

Politics of Representation in Cinema and Recent Interventions

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Movies, one of the main forms of mass arts, have the advantage of reaching a larger section of population. A conspicuous trait of the Indian cinema is its mode of narration with hyperreal (Jean Baudrillard) elements propelling audience from grim realities on a flight of fantasy. The hyperreal elements related to stylised romance, songs, fights, and dramas enshrining the pan Indian sentiments were incorporated into movies mainly to distract audience from core issues ailing society. Furthermore, movies were a dominant apparatus to proliferate myths surrounding dominant cultures and their ideologies. In addition to it, mythicized conceptualisations concerning movie making, images of heroes on and off screen, were also heralded creating a subculture of cult movies. The induction of reality was often meant to brook the hyperreal narration and to accord it an edge of believability. Real was often beaten down to suit the requirements of the hyperreal and to sustain the charm of fairy-tale narratives.

As Suraj Yengde in his article “Dalit Cinema” remarks that Indian cinema as a project has failed to embody inclusion and diversity (1), Indian mainstream movies have projected Indian culture as the monolithic culture, the portrayal of which often mirrored the ethos of dominant communities: language, lives, culture, the real or created personas, belief systems keeping diversity and voices that differed from the dominant at the marginal. The serious issues of caste, religion, gender, sexuality were intentionally kept off the focus of cinematic portrayal. The issues ignored or kept at the marginal formed the basis of the fragile Indian fabric and betrayed how unjustly the system worked. The issues reflecting deep, divisive, contradictory binaries governing societies were treated as aberrations for cinematic projections. The problematic issues were often airbrushed in dreamy, romantic, sentimental plots that projected things out of reality to place them in fairy-tale circumstances. It is astounding to find that caste issue in India, an overriding principle

of most of the social relationships, the basis of Indian politics, and the major factor behind violence, is effaced in mainstream movies.

Discourse concerning caste in movies deluded audience with nearly perfect portrayal of Indian life brushing disturbing questions under the carpet. Caste questions were either blurred or incorporated into the convenient categories of rich and poor binary or by ruling them out with the blanketing justification of aesthetics. The concerns necessary for the projection of reality were expunged in the name of artistic portrayal of life. Two popular explanations are promoted for the stylised presentation of life in movies. Firstly, movies were viewed as a vital medium to escape reality; secondly, the elements that would market a movie were kept in focus.

However, realities behind stylised portrayals go beyond these simplistic, stated reasons and are deeply conjoined with the inherent bias of a system. This paper enquires this by delving into two areas: stereotypical cinematic representation and recent interventions to break away from established normal modes.

The Indian cinema has been unapologetically blatant in its imaginative portrayal of life. They worked on the right dose of reality to sustain imaginative narratives of fantasy, which was supported by hyperreal factors, to ensure they clicked the right chords with audience. Every other aspect of real, burning issues was made secondary and subservient to the main theme of drama filled action. The aesthetic element in movie making was synonymous with the hyperreal magic potion of drama, sensationalism, heroism, romance and hero glorifying actions that are time-tested main ingredients for the success of movies. Further, an aesthetic portrayal of life laced with the middle class morality was a hit among all classes of masses. Heterogeneity of life, the backyard of society, projection of low life

was either totally shunned or introduced only to glorify the facile features of dominant culture as the movies were interested in showcasing just the pleasant side of life. The thoughts behind projections often conformed to one main ideology that could never be claimed as belonging to the marginal life. The diversity of anything in terms of lives, thoughts, and culture was mainly absent on screen. Even if they were brought to screen, they were either bent down to suit the ideologies of the dominant or taken off as unrelated part of life that should exist without coming into contact with the main ideologies the movies portrayed. Paradoxically, the wilful amnesia towards the social issues was particular in its endeavour to bring scenes of rape, molestation, eve teasing and stalking to the screen and even romanticised these acts of patriarchal violence on women.

