

Television And Cinema as Agents of Social Change: Ambedkarite Ideals in Popular Media

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Abstract—This study examines the role of television and cinema in propagating Ambedkarite ideals to foster social change in India. The pervasive influence of television and cinema in shaping societal norms and values is well-documented. In the Indian context, where media consumption is extensive, these platforms play a crucial role in reflecting and molding public consciousness. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a formative figure in advocating for the rights of marginalized communities, espoused ideals centered on social justice and equality. While his contributions have been extensively studied in socio-political spheres, their representation in popular media remains underexplored. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining how Ambedkarite ideals are portrayed in Indian television and cinema and assessing their potential as catalysts for social change.

Preliminary findings suggest a dichotomy in representation. Mainstream cinema and television often exhibit a superficial engagement with caste issues, occasionally perpetuating stereotypes or relegating Dalit characters to peripheral roles. For instance, certain popular films, while addressing caste, do so from a savior complex perspective, undermining the agency of marginalized communities. Independent and regional media, on the other hand, have made strides in authentically depicting the struggles and resilience of marginalized communities. Through qualitative content analysis, this research investigates how Ambedkarite principles are portrayed in television programs and films, and their impact on public consciousness. By analyzing narrative structures, character development, and audience reception, the study assesses the effectiveness of these media forms in challenging caste-based hierarchies and promoting social equity.

Index Terms—Caste, Media, Television, Cinema, Popular culture, Social Justice, Ambedkarite

I INTRODUCTION:

Media has become an integral part of every sphere of an individual's life, influencing personal, professional, social, intellectual, and even spiritual dimensions.

Social media platforms play a significant role in shaping personal identity and professional opportunities, while television, cinema, and books contribute to intellectual growth and spiritual exploration. The content produced by these media forms not only entertains but also shapes ideologies, beliefs, and societal attitudes. As media continues to evolve, its influence on individuals and society at large becomes even more profound, reinforcing or challenging existing norms in multiple ways.

Television and cinema have long been powerful instruments in shaping societal norms, influencing public opinion, and reflecting the socio-political climate of a nation. In India, where media consumption is vast and deeply integrated into everyday life, these platforms play a crucial role in molding public consciousness. Historically, Indian media has addressed various social issues, from gender equality to economic disparity. However, one of the most pressing and persistent concerns—caste discrimination—remains inadequately represented or often misrepresented in mainstream media.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a towering intellectual and social reformer. His contribution to the fight against caste discrimination is unparalleled. His vision for an inclusive and just society laid the foundation for India's democratic principles. By advocating for legal reforms, political empowerment, and social transformation, he sought to annihilate the caste system and establish a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

While Ambedkar's ideas have significantly influenced social and political movements, their presence in popular media has been relatively limited. Ambedkar's vision for India was not just about small reforms; he believed in radical transformation of society. If television and cinema want to be agents of real change, they must actively contribute to the fight for justice,

equality, and dignity. This means telling stories that reflect reality, challenge harmful stereotypes, and push for real conversations about caste and discrimination. Media should not just talk about social change—it should play an active role in making it happen. Only when television and cinema take responsibility for challenging discrimination and amplifying the voices of the oppressed can they truly contribute to building a more just and equal society.

Through qualitative content analysis, this research investigates how Ambedkarite principles are portrayed in television programs and films, and their impact on public consciousness. By analyzing narrative structures, character development, and audience reception, the study assesses the effectiveness of these media forms in challenging caste-based hierarchies and promoting social equity.

II MEDIA, CASTE AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES:

The Indian Media houses that produce stories and content, with very few exceptions, have failed to address the issue of caste. Historically, mainstream Indian media has either ignored caste realities or misrepresented them through stereotypical portrayals. While early Indian cinema focused on nationalist narratives that sought to unify the country, it often did so at the cost of invisibilizing caste discrimination. The post-independence era saw few films that directly addressed caste oppression, as dominant narratives favored an upper-caste, elite perspective. Films like *Sujata* (1959) and *Ankur* (1974) touched upon caste discrimination but did so through a savior complex, where upper-caste characters were central to resolving caste conflicts.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, media liberalization led to greater diversification of content, yet caste remained a sensitive subject. While some filmmakers attempted to challenge caste hierarchies through socially conscious storytelling, many mainstream productions continued to depict Dalit characters in passive, victimized roles or completely erased them from dominant narratives. Even today, caste representation in popular media remains a contentious issue, with many productions reinforcing rather than challenging existing hierarchies. Films like *Article 15*

(2019) attempted to address caste-based discrimination but were criticized for portraying an upper-caste protagonist as the savior while sidelining Dalit agency.

