Sommer, Perry Pauley, Alesia Hanzal & Laura Triplett, 'Love Suspense, Sex, and Violence: Men's and Women's Film Predilections, Exposure to Sexually Violent Media, and their Relationship to Rape Myth Acceptance,' *Sex Roles* 55 (2006), 311–320 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9085-0> [accessed 11 September 2023]; Edward Donnerstein & Stacy Smith, 'Sex in the media: Theory, influences, and solutions', in *Handbook of children and the media,* ed. by Dorothy G. Singer & Jerome L. Singer (New Delhi : Sage Publications, 2001), pp. 289–307.

[7] See Roger C. Schank, Robert P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1977); William Simon and John H. Gagnon, 'Sexual scripts: Permanence and change', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour,* 15: 2 (1986), 97–120 <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01542219>[accessed 08 September 2023].

represent cognitive structures governing the nuanced sequences of actions deemed appropriate within specific contextual scenarios. This exploration examines the implications and scholarly significance of theoretical paradigms in interpreting how filmed narratives of rape involving Dalit women might shape societal understandings of sexual violence.

In this chapter, I used purposive sampling to identify films that align with the thematic focus on sexual violence and the intersecting oppressions faced by Dalit women. Initially, I reviewed 75 films centred around the Rajasthan region, its societal structures, and cultural milieu. From this corpus, I narrowed the focus to 13 films prominently engaging with narratives involving lower-caste/Dalit families. Among these, seven films were selected for their explicit exploration of the intersection of caste and gender dynamics, with Dalit women playing central roles. From these seven films, I further refined the selection to three films for an in-depth analysis, creating a streamlined focus for this chapter.

The rationale for choosing *Bawandar* (2000, Jag Mundhra), *Lajwanti: The Honor Keeper* (2014, Pushpendra Singh), and *Kaanchli: Life in a Slough* (2020, Dedipya Joshii) stems from several factors: (1) Centrality of Dalit Women Protagonists: While all seven films address caste and gender, these three prominently feature Dalit women as central characters. Their stories explore and reflect on their lived experiences and the multifaceted oppressions they endure, offering a more nuanced perspective on their struggles and agency. (2) Relevance to Themes of Violence and Resistance: These films explicitly address themes of sexual violence, rape, and resistance, making them particularly suitable for this chapter's focus on the portrayal of women's desire, violence, and resilience. (3) Narrative Depth and Cultural Context: These three films stand out for their in-depth engagement with the sociocultural and political contexts of Dalit women's lives. For instance, Bawandar goes further by incorporating the complex process of adapting real-life events into its narrative, a dimension less emphasized in the other two films, *Kaanchli* and *Lajwanti*. (4) Chronological and Stylistic Diversity: The selected films

span two decades (2000–2020), providing a range of stylistic and narrative approaches to the subject. This chronological diversity allows for a more comprehensive analysis of evolving cinematic representations of Dalit women over time.

The selection process was guided by thematic alignment, the depth of portrayal of Dalit women, and the richness of the films' engagement with the intersection of caste and gender. While the remaining four films in the subset of seven also explore related themes, they either place less narrative emphasis on Dalit women as central protagonists or engage with the themes in ways less aligned with the objectives of this chapter. Throughout this chapter, my objective is to illuminate the nuanced and layered portrayals of Dalit women, elucidating their struggles, resilience, and the convoluted intersections of their identities within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. The analysis will not only scrutinize the cinematic techniques and storytelling choices employed but also unravel the socio-cultural implications embedded in these films.

This analysis focuses on how the selected films portray different layers of oppression, objectification, and agency, revealing the complex social realities faced by marginalized women. *Lajwanti* is set in a remote village inhabited solely by Dalits, creating a space where Dalit women can express themselves and pursue their aspirations without the immediate threat of violence from non-Dalit groups. However, this spatial isolation doesn't erase the systemic inequities they continue to face. *Kaanchli* uses both comedy and tragedy to explore the multifaceted oppression of Dalit women—the comedic elements expose the absurdity of societal norms, while the tragic moments underscore the persistent brutality of their experiences. In particular, *Kaanchli* highlights the objectification of Dalit women, portraying how they are often reduced to a subhuman status. While *Bawandar* and *Kaanchli* depict women from the *Shudra* community—typically classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC) rather than Dalits in the constitutional sense—I refer to them as Dalits in this context due to

their continued social, cultural, and economic marginalization. This usage, and the reasoning behind it, will be elaborated further in the chapter. These women face not only oppression from 'upper caste' communities but also from dominant groups within the OBC category, revealing the layered and intra-caste dynamics of marginalization that often go unacknowledged.

This study not only sheds light on the perpetuation of rape culture but also reveals how these narratives either bolster or challenge the existing power structures and systemic inequalities. While the broader subject of rape in cinema has been explored to some extent, there is a significant gap in the research concerning the experiences of Dalit women. Their experiences of sexual violence are often made invisible and are silenced due to deeply ingrained caste-based prejudices and social hierarchies. In various films, Bollywood has addressed the issue of caste through the 'upper caste' gaze, focusing on the romantic love story of an 'upper caste' boy and 'lower caste' girl or vice versa, as well as dealing with the issue of untouchability. However, even in contemporary times, the marginalization of 'lower caste' women has never been depicted critically on the big screen. As Farhana Naaz interprets, 'Bollywood failed to record the subordination spawned out of the intersection of their various identities (as 'Dalit', 'poor', and 'woman' altogether)'.[8] Apart from 'Dalit cinema' or anti-caste films, the Dalit community, particularly the Dalit women, are stereotyped.[9] Similarly, Smita M Patil argues that mainstream feminism, which primarily focused on addressing gender-based inequalities, often failed to recognize the unique challenges faced by Dalit women. These women face a triple burden of oppression due to gender-based discrimination, caste-based discrimination, and economic-based discrimination, with each layer reinforcing the others. This

[8] Farhana Naaz, 'The Construction and Representation of Lower-Caste Women in Bollywood Films', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge), p.165.

[9] 'Dalit cinema' refers to the affirmative visual representation of Dalit lives in films made by anti-caste filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, Vetrimaaran, Mari Selvaraj, and Neeraj Ghaywan. See Suraj Yengde, 'Dalit cinema,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 41: 3 (2018), 503–518 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848> [accessed 20 May 2023].

intersection of oppressions creates a distinct set of challenges that mainstream feminist movements have not adequately addressed. By highlighting this 'three-layered oppression', Patil emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of the specific challenges faced by Dalit women and the need for strategies that address both gender-based and caste-based discrimination.[10]

Bawandar: A storm raised by a 'Dalit woman'

In this section, I analyse the film *Bawandar* which centres around a courageous woman belonging to a Dalit community who endeavours to advocate for the rights of women and girls, only to endure the harrowing ordeal of being subjected to gang rape by individuals belonging to the 'upper caste'. The detailed exploration of the Bhanwari Devi case, which is based on a true story, holds significant importance due to the complex nature of the caste dynamics involved. Bhanwari Devi, belonging to the Other Backward Class (OBC) and hailing from a potter community, was a victim of gang rape perpetrated by individuals from the same OBC category but from different caste strata. Notably, one of the accused belonged to the Brahmin caste. The subsequent legal proceedings culminated in a verdict delivered by the Session Court judge Jagpal Singh 'in November 1995, wherein the accused were acquitted of the charge of rape but found guilty of lesser offenses such as assault and conspiracy'.[11]

They were sentenced to nine-months' imprisonment. The judge's decision to clear the accused of the rape charge contained six main justifications, which underscores the need for a comprehensive discussion of this matter. First, the judge believed that the village head, being

[10] See Smita M Patil, 'Caste and Gender Debates in India', *Asia Leadership Fellow Program,* 2017 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339352249_Caste_and_Gender_Debates_in_Indi>[accessed 19 June 2023].
[11] Geeta Pandey, 'Bhanwari Devi: The rape that led to India's sexual harassment law', *BBC News,* 17 March, 2017 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-39265653> [accessed 18 July 2023].

a figure of authority, would not engage in rape. Second, the judge held the view that individuals from different castes would not partake in a gang rape. Third, the judge asserted that elderly men between the ages of 60 and 70 were incapable of committing rape. Fourth, the judge stated that a man could not commit rape in the presence of a relative, referring to two of the accused who were an uncle and a nephew. Fifth, the judge, in invoking notions of caste purity, argued that a member of a 'higher caste' cannot rape a woman from a 'lower caste' based on the Hindu-religion sanctioned concept of 'purity' and 'pollution'. Lastly, another reason put forth by the judge was that Bhanwari Devi's husband could not have silently witnessed his wife being subjected to a gang rape.[12]

Bhanwari Devi's treatment within the village, as well as the outcome of her case, have pushed her to the margins of society. Being part of a labouring and 'lower caste' community, her assertiveness and independence provoke the dominant 'backward' class, resulting in her sexual assault as a means of 'teaching her a lesson' and reminding her of her subordinate social position. Consequently, despite Bhanwari Devi belonging to the Other Backward Class (OBC) community, similar to Kajri in the film *Kaanchli,* it is appropriate to categorize her within the broader framework of Dalit, enabling an analysis of her subjugation, humiliation, violence, and oppression from this perspective. Gail Omvedt highlights that 'the [Dalit] Panthers defined "Dalit" very broadly in their manifesto – to include all the class and caste oppressed, including workers and agricultural labourers as well as Scheduled Castes'.[13]

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[12] Geeta Pandey, 'Bhanwari Devi: The rape that led to India's sexual harassment law' [accessed 18 July 2023]; 'Women's group shaken after Jaipur court dismisses Bhanwari Devi rape case and clears accused', *India Today*, 15 December, 1995 <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/special-report/story/19951215-womens-group-shaken-after-jaipur-court-dismisses-bhanwari-devi-rape-case-and-clears-accused-808044-1995-12-15> [accessed 18 July 2023]; Kanchan Mathur, 'Challenging the collusion of Caste, Class and Patriarchy Embodied in the State', in *Indian Feminisms – Individual and Collective Journeys,* ed. by Poonam Kathuria and Abha Bhaiya (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2018), pp.59-88.

[13]Gail Omvedt, 'Dalit or Scheduled Caste: A Terminological Choice', *Seeking Begumpura,* 08 July, 2012 <https://seekingbegumpura.wordpress.com/2012/07/08/Dalit-or-scheduled-caste-a-terminological-choice/> [accessed 18 July 2023]; 'Dalit Panthers' Manifesto [document]' in *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing* ed. by K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013), pp.55-65.

The term 'Dalit' is a broad category that involves those who have been historically oppressed and marginalized in India by rulers and dominant landowning communities. This includes women, particularly those from the lower strata of society, underprivileged groups within minority communities, and Scheduled Castes (SCs). In addition to this, it is also a category that embraces empowerment, solidarity, fraternity, and collective resistance by the oppressed against the oppressors. Notable Dalit scholar Gopal Guru posits that the term 'Dalit' refers to a person who is fundamentally committed to dignity, universal recognition, fraternity, equality, justice, and friendship. This definition emphasizes the transformative potential of Dalit identity, which Guru argues is not simply a marker of social exclusion but also a source of political and moral agency.[14] Guru's definition is consistent with the broader Dalit movement's emphasis on the struggle for dignity and equality. It builds on Dr Ambedkar's insights by emphasizing the importance of universal recognition, fraternity, and friendship. Therefore, Bhanwari, despite being classified as an Other Backward Class (OBC), qualifies to be called a Dalit.[15]

The film *Bawandar* opens with a pre-credits sequence of a four-year-old girl named Sanwari married off to a boy of the same age, named Sohan. As someone who had personally experienced the impact of child marriage in her own life, Sanwari later became a Sāthin, a community health worker in the Women's Development Project (WDP) of the Government of Rajasthan. She devoted herself to the mission of eliminating harmful social practices, such as child marriage and female illiteracy, while also spreading awareness and providing accurate scientific knowledge about menstrual cycle hygiene and dispelling related misconceptions.

[14] P. Ambedkar, 'Dalit Is 'Proper Noun', Not An 'Adjective', Says Political Theorist Prof Gopal Guru', online video recording, *YouTube*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rciW7_ZGhxU> [accessed 01 August 2023].

[15] This is evident in the case of Uttar Pradesh, where Bhanwari's caste (Potters) and other OBC communities are fighting for constitutional recognition as Scheduled Castes (SCs), see Asad Rehman, 'UP to ask Centre to pass a law to include 17 OBC sub-castes in SC list', *Indian Express,* 08 September, 2022 <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/up-to-ask-centre-to-pass-law-to-include-17-obc-sub-castes-in-sc-list-8137355/> [accessed 01 August 2023].

However, her pursuit of social reform takes a harrowing turn when she faces resistance from the ‘upper caste’ Gujar men. These men, enraged by her efforts to persuade them not to marry off their nine-month-old daughter, commit a horrific act of violence, subjecting her to rape. This incident, which forms the central plot of the film, will be discussed later.

Decoding the caste system through linguistic expression

This section discusses the often-neglected linguistic landscape of Rajasthani culture, arguing that its verbal expressions subtly reinforce feudal and caste hierarchies. It claims that the language choices (dialogue, phrasing, vocabulary) in the film *Bawandar* perpetuate oppressive power structures. Additionally, it critiques the prevalent portrayal of Rajasthan in popular narratives, which present its feudal past as merely welcoming and colourful, ignoring the underlying social inequalities. In the realm of representation, the utilization of verbal expressions to perpetuate violence against Dalit characters serves as a means of reinforcing their societal subjugation. Such an approach entails the deliberate selection of words and phrases to create a narrative that intensifies the suffering and discomfort of humiliating and painful experiences, to control the viewer's emotions and use the resulting intensity and violence for entertainment. In *Bawandar,* the use of language augments caste hierarchies in several ways. For example, the film’s opening credits are accompanied by a Rajasthani folk song, ‘Kesariya Balaam Aao Nee Padhaaro Mhaare Desh’ (O’ my beloved please visit my country), and a folk dance, ‘Ghoomar’. The music by Vishwa Mohan Bhatt further establishes the film’s Rajasthani folk culture setting. The repeated use of the folk song ‘Padhaāro Mhaare Desh’ and the salutation ‘Khamma Ghāni’ are often associated with representations of Rajasthani culture. The characters Sanwari Devi and her husband Sohan are also seen using vocabulary such as ‘Annadāta’ (bestower of sustenance), ‘Khamma Ghāni’ (I beseech your

forgiveness), and 'Hukum' (directive or command) in the film are clear markers of caste hierarchies, which will be discussed in the following sections.

These linguistic and cultural markers have been critically analysed by Bhanwar Meghwanshi, a Dalit activist from Rajasthan. In a podcast, Meghwanshi argues that these markers can be seen as perpetuating stereotypes about Rajasthani culture and marginalizing the voices of Dalits. He says, 'As soon as you say Rajasthan, an image comes to people's minds that has been put in front of them in various ways. It is a desert, camels are running, and the song is playing in the background, 'Kesariya Balaam Padhaaro Mhaare Desh Mein'. I often think that you [upper castes] are inviting people from all over the world, but you have not allowed us [Dalits] to feel in our country that this is our village, our land, our area. Where are we [Dalits] in the art, culture, music, architecture, and history that you are serving in the name of? This is a serious question! You have stories of valour, but where are the heroic ballads of our [Dalit] history?'[16] This critique highlights how the one-sided celebration of culture conjures images of deserts, camels, and the song itself, thereby fostering a narrow and stereotypical view of the region. This portrayal overlooks the diverse experiences of its people, including Dalits, implying their lack of ownership and representation within the presented cultural markers such as the folk song. It underscores the broader issue of inadequate recognition of Dalit experiences and contributions in the cultural narrative.

By focusing solely on dominant caste narratives and cultural symbols, other communities' contributions are either erased or minimized. Additionally, it is essential to recognize that folk songs and culture in Rajasthan constitute a heritage preserved by marginalized communities for centuries, passed down from one generation to the next. These

[16] I have translated the entire podcast conversation from Hindi to English for this chapter. Listen to the full episode here: Bhanwar Meghwanshi, 'With Bhanwar Meghwanshi (Caste in Rajasthan)', *Anurag Minus Verma Podcast,* August 2022 <https://open.spotify.com/episode/745rnDde0XQbiI2RBgpn5A?si=Rq36XEOLSTi7ZMXlPiok3A> (accessed 21 August 2023).

heroic ballads, influenced by the caste hierarchy and the feudal system of the state, portray 'upper castes' as warriors, saviours, and martyrs, with 'lower castes' obligated to serve and praise them in songs and folklore. Therefore, the song 'Kesariya Balaam Padhaaro Mhaare Desh Mein' epitomizes this mutually hierarchical dependent relationship. This song is 'about a Rajput Warrior's return and his welcome in his own home'.[17]

Meghwanshi further argues that the linguistic style and lexicon prevalent in the region exhibit distinct characteristics. Local inhabitants engage in salutations through the gesture of clasping hands, accompanied by verbal expressions such as 'Annadāta' and 'Hukum'. Notably, conversational initiations frequently feature the phrase 'Khamma Ghāni', which, at first glance, might be misconstrued as a courteous salutation within the cultural milieu of Rajasthan. However, it is crucial to understand the deeper, caste-laden connotations embedded within this seemingly innocuous phrase. Etymologically, 'Khamma Ghāni' translates to 'I beseech your forgiveness'. Intriguingly, when employed to inaugurate an utterance accompanied by a lowered head and hands placed behind the back, the rhetorical significance transcends mere courtesy. It becomes a marker of subordination and deference to someone of higher social standing, particularly within the feudalistic hierarchy that persists in Rajasthan. This power dynamic is exemplified in the film *Bawandar.* When Sanwari and her husband encounter 'upper caste' individuals, they invariably use 'Khamma Ghāni' and 'Hukum'. These utterances, coupled with their submissive posture and deferential tone, highlight the ingrained caste hierarchy and the power dynamics it dictates.

[17] Rajasthani folk songs 'Ghoomar' and 'Kesariya Balam' were made popular by the legendary singer Allah Jilai Bai, who graced the court of Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner. Raj Rathore, "Kesariya Balam' meaning, original composition, lyrics & story behind', *FOLK MUSIC,* 10 Jan 2015 <https://www.rajrathore.com/kesariya-balam-meaning-original-composition-and-story-behind/> [accessed 10 January 2024]; Raj Rathore, 'Ghoomar Original Folk Song' Lyrics & its Meaning Explained, *FOLK MUSIC,* 14 Nov 2016 <https://www.rajrathore.com/kesariya-balam-meaning-original-composition-and-story-behind/> [accessed 10 January 2024].

In one particular scene, for instance, when Sanwari simply seeks to buy milk from an 'upper caste' household, she enters the premises and immediately offers 'Ghani Khamma', bowing her back to the 'upper caste' man. In another scene, when members of the 'upper caste' community visit Sanwari's home and publicly humiliate her, dragging her away due to her report of a child marriage to government authorities, her father-in-law pleads with folded hands and utters 'Hukum' in a subdued voice. However, he is rebuffed with warnings and pushed aside, further emphasizing the cruel extent of the power dynamics at play.[18] Sanwari Devi is often branded with the pejorative term 'rānd', which connotes a derogatory slur towards her chastity. The term 'rānd', which literally translates to 'whore/slut', appears recurrently in reference to Sanwari, used by various 'upper caste' individuals across disparate settings within the film. By employing derogatory language and labelling Sanwari as 'Nich Jaāt' or of a 'low caste,' and using the term 'Chamaran,' a pejorative insinuation toward the Dalit community, the individual seeks to demean and dehumanize her. In the given context, Arya Aiyappan posits that '[t]he choice of words, phrases, and conversational styles reflect the social class positions of Sanwari'.[19] Nevertheless, I argue that this pejorative contention serves to sustain and accentuate societal stratifications, a phenomenon that the film itself perpetuates through its persistent utilization of said linguistic markers. The socio-political landscape in its entirety is characterized by the subjugation of the broader populace, containing Dalits, Backward Classes, and Indigenous communities, to the confines of a deeply entrenched caste-feudal system. The reproduction of these phrases in *Bawandar* can be seen as a means of strengthening power dynamics between different castes, primarily through linguistic expression.

[18] Bhanwar Meghwanshi, 'With Bhanwar Meghwanshi (Caste in Rajasthan)'.
[19] Arya Aiyappan, 'When Rudaali: Raises a Bawandar: The marginalised get a voice,' *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific,* 28 (2012) <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue28/aiyappan.htm> [accessed 05 August 2023].

Bawandar highlights Rajasthan as a prominent tourist destination through the lens of Amy, a British correspondent from London. Tasked with documenting the tragic life of Sanwari Devi, a woman who endured a publicized gang rape, Amy's journey unfolds amidst Jaipur's iconic landmarks like the Hawa Mahal and Albert Museum. From the outset, Amy's fascination with Rajasthan is evident, though it remains distinctly detached. Her engagement with the local culture and Sanwari's story is framed more as a professional curiosity than an empathetic exploration. This detachment is central to her character, as she often treats the people and events around her as subjects to be analysed and documented rather than as lives impacted by complex social issues.

Amy's lack of empathy becomes apparent when she drafts an email to her partner, expressing that Sanwari's story has provided 'great material' for her work. In the frame, Amy can be seen typing an email with visible excitement and joy on her face, while her tourist guide and friend Ravi is sleeping peacefully in the background (see Figure 01). This phrasing underscores a sense of detachment, suggesting that Amy views Sanwari's suffering as a professional asset rather than a human tragedy requiring sensitivity. Her role as a journalist in this context is problematic, as she seems to commodify Sanwari's plight for her own gain. Instead of seeking a deeper understanding or advocating for change, Amy reduces Sanwari's experience to mere data—a product for her portfolio. This reveals a disturbing tendency within journalism to exploit human suffering for marketable stories, where the emotional and personal significance of an individual's pain becomes overshadowed by the potential for professional success. In Amy's case, her detached attitude directly reflects this trend.

The film's visual portrayal of Sanwari's ordeal reinforces this distance, reflecting Amy's external gaze. By capitalizing on the shock value of her trauma, the narrative seems more focused on the grievous aspects of her story than on her resilience or the socio-cultural context that defines her life. Amy's character epitomizes this problematic dimension, as she

embodies the role of a foreign observer whose approach aligns more with exploitation than with genuine empathy. Through Amy, *Bawandar* critiques a broader media culture that, while drawing attention to tragedy, may also perpetuate it by failing to respect the humanity and agency of its subjects. This perspective invites viewers to question whether the representation of suffering in the media can ever fully escape commodification, especially when filtered through a detached, foreign gaze.

Figure 01, Amy and Ravi in their hotel room.

It is pertinent to note that the film's approach towards Sanwari Devi, rather than functioning as a medium of empowerment for the individual in focus, appears to wield a disempowering effect, accentuated by the meticulous (re)enactment of her agonizing experiences. Drawing on Sanwari Devi's experiences, the director deliberately portrays the hardships faced by other women from 'lower castes'. An illustrative instance emerges in the portrayal of Mishri, a character engaged in mundane activities like bathing and laundering garments by the village pond. The camera's gaze, assumed from the vantage point of Bhuriya Meena, a male denizen

of the village, encapsulates a sequence wherein Mishri's wet physique becomes the object of his voyeuristic gaze. In this context, Mishri's appearance in wet clothes holds a significant place in the world of Hindi cinema. The portrayal of a wet body, water, and translucent clothing has traditionally been utilized to enhance sensuality and cater to the visual pleasures of a male audience.[20] This narrative commences with a distanced appraisal and progressively culminates in an invasive approach, as he endeavours to subject her to harassment. Mishri, however, counters this transgression by wielding a bucket as an impromptu defensive measure, subsequently effecting her escape from the situation (see Figure 02).

Figure 02, Mishri, a 'lower caste' woman, washing clothes at the pond.

This instance of defiance enacted by Mishri is swiftly revoked by the director within the narrative's progression. Subsequent to her resistance, Mishri returns home and engages with her mother-in-law. During this interaction, she recounts the event that transpired at the pond.

[20] Rachel Dwyer, 'The erotics of the wet sari in Hindi films', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies,* 23. 2 (2000), 143-160 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400008723418> [accessed 05 October 2023].

In response, her mother-in-law, while reproachfully inquiring, 'Why did you visit the pond?' slaps her by stating, 'Are you comporting yourself as a Brahmin [upper caste], that you bathe daily? Are you unhappy in your marriage that you seek the attention of other men?'[21] This sequential narrative strategy initially objectifies Mishri's body, catering to a voyeuristic male gaze. Subsequently, it introduces an antagonist from within the familial context to suppress her agency, consequently rendering her more susceptible to external and internal vulnerabilities within the domestic sphere. The director has downplayed the potential resistance that Mishri tries to assert, like Sanwari. Both Mishri's and Sanwari's mothers-in-law become the opponents. The potential fragmentation of solidarity among Dalit women within their homes may pose challenges for Dalit feminist movements aiming to advocate for a unified front based on shared experiences of caste and gender oppression.[22]

Sanwari, as a 'Sāthin', engages in a collective endeavour alongside fellow women to advocate for Mishri's cause. This collective action incites the ire of the male inhabitants of their village, prompting them to convene a Panchayat, a traditional village council, in support of the accused Bhuriya Meena. The village priest and Sanwari's mother-in-law frown upon her outspokenness and assertiveness, expecting her to conform to social norms. These sentiments collectively contribute to the curtailment of Sanwari's endeavours to challenge established social boundaries and institute transformative change. The film's narrative prominently accentuates the standpoint of the oppressors, overshadowing Sanwari's crusade, and her display of valour. The humiliation and physical aggression inflicted upon her and her family by the oppressors are overt manifestations, whereas the subtleties of her resistance are downplayed. When Sanwari raises concerns regarding the premature marriage of a nine-month-old girl

[21] The translation is mine.
[22] Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 33.44 (1998), 39-46 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4407323> [accessed 09 October 2023].

belonging to an 'upper caste' family, this action triggers a series of repercussions, including a social ostracism by the village council against her family, effectively isolating her from the communal fabric of the village. The instances of punishment inflicted upon Sanwari appear to stem not solely from a desire for retribution but from a deeper manifestation of dominance within the 'upper caste' male group. Their actions aim to impart a severe lesson to Sanwari. One evening around 6 PM, while Sanwari and her spouse Sohan are engaged in agricultural activities, this group arrives at the scene. They initiate a violent and brutal physical assault on Sohan, accompanied by a barrage of derogatory insults. Simultaneously, Sanwari intervenes in an attempt to protect Sohan and pleads for mercy. The assailants, acting collectively, restrain Sohan while subduing Sanwari. The main culprits among them take turns to commit the act of gang rape against Sanwari. Sohan is forced to watch helplessly as his spouse is assaulted.

This phenomenon of systematic disempowerment of Dalit men is manifest through their wives in the context of Indian society, where the onus of upholding the *Izzat* of the family, community, and the husband rests upon women. In this scenario, Sohan's 'honour' is infringed upon through the 'expropriation of his spouse', which results in an (in)direct emasculation. This process effectively serves as a means through which men from the 'upper caste' demonstrate a form of social control. [23] In a subsequent portrayal, the film's choice to depict Sanwari's body from an aerial perspective in the desert serves as more than a dramatic visual technique; it underscores her physical and social isolation, contrasting her violated, dehumanized form against the vast, barren landscape marked by chaotic footprints (see Figure 03).

[23] Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran 'Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26.37 (1991), 2130-2133< https://www.jstor.org/stable/41626993> [accessed 10 October 2023].

Figure 03, Sanwari Devi is lying down in the desert after being raped.

This juxtaposition symbolically suggests that Sanwari, like the desert terrain, has been trampled and disregarded by those around her—a stark visual statement on the brutality and indifference of societal structures toward vulnerable individuals. Yet rather than inviting a nuanced empathy for her suffering, the scene risks turning her trauma into spectacle. The mournful, dolorous soundtrack intensifies the visual and emotional weight of the moment, but rather than deepening understanding, it veers toward aestheticizing pain. This raises ethical concerns: the filmmaking choices appear to prioritize emotional manipulation over ethical representation, using Sanwari's trauma as a dramatic device rather than a means to confront the systemic injustices she endures. In doing so, the film risks flattening her subjectivity—drawing attention to her pain, but not to her personhood.