Caste in India had been a hushed up subject not just in cinema but also in other artistic forums. Caste questions are considered to be unsettling even though caste is the driving factor in politics, political solidarity and governance. Movies have avoided mentioning of caste names except upper caste names, wrapping the plots neatly in high caste and low caste equation. In the article “Caste in Contemporary Bollywood Movies: An Analysis of the Portrayal of the Character,” the researchers analyse Bollywood mainstream movies produced between 2014 and 2017 and come up with interesting observations which could be summarised as: Bollywood movies have always maintained non-linear attitude towards the projection of sensitive issue of caste in movies. The protagonists and main characters often shared screen names of dominant castes and the less important characters or characters with negative/humorous shade had names of lower caste origin. They reinforced the Varna system adopting the dominant caste names implicating it to be standard and appropriate on screen. The research also highlights the meagre presence of Dalit artists in film industry. The artistic movies that dealt with caste issues showcased only the pain and sufferings of Dalits foregoing the vibrant aspects of their lives (Singh and Azeez).

The impasse created by stereotypical picturization for decades together concerning the portrayal of Dalit lives and near to non-existing delineation of Dalit issues in movies is slowly giving way to new

experimentations on screen. New wave movies are voicing out their dissent and paving way for new idiomatic expressions embracing the new gamut of life that is divergent and culturally enriching. Movies like *Sairat* (2016), *Fandry* (2013), *Massan* (2015), *Asuran* (2019), *Karnan* (2021), *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), and *Jai Bheem* (2021) have been trying to balance the previously existing disparities in the projection of life. The present article brings under its purview four Dalit Tamil movies released recently that are changing the perspectives we view cinema and cinema’s perception of reality. Suraj Yengde’s interpretation of Dalit movies holds much value in understanding them in a proper perspective. He remarks, “Dalit cinema is a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film makers, relating to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, and as a universal monument of time and space”(1). The definition marks off movies made by Dalits on issues encompassing and initiating socio-cultural criticism.

Dalit movies discussed in this article are: *Asuran* (2019), *Karnan* (2021), *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021) and *Jai Bheem* (2021). Each movie is unique in its sensitive depiction of underlying issues connected with Dalit representation on the big screen. If the movies are arranged in a chronological order as per the time frame in which the movies are narrated, instead of the time frames in which the movies were made, the order would be *Sarpatta Parambarai*, *Jai Bheem*, *Asuran* and *Karnan*.

Kabilan and Rajakannu, Dalit protagonists from the movies *Sarpatta Parambarai* and *Jai Bheem* respectively, struggle to understand and conceptualise oppression that is meted out to them. Kabilan with his brute strength is able to fight off the physical threat to some extent whereas Rajakannu is a subaltern in the true sense bereft of voice and agency. His character’s dimension stops at being the scapegoat of atrocities that are perpetrated on him. Karna and Sivasami from *Karnan* and *Asuran* represent activism, crusading for political/social action. The movies bring out the roadblocks to Dalit emancipation, which get manifested in multiple ways: Firstly, the recognition of the staging of caste hegemony perpetuated through ideological manipulation, exclusivism of knowledge, resources and arts. Secondly, the movies highlight that by assigning labels on caste, inherent hatred and bias

towards the differences, cleverly crafted and preserved since ancient times, caste reigns not just in communities but also in consciousness. In the confrontational nexus of caste, politics and judiciary, struggle for justice exposes the ugly underworking of the caste system. Thirdly, progression of proactive struggles to overcome degradation illustrates the sustainable nature of empowerment. Attempts to eliminate casteism and the possibilities of creating equal opportunities or their improbability in the contemporary context are delineated in the movies.

