Manifestation of Subaltern Narratives in Cinema

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Abstract: It is seemingly an obligatory phenomenon to be observe and analyze caste in Indian cinema, as cinema being an extension of art and literature, ostensibly serves an imperative function in representing the socio-cultural, political scenarios of the country, since caste system is an integral entity in the socio-cultural sphere, it seems indispensable to examine the relationship of these binaries. Nicolas Deakin attributes film as the most potent media in understanding how a culture responds to various issues, from mental illness to social attitudes and behavior. Films reflect the society within which they are made but also influence society as a result. The gargantuan Hindi cinema have scantly contribution to the representation of caste related issues, moreover it’s also imperative to understand on what ideological framework does the representation of Subalterns illustrated in such films. We hereby argue that the manifestation of Subaltern (Dalits) in Hindi cinema are relatively more in the Ghandian framework rather excommunicating the Phule-Ambedkarite perspective. The narratives of the Subaltern in Hindi cinema mostly attempts to declare stereotypical imageries, variant only with few film makers. The article also attempts to putforth works of Nagarajanmanje and other contemporary Hindi Film makers as an alternate approach to the preexisting subaltern (Dalits) narratives in Hindi cinema.

Keywords: Subaltern; narratives; cinema; Dalits, manifestation

I. Introduction

Cinema is not just a mode of entertainment, its also a integrant referral of culture in India. For millions of Indians whatever they do, almost everything comes from cinema. Cinema has provided for the majority of India’s citizens an entertainment with mixed culture and creation. As a cultural reference Indian cinema reflects the social diversity of the country and the density of everyday life. Moreover Cinema also perceived to be influential, it reflects all the complexities of the society like other forms of art. The advantage with cinema is that it can reach out to the wide audience and can influence people mind. It's very apparent that cinema seems so prominent in the Indian society, in such phase it would be obligatory to observe how Indian cinema deals with caste? how caste functions in the industry? Do Hindi cinema provides spatial representation for Dalits? If yes, how such Dalits are represented? Scholars generally perceive that Cinema should be democratic, responsible & impartial medium. With the huge capacity, cinema also bears the huge responsibility of seeking truth and providing platform to the marginalized people (Dalits). There might be an inquiry on why is it essential to know about Dalit representation in Cinema? why is it significant to understand about Dalit cinema, why not about other caste. It is very obligatory here to observe that the issues pertaining to caste is about the most privileged (Brahminical caste), the medium privileged (Intermediate caste Hindus) and the underprivileged (shudras/panchamas/Dalits). The history of caste from ancient period would substantiate the proclamation on this category of privileges.

Dalits in Cinema

It would be essential to look through the issue of caste from the grassroot approach, though there seems many issues for the intermediate Hindus towards caste system, the one who has been historically disadvantaged, marginalized, retained from the socio-political, economic & cultural development and prone to be victims of gruesome violence and massacre are Dalits. Instead among few, the scenario hitherto has not changed its dimensions over majority of Dalits. In correspondence to that, its mandatory to observe caste from the bottom of the pyramid (Varna structure) to understand its magnitude of existence and pre-eminence. So even in observing Indian cinema it would be indispensable to look through how the marginalized has been portrayed in films and also cinema being an extension of art, what space does it provide for Dalits. Getting straight to the context, 'the artistic spaces, such as the cinema industry, are still untouched by Dalit issues, narratives or stories. Indian cinema has either been unable to represent Dalit life and concerns on the big screen or has willingly chosen not to.
to do so. The severe and complex problems of Dalits could not get much space in the mainstream commercial films. But it apparent that Indian cinema seems to approach concepts of untouchability in earlier films but not with the essential theory. According to film historian Theodore Baskaran, silent films and early talkies were more committed to adopt the Gandhian principle of anti-untouchability. What could be the Gandhian approach in handling Dalit cinema? Is an essential inquiry that could emanate at this moment? The Gandhian movement or ideology in dealing with anti-untouchability or Dalit is through making adequate reformation in the Hindu religious system which advocates on accepting Dalit in the society. It very specifically illustrates that caste Hindus should melt down sympathetically towards Dalits and attempt to be generous to accept them and apparently such approach serve to the cause of diminishing untouchability. This perspective apparently seems incongruous as it austerely promotes a level of dependency over Dalits towards the caste Hindus who in most cases exhibited violence against the former, also this approach seems to leave the rights & livelihood of Dalits towards the probability of caste Hindu’s generosity, which in turn declares a paradoxical nature within itself. Another most imperative perspective is that individual rights and voice of Dalits will be submerged under the benevolence of caste Hindus, which is in not a greater way different from casteist supremacy exuded by dominant caste earlier. So any cinema which follows this approach in handling Dalit characters could be placed in this category. In the Parallel Cinema Movement certain Dalit characters are portrayed as lead character, but these Dalit characters are based on Harijan understanding of scheduled castes, coming from a Gandhian framework, instead of ‘Dalit’ understanding, coming from a Phule-Ambedkarite perspective. An example of this kind of film is Achyut Kanya.