In various forms of media and art, there is a recurring issue with the way women are depicted, giving rise to significant concerns. These depictions encompass everything from explicit scenes, like disrobing within rape narratives, to the portrayal of the 'feminine' mannerisms of a rural female character. These examples underscore instances where the representation of women may come across as overly objectifying and lacking sensitivity. In

these instances, it becomes imperative to conduct a critical analysis of how the ostensibly objective portrayal of 'reality' may inadvertently contribute to the objectification of female characters, highlighting their 'sensuality' and vulnerability.[24]

Rape is a recurring theme in Indian cinema, often functioning as a narrative device to advance revenge plots while simultaneously offering viewers various forms of 'scopophilic pleasure.'[25] In this context, rape is not only a form of retribution against individual characters but can also carry symbolic significance within broader social structures. For instance, in the case of Sanwari Devi, her rape serves as symbolic punishment for Sohan, a male character.[26] This instance exemplifies what Karen Gabriel describes as 'caste rape,' a form of sexual violence where the act is used to reinforce and perpetuate the caste hierarchy. Perpetrators from 'higher' castes often target women from 'lower' castes, amplifying the trauma and humiliation due to the power dynamics at play. This violence is deeply rooted in discriminatory social structures and adds layers of stigma and shame for survivors.[27]

The phenomenon of 'caste rape' reflects the complex interweaving of sexual violence with socio-economic power. Acts of 'rape and sexual vulnerability' are intimately tied to existing social and economic dynamics.[28] In the case of Sanwari Devi, who lives in a rural setting, her socio-economic survival depends on interactions with dominant caste groups. As a seller of pottery pitchers, she engages with individuals of higher social standing, receiving payments in the form of commodities like milk, vegetables, and occasional money. This economic dependence means that any dissent or assertion from Sanwari Devi against the

[24] Leela Rao, 'Woman in Indian films — a paradigm of continuity and change', *Media, Culture & Society,* 11.4 (1989), 443-458 <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344389011004007> [accessed 10 October 2023].
[25] Sangeeta Datta, 'Globalization and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema', in *Social Scientist*, 28:3 (2000), 71-82 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3518191> [accessed 07 October 2023].
[26] Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran 'Caste and Gender'.
[27] Karan Gabriel, 'Reading Rape: Sexual Difference, Representational Excess and Narrative Containment', in *Narratives of Indian Cinema,* ed. by Manju Jain (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014), p.149.
[28] Karan Gabriel, 'Reading Rape', pp.153-4.

privileged castes is perceived as non-conformist and, therefore, unacceptable within societal norms.

Sarah Projansky argues that rape in cinema serves to heighten apprehension and achieve one of two purposes: (1) to restore characters to a conventional social order characterized by strict gender, class, and caste distinctions, with the 'heterosexual family' as the ideal, or (2) to illustrate the consequences of deviating from one's assigned roles.[29] In Sanwari Devi's case, her courage to challenge caste norms triggers a coercive response from the dominant castes, intending to 'teach her a lesson.' This response functions as a mechanism to uphold the existing social order by discouraging similar acts of defiance from other marginalized caste groups. Ultimately, the portrayal of rape in such narratives represents an interplay between the 'female body'—symbolizing the individual—and the 'social body,' which collectively serves to maintain the status quo of societal hierarchies and power dynamics.[30]

The impact of *Bawandar* on Bhanwari Devi

This section of the chapter will examine the impact of the film on Bhanwari Devi, the actual person on whom the film is based. I argue that the film itself becomes an arena for re-victimizing Devi, as her life is articulated through the character of Sanwari. The cinematic portrayal of Bhanwari Devi as Sanwari prompts reflection on the film's exploitation to marginalize oppressed groups. The visual (re)enactment of her harrowing experience of sexual assault, juxtaposed with the perpetrators exhibiting a sense of caste-based arrogance by twirling their moustaches, exacerbates Bhanwari's anguish. In an interview, Bhanwari Devi remarks that the film has inadvertently fortified the villagers' allegations against her, as they reproach

[29] Sarah Projansky, 'The Elusive/Ubiquitous Representation of Rape: A Historical Survey of Rape in U.S. Film, 1903-1972', *Cinema Journal,* 41.1 (2001), 63-90 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225562> [accessed 07 October 2023].

[30] Karan Gabriel, 'Reading Rape', pp.153-4.

her for bringing turmoil to the community through its production. 'It's like I have been skinned twice over', she says.[31] Engaging with the cinematic portrayal of her life essentially rekindles the trauma, evoking profound psychological distress and haunting recollections for Bhanwari Devi as she watches herself being re-raped on screen.[32] The director of the film posits, 'my aim was essentially to capture the spirit and courage of a village woman from a rape victim to a rape activist'.[33] Yet, upon viewing the cinematic production, it becomes apparent that instead of portraying Bhanwari Devi as an activist or advocate, the director tends to amplify her victimization and the associated violent aspects for dramatic effect.

Angela Aujla argues that, in the case of Phoolan Devi in *Bandit Queen* and Bhanwari Devi in *Bawandar*, the lives of these women have been 'simulated and commodified for mass consumption, passed off as a "true story"'.[34] Their stories are often manipulated and presented as true accounts, even though they may be inaccurate or misleading. *Bawandar,* for example, utilizes the popular Bollywood trope of sensationalization in its portrayal of Bhanwari Devi's case. By focusing heavily on the rape aspect, the film attracts viewers but potentially misrepresents the facts for the sake of popularity. In the case of these women's stories, I argue that truth is not fixed and objective but rather shaped by social and cultural forces. This understanding often results in the silencing of voices from marginalized groups like Dalit women, while simultaneously amplifying the narratives of those in power who benefit from the status quo.

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[31] Sukhmani Singh, 'Rape victim enters Bollywood filmscript but stays an outcast', *Indian Express,* 23 November, 2001<http://www.ambedkar.org/News/News112701.htm> [accessed 10 August 2023]; Arya Aiyappan, 'When a Rudaali Raises a Bawandar [accessed 10 August 2023].

[32] Sukhmani Singh, 'Rape victim enters'.

[33] Bawandar portrays rape victim turned activist, *Times of India,* 24 November, 2001 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/bawandar-portrays-rape-victim-turned-activist/articleshow/1220198655.cms> [accessed 07 August 2023].

[34] Angela Aujla, 'Caste as Woman: Izzat and Larai in Northern India', *The Peak,* July, 1997 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261161291_Caste_as_Woman_Izzat_and_Larai_in_Northern_India> [accessed 14 October 2023].

Nandita Das, a distinguished actress acclaimed for her portrayal of the character Bhanwari Devi, has articulated that certain sequences within the film posed considerable challenges during her enactment. Notably, she recounted the profoundly distressing nature of the gang rape scene, an enactment that exacted a significant toll on her both 'physically and emotionally'.[35] In extending this line of contemplation, it becomes pertinent to consider the potential ramifications of these performances upon the subject of the narrative itself, Bhanwari Devi. Given that the portrayal might necessitate her reliving the traumatic event vicariously through its representation, it arguably engenders a disconcerting parallelism to the act of re-victimization. This line of reasoning posits that the act of (re)enacting the rape on screen could conceivably be construed as a symbolic perpetuation of the initial violation.

Kavita Srivastava, a social activist from Rajasthan who supported Bhanwari Devi from the start, recounts that, at first, Bhanwari Devi displayed unease towards the film *Bawandar.* This discomfort was further intensified by the unsettling nature of its content. She also expressed concerns that it might lead to villagers wanting to watch the portrayal of her own traumatic experience of rape for entertainment. When she attempted to view the film, she found it impossible to proceed beyond the scenes depicting the gang-rape.[36] Ironically, despite its director's purported advocacy for Bhanwari Devi, the film inadvertently accentuates the oppressors' narrative by underscoring their dominion within its framework. This is accomplished through the portrayal of their dominant presence throughout the film. Even subsequent to its release, the film's contentious depiction of the rape scene has been exploited

[35] Bawandar portrays rape victim turned activist, *Times of India,* 24 November, 2001 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/bawandar-portrays-rape-victim-turned-activist/articleshow/1220198655.cms> [accessed 07 August 2023].

[36] Shivam Vij, 'A Might heart', *Tehelka,* 13 October 2007 <https://web.archive.org/web/20120527074809/http://www.tehelka.com/story_main34.asp?filename=hub131007A_MIGHTY.asp> [accessed 15 August 2023].

on various online platforms, often shared, and disseminated as a form of exploitative content akin to pornography.

Additionally, the chapter now examines the unfolding events in the film following the gang rape, delving into how the incident is depicted and its subsequent scandalization, shedding light on the profound implications associated with the notion of *Izzat* (honour). Sanwari and her husband seek to report the gang rape at the police station, but they encounter resistance and bias from the Station Head Officer (SHO). The SHO implies they should compromise with the Gujjar community and makes disturbing insinuations about Sanwari's consent in the rape. The SHO demands a medical certificate and verbally abuses Sanwari. This highlights a key aspect of rape culture: placing the unfair burden of protecting the community's *Izzat* on women, essentially blaming them for the sexual violence committed against them.[37] They visit a primary health centre for the certificate, where a male nurse insists on conducting the examination against Sanwari's wishes, leading to a molestation attempt.

In this narrative, Sanwari seeks help after a traumatic experience but encounters cruelty and mistreatment within the broader administrative system. She faces disdain and victim-blaming from female constables at a women's police station. The head-constable and her colleague belittle Sanwari's suffering and dismiss her trauma. Their laughter solidifies patriarchal norms that diminish the seriousness of violence against women. The cinematic approach effectively highlights Sanwari's distress, drawing attention to the broader issue of how the media often exploit marginalized individuals. In this context, Sadaf Ahmed emphasizes that the association between a sexually 'pure' body and 'honour' or *Izzat* has

[37] Sadaf Ahmad, 'Sexualized Objects and the Embodiment of Honor: Rape in Pakistani Films', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39.2 (2016), 386-400 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1166473> [accessed 15 October 2023].

become so intertwined that rape, as an intimate act of violence that is based on lack of consent, is popularly called *Izzat lut jana* or 'robbed of honour'.[38]

The constable's derogatory comments about Sanwari's caste further reveal deep-seated biases and the objectification of Dalit women. The constable recites the couplet: *Rahiman chak kumhar ke maange diya na deya, ched me danda darike chahe Nand Le Ley.* She goes on to explain its meaning, stating, *'*A potter's wheel doesn't yield a lamp even when asked, but if you spin a stick in the hole, you get a pot too'. The second constable, while providing her interpretation of this couplet, asserts that everything in life is a product of 'sticks' and 'holes'. This gendered sexualisation, when analysed through a phallocentric lens, reveals a deeply troubling subtext. It can be seen as an attempt to subjugate Dalit women and reduce them to sexual objects, portraying their rape as a means of seeking pleasure to be consumed. The couplet itself carries implications of exploitation, where the potter's wheel represents a demand for sexual favours. In contrast, the stick in the hole alludes to a crude act of penetration, suggesting that the (Dalit) woman's body is commodified and reduced to a mere receptacle for male desire.[39]

This narrative underscores the dehumanization, objectification, and harmful stereotypes faced by Dalit women, highlighting the need for addressing biases and prejudices in the criminal justice system. The next morning, following the receipt of her medical report from a hospital in Jaipur, Sanwari proceeds to the local police station near her village to file the complaint. At the station, the Station House Officer (SHO) requests her to submit her clothing as potential evidence. After initially refusing, she covers her body with her husband's turban and takes off her skirt and gets it deposited. The Senior Police Officer displays inappropriate

[38] Sadaf Ahmad, 'Sexualized Objects'.
[39] This couplet used in the film is from Rahim Das (1556-1627), also known as Khanzada Mirza Khan Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, who was a prominent poet and statesman during the Mughal Empire in India. He was renowned for his Hindustani *dohas* (couplet), simple yet profound couplets exploring human nature, social issues, and spiritual truths.

and intrusive behaviour, unwarrantedly gazing at her with a prurient interest, which reflects a disturbing pursuit of sexual gratification through voyeurism. On their way home from the police station, Sanwari and her husband come across the individuals who subjected her to the harrowing experience. These assailants' resort to derogatory comments aimed at demeaning and humiliating the couple, insinuating that the traditional turban, a symbol of social prestige and respect in their culture, has been placed on her 'lower body'. The significance of the turban in this context is closely intertwined with the notion of *Izzat*, as it underscores the erosion of Sanwari's husband's *Izzat.* This recurring theme redefines the emasculating experiences endured by Sohan, a Dalit man, at every juncture, ranging from having to endure seeing his wife being gang-raped in front of him to the subsequent process of reporting the crime; the eventual act of draping Sanwari Devi with his turban is the ultimate symbol of his humiliation.

In a disconcerting scene, the SHO, involves in viewing of an erotic magazine and subsequently playing a Rajasthani folk song on the radio titled 'Ghaghara' (referring to a full skirt). He then proceeds to take Sanwari's skirt from the almirah, inhaling its scent and donning it to engage in a provocative dance while, and then masturbates in her skirt (see Figure 04). These formal (i.e. narrative and cinematographic) choices by the director not only objectify Sanwari's traumatic experience but also fetishize her clothing, transforming it into a means for the police officer to vicariously relive the rape incident. In regard to cinematic choices like these, Rachel Dwyer argues that Hindi cinema sexualizes clothing through song sequences, with a particular focus on the prevalence of songs centred around the veil, which serves as a 'metonym for a woman's virtue and honour'. [40]

[40] Rachel Dwyer, 'The erotics of the wet sari in Hindi films'.

Figure 04, A police officer dancing in Bhanwari Devi's skirt at the police station.

Following a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry, the main culprits are found guilty, with two being incarcerated and three granted bail. In a dramatic turn, they visit Sanwari's home at night, seeking forgiveness by placing their turbans at her feet. However, Sanwari demands a public apology in front of the entire village. The director employs contrasting techniques: dimly lit scenes for the perpetrators' submission and highlighting their abusive language towards Sanwari, emphasizing her vulnerability. Initially seen as a symbol of *Izzat*, the turbans become a tool for the accused to clear their names. Their offering lacks respect, representing desperation and a plea for forgiveness rather than genuine remorse. It signifies their desire to rectify the situation and resolve the conflict, suggesting that they are willing to go to great lengths, including surrendering their own *Izzat* symbolized by the turban, to be in her good graces and dispel any allegations against them.

However, as I have previously discussed, the director's deliberate decisions involve not explicitly emphasizing this particular act, but instead swiftly move past it through the use of derogatory remarks by the perpetrators and strategic lighting. These choices ultimately serve

to place Sanwari in a deeply humiliating situation. Examining the resistance exhibited by the character Sanwari throughout the film, it becomes apparent that while the director does not explicitly highlight the openly defiant elements of Sanwari's character, they are nonetheless present and warrant a more profound exploration. An illustrative example of this is Sanwari's engagement in mobilizing women to protest against Bhuriya Meena, the perpetrator of Mishri's harassment. Sanwari's initiative to report the child marriage within the 'upper caste' household, which ultimately led to the rape, highlights her resolve.

Furthermore, her efforts to persuade her husband to approach the police station to report the rape, obtain a medical report from the hospital, and subsequently pursue justice through legal channels underscore her unwavering determination. What is remarkable is Sanwari's resilience in the face of the harrowing experience of rape. She appears undeterred by the potential repercussions, such as being stigmatized as a 'whore' and enduring social and economic ostracism. It is important to note that a raped woman is often perceived as bringing 'dishonour' to her family and community, and this is considered a fate worse than death. She rejects the notion of 'community gaze of shame and *Izzat* as a form of control' and re-defines it through her fight against the casteist-feudalist-patriarchal perpetrators.[41] Sanwari even chooses to remain in the same village rather than seeking refuge in other locations, serving as a testament to her fearless and indomitable attitude.[42]

The film ends with the court proceedings which are portrayed in painstaking detail, highlighting the disturbing conduct of the perpetrators. The defence attorney, Purohit, poses

[41] Kirandeep Kaur Peart, 'Izzat and the gaze of culture', *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 3.1 (2012), 53-70 <https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.3.1.53_1> [accessed 16 October 2023].

[42] Seventy-year-old Bhanwari Devi, real person of the film *Bawandar*, still lives in the same village and is fighting for justice with unwavering determination. She not only advocates for the rights of thousands of girls and women from different villages who are victims of various crimes but also provides them with support and courage. It is noteworthy that out of the five accused in Bhanwari Devi's case, four have died due to natural causes, leaving only one offender alive, who still resides in the same village with the same arrogance and caste pride. See Jyoti Yadav, '2 men raped Bhanwari Devi for trying to stop 1992 child marriage. 'I curse her daily,' says bride, *The Print,* 18 September 2023 <https://theprint.in/ground-reports/bhanwari-devi-was-raped-for-trying-to-stop-1992-child-marriage-i-curse-her-daily-says-bride/1765956/> [accessed 16 October 2023].

intrusive and inappropriate questions to the medical officer, including inquiries about Sanwari's physical responses and the size of her vagina. Throughout this sequence, the camera captures the perpetrators' carefree expressions on their faces as they twirl their moustaches. I have referred to moustaches in reference to 'upper caste' perpetrators because in the context of Rajasthan, a region characterized by a feudal societal structure, the presence of a moustache holds a distinctive significance closely linked to social privilege and caste associations. Specifically, the act of sporting a moustache carries profound implications within this complex caste hierarchy. When an individual from the Dalit community chooses to keep a moustache, they are met with resistance and disapproval from individuals belonging to the 'upper castes'. This resistance is rooted in the belief that having moustaches is a prerogative exclusive to the 'upper caste' populace, perceived as a matter of great 'pride' and *Izzat*. Thus, the Dalit individual's choice to have a moustache is perceived as a challenge or undermining the 'upper' castes' social status.[43]

The persistent appearance of the moustache in the film can be interpreted as indicative of a prevalent superiority complex within the societal context. Furthermore, it functions to perpetuate the established connotations and hierarchical distinctions associated with the presence of a moustache, rather than challenging or disrupting them. Without any fear, they (perpetrators) appear to be brazenly present in the court proceeding. In stark contrast, we witness Sanwari, portrayed as a deeply anguished soul, enduring her harrowing ordeal in a state of heartbreaking despair. In a situation marked by profound vulnerability and a sense of powerlessness, Sanwari Devi experiences a heightened state of emotional distress. During the subsequent defence attorney's inquiry, the process re-awakens the psychological trauma of Sanwari's rape, a central narrative element in the film. This reawakening triggers a resurgence

[43] 'Rajasthan: Dalit man killed for his stylish moustache and lifestyle, earlier the accused had fought with him for making eye contact' *OpIndia,* 18 March, 2022<https://www.opindia.com/2022/03/rajasthan-dalit-man-jitendrapal-meghwal-killed-for-his-stylish-moustache/>[accessed 15 October 2023].

of emotional anguish associated with her experience. Thus, the detailed investigative process portrayed in the film worsens the emotional vulnerability of Sanwari instead of empowering her.

Given the complexity of its portrayal, *Bawandar* warrants a more rigorous critical examination, particularly regarding its use of dramatic elements that deviate from actual events, which I explore further in this section. In the realm of cinema, where stories claim to be based on real events, Leela Rao posits that the assertion of authenticity may serve not as a subversive agent but rather as a mechanism that upholds the existing socio-cultural norms and structures.[44] Several incidents within the film, such as the depiction of a male nurse attempting to harass Sanwari, her stay at a women's police station, and a particularly disturbing scene involving Sanwari and her husband's turban, appear to have been embellished for dramatic effect rather than representing actual events. These embellishments serve to underscore the vulnerability of Sanwari but do so at the expense of factual integrity.[45] The inclusion of these elements amplifies the theme of victimization, exploitation, and assault against the character Sanwari. As a result, these elements divert the narrative's attention solely towards Sanwari's one-dimensional portrayal.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the song 'Ghaghara' in the film appears to exploit Sanwari's clothing, symbolizing the 'lower part' of her body, which adds a layer of objectification to her character. This aspect appears with a similar song to 'Ghaghara' in the film *Dirty Politics* (2015, K. C. Bokadia) reflecting the recurring re-construction and

[44] Leela Rao, 'Woman in Indian Films'.
[45] Kanchan Mathur, 'Challenging the collusion of Caste, Class and Patriarchy Embodied in the State', in *Indian Feminisms – Individual and Collective Journeys,* ed. by Poonam Kathuria and Abha Bhaiya (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2018), pp.59-88; Kanchan Mathur, 'Bhateri Rape Case: Backlash and Protest', '*Economic and Political Weekly,* 27.41 (1992), 2221-2224 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/4398990> [accessed 20 August 2023]; William Dalrymple, *The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters* (London : Harper Collins Publishers,1999), pp. 97-110.

commodification of Dalit women through sartorial representation.[46] It is evident that the director of *Bawandar* employs various cinematic techniques to draw attention to Bhanwari's rape story, often distorting facts, marginalizing her voice, and prioritizing the narrative of her perpetrators. This approach not only compromises the accurate portrayal of Bhanwari's experiences but also has the potential to re-traumatize and endanger her present life.

In many respects, the cinematographic style of *Bawandar* resembles that of Shekhar Kapoor's film *Bandit Queen*, which was released six years earlier. *Bandit Queen* narrates the life of Phoolan Devi, a Dalit woman who endured sexual harassment from childhood, was gang-raped by 'upper caste' men, and subsequently popularized as a bandit by the media and society. However, this film faced criticism for simplifying Phoolan's complex life to create a formulaic rape-revenge story, thereby stripping it of its depth and intricacies.[47] Similarly, *Bawandar* has been accused of eroticizing the mistreatment of Bhanwari Devi, thereby commodifying women's bodies and infringing upon their dignity as human beings.[48] Arundhati Roy asserts, in the context of *Bandit Queen*, which also holds true for the film *Bawandar*, that 'it is difficult to match the self-righteousness of a filmmaker with a cause. It is even harder when the filmmaker is a man, and the cause is rape'.[49] I would further augment her assertion by emphasizing the heightened complexity arising when the victimized woman hails from the marginalized lower socio-economic strata and the filmmaker represents the privileged 'upper

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[46] *Dirty Politics* (2015, K. C. Bokadia) is a story about a Dalit woman who initially contacts a politician for personal gain and later becomes entangled in a life of luxury, ultimately leading to her recording compromising videos with the politician from Rajasthan and her subsequent murder.

[47] Madhu Kishwar, 'The Bandit Queen', *Manushi,* 84 (1994), 34-37 <https://www.manushi.in/issues/issue-84/> [accessed 21 August 2023]. By 'formulaic', I refer to the tendency of the narrative to follow a predictable arc wherein a survivor of sexual violence exacts vengeance as an ultimate resolution. This pattern, while emotionally evocative, risks reducing multifaceted individuals like Phoolan Devi to archetypal figures, overshadowing the broader social, cultural, and personal contexts that shaped their lives. In this case, her political journey, her complex agency, and her identity as a Dalit woman navigating systemic oppression are subordinated to a single, dramatic storyline.

[48] Nandita Gandhi & Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women), p.75.

[49] Arundhati Roy, 'The Great Indian Rape-Trick I', *SAWNET -The South Asian Women's Network,* 22 August 1994 <https://web.archive.org/web/20160414182145/http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/roy_bq1.html> [accessed 28 August 2023].

caste'. In such instances, the dominant filmic narrative point of view appears to belong, invariably, to the character of the male in the film and 'upper caste' gaze in general.

The veil, the well, and the will to be free: Lajwanti's subversion of *Izzat*

This section will examine the film *Lajwanti,* focusing particularly on its exploration of intimately intertwined themes including (i) the interplay between the veil, beauty, and the patriarchal constructs surrounding the notion of *Izzat;* (ii) the geographical separation of the Dalit community from the dominant castes within Hindu society; (iii) the central role of marriage in upholding women's 'honour' while stifling their desires; and, notably, (iv) the transformative agency embodied by Lajwanti, the film's central character. By examining these thematic elements, one can illuminate the complex dynamics at play within the narrative and the ways in which the film delivers a broader social and cultural commentary with regard to the challenges women face in navigating these complex social constructs. Through the character of Lajwanti, we witness her bold choice to separate from her husband and cohabit with an unmarried man, a decision that challenges traditional norms. Within this context, the discussion revolves around Lajwanti's remarkable subversion of established societal norms, her resolute assertion of personal desires, and her audacious (re)definition of the overarching concept of *Izzat*.

The film *Lajwanti* offers a poignant exploration of the lives of Dalit women in a rural village, using the act of fetching water as a symbol of their struggles and aspirations. The opening scene of women drawing water from a nearby pond sets the stage for the narrative. Lajwanti questions why these women would choose to travel further to fetch water from a well when a pond is available nearby. However, as the story unfolds, we realize that their preference for the well is not just about the physical challenge of the journey but about the deeper sense

of freedom and empowerment it offers. Walking to the well becomes a temporary escape from the constraints of the patriarchal system and the burdens of their in-laws' homes. It's a time for these women to laugh, share their grief, and feel like free individuals. In essence, the film suggests that even though the distance to the well is greater, this journey transforms the women's dreams and the songs they sing. It celebrates the liberation and joy they experience when they remove their veils and venture beyond their village. In this context, the act of unveiling becomes a way of seeing beyond the confines of the social setup. However, Lajwanti remains veiled, in the prevalent belief that the gaze of others is a threat to her commitment to preserving her *Izzat*, as her beauty is reserved for her husband and not for the consumption of *others*. Lajwanti's relationship with the veil will be discussed in detail later in the section.

However, it is essential to recognize that walking for water in the desert is an arduous task, far more challenging than one might imagine. While it symbolizes freedom, it also brings additional burdens and tensions for these women. The struggle to fetch water from distant sources exacerbates their existing deprivations. It's a bittersweet reflection on the complexities of seeking independence and empowerment in a challenging environment. By these narrative and cinematic choices *Lajwanti* conveys the dual nature of the women's journey for water —it represents both liberation and hardship. As Gayathri D. Naik points out, women often bear the brunt of both 'water scarcity and pollution'. This process of water retrieval further marginalizes women, transforming them into 'second-class citizens'. The situation is particularly dire for women from lower socio-economic strata who are 'denied access to water sources like public wells'.[50] Gayathri Naik's observation that access to water is denied to women of 'lower' castes in mixed-caste villages is true in many cases. However, in the case of *Lajwanti*, the scarcity of water due to geographical conditions is the primary challenge, rather than discrimination from

[50] Gayathri D. Naik, 'Why collecting water turns millions of women into second-class citizens', *The Week,* 22 October, 2018 <https://www.theweek.in/leisure/society/2018/10/22/collecting-water-turns-millions-women-second-class-citizens.html> [accessed 02 January 2023].

'upper' castes. This scarcity makes women vulnerable, as they are responsible for fetching water from distant sources. Despite the hardships they face, women like Lajwanti find temporary freedom and joy through the songs they sing. This acts as a coping mechanism and helps them escape their pain and suffering for a short period of time.[51]

Lajwanti and the other women in the village reside in a separate settlement populated by individuals from the Dalit community. They deliberately choose to live apart from the Hindu caste groups in the main village due to the oppression and discrimination they face based on their caste identity. By residing in a distinct village or 'Bāsti', they minimize the fear of discrimination from the 'upper' castes in their locality. The phenomenon of segregation is varied, characterized by the deliberate choice of Dalits to reside separately from the broader Hindu society. The underlying question of their motivations for this choice is a complex matter, as articulated by Dr Ambedkar, who referred to this separation of Dalits as a manifestation of a 'ghetto system' within the context of territorial confinement. He argues that the caste system is a form of social apartheid that denies Dalits basic human rights and dignity. He writes that Dalits are subjected to a 'cordon sanitaire', or a policy of segregation and exclusion. He contends that this policy was designed to keep Dalits 'impure' and to prevent them from mingling with the rest of society.[52]

Similarly, Sukhadeo Thorat observes that Scheduled Caste settlements in rural India are often physically and socially isolated, a result of historical discrimination and oppression. This isolation has several negative consequences for Scheduled Castes, including limited

[51] A recently released documentary by *The Lallantop* focuses on the lives of marginalized people in the arid desert regions of Rajasthan, illustrating the profound impact of water scarcity on their daily existence. Rajat Sain and Roohani, *India Water Crisis Documentary 4K*, The Lallantop, YouTube, 29 July 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uWxDUesIis> [accessed 24 Oct 2023].
[52] B. R. Ambedkar, 'What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to The Untouchables' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 09, ed. by Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), pp.186-9.

access to education, employment, and healthcare.[53] However, I argue that despite the negative impact of historical marginalization on the lives of Dalits, the segregation that results from this marginalization may offer some protection from the oppression and discrimination of caste Hindus. In the case of Lajwanti, this segregation provides her with the opportunity to embrace her desires and choose a life partner outside of the social constructs of marriage. Geographical segregation plays a pivotal role in shaping the absence of violence within this context. For Dalit women, this geographical context adds a distinct dimension to their lives. While they experience patriarchy, they do not regularly encounter caste-based gender discrimination. This reality not only shapes their experiential understanding of gender within a patriarchal society but also obscures their position in the broader social hierarchy due to limited interactions with members of higher castes.