- Caste Hegemony and Exclusivism of Human Forums

Since ages, caste has been an unyielding fence to keep a sizeable section of humanity from evolving by excluding lower castes from possessing and accessing human forums, culture, and means of civilisation. The 2021 movie *Sarpatta Parambarai* by the director Pa. Ranjith is a period drama based upon a boxing tradition that existed in Tamil Nadu a few decades ago. Casteist practices had for long been normalized as legitimate without any intervention. Double colonisation of outside white masters and internal casteist forces keep Dalits outside the folds of regular human activities and forums. Boxing is a western game introduced by the English for their entertainment. It was also taught to the colonised people to continue the legacy of the western heritage. A western legacy was adopted and nativized to suit the temperaments of the natives. Rapidly, the game became a symbolic presentation of a culture with strong imprints of caste, clan, language, politics and gender. Rangan, the coach, much revered for his contribution to boxing is at a crossroad to defend his credentials of producing greatest boxers. He had previously produced some of the boxers who took the honour of the Sarpatta clan to unimaginable heights. At present, the clan has given way to multiple factions involved in revenge, feud and personal grudges. The game is one but it means different things to different people. The perpetuation of the legacy of the Sarpatta clan would thereby foster his personal legacy. Kabilan lingers at the periphery staying loyal to his master Rangan like the archetypal Ekalavya and reveres him as the upholder of the clan pride. His awe and admiration to put his teacher worship before everything makes him a modern day Ekalavya. The servitude of Kabilan is built upon his acceptance of his master as the

mainstay of all knowledge concerning boxing. His unquestioning devotion betrays his wilful subjugation to the power that he does not understand completely. He is more selfless than Shakespeare's Ariel, ever ready to serve his master without any sense of direction. More than the honour of clan or to promote himself as a great boxer, he fights for the sake of the honour of his guru. Having internalised inferiority complex or as Fanon calls "epidermalization" (*Black Skin and White Masks* Foreword xiii), he hardly thinks of the nuances of caste oppression. The hegemony of caste ensures that the lower castes people are excluded from forums of human activity like sports, culture, arts, and politics. Even when they get into these forums even at marginal levels, clashes begin to pan out playing to exclude the marginal presence. Kabilan's heroism, bravery, hooliganism are all attributed to his love and respect for his teacher. For others in Rangan's team and in opposition, it strikes different chords. Most dominant of all issues is the question of caste. It is essentially the inability to accept a boxer from a lower caste "who begs for food" and "toils in their fields" as their superior as illustrated by his boxing skills. Kabilan's father was killed for the same reason that he defeated upper caste rivals. The same caste rivalry that lead to his father's death also leads Kabilan astray as he becomes an easy prey to the elements that he barely comprehends. He responds quickly to emotions rather than intellect. Without education, without exposure to the outside world, he remains a puppet by high devotion and unquestionable loyalty. He has a boorish strength without the help of intellect. He is an uncontained strength that can be used for anything. Firstly, Rangan sees his unrealised potential to be a great boxer when he beats Raman and decides to use him for his clan battle against Vembuli. Kabilan fights Raman as a particular move to restore his tutor's reputation. The strange irony to be noted here is that Rangan never acknowledged him as his disciple before. He had not even trained him so that some affiliation could be discovered and projected. The encounter between him and Kabilan was a very short affair with the intervention of Kabilan's mother who creates a hue and cry about her son taking the same course as her husband. At every stage of their encounter, Kabilan is unacknowledged or disowned by his master. It was only when he proves his mettle that he was recognised. Kabilan lingers on periphery to witness his master, pining for his love and recognition.

The movie that progresses on a popular movie theme including thrilling twists in plot nevertheless succeeds in entertaining through the motif of hero coming back on his circuit. However, the movie is a reflection of an exclusivist system that maintains the status quo of societies subscribed to the primitive model forging clear boundaries and hierarchies against caste intrusion.