Subaltern descriptions in early & parallel films

This Hindi film came in 1936, it deals with the story of a lower caste girl and a Brahmin boy falling in love with each other. A similar perspective Indian films could be Diksha (Hindi film, 1991). Moreover there are even films that portray subaltern characters in much stereotyped manner. One among them is Ankur, a Hindi film released in 1974, directed by Shyam Benegal, explains how dalit characters being portrayed in films that are claimed to be anti caste movies. The Dalit couple seems to Lakshmi and Kishstayya and the village landlord seems to be surya, it is generally perceived this movie speaks on caste domination, but it very imperative to understand its characterization. The Dalit women lakshmi is frequently worshipping the village goddess asking for a child and her Dalit husband kishstayya is deaf &dum, alcoholic and irresponsible in family life, the landlord surya attempts to be intimate with lakshmi, but there seems no hard resistance from lakshmi, also there are scenes in move were lakshmi show signs of interest for landlord and one fine night the landlord sleeps with lakshmi, later lakshmi get pregnant and without knowing the fact the Dalit husband kishstayya goes to village god and delivers thanks for making her wife conceive. It really astonish in what way caste is being handled in this film. There seems a stringent reference of Dalit stereotypical in the movie which gone unnoticed, the Dalit men is portrayed irresponsible, alcoholic, ignorant and impotent, whereas Dalit women are represented as admirer of landlord men, open to any relationship with landlord or in some way promiscuous and un-virtuous. The film ends with the landlord punishing kishstayya for stealing toddy. These perspective of characterizing Dalits goes similar with reference of vedic literature, were Shudras(Dalits) are invariably represented as ignorants & Thieves. Director Shyam Benegal in another movie named Nishant released in 1975 depicts his protagonist as a landlord named Vishwam, who is being characterized as shy, innocent, non-alcoholic, non womanizer and almost a well manner gentleman. There seems a stringent contradiction in portraying Dalit protagonist in these films. There are some Indian films similar to this perspectives handling caste in entirely paradoxical manner. Other Indian caste based movie revolving a Subaltern(Dalit) characters as protagonist are Sadgati (Hindi film, 1981), Paar (Hindi film, 1984, Damul, (Hindi film,1985) Bandit Queen (Hindi film, 1994), Samar (Hindi film, 1999). Among these movies, its imperative to observe Satyajit Ray’s Sadgati released on 1981, which apparently approaches caste from its roots, Sadgati converse on the Brhaminical pre-eminence in villages and how shudras being exploited in the name of caste and Varna dharma, he put forth a unbreakable stout log as a metaphorical representation of caste structure and how Shudra attempt to break it with all anguish,desperation, anger, vexation and finally dies failing to break the log. The movie ends with shot describing the burly tough log and a axe rooted over the top of log, nearby lies the Shudras corpse, Satyajith Ray depicts the log as the indestructible Brhaminical supremacy and caste system and the axe denoting the working class Shudras and coprse of Shudra as the culminated outcome of caste system and its dominance.