Mainstream media often upholds caste-based hierarchies through selective storytelling. Bollywood films, for instance, have historically portrayed Dalit characters either as subjects of pity or as criminals, rarely allowing them agency or leadership roles. Television serials, too, frequently showcase upper-caste protagonists, sidelining caste narratives unless they serve dramatic or sensationalized plotlines. Shows like *Balika Vadhu* and *Udaan* briefly addressed caste-based discrimination but largely focused on individual struggles rather than systemic oppression.

However, independent and regional media have made significant strides in challenging these structures. Directors like Nagraj Manjule (*Fandry*, *Sairat*) and Pa. Ranjith (*Kaala*, *Pariyerum Perumal*) have used cinema as a tool to critique Brahmanical supremacy and depict Dalit empowerment. Unlike commercial Bollywood productions, these films center Dalit characters in their own stories, showcasing their resilience, struggles, and aspirations. *Sairat* (2016), for example, portrayed an inter-caste love story that exposed the brutal realities of caste violence, challenging dominant Bollywood romantic tropes.

Additionally, the rise of digital media platforms has allowed for the creation of more nuanced and diverse narratives that address caste issues more openly and critically. Platforms like YouTube and independent production houses have supported documentaries such as *India Untouched* (2007), which examines caste discrimination across different regions of India, providing an unfiltered look at everyday caste-based oppression.

The lack of Dalit representation behind the camera further reinforces caste privilege in the media industry. The majority of filmmakers, producers, and scriptwriters in Bollywood and Indian television come from dominant caste backgrounds, which influences the kinds of stories that are told and whose voices are amplified. This structural exclusion leads to the perpetuation of upper-caste perspectives and the marginalization of Dalit and Bahujan narratives.

Furthermore, political and economic power plays a crucial role in determining which caste narratives reach the public. Media ownership in India is largely concentrated among upper-caste elites, shaping the ideological orientation of television and film production. Caste-conscious storytelling often faces resistance from industry gatekeepers, censorship boards, and political entities that seek to maintain the status quo. Films like *Jai Bhim* (2021), which depicted police brutality against marginalized communities, faced political backlash despite its critical acclaim.

Despite these challenges, the growing demand for authentic caste representation is leading to slow but significant changes. Dalit filmmakers, writers, and activists are increasingly using independent platforms to tell their own stories, pushing back against dominant caste hegemony in Indian media. The success of films and documentaries that directly engage with caste issues signals a shift in audience reception and highlights the urgent need for more inclusive and representative storytelling in television and cinema.

III AMBEDKARITE IDEALS IN MEDIA:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar dedicated his life to fighting for social justice, equality, and dignity for all. He believed that caste discrimination was not just a social problem but a deeply embedded system that had to be completely dismantled. His ideas focused on education, self-respect, political empowerment, and economic independence as the key to uplifting marginalized communities. He also understood the power of media and knowledge in shaping people's minds and influencing society. Media, whether through cinema, television, or other forms, plays an important role in how caste is understood, discussed, and challenged. It has the power to either reinforce discrimination or promote equality and justice.

Despite its influence, mainstream media has often failed to engage with caste issues meaningfully. Many films and television shows either ignore caste completely or portray it in a way that favors dominant caste perspectives. In many cases, caste discrimination is shown as a problem that exists only in villages or among uneducated people, giving the false impression that caste is no longer an issue in modern India. This goes against Ambedkar's view that caste is a systemic

problem that affects all aspects of life, including education, employment, and social status. Instead of recognizing caste as a structural issue, many media narratives present it as an individual problem—suggesting that success is simply a matter of personal effort rather than recognizing the barriers created by caste-based discrimination.

One of the key ideas in Ambedkar's philosophy is self-representation. He believed that people from marginalized communities should have the right to tell their own stories and represent themselves in positions of power. However, in the media industry, most films and television programs are created by people from dominant caste backgrounds, leading to one-sided storytelling. The experiences of Dalits and other oppressed communities are often filtered through an outsider's perspective, which may not fully capture the realities of discrimination and resistance. Ambedkar argued that true empowerment comes when marginalized communities have control over their own narratives. For media to truly represent Ambedkarite ideals, it must not only include caste-related themes but also give space to Dalit voices in decision-making roles—as writers, directors, producers, and actors.

Ambedkar also emphasized social unity and fraternity as essential for building an equal society. He believed that people should see each other as equals, without caste-based divisions. Media plays a major role in shaping public attitudes, but it often reinforces social divisions rather than breaking them. Television serials, for example, frequently depict upper-caste families as the default and either completely erase lower-caste characters or present them in stereotypical roles. News channels, while sometimes covering caste-based violence, often treat such incidents as isolated events rather than part of a larger pattern of discrimination. By failing to show the wider reality of caste oppression, media can make people believe that caste is no longer a major issue, which prevents meaningful conversations and social change.

Although there have been positive developments, challenges remain in ensuring that media reflects Ambedkar's vision. Some filmmakers and creators have begun bringing caste-conscious narratives into cinema and television, but many of these stories still struggle to reach large audiences due to market pressures, censorship, and political backlash. The media industry needs structural changes—including

more opportunities for Dalit and marginalized creators—to ensure fair and accurate representation. For media to truly serve as an agent of social change, it must go beyond superficial representation. It is not enough to simply include caste-based themes; media must actively question the structures that uphold caste discrimination. It should tell stories that do not just portray Dalit characters as victims but as individuals with agency, strength, and resilience. Ambedkar's ideals call for a bold and honest engagement with the realities of caste. If television and cinema truly wish to contribute to a more just and equal society, they must take responsibility for challenging stereotypes, amplifying marginalized voices, and pushing for real social transformation.

IV POPULAR CULTURE AND THE POLITICS OF PORTRAYAL (THE SAVIOUR COMPLEX OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA)

As mentioned, popular media or popular culture encompassing films, television, literature, and digital media plays a significant role in influencing an individual's intellect and in shaping societal attitudes reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies.

The political landscape of India greatly influences how caste is portrayed in media. Films and television shows that address caste oppression often face censorship, political backlash, or limited distribution. For example, *Jai Bhim* (2021), which highlighted police brutality against marginalized communities, faced significant political criticism despite its widespread acclaim. Similarly, documentaries like *India Untouched* (2007) struggle to reach mass audiences due to the reluctance of mainstream platforms to engage with caste-conscious content.

The reluctance of mainstream media to address caste stems from both market pressures and ideological resistance. Since media industries are predominantly controlled by upper-caste individuals, there is often little incentive to produce content that challenges caste privilege.

Bollywood, as the dominant force in Indian popular culture, has often struggled with representing caste authentically. While some films attempt to address caste-based discrimination, many reinforce stereotypes or dilute the complexities of caste struggles. For example, *Lagaan* (2001) included a

Dalit character but largely reduced his role to that of a passive follower, rather than an active agent of change. Similarly, *Super 30* (2019), a film based on the life of a Bahujan mathematician, downplayed caste and presented the protagonist as an individual achiever rather than engaging with systemic oppression.

Television serials, which reach a vast audience across urban and rural India, have also largely ignored caste realities. Popular family dramas and soap operas frequently depict upper-caste households as the norm, relegating lower-caste characters to secondary roles or erasing them altogether. Even when caste narratives are explored, such as in *Udaan* and *Balika Vadhu*, the focus is often on individual resilience rather than a systemic critique of caste structures. Therefore, we see no examples of a challenge or critique of Caste that is downright comprehensive.

A recurring issue in popular culture is the portrayal of caste struggles through the lens of upper-caste 'saviors'. Films like *Article 15* (2019) center on a privileged Brahmin protagonist fighting caste-based injustice, reinforcing the notion that marginalized communities require external intervention rather than having agency of their own. This narrative framing diminishes the lived experiences and leadership of Dalit and Bahujan individuals in their liberation movements.

The mainstream media and films often put up a glorification of oppression and not liberation. Many films and TV shows focus on the harsh struggles faced by Dalits. However, instead of giving a deep and accurate picture of discrimination, they often exaggerate suffering for dramatic effect. Rather than showing how Ambedkar's ideas continue to inspire change, these stories tend to dwell on pain, making it seem like there is no hope or progress.

While it is important to show Dalit oppression, these portrayals often seem more focused on making money than creating real conversations or change. By showing only suffering—without highlighting the fight for justice, equality, and empowerment—such media risk turning Ambedkar's struggle into just another product to sell.

Also a major problem with mainstream films and TV shows is their tendency to change or exaggerate details about Ambedkar's life and the Dalit experience. To attract larger audiences, filmmakers often take creative

liberties, which can distort the truth. While some changes may be made to make the story more engaging, they risk misrepresenting Ambedkar's real message.

Rather than highlighting the power of education, social reform, and constitutional rights—key aspects of Ambedkar's vision—these productions often focus on dramatic scenes of suffering. This creates an incomplete and misleading narrative that fails to explain the deeper social and political realities.

As a result, Dalits' deep emotional connection to Babasaheb Ambedkar is often used for profit. This exploitation of history and struggle is deeply troubling, as it shifts attention away from Ambedkar's lasting contributions to India and instead benefits those making these films.

So, the politics of portrayal in popular culture is not just about representation but about who controls the narrative. Shifting this control toward more inclusive and authentic storytelling is crucial for fostering a media landscape that truly reflects India's social realities.

V THE DALIT CINEMA:

Dalit cinema has emerged as a powerful medium for articulating the lived experiences, struggles, and resistance of marginalized communities. Unlike mainstream Indian cinema, which has historically excluded or misrepresented Dalit narratives, Dalit cinema seeks to challenge dominant caste ideologies and provide a counter-narrative that centers Dalit voices. This form of cinema does not merely aim for representation but actively engages in political and cultural resistance, questioning the socio-economic structures that perpetuate caste discrimination.

The evolution of Dalit cinema has been gradual, shaped by pioneering filmmakers who have used the visual medium to challenge entrenched caste hierarchies. Historically, Indian cinema either erased caste or presented it in a way that reinforced Brahmanical supremacy. Early films such as *Sujata* (1959) and *Ankur* (1974) acknowledged caste but often framed the narrative from an upper-caste perspective, positioning Dalit characters as objects of sympathy rather than agents of change. In contrast, the works of filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule, Pa. Ranjith, and Neeraj Ghaywan have fundamentally altered this

approach, placing Dalit characters at the center of their own narratives.

One of the most significant contributions to Dalit cinema comes from Nagraj Manjule, whose films *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016) serve as landmark explorations of caste in contemporary India.

Fandry: A Raw Portrayal of Caste Humiliation -

Manjule's *Fandry* offers an unfiltered depiction of caste oppression through the story of Jabya, a young Dalit boy who dreams of breaking free from caste restrictions but is repeatedly reminded of his social position. Unlike Bollywood's polished narratives of struggle, *Fandry* remains deeply embedded in the realism of everyday caste violence.

The film portrays Jabya's infatuation with an upper-caste girl, an aspiration that is silently discouraged not through explicit casteist statements, but through an unspoken societal order that dictates whom one can love. Manjule uses visual storytelling to illustrate Jabya's exclusion: he is often positioned at the margins of the frame, his interactions with the dominant caste are restricted, and his family's labor as pig catchers constantly reminds him of his social reality.

The film's climactic scene is particularly powerful—Jabya, who has spent the entire film dreaming of transcending caste barriers, is ultimately forced to chase and capture a pig, a caste-based occupation imposed on his community. As he throws a stone in frustration at the end, it is not just an act of defiance but an explosion of pent-up rage against a system that refuses to see him beyond his caste identity. This final moment is not just Jabya's; it is symbolic of an entire community's suppressed anger against systemic oppression.

VI SAIRAT: LOVE, CASTE, AND BRUTAL REALITY

Manjule's *Sairat* expands on the themes of caste injustice introduced in *Fandry*, but through the lens of inter-caste love. At first glance, *Sairat* appears to be a youthful romantic drama, but beneath its vibrant music and teenage romance lies a searing critique of caste violence. The story follows Parshya, a lower-caste boy, and Archi, an upper-caste girl, who attempt to escape societal restrictions and build a life together.

Unlike Bollywood's sanitized depictions of inter-caste love, where social barriers magically disappear, *Sairat* roots its narrative in caste realities. Archi's privileged

position is subtly reflected in her confidence, body language, and social standing, while Parshya, despite his intelligence and resilience, remains aware of his vulnerability as a lower-caste man.

One of the film's most striking aspects is its use of perspective—while Bollywood often places the savior role on upper-caste characters, *Sairat* ensures that agency remains with Parshya. Their love story, however, does not lead to a fairytale ending. In a shocking subversion of audience expectations, the film concludes with a scene of honor killing, where both Parshya and Archi are murdered by her family. The violence occurs off-screen, but the sight of their child crawling towards their blood-soaked bodies is a haunting reminder of how deeply entrenched caste prejudices remain in Indian society.

What sets *Sairat* apart from mainstream narratives is that it does not offer false hope; it does not suggest that love alone can overcome caste. Instead, it holds up a mirror to society, forcing viewers to confront the brutal reality that caste hierarchies continue to dictate who gets to love, live, and survive.

VII DALIT CINEMA AS A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Beyond Manjule's work, Dalit cinema has continued to challenge dominant caste representations. Films like *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) by Mari Selvaraj take caste discussions beyond rural oppression and into institutional discrimination. *Kaala* (2018), directed by Pa. Ranjith, reclaims Dalit identity through the lens of a powerful, defiant protagonist who fights against land dispossession. Unlike Bollywood, where Dalit characters are often shown as submissive, *Kaala* depicts them as active agents of resistance.

What distinguishes Dalit cinema from mainstream representations is its rejection of the savior complex. Bollywood films like *Article 15* (2019) may raise awareness about caste issues, but they ultimately center upper-caste protagonists as heroes of the narrative. Dalit cinema, on the other hand, ensures that the oppressed communities themselves remain in control of their own stories.

VIII CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF DALIT CINEMA

Despite its growing impact, Dalit cinema continues to face significant barriers. The Indian film industry remains dominated by upper-caste filmmakers, producers, and distributors, making it difficult for Dalit-led narratives to find funding and mainstream platforms. Films that explicitly challenge caste oppression often face political backlash, censorship, or restricted releases, as seen with *Jai Bhim* (2021), which was criticized for its portrayal of police violence against Dalits.

Moreover, commercial viability remains a challenge—mainstream audiences, particularly those from privileged caste backgrounds, often resist engaging with caste-based narratives, leading to limited box-office success. However, the rise of digital platforms has provided an alternative space for Dalit filmmakers. Platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and independent YouTube channels have become crucial for caste-conscious storytelling. Documentaries such as *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) and *India Untouched* (2007) have reached wider audiences, sparking critical discussions on caste discrimination.

Dalit cinema is not just about representation—it is about reclamation. It challenges the sanitized versions of caste that mainstream media propagates and forces audiences to confront uncomfortable truths. By placing Dalit voices at the center of storytelling, it disrupts hegemonic narratives and offers a vision of cinema that is not just reflective but revolutionary.

As filmmakers like Manjule, Ranjith, and Selvaraj continue to push boundaries, Dalit cinema has the potential to reshape India's cinematic and social landscape. Its future depends not only on the perseverance of its creators but also on a cultural shift that recognizes the necessity of these stories in transforming Indian society.

IX CONCLUSION:

Television and cinema are powerful mediums that shape public perceptions, influence social norms, and contribute to the discourse on caste and equality. In the Indian context, where caste remains deeply entrenched in social, political, and economic structures, the role of media in either reinforcing or challenging these hierarchies becomes crucial. This paper has explored how Ambedkarite ideals—rooted in justice, equality, fraternity, and the annihilation of caste—are reflected in Indian popular media.

Mainstream cinema and television have ignored or misrepresented caste realities. Dalit characters have often been portrayed in a way that reinforces stereotypes, and many films and TV shows have approached caste discrimination as an individual problem rather than a systemic issue. Instead of focusing on the real struggles of Dalit communities, these stories often present upper-caste saviors as the ones solving caste problems. Television, which reaches millions of people daily, has been even slower in addressing caste discrimination. Most popular TV serials do not discuss caste at all, while news channels report caste-based violence as isolated incidents rather than part of a larger pattern of oppression. This limited and biased representation prevents viewers from understanding the real impact of caste discrimination and reduces the possibility of meaningful conversations about social change.

Dalit cinema on the other hand has emerged as a crucial counter-narrative to mainstream Indian media, challenging dominant caste ideologies and offering a space for marginalized voices to reclaim their stories. Unlike the superficial or stereotypical representations often found in Bollywood and television, Dalit cinema provides an unfiltered, unapologetic depiction of caste realities. Through films like *Fandry* and *Sairat*, Nagraj Manjule has demonstrated how cinema can serve as both a mirror and a battleground—exposing systemic oppression while simultaneously resisting it.

This shift in storytelling is significant—it not only challenges the narrative structures of Indian cinema but also forces audiences to confront the lived experiences of Dalits without the filter of upper-caste sympathy or heroism.

However, the challenges faced by Dalit cinema cannot be overlooked. Access to funding, censorship, and resistance from dominant caste groups continue to limit the reach of such films. Even when caste issues are addressed in mainstream media, they are often diluted to fit commercial narratives that do not disrupt the status quo. The reluctance of production houses to invest in films that directly address caste discrimination reflects the deep-seated biases within the Indian entertainment industry.

For media to truly support social change, it must go beyond just showing caste issues on screen.

Representation is important, but it is not enough. The structure of the media industry itself needs to change. More opportunities must be given to Dalit filmmakers, writers, directors, and actors so that they can tell their own stories in their own voices. Media should not just include Dalit narratives—it should allow marginalized communities to have control over their own representation. Instead of presenting caste discrimination as an issue that can be solved with simple solutions, media needs to question and challenge the structures that keep discrimination alive.

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