- Internalization of Hatred and Political Nexus

Jai Bheem directed by T J Gnanavel is a portrayal of the dispossession of a tribal sect, Irular community. Stereotypical notions about lower castes and branding them negatively on the basis of their profession further jeopardising their positions. The caste consciousness of people thrives on the creation of binaries in caste that views some castes as noble, good, clean and culturally rich and other castes as tricky, bad, unclean and with questionable ethics. The deeply ingrained Savarna principles get unravelled in the structures of the thinking patterns. Racializing Dalits as the ‘others’ and viewing them through binaries, the Savarnas misappropriate Dalit culture and ethos as subservient to their dominant culture. The entrenched views about Dalit that stereotype them get reflected in a short movie “The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas”. The image of educated, well dressed, well-behaved Dalit is an anathema to the Savarna’s perception of the oppressed caste. Caste practices perpetuate by discriminating people belonging to the same land, race, sharing same physical features, speaking the same language.

The movie talks about the stigmatic images that the society assigns people from marginal communities. Ranjakannu, a tribal working hard by taking different menial, backbreaking jobs to nurture his family, is subjected to extreme police brutality for his supposed connection with a burglary in a house. The police yielding to the political power arrest him without verifying the allegations. The inhuman torture to make him confess to the crime, results in a lock up death. The police cover it up reconstructing the whole scene as a case of escape from police custody. His wife Senggini carries out the lone battle with the help of a lawyer Chandru. The movie based on a true incident unpacks the most unexpected ways in which caste operates to form hand in glove relationship in political hierarchy. When mainstream movies are churning out

movies exclusively for hero worshipping and to appease mass-following cult, *Jai Bheem* belongs to the thin stream of movies projecting real issues tormenting societies by and large. However, there are two fundamental concerns in the representation of the tribals in the movie: Firstly, the movie underrepresents the community failing to show the vibrancy of their everyday life and choosing to cover only the pain and suffering of life culminating in bleaker, sympathetic projections as they often work in marketing movies. Cinematic projection of the community would be reinvigorating, but portraying it as one-dimensional screen, highlighting the helplessness, stigma attached to the community through predictable ways would just garner sympathy and nothing beyond it. The bringing of a tribal issue on a screen is a noteworthy effort to begin with, when movies have not shown any interest in this aspect. But adopting the narration to include the dynamic, rich, invigorating life and the complexities of representation is the new challenge to be assimilated into representation. Representation has to become evolved and more refined keeping the complexities of the projections as the focal point.

Secondly, the problematic projection concerns the messianic culture glorified through the protagonist, the lawyer. When the dispossessed lots are denied education and that liminal position becomes a site for their oppression, the movie seems to suggest that the only ray of hope for the oppressed people is a Savarna saviour, one who is well-read and powerful enough to understand the politics of the system to challenge it. The messianic culture is shown to be indispensable for the rescue operation. Denying agency to the Dalit characters to fight for their rights, the movie rests the power to save the subalterns from the crises with an external personal outside the folds of oppression. The hero has to step in to save them from oppression. This steals the limelight from the real issue afflicting the society and seems to project that the answer lies in the messianic, saviour culture. The empowerment that comes through an external agency becomes incomplete as the helped remains a helpless entity at the behest of the dominant groups who understand and speak the language of law and power. However, these external supports are still important but the danger of perceiving them as absolute maims the fuller implications of empowerment.

- Resistance and Violent Revolt

Karnan directed by Mari Selvaraj is rich with ample artistic experimentation and symbolism set in a time frame before 1997. The village hamlet in the movie is ostracised for many years by cutting it off as a bizarre unit of life. The hardworking people, who have made a life for themselves by working on a wasteland to convert it into a living space throbbing with arts and culture, are dispossessed of their access to life and their village. Their village is referred as “wasteland” by the people of other communities. This non recognition forms one of the primordial responses to Dalit life: ignoring its identity and its existence. People live in total harmony with nature. Pigs, dogs, cats, chicken, earthworm and eagles are used as symbols throughout the movie. The scene where the protagonist cuts the string tied to a donkey’s feet metaphorically represents unleashing of his anger towards oppression. A headless torso, eagles swooping on chicken, magical realism aspects of a dead girl roaming as a village goddess, dream symbolism offer to the multi-layered, multi-dimensional critique of the movie.