Consequently, it could be observed that these Dalit women might experience a relatively different, and in some aspects, less intense burden of oppression within the multilayered cycle of subjugation compared to their counterparts in other Dalit communities. This relative difference, as seen in the case of Lajwanti, brings them slightly closer to realizing their dreams of freedom. However, this is not the situation for individuals like Bhanwari Devi, as previously discussed, or Kajri, which I will explore later. These differences largely arise from their co-existence with caste Hindus, which exacerbates their experiences of sexual, social, and economic oppression. While I draw on my perspective as a Dalit man, I recognize the need to foreground the voices and lived realities of Dalit women themselves to provide a fuller understanding of these complexities.

Throughout the film, there are recurring themes that revolve around the veil and the beauty of Lajwanti. The other women in her village make fun of her for constantly wearing the

[53] Sukhadeo Thorat, 'Access to Civil Amenities: Housing, Water, and Electricity', in *Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny*, ed. by Sukhadeo Thorat, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 05.

veil, linking it to traditional ideas about beauty and aesthetics. When Lajwanti removes her veil on a few occasions, it symbolizes her ability to see the world beyond her own limited perspective and desires. [54] She no longer wants to live in a world of illusions and instead chooses to face reality as it is. By developing a balanced perspective, she approaches the world with a richer understanding. This can contribute to a more informed approach to decision-making, as seen in her choice of partner who is obsessed with doves —signifying love and peace— and is therefore known as the 'dove man'. When questioned regarding the utilization of the veil within the film, the director expounded,

> The inclusion of the veil was an integral aspect of the original narrative that captivated my interest. In the specific geographical context of my region, the Chambal region in the Braj, the veil is commonly referred to as 'Laj'. Additionally, it bears semantic relevance as it signifies 'honour'. This duality of meaning imbues the story with its inherent potency.[55]

This dual play of meaning not only underscores the physical aspect of the veil but also alludes to the broader societal values attached to it. The veil, in this context, becomes a tangible symbol of 'honour', embodying the deeply rooted social norms and expectations within the community (see Figure 05).[56] K. D. Upadhyaya elucidates the pivotal role of the practice of veiling, commonly referred to as *'parda'* in Indian society. He posits that this societal system

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[54] Amrit Dhillon, 'Rajasthan's women encouraged to remove veil in state campaign', *The Guardian,* 23 January 2020<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jan/23/rajasthans-women-encouraged-to-remove-veil-in-state-campaign> [accessed 15 September 2023].
[55] Neeraj Bunkar, email to Pushpendra Singh, 17 July 2023.
[56] Isha Mathur explores the historical evolution of the veil, emphasizing its dynamic transformations and delving into the socio-economic aspects associated with its changing forms in the context of Rajasthan. See Isha Mathur, 'From Ghoonghat to De Beauvoir: Finding a Feminist Voice through Ethnography', *Journal of Big History,* 3.1(2018), 165-178 <http://dx.doi.org/10.22339/jbh.v3i1.3180> [accessed 20 October 2023].

often engenders misunderstandings and intra-family conflicts. The veil serves as a barrier, impeding effective communication and conflict resolution between the daughter-in-law and other household members.[57] In cases of disputes with the mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law finds herself constrained from articulating her perspective, as she is frequently held responsible for various alleged transgressions.[58] In a parallel vein, Katherine Bullock proposes the evolving symbolism of the veil and headscarf in the context of post-colonial modernization. During this period, these garments were emblematic of notions associated with backwardness, rural peasantry, and limited educational attainment—manifestations of the West's Orientalist perspective.[59] Bullock further elucidates that in contemporary times, the veil can serve as an expression of religiosity, a demonstration of cultural allegiance, and a rejection of Western cultural dominance and influence.[60]

[57] The recently released film *Laapataa Ladies* (2023) presents a compelling critique of the veil as a significant obstacle for women in India. The film argues that the veil functions as a tool of obfuscation, obscuring a woman's identity and reducing her to a mere symbolic figure. This portrayal aligns with feminist scholarship that examines the veil as a potential instrument of patriarchal control, restricting women's agency and self-expression. Neeraj Bunkar, ''Laapataa Ladies': A meaningful engagement with the aspirations of rural Indian women', *Forward Press*, 13th May 2024 <https://www.forwardpress.in/2024/05/laapataa-ladies-a-meaningful-engagement-with-the-aspirations-of-rural-indian-women/> [accessed 15 May 2024].

[58] K. D. Upadhyaya, 'On the Position of Women in Indian Folk Culture', *Asian Folklore Studies,* 27.1 (1968), 81-100 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1177801> [accessed 20 October 2023].

[59] In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said investigates how Western perceptions of the East often perpetuated stereotypes and prejudices, shaping views of cultures and peoples perceived as 'other' or 'exotic'. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[60] Katherine Bullock, 'Turbans, Veils, and Villainy on Television: Stargate SG1 and Merlin', *ReOrient,* 6.2 (2021), 151–72 <https://doi.org/10.13169/reorient.6.2.0151> [accessed 20 October 2023];See Mashael Al-Sudeary, 'Representations of the Veil in Modern Fiction', *Interventions,* 14.4 (2012), 533-550 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2012.730859> [accessed 20 October 2023]. Even Dr Ambedkar, in his analysis of the veil and its relationship to the *purdah* (veil) system among Muslims, acknowledges its presence among certain Hindu communities in specific regions. However, he emphasizes a crucial distinction: for Muslims, *purdah* carries a 'religious sanctity' absent in the Hindu context. This imbues it with deeper roots, rendering its removal contingent upon confronting the inherent tension between religious tenets and societal demands. Unlike among Hindus, the sheer presence of religious justification makes purdah a 'real problem' within Muslim communities, as evidenced by a perceived lack of initiative to abolish it. see B. R. Ambedkar, 'Pakistan or The Partition of India' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 08, ed. by Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p 232.

Figure 05, Lajwanti in veil.

The film's depiction of women's beauty as a construct exploited by the patriarchal system is evident in the scene where the women forcefully remove Lajwanti's veil, praise her physical attractiveness, and challenge her to use her beauty to attract the attention of the dove man. This incident reinforces the notion that a woman's beauty is a form of privilege, capable of charming all men. In this context, the concept of beauty is defined by external, observable aspects of a person's physical appearance. However, internalized qualities such as 'honour' and 'sacrifice' are also considered important, even though they are not as visible.[61] Lajwanti's marriage to a man she does not love is an example of sacrifice. She agrees to marry him to preserve her family's *Izzat*. In doing so, she gives up her own desires and personal freedom. The concept of beauty in Lajwanti is therefore multifaceted, and it carries with it a heavy burden for Lajwanti. She is expected to be both physically attractive and morally virtuous. *Lajwanti* addresses the complex issue of *Izzat* traditions and their impact on women in rural communities. It explores the deeply ingrained social norms and expectations that force women to conform to restrictive roles and behaviours. Lajwanti's experiences exemplify the profound hardships endured by women under oppressive patriarchal structures. It vividly depicts how

[61] Kirandeep Kaur Peart, 'Izzat and the gaze of culture'.

societal expectations clash with individual desires, illustrating the profound impact of these systems on women's lives. Lajwanti's character serves as a powerful vehicle for shedding light on this pervasive issue and advocating for the need to challenge and dismantle such oppressive structures.

In essence, the film provides a critical examination of traditional 'honour' norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Pushpendra Singh, director of the film, states in this context, 'the dove man represents a crazy man on the margins of society who is just obsessed with following a passion —untouched by anything else —signifying a freedom from any societal norms to function as the society wants. The woman desires for a similar freedom and decides to shun the veil and her patriarchal conditioning. She walks on a path which keeps the honour of the dream, that signify freedom'.[62] In rejecting the traditional concept of 'honour', or *Izzat,* in favour of her own dreams and desires, she subverts it by accepting the 'untouchable'— the man who is considered to be mad and abnormal by society. In doing so, she redefines *Izzat* as something that is internal and self-determined, rather than something that is externally imposed.

The film also presents two contrasting male archetypes: the married philanderer, who is obsessed with other women and views them solely as objects of desire, and the dove man, who deliberately avoids direct contact with women and maintains a respectful distance. The dove man is associated with the doves, symbols of peace and purity. Married men within the Dalit community express a significant apprehension regarding the concept of Dalit patriarchy and its impact on women in their socio-cultural milieu. While the menace of violence may not manifest overtly, it remains latent and comparatively diminished but not entirely absent within this particular framework.

[62] Neeraj Bunkar, email to Pushpendra Singh, 17 July 2023.

Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran explicate the dynamics of gender relations within the context of caste and patriarchy, shedding light on a phenomenon wherein Dalit men, upon ascending to positions of power, opt to employ the modus operandi historically associated with the dominant 'upper' castes in the exercise of their new-found power.[63] Lajwanti becomes intrigued by the dove man despite her steadfast loyalty to her husband and her belief in his authority over her. She asks her husband to grow a beard, as the dove man possesses one. This suggests that she is beginning to perceive the dove man as a more desirable partner than her husband. As her thoughts increasingly revolve around the dove man, Lajwanti begins to blur the boundaries between her desires and reality. This becomes evident in the scene where, in the bedroom, she sees the dove man in place of her husband.

Ultimately, the dove man's presence in Lajwanti's life is fulfilled, suggesting that she has succumbed to her desires and rejected the patriarchal norms that govern her space. In a society where 'chastity is considered inseparable from truth and "honour" is inseparable from virtue', Lajwanti's act of demolishing these concepts stands out defiantly.[64] By choosing her own partner, Lajwanti simultaneously undermines the concept of marriage as an institution in which the wife is expected to serve her husband and preserve the *Izzat* of her family and husband. This may seem perfectly normal to some people, but in a caste society where women, especially Dalit women, are rarely given the opportunity to express their dissent, choosing a partner is a bold statement.

[63] Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran, 'Caste and Gender'.
[64] Leela Rao, 'Woman in Indian Films'.

***Kaanchli*: a journey of self-discovery**

This section will analyse the film *Kaanchli: Life in a Slough* through the lens of intersectionality, specifically focusing on the ways in which Dalit women experience marginalization and divergence from mainstream society. This analysis builds upon the discussions of *Bawandar* and *Lajwanti* presented earlier in this chapter, drawing parallels, and exploring the nuances of their experiences. I argue that the filmmaker uses cinematic choices to objectify and commodify the central protagonist, Kajri, for the visual pleasure of the 'upper caste' gaze. However, *Kaanchli* also explores the faceted social and cultural constraints confronting Dalit women; while highlighting the resilience and strength they exhibit in the face of adversity. The film opens with a voice-over narration that sarcastically comments on the current state of Dushyant Singh, the Thakur (landlord) of Jaitasar, who is referred to as 'Annadata'.[65]

The narration highlights the irony that the supposed bestower of sustenance is himself struggling to survive. It is crucial to recognize that even in adverse circumstances, the power positions that caste Hindus hold are deeply ingrained in the caste-society. They often express their hegemony over marginalized communities through various means, one of which is the exertion of control over the sexuality of Dalit women. Beyond the voice-over narration, the film emphasizes Thakur's control over the labouring communities of 'lower' castes. This control grants him the entitlement to sexually assault women from these communities.

From the outset, the film establishes its perspective by prominently featuring Kajri's body. In the introductory credits, Kajri is the only character who is visually introduced; she is depicted from the chest up, gazing into a pound in an inverted position. The juxtaposition of

[65] The title '*Annadata*'— meaning the bestower of sustenance— holds significant meaning in folkloric traditions, where local deities are revered as *Annadata* or Maharaj. Similarly, the title 'Thakur' is also linked to the warrior caste often associated with the 'upper caste'. Here, *Annadata* is a title used to honour Thakur in a respectful manner.

frames showcasing mud houses and the dilapidated Haveli (mansion) of Thakur, along with the voice-over narration, contributes to the depiction of Kajri's body as a central element. The narration describes Kajri as the embodiment of unmatched beauty, as if nature's beauty has taken refuge in her. Simultaneously, Kajri is shown in the bridal chamber, waiting for her husband Kishnu on their first night together. Kishnu appears and seductively whispers to her, praising her beautiful body and remarking that it makes one's mouth water. This early portrayal sets the stage for the objectification of Kajri and her body. The film promotes the idea that the villagers, seemingly consumed by desire, are eager to possess and consume her. Through close-up shots, the camera captures Kajri's anxiety, focusing on her rapid breaths and heaving chest while Kishnu continues to extol her beauty. Kajri smiles and expresses her desire to be solely born for him in every lifetime, after which darkness envelops the room. The darkness represents the unknown and the uncertainty of Kajri's future. She is about to embark on a new life with Kishnu, but she does not know what lies ahead.

The darkness of the bridal chamber is both exciting and daunting to her. On the one hand, it represents the potential for a new and fulfilling life. On the other hand, it is also a symbol of the patriarchal society that she is entering, a society that will likely consume her without giving her agency or a voice. The lack of colour in the bridal chamber further emphasizes the oppressive nature of the patriarchal society. In a society where women are not allowed to speak or make decisions for themselves, life can be bleak and colourless. It is an illustration of the challenges that Kajri will face in her new life and a reminder that she is entering a world where she will be silenced and objectified. In every conversation among the village women, Thakur, and his henchman Bhoja, she becomes the desired object.

In a village controlled by Thakur, a feudal system of oppression allows him, the landlord, to exploit and abuse the women of Dalit communities for his own sexual gratification. This is evident in instances like Kajri's, where her recent marriage makes her a target for

Thakur's predatory desires. This highlights the normalized subjugation of these women. These aspects of a woman's subjugated and 'second-class' citizen status—such as 'restriction, constraint, contortion, display, self-mutilation, and the requisite presentation [of oneself as a beautiful object]'—are transformed into sexual content aimed at women. This transformation aligns with Catherine Mackinnon's assertion that sexuality is constructed in ways that reinforce women's subordination.[66] Mackinnon further argues that women are identified as existing solely for the sake of others' sexuality, and the primary process involved in their subjugation is sexual objectification. However, this sexual objectification and humiliation are not solely gender-based; they are also inherently caste-oriented, further oppressing Dalit women. Everyone, including Bhoja and other Dalit women, who are themselves victims of this caste-based hierarchical order, actively participate in efforts to convince Kajri to succumb to Thakur's advances.

It is worth noting that the film does not feature a single glimpse of women from 'upper caste' households. While these women are indeed impacted by the patriarchal system, their oppression differs from that experienced by Dalit women. The director decided to omit the portrayal of 'upper caste' women and deny them screen time. In this analysis, I argue that it signifies how the bodies of Dalit women are subjected to consumption by characters within the film as well as by the spectators outside the film. Conversely, 'upper caste' women are regarded as 'respectable' and 'pure', resulting in their visibility primarily in private spaces rather than public ones. According to M. Madhava Prasad, in a society characterized by caste divisions and entrenched traditional ruling classes, the portrayal of the 'private' sphere in public, or the depiction of images from a 'private point of view' in cinematic terms, becomes problematic.

[66] Catherine Mackinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.130.

This is due to the inherent transgression of the ruling class's 'scopic privileges'.[67] It refers to the prerogative of certain classes to remain unmarked in the representational register while others are rendered hyper-visible as objects of scrutiny. This privilege includes the power to dictate what is revealed and what remains concealed within the realm of representation. In a society structured by caste, gender, and class hierarchies, the ruling class maintains its dominance in part by controlling the flow of images and perceptions, ensuring that its private life and spaces are shielded from public scrutiny. This dynamic reinforces its figurative untouchability, even as the labouring classes and marginalized groups are subjected to relentless exposure and consumption.[68]

In a collective gathering of women, including Kajri, while fetching water from a communal well, a woman poses a thought-provoking question: 'Can women establish multiple relationships with men, just as men often do?' While this question may initially appear progressive, its underlying context reveals a regressive intention. Specifically, the women present are attempting to persuade Kajri to succumb to the advances of Thakur, arguing that it would bring her great fortune and prestige if she were to offer her beautiful body to him. Consequently, this question serves as a pretext or strategic tool to ensnare Kajri in the clutches of Thakur's lustful desires. In response, Kajri vehemently opposes the women's persuasion and employs a metaphorical reference, likening the husband to a vessel of water, and advocates that women should only drink water from it. In a fiery tone, she reaffirms her loyalty to her husband,

[67] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of The Hindi Film*, p. 78.

[68] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of The Hindi Film*, pp. 92-97.

emphasizing that a woman's respect is derived from her relationship with her spouse and not from engaging in extramarital affairs with strangers.

Through her response, Kajri not only rejects the other women's attempts to persuade her but also asserts her own agency by defining herself through her commitment to her husband. Kajri's rejection of Thakur can be interpreted as a subversion of his patriarchal dominance and control over women's bodies, particularly her own body and sexuality. However, her assertion of agency is mediated by her adherence to prevailing social norms and cultural codes of *Izzat*, which prescribe a specific code of conduct for South Asian women that emphasizes 'honour' and 'respectability'.[69] In this context, Kajri's vehement opposition to the other women's proposal to accept Thakur as a 'norm'—which would perpetuate the exploitation of Dalit women as mistresses to dominant 'upper caste' men—differs from her resistance to, and denunciation of, the institution of marriage, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

During a visit to Kishnu's home, Thakur, accompanied by Bhoja, catches sight of Kajri for the first time, resulting in her experiencing a sense of unease as their eyes meet. Thakur's gaze reflects the typical perspective of the 'upper caste' male gaze, which derives pleasure from observing women in a submissive position. By consistently observing Kajri from a distance, Thakur initiates a conversation about cows, seemingly referring to Kajri herself rather than the actual animals. The camera captures a medium close-up shot of Kajri, emphasizing Thakur's underlying intention. In response, Kishnu addresses Thakur respectfully, expressing his willingness to comply with Thakur's desires and seeking his benevolence. As Kishnu touches Thakur's feet, the camera foregrounds Kajri, with a partial view of the cow, symbolizing her realization of her husband's subordinate position in front of Thakur. As Thakur continues to gaze at her, Kajri's vulnerability intensifies.

[69] Kirandeep Kaur Peart, 'Izzat and the gaze of culture'.

This encounter marks Thakur's first interaction with Kajri, conveyed not through spoken words, but through gestures, in the presence of her husband, Kishnu. The hierarchical power structure rooted in the caste system amplifies the disempowered status of Kishnu in the presence of his wife, subsequently rendering him more vulnerable and powerless. This dynamic also contributes to the marginalization of his wife when confronted with Thakur's authority. A parallel pattern of emasculation and humiliation, as previously discussed in the case of Sohan with respect to *Bawandar*, is evident.

Thakur and Bhoja arrive for a second visit to see Kajri, discovering her alone diligently working in the cattle pen. They inquire about the whereabouts of Kishnu, to which Kajri responds that he is likely somewhere nearby. Exploiting the situation, Thakur and Bhoja proceed to subject Kajri to harassment. Within the frame, the camera foregrounds Kajri's evident unease and fear etched upon her face, with Thakur positioned at a distance while Bhoja is in close proximity to Kajri in the background. Thakur takes a leisurely stroll around the cattle pen, inspecting the cows before fixing his gaze upon Kajri once again. With a momentary pause, he remarks, 'This is a very vigorous breed'. This statement serves to objectify Kajri, drawing a parallel between her and the cows. In Hindu culture, cows are revered as sacred creatures, symbolizing purity, obedience, and reverence.[70] Thakur poses a question, 'How many times has she been pregnant?' By interweaving the themes of labour and sexualized identity, the portrayal of Kajri seeks to present her as a meek and subservient subject.

As Kirandeep Kaur asserts, 'her body [is] to be viewed as the reproductive visible body'.[71] The deliberate use of metaphors such as cow, milk, curd, and buttermilk, which are

[70] S.M. Batra, 'The Sacredness of the Cow in India', *Social Compass*, 33.2 (1986), 163-175 <https://doi.org/10.1177/003776868603300203> [accessed 07 November 2023]. See Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Gandhi and the cow: The ethics of human/animal relationships', *Between the Species*, 1.1 (1985), 11-17 <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1394&context=bts> [accessed 07 November 2023].
[71] Kirandeep Kaur Peart, 'Izzat and the gaze of culture'.

deeply associated with the labouring communities, further serves as symbols to demean and dehumanize Kajri, reducing her to the status of an inanimate object and a non-human being. For example, comparing a labouring community to a herd of cows can make the community seem like it is not capable of independent thought or action. Similarly, comparing a labouring community to a product of a cow, such as milk, can make the community seem like it is something that is to be used and consumed, rather than something that is to be respected and treated as human beings. As Catherine A. Mackinnon argues, 'women are made into and coupled with anything considered lower than human: animals, objects, children, and (yes) other women'.[72]

In a carefully strategized plan, Kishnu is sent to a different village, while Thakur and Bhoja make their third visit to take advantage of Kajri sexually, exploiting her husband's absence. In this scene, Kajri is seen engaging in a process whereby she releases a bull to mate with a cow tied to a peg. Suddenly, Thakur and Bhoja make an unexpected appearance, with Thakur displaying immense excitement upon witnessing this spectacle (see Figure 06). Expressing his enthusiasm to Bhoja, Thakur emphasizes the rarity of such an opportunity, stating that missing it would be detrimental. Meanwhile, Bhoja comments to Kajri that her focus should solely lie on the bull, neglecting Thakur Sahib's desires.

[72] Catherine A. Mackinnon, 'Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: Pleasure under Patriarchy', *Ethics*, 99.2 (1989), 314–346 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381437> [accessed 08 November 2023].

Figure 06, Kajri releasing a bull into the pen to mate with a cow.

In this context, the bull appears to be trying to force himself on the cow, but the cow initially tolerates it in a calm, subdued state, but eventually resists and shoves the bull away. Kajri's fear forces her to walk out of the spectacle. Seeing the frightened expression on Kajri's face, Thakur, eager to take advantage of the opportunity, moves towards Kajri at a fast pace and while praising her beauty, he hugs her from behind. Breathing heavily, the scared Kajri, showing courage, turns and pushes Thakur away from her. Thakur falls down with the force of the blow, along with his turban (see Figure 07). This scene in which Kajri resists Thakur's sexual advance is a powerful and complex one. On the one hand, it is a moment of triumph for Kajri, who refuses to be cowed by Thakur's power and privilege: she stands up for herself even though she knows that she is risking her safety. This is a clear message of resistance to the casteist, feudal society in which she lives. On the other hand, the scene is also a reminder of the immense power that the 'upper' castes wield over the 'lower' castes. Thakur is a powerful man, and he believes that he can do whatever he wants to Kajri without consequence. He is so confident in his superiority that he does not even bother to hide his intentions from her. This scene is a stark reminder of the violence and oppression that are inflicted on the 'lower' castes on a daily basis.

The fact that the scene is shot from a bird's-eye view is significant. Kajri is standing up for herself, while Thakur is lying on the ground. The intentional selection of an aerial shot for this particular scene underscores Kajri's audacious endeavour, effectively showcasing the inversion of the social hierarchy by leveraging the vantage point of altitude. This aerial shot distinguishes itself from the aerial shot featured in the film *Bawandar*, specifically the scene where Sanwari Devi lies in the desert with her legs exposed after she was gang raped (see Figure 03). In the case of Kajri, it is evident that the Thakur, who represents patriarchal honour, is depicted on the ground, signifying a loss of his perceived *Izzat*, symbolized through the fallen turban. Meanwhile, Kajri stands in the frame with an air of pride.

Figure 07, Kajri knocks Thakur to the ground and looks at him in fear.

In contrast, the portrayal of Sanwari's situation conveys the grim reality of her *Izzat* being plundered through the act of rape, with the perpetrators from the 'upper caste' proudly asserting their dominance and retaining their own *Izzat* in the process. The image of Kajri exudes resistance, indicating her ability to challenge conventional notions of 'honour'. In Sanwari's case, the image reflects her state of submission after enduring sexual violence, a state perceived

by society as the loss of *Izzat.* Notably, Kajri subverts the traditional notion of *Izzat*, thus challenging and redefining the prevailing dynamics of honour and power. By attacking Thakur, she shatters the confines of *Izzat* and reject it 'as a form of control' (see Figure 07).[73]

It is also important to discuss the Thakur's fallen turban of because it is linked to the notions of honour, respect, and dignity in Indian society. If the people of the village learn that Thakur's turban has been knocked off by a Dalit woman, he will lose his *Izzat*. He asks Bhoja to tell Kajri not to reveal this incident to anyone in the village. Bhoja, who himself belongs to the 'lower caste', remarks about Kajri, 'If you try to have a relationship with a degenerate woman, a person who has no morals, *Badjaāt*, then you have to face the consequence, Thakur ji'.

Here, delving into the intricacies of the turban becomes crucial because it holds profound significance in the cultural milieu of Indian society, notably in the region of Rajasthan, where it is precisely linked to the concept of *Izzat* or honour. This association is emblematic of the pervasive caste hierarchy prevalent in the societal fabric, underscoring the nuanced interplay between cultural symbols and social stratification. The different styles of turbans worn by kings, maharajas, thakurs, and nawabs in India reflect a unique form of headgear that carries a distinct cultural and social significance. Alongside these royal and aristocratic headpieces, the turbans worn by farmers, merchants, shepherds, and priests also have their individual characteristics. Turbans serve as symbols of identity, cultural heritage, and social standing within Indian civilization and culture. In Sanskrit, a turban is referred to as 'Shirostrana' or 'Shirovesh'. Throughout ancient times, people have maintained the tradition of wearing turbans, which are also known by various regional names such as *Pag*, *Pagdi, Potiya*, *Phenta*, and *Safa*. Turbans are not just a piece of cloth wrapped around the head; they

[73] Kirandeep Kaur Peart, 'Izzat and the gaze of culture'.

carry connotations of 'security', social order, 'aesthetic awareness', 'progressiveness', and even caste distinctions. The turban serves as a distinguishing marker for various segments of society and is influenced by factors such as class, geography, weather conditions, and daily life.[74]

In the state of Rajasthan, distinct caste groups are identified by specific chromatic attributes, with each caste being associated with a particular set of colours that serve as distinctive markers of their identity. For instance, individuals belonging to the shepherding community are easily recognizable by their preference for adorning red turbans, while the Bishnoi community, renowned for their dual identity as nomadic shepherds and staunch environmental conservationists, consistently don white turbans as an emblem of their heritage and values. In contrast, other tribal communities within the region can be distinguished by their proclivity for turbans adorned with various layered patterns and prints. 'The size of turban indicates the position of the person in the society they live'.[75] In this particular scenario, Thakur's turban, distinct for its elongated design with a trailing end, differs from the turbans worn by Kishnu and Sohan. The significance lies in the fact that Thakur's 'honour', or *Izzat*, is compromised, not due to a mere accident in which his turban falls to the ground, but rather because it is deliberately done by Kajri, a Dalit woman. This act of intentional disrespect holds a higher level of indignity, amplifying the dual nature of Kajri's resistance: firstly, it involves physically pushing Thakur away from her, and secondly, it involves the act of causing his

[74] Vipin Chandra Solanki, 'The History of Turbans of Every Community in Rajasthan, Showcased in the Udaipur', *ABP News,* 08 February 2023 <https://www.abplive.com/photo-gallery/states/rajasthan-history-of-rajasthani-turban-has-been-preserved-in-this-museum-located-in-udaipur-check-details-ann-2328893> [accessed 09 November 2023].

[75] 'Colorful Turbans of Rajasthan - The Rajput Pride', *Rajasthan Unlimited,* 15 June 2013 <https://web.archive.org/web/20130316052021/http://www.rajasthanunlimited.com/artandcraft/turban.html> [accessed 09 November 2023]. Some specific types of turbans were prevalent in different communities, such as: *Munim* or *Munshi* turban, *Seth* (merchant) turban, *Basanti* turban, *Kesāriyā* turban, *Motha* turban, *Rebari Safa* (turban), Patel (Dangi) turban, and Gayari turban (Translated by me). See Vipin Chandra Solanki, 'The History of Turbans of Every Community'.

turban to fall on the ground. This dual resistance signifies her defiance against the feudalistic and patriarchal dominance inherent in the 'upper caste' male figure, Thakur.

