

## ANALYSING THE IDEOLOGY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND REPRESENTATION OF DALITS

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The term 'caste', derived from the Latin word *castus*, was vaguely applied to the Hindu system of social stratification by the Portuguese, India's first colonizers, during India's colonial era in the sixteenth century. While Portuguese colonialism outlived its English counterpart, they had restricted authority beyond the constraints of their colonies. The term 'castus' in Portuguese meaning 'chaste' or 'pure', was associated as being akin to race, species, or lineage. The system originated in Portugal in order to preserve the purity of a bloodline. However, it was later observed that although the ideology of social segregation existed throughout history across the world, the form prevalent in India was not to be found anywhere else. The closest Indian term for caste is 'Jati' or 'varna.' While varna refers to the four basic classes - Brahmins (the priests), Kshatriyas (the warriors), Vaishyas (the traders), and, at the lowest rank, Shudras (the working class), it is used interchangeably with Jati. These low-caste Hindu groups, formerly known as Harijan or untouchables, are known in today's society as Dalits (officially Scheduled Caste). While almost 25% of India is constituted by these 'outcastes' they had restricted contact with other castes and unachievable mobility impossible because they were treated 'untouchable' and even 'unseeable'. Through this research paper, I aim to break down the representation of Dalits in today's modern society in the field of literature and film and social justice and reforms for them.

The upper-class/caste Indian filmmakers have been ineffective in expanding their cinematic creativity beyond their own privileged social realities. In a report published by the popular newspaper *The Hindu* on 'Hindi Cinema and Dalit Representation,' in Bollywood, between 300 films were made from the years 2013 to 2015 but only 5 of them featured Dalit actors.<sup>1</sup> Using the example of the film *Kaala*, directed by Pa. Ranjith and starring Rajnikanth, the film uses the land-possession narrative to break down Dalit politics in India. This movie subtly

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<sup>1</sup> "Dalits in Cinema: New Voices but Not Enough Noise, Writes Namrata Joshi - The Hindu." *The Hindu*, The Hindu, 22 Jan. 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/New-voices-but-not-enough-noise/article14015881.ece>.

criticizes the political system in India and brings light to the issue of oppression of the majority in our country, i.e., the Bahujan through the lens of an alternate telling of the Ramayana.

Indian cinema has almost always had films catering to the tastes and needs of the Savarnas but Pa. Ranjith – the director of the film, believed that by casting an actor as big as Rajnikanth in a movie like Kaala, he could try to redefine the representation of Dalits on the big screen. Caste is not an active theme in mainstream films, but this movie goes to show that Indian cinema could go a long way with better Dalit representation. He is the first commercially successful Dalit filmmaker in India, featuring Dalit characters as heroes and highlighting caste oppression, which remains entrenched in the country despite decades of affirmative action and anti-discrimination laws.<sup>2</sup> He aimed to empower the Dalit community, who were formerly known as “untouchables,” by showing the issues faced by them through commercial cinema. He also portrays various symbols of Dalit struggle, pride, and honor throughout the film with the use of references to Phule, Ambedkar, and Bheem and using blue flags, chairs, and powdered color as props.

The Dalit community in India has constantly been the victim of exploitation and injustice. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a political leader and a Dalit rights activist who advocated for social justice for them. He also encouraged the Dalit Buddhist movement in India after renouncing Hinduism. The Dalits in India are subjected to multiple atrocities from forced prostitution to not even being treated as humans and experiencing caste violence. An instance of Dalit ill-treatment can be seen in the award-winning Indian documentary - Jai Bhim Comrade, directed by Anand Patwardhan, wherein the video starts off with Vilas Ghogare singing with his choir but in the very next shot, he is shown to have hanged himself protest against the police force at Ramabai Nagar in Maharashtra who opens fired at innocent Dalits who were protesting in peace after a statue of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was desecrated with a garland of shoes. This left 10 dead and several injured. The film helps us understand how these atrocities have become systemized in our society. The documentary also touches upon the Khairlanji Massacre wherein a scheduled caste family was tortured, mutilated, and sexually abused by people of the upper caste.

Another example of injustice that Dalits face today can be seen in the movie Aarakshan directed by Prakash Jha which showed the unrest and chaos that ensued post the implementation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Masih, N., 2022. The Dalit filmmaker challenging India's caste discrimination. [online] The Washington Post.

controversial policy of caste-based reservation for jobs and education. Caste-based reservations are a necessity in India to compensate for the centuries of exploitation and trauma faced by the lower caste, but this is a concept that is still debated in present India. The reservations and quotas act as a way for the oppressed to regain their self-respect and dignity in society and be on par with those in power. Discrimination against Dalits in Indian universities can also be seen in the case of the death of Rohit Vemula and the plight of unequal access in higher education institutes can also be seen in the book by N. Sukumar titled *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection*.

One shortcoming of the country's approach towards the welfare of Dalits is that atrocities are mostly taken as a law-and-order problem, divorcing them from the larger strategy for social justice. Atrocities do represent a significant hindrance to socio-economic mobility of the community.<sup>3</sup> When these victims of caste violence try to gain justice, often the first barrier they face is institutional bias from the law-enforcement officers. The police force is usually reluctant to record the victim's reports and their pleas often go unheard. While there are acts in place for their protection known as The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and Article 17, there is still an exceptionally low conviction rate, and this law is often the most misused. Empowering them through primary education facilities, economic upliftment, and getting rid of discriminative policies will achieve considerable success in making society a better place for them to live in. The 'creamy layer' keeps reaping the benefits of quotas and the government can fix this by revising the reservation policy to give benefits to the lowest and most neglected communities as well, which would help in their upliftment. Emancipation and economic and political empowerment will help them to get out from under the shadow of the upper castes eventually.

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<sup>3</sup> Economic and Political Weekly. 2022. Why Do We Need a Specific Law to Safeguard Dalits Against Caste Violence?