The village is denied of a bus stop as an intentional act to invalidate its presence. Capitalistic means as an urban excess are used to further exclude the people. The complications arising out of this non-acknowledgement impinge upon human rights as the village is denied of its identity and results in the casualty of villagers. A girl is left to die of epilepsy on the road, ignored by moving transports on the road is a mirror to the inhuman system. The societal attempts to maintain status quo preventing upward mobility and social aspirations of the marginal communities get reflected in the denial of recognition to the rich, invigorating culture of the village. Social aspirations for upward mobility are curbed in an organised way. The village as a countering force to oppression rally behind the protagonist Karna for equality and dignity. A powerful theme of this movie is the difference characterise the culture of people are totally embraced by the villagers and their revolt is augmented in their cultural terrains.

- Sustainable Empowerment

Asuran by Vetrimaran is a movie that talks about the lived experiences of being a Dalit. Sivasami, an aggressive crusader of changes in his youth is a beaten

man in his mellowing years. The high cost of his social crusades for social change, progress of his people and community have rudely impeded his social ambition for mobility and upliftment. Nothing holds a friendship in place as strongly as caste and in some situations there need not be any friendship just the bonding of caste suffices, breaking the protagonist’s assumptions that his master would prioritize him above anyone else. Caste is the prime factor that pulls the strings in most of the situations. The protagonist’s strive for dignity and social security for his community stirring the hornet’s nest i.e., at the cost of incurring the wrath of upper caste people results in a series of disastrous consequences of loss life and struggle. Post twenty years of revolutionary acts, the protagonist’s life is driven by instinctive impulse of protecting his family that goes beyond any of his priority. His early youth’s predominant strive for respect and dignity through violence are overtaken by living life in total submission to the upper caste domination and atrocities. Murugan and Chidambaram and his wife, Pachaiyama differ in their stance towards oppression. They espouse resistance for dignity and self-preservation even through violent means. An eye for an eye approach results in a series of catastrophic incidents making the family of Sivasami to pay a heavy price. Violence is a stylistic feature of this movie which is essential to narration of main theme that violence is not a solution to any of the problems concerning caste oppression. The movement for Dalit dignity gets seeped in violence and bloodshed as the resistance to their upward mobility become the point of tension and rage filled uproar by the upper caste people. The assertion of self-reliance and resistance is viewed as an aberration and a threat challenging the superiority of upper caste people. It is worth noting here that Bakha from *Untouchable* (Mulk Raj Anand) and Chandu from “Barbers Trade Union” are ostracised and viewed with enmity because of the same reason: attempt to look like one of the powerful.

Few things that are common to all the four movies are the extreme involvement of the police and its nexus with the upper caste members to play phony in denying justice to victims. Secondly, increasing covert means of operation to cut the mobilizers down to sizes become the motto of all involved in the power game. The assertion of independence is responded with violent methods and strategies of keeping them in

place by terrorizing them into the roles of obedience and slavery. It is all about negating the masses their rightfully deserved places in life and that is achieved by ambushing their social ambitions of equality through unexpected ways and means.

The movies discussed here show the rich and variegated picture of Dalit lives marked by a harmonious living, the close presence of the nature, vibrant with different forms of arts and culture, love that springs up more readily and spontaneously just as the defensive violent acts to the upholding of their culture. Suffering, strive for dignity, the network of love and human relationships are the monolithic traits of Dalit theme dealt in all the selected movies.

Movies attempting to bring out the underside of caste system, its complexities and the deep rooted bias, are rare. The nexus of caste system and forces working to keep the system intact have harmed people from disadvantaged section from times immemorial. Art that is seen as a liberating force, a bridging force in society in an idealistic way, had for long been associated and stereotyped before it could be a venue for new voices and new narrations. Few movies from the Tamil movie industry are breaking all the norms about how a movie should be made. They are exposing both glaring and subtle forms of manipulation, oppression, and long traditions of violence. However, the cue is yet to be taken by the mainstream movies in all Indian languages to emulate the model and to show the inherent pluralities that the marginalized cultures harbour in them.

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