

CASTE ISSUES IN INDIAN FILMS: A STUDY OF BENEAL'S *ANKUR* AND RAY'S *SADGATI*

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Abstract: *Caste issues represented in any form in India raises questions of appropriation, modification and half truths. Mainstream Indian films are no exception from that. Being an integral part of India's social system caste depictions has been frequently present in Indian films. Most of the films offer half narratives of caste issues and many among them hardly have Dalit male or female protagonists. Yet there have been made a few attempts where directors like Bimal Roy, Shyam Benegal and Satyajit Ray touched upon the subject of caste representation with honesty and sincerity. When we compare these attempts with mainstream Hindi films we witness loopholes in their presentation of caste and its issues. These limitations in representation arise when we ask the following question: 1. How these films depict the caste system? 2. How these depictions reinforce the existing caste stereotypes prevalent in society? 3. Do these representations cause any social change in the perception of caste? In this paper I have analysed films by Benegal and Ray in order to establish that their representation of characters who have caste dimensions do not reinstate or uphold dominant caste values. These characters are successful portrayal of the sufferings and struggle of the subalterns in an Indian society.*

Keywords: *Caste, India, Films, Benegal, Ray.*

Caste representation in any form in India raises questions of appropriation, modification and half truths. Mainstream Indian films are no exception from that. Being an integral part of India's social system Caste depictions has been frequently present in Indian films. Most of the films offer half narratives of caste issues and many among them hardly have Dalit male or female protagonists. Yet there have been made a few attempts where directors like Bimal Roy, Shyam Benegal and Satyajit Ray touched upon the subject of caste representation with honesty and sincerity. When we compare these attempts with mainstream Hindi films we witness loopholes in their presentation of caste and its issues. The reason thinks Kumar (2014) for the underrepresentation of caste issues in mainstream Hindi films is primarily due to the presence of limited number of professionals in the film industry from Dalit community. He also believes that the issue of marketability of such films remains a cause of concern. These limitations in representation arise when we ask the following question: 1. How these films depict the caste system? 2. How these depictions reinforce the existing caste stereotypes prevalent in society? 3. Do these representations cause any social change in the perception of caste? In this paper I have analysed films by Benegal and Ray in order to establish that their representation of characters who have caste dimensions do not reinstate or uphold dominant caste values. These characters are successful portrayal of the sufferings and struggle of the subalterns in an Indian society.

Since its inception, the Indian society has the most rigid system of social stratification known as “caste system” or “*varna vyavastha*.” The caste system can be broadly defined as “a hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent. Here, the hierarchy includes inequity both in status and access to goods and services” (Berreman, 1960). Shyam Benegal talks about caste in his first feature film *Ankur* (The Seedling, 1973) when no one else is talking about it so boldly and

unapologetically. This film is one of such films that linger in our minds long after it is watched on screen. One of reasons of such impact is Benegal's honest and bold portrayal of nuanced characters with their strength and vulnerability. The film is multi layered in its meaning and significance. From depicting gender issues, class issues and to caste issues this film is a microscopic representation of Indian society. *Ankur* takes a hard look into the deeply engraves caste system in rural Indian society. The story revolves around two primary characters: Surya, the landlord and Lakshmi, the house maid. Surya who wants to study further is forced into marriage with a child bride. The social problems related to patriarchy and early marriage with underage girls comes to the surface in the very first scenes of the movie. We begin to understand that these social problems are interlinked and the common source of domination is patriarchy. The patriarchal power play becomes vividly present when we see the systematic domination of the Dalit family by the upper caste men in the village.

Lakshmi is appointed as the house maid to look after the needs of Surya. Surya being an upper caste, educated man gives the impression that he is liberal minded. He gives permission to Lakshmi to cook. Cooking for upper caste family by a Dalit woman is forbidden in such an Indian village. This gesture makes us instantly like Surya. But the following scenes make us realise that this upper caste man to whom eating food made by a Dalit woman is unquestionably easy and similarly exploiting her sexually is equally easy. The social position of these characters determines their actions in the private sphere. Lakshmi whose voice is suppressed in a male dominated society is helpless in front of an upper caste man. She knows that she cannot reject the advances made on her by Surya as it involves her dwindling financial status and the vulnerability of being a lower caste woman. Her husband also creates problems for her as he is an alcoholic person who spends every little penny he earns. So the responsibility of running her family is on her shoulders. Being a woman and also a lower caste woman Lakshmi becomes an easy target of the dominant power dynamics prevalent in the society.

