

Representation of backward caste in mainstream Bollywood: An analysis of portrayals of Dalits in films

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Abstract— The psychological effects of films cannot be ignored. Films play an inevitable role in creating expectations of reality for people who consume. The People who watch more romantic films, dramas and serials are found to spend more time fantasizing about marriages and romantic relationships. These movies, dramas and serials, set the standard for their real-life expectations for them. The movies for the analysis were chosen through various steps. To delimit the scope of the study, only the 5 top grossing movies in terms of worldwide Box-Office revenue of the years 2018–2021, which constitutes ten movies from every year, are selected, leading to the total number of 20 films. Since there was no funding for the present study we have chosen which were freely accessible. At the time of the study, the movies between 2018-2021 were freely accessible on different platforms.

Keywords— Dalit, Movie, Cinema, Box office, India (key words)

I. INTRODUCTION

India is perhaps the largest and most complex culture/society in the world, in terms of religion, language, community, caste, and tribe. Indian society is divided by caste division since ancient times. Traditional India was divided strongly based on the caste system. Hindu dharma or ideology insisted the caste system based on their birth, then divided people based on the four caste divisions which follows a hierarchy - the Brahmins the priests, followed by Kayastha the warriors, Vyshya the traders, and Shudras the servants.¹

The term ‘Dalit’ was coined by Jyotibha Phule, the founder of the Satya Shodhak Samaj. The term was derived from the root “dal” which means to break or split. He used this term to refer to the “outcastes and untouchables” as victims of caste based social division of the Indian society. The history of the Dalit goes back to ancient Indian days. Initially there were tribes’ men and broken men who didn’t belong to tribes. These are the people who later were later named as untouchables. The untouchables were then referred to as broken men, which translates to Dalit. They are now referred to as Scheduled caste (SC), after the 1935 government order,

before that they were referred to widely as depressed classes.²

One of the problems that the movies face are, when controversial subject defying a normal commercial are made; chances are that it might be branded propagandistic. There is growing demand for, moviemakers to be responsible, especially among the intellectual crowd, where a movie is found to be no different than a newspaper or news channel, as they all derive power from freedom of expression.

When it comes to Dalit films it must be handled cautiously. The degrading treatment of blacks in America could be related to that of Dalit in India. The research conducted by Teahan & Podany in 1974 show that films, which depict the blacks (can be equated to Dalit in Indian scenario) as successful, have a different impact on higher and lower socio-economic black youth. The blacks of higher socio-economic standard reacted more positively towards White (comparable to the people upper castes in India) which was opposite for blacks of lower socio-economic standard. If pride about a race (can be equated to cast in India) increased it generally might result in a negative attitude towards whites. The anti-white attitude might be temporary and might be the initial step towards the improved positive self-concept of blacks. Raj et.al, (2016) reported that representation of Dalit in film becomes a problem if non-Dalit filmmakers are involved, in spite of their good intentions. There arises a problem of political correctness and authenticity. Dalit are generally portrayed as a victim or as a helpless person who presents an opportunity for the protagonist to display his heroism. Dalit narratives condemn victