



Communication
Volume 3, Issue 1, Feb-Jul 2026, pp. 114-120

Representation of the Marginalised Caste and Dalits on Screen: Post-2000 Indian Cinema

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Received on: April 23, 2026 | Accepted on: May 11, 2026 | Published on: July 15, 2026

Abstract:

The commercial Indian cinema has hitherto put a blind-eye towards the caste-based discrimination and atrocities, or it depicted marginalised characters through a paternalistic, upper-caste lens, as victims seeking salvation. This paper tries to explore the drastic shift in the representation of these marginalised communities in Indian cinema, particularly after 2000. The study tries to examine the paradigm shift from a sympathetic representation to a stronger, authentic, assertive self-representation in the post-millennial era, especially after 2010. A new bunch of progressive filmmakers led this cinematic movement that disrupts dominant narratives, repossesses cultural symbols and initiates a powerful “*Dalit Gaze*”. Taking cues from a selection of prominent Hindi and other regional Indian films, this paper investigates how these renewed narratives challenge the orthodox hierarchical social structure and caste-based discrimination. Utilising a qualitative textual analysis of these important films, this study scrutinises the narrative approaches, aesthetic adoptions, and ideological foundations of these cinematic representations. In addition, the study tries to explore how the commercial success of these films raises an enhanced caste-consciousness in the public sphere and initiates a catalyst for political intervention and cultural assertion.

Keywords: #IndianCinema #CasteBasedDiscrimination #DalitRepresentation #IndianSociety #CasteSystem

Introduction

Cinema in India functions not merely as a mode of entertainment, but exerts enormous socio-political significance, providing mass audience both an escape from struggles of daily life and often shaping collective consciousness. Indian cinema, the world's largest film industry, has long been a powerful ideological state apparatus, defining the nation's collective consciousness, aspirations, and social norms (Bhattacharyya, 2024). The Indian film industry has been predominantly a hero-centric one, patriarchal set up where female characters were placed in domesticated, dependent roles. Hence, from the early days, the narrative landscape of Indian cinema has been largely dominated by an upper caste, patriarchal sensibility (Gupta, 2021). The age-old Caste and caste-based discrimination were typically blind-spots for the commercial cinema. The rigid and complex caste-based society and violent reality of caste system is a hierarchical structure.

Cinema is a potent medium of creative expression. Cinema in India is not merely a form of entertainment, rather it is a powerful cultural apparatus that shapes social consciousness, norms and public discourse (Prasad, 1998). Due to its unmatched reach, Indian cinema has the prospective to either reinforce or challenge deeply rooted dominant social hierarchies. Although a handful of films such as *Achchut Kanya* (1936), *Sujata* (Bimal Roy, 1959), *Ankur* (Shyam Benegal, 1974), *Bandit Queen* (Shekhar Kapoor, 1994), *Bawandar* (Jag Mundhra, 2000), and *Aarakshan* (Prakash Jha, 2011), brought the caste issues to limelight over the years, Lower-caste or Dalit protagonists continued to be a rarity in Hindi cinema, particularly in commercial popular mainstream Hindi films.

Among the most prevalent and oppressive of these hierarchies is the Indian caste system, a rigid structure of social stratification that has decreed social relations in the subcontinent for ages. Nevertheless, despite its overwhelming impact on the lives of millions, it never got its due representation in Indian commercial films. The depiction of the reality of caste-based discrimination and oppression was mostly distorted or omitted in the narratives of mainstream Indian cinema for much of its history. The violent and complex reality of caste system, and caste-based discrimination mostly remained a cinematic blind spot. Jadhav states that caste remained “invisible on screen, despite its overwhelming visibility off-screen” (Jadhav, 2020). Even when caste system appeared on screen, it was stereotypically enclosed within a Gandhian narrative of social reform, where deprived, marginalised characters were depicted as helpless, passive figures (e.g., *Achchut Kanya*, 1936), or a group of oppressed people in a feudal village waiting for an upper-caste saviour who enlightens the village (Prasad, 1998). Spivak critiques early Indian cinema for predetermining caste marginalization within victimhood tropes (Spivak, 1998). *Achchut Kanya* (1936) incorporated Dalit figures occasionally, but those texts were structured within reformist morality, not Dalit activity. Again, the saviour narratives reinforced the upper-caste gaze by positioning reform as gift from the upper caste rather than Dalit resistance (Roy, 2017).

Historically, the Indian film industry was primarily dominated by the upper-caste directors, producers and actors who built a sanitised, caste-blind version of the Indian society on screen. The scenes where characters from lower or marginalised castes, especially Dalits (previously ‘untouchables’) appeared, they were often sidelined to the periphery, portrayed as passive victims waiting for salvation by a benevolent upper-caste hero, or even as caricatures for comic relief. This symbolic annihilation aided as the cultural hegemony of the dominant castes (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

Nevertheless, the 21st century, especially the last decade, has witnessed a dynamic shift from the conventional underrepresentation of the marginalised. A new wave of filmmakers, some belonging to Dalits or other the marginalized class, emerged and brought caste out of the shadows to limelight. The narratives saw an unprecedented engagement with directness, authenticity and political intensity, while engaging with the subject. A burgeoning ‘Ambedkarite’ political consciousness paved the way for a fertile ground for novel and assertive political voices. Srinivas deliberates on the “Dalit gaze,” a viewpoint that focuses on the lived experience, history, and aspirations of the marginalised (Srinivas, 2020).

Post-2000 Early Phase of Symbolic and Didactic:

With the arrival of the new millennium, we witness a new phase, where addressing of caste was more direct than it was in the 1990s, however often allegorically and didactically. The Oscar nominated Hindi film *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) utilised the metaphor of cricket to fight the British colonizers. In the film, the director used the character of Kachhra, an “untouchable” Dalit spinner to address the issue of caste-based discrimination. However, this inclusion of an “untouchable” again falls under the saviour narrative style, where the upper-caste male protagonist Bhuvan allows to include the Dalit character and

grants his liberation. Hence, the character is used for national integration, rather than being a Dalit agency as a distinct subject.

Again, director Ashutosh Gowariker addresses caste in his next venture *Swades* (2004), where rural development and caste discrimination found its space. But the film also follows the classic 'saviour' trope of an NRI scientist Mohan Bhargav returning to India to elevate the condition of his village. Here the lead upper caste Brahmin protagonist Mohan Bhargav fights against the age-old caste-based discrimination Indian society, gets into altercation with orthodox villagers, and convinces tribal parents to send their children to school, which reflects the 'saviour' trope. Direct engagement or resistance of the lower-caste characters is absent from the narrative. A slight aberration from the above-mentioned films is *Aarakshan* (2011) by director Prakash Jha, where stronger, vocal lower-caste characters speak for their rights. Although the film is not entirely based on Caste-based reservation, it touches upon the pros and cons of caste-based reservation policies in India.

2010-Present: Evolution of an Assertive Authorship:

From 2010 onwards, there was an upsurge of progressive, liberal and audacious narratives where filmmakers brought stories with rage, anger, dignity and unwavering honesty. The narratives of the films of this decade reflected an assertive authorship where a historic shift is witnessed. Regional cinema such as Marathi films, came out with significant films that registered this assertive voice, with films such as *Fandry* (2013) by Nagraj Manjule. Termed as the *Marathi New Wave*, Manjule's films shattered the conventional narratives. *Fandry* (2013) is a poignant tale of a Dalit boy Jabya and his family of pig-catchers, who face everyday humiliation. The final scene of the film, where Jabya throws a stone directly at the camera and audience, breaks the fourth wall. This act of climax is not meant only for his tormentors, but also at the audience, which embodies viewers in the 'caste-gaze' and system of caste-based oppression, that objectified him throughout the narrative. *Sairat* (2016) by Manjule, based on inter-caste love and honour killing, packaged in a commercial format, went on to become one of the biggest blockbusters of the year. It reflects that genuine stories of caste-based violence could be a part of mainstream commercial cinema, and its tragic climax was a strong accusation of the 'honour' that imposes purity of castes.

Another prominent regional cinema in India, Tamil cinema also became a centre stage for making anti-casteism cinema, with a new bunch of filmmakers such as Pa Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj and Vetrimaaran. This new phase is considered the *Tamil Renaissance*. Pa Ranjith with his films such as *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018), he created an assertive, suave, and politically conscious Dalit gangster-leader, casting the Tamil superstar Rajinikanth in the lead roles. Ranjith disrupter skin colour politics by presenting black as beautiful and inverted mythologies by depicting a Raavana versus Rama narrative from the subaltern perspective in *Kaala* (2018) and significantly featured symbols of Dalit assertions such images of BR Ambedkar, his books and the colour blue. (Round Table India, 2023). Mari Selvaraj posits a poetic and raw essence in her films such as *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) which is the story of a Dalit law student's struggle for dignity. The film also employs strong animal symbolism - with the killing his beloved dog Blackie as a casteist attack- to signify the dehumanization faced by the Dalit community (The Economic Times, 2024). Another film *Karnan* (2021) is the director's reimagination of a mythological character as a village hero fighting to get a bus stop in his village, used as a metaphor for fundamental human rights and dignity. *Asuran* (2019) by director Vetrimaaran is another example, is the depiction of a brutal, generational land struggle, with Tamil film star Dhanush in the lead. The film ends with a strong 'Ambedkarite' message from the father to his son, that signifies the struggle and assertiveness of the

marginalised community, “They can take our land. But they can never take our education” (Vetrimaaran, 2019).

Jai Bhim (2021) which was also released in multiple languages including Hindi exposes the complicity of the criminal justice system in prolonging the caste-based violence, spotlighting the intersectionality of state power and social marginalization (Kalal, 2024). The narrative is based on real-life events, police brutality faced by the Irular tribals, and the following legal struggle led by advocate Chandru on behalf of the marginalised Irular tribal family and systemic discrimination. By paying tribute to Dr B.R. Ambedkar in its title page, the film tries to symbolise a strong Dalit assertion. While the marginalised community occupies both narrative and emotional space, the protagonist Chandru, a not a Dalit himself is depicted as a facilitator rather than a saviour – which is critical detail (Kumar, 2022). The raw depiction of police brutality, custodial violence, and legal obstacles reverberates with the contemporary calls for intersectional justice (Nair, 2021). The success of *Jai Bhim* mirrors the transforming audience appetite for narratives embedded in lived Dalit experiences.