In the mean time Lakshmi gets pregnant with Surya's child. Surya fearing the inevitable shame and humiliation of having an illegitimate child with an untouchable woman constantly persuades Lakshmi to abort her child. Lakshmi however rejects as having a child of her own has been her desire for a long time. She could not have a child with her husband Kishaya as he is impotent. Kishaya receives the news of her pregnancy with much elation as he thinks it is his child. At this point Kishaya becomes serious about his earnings because now he has to look after both Lakshmi and the baby. He goes to the house of Surya to ask for a job. Surya however believes that Kishaya is here to beat him as he has impregnated Lakshmi. The situation turns violent and Lakshmi rushes to the scene and tries to save her husband and curses Surya. The film ends with a scene where a little boy is shown throwing stones at the house of the landlord. The film shows how deeply exploitative the feudal system is. It also presents the anger frustration and resentment of these marginal communities towards the dominant class.

Surya's privileges as an upper caste man and Lakshmi's disadvantages as a lower caste woman is starkly present in each frame of the film. In the scene where Lakshmi watches the socially ostracised woman being humiliated for having an affair and also the shaving of her husband's head prove that it is always the socially vulnerable ones who are punished and humiliated for actions that the society thinks as crime. Yet the men of upper caste origin continue to live guiltlessly. This is exactly what happens when Surya no longer shows interest in Lakshmi when his wife comes to stay with him. This leaves Lakshmi unsettled and she begins to realise that she has been used and also violated. The reason for this is her social position. Shyam Benegal brilliantly portrays the subtleties in Lakshmi's character and Surya's slow maturity. The film makes its viewer uncomfortable and it rightly does so because the issues raised in the film are seldom talked about even in our day to day life. It become a must watch Hindi film not only for the rich performances but also for the commentary it makes on serious social issues.

Main stream Hindi films are rarely vocal about the domains of caste. These films can easily be

defined in terms of having a “well defined protagonist” (Duuren, 2008) and “deadline plot structure” (Bordwell, 1979). Such film structures are incapable in the representation of caste realities as this problem is complex and multi faceted. In the hands of the master film maker Satyajit Ray we have another brilliant cinematic representation of the caste issue. Though Ray's popularity rests mainly on Apu Trilogy and films like Mahanagar and Charulate yet *Sadgati* (*Deliverance*, 1981) remains one of the most powerful films ever made for Indian screen. Ray's *Sadgati* holds a mirror to Dalit atrocities prevalent in Indian society. It is said that when the film is being shot Om Puri (plays the Dalit character) is instructed to enter the house of the priest gingerly (The Indian Express). When asked, Satyajit Ray says that the meaning of gingerly is the movement of a dog or a goat while entering an unknown territory. This explanation of the word gives us an adequate understanding of what this film is about: the caste ridden violence of Dalits.

The story revolves around the tragic life of a Dalit family: the husband Dukhi, the wife Jhuriya and their daughter Dhaniya. In order to fix an auspicious date for the marriage of their teenage daughter Dukhi visits the house of the priest to invite him at his place. Knowing that Dukhi is unable to offer any monetary gift for the priest Ghasiram orders Dukhi to work at his place. Dukhi is compelled to follow the orders though the work demands high physical labour. Dukhi in spite of being weak after days of fever agrees as there is no other way left for him to convince the priest to come at his humble home. And without a priest's help Dukhi will not be able to marry his daughter off because it is a societal norm. Ghasiram continues to order Dukhi one job after another. Dukhi follows every order of the pundit without any protest. Dukhi who is already suffering from bouts of fever and is in empty stomach is gradually losing his strength. Finally he is ordered to chop a huge tree trunk. The pangs of hunger are so strong that Dukhi in the meantime asked for a little fire to smoke a pipe to the wife of the pundit. She too humiliates Dukhi and reminds him that he belongs to a *chamar* caste, a caste that is perceived as untouchable in society. After several episodes of cruelty and humiliation Dukhi returns to chop the trunk.

Under the scorching sun the exhausted Dukhi tries hard to chop the log. He hits the log with all his remaining strength yet all his efforts fail. Hunger, helplessness, despair give Dukhi a tremendous sense of anger and he begins to hit the trunk time and again. Finally his lifeless body falls on the perched ground. The depiction of the cruelties directed to Dukhi does not end here. A life that is spent in humiliation ends also in utter indignity. The dead body of Dukhi becomes a burden for the pundit. He cannot touch it as it belongs to a marginal caste. He waits for others to do the job. The other people who belong to the same communities refuse to move the body as an act of protest. Finally at night the pundit drags the dead body along the muddy road and throws it where lie the carcasses of dead animals. Dukhi finally achieves *sadgati* or deliverance. The word is used ironically as for a Dalit this is how deliverance is achieved.

The central plot line of the film traces the journey of a Dalit family living in a society that follows strict caste rules. This has been represented from the very beginning of the film where Ray offers the visuals of Dukhi's hut. It is made of mud, with dried leaves as its roof. The house itself is located in a separate part in the village known to all as the “chamar basti”. The words “chamar basti” literally mean a place where only people from a particular caste live. This separation of certain community is again emphasised when Dukhi is not given food or fire to light up a pipe in the house of the pundit. This separation again surfaces when the pundit goes to the basti to ask others to move the dead body of Dukhi. Dukhi who represents in the film the untouchables of the Indian society himself believes in the superior position of the Brahmins in the society. This implies a psychological domination of the marginal castes by other so called superior casts. The psychological acceptance of the Brahmins as the rightful superior is reflected when Dukhi says after being burnt by the fire that he asked to smoke: “She was speaking the truth how could a tanner ever come into a Brahman's house?”

These people were clean and holy, that was why the whole world worshipped and respected them. A mere tanner was absolutely nothing.” (*Sadgati*)

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay in his article “Premchand and Dalit Literature: Representation of Dalits in the Literature of Premchand” argues:

Dukhi is so completely grounded under the weight of tradition and Brahmanical superiority that he considers himself a non-entity before the spiritual might of the Brahman. He is so laden with his consciousness of being an untouchable that he follows those norms even when there is nobody to observe or enforce it...Even when he gets burnt in the process of getting fire from the Brahman's wife [Panditayin] for lighting his beedi, he does not get angry, upset or irritated. Instead he blames himself for violating the sanctity of a Brahman's house and thinks that this 'punishment' was well deserved' (Upadhyay in Ahmad and Upadhyay, 2010, p.172).

Both Ray and Benegal portray realistic representation of Dalit characters in their films. Yet the question remains that the issues of Dalit struggle be represented with its totality by a non- Dalit author or film maker. The answer lies in the observation made by Nishat Haider : 'Characterized by failure, lack and inadequacy, most of the Dalit-speaking subjects are silent sufferers who bend beneath the lashes of undeserved fate, and encounter expressivity or volubility in others without counter-poising their own expressions of suffering' (Haider, in Asaduddin, 2016, p. 206). The problem in representation arises when such characters are shown as victims of social injustices and passively accepting discrimination. Judged by these criteria both Benegal and Ray have been successful in representing the anger and frustration of the Dalit community through the portrayal of the women characters of the film. Jhuriya after knowing the death of her husband goes to the house of the pundit and accuses him for her husband's death. She is fearless in presenting her state of mind and unapologetically speaks the truth. Lakshmi on the other hand is boldly raises her voice against injustice and domination. Jhuriya's howling cry after her husband's death and Lakshmi's refusal to accept the humiliation of her husband shows that these women are not docile rather are strong and outspoken in the face of suppression and domination.

Both Benegal and Ray deserve appreciation as both have been successful in representing the deeply rooted caste based segregation that exists in Indian society and the ill treatment of the socially marginal casts. These films are critically acclaimed as realistic films and they have received appreciation around the world. The success depends largely on the performances given by great actors like Sabana Azmi, Anant Nag, Sadhu Meher in *Ankur* and Smita Patel, Om Puri, Mohan Agashe in *Sadgati*. Equal credit for the success of the films goes to the narrative style of the film makers. The films starts with the introduction of the principal characters followed by the scenes relating to the main conflict and finally end with the presentation of a strong voice raising against the caste atrocities. The characters first appear as shy and submissive. Both Lakshmi and Dukhi accept though reluctantly the orders of their respective masters. Yet at the end these marginal characters (Jhuriya in *Sadgati*) revolt against the system that oppresses them.

The analysis of the key aspects of the film: story line, acting, narrative technique and the representation of the caste issue reflect the film maker's brilliance in the craft of cinematic story telling. Yet the question remains that whether these realistic representations have brought any social change? The answer of such questions remains ambiguous as the social impacts of such films are not immediate. The impact of a film depends on aspects besides the story line or the embedded message of a film. Naomi Schillar points out, “The meaning of a film is shaped not only by its composition but by who is responsible for its circulation, when and where the film is screened, and the contextual information provided to the audience.”(Nisbet, 452). Such films are effective in generating debates, moulding public opinion, shaping policies and building activist network. It serves another purpose of setting out examples for modern film makers as to how to woven a story that has strong social message. The problem in main stream representation of marginal issues can be analysed in the light of such films. Furthermore it creates a space for discussions and thereby solutions that definitely serves the purpose of substantial social change.

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