Subaltern in contemporary narratives

It imperative to converse an important & commercial successful films that has Gandhian perspective in dealing Dalits is Lagaan, released in 2001, the most blockbuster Hindi movie of its time. The character kachra in lagaan, seems to be an untouchable subaltern who was once resisted by caste Hindus to participate in the cricket game and then later under the benevolence of caste Hindus he will included in the game. In Lagaan, when Kachra was made part of the team as a spinner, it was all about the magnanimity of the upper caste in accepting him and
using him to snatch victory from the British. The movie lagaan is metaphorical representation of freedom struggle against British, it symbolically refers how the Harijan movement and untouchability politics have essentially attributed to the freedom movement. Lagaan hesitated to portray Dalit in a free willed, self esteemed & confident manner. It is imperative to account this because such depiction in cinema develops a generalized image of Dalits during that period. Lagaan movie depict its period of occurence as 1890’s, whereas during 1860s itself there seems to be rise in agitation among Dalits, especially through Jyothi Rao Phule, were Dalit voices are given importance and caste discrimination and untouchability are addressed and responded. There might be a disagreement in this context because Phules revolt occurred majorly in Maharashtra and lagaan movie portrayed issues in Gujarat. But the intended argument and proclamation is that, a pathetic, unskilled, voiceless, submissive Dalit character like Kachra in lagaan movie, might exude a holistic image on Dalits, overshadowing the Dalit movements and revolt occurred in the same period in India. In popular Indian cinema Dalits are traditionally portrayed as ill-dressed, under confident and ugly. Furthermore, characters from lower castes are rarely played by Dalit actors, instead, they are performed by upper caste actors donning blackface. Another recent film named Eklavya by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2007, the story revolves around Eklavya(AmithabhBachchan) who is perceived to be the royal guard, whose Dharma is to protect his king and the dynasty. Eklavya movie on its contours subjects like a Anti caste movie, but very precisely it could never be, because anything that’s is perceived to be anti caste or anti untouchability should directly strike the Varna structure, whereas Eklavya stringently impinges Varna system through primarily insisting the duties of Eklavya (Shudra), to serve the higher social order people as represented in the Vedic literature on caste. The movie attempt to converse anti untouchability by leaving Eklavya being given royal status in the fort and in some scene were the kings or the prince directly hugs Eklavya. That doesn’t attribute much to the eradication of untouchability. Moreover another imperative element is the queens letter to prince Harshavardhana (Saif Ali Khan) stating that the Shudra Eklavya is the biological father of the prince. It very obligatory to observe here, the movie that’s very particular in insisting the caste Dharma of Eklavya, has resisted to represent vedic norms that suits in the Prince’s case. According to Vedic literatures, if a Shudra male is mixed with a Brahmin female, the offspring of the interrelationship is perceived to be Chandalas and this kind of inter racial mixtures are referred as Pratiloma in Vedic period. The Chandalas are treated heinously disgraceful in ancient period and scholars affirm this practice as the origin of untouchability. If the Varna duties of Shudra Eklavya, is precisely insisted in the movie than why prince Harshavardhana is not being as perceived as Chandalas or rather the King who killed Prince’s mother just because she whispered Eklavya’s name, didn’t put forth any agony, vengeance or aversion towards Eklavya. These serious inquiries leaves back Eklavya movie to revolve within a paradoxical approach. There also seems Ghandian perspective in Eklavya movie in dealing untouchability, especially with urge of preserving the Varna system and leaving untouchable (Eklavya) under the compassion of dominant caste. Its apparent that Indian film industry is largely in the hands of upper caste, upper class elites from big cities. Also in India, cinema and media has been used until now to perpetuate Brahmanical culture, values. According to a study done by The Hindu in June 2015, just six of the lead characters in the nearly 300 Bollywood movies released between 2013 and 2014 belonged to a backward caste. Namrata Joshi argues as the systematic exclusion of Dalits from education has resulted in a de-facto hegemony of cinema spaces by the savarnas (caste Hindus). That has naturally led to Indian Cinema being ‘casteist’ at its worst and ‘caste-blind’ at the least.