Simultaneously, it serves as a symbolic gesture by placing Thakur's *Izzat,* which is closely associated with his 'upper caste' status, in a compromised position. Notably, the turban, a symbol that reflects Thakur's elevated caste identity and his *Izzat*, is challenged in this context. In a similar vein, in the case of *Bawandar*, the turban worn by Sohan, which also carries connotations of *Izzat*, is employed to cover his wife after the rape. In this way, Sohan, too, challenges the notion of *Izzat* traditionally linked to the turban. For this, Sohan endures the mockery and insults directed at him by the 'upper caste' perpetrators. He sacrifices his own 'honour' to shield and preserve the *Izzat* of his wife.

Kajri's resilience stands firm, just like other women in Indian society who refuse to submit to male dominance. However, they often face unjust labels such as being deemed morally questionable or are silenced and shamed for defying expectations. However, it is crucial to note that her resistance is primarily observed when her husband is absent. Her husband not only aligns himself with Thakur but actively suppresses her autonomy, asserting that Thakur holds a position of authority over his life and possessions. This implies that even if Thakur were to harass or assault Kajri, he would remain silent as he is indebted to Thakur for his survival.

He goes on to say that 'I can bring twenty women like you to do the household chores, but where will I go leaving the shelter of Thakur!'[76] For him, Thakur is more important than his wife in order to survive in the caste society. Gopal Guru argues that external factors like caste and class heavily influence social standing, even within households. [77] This can lead to

[76] The translation is mine.
[77] Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30.41 (1995), 2548-2550 <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4403327> [accessed 15 July 2023].

unconscious biases, as seen in Kishnu's behaviour towards Kajri. Rooted in 'upper caste' patriarchal norms associated with his caste and class, Kishnu fails to recognize Kajri's agency, perpetuating this very dynamic even within a Dalit household, unlike Sanwari's husband. The complexities inherent in Dalit social and cultural contexts render a precise definition of patriarchy within these spheres a challenging endeavour.[78]

The presence of Dalit patriarchy can be seen as an internal factor that is influenced by external factors such as caste and class. When examined in the context of all three texts, a distinct contrast becomes evident. In *Bawandar*, Sohan deviates from the prevailing patriarchal ideology by refusing to adhere to the conventional societal stance of rejecting a woman who has experienced rape. Instead, he steadfastly stands by her side throughout her arduous legal, social, and economic struggle. Conversely, in the case of *Kaanchli,* Kishnu assigns blame to his wife, Kajri, rather than offering support as she resists the oppressive actions of Thakur.

Similarly, the husband of Lajwanti subtly reinforces patriarchal values by passively remaining at home and indulging in listening to the radio, while Lajwanti dutifully attends to all her household responsibilities, including serving him, all without uttering a single word. As characters, all of these women challenge prevailing patriarchal norms within their respective spheres and beyond, employing their own distinct methods. Notably, only Sanwari in *Bawandar* receives support from her husband, while the others do not. The caste system has traditionally assigned Dalits to a low social status, and this has led to a culture of oppression and disempowerment. As a result, Dalit men may feel the need to assert their dominance over Dalit women to compensate for their own sense of inferiority.

[78] Sunaina Arya, 'Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism', *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion,*1.1 (2020),217-228 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48644572> [accessed 08 November 2023].

In conclusion, Kishnu's actions and attitudes reflect the internalization of the dominant norms and values of the broader society, which are heavily influenced by external elements like caste and class. This internalization, in turn, affects his relationship with Kajri and undermines her agency and resistance. Therefore, the presence of Dalit patriarchy, in this case, can be understood as an internal factor within the Dalit community, but it is profoundly influenced by the overarching external factors of caste and class that continue to shape social hierarchies and power dynamics in Indian society today.[79]

The character dynamics in the film *Kaanchli* may be seen as creating a rift between Dalit men and women. It highlights a divide by illustrating how the husband actively upholds patriarchal and feudal values within a Dalit household. This portrayal seems to obscure the emerging Dalit assertion and consciousness that has been gaining momentum in Indian society through the Phule-Ambedkarite movement. The emergence of the movement has facilitated the empowerment of Dalit women, enabling them to assert themselves and unite amidst adverse circumstances.[80] While Kajri remains devoted to her husband, who disregards her concerns when she expresses her worries about Bhoja and Thakur, she begins to question her existence in the institution of marriage, where she tests her husband's love for her and is repeatedly disappointed. In another scene, Kishnu blames Kajri for everything instead of supporting her emotionally and says to Kajri that it would not be a problem if she weren't so beautiful.

In this context, Kishnu is in a weaker position than Kajri before Thakur and Bhoja: rather than appreciating Kajri's retaliation, he asks her to bow before Thakur. As Ritu Jangid argues, Kishnu's 'low caste' status makes him so weak that he has no voice to oppose Thakur,

[79] Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently'; Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 33.44 (1998), 39-46 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4407323> [accessed 08 November 2023].
[80] Shailaja Paik, 'The rise of new Dalit women in Indian historiography', *History Compass*, 16.10 (2018), 1-14 <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12491> [accessed 08 November 2023].

it also makes him a 'lesser husband' who has no agency over his 'wife's sexuality'.[81] Bhoja being Thakur's right-hand man becomes more powerful than Kishnu, even though he belongs to the same caste group as Kishnu. He helps Thakur in all his illicit activities and follows whatever instructions he receives from Thakur. This recurring phenomenon further reinforces the concept of emasculation experienced by Dalit men within the hierarchical structure of the caste-based society, not only within the confines of their own marital relationships but also in the presence of caste Hindus.

The patriarchal notion of the societal norms can be observed in the film when women who themselves are part of this exploitative caste structure help Bhoja get Kajri for Thakur. This lack of solidarity among Dalit women can be seen in the case of *Lajwanti* as well. Bhoja who himself is positioned in the bottom rung of the caste hierarchy, takes part in Thakur's illicit, and oppressive activities against his own community. In Kajri's dreams, her husband is a strong and capable man who is willing to do anything for her, even defy the powerful Thakur. However, in reality, her husband is weak and subservient to Thakur. This discrepancy between Kajri's dreams and reality causes her great emotional distress. She feels trapped and powerless, and she is unable to sleep due to the constant pressure.

The contrast between Kajri's dreams and reality highlights her powerlessness and oppression in a patriarchal and casteist society. As a woman, she is subject to the whims of 'upper caste' men like Thakur, leaving her constrained and voiceless. In her dreams, however, she envisions a world where she is free and confident enough to challenge the powerful. This contrast serves as an analogy for the universal struggle of striving for dreams while confronting the challenges of reality. Kajri's difficulties stem from social constraints and personal

[81] Ritu Jangid, 'Village, Caste and Gender in Vijaydan Detha's Duvidha and Kenchuli', *Nidan: International Journal for Indian Studies*, 6.1 (2021), 33-47 <https://doi.org/10.36886/nidan.2021.6.1.3> [accessed 16 July 2023].

limitations, such as a lack of support from loved ones. The resulting frustration and disappointment manifest in feelings of despair, anxiety, and insomnia, reflecting the emotional toll of unfulfilled aspirations. She also feels coerced to have intimate relations with her husband, which makes her emotionally estranged from him. She begins to see her spouse as a shallow individual, lacking intellectual and emotional depth, driven primarily by carnal desires like other men, regardless of their social status, such as Thakur or Bhoja. In fact, in the film, her husband is depicted as a mute, non-living object, like a scarecrow. This is a figurative portrayal of how he appears to her. Lajwanti decides to leave her husband in favour of her lover, whom she sees as a substitute for her spouse. However, for the protagonist Kajri, the decision to remain in her marriage or leave is complicated. She considers various aspects of her married life, including her relationship with her husband, her familial ties, and societal expectations. Ultimately, her decision to leave her husband does not involve the availability of an alternative (such as romantic love) that provides the same level of physical and emotional security that Lajwanti appears to have found.

In the end, everyone is in a state of despair: Bhoja is used by Kajri to test her husband, Thakur cannot fulfil his desire to make Kajri his mistress, and Kajri is disappointed with her husband Kishnu. Kajri is tied with a rope at the centre of the picture (see Figure 08). On her left, Thakur is pulling her toward his side, while Bhoja stands passively beside him. Kajri herself is positioned on the right, attempting to pull herself away from Thakur. Her husband stands with her on the right side but does nothing to assist her (see Figure 08). The image serves as a metaphor for Kajri's struggle. She is being pulled in the opposite direction by Thakur, who represents the forces of tradition, oppression, temptation, and greed. Although Kajri tries to resist these forces, she is visibly struggling. Her husband, while physically on her side, is merely a bystander, similar to Bhoja, who stands with Thakur but also does nothing to help her. Despite being on opposite sides, both Bhoja and Kishnu remain passive and appear helpless,

symbolizing their submissive roles due to their lower caste identity. This picture powerfully depicts the challenges women face in a patriarchal society. Kajri serves as a symbol of women who struggle to resist the forces of oppression and temptation. She reminds us that women must be strong and independent, as they cannot rely on men to support them.

Figure 08, Kajri tied with a rope in the middle is struggling to free herself from all the shackles.

A voice-over narration of her voice echoes in the background, 'I came out to find the essence of life, and even after being bound in thousands of shackles of home, fraternity, caste, religion, rites, and customs, I couldn't find a strong bond of husband's courage. So, what exactly is the essence of these thousand shackles?'[82] The bond that Kajri is chasing is her husband's true and unconditional love, in which he has the courage to face any major difficulties to protect her. The film highlights the positionality of women in rural settings, illustrating their pursuit of emotional and financial security within marriage. When this pursuit fails, they often experience a sense of alienation and distrust, feeling disconnected from the very relationships and

[82] The translation is mine.

communities they once considered their own. In response, they seek alternative means to find fulfilment and reestablish a sense of belonging.

The juxtaposition of the characters Sohan from *Bawandar* and Kishnu from *Kaanchli* highlights the importance of Dalit male alliance in challenging caste-based oppression. Despite encountering numerous obstacles and societal pressures, Sohan unwaveringly supports his spouse Sanwari, thereby fortifying her resolve to confront and combat her adversaries within the confines of the caste-based feudal structure. Conversely, Kishnu fails to align himself with Kajri, compelling her departure from both him and the conventional constructs of society and family.

In the film, darkness is used as a metaphor for Kajri's anxieties, helplessness, and her hapless world. Kajri's jewellery represents the suffocating contract of marriage. After making several attempts to get a response from her husband about her extramarital affair, she identifies herself with a crawling snake, vulnerable until it breaks free from its own skin or slough, the meaning of *Kaanchli*. In the end, she wakes up worried while her unconcerned husband sleeps soundly. Here, the husband is a symbol of a patriarchal society that does not care about women's concerns or feelings. In the darkness of that night, like a snake, she slowly begins to shed all the shackles from her body, throwing away her jewellery and clothes. Kajri emerges from the institution of marriage, where her role was reduced to that of a woman whose duty is to perform well in the domestic sphere without any expectations.

She walks naked in the rain, echoing the state of having no physical or emotional burden and rejecting the notion of marriage as the only source of financial and emotional support (see Figure 09). Nudity may refer to the assertion against patriarchal society as Ved Prakash postulates, the 'act of undressing could be a way to revolt against the obsession which society

shares with body, morality, and codes of conduct'.[83] The depiction of nudity in the film raises several questions. The way Kajri's body is portrayed on screen, as an example of a Dalit woman, seems to cater to the visual pleasure and desires of the male audience. This positioning of Kajri as a commodity to be consumed by the 'upper caste' in various ways is problematic. However, her courage of being naked and shedding all possessions can be interpreted in a different way where nakedness bears more complex meanings.

According to Kenneth Clark, being naked simply refers to the state of not wearing clothes, devoid of any artistic or symbolic context. However, the nude is a representation of the human body that goes beyond mere nakedness. It is a deliberate choice of artistic creation, often with idealized forms and poses, intended to convey deeper meanings, emotions, and aesthetic qualities. The nude, in this sense, is a form of art that explores beauty, sensuality, and the human condition. Clark's distinction between the naked and the nude reflects his belief that art elevates the human form beyond its utilitarian and basic state. By exploring the nude, artists engage with concepts such as beauty, symbolism, and cultural ideals. This perspective suggests that the nude form in art serves as a canvas for exploring philosophical, psychological, and societal themes, transcending the literal representation of the naked body.[84]

In the Bollywood film industry, the portrayal of nudity, particularly depicting a naked woman, is uncommon, which is why *Kaanchli* becomes a significant film to examine the purpose and impact of including such a subject. In this context, Rachel Dwyer contends that 'nakedness' is a seldom depicted element in Hindi cinema, and this scarcity is likely due to self-censorship. This is evident, for instance, in the portrayal of Phoolan Devi in *Bandit Queen*, where she is shown 'naked' following a sexual assault. Notable exceptions include instances

[83] Ved Prakash, 'Examining the Domain of Caste, Gender, and Sexuality Through Select Films of Jayan K. Cherian', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), p.196.
[84] Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p.40.

of violence where a woman's clothes are forcibly removed, which is often portrayed in a voyeuristic and exploitative manner. Hindi filmmakers have established their own codes for revealing a significant amount of female skin while 'concealing breasts and genitalia'.[85] The most minimal clothing typically seen in the films is the swimsuit and, interestingly, the bikini, a trend dating back to at least 1951 in Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* where Nargis, a leading star of the era, notably appears in a swimsuit. However, it is essential to note that most scenes featuring partial nudity involve the actress being partially clothed. This is because Indian cinema places a unique emphasis on the eroticism of clothing, while nakedness is generally associated with 'shame and fear'.[86]

Figure 09, Naked Kajri is knocking on Bhoja's door.

Throughout the film, Kajri's attire, such as a deep-neck blouse, and ultimately her naked body, with a particular emphasis on her breasts, reflect the choices made by the 'upper caste'

[85] Rachel Dwyer, 'The erotics of the wet sari in Hindi films'.
[86] Rachel Dwyer, 'The erotics of the wet sari in Hindi films'.

filmmaker to present her body for a scopophilic and voyeuristic experience for the spectators.[87] This selective exposure of her body's sensuous elements becomes the focal point of eroticism in the film, ultimately resulting in the 'fetishization' of these specific, revealed areas.[88] Waseem Ahad and Selma Koc suggest that the role of breasts as an 'erotic field' can be seen as an illustration of the complex and diverse subjectivity that women navigate. Conversely, women who challenge conventional dress norms and express their sexuality through their attire may perceive it as a form of empowerment and personal exploration. This tension is deeply tied to the societal foundations that shape the expression of female sexuality.[89]

In many cultures, breasts are seen as a symbol of fertility and motherhood, and they are often associated with modesty and purity.[90] As a result, women who expose their breasts may be seen as violating social norms and challenging traditional gender roles. This can lead to them being judged and stigmatized, as well as being subjected to harassment and violence. However, for some women, exposing their breasts can be a way of asserting their sexuality and taking control of their own bodies. For these women, revealing clothing can be a form of empowerment and self-expression. The conflicting views of breasts as both erotic and taboo reflect the complex and often contradictory ways in which female sexuality is viewed in society.

Waseem Ahad and Selma Koc further contend that the 'eroticization of breasts is not only the objectification of female body parts'[91], but also highlights how, as part of societal norms and culture, breasts are expected to serve 'exclusively "for" the other — whether as

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[87] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan,1989), p.16.
[88] Rachel Dwyer, 'The erotics of the wet sari in Hindi films'.
[89] Waseem Ahad & Selma Koç Akgül, 'Female body, femininity, and authority in Bollywood: The "new" woman in Dangal and Queen', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies,* 26.1 (2020), 3-21 <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2019.1690777> [accessed 17 July 2023].
[90] Carmen Webb, Natalie Jacox, & Claire Temple-Oberle, 'The Making of Breasts: Navigating the Symbolism of Breasts in Women Facing Cancer', *Plastic surgery*, 27.1 (2019), 49–53 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2292550318800500> [accessed 08 November 2023].
[91] Waseem Ahad & Selma Koç Akgül, 'Female body'.

instrument and symbol of nurturing love, or as erotic fetish', as aptly pointed out by Bordo (see Figure 09 &10).[92] In the context of *Kaanchli,* the director's decision to focus on Kajri's breasts and cleavage has a significant connotation. Kajri's body is presented as a site of beauty that is intended to attract men in society, who gaze at her and attempt to consume her in every way. She is not only an object of pleasure for the characters within the film, but also for the spectators outside the film.

Figure 10, Bhoja, Thakur's henchman, gazing at Kajri.

Kajri's freedom, desires, and social security are all dependent on her husband and male-dominated society. She does not have an independent existence, and her life is completely controlled by him. For instance, she first attempts to elicit a response from her husband regarding his love for her. Disillusioned by her husband's emotional neglect, Kajri turns to Bhoja—not out of desire, but as a desperate attempt to reclaim agency within the limited choices available to her. Initially, her body is positioned within the narrative as an object of gratification for the 'upper caste' male gaze, reflecting dominant cinematic tropes. However,

[92] Susan *Bordo, Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 20.

the filmmaker complicates this representation by reorienting Kajri's body from a passive object to an active instrument of defiance. By using her body to confront the very systems that seek to control it, Kajri disrupts patriarchal codes of *izzat* and submission.[93] Her embodied resistance unsettles both the authority of powerful men like the Thakur and Bhoja, and the internalized patriarchy of the women around her. Kajri, through this act, uses her body as a site of resistance—subverting the male gaze by forcing it to confront itself. The close-up shots here do not eroticize; they accuse. Camerawork becomes a political tool: instead of fragmenting her, it centers her defiance. This is the Ambedkarite gaze at work—disrupting a cinematic grammar that typically renders Dalit women as passive victims. From one perspective, the female protagonist Kajri assumes the role of the sacrificing labouring body, ultimately sacrificing numerous aspects of her life, including her personal future, the well-being of her unborn child, and the stability of her family.[94]

However, in contrast, all other members of society, despite not attaining their desired aspirations, do not experience any tangible losses. She tirelessly engaged in unpaid labour throughout the day and night, displaying remarkable dedication without seeking respite. Unfortunately, her contributions were not duly acknowledged or valued, and her physical existence was reduced to mere objects for comparison by others, including Bhoja, Thakur, and her husband, Kishnu, who attempted to exploit and consume her for their own purposes. However, the emphasis on Kajri's body can also be seen as a critique of the patriarchal gaze.[95]

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[93] Kirandeep Kaur Peart, 'Izzat and the gaze of culture'.

[94] Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, 'The Labouring Woman in Hindi Films', *Manushi,* 42 (1987), 62-75 <https://www.manushi.in/issues/issue-42-43/> [accessed 28 September 2023]; Charu Gupta, 'Dalit women as victims: iconographies of suffering, sympathy and subservience', *South Asian History and Culture,* 7.1 (2016), 55-72 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2015.1109306> [accessed 28 September 2023].

[95] Rachel Alicia Griffin, 'Pushing into Precious: Black Women, Media Representation, and the Glare of the White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchal Gaze', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 31.3 (2014), 182-197 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2013.849354> [accessed 18 September 2023].

At the end, the film suggests that Kajri is aware of the way that men look at her, and she uses her body to challenge their gaze. She refuses to be objectified, and she asserts her own agency.

Deconstructing the caste-informed gaze: a conclusion

A central theme across all these texts is the objectification and commodification of Dalit women, yet, notably, in *Kaanchli* and *Lajwanti*, the female protagonists ultimately tread a path towards greater personal freedom, finding a sense of liberation and while Sanwari, the female protagonist of *Bawandar*, is denied justice from the legal and social framework, she resists throughout with full of force and voice against the system. Furthermore, a pivotal thematic element explored in all three texts is the notion of 'honour', commonly referred to as *Izzat* in the Indian context. The concept of 'honour' in relation to caste identity manifests in a distinctive manner, serving as a mechanism for asserting one's social identity while concurrently perpetuating domination and oppression upon those who deviate from established caste norms rooted in graded inequality and hierarchical structures.

This assertion often extends to extreme measures, including instances commonly recognized as 'honour killings', as discussed in the preceding chapter of this thesis. This phenomenon holds a central position within the narratives. For instance, the film *Lajwanti,* aptly sub-titled 'The Honor Keeper', underscores the significance of 'honour', elucidating how Lajwanti, the protagonist, defies societal expectations of maintaining 'honour' by adhering to the conventional role of a trustworthy and faithful wife within the confines of marriage. Lajwanti's journey towards liberation involves a deliberate relinquishment of this prescribed 'honour'.

Similarly, in *Bawandar*, the narrative revolves around a rape survivor who becomes stigmatized as a woman bereft of 'honour' and 'chastity'. Within the context of Indian society,

instances of rape are frequently perceived as grave violations against a woman's *Izzat.* Consequently, survivors often endure a pervasive social ostracization, a phenomenon that far surpasses the societal condemnation directed towards the actual perpetrators of the heinous act.[96] For example, in the film, the rape survivor Sanwari Devi confronts social isolation and is unjustly held responsible for the rape, resulting in a life marred by stigmatization and exclusion. These texts illuminate complex and multidimensional themes of objectification, gender dynamics, and *Izzat* within the backdrop of Dalit women's experiences. The narratives reflect the interlocking interplay between societal expectations, gender roles, and the harsh consequences faced by those who defy conventional norms, providing valuable insights into the broader sociocultural landscape in India**.**

In this chapter, I have examined the formal and stylistic elements in *Lajwanti, Kaanchli,* and *Bawandar*, highlighting how they contribute to a 'male gaze' informed by caste dynamics in India. This gaze, influenced by the hierarchical power relations inherent in the caste system, portrays Dalit women as objects subjected to desire and control, thereby exacerbating their marginalization. Through the analysis of camera angles, framing, character relations, and narrative arc/progression, this chapter elucidates how these films both perpetuate and confront this problematic gaze. This analysis forms the foundation for the following chapter, which investigates the notion of 'anti-caste cinema' by shifting the focus towards films that actively resist and dismantle the oppressive structures upheld by the 'upper caste' male gaze. The chapter will critically examine how alternative cinematic representations can challenge and deconstruct caste-based hierarchies. It will focus on the role of these representations in

[96] Geetanjali Gangoli, 'Controlling women's sexuality: Rape law in India' in *International Approaches to Rape,* ed. by Nicole Westmarland & Geetanjali Gangoli (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011), pp. 101–120; Kalyani Menon-Sen, 'Better to have died than to live like this: Women and evictions in Delhi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41: 20 (2006), 1969– 1974 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418236>[accessed 14 September 2023].

elevating Dalit voices, fostering an anti-caste spectatorship that actively engages with the socio-political implications of caste in cinema.

Chapter Four: Resistance from Real to Reel: Towards Re-conceptualising Anti-Caste Cinema

Dr B. R. Ambedkar encapsulates the foundational principles of the Dalit identity and self-respect movement, his work serving as a guiding framework for the anti-caste struggle. He posits that the primary objective for a historically marginalized community should transcend mere acquisition of material comforts and political influence, emphasizing the imperative of (re)claiming their suppressed existence, identity, and freedom. Dr Ambedkar underscores the significance of advocating for a dignified share and active participation of Dalits in the broader national movement for political and social empowerment. He clearly states that '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 human personality'.[1] This call arises from a recognition that the anticipated triumph of political power, historically perceived as favouring the caste Hindus, could potentially perpetuate socio-economic disparities and deny Dalits the realization of social equality— an issue deeply rooted in the historical power dynamics of Indian society. For Dr Ambedkar, social and economic democracy were the foundation of a meaningful political democracy. He argues that without these, political democracy is hollow.[2]

Guided by Baba Saheb Ambedkar's progressive and inspiring ideas, the Dalit community pioneered a new literary movement known as Dalit literature, which served as a resistant force against the caste system and Brahmanical hegemony.[3] Its aim was to reclaim their identity and produce artistic expressions from a Dalit worldview, thus establishing a space

[1] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 17.3, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), p. 276.
[2] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Labour and Parliamentary Democracy' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 10, ed. by Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 108.
[3] Arjun Dangle, *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, ed. by Arjun Dangle (Mumbai: Orient BlackSwan, 1992).

that had been long denied in the literary realm.[4] Inspired by Jyotirao Phule, Dr. Ambedkar, and Periyar—protagonists of anti-caste movements who challenged conventional narratives—a collective of Dalit experimental filmmakers emerged. They pushed the boundaries of cinema by infusing their personal experiences into their films, effectively portraying the struggles of anti-caste movements. This kind of filmmaking, termed 'Dalit cinema' by Suraj Yengde and occasionally referred to as 'anti-caste cinema,' produced films that championed self-respect, dignity, and assertion.[5] While acknowledging the commendable contributions of Dalit filmmakers, the term 'Dalit cinema' may inadvertently obfuscate the broader social impact of Dalit themed films. I believe in the transformative power of anti-caste cinema. Its potential expands far beyond dismantling oppressive caste systems, holding the ability to ignite global social change. Collaborating with filmmakers of diverse backgrounds, irrespective of caste, race, religion, geography, or gender, it fosters a powerful platform for marginalized voices to rise and be heard. This widespread adoption would not only challenge discriminatory structures and spark essential dialogue but also amplify perspectives often silenced, fostering empathy, and understanding across castes, communities, and cultures. Anti-caste cinema, in its essence, advocates for a world free from all forms of injustice, ultimately realizing its full potential as a vehicle for a more equitable future. This fight to build a casteless society does not rest solely on the shoulders of Dalit or 'lower caste' communities who are the most oppressed and disadvantaged by the system. It is a shared responsibility, including those who have benefited from the privileges it affords.

Recognizing the scarcity of films by non-Dalit directors that authentically depict the Dalit socio-cultural milieu, the concept of 'anti-caste cinema' serves as a catalyst for fostering

[4] Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, (Trans.) A. Mukherjee (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2004).
[5] Suraj Yengde, 'Dalit Cinema', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies,* 41.3 (2018), 503-518 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848> [accessed 11 December 2023].

future collaborations and opportunities. This shift towards a more inclusive cinematic discourse is pivotal for fostering a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted aspects of identity, caste dynamics, and societal narratives. These filmmakers, particularly exemplified by the works of directors like Nagraj Manjule and Pa. Ranjith, challenge and break away from the traditional stereotypes perpetuated by the Indian film industry, thereby highlighting the Dalit identity and personality in various layered ways. Through the skilful application of innovative technical approaches in the realms of visuals, sound, colour-coding, lighting, music, and cinematography, these Dalit filmmakers effectively challenge the stereotypical portrayal of Dalits and conventional historical narratives, cultivating a more empowering understanding of history from the anti-caste perspective, ultimately constituting a form of 'resistant historiography'.[6]

In the interwoven tapestry of social discourse, the Ambedkarite perspective emerges as a powerful stimulant for the genesis and sustenance of anti-caste ideology, fostering a profound resistance against the deeply entrenched stratifications in modern society. Rooted in a legacy of transformative thought, this perspective, anchored in the teachings of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, serves as the bedrock for contemporary anti-caste ideology and resistance, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of the marginalized. As Chinnaiah Jangam notes,

> From ancient times to the postcolonial present, Dalits have been articulating anti-caste ideologies, and aspiring to an egalitarian, ethical society based on principles of social equality and human dignity.[7]

[6] Manju Edachira, 'Anti-Caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 55.38 (2020), 47-53 <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/38/special-articles/anti-caste-aesthetics-and-dalit-interventions.html> [accessed 11 December 2023].
[7] Chinnaiah Jangam, *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.05.

This highlights the enduring spirit of this resistance, portraying a narrative that surpasses temporal boundaries and underscores the unwavering commitment of Dalits to forge a society founded on principles of justice and equality. The idea of dismantling caste, a system that has plagued Indian society for centuries, has been championed by many thinkers across time. While some have sought to eradicate caste through spiritual means, others have advocated for a more radical approach. Jyotirao Phule, a pioneer in the anti-caste movement, believed in the power of collective action. He envisioned a united front of oppressed castes, reclaiming their history, embracing education, and challenging the dominance of 'upper castes'. Periyar, the founder of the Self-Respect movement, adopted a distinct methodology. He advocated for a rationalistic approach, urging people to detach themselves from all affiliations – nation, state, divinity, religion, or language — to achieve true liberation from caste-based constraints. Dr Ambedkar took the most radical stance. He called for the complete annihilation of caste by uprooting Hindu religious scriptures. His personal commitment to righteous living, symbolised by his 22 vows of Navayana Buddhism, embodied this vision.[8] These anti-caste thinkers, though differing in their approaches, shared a common goal: to free Indian society from the shackles of caste-based discrimination. Their ideas continue to inspire and guide the fight for a casteless society, a world where every individual is treated with dignity and respect.