The Growth of Caste Portrayal in Hindi Cinema:

The representation of the lower-caste and Dalits in have been primarily either erased or stereotyped, often demoting them to the periphery or portraying them through the lens of victimhood and oppression (Hossain & Roy, n.d.; Yengde, 2018). A few significant films such as *The Bandit Queen* (1994) by director Shekhar Kapoor created an uproar with the explicit and brutal depiction of caste-based violence and atrocities, with a narrative based on the real-life story of Phoolan Devi. *Bandit Queen* (1994) along with another film *Lajja* (2001) incorporates caste-based discrimination with gendered violence, depicting the Dalit woman’s body as contested site of power (Pal et. al, 2021).

A gradual growth in the narratives structured around caste-based discrimination and exploitations are witnessed. Films such as *Aarakshan* (2011) by director Prakash Jha highlighted the caste discriminations, injustices although with an upper caste protagonists, maintains a narrative of saviourism (Indian Express, 2019; Chauhan, 2025; Hossain & Roy, n.d.). *Article 15* (2019) directed by Anubhav Sinha underscores the rigid, oppressive caste-structure prevalent in the Indian society ruled by upper castes. The film is inspired by real-life incidents such as 2014 Badaun and 2016 Una. Although the film highlights the brutalities and violence involved in the caste-based discrimination, it again falls into the saviour trope, where an upper caste Brahmin, after realization emerges as the sole saviour of the oppressed lower-caste characters. It enhances the “Savarna saviour complex” where upper-caste protagonists are portrayed as saviours and primary drivers of social justice, remains dominant in the narrative, but gradually challenged (Wangkhede, 2019, Mehta, 2020). The oppressed Dalit characters are predominantly voiceless, and the actual emancipator is an enlightened outsider, not the Dalit community itself. Nevertheless, *Article 15* fosters mass awareness by its blatant depiction of institutional disregard and social apathy, using the nominal constitutional guarantee of equality as a rhetorical touchstone (Banerjee, 2019).

Sexual violence against Dalit women being the centre of the plot in *Bandit Queen*, *Lajja* and *Article 15*, can be rather seen as a tool to exercise power by the upper caste patriarchy. It can be stated that in the mentioned films, marginalized women are imprisoned and ghettoized in the “mutual bracketing” of caste and gender (Guru, 1995).

The White Tiger (2021) based on a novel by Arvind Adiga touches upon the subaltern view of caste system, where the protagonist Balram Halwai from a subaltern background, struggles through caste oppressions and navigates through an enormously stratified Indian society. The narrative emphasizes upon the caste-based discrimination, while connecting it to larger socio-economic disparities. The protagonist’s gradual

rise from the slavery to self-proclaimed entrepreneurship unsettles the stereotypical 'rags-to-riches' narrative with a morally ambiguous, anti-hero journey (Adiga, 2008). Scholars opine that the film exposes the systemic and psychological violence suffered by the underclass of India, providing a sharp critique of the myth of social mobility (Nakassis, 2021). Here, marginalized and Dalit prejudices are not sanitized for comfort; in fact, the narrative reveals the deeply stratified social structure, and certain violent ways to escape the structural barriers.

Conclusion:

A collective consciousness is reflected in the Indian films that deliberates on caste and caste-based discrimination. While historically the Indian popular commercial cinema has put a blind eye towards caste, or depicted a reformist Gandhian view on the subject, there are a few filmmakers that adopted an assertive approach in presenting the caste-based oppression. With the rise of a bunch of filmmakers belonging to the marginalised Dalit communities, an aggressive "*Dalit-gaze*" came into the mainstream cinema, where the assertiveness was more direct and open. With a Marathi New Wave and Tamil Renaissance, these filmmakers created an unprecedented representation of the historically silenced marginalised communities. Nevertheless, Bollywood and mainstream commercial Hindi cinema, still primarily projects the caste-based narratives through an upper-caste lens, where marginalised seeking emancipation from oppression is eventually rescued by an upper-caste saviour, often an outsider. These films often fall into the saviour trope of stereotypical representation of the marginalised community.

Nevertheless, these films entrenched in the lived Dalit realities mark a pivotal shift in Indian cinema, that emphasizes on providing a voice for the silenced Dalit and marginalised communities. They function not only as subjects of reform, but also as vehicles of complex social structures and issues. The transition from invisibility to politically charged assertion reflects the potential of the *Dalit Gaze* cinema, as a cultural resistance and a radical movement that challenge the hegemonies of the Indian society. The assertiveness of caste politics and caste-based discrimination in Indian society is visible through this new wave of interventionist cinema that changes the conventional grammar of Indian cinema and imagination of the nation itself.

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