Legitimate representation in recent films

There also seems some exception, were few directors put forth Casteism in much practical approach. Director Nagaraj Manjula seems notable among them. Young Marathi filmmaker NagrajManjule’s feature film, Sairat (Passion), has been picked as one of India’s official entries for Berlinale, the Berlin International Film Festival 2016.Sairat is a rare example of an Indian director addressing caste issues from first-hand, lived experience, as distinct from that of a privileged, if empathetic, director. Even Manjule attempted the same context his previous movie Fandry. His impressive debut movie Fandry (Pig), on the love story of a boy from a family of low-caste pig-catchers in rural Maharashtra, has won awards and been at festivals worldwide. Both Fandry and Sairat have won many accolades abroad and in India it seems commercially successful. This is a welcome stand to take considering there have been very few mainstream Dalit stories and characters in the more than 100 years of Indian cinema. As Nagaraj Manjule argues, caste is the foundation of our society; discrimination is in the air we breathe. These are our realities ‘The Bollywood films I watched never even had people with names that sounded anything like those of the people around me. I could never connect to those films’ says Nagaraj Manjula. There also been certain directors coming forward to approach Dalit cinema in most appropriate manner. Along with Sairat and Fandry, recent Indian films which handled caste narratives in most practical approach are Chauranga (2014), Court (2014) and Masaan (2015). Gurvinder Singh’s Anhey Ghore Da Daan (Punjabi, 2011), Jayan Cherian’s English-Malayalam film Papilio Buddha (2013).In accordance to that Aarakshan (Hindi, 2011) is also notable film that conversed on reservation system, which is a contemporary caste related issue. The Ramabai colony, Ambedkar nagar caste violence which is being conversed in the discourse of pervasive chapters.
on caste conflicts in India, has been reflected into a documentary film named Jai Bhim Comrade came in Hindi and English in 2011.

**II. Conclusion**

Recapitulating the context of discourse, the measure of Dalit films produced in Bollywood seems to be apparently unparalleled with the total number of films produced in Bollywood, leaving the amount of Dalit related scripts comparatively scanty. Also the participation and contribution of Dalits in the Bollywood Hindi film industry seems to be meagre, which ostensibly provides spatial access for the caste elite and caste Hindu directors to handle scripts relating to Dalit livelihood, rights and issues. This approach in some means ends up with appropriate representation of Dalits and in some means ends up stereotypical approach or a Gandhian approach. So what has resisted the contribution of Dalits in film industry is a stern inquiry? Whereas there seems apparent inadequacy of academic literature and research reports in the field of Caste and cinema, Dalit cinema, which obviously leaves negligible account of text to clarify and substantiate many inquiries.Probably it would be appropriate if Dalit scripts could be handled in Jyothi Rao Phule &B.R.Ambedkar’s perspective that would apparently provide spatial for Dalit voices, which in turn would helps us to understand the caste issues in a better approach. Somnath Waghmare put forths that Filmmakers who portray Dalit characters in the Phule-Ambedkarite-Periyar ideological perspectives rather avoiding Gandhian perspective are Nagraj Manjule of Marathi film industry, Pa.Ranjith of Tamil film industry and NeerajGhaywan of Hindi film industry. Hindi cinema in some way literally excluded the Phule-Ambedkarite perspective of handling subaltern scripts, the argument doesn’t limits it standing point with Phule–Ambedka rite approach rather it stress more on the need of an alternative ideology or framework to capture the lifestyle, culture, rights and voices of subaltern in alternate manner, leaving behind the conventional approach in representing subaltern.

**III. References**