This chapter examines the anti-caste films in relation to spectatorship and resistance, exploring the realms where the 'real' converges with the 'reel', unravelling the tangled threads of resistance woven into the fabric of societal transformation. To explore the concept of anti-caste ideology and gaze, I analyse the film *Kaala* (2019, Pa. Ranjith), drawing on insights from other anti-caste films such as *Karnan* (2021, Mari Selvaraj), *Asuran* (2019, Vetrimaaran), and

[8] Meena Dhanda and Karthick Ram Manoharan, 'Freedom from Caste: New Beginnings in Transdisciplinary Scholarship', *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 3:1 (2022), 1-10 <https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v3i1.398> [accessed 28 November 2023].

Kabali (2016, Pa. Ranjith). I explore how these films engage spectators emotionally, intellectually, politically, and ideologically from an anti-caste Ambedkarite gaze. *Kaala* encapsulates a myriad of elements that resonate deeply with the ethos of anti-caste struggle. It integrates the iconography of Bahujan ideals, symbolism, politics, community spirit, and religion, all of which converge to create a powerful narrative of resistance against caste-based oppression. In this chapter, I analyse the anti-caste elements in the films and explore the complex dynamics of construction and disturbance of spectatorship within the realm of Dalit filmmakers.

The concept of spectatorship transcends mere observation. It encompasses the emotional engagement with on-screen imagery, shaped by pre-existing perceptions, and its subsequent influence on daily life, encompassing societal conduct, politics, and beyond. As Judith Mayne argues, spectatorship is not just the act of viewing a film. It involves the variable degrees of 'pleasure derived from the experience', the potential for film consumption to become a passionate pursuit, or simply a casual pastime. More importantly, spectatorship highlights how film-going and engaging with cinematic narratives and their underlying 'myths constitute symbolic activities – culturally significant events'.[9]

Judith Mayne delineates various forms of spectatorship, such as the 'informed' and 'critical' spectatorships that prompt individuals to think and reflect, challenging cinematic conventions in pursuit of forging a new language of the cinema. Conversely, 'uninformed' and 'uncritical' spectatorships perpetuate prevailing cinematic and cultural norms. This divide extends into binaries like 'consumption' versus 'contemplation', and 'rejecting' versus 'resonating' with the screen image.[10] Building upon Judith Mayne's framework, this chapter

[9] Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.1.
[10] Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship.*

introduces the concept of Ambedkarite Spectatorship. This approach emphasizes the power of viewing and interpreting cinematic subjects through the lens of anti-caste consciousness.

This analysis explores how filmmakers employ imagery to challenge dominant power structures, depict underrepresented communities, and present alternative storylines. Born and raised in historically oppressed groups, Dalit filmmakers navigate the cinematic landscape with a distinct purpose — to address the pervasive social injustices, deep-seated discrimination, and the enduring historical marginalization endured by the Dalit community. This exploration discusses how Dalit filmmakers use an anti-caste gaze to re-define the narrative contours of their experiences through cinema.

It is crucial to acknowledge the complexities and subtleties within any discussion, especially when discussing religious representation and its socio-political implications. While Buddhism's core tenets indeed emphasize equality, compassion, and social justice, it is essential to recognize that interpretations and practices can vary widely across different regions and communities. Dr B.R. Ambedkar's advocacy for the adoption of Buddhism as a vehicle for social emancipation, concerning the plight of the Dalit community in India, underscores his distinct engagement with Buddhist principles. Central to his approach is a deliberate departure from traditional interpretations of Buddhism, marked by their adherence to superstitions and rigidity. Instead, Dr Ambedkar articulates a distinct vision of Buddhism, which he terms 'Navayana' or 'Neo-Buddhism', ('New vehicle') emphasizing its alignment with scientific, humanistic, logical, and rational tenets. Dr Ambedkar's conceptualization of 'Navayana Buddhism' is informed by a critical examination of historical Buddhist traditions juxtaposed with contemporary manifestations prevalent at the time of his conversion.

A key point to emphasize is his differentiation between these existing forms and the aspirational ideals of Buddhism to which he sought adherence and propagation. In his

formulation, 'Navayana' represents a deliberate departure from sectarian categorizations such as Theravada or Mahayana, aligning instead with what he perceives as the essence of early Buddhism—characterized by its purity and timeless relevance.[11] Despite its grounding in historical antecedents, Dr Ambedkar's 'Navayana Buddhism' incorporates modern elements, reflecting his pragmatic approach to social reform.[12] Notably, he advocates for the integration of Christian-inspired social action among contemporary Buddhist monks, underscoring his willingness to adapt traditional religious frameworks to address contemporary social challenges. Additionally, Dr Ambedkar emphasizes the need for a codified scripture akin to a 'Buddhist Bible' to facilitate the widespread dissemination of Buddhist teachings, further exemplifying his forward-looking approach to revitalizing Buddhism within a modern context.[13] However, there are instances where Buddhism has been associated with nationalist movements or used to justify discriminatory actions, such as the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.[14]

The concept of *Dhamma*, central to Buddhist philosophy, manifests as a symbol of assertion and empowerment in anti-caste films, providing a source of resonance and celebration for Ambedkarite spectators. In the context of *Kaala*, this chapter examines the various instances where Dhamma is juxtaposed with Hindu religion to amplify the anti-caste message effectively. By examining *Kaala* from an anti-caste spectatorial standpoint, this analysis aims to illuminate

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[11] D. L. Ramteke*, Revival of Buddhism in Modern India* (Deep & Deep Publications: New Delhi, 1983), p. 169; Bhikkhu Sangarakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1986), p.131.

[12] Richard Gombrich and Obeyesekere Gananath, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Pres,1988); Christopher S. Queen, 'Blurred Genres of Protestant Buddhism: Olcott's Catechism and Ambedkar's Bible'. Paper delivered to the American Academy of Religion in Kansas City, 1991.

[13] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution: Socio-Political, Religious Activities' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 17.2, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 105; Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962), p. 503; D. L. Ramteke*, Revival of Buddhism in Modern India* (Deep & Deep Publications: New Delhi, 1983), p. 108.

[14] Brenna Artinger and Michael Rowand, 'When Buddhists Back the Army', *Foreign Policy,* 16 February 2021 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/myanmar-rohingya-coup-buddhists-protest/> [accessed 30 April 2024].

the diverse ways in which cinema can serve as a platform for challenging caste-based hierarchies. The film's blend of narrative, symbolism, and religious imagery provides a compelling framework for understanding the composite relationship between anti-caste ideology and popular culture.

Kaala:* A *perspective from below

Kaala, set in the backdrop of Mumbai's Dharavi slum, one of Asia's largest slums, revolves around the life of Buddhist protagonist Karikaalan, commonly known as Kaala, a powerful community leader. Kaala is revered as a Robin Hood-like figure, fighting for the rights of the residents of Dharavi. The story narrates the conflicts between Kaala and the corrupt politicians, mainly Haridev Abhyankar also known as Hari Dada and land developers who seek to exploit the slum-dwellers for personal and political gain. The film explores themes of social inequality, land rights, and the struggles faced by the urban poor. Pa. Ranjith carefully uses the physical environment to reflect the socio-economic disparities perpetuated by caste. Dharavi becomes a character in itself, representing the struggles of the marginalized.

While earlier cinematic works such as *Salaam Bombay* (1988, Mira Nair), *Dharavi: City of Dreams* (1992, Sudhir Mishra), and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008, Danny Boyle), explore stories set in slums, these depictions often 'spectacularized Dharavi as a unitary and fixed space-jungle like, barbarous, remote and dark'.[15] In contrast, *Kaala* distinguishes itself by adopting an anti-caste gaze. In India, slums are home to millions of people who provide essential unskilled and skilled labour to the rest of the country. However, slums are also seen as a symbol of shame and a blot on India's image and are often hidden from view when India

[15] Shailaja Menon, 'Contesting Culture: The Grammar of 'Kaala'', *ANTYAJAA: Indian journal of Women and Social Change,* 5:2 (2021), 147-155 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/24556327211012845> [accessed 05 January 2022].

is showcasing its pride and development. This was seen during the 2020 presidential visit of then US President Donald Trump to India, and the recent G20 Summit held in Delhi.[16] Pa. Ranjith 'visualised the aesthetic of Dalit life in order to break the stereotype that Dalits are fragile, weak, and filthy'.[17]

Pa. Ranjith's distinctive cinematic portrayal of slums echoes Robert Neuwirth's examination of informal settlements, focusing on Istanbul, Mumbai, Nairobi, and Rio, across four continents. Both Ranjith and Neuwirth challenge dominant narratives of slums as sites of deprivation and despair. Instead, they reveal unique survival strategies adopted by slum dwellers, showcasing the astonishing thriving, ingenuity, and resilience of the community. This highlights the enduring 'human spirit' in the face of adversity.[18] Ranjith's celluloid slums resonate with Neuwirth's anthropological research, offering a powerful counter-narrative to dominant discourses on slum-life. Both works humanize the slum experience, revealing the dignity, resilience, and even joy that persist amidst challenging circumstances. This perspective paves the way for a more empathetic and informed understanding of these often (mis)understood and (mis)represented spaces. The film *Kaala* tackles the complex intersections of caste, class, and spatial politics in urban India, challenging dominant aesthetic norms and questioning the very notion of what constitutes 'beauty' in the cityscape. Pa. Ranjith critiques the 'upper caste' gaze that reduces slum dwellers to mere criminals, marring the city's perceived 'beauty'. This gaze conveniently disregards the vital role these communities play in

[16] Adolfo Arranz, Adnan Abidi, Anand Katakam, Sudev Kiyada and Sakshi Dayal, 'How slums in Delhi were flattened before the G20 summit', *Reuters,* 05 September 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/G20-SUMMIT/SLUM/zdpxrxoaypx/> [Accessed 05 January 2022]; Muneeza Naqvi, 'New 1,640 Foot Wall Built in Indian City to Hide Slums from View During 'Namaste Trump' Presidential Visit', *Time Magazine,* 19 February 2020 <https://time.com/5786417/india-slum-wall-trump-visit/> [accessed 05 January 2022].

[17] Raja M, 'The Visual Representation of Caste: Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala*', *All About Ambedkar: A Journal on Theory and Praxis*, 3:1 (2022), 124-145 <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/_files/ugd/1f8eaa_ab7cc6ab37934b35b82221e51dc25ba5.pdf> [accessed 01 January 2022].

[18] Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

maintaining urban sanitation and infrastructure, while simultaneously stigmatizing them as 'dirty' and 'unclean'.

Manju Edachira's concept of 'anti-caste aesthetics as affect' aptly captures Ranjith's approach.[19] Instead of solely focusing on narratives of 'pain and humiliation', he celebrates the life, struggles, and joys of Dalit communities within the often-neglected space of the slum.[20] This celebration extends to the act of naming itself, subverting the mainstream Indian cinematic gaze that relegates Dalit experiences to the margins. He re-imagines them not as eyesores or breeding grounds for criminality, but as vibrant spaces pulsating with life, resilience, and a distinct aesthetic sensibility. Ranjith recognizes and celebrates the unique beauty and cultural identity in terms of food habits, dance forms, traditions that are inherent in these neighbourhoods. By reframing these spaces, Pa. Ranjith gives them dignity and challenges spectators to see them in a new light. This re-framing disrupts the 'upper caste' perception of beauty, exposing its classist-casteist and exclusionary underpinnings. Pa. Ranjith foregrounds the contrasting aesthetics of Dalit and 'upper caste' experiences, prompting critical inquiries into the power dynamics of urban space representation. Here, aesthetics refers to the sensory qualities and values associated with an experience, encompassing aspects like beauty, art, cultural practices, and the built environment. In this context, Ranjith through *Kaala* underscores that Dalit experiences within the city are shaped by a distinct set of aesthetic values. These values differ from those presented in 'upper caste' narratives, often portrayed by filmmakers from privileged backgrounds. 'Upper caste' aesthetics frequently emphasizes elements like religious authority, adherence to tradition (which often implicitly reinforces caste hierarchy), and the perceived grandeur of Hinduism. Ranjith critiques this selective portrayal, arguing that it overshadows the realities of caste and the contributions of Dalit labour to the

[19] Manju Edachira, 'Anti-Caste Aesthetics'.
[20] Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2004), p. 19.

urban landscape. His films demand a reckoning with the spatial politics of caste and class, urging us (spectators) to re-examine the very terms through which we evaluate and value urban landscapes.

A comparable thematic contribution in the field of cinema can be found in Mani Ratnam's directorial venture *Nayakan* (The Leader, 1987). The film delineates the narrative of a Tamil gangster situated in the Dharavi Slum, addressing the discriminatory experiences of Tamils as a minority community within the context of Hindu-Marathi nationalist sentiments. While the film accentuates the struggles of an individual advocating for Tamil interests, it conspicuously omits a discussion on caste dynamics, choosing instead to focus predominantly on economic impediments. In contrast, Pa. Ranjith's film *Kaala* adopts a distinctive approach by consciously de-Brahmanizing the narrative and the spectatorial modalities it facilitates. I argue that the film disrupts the traditional narrative and viewing experience, which have been historically shaped and controlled by the Brahminical caste system. This de-Brahmanization involves a critical examination of established representational forms, a challenge to dominant norms, and a reclamation of the 'right to look' from a subaltern, anti-caste gaze. Ambedkarite spectatorship presents a multifaceted challenge, rooted in the process of de-Brahmanizing the gaze. Firstly, it contests the established methods of representation within Indian cinema. Secondly, it disrupts the normative ways of seeing, reclaiming the right to look for marginalized communities. Finally, it dismantles the existing power structures of visuality. This emphasis on the 'right to look' stems from the inherent inequalities within caste society.

As Dr B.R. Ambedkar's concept of the 'unseeables' demonstrates, certain castes, particularly Dalits (formerly untouchables), are rendered invisible due to their perceived pollution. They are denied the agency to look upwards within the social hierarchy. This control over seeing and appearing reflects the power dynamics of vision itself: the 'power of vision'

and the 'vision of power'.[21] In essence, caste dictates who can see and who can be seen. Hence, de-Brahmanizing the gaze becomes a form of resistance against the caste system, dismantling the 'gaze of disgust' that objectifies and marginalizes 'lower castes'. By challenging these ingrained tropes, *Kaala* (re)defines how audiences engage with the narrative, fostering a more equitable and empowered mode of spectatorship. Ranjith emphasizes the imperative of recognizing caste dynamics in a society structured by caste distinctions, thereby challenging prevailing socio-cultural hierarchies.[22] The film portrays the slums as inhabited predominantly by individuals from *Bahujan* backgrounds, including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and minority communities. It highlights the significance of their communal bonds, solidarity, celebrations, and collective resistance.

Figure 01, An aerial view captures Hari Dada encircled by the Ambedkarite-Buddhist community in the slum.

[21] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 05, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 242.
[22] Rajesh Rajamani, 'The Dharavi story in Tamil cinema: How 'Kaala' inverts the 'Nayakan' gaze', *The News Minute*, 30 August 2018 <https://www.thenewsminute.com/flix/dharavi-story-tamil-cinema-how-kaala-inverts-nayakan-gaze-87512> [accessed 26 December 2023].

Pa. Ranjith presents an aerial view of Ambedkarite resistance in many frames by utilizing different colours (see Figure 01). The aerial picturization of the slum, awash in the defiant hues of black and blue, stands in stark contrast to the dominant white world ('upper caste') which is clearly visible in the frame (see Figure 01). Here, the Ambedkarite-Buddhist community surrounds Hari Dada, who represents the Savarna *Samudāy* (community), as he arrives in Dharavi for the *Bhumi-Pujā*, a Hindu religious ceremony held prior to the start of any construction activity. However, the moment he reaches for a handful of sand, a young boy retaliates with a fistful of black powder, blurring his vision and scattering the sand. This act ignites a collective response as people, all adorned with Kaala's mask, unleash a wave of black and blue paint. As these colours coalesce, they form an efficacious symbol challenging Hari Dada's perceived 'purity' and dismantling the classist and casteist hierarchy he represents. In this scene, Hari Dada's frantic attempts to shield himself with his white towel become a desperate effort to ward off the Ambedkarite vision of anti-caste resistance embodied by the black and blue.

Towards an Ambedkarite feminism

Pa. Ranjith's cinematic work is marked by a commitment to depicting the stories of historically marginalized communities with keen insight. This is particularly evident in his portrayal of strong female characters, who are depicted with depth and sensitivity. Ranjith's narrative strategy involves a meticulous engagement with the intersectionality of identities, specifically within the framework of Ambedkarite feminism. Ambedkarite feminism is a distinct strand of feminism in India that focuses on the specific experiences and struggles of Dalit women. While many scholars have extensively used 'Dalit Feminism' as a conceptual anchor in their critical practice, I will particularly focus on how Dalit women perform resilience and resistance in the

context of Ambedkarite feminism. Drawing inspiration from the life and work of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Ambedkarite feminism has some fundamental principles such as intersectionality, which recognizes that Dalit women face intersecting oppressions based on both their caste and gender.[23] They are marginalized not only because they are women but also because they belong to a historically ostracized community. Caste is a central factor that shapes the realities of Dalit women's lives, including issues such as poverty, access to education, healthcare, and employment. The critique of Brahminical patriarchy views the caste system and patriarchy as intertwined, where 'upper caste' men hold power and privilege over all women, but especially over Dalit women who face the double burden of caste and gender oppression. Focusing on education and empowerment is crucial for challenging social norms and enabling Dalit women to assert their rights and agency.

Ambedkarite feminism also critiques mainstream feminism, arguing that mainstream feminist movements often overlook the specific challenges faced by Dalit women, which might not resonate with narratives centred around the experiences of 'upper caste' women. Departing from traditional cinematic tropes that often render Dalit women as docile, submissive, and downtrodden, Pa. Ranjith endeavours to imbue his female characters with agency, vocal assertiveness, and independence. This departure is manifest in the personas of Zarina, ex-lover of the protagonist Kaala; Selvi, Kaala's wife; and Puyal, the girlfriend of Lenin, Kaala's son. Noteworthy is the nomenclature assigned to the character Puyal, denoting 'storm', a lexical choice that encapsulates her portrayed attributes of bravery, fortitude, and resilience.[24] Zarina, as a single mother, emerges as an embodiment of open-mindedness and courage, staunchly

[23] Shailaja Paik, 'Dalit women's agency and Phule-Ambedkarite feminism', in *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sunaina Arya, and Aakash Singh Rathore (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 65-88; Shailaja Paik, 'The rise of new Dalit women.

[24] Christina Chinnappan, 'Kaala and Its Triumphant Subversions of Caste and Gender Roles', *Feminism in India,* 27 July 2018 <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/07/27/kaala-review-caste-feminist/> [accessed 27 December 2023].

upholding principles of dignity and equality across caste, class, and gender boundaries. Selvi, too, defies traditional norms by unabashedly expressing her opinions in the public domain, illustrated by her condemnation of Hari Dada's casteist behaviour, notably refusing to drink water from their residence. Recognizing the importance of collective effort and shared responsibilities, protagonist Kaala emphasizes that everyone, regardless of gender, should contribute to the cooking needs during the protest in Dharavi against Hari Dada's project, breaking down gendered expectations. The thematic emphasis on the strength and resilience of these female characters underscores their capacity to confront and navigate diverse societal pressures. Moreover, Ranjith ensures that these characters possess articulate perspectives on a range of issues pertinent to their experiences. As Janani K emphasises, 'These women are not just there in the movie, but they are in it to take the story forward'.[25] In doing so, the filmmaker effectively challenges established stereotypes and contributes to a cinematic discourse that champions the multifaceted dimensions of marginalized female identities.

Caste, exclusion, and spatiality: an anti-caste discourse

The concept of space, which includes not only physical location but also political and ideological space, plays a significant role in discussions about anti-caste issues. This is demonstrated in *Kaala* where the importance of the Buddha Vihara transcends its physical existence and becomes a cultural and ideological force that challenges the dominance of Brahmanical culture and territory (see Figure 02). It functions as a community resource centre and a space for Kaala to unite his people and propel the movement forward. The film amplifies its message through visual storytelling, weaving a tableau of historical figures and symbols like

[25] Janani K, 'Kaala is not just about Rajinikanth. Women empowerment is at its core', *India Today*, 08 June 2018 <https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/regional-cinema/story/pa-ranjith-kaala-has-three-strong-women-characters-eswari-rao-anjali-patil-huma-qureshi-1255504-2018-06-08> [accessed 06 January 2023].

Buddha, Jyotiba Phule, Iyothee Thasar, Marx, Lenin, and a small statue of Bali Raja. These figures, juxtaposed with the caste society's inhuman treatment, hostility, and oppression, narrate a long history of humanity's struggle for fraternity, solidarity, harmony, compassion, and equality. The presence of the Buddha, whether within the confines of a Vihara or in the homes of individuals like Kaala, becomes a source of constant inspiration. This sentiment has been echoed through history, linking the Buddha to visionary leaders such as Phule and Ambedkar, who, like him, have been instrumental in the liberation of the oppressed. The significance of the Buddha's presence in anti-caste discourses is not limited to its inspirational value. The Buddha's teachings and philosophy have been used as a counterpoint to the Brahmanical hegemony of culture and territory. By emphasizing the importance of the Buddha, anti-caste movements have sought to challenge and subvert the dominant cultural narrative, which is rooted in Brahmanical traditions. Furthermore, the enduring influence of the Buddha has been used to galvanize the oppressed and marginalized communities, providing them with a sense of purpose and direction. This has been particularly true for leaders such as Ambedkar and Iyothee Thass who drew upon the Buddha's teachings to articulate a vision of a more just and equitable society. The inclusion of Periyar on the celluloid is a powerful assertion of his lifelong dedication to the anti-caste movement and his fight against religious blindness. Furthermore, the film subtly underscores the deep-rooted connection between Dalits and the land they have cultivated for centuries, highlighting the historical injustices inflicted by landowning communities.

Figure 02, Kaala, the protagonist, at the community meeting in Buddha Vihara, in his locality named Bhimwada.

The conspicuous absence of the Ambedkarite gaze in cinematic representations has spurred anti-caste filmmakers on to challenge this dominant narrative through their own unique storytelling. Pa. Ranjith, through his critical inquiry, questions why Dalits—who have been a historically resistant community since the time of Buddha—are continuously depicted as subjugated and powerless in relation to authority.[26] The Ambedkarite gaze does not function in abstraction—it is materially encoded in cinematic form. In *Kaala*, Dalit spatial realities such as slums, community grounds, and Buddha Viharas are not passive backdrops but active sites of resistance. These spaces are framed deliberately, often through wide shots or aerial views, to emphasize collective presence, movement, and solidarity. Camerawork plays a crucial role: low-angle shots of Kaala and his allies assert visual authority, repositioning Dalit bodies from the margins to the cinematic centre. The use of chiaroscuro lighting—especially in scenes of confrontation and protest—heightens the emotional stakes and underscores the moral polarity

[26] Pa. Ranjith, 'Dalit Cinema in India', in *The Dalit Truth: The Battles for Realizing Ambedkar's Vision*, ed. by K. Raju (Gurugram: Penguin Random House, 2022), p.135.

at play, casting Dalit resistance in sharp visual contrast against the oppressive forces they oppose. In this way, spectatorship becomes political. The Ambedkarite gaze does not allow viewers to passively consume these images; it demands interrogation. It invites Dalit audiences to see themselves not as victims or recipients of reform, but as agents of history, reframing the act of watching as an act of reclaiming.

In *Kaala,* the figure of Buddha is not merely a passive symbol; it is actively wielded as a robust critique of the oppressive caste system and its Hindu underpinnings. Raja M aptly observes that Pa. Ranjith uses visual cues throughout the film to suggest Buddhism as a competing and alternative belief system to Hinduism.[27] Ranjith portrays Buddhism as a more inclusive and just religion, standing in opposition to the prejudiced and exclusionary practices that are often linked to the majority Hindu faith. Kaala's black car bears the license plate MH01 BR 1956, a silent tribute to Dr BR Ambedkar's momentous decision of embracing Buddhism in that year. This deliberate framing prompts spectators to question the predominant cinematic portrayal of Dalits and challenges the underlying power structures that perpetuate such marginalization.

According to Sujit Nikalje and Shailesh Kumar Darokar, Buddha Viharas as community centres in rural and urban Maharashtra evolved as 'symbols of the socio-cultural identity of Neo-Buddhist converts'. Initially featuring idols of Buddha in open spaces, they later developed into 'mud, semi-concrete, or concrete structures'. The Viharas played a crucial role in addressing discrimination faced by converts in public places and served as centres for various collective activities, such as 'recitation of Buddhist Precepts, public meetings, non-formal school, celebrations of Buddha and Ambedkar Jayanti, study, and discussions on

[27] Raja M, 'The Visual Representation of Caste'.

societal issues'. Unlike Hindu Temples, Buddha Viharas did not become places of worship but rather served as hubs for 'socio-cultural, educational, and political activities', embodying the aspirations of creating a society based on equality, liberty, and fraternity, in line with the vision of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.[28]

In the frame (see Figure 02), Kaala is not only shown wearing the blue shirt but also standing in the Buddha vihara. This includes his release from the police station, detained for a night simply for vocalizing his community's rights. As he appears in a blue shirt, he waves with a smile to his community waiting outside, a gesture echoing throughout the film. These recurring signifiers popping up in various scenes are not mere coincidences; they are hallmarks of the Ambedkarite movement. Pa. Ranjith's deliberate choice of Kaala's attire reflects his intention to vibrantly showcase the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement. The politics of clothing and dress code were also addressed in Ranjith's earlier film, *Kabali* (2016). There, the question of Kabali's suit frequently arises, with him stating, 'If we don't wear a suit, then who else will? This is also our way of showing protest. There's a lot of politics in Gandhi going shirtless and Ambedkar donning a suit'.[29] The film uses clothing as a metonymy for the complex relationship between tradition, colonialism, and claiming agency within a social hierarchy. *Kabali's* character suggests that clothing choices can be a form of protest and redefinition of cultural symbols. It highlights the contrasting sartorial choices of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi as symbolic expressions of their political ideologies. While Dr Ambedkar's adoption of Western attire, specifically a suit and tie, can be interpreted as an assimilation into Western culture, it transcends mere fashion. It constitutes a powerful political statement. For Dr Ambedkar, it signifies the historical denial of basic necessities, including clothing faced by the

[28] Sujit Nikalje and Shailesh Kumar Darokar, 'Appraising Buddha Viharas from A Historical Perspective', *IJDTSA*, 1:1 (2017), 1-11 <http://www.ticijournals.org/appraising-buddha-viharas-from-a-historical-perspective/> [accessed 28 Dec 2022].
[29] From the film's English subtitles.

Dalit community he belonged to. In contrast, Gandhi's attire, which often consisted of simple *dhoti* and *shawl*, stemmed from a position of privilege. Having never experienced deprivation, he could prioritize returning to traditional Indian clothing, potentially imbuing it with spiritual significance. However, for the Dalit community, mired in social and economic marginalization, the need for inspiration and empowerment is paramount.

In this context, Dr Ambedkar's dressing sensibilities become a powerful symbol. By adopting Western attire, he embodied the idea of progress and social mobility achievable through education, particularly English education, which was seen as a key tool for advancement. In another scene from *Kabali*, the blue uniform designed for adolescents with a criminal history at school symbolizes an inclusive egalitarianism that disregards a troubled past. This portrayal employs the colour blue as a symbol and the clothing as a signifier.[30] In the Ambedkarite movement, blue symbolizes equality and resistance. In the context of the film, the blue uniform represents a sense of belonging and acceptance despite one's past struggle. It suggests a desire to rehabilitate these adolescents and integrate them into society without prejudice or discrimination based on their history. The uniform itself acts as a signifier, indicating a specific status or circumstance. In this case, it signifies that the wearer has a criminal history at school. However, instead of stigmatizing or marginalizing these individuals, the uniform becomes a means of inclusion. It communicates a message that despite their past mistakes, they are still valued members of society deserving of a chance to improve and contribute positively. By providing these adolescents with a uniform that symbolizes inclusion rather than exclusion, the film highlights a progressive approach to social integration and rehabilitation. This emphasis on sartorial choices is a signature of Pa. Ranjith's filmmaking, showcasing his anti-caste politics.

[30] Benson Rajan and Shreya Venkatraman, 'Fabric-Rendered Identity: A Study of Dalit Representation in Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi, Madras* and *Kabali*', *Artha-Journal of Social Sciences,*16:3 (2017), 17-37 <https://doi.org/10.12724/ajss.42.2> [accessed 12 January 2024].

Ranjith's films consistently employ unique thematic elements that dismantle the dominant cinematic gaze. He foregrounds Dalit narratives, challenging the peripheralization of Dalit characters and stories with creation of 'Dalit Popular'. As P. Shyma argues, films like *Kaala* and especially *Kabali* conceptualize this Dalit Popular. It centres Dalit experiences, historicizes their memories, and uses a visual and spoken language that reflects a politically conscious Dalit identity. This Dalit Popular is imagined and nurtured through cinema, but its influence extends beyond the screen.[31] Ranjith's 'Dalit Popular' that navigates the intriguing interplay between individual agency (private and personal) and collective empowerment (public and community), forging a representation of Dalit experience.[32] His protagonists are not passive victims but agents of their own destinies, grappling with the realities of caste discrimination and oppression while asserting their identities and aspirations. Additionally, Ranjith incorporates elements of Ambedkar's philosophy of annihilation of caste, Periyar's critique of Brahminical hegemony, and Marx's analysis of class exploitation, weaving them into the fabric of his narratives through filmic elements like colour, script, tropes, character portrayal, and narrative structure. These elements provide frameworks for understanding the systemic nature of Dalit oppression and the potential for collective action and social transformation.

The land in the film has been shown as a symbol of domination and power. Film narrates how land has always been pivotal to human civilization and how the people who controlled vast territories used them as tools to dominate others. It continues even in independent India. The introduction of Urban Land Ceiling Act (1976) was a big step in providing land to the urban poor landless, but it failed to fulfil the objectives which include shelter to the urban poor

[31] P. Shyma, 'Kaala and the Dalit Popular: Recovering Caste Histories of Modernity', *Payyanur College* <www.payyanurcollege.ac.in/shyma.pdf> [accessed 30 April 2024].
[32] Reju George Mathew, 'Beyond Narratives of Modernity, Pain, and Pathos: Dalit Aesthetic in *Kabali* and *Kaala*', in *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India,* ed. by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (New York: Routledge, 2023), p.367-370.

and improving the distribution of the land effectively.[33] The film explores the stark contrast in perspectives on land between the affluent and the impoverished. For the affluent, it is a symbol of status and dominance, a tool to exert power over those who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. However, for the slumdwellers, every inch of land they possess, no matter how meagre, represents their very survival. It is the foundation of their homes, their source of livelihood, and their only haven in a harsh world. This disparity is poignantly captured in the protagonist's powerful statement to the antagonist: 'Land is power for you but to us it means life'.[34] In this way, 'Kaala asserts the organic relation that people of Dharavi have with land by juxtaposing it against Hari Dada's notion of land as power'.[35] A song in the film echoes the continued pursuit of land rights during the protests, with the lyrics resonating: 'We will fight with our lives. For this land will be ours…...This land is our right. Assert it, Aloud, proud, unbowed. This land is our right'.[36]

Black: the color of the proletariat

The visual language employed by Pa. Ranjith includes specific symbols, colours, and imagery that carry cultural and historical significance in the Dalit community. This creates a distinct identity for anti-caste cinema. In this way, semiotics work as a powerful tool to convey deeper meanings, evoke emotions, and disrupt traditional modes of representation. He presents the colour black in a different light, shifting away from its historical association with mourning and darkness. Instead, black is portrayed as a symbol of resilience, empowerment, and rebellion, particularly in the context of the struggle against oppression and injustice. The

[33] Lakshmi Srinivas, 'Land and Politics in India: Working of Urban Land Ceiling Act, 1976', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26:43 (1991), 2482–84 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4398226> [accessed 20 Dec 2022].
[34] From the film's English subtitles.
[35] Reju George Mathew, 'Beyond Narratives', p.367.
[36] From the film's English subtitles.

contrast between black and white is used throughout the film to challenge the entrenched cultural and social norms associated with white. While white is often seen as a symbol of purity, innocence, and neutrality, it can also be used to enforce hierarchical power structures and perpetuate systems of privilege. Ranjith adeptly deconstructs and subverts the traditionally ascribed grandeur to the colour white, strategically redirecting its significance. In this transformative process, he presents black not merely as an alternative but as a spectacular form of contestation. Black, in Ranjith's narrative, goes beyond its conventional connotations and emerges as a powerful symbol of resistance, serving as a tool for revolutionary change. Furthermore, the appropriation of black aligns with the historical context, notably resonating with Periyar's Self-Respect movement, where black stands as the emblematic colour associated with the ideals of self-respect and socio-political transformation.[37]

The protagonist of the film, named Kaala which means black in Hindi, embraces the colour black in various forms, such as using a black car, a black umbrella, a black watch, and black glasses. These choices symbolize Kaala's rebellious and assertive nature. The antagonist in the film Hari Dada, always seen clad in a crystal white, lives in a grand white coloured house. He associates Kaala with the demon king Ravana, perpetuating the mythological projection of assertive Dalits by the Savarna people. However, Kaala rejects this narrative and describes himself as a confident and vocal individual beyond religious narratives.

Within the narrative landscape of *Kaala,* Kaala emerges as a powerful figure who disrupts the hegemonic power structures embedded in notions of colourism. His confrontational dialogue with the antagonist, Hari Dada, serves as a microcosm of this larger struggle, offering a multifaceted exploration of racialized aesthetics and the inherent value

[37] Karthick Ram Manoharan, 'Being Dalit, being Tamil: The politics of *Kabali* and *Kaala*', in *Tamil Cinema in the Twenty- First Century: Caste, Gender, and Technology,* ed. by Selvaraj Velayutham and Vijay Devadas (New York: Routledge, 2021), p.59.

embedded within blackness. Hari Dada's initial pronouncements, deeming both Kaala's name and his skin colour 'impure' and 'ugly', lay bare the pernicious assumptions underpinning colourism and casteism. This entrenched prejudice associates darkness with negative attributes, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege whiteness as the epitome of purity and beauty. Kaala's swift and assertive rebuttal dismantles these oppressive constructs. He challenges the very notion of inherent superiority within white, framing it as a mere 'mask' that obscures the complexities of identity and lived experience. His declaration, 'Black is the colour of the proletariat', reframes blackness as a marker of resilience and labour, inextricably linked to the struggles of the working class.[38] This reframing empowers blackness, shifting the narrative from one of deficit to one of strength and solidarity. Further subverting Hari Dada's prejudiced gaze, Kaala invites him to witness the vibrant beauty of his 'chawls', the slum tenements that serve as his community. By invoking the image of 'dust scattering into a rainbow', he challenges the association between blackness and squalor, instead highlighting the inherent beauty and diversity within his community.[39] This act of reclamation asserts ownership of spaces deemed 'impure' by the dominant gaze, revealing them as sites of rich cultural motifs and communal strength.

Kaala's defiance is not merely personal; it serves as an influential symbol of resistance against broader systems of oppression. His interrogation of colourism's underlying assumptions lays bare the constructed nature of racial and casteist hierarchies, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive understanding of identity and lived experience. Furthermore, Pa. Ranjith employs black in various ways throughout the film. For example, Zarina's daughter is named Keira, which means 'black' in Greek. This choice reinforces the metonymic significance of black as a source of strength and identity. *Kaala* presents a *perspective from*

[38] From the film's English subtitles.
[39] From the film's English subtitles.

below, offering an aesthetic that emerges from the Dalit community and challenges the binary notion of white as superior and black as inferior. Through the symbolism of colour, the film deconstructs established narratives and emphasizes the resilience, empowerment, and rebellion associated with black. Pa. Ranjith says, 'The film [*Kaala*] also incorporates the Ramayana in the narrative, in an attempt to show the opposition between fair and dark, between Aryans and Dravidians'.[40] In this context, Pa. Ranjith goes beyond the binary of white/good versus black/evil. By employing the Ramayana narrative in the film, he illustrates how it has historically served to perpetuate a social hierarchy favouring Aryans, lighter-skinned Indo-European people, over the indigenous darker-skinned Dravidians of South India.[41]

Blue: a colour of Ambedkarite consciousness

The colour blue, with its diverse connotations across different cultures and historical periods, has emerged as a persuasive symbol of serenity, spirituality, and transcendence. It often signifies a realm of calmness and contemplation, invoking notions of peace, introspection, and the ethereal. The colour blue, as portrayed in *Kaala*, symbolizes a challenge to the dominant Hindu caste hierarchy and presents an alternative narrative. Specifically, within the film's songs, the colour blue signifies an Ambedkarite consciousness. For instance, two boys dressed in blue emerge from a crowd, symbolizing a departure from Hindu supremacy (see Figure 03). In this scene, the gate is adorned with a bold statement: 'The Great Warriors Who Conquered Asuras'. Here, 'Asuras' denotes individuals from the 'lower caste' while 'warriors' pertains to

[40] Udhav Naig, "Kaala is about how urban poor are being squeezed', says director Pa. Ranjith', *The Hindu,* 06 June 2018 <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/kaala-is-about-how-urban-poor-are-being-squeezed-says-director-pa-ranjith/article24091236.ece> [accessed 02 January 2023].

[41] In some versions of the Ramayana, Rama kills Shambuk, a Shudra performing forbidden rituals, sparking debate about caste and religious hierarchy. See Sudhanva Deshpande, 'The Killing of Shambuk: A retelling from a Director's Perspective', in *Performing the Ramayana Tradition*, ed. by Paula Richman and Rustom Bharucha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Manohar Patil, 'Lord Rama and Shambuk story', *ISKCON Desire Tree,* 03 October 2015 <https://iskcondesiretree.com/forum/topics/lord-rama-and-shambuk-story> [accessed 01 May 2024].

communities belonging to the 'upper caste'. However, the term 'Asuras' takes on a new meaning here. Instead of its traditional association with negativity and impurity, it is reinterpreted as a symbol of strength and resilience, representing marginalized communities who have historically been ostracized in the name of purity and pollution. This visual motif used by Pa. Ranjith, subverts the dominant narrative surrounding 'Asuras' and empowers its reinterpretation. Similarly, the film *Asuran* engages with the politics of naming and power by associating the term 'demon' with Dalits. However, instead of perpetuating ingrained stereotypes, the film subverts them by showcasing the strength, resilience, and righteous anger of the Dalit characters. *Asuran* dismantles the one-sided narrative that portrays Dalits as submissive Others and, instead, empowers them as assertive agents of change. This reversal of the gaze challenges the very foundations of societal structures that have historically demonized and marginalized Dalit communities. The use of blue, as noted by Christophe Jaffrelot, symbolizes resistance to injustice, particularly in the context of Dalit struggles. Notably, Dr Ambedkar introduced the blue flag for his party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), and since then, blue has become associated with the Dalit struggle.[42] In *Asuran*, the colour choices for clothing are not merely for an aesthetic purpose. The Dalit protagonist's persistent blue turban becomes a marker of his distinct identity and resistance in the face of the oppressively white attire favoured by the dominant caste characters. Through his use of black, blue, and red, each associated with distinct political movements – Periyarism, Ambedkarism, and Marxism – Pa. Ranjith champions an intersectional approach to dismantle systemic oppression.

[42] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar, and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (Ranikhet: Permanent Back, 2006).

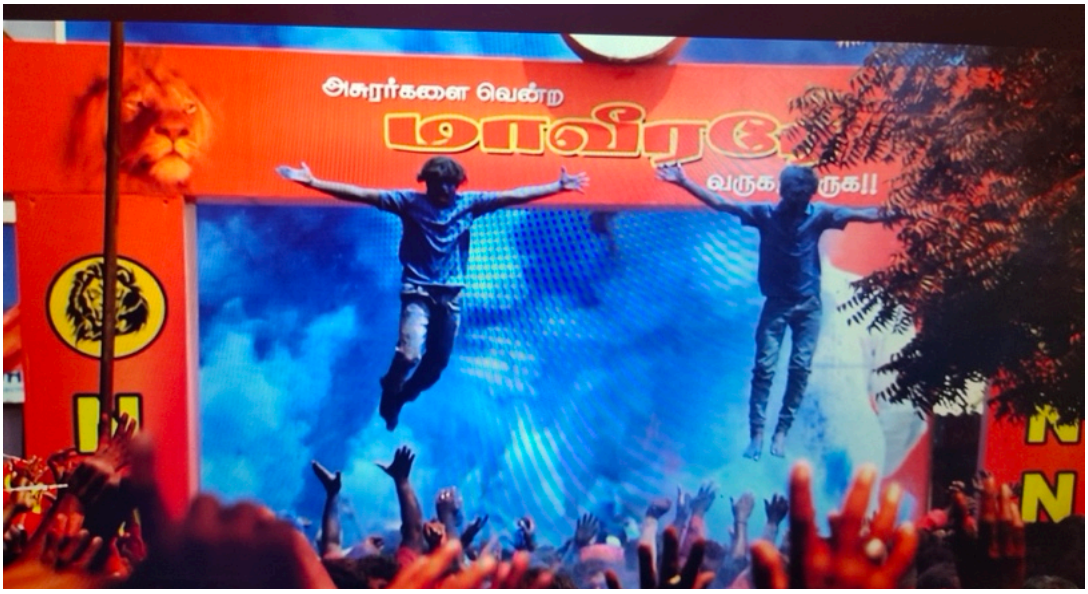

Figure 03, Two boys joyfully emerge from the gates decorated by the Hindu-Nationalist party in a song sequence.

In the film, the political parties serve as reflections of the ideological conflict between right-wing Hindutva nationalists and Ambedkarite parties. The antagonist in the film belongs to a party called the 'NavBharat Rashtrawadi Party' (New India Nationalist Party, NNP) and is depicted as a spiritual nationalist leader. The 'Oppressed People Republic Party', represented by a blue flag with the *Ashoka Chakra*, a wheel, symbolizes the Ambedkarite movement within the political arena. This portrayal resembles the parties initiated and envisioned by Baba Saheb Ambedkar, such as the 'Independent Labour Party', 'Scheduled Castes Federation', and 'Republic Party of India'(RPI). The RPI's signboard is actually visible amidst the protest, standing alongside the towering statue of Dr Ambedkar. These deliberate details observed throughout the film resonate not as mere observations, but as defining characteristics of an Ambedkarite movement.

Asserting identity: the Ambedkarite movement and its forms of resistance

The struggle of Dalits against caste oppression in India, spanning millennia, has taken on a new character since the revolutionary contributions of Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar. The Indian Constitution, drafted by Dr Ambedkar himself, has become a crucial weapon in this fight. In

Kaala, we witness two distinct modes of Dalit protest that illuminate the evolving nature of their resistance. The first mode involves collective action and strike. This strategy echoes the Gujarat protests following the Una incident, where Dalits boycotted sanitation work to express solidarity with victims of caste violence.[43] In the film, we see the workers' society, taxi drivers, and sweepers unite to protest against the government by dumping garbage in front of the Municipal Corporation. This act disrupts the very foundation of urban life, highlighting the vital role Dalits play in maintaining the urban economy, while simultaneously (symbolically) rejecting the dehumanizing nature of their assigned professions.

The second mode of resistance is embodied in the protagonist, Kaala. In contrast to Hari Dada, the antagonist who flaunts his 'upper caste' Hindu identity and demands subservience, Kaala embodies Ambedkarite ideals of equality and self-respect. He refuses to be cowed by Hari Dada's power or wealth, instead asserting his own agency and the collective strength of his community. Kaala's act of placing his foot on the table is not just defiance—it is a reclamation. By echoing Hari Dada's earlier demand for submission, he flips the script, unsettling both the narrative hierarchy and the viewer's comfort. Ranjith choreographs this moment with intentional symmetry, visually inverting the power dynamic. This is the Ambedkarite gaze in action: not merely recounting resistance but reshaping how power is framed—and who holds the right to frame it.

Further emphasizing this shift, Zarina, another central character, says to Hari Dada, 'Give me your hand [she shakes his hand], this is what we call equality ok? Not making someone fall at your feet'.[44] This simple act signifies the rejection of hierarchical structures, and the embrace of horizontal relationships based on mutual respect. Kaala's confidence and

[43] Mari Marcel Thekaekara, 'The Dalit Fightback at Una is India's Rosa Parks Moment', *The Wire*, 13 August 2016 <https://thewire.in/rights/the-dalit-fightback-at-una-is-indias-rosa-parks-moment> [accessed 26 December 2023]; 'Dalit Protests in Gujarat: Una Protester Dies; Community Holds Anti-BJP Rally', *The Wire*, 01 August 2016 <https://thewire.in/rights/gujarat-dalit-protests> [accessed 26 December 2023].
[44] From the English subtitles of the film.

defiance also stem from his awareness of the power he wields as a community leader. He represents not just himself but a collective force capable of challenging the established order. This resonates with the growing political consciousness and mobilization of Dalit communities in contemporary India.

In the midst of the anti-eviction protest, a police constable named Shivaji Gaikwad defies expectations. Standing before the very people he was meant to control, Gaikwad extends his support to their cause. His voice, full of emotion, echoes in the slum, 'I was born and raised in Bhim Nagar, the place that no longer exists! Evicted in the name of progress, our homes turned to dust by "upper castes". They demand sacrifice for development, but why must it always be the poor who bleed? Can't the rich and powerful offer the same blood? Today, I stand with you, not as a constable, but as a son of Bhim Nagar! Jai Bhim! Jai Bhim!'[45] After his speech, the spectator in the film and in the theatres repeat Jai Bhim with equal fervour.[46] Upon closer inspection, the Jai Bhim slogan emerges as a powerful symbol of resistance, while the constable named Shivaji subtly embodies the Shudras' long history.[47] In the film, certain scenes prominently feature names such as *Bhim Nagar* and *Bhimwada*. These locations aren't merely geographical; instead, they symbolize Dr B.R. Ambedkar, as depicted in the film. Amidst the protest scenes, a myriad of slogan boards emerges, resonating with powerful declarations such as 'No Land, No Vote' and the unequivocal assertion that 'Rights assured by Babasaheb can't be confiscated'. This cinematic invocation not only adds historical depth to the narrative but

[45] From the English subtitles of the film.
[46] Jai Bhim is a powerful salutation used by followers of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It literally translates to 'Victory to Bhim (Ambedkar)'. It was adopted in the 1930s by Babu Laxman Rao Nagarale Hardas, a close associate of Ambedkar. K. Jamanadas, 'Know the History of Slogan "Jai Bhim"', *Velivada,* 16 April 2011 <https://velivada.com/2011/04/16/jai-bhim-and-jai-hind/> [accessed 17 January 2024]. While watching *Kaala* at Cinépolis cinema hall in Chembur, Mumbai, I witnessed this moment when a significant number of individuals enthusiastically exclaimed 'Jai Bhim' during this particular scene.
[47] Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, hailing from a non-élite background, his rise to kingship challenged entrenched social hierarchies and ignited hope for social justice.

also, and perhaps more importantly, compels spectators to reflect on the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's struggle for equality and justice in contemporary times.

Challenging narratives: reimagining myths from an Ambedkarite standpoint

Removing individuals who uphold caste-based ideologies can be seen as a direct rejection of divine principles and Hindu mythological tenets. This thematic portrayal is illustrated in a pivotal fight sequence, wherein Kaala, the protagonist, engages in the lethal confrontation resulting in the demise of Vishnu, a character representative of a henchman affiliated with Hari Dada's 'upper caste' political sphere. The symbolic resonance is noteworthy, as Vishnu, a Hindu deity, becomes emblematic of the ideological adversary. In a later scene, the figurative representation of Ganesha, another Hindu deity, is depicted being cast into the sea and ultimately succumbing to submersion (see Figure 04). This imagery underscores the cinematic narrative's utilization of metaphorical elements to convey a thematic critique and commentary on the intersection of societal structures and mythological symbolism. In another scene, when Kaala is conversing with Hari, in response to Hari's reference to the Mahabharata, Arjuna and Krishna, Kaala says, 'If stealing my land is your Dharma and your God's dharma, then I won't spare even your God'.[48] This message unequivocally communicates the sentiments of the anti-caste movement to the higher echelons of Hindu society. The film critiques popular mythological narratives and oppressive societal structures through its set design. For example, the construction company 'Manu Realty', owned by Hari Dada, evokes the controversial religious text Manu Smriti, known for its hierarchical social codes. Additionally, the housing project's name, 'Dandakaranya Nagar', references the mythical kingdom of 'Rakshasas' (demons) from the Ramayana, located in present-day central and eastern India. This layering

[48] From the English subtitles of the film.

of references challenges traditional Hindu narratives and their connection to real-world power dynamics.[49]

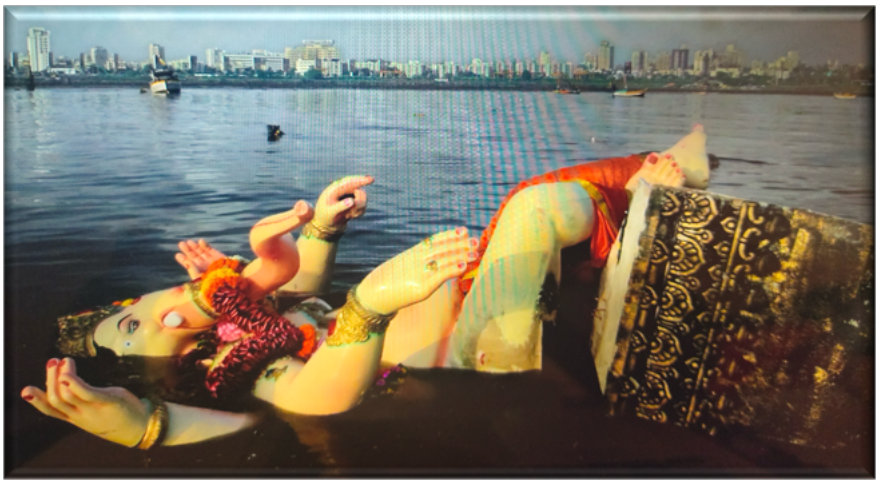

Figure 04, Ganesha, Hindu god, drowning in the sea.

In the film, Pa. Ranjith incorporates a contentious scene depicting the submersion of the Hindu deity Ganesha, utilizing this imagery to convey a potent critique of the caste system (see Figure 04). The controversy surrounding this scene stems from its juxtaposition: while it references a traditional Hindu festival celebration, Ranjith employs it within the broader narrative framework to express his Ambedkarite ideology. By doing so, he challenges and dismantles the perceived structures of oppression inherent within Hinduism. And further, this image is juxtaposed with a fight scene of resistance, creating a stark contrast, and prompting spectators to reconsider familiar narratives. 'Ganesha Chaturthi', a widely celebrated festival in India, particularly in Maharashtra, involves bringing an idol of the god Ganesha home for worship over several days. The culminating ritual involves immersing the idol in a river or the

[49] Sumeet Samos, 'Kaala is not a 'Rajinikanth movie': A Dalit-Bahujan reading of the anti-caste politics in Pa Ranjith's film', *Firstpost,* 15 June 2018 <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/kaala-is-not-a-rajinikanth-movie-a-dalit-bahujan-reading-of-the-anti-caste-politics-in-pa-ranjiths-film-4505063.html> [accessed 22 December 2023].

sea, symbolizing his return to his divine abode.[50] However, Ranjith's choice of this imagery, coupled with specific camera angles and editing techniques, imbues the scene with deeper meaning. Pa. Ranjith conveys his ideological stance through this scene by utilizing parallel editing and strategic scene arrangement. When Kaala attacks Vishnu, we do not witness his dead body. Instead, the scene immediately transitions to a depiction of a Ganesha submerging into the sea. This juxtaposition suggests a deliberate symbolic connection, where the act of violence against Vishnu is metonymically linked to the submersion of the Ganesha image, reinforcing the film's underlying critique of dominant religious and cultural narratives.

He subverts the traditional understanding of the ritual from an 'upper caste' perspective and invites spectators to interpret it through the lens of Ambedkarite thought. Dr B.R. Ambedkar argued that dismantling the caste system in Hinduism necessitated a rejection of its scriptures, which he viewed as legitimizing social hierarchies.[51] Pa. Ranjith's symbolic act of drowning Ganesha, a revered Hindu deity, can be interpreted as echoing Ambedkar's critique by challenging the religious foundations of caste. Ranjith critiques the perceived divinity of dominant castes, questioning the (un)questioning reverence they receive.

Rajnikanth's iconic status in Tamil cinema is inseparable from *Kaala*'s subversive power. His established mass appeal—rooted in his image as a working-class hero—enables the film to disseminate an anti-caste message to a broad audience. Pa. Ranjith leverages Rajnikanth's charisma to challenge Savarna dominance, reconfiguring the star vehicle into a site of resistance. The film both uses and redefines Rajnikanth's screen legacy, making his presence a deliberate political strategy.

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[50] 'Ganesh Chaturthi 2023: What is the story behind the tradition of Ganesh visarjan?', *Times of India,* 18 September 2023 <https://m.timesofindia.com/life-style/events/ganesha-chaturthi-2019-what-is-the-story-behind-the-tradition-of-ganesh-visarjan/articleshow/70878145.cms> [accessed 27 December 2023].

[51] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches,* Vol. 1, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019).

Singing, dancing, and defiance: the cultural power of Ambedkarite celebration

Beyond mere entertainment, song and dance in marginalized communities transcend their performative aspects, transforming into powerful tools for cultural expression and social commentary.[52] As energized motifs infused with rhythm, melody, and movement, they subvert dominant narratives, celebrate identity, and challenge ingrained power structures. The film *Kaala's* engagement with the rich realm of music and dance within the specific context of the Ambedkarite movement showcases how these art forms become vessels to articulate the collective consciousness and aspirations of the Dalit community. Through the pulsating beats of hip-hop, the defiant lyrics of rap, and the ancestral echoes of the parai drum, we witness the emergence of a powerful counter-narrative that re-writes the script of caste-based oppression and celebrates the vibrant essence of Dalit culture. Pa. Ranjith's The Casteless Collective's fusion isn't just sonic, it's symbolic. The raw energy of rock and the confrontational nature of rap complement the storytelling tradition of *Gaana*. This creates a powerful platform for lyrics that dismantle caste hierarchies. For instance, their song *'Kaalu Ruba Dhuttu'* translated as 1/4 rupees note, criticizes the dehumanizing practice of manual scavenging, using rap verses to voice the anger and frustration of the oppressed caste.[53] The band's name has a historical context, inspired by Iyothee Thassar's call for 'outcastes' to identify as 'casteless' in response to colonial census mandates.[54] Ranjith's initiative rises above the mere realm of 'music and

[52] Smita M. Patil, 'Listening to the Call for Social Justice: On Ambedkarite Women's Songs and Poetic Expressions from Maharashtra, India', Revista *Científica Arbitrada de la Fundación Mente Clara*, 8: 336 (2023) 1-35 <https://doi.org/10.32351/rca.v8.336> [accessed 16 Feb 2024]; Susmit, 'Dalit Bahujan Rappers Are Resisting Caste, One Beat At A Time', *Youth Ki Awaaz,* 02 April 2022 <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2022/04/spirit-resistance-caste-culture-rap-hip-hop-popular-india/> [accessed 16 Feb 2024].

[53] Manasa Rao, 'Pa. Ranjith's 'The Casteless Collective': A Coming Together of Rock, Rap and Gaana', *The News Minute*, 27 December 2017 <https://www.thenewsminute.com/features/pa-ranjith-s-casteless-collective-coming-together-rock-rap-and-gaana-73809> [accessed 03 January 2024]; Madras Medai, 'Kaalu Ruba Dhuttu | காலு ரூபா துட்டு | The Casteless Collective | Madras Medai | Pa Ranjith | Tenma', online video recording, *YouTube,* 4th August 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcDnsO4xBtg> [accessed 03 January 2024].

[54] Dickens Leonard, 'Anti-caste Communitas and Outcaste Experience: Space, Body, Displacement and Writing', in *The Politics of Belonging in Contemporary India.* ed. by Kaustav Chakraborty (Routledge, 2020), pp. 101–25.

caste' discussions by creating a 'pragmatic initiative of a collective fusion'.[55] This choice, privileging musicians from underprivileged backgrounds (largely Dalits) aims to achieve a 'cultural effect' that exceeds mere aesthetics. This 'cultural effect' lies in the 'sensorial scripting of castelessness' through the evocation of 'human feelings'.

Ranjith's music intentionally sidesteps the limitations of academic or elite intellectual discourse, opting instead for a visceral, emotional register that resonates across caste lines. This move aligns with the Ambedkarite aesthetic tradition, where affect becomes a political strategy. By foregrounding rhythm, anger, joy, and resistance through sound, Ranjith taps into what Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai describe as the 'embodied knowledge' of Dalit communities—a kind of knowing that is felt before it is theorized.[56] The music does not just communicate ideas; it produces a shared sensorium that unsettles caste as an emotional structure. In this sense, the emotional force of the music is not incidental—it is central. It becomes a tool of unlearning, dismantling the deep affective conditioning that sustains caste hierarchies. Ranjith's use of music, then, becomes a form of cultural activism, building what scholars like Anand Teltumbde would call a politics of assertion—not just representing Dalit identity, but demanding its recognition through affective solidarity.[57] By invoking this 'paradigm of affect', the music aims to forge a sense of community among spectators, dismantling caste barriers on an emotional level.[58]

It is worth noting here that the *Parāi* drum traditionally performed by 'Paraiyars' or 'Arunthathiyars' (Dalits) during 'upper castes' funerals, held a deeply negative association. It

[55] Dickens Leonard, 'Collective sounds: Pa. Ranjith's cinema, Gaana, and fusion music', *South Asian Popular Culture,* 21.1 (2022), 105–122 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2022.2115738> [accessed 20 January 2024]
[56] Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *Experience, Caste and the Everyday Social* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019); Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[57] Anand Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid* (London: Zed Books, 2010).
[58] Manasa Rao, 'Pa. Ranjith's 'The Casteless Collective'.

was seen as a symbol of impurity and marked a lowly, degrading act. However, in a powerful act of resistance, Dalits reclaimed the 'Parai', transforming it into a symbol of pride and cultural identity. They embraced it within their art forms and folk music, asserting their right to self-expression and challenging the caste system's oppressive norms. Anti-caste filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith played a crucial role in this (re)interpretation in the cinematic sphere. By showcasing the 'Parai' through a celebratory lens, they actively countered its historical stigma and inverted the negative perception. This deliberate shift redefined the 'Parai', turning it from a tool of oppression into a powerful symbol of Dalit empowerment and cultural celebration.[59]

The song 'Katravai Patravai' ('Educate, Agitate') serves as a significant reminder to the Dalit community, drawing upon the iconic 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' mantra of Dr Ambedkar. The lyrics, declaring 'a thousand years of silence is enough', break the historical trope of Dalit passivity and instead advocate for active resistance through education, political mobilization, and social organization. This shift from silence to agency, captured within the film's narrative, reflects the core tenets of Ambedkarite ideology. By emphasizing education as a means of empowerment, the song challenges systemic inequalities that perpetuate caste hierarchies through knowledge deprivation. Agitation, meanwhile, signifies a collective rejection of discriminatory structures, urging Dalits to confront and dismantle them. Finally, organizing underscores the importance of building solidarity and collective strength, enabling Dalits to advocate effectively for their rights and achieve social emancipation.[60] Similarly, in the film *Asuran*, the protagonist's resolute dedication to educating his child is depicted as the key to breaking the cycle of oppression experienced by his marginalized community. He

[59] The *Parāi*, also referred to as thappu, is a drum-like instrument typically crafted from calfskin and featuring a single drumhead. Hugo Gorringe, 'Drumming out oppression, or drumming it in? Identity, culture, and contention in dalit politics', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 50:1 (2016), 1-26 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966715615021> [accessed 14 January 2024].

[60] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 17.3, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), p. 276.

prioritizes education above all else, sacrificing other needs and opportunities in the belief that it represents the sole avenue for socio-economic mobility and empowerment. This sentiment is captured in his powerful line:

> If we own farmlands, they will seize it; if we have money, they will snatch it. But if we have education, they can never take it away from us. If you really want to win against them. Study. Study hard and become a powerful man. But when you have power, don't do to anyone what they did to us. It's easy to deepen hate. But we must rise above it.[61]

This echoes the ideology of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who championed education as a crucial tool for societal emancipation and the dismantling of systemic inequities. *Asuran* presents education not merely as a personal tool for advancement, but as a collective weapon for dismantling established hierarchies and achieving social justice. Furthermore, within the cinematic narrative of *Asuran,* the utilization of songs and music functions as a communicative tool for articulating an anti-caste perspective, aligning with the tenets of Ambedkarite politics. The lyrics of a particular song convey a powerful message: 'Rise! Against all odds […] Rise! To hunt them down; Hunt them till they howl in pain. Rise! To agitate, to annihilate; Make them tremble in fright'. [62] This musical expression within the film encapsulates and propagates the ethos of resistance against caste-based oppression, echoing the ideological framework inspired by the teachings of Dr Ambedkar. In juxtaposing the actions of the Dalit protagonist in the film *Asuran* with the tenets of the Ambedkarite stance, one discerns a contemporary manifestation of Dr Ambedkar's enduring principles. Over time, the foundational ideologies propagated by Dr Ambedkar have undergone evolution, leading to adaptations in strategies for navigating and

[61] From the English subtitles of the film.
[62] From the English subtitles of the film.

resisting the entrenched caste system. In the present era, instances of harassment, humiliation, and oppression inflicted upon Dalits by individuals from 'upper caste' backgrounds are no longer passively accepted as societal norms; rather, they are met with active resistance. This resistance draws upon both constitutional avenues, as prescribed by Ambedkarite ideology, and physical strength. Unlike the Gandhian approach to resistance, which advocates patience and even acceptance of physical violence, drawing inspiration from biblical sources such as the Gospel of Matthew ('But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also'), the contemporary Ambedkarite movement embraces a multifaceted strategy.[63] This strategy incorporates various means, including physical retaliation for purposes of self-defence, in order to assert a robust stance within society. The closing shot of *Kaala* with the final credits rolling, juxtaposing the Jai Bhim flag and the Indian flag, resonates with Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar's celebrated assertion, 'We are Indian firstly and lastly'.[64] This deliberate visual pairing evokes a complex interplay of identity and social hierarchy within the Indian context. By placing the symbols of Dalit empowerment (Jai Bhim) alongside the national emblem (Indian flag), the film suggests a potential reconciliation between marginalized communities and the dominant national narrative. Ambedkar's quote further underpins this idea, emphasizing the simultaneous embrace of Indian nationality and a commitment to achieving true social justice for historically disadvantaged groups. This ending, therefore, invites a detailed interpretation, prompting spectators to contemplate the tension between national unity and the ongoing struggles for Dalit inclusion within the Indian nation-state. The national narrative often overlooks the historical oppression they faced, creating a sense of alienation, and hindering their feeling of belonging. This tension

[63] M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House,1958), p.49.

[64] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. Ambedkar in the Bombay Legislature' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 2, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), p. 195.

is reflected in Dr B.R. Ambedkar's powerful statement to M.K. Gandhi: 'I have no homeland'.[65] Additionally, policies aimed at uplifting Dalits, such as affirmative action, is often perceived as conflicting with the meritocratic ideals of national unity, potentially leading to societal resentment. Furthermore, the fear of openly addressing caste issues for fear of fragmenting national unity exacerbates the marginalization of Dalits. In this crucial discourse in India, I posit that achieving balance necessitates a reimagining of national identity that acknowledges past injustices, fosters open dialogue on caste issues, and emphasizes shared values such as democracy and equality. Additionally, effective execution of affirmative action policies is imperative to ensure genuine empowerment and inclusion. Traditionally silent and marginalized in mainstream films, the characters in *Kaala*, hailing from 'lower castes', break free from the shackles of meekness. They reclaim their voices and identities through powerful expressions—through the pulsating rhythms of *Parai* drums and electrifying hip-hop verses, they challenge the Brahminical hegemony that holds them at the periphery.[66]

Kaala portrays the anguish, sorrow, and struggles of the Dalit community, particularly the Tamil Dalits, who make up 15% of Dharavi's population. Originating from Tamil Nadu decades ago, they face significant challenges.[67] However, amidst this adversity, the film also highlights their resilience, community solidarity, and the pivotal role of family in driving the Dalit movement. Unlike other films, it not only encapsulates the pitiable world of Dalits, but offers an Ambedkarite vision as a solution. Hence *Kaala* is a combination of what the world is

[65] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 17.1, ed. by Hari Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, & Ashok Godghate (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), p. 53.
[66] Sumeet Samos, 'Kaala is not a 'Rajinikanth movie' [accessed 22 December 2023].
[67] Rupsa Chakraborty, 'With Covid-19 cases on the rise in Mumbai's Dharavi, migrants from Tamil Nadu try to return', *Hindustan Times*, 05 May 2020 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/with-covid-19-cases-on-the-rise-migrants-from-tamil-nadu-in-mumbai-try-to-return/story-htPd1d0OIsRoJEftIJL7zM.html> [accessed 22 December 2023].

and how it should be: an equal, just, and diverse world with fraternity and humanity. Pa. Ranjith notes that,

> There have been films in the past that depict Dalit characters and lives. They were made by non-Dalits, who view us [Dalits] through a lens of pity. Our world is shown as colourless and poverty-stricken. Yes, we are economically poor but not culturally so. Where is the depiction of our vibrant culture, music, and food? Why is our world shown bereft of it all?[68]

Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* presents a critical examination of Dalit identity within the Indian social landscape. Through an Ambedkarite gaze, the film inquiries into the cultural fabric and everyday realities of a slum community in Mumbai. Ranjith's focus on delicacy and cultural richness within these marginalized spaces subverts the typical negative portrayal of Dalit communities in Indian cinema. The debate of Hindi versus Tamil becomes a microcosm of larger power struggles, highlighting the linguistic hegemony faced by regional languages. *Kaala*'s protagonist, unlike the typical cinematic portrayal of Dalit characters as outlaws or criminals, emerges as a complex figure. He is outspoken, charismatic, and knowledgeable about his rights and the law. This intentional portrayal reframes the narrative from one of Dalit characters being inherently anti-national to one of asserting their rightful place within the national fabric. In contrast, the film's antagonist, Hari Dada, embodies the hypocritical nature of nationalist rhetoric. His political banners proclaim him a patriot who promises to 'clean this country', yet his actions reveal a deep-seated prejudice and a disregard for the rights of marginalized communities. This juxtaposition effectively critiques the appropriation of

[68] Dipti Nagpaul, 'When Dalit filmmakers embrace their identity and reclaim their stories', *The Indian Express,* 12 June 2018 <https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/when-dalit-filmmakers-embrace-their-identity-and-reclaim-their-stories-5209972/> [accessed 21 December 2023].

patriotic symbols and exposes the underlying power dynamics at play. By contrasting these two figures, Ranjith raises critical questions about power dynamics, social exclusion, and the construction of national identity.

Pa. Ranjith's re-interpretation of the established Hindu mythological narrative constitutes a critical subversion that challenges the dominant cultural discourse, while simultaneously empowering and (re)claiming the identities of historically marginalized groups such as Dalits and Bahujan. In *Kaala,* Ravana, the demonized Other in Ramayana, is re-framed as a symbol of resistance against Brahmanical hegemony. When Kaala, under the guise of collective community spirit, eliminates Hari Dada—the Rama figure in the film—the encounter becomes a compelling act of subversion. It shatters the myth of the righteous, caste-sanctioned saviour, and empowers the marginalized to reclaim their agency.[69] Pa. Ranjith is clear about his intentions: 'Cinema can be used by people to claim their freedom. And I use it against the Brahmanical system'. [70] This is not mere rhetoric; it is evident in his manipulation of cinematic tropes including the use of mythology, names, and sartorial choices for the characters. The retelling of Ramayana through a Dalit lens is not mere iconoclasm; it is a deliberately counter-hegemonic act. He challenges the dominant Hindu nationalist narrative, not by negating it, but by re-contextualizing it from the perspective of the oppressed. Pa. Ranjith's earlier film, *Kabali,* showcases another facet of his critical lens. He tackles the labyrinthine issue of Tamil nationalism, which often subsumes caste identities under a supposedly universal banner. Ranjith exposes the fallacy of this assimilationist approach, highlighting the struggle of Dalits

[69] Stalin Rajangam, 'Pa Ranjith's 'Kaala' turns the Ramayana on its head – by making Raavana the hero', Scroll, 14 June 2018 <https://scroll.in/reel/882609/pa-ranjiths-kaala-turns-the-ramayana-on-its-head-by-making-raavana-the-hero> [accessed 26 December 2023].
[70] Pa. Ranjith, 'View: The problem is the Brahminical system, the basis of which is inequality', *The Economic Times,* 24 November 2018 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/view-the-problem-is-the-brahminical-system-the-basis-of-which-is-inequality/articleshow/66787222.cms> [accessed 26 December 2023].

to find their rightful place within a 'Tamil body politic' that often ignores their specific experiences and oppressions.[71]

In a similar vein, Mari Selvaraj, an anti-caste filmmaker, presents an anti-caste reading of the Hindu epic Mahabharata. He incorporates characters from the epic and subverts traditional narratives to convey an Ambedkarite gaze. Selvaraj's (re)imagining of the Mahabharata in the film *Karnan* employs a strategy of character appropriation. While he borrows names from the epic, he subverts their established meanings, imbuing them with new agency and significance within his contemporary narrative. Notably, Selvaraj's Karnan stands in stark contrast to his Mahabharata counterpart. While the Karnan of the epic is traditionally ostracized due to his upbringing in a 'lower caste' household despite his royal lineage, Selvaraj's Karnan embodies courage, intelligence, and unwavering self-respect. This deliberate shift underscores the film's central themes of marginalized identity, community resistance, and pride in one's heritage. Through Karnan's unwavering defiance, Selvaraj challenges the very notion of preordained social hierarchies, crafting a cinematic portrait of empowerment and self-assertion. The cinematic narrative also incorporates a subtle depiction of romantic entanglements, balancing between overwhelming passion and emotional restraint. Notably, the romantic subplot assumes a distinctive character, as the protagonist's love interest bears the name Draupadi, a nomenclature derived from the Mahabharata. In the original mythological context, Karnan, a 'suta-putra', faced ineligibility in pursuing a marital union with Draupadi due to her noble lineage. However, in the cinematic rendition, no impediments obstruct their union, thereby facilitating an amalgamation of contemporary storytelling with mythological

[71] Karthick Ram Manoharan, 'Being Dalit, being Tamil'.

motifs. Consequently, the film endeavours to navigate an alternative reality characterized by a symbolic elevation of historically marginalized entities.[72]

Beyond passive consumption: Ambedkarite spectatorship as agency

Anti-caste films like *Kaala, Kabali, Karnan,* and *Asuran* act as a powerful counter-narrative, stimulating community spirit, challenging the existing hierarchies based on caste, class, and gender, and offering an Ambedkarite spectatorship that subverts the Brahmanical hegemony in cinematic space. These directors' bold representation of marginalized Others disrupts prevailing narratives and the 'sensibilities' of the spectators.[73] Jyoti Nisha's framework of 'Bahujan Spectatorship' draws inspiration from bell hooks' 'oppositional gaze', but I propose a more specific, yet broader, lens: 'Ambedkarite Spectatorship'.[74] This term reflects the historical struggle of Ambedkarites to reclaim their dignity and self-respect within a caste-ridden society. It goes beyond mere opposition, by embodying an inner wisdom and self-awareness that fuels the fight against caste injustice.

This 'Ambedkarite Spectatorship' is not just reactionary, but a proactive force for building an inclusive and humane society. Pa. Ranjith's films use cinematic elements not only for aesthetic enhancement but to subvert dominant narratives and challenge dehumanizing stereotypes of Dalit characters. Central to this is his ability to transform cinema into a medium that represents Dalit lives while actively reimagining their role in society, fostering dignity, pride, and resilience. Manju Edachira's concept of the 'way of being and becoming' captures

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[72] Prantik Sengupta, 'Karnan: Of Symbols And Social Inequality', *Film Companion,* 19 May 2021 <https://www.filmcompanion.in/readers-articles/karnan-movie-review-of-symbols-and-social-inequity-dhanush-mari-selvaraj-rajisha-vijayan> [accessed 27 December 2023].
[73] Manju Edachira, 'Anti-Caste Aesthetics'.
[74] Jyoti Nisha, 'Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship, *EPW Engage*, 15:20 (2020), 2349-8846 <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/indian-cinema-and-bahujan-spectatorship> [accessed 27 December 2023]; bell hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze, Black Looks: Race and Representation,* (Boston: South End Press,1992), pp 115–131.

this dynamic by emphasizing the lived, experiential dimension of Ranjith's anti-caste aesthetic.[75] Ranjith's work goes beyond corrective portrayals of Dalit identity and invites viewers to engage with an empowering redefinition of Dalit existence, celebrating their multi-dimensionality. Through cinematic tools like character arcs, symbolism, and music, his films craft narratives of resilience and aspiration, allowing audiences—especially Dalit spectators—to experience a sense of agency while acknowledging historical oppressions without being confined by them. This transformation extends beyond Dalit spectators, inviting all viewers to reconsider ingrained biases. In doing so, Ambedkarite spectatorship becomes a participatory force for cultural and social change, reshaping collective consciousness and contributing to a more inclusive future in the cinematic realm and beyond. This intricate portrayal fosters empathy and punctures preconceived notions about Dalit individuals, inviting the spectators to connect with their stories on a deeper level. Echoing bell hooks' concept of 'Black looks' as 'interrogating gazes', the anti-caste gaze also questions the reality of visual pleasure instead of passively consuming it. It mobilises a conscious, and critical act of looking.[76]

The 'Savarna gaze', offered by 'upper caste' filmmakers in their representations of Dalit subjectivity, fails to resonate with the Ambedkarite spectatorship. It positions these viewers at the periphery, forcing them to observe their own reality from a distance and with trauma. In contrast, the 'Ambedkarite gaze', employed by Dalit filmmakers in their anti-caste films, empowers viewers from 'lower castes' by granting them agency to reflect on and resonate with the on-screen image. This fosters a strong Ambedkarite spectatorship. And this spectatorship resonates with Manthia Diawara's idea of 'resisting spectatorship', which offers a valuable lens through which to examine the cinematic experiences of marginalized communities, including those within the Indian caste system. By interweaving his insights with

[75] Manju Edachira, 'Anti-Caste Aesthetics'.
[76] bell hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze, Black Looks: Race and Representation,* (Boston: South End Press,1992), pp 115–131.

the principles of Ambedkarite spectatorship, we can develop a deeper understanding of how film both reflects and reinforces social power structures based on race and caste. Both Black and Dalit (Ambedkarite) spectators grapple with the 'impossible position' within dominant narratives. While Black audiences navigate the white gaze and racist portrayals, Ambedkarite spectators confront Brahminical hegemony and 'upper caste' representations. Both groups engage in 'resisting spectatorship' by (de)constructing these narratives and advocating for counter-representations. Both frameworks move beyond the simplistic notion of narcissistic identification.[77]

Ambedkarite spectatorship emphasizes the role of historical oppression and structural inequalities in shaping viewing experiences. Similarly, Diawara highlights how race and gender intersect with the mirror phase (as we understand in Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage), creating diverse and compound spectatorial positions. In Lacan's theory, the Mirror Stage describes a formative moment when an individual recognizes themselves in a reflection or an image, experiencing a duality between their actual fragmented self and the unified, idealized self-represented in the image. This foundational concept underpins identity formation and the subject's relationship with representations. Diawara builds on this framework to highlight how race and gender complicate the spectator's relationship with on-screen representations, especially for marginalized communities. For Black audiences, the white gaze dominates cinematic narratives, constructing Black characters primarily for white spectators' pleasure and reinforcing racial hierarchies. This imposed perspective disrupts the possibility of identification, forcing Black spectators to confront an 'impossible position' where they cannot

[77] Manthia Diawara, 'Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance', *Screen*, 29:4 (1988), 66-79 <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/29.4.66> [accessed 29 December 2023]; Raja M, 'The Visual Representation of Caste'.

fully align with the on-screen representation. Instead, they must navigate the dissonance between their lived realities and the distorted or absent representations in the narrative.[78]

When this is applied to the Ambedkarite context, Dalit spectators experience a similar disruption in identification. Brahminical hegemony, which dominates 'upper caste' cinematic narratives, positions Dalit characters as peripheral, stereotypical, or even absent, denying Dalit viewers the possibility of seeing themselves authentically reflected on screen. The 'Savarna gaze' thus alienates Dalit spectators, requiring them to confront their own realities from a detached and often traumatic perspective. Race and gender intersect with the Mirror Stage in that they shape the idealized images presented within dominant narratives. For Black and Dalit audiences, these images rarely align with their lived experiences. Instead, they are filtered through hegemonic ideologies—white supremacy in the case of Black spectators and Brahminical patriarchy in the case of Dalit spectators. These hegemonies not only dictate who gets to occupy the central roles within narratives but also how marginalized identities are constructed and viewed. The concept of compound spectatorial positions emerges from the intricate intersectionality of identity and experience. Race profoundly influences how bodies are racialized in film, often creating layers of alienation for Black spectators who are compelled to view representations of Blackness filtered through a white supremacist lens. This alienation deepens when gender is introduced as another intersecting factor, as cinematic portrayals frequently reflect patriarchal norms. These compounded dynamics further marginalize individuals such as Black and Dalit women, whose identities are shaped by the confluence of race, gender, and other social hierarchies, making their experiences within these narratives especially complex and alienating.

[78] Manthia Diawara, 'Black Spectatorship.

In resisting spectatorship, both groups actively deconstruct these imposed images. They refuse to passively accept the dominant gaze, instead engaging critically with representations, creating counter-narratives, and seeking spaces where authentic reflections of their identities and histories are possible. This aligns with Ambedkarite spectatorship, which not only challenges the Savarna gaze but also asserts the right to self-representation and narrative agency. By integrating Diawara's perspective with the Ambedkarite gaze, we see a shared critique of the ways dominant ideologies use film to maintain power structures. Both emphasize the transformative potential of resisting spectatorship, where marginalized audiences reclaim agency and redefine their relationship with on-screen representations, moving beyond simplistic identification to critical engagement.

Kaala's explicit engagement with anti-caste themes qualifies it as a genuine Ambedkarite cinematic expression. It meticulously portrays various facets of the anti-caste struggle, including references to Buddha, Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, and the Jai Bhim slogan. The significance of education, agitation, and collective organization are also interwoven throughout the narrative. The act of Beemji, a literal abbreviation of Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar, throwing a stone at the poster of Hari Dada, which reads: 'I am a patriot, I will clean this country,' can be interpreted as a powerful analogy. Beemji embodies the anti-caste movement, actively challenging the entrenched Brahmanical hegemony represented by Hari Dada. This symbolic stone throwing serves as an act of defiance against the brutal caste system and the dominance of Hindutva ideology. However, this defiance is met with a brutal end. In a public display of chilling cruelty, Beemji is killed and hanged, illustrating the tragic irony of his sacrifice. His courageous stand for justice and equality leads to his martyrdom, yet it highlights the harsh reality faced by those who dare to challenge deeply ingrained systems of oppression. This irony underscores the immense courage required to fight for change in a society where the price of dissent can be one's own life. Yet, his sacrifice serves as a catalyst for change,

sparking a movement of unity against oppressive forces. This stands as a poignant reminder of the enduring legacy upheld by the marginalized community, akin to the posthumous impact witnessed following the demise of Dr Ambedkar and more recently Rohit Vemula.[79]

A similar symbolic gesture is employed in Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry*, where the protagonist, Jabya, throws a stone at the camera. This act shatters the illusion of the cinematic lens as an objective observer. By revealing its inherent bias, it forces the viewer to confront the caste system's oppressive structures embedded within the film itself. Both films, through their strategic use of symbolic action, threaten the narrative from *within*, 'implicating the frame, camera, and spectator in the perpetuation of caste hierarchies'.[80] These anti-caste films employ diverse signifiers —colours, symbols, and aesthetics— to subtly encode representations of caste within the narrative. While initially labelled as 'caste films', they go beyond that. They challenge spectators to actively look for these embedded signifiers, ultimately dismantling the idea of the downtrodden being simply victims. Instead, these films show the complexities of the situation.[81]

Conclusion

The analysis in Chapter Two unveils the striking difference between the perspectives of Savarna and Dalit filmmakers in their cinematic narratives. Shashank Khaitan's film *Dhadak* embodies the 'caste-blind' attitude often adopted by Savarna filmmakers, while

[79] Rohit Vemula was a Dalit student at the University of Hyderabad who tragically died by suicide in 2016 after facing caste-based discrimination and harassment. Dalit activists called his death an 'institutional murder.' His death sparked widespread protests and brought attention to the ongoing struggles of Dalit students in academic institutions, highlighting the intersection of caste-based oppression and institutionalized violence in contemporary India. He became a symbol of resistance in student struggles and the Dalit movement across India. 'Vemula's suicide an 'institutional murder': Satchidanandan', *The Hindu*, 17 November 2021<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Vemula's-suicide-an-'institutional-murder'-says-poet Satchidanandan/article60541030.ece> [accessed 05 January 2025].
[80] Manju Edachira, 'Anti-Caste Aesthetics'.
[81] Raja M, 'The Visual Representation of Caste'.

Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* disrupts this impression by boldly confronting caste and its entrenched structures. Dalit filmmakers are more apt to tackle caste issues head-on, forging a cinematic discourse that resonates with conscious Ambedkarite spectatorship rooted in lived experiences. In contrast, Savarna spectatorship often exhibits a lesser degree of scrutiny toward representations and narratives around the world of Dalit and caste-based formations presented by 'upper caste' filmmakers. This divergence in perspectives reflects the filmmakers' ideological inclinations and intention, and the emergence of a more insightful Ambedkarite spectatorship that actively engages with cinematic portrayals. This critical engagement contributes to a comprehensive understanding of caste dynamics in the cinematic world.

The statement often heard that cinema is a reflection of society holds true in many senses, and it simultaneously influences societal norms. Over time, glimpses of change occurring in society can be observed in various forms within cinema, whether it be the increasing trend of education among rural populations, the progressive mindset towards women, or the portrayal of the struggles, unity, and resistance of the impoverished. Indian cinema has provided a platform for these facets of societal transformation. However, when discussing issues related to caste, it is evident that this matter finds limited space in the cinematic realm. Even if space is allocated, it is often approached from an 'outsider perspective', lacking a profound comprehension of the intricacies of the lives of the Dalit community, which is most affected by caste-based discrimination. Cinema has often equated caste and Dalits with 'class', obscuring Dalit identity for someone perceived as casteless and poor from a village. This obscuration suppresses their inherent complexities and perpetuates their marginalization.

Cinema, while dynamically representing other societal issues, has not consistently highlighted the growing consciousness and struggle for self-esteem among Dalits. The collective efforts for political assertion and the defiance of assertiveness in political and higher

educational institutions have been downplayed. To counter the entrenched dominance of the 'upper castes' in cinema and celebrate the burgeoning Ambedkarite identity among Dalits in recent years, there is a genuine need for more Ambedkarite anti-caste filmmakers. These filmmakers would act as insiders, offering a unique perspective on the Dalit experience. Their films would boldly portray the dynamism, the interplay of 'change and continuity', with the aim of empowering the growing Ambedkarite spectatorship and finding its 'authentic' reflection on screen. And this truth was substantiated when anti-caste Ambedkarite filmmakers such as Nagraj Manjule, Neeraj Ghaywan, Pa. Ranjit, and Mari Selvaraj entered the cinematic world. They not only challenged established narratives but also presented a robust alternative Ambedkarite lens. In this chapter, I have attempted to discuss the discourse surrounding these developments through anti-caste films.

Conclusions: Constructing an Ambedkarite Grammar of Cinema

The concept of ‘Constructing an Ambedkarite Grammar of Cinema’ unfolds as both a theoretical and practical intervention into the landscape of Indian cinema. By envisioning a structured framework—comparable to linguistic rules—for representing Dalit narratives, this thesis challenges the pervasive Brahminical gaze that dominates cinematic discourse. Instead, it advocates for a counter-narrative rooted in equity and ‘authenticity’, one that foregrounds the lived ‘realities’ and struggles of Dalit communities. By integrating an Ambedkarite perspective, this study contributes to a growing movement in film studies and visual culture, where the language of cinema becomes a tool for social justice, challenging entrenched caste hierarchies and fostering inclusivity.

The Ambedkarite grammar of cinema is not merely a theoretical construct but a praxis-driven framework that transforms both the content and the form of cinematic representation. By emphasizing the importance of Dalit- centred narratives and employing counter-hegemonic stylistic choices, this grammar seeks to dismantle the structural inequalities embedded in mainstream Indian cinema. It challenges the homogenized, ‘upper caste’ narratives that dominate the industry and instead foregrounds stories that ‘authentically’ represent marginalized communities. This grammar forms a new cinematic language, utilized by Dalit (Ambedkarite) filmmakers to depict the multidimensional aspects of the Dalit world. It also equips Ambedkarite scholars to analyse films critically, advancing the discourse on representation, power, and justice in Indian cinema.

The introductory chapter examined the historical and cultural context of Hindi cinema, focusing on the erasure and (mis)representation of Dalit experiences. Using an Ambedkarite lens, the study critiques the systemic exclusion of marginalized communities, particularly

Dalits, in mainstream cinema. It builds on the critique of the 'Brahmanization of Bollywood' and highlights a gap in Indian cinema scholarship—the absence of Dr Ambedkar's anti-caste perspective. While much scholarship addresses themes like nationalism and gender, representation of caste, particularly Dalit representation, remains underexplored. This study aims to fill that gap by integrating both Western theories and Dr Ambedkar's writings. Additionally, drawing on Kaushik Bhaumik's concept of 'Cinema Rajasthan,' the analysis includes 73 Hindi films set in Rajasthan, with six selected for in-depth study.

In Chapter One, the thesis examined Rajasthan-based Hindi films *Guide* and *Ghulami*, investigating how these films utilize the Rajasthani landscape to narrate caste-inflected social realities. Drawing on the ideological contrast between Gandhi's utopian vision of the village and Dr Ambedkar's pragmatic critique, the analysis revealed how the cinematic portrayal of rural spaces often perpetuates exclusionary narratives. This chapter argued that the visual and narrative treatment of Dalit realities in these films reflected the larger sociopolitical dynamics of caste in the Nehruvian idea of India.

Chapter Two extended this critique by analysing the Bollywood remake *Dhadak* in contrast to the Marathi film *Sairat*, focusing on the 'diversion of content and intent'. While *Sairat* presented a raw and unflinching critique of caste-based oppression, *Dhadak* sanitized this narrative, replacing it with an aestheticized romance that omitted critical caste-specific contexts. This shift reflects not only a divergence in content but also the intent of the filmmakers, whose ideological stance and implicit biases shaped the narrative. The creators of *Dhadak* prioritized a caste-neutral portrayal, aligning with dominant caste perspectives and diluting the original's subversive critique. My Ambedkarite analysis underscores how such diversions in intent perpetuate a sanitized version of reality, failing to challenge caste hierarchies and instead reinforcing hegemonic ideologies.

Chapter Three shifted focus to the representation of Dalit women in *Bawandar*, *Lajwanti*, and *Kaanchli*. By interrogating the cinematic style, narrative choices, and the filmmakers' gaze, this chapter highlighted how these films alternately perpetuated or challenged stereotypes about Dalit women. Central to these films is the theme of 'honour' (*Izzat*), a concept deeply intertwined with caste identity, serving as a tool for enforcing dominance and control over women's bodies and choices.

The final chapter of my thesis engaged with the emergence of anti-caste cinema, centring on Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* as a landmark work in the creation of an Ambedkarite grammar of cinema. This chapter elaborated on how Ranjith's films foreground Dalit experiences, history, and resistance, constructing a counter-hegemonic visual language that reclaims agency and representation. It also introduced the concepts of 'Ambedkarite spectatorship' and the 'Ambedkarite gaze,' which offer critical frameworks for analysing and contesting the Brahminical narratives that dominate Indian cinema. Furthermore, the chapter explored how the growing consciousness among Dalit viewers is reshaping their perception of cinema and influencing how they contest and relate to cinematic representations. This emergent Ambedkarite spectatorship reflects a transformative shift, empowering audiences to actively engage with and challenge hegemonic narratives while fostering a deeper connection with films that centre Dalit voices and aspirations.

The concept of 'Ambedkarite spectatorship' builds upon this framework by examining how Dalit audiences actively interpret and critique films through their lived experiences. This perspective shifts the focus from passive consumption to active engagement, enabling a nuanced understanding of how marginalized viewers relate to cinematic portrayals of caste. This study found that very few films accurately depict Dalit realities, and when they do, they often reinforce stereotypes about Dalits. A distinct contrast was observed in the portrayal of Dalits between films by 'upper caste' filmmakers and those produced by Ambedkarite

filmmakers. This underscores the importance of presenting an 'authentic', unbiased portrayal of Dalits by ensuring either first-hand experience or an empathetic perspective. Additionally, it is essential to involve a diversified team throughout the process, from research to the final production of the film.

In this thesis, I approach the analysis of film through a lens that emphasizes the medium itself—examining how films engage with themes, visual language, and narrative structures independent of external interpretations or critiques. Central to this analysis is the concept of the gaze, which plays a pivotal role in how the viewer interacts with and interprets visual content. By examining the interplay between spectatorship and cinematic representation, my work aims to contribute to broader discussions within film studies, not only with a regional focus but also in relation to global film theories.

While my research has a strong regional focus, addressing specific cultural and historical contexts, it also aims to engage with universal questions surrounding the act of viewing and interpretation in cinema. This dual approach allows for a deeper understanding of both localized nuances and their relevance to global discourse in film theory. In this way, my thesis not only identifies gaps in regional film scholarship but also provides a framework for understanding how these regional perspectives contribute to and influence global discussions within the field of film studies.

In 2022, the second season of the web series *Panchayat* premiered on the OTT (over-the-top) platform Amazon Prime. At that time, I was in the first year of my PhD. The series had already gained significant popularity when its first season was released in 2020, just one month after the Covid-19 lockdown was imposed by the Indian government. With everyone confined to their homes, OTT platforms became a primary source of entertainment, and *Panchayat* quickly became a hit. Its humorous portrayal of the mundane aspects of village life resonated

with a wide audience, particularly those with roots in rural India. The series' success led to high anticipation for the second season, which was also well-received. While I enjoyed the first season, I watched the second season more critically. I found several problematic elements, which I articulated in an article for *RoundTable India*. Specifically, I argued that the 'upper caste' director employed a Savarna gaze, depicting a village where all dominant positions are occupied by Brahmins.[1] In contrast, members of marginalized castes are depicted through a character struggling to secure a toilet for his home, highlighting their marginalization. When I shared this article on social media, it garnered significant attention, with thousands of shares and widespread discussion. Journalists brought these concerns to the attention of the series' creators, who responded by stating, 'This was not our intention; we simply showed what we observed. It is just a coincidence. We will be more careful in the future, and as storytellers, we will strive to narrate stories of other groups as well'.[2] In June 2024, the third season of *Panchayat* was released. While the creators included more characters from marginalized communities, these characters are still depicted from an 'upper caste' gaze, often shown struggling to survive and relying on the mercy of 'upper caste' characters. This persistent portrayal shows the creators' deeply ingrained caste gaze, privileges, and biases despite their claims of unintentionality and inclusivity.[3]

Why has the depiction in this web series turned out to be problematic? The primary issue I found lies in the lack of inclusivity within its creative team, which includes the director, writer, and producer—all of whom come from Brahmin 'upper caste' backgrounds. Conversely, how did *Dahaad*, a web series set in Rajasthan featuring a Dalit woman as a sub-inspector and

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[1] Neeraj Bunkar, 'Panchayat: Rural Dalit In Savarna Fantasy', *RoundTable India*, 31st May 2022 <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/panchayat-rural-dalit-in-savarna-fantasy>[accessed 13 June 2024].

[2] Lallantop Cinema, 'Panchayat Series epic Interview: Arunabh Kumar, Deepak Mishra, Chandan Kumar|Saurabh Dwivedi|TVF', online video recording, *YouTube,* 05th June 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArmdkrcB1zo&t=4197s> [accessed 15 June 2024].

[3] Neeraj Bunkar, 'Savarna Saviors and Subaltern Stereotypes: The Caste Problem in 'Panchayat'', *RoundTable India*, 18th June 2024 <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/savarna-saviors-and-subaltern-stereotypes-the-caste-problem-in-panchayat/> [accessed 19 June 2024].

protagonist, manage to break away from the norm, where Dalit protagonists in films and television shows are seldom seen, especially in a positive light? The answer is both complex and straightforward: it involves incorporating perspectives from the community to which the character belongs. The creators of *Dahaad* engaged activists and a multi-media artist from the Dalit community as part of their research team, ensuring that they break stereotypes instead of perpetuating them.[4] This approach signifies a new development in popular culture, where the diversity within the Dalit community is increasingly acknowledged by 'upper caste' directors and producers, albeit at a gradual pace.

The last decade has seen a considerable shift in Indian cinema, with the rising influence of right-wing ideology, particularly after 2014 under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This shift reflects a deliberate use of film as a tool for political and ideological propagation. The BJP's strategic engagement with the cinematic medium has resulted in a series of films that serve to bolster its agenda, shaping public perception and fostering a specific narrative centred around nationalism, historical revisionism, and cultural identity. These films—ranging from *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2014, Sanjaya Baru) to *The Sabarmati Report* (2024, Dheeraj Sarna)—function as more than just entertainment; they are cultural instruments designed to galvanize support for Hindu nationalist policies and create a unified national identity aligned with the party's ideological tenets.[5] Prime Minister Modi's references to films like *The Kerala Story* (2023, Sudipto Sen) and *Article 370* (2024, Aditya Suhas Jambhale) during political rallies further highlight the symbiotic relationship between

[4] Neeraj Bunkar, ''Dahaad': In pursuit of a serial killer, it's the Constitution vs caste', *Forward Press*, 28 June 2023 <https://www.forwardpress.in/2023/06/dahaad-in-pursuit-of-a-serial-killer-its-the-constitution-vs-caste/> [accessed 17 June 2024].

[5] These films, including *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2014, Sanjaya Baru), *PM Narendra Modi* (2019, Omung Kumar) *Uri – The Surgical Strike* (2019, Aditya Dhar), *The Kashmir Files* (2022, Vivek Agnihotri), *Hindutva* (2022, Karan Razdan), *The Kerala Story* (2023, Sudipto Sen), *Bastar: The Naxal Story* (2024, Sudipto Sen), *Swatantra Veer Savarkar* (2024, Randeep Hooda), *Jahangir National University* (2024, Vinay Sharma), *Article 370* (2024, Aditya Suhas Jambhale), *Main Atal Hoon* (2024, Ravi Jadhav), *Bengal 1947* (2024, Akashaditya Lama), *Razakar* (2024, Yaata Satyanarayana), *Fighter* (2024, Siddharth Anand), *The Sabarmati Report* (2024, Dheeraj Sarna).

the film industry and political discourse, where cinema is leveraged to reinforce and disseminate the BJP's vision for 'Hindu Rāshtrā'—a nation based on the ethics, culture, values, and ethos of the Hindu religion.[6] This trend underscores a broader cultural strategy that uses the influential power of cinema to reinforce a singular, homogenized national identity, which resonates with the principles of Hindu nationalism and aids in consolidating the party's political base.

The emergence of a powerful anti-caste cinematic movement, particularly within the works of Pa. Ranjith, has significantly re-shaped the landscape of Indian cinema. Beginning with his debut film *Attakathi* (2012) and continuing through to his most recent release, *Thangalaan* (2024), Pa. Ranjith has established a distinct and radical genre that serves as an alternative to the conventional portrayal of Dalits and their histories in Indian cinema. This body of work has not only expanded the scope of Dalit representation but also contributed to the construction of a new Ambedkarite cinematic grammar.

Ranjith's films depart from the traditional narrative tropes that have long marginalized Dalit identities, instead foregrounding their experiences, struggles, and histories with 'authenticity' and nuance. By doing so, he is not merely creating a series of Dalit-themed films but is actively engaged in cultivating a robust and comprehensive anti-caste cinematic force. This force encompasses filmmakers, actors, singers, lyricists, cinematographers, and writers, all of whom are provided with a platform, resources, and a launching pad by Ranjith, thereby

[6] 'The Kerala Story brings out terror conspiracies: PM', *The Hindu*, 06 May 2023 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/the-kerala-story-brings-out-terror-conspiracies-pm/article66817991.ece> [accessed 03 June 2024]; 'PM Modi says Article 370 movie 'useful for people to get correct information'; actor Yami Gautam reacts', *Livemint*, 21 February 2024 <https://www.livemint.com/news/pm-modi-says-article-370-film-useful-for-people-to-get-correct-information-actor-yami-gautam-reacts-11708483395274.html> [accessed 03 June 2024]; 'Exposes truth': After PM Modi, Amit Shah backs 'Sabarmati Report', *The Times of India*, 18 November 2024 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/exposes-truth-after-pm-modi-amit-shah-backs-sabarmati-report/articleshow/115412291.cms> [accessed 03 June 2024].

nurturing a vibrant community of Ambedkarite creatives within the industry. In this way, through his films, he challenges the conventional idea of what is popular, thereby re-creating the 'politics of popular' and redefining the notion of popularity.[7]

In the face of the rising tide of Hindutva politics and its associated ideological efforts to re-write and distort history, Pa. Ranjith stands as a singular and unwavering Ambedkarite force within the national (Indian) cinematic domain. His work directly contests and negates these efforts, offering a counter-narrative that (re)claims and re-asserts the historical and cultural dimensions of the Dalit community. *Thangalaan* (2024), exemplifies this approach by exploring the historical lineage of the Dalit community and its deep connection to the rich heritage of Buddhism. The film draws inspiration from Dr B.R. Ambedkar's groundbreaking study, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*. Through bold symbolism, carefully crafted mise-en-scène, evocative songs, and compelling narrative content, the film does not shy away from depicting the ruthless role of Brahminical forces in distorting the culture, nature, language, beliefs, and practices of the Buddhist ancestors of present-day Dalits and Adivasis.[8]

At a policy level, my findings highlight the importance of government intervention in promoting equitable representation within the cinematic sphere. It is crucial for policy frameworks to be established to ensure the participation, representation, and equal stake of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, in the film industry. I believe the government has a responsibility and accountability to uplift marginalized groups across all fields, including cinema. Additionally, the film fraternity, including independent organizations of writers,

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[7] Aarti Wani, 'Sairat's Transgressive Femininity: Quizzing Marathi Cinema', in *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood: The New Independent Cinema Revolution,* ed. by Ashvin Immanuel Devasundaram (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp.224-25.

[8] Neeraj Bunkar, Pa. Ranjith's 'Thangalaan' is another compelling portrayal of the struggles of the Bahujan', *Forward Press*, 17 August 2024 <https://www.forwardpress.in/2024/08/pa-ranjiths-thangalaan-is-another-compelling-portrayal-of-the-struggles-of-the-bahujan/> [accessed 05 September 2024].

directors, and producers, should take the lead—both as a moral responsibility and on humanitarian grounds—in ensuring that Dalit voices are authentically and meaningfully represented in cinema. This can be achieved through policies and practices that promote inclusivity and equity, contributing to a more just and representative cinematic landscape.

This study does not aim to present an exhaustive framework but rather to initiate a critical conversation about constructing an Ambedkarite grammar of cinema. The scope of this thesis is intentionally broad, reflecting the complexities and multifaceted nature of Dalit representation in Indian cinema. While the work draws on a diverse range of films, theories, and perspectives, the goal is not to suggest finality or comprehensive conclusions but to contribute to an evolving discourse. The dynamic and ever-changing socio-political landscape of India, alongside the emergence of new filmmakers, narratives, and technologies, ensures that the process of constructing and refining an Ambedkarite cinematic grammar will remain an ongoing and iterative endeavour. This thesis is a foundational step in that direction, offering a robust framework for further critical engagements and practical applications in the field.

APPENDIX 1: CASTE FILMS

1. *Aakrosh,* dir. by Govind Nihalani (Krsna Movies,1980).
2. *Aarakshan,* dir. by Prakash Jha (Reliance Entertainment, 2011).
3. *Achhut*, dir. by Chandulal Shah (Ranjit Film, 1940).
4. *Achhut Kanya,* dir. by Franz Osten (Bombay Talkies, 1936).
5. *Amar Singh Chamkila*, dir. by Imtiaz Ali (Netflix, 2024).
6. *Ankur,* dir. by Shyam Benegal (Blaze Film Enterprises, 1974).
7. *Article 15,* dir. by Anubhav Sinha (Zee Studios, 2019).
8. *Banaras: A Mystic Love Story,* dir. by Pankaj Parashar (Setu Creations, 2006).
9. *Bawandar,* dir. Jag Mundhra (Smriti Pictures, 2000).
10. *Bandit Queen,* dir. by Shekhar Kapur (Kaleidoscope Entertainment,1994).
11. *Bheed,* dir. by Anubhav Sinha (AA Films, 2023).
12. *Bhumika,* dir. by Shyam Benegal (Blaze Film Enterprises, 1976).
13. *Chachi 420*, dir. Kamal Haasan (Raaj Kamal Films International, 1997).
14. *Chauhar,* dir. by Raghubeer Singh (Dinkar's Film Productions, 2017).
15. *Chauranga,* dir. by Bikas Ranjan Mishra (Anticlock Films, 2016).
16. *Dhadak,* dir. by Shashank Khaitan (Dharma Productions & Zee Studios, 2018).
17. *Dhadak 2*, dir. by Shazia Iqbal (Dharma Productions, Zee Studios & Cloud 9 Pictures 2025).
18. *Dharmatma,* dir. by V. Shantaram (Prabhat Films, 1935).
19. *Dirty Politics,* dir. by K. C. Bokadia (Zee Music, 2015).
20. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar,* dir. by Jabbar Patel (The Mooknayak, 2000).
21. *Eklavya: The Royal Guard,* dir. by (Eros International, 2007).
22. *Geeli Pucchi,* dir. by Neeraj Ghaywan (Netflix, 2021).

23. *Ghulami,* dir. by J. P. Dutta (Nadiadwala Sons, 1985).
24. *Guddu Rangeela,* dir. by Subhash Kapoor (Fox Star Studios, 2015).
25. *Guthlee Ladoo*, dir. by Ishrat R. Khan (UV Films, 2023).
26. *Haat: The Weekly Bazaar*, dir. by Seema Kapoor (NFDC, 2011).
27. *Hurdang,* dir. by Nikhil Nagesh Bhat (AA Films, 2022).
28. *I Am Kalam,* dir. by Nila Madhab Panda (Ultra Films, 2011).
29. *Jhund,* dir. by Nagraj Manjule (Zee Studios, 2022).
30. *Kathal,* dir. by Yashowardhan Mishra (Netflix, 2023).
31. *Khap*, dir. by Ajai Sinha (Ananda Film & Telecommunications, 2011).
32. *Khuda Ki Shaan,* dir. by R.S. Choudhury (Imperial Films, 1931).
33. *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India,* dir. by Ashutosh Gowariker (Aamir Khan Productions, 2001).
34. *Lost,* dir. by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury (ZEE5, 2023).
35. *Madam Chief Minister,* dir. by Subhash Kapoor (T-Series Films & Kangra Talkies, 2021)
36. *Manjhi – The Mountain Man,* dir. by Ketan Mehta (Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2015).
37. *Manthan,* dir. by Shyam Benegal (Sahyadri Films, 1976).
38. *Masaan,* dir. by Neeraj Ghaywan (Drishyam Films, 2015).
39. *Matto Ki Saikil,* dir. by M. Gani (PVR Pictures, 2022).
40. *Maya Darpan*, dir. by Kumar Shahani (NFDC, 1972).
41. *Mirch Masala,* dir. by Ketan Mehta (NFDC,1987).
42. *Mrigayaa,* dir. by Mrinal Sen (Udaya Bhaskar, 1976).
43. *Mukkabaaz,* dir. by Anurag Kashyap (Eros International, 2018).
44. *Newton,* dir. by Amit V. Masurkar (Eros International, 2017).
45. *Nishant,* dir. by Shyam Benegal (Blaze Film Enterprises,1975).

46. *Om-Dar-B-Dar,* dir. by Kamal Swaroop (PVR Director's Rare, 1988).

47. *Pareeksha,* dir. by Prakash Jha (Prakash Jha Productions, 2020).

48. *Parinati,* dir. by Prakash Jha (Prakash Jha,1989).

49. *Phule,* dir. by Anant Mahadevan (Dancing Shiva Films & Kingsmen Productions, 2025).

50. *Raajneeti,* dir. by Prakash Jha (UTV Motion Pictures, 2010).

51. *Rudaali,* dir. by Kalpana Lajmi (NFDC/Doordarshan,1993).

52. *Serious Men,* dir. by Sudhir Mishra (Netflix, 2020).

53. *Shamshera,* dir. by Karan Malhotra (Yash Raj Films, 2022).

54. *Sonchiriya*, dir. by Abhishek Chaubey (RSVP Movies, 2019).

55. *Sujata*, dir. by Bimal Roy (Bimal Roy Productions, 1956).

56. *Susman,* dir. by Shyam Bengal (Sahyadri Films, 1987).

57. *Swades,* dir. by Ashutosh Gowariker (UTV Motion Pictures, 2004).

58. *Tamas,* dir. by Govind Nihalani (Blaze Ents, 1988).

59. *Tarpan*, dir. by K. Bikram Singh (NFDC/Doordarshan, 1994).

60. *The Naxalites,* dir. by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (Naya Sansar,1980).

61. *Vedaa,* dir. by Nikkhil Advani (Zee Studios, 2024).

62. *200 Halla Ho*, dir. by Alok Batra & Sarthak Dasgupta (Yoodlee films, 2021).

APPENDIX 2: CINEMA RAJASTHAN

1. *Aan,* dir. by Mehboob Khan (Mehboob Productions, 1952).
2. *Afwaah,* dir. by Sudhir Mishra (AA Films, 2023).
3. *Amar Singh Rathore,* dir. by Jaswant Jhaveri (Gourishankar Goel, 1956).
4. *Angrezi Medium,* dir. by Homi Adajania (Pen India Limited & Jio Studios, 2020).
5. *Batwara,* dir. by J. P. Dutta (Aftab Pictures, 1989).
6. *Bawandar,* dir. Jag Mundhra (Smriti Pictures, 2000).
7. *Bhoot Police,* dir. by Pavan Kirpalani (Tips Industries &12 Street Entertainment, 2021).
8. *Border,* dir. by J. P. Dutta (J. P. Films, 1997).
9. *CityLights,* dir. by Hansal Mehta (Vishesh Films, 2014).
10. *Chitor Rani Padmini,* dir. by Ch. Narayana Murthy (Uma Pictures, 1963).
11. *Desire of the Heart,* dir. by James Kicklighter (DOTH Entertainment LLC, 2013).
12. *Dhanak*, dir. by Nagesh Kukunoor (PVR Pictures, 2016).
13. *Dhadak,* dir. by Shashank Khaitan (Zee Studios & Dharma Productions, 2018).
14. *Dirty Politics,* dir. by K. C. Bokadia (Zee Music, 2015).
15. *Do Boond Pani,* dir. by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (Naya Sansar, 1971).
16. *Dor,* dir. by Nagesh Kukunoor (Sahara One Motion Pictures, 2006).
17. *Duvidha,* dir. by Mani Kaul (Film Finance Corporation (NFDC), 1973).
18. *Eklavya: The Royal Guard,* dir. by Vidhu Vinod Chopra (Vinod Chopra Productions & Eros International, 2007).
19. *Ek Paheli Leela,* dir. by Bobby Khan (AA Films & B4U Motion Pictures, 2015).
20. *Firangi,* dir. by Rajiev Dhingra (K9 Films, 2017).
21. *Genesis,* dir. by Mrinal Sen (Mrinal Sen PLRT Productions, 1986).
22. *Ghulami,* dir. by J. P. Dutta (Nadiadwala Sons & Bombino Video Pvt. Ltd., 1985).
23. *Guide,* dir. by Vijay Anand (Navketan Films, 1965).

24. *Gulaal,* dir. by Anurag Kashyap (Zee Limelight, 2009).
25. *Haat - The Weekly Bazaar,* dir. by Seema Kapoor (NFDC, 2011).
26. *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam,* dir. by Sanjay Leela Bhansali (Sony Pictures Network & Eros International, 1999).
27. *I am Kalam*, dir. by Nila Madhab Panda (Ultra Films, 2011).
28. *Jodha Akbar,* dir. by Ashutosh Gowariker (UTV Motion Pictures, 2008).
29. *Kadvi Hawa,* dir. by Nila Madhab Panda (Eros International & Drishyam Films, 2017).
30. *Kasaai,* dir. by Gajendra Shanker Shrotriya (Harbinger Creations, 2019).
31. *Kaanchli: Life in a Slough,* dir. by Dedipya Joshii (Pisceann Pictures, 2020).
32. *Khoobsurat,* dir. by Shashanka Ghosh (UTV Motion Pictures, 2014).
33. *Kshatriya,* dir. by J. P. Dutta (Pushpa Movies, 1993).
34. *Lajwanti: The Honor Keeper,* dir. by Pushpendra Singh (Crowdfunded, 2014).
35. *Lamhe,* dir. by Yash Chopra (Yash Raj Films, 1991).
36. *Lekin,* dir. by Gulzar (Lata Mangeshkar, 1990).
37. *Maharana Pratap: The First Freedom Fighter,* dir. by Dr Pradeep Kumawat (Alok Audio Visuals Pvt. Ltd & Alok Sanskar Vision Films, 2012).
38. *Manorama Six Feet Under,* dir. by Navdeep Singh (Shemaroo Entertainment).
39. *Mardaani 2,* dir. by Gopi Puthran (Yash Raj Films).
40. *Maya Darpan,* dir. by Kumar Shahani (NFDC, 1972).
41. *Mera Gaon Mera Desh,* dir. by Raj Khosla (Khosla Enterprises, 1971).
42. *Meera,* dir. by Gulzar (Suchitra International, 1979).
43. *Mehbooba,* dir. by Afzal Khan (Eros Labs, 2008).
44. *Mirch,* dir. by Vinay Shukla (Reliance Big Pictures, 2010).
45. *Mirzya,* dir. by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra (AA Films, 2016).
46. *Mughal-E-Azam* dir. by K. Asif (Sterling Investment Corporation, 1960).

47. *Mr. & Mrs. Mahi,* dir. by Sharan Sharma (Dharma Productions & Zee Studios, 2024).

48. *Nanhe Jaisalmer- A Dream come true,* dir. by Samir Karnik (Eros International, 2007).

49. *Neel Kamal,* dir. by Kidar Sharma (Bombay Talkies, 1947).

50. *Om-Dar-B-Dar,* dir. by Kamal Swaroop (PVR Director's Rare, 1988).

51. *Padmaavat,* dir. by Sanjay Leela Bhansali (Viacom18 Motion Pictures, 2018).

52. *Paheli,* dir. by Amol Palekar (Red Chillies Entertainment, 2005).

53. *Parinati,* dir. by Prakash Jha (National Film Development Corporation of India, 1986).

54. *Parmanu: The Story of Pokhran,* dir. by Abhishek Sharma (Pooja Entertainment, 2018).

55. *Pataakha,* dir. by Vishal Bhardwaj (B4U Motion Pictures & Eros International, 2018).

56. *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo,* dir. by Sooraj R. Barjatya (Fox Star Studios, 2015).

57. *Rajput*, dir. by Vijay Anand (M. R. Productions, 1982).

58. *Reshma Aur Shera,* dir. by Sunil Dutt (Ajanta Arts, 1971).

59. *Road,* dir. by Rajat Mukherjee (Varma Corporation Ltd, 2002).

60. *Road, Movie,* dir. by Dev Benegal (August Entertainment, 2009).

61. *Rudaali,* dir. by Kalpana Lajmi (NFDC and Doordarshan, 1993).

62. *Rukmavati Ki Haveli,* dir. by Govind Nihalani (Doordarshan, 1991).

63. *Saankal,* dir. by Dedipya Joshii (Pisceann Pictures, 2015).

64. *Sanshodhan,* dir. by Govind Nihalani (NDFC & UNICEF, 1996).

65. *Shaadisthan,* dir. by Raj Singh Chaudhary (Famous Digital Studio, 2021).

66. *Shuddh Desi Romance,* dir. by Maneesh Sharma (Yash Raj Films, 2013).

67. *The Song of Scorpions,* dir. by Anup Singh (Agora Films, 2017).

68. *Tarpan,* dir. by K. Bikram Singh (NFDC & Doordarshan, 1994).

69. *Thar,* dir. by Raj Singh Chaudhary (Anil Kapoor Films, 2022).

70. *The Warrior,* dir. by Asif Kapadia (FilmFour Distributors, 2002).

71. *Trishna,* dir. by Michael Winterbottom (Artificial Eye, 2011).

72. *Vedaa,* dir. by Nikkhil Advani (Zee Studios, 2024).

73. *Veer Amarsingh Rathod,* dir. by Radhakant (NH Studioz, 1981).

74. *Veer,* dir. by Anil Sharma (Eros International, 2010).

75. *Zubeidaa,* dir. by Shyam Benegal (Yash Raj Films, 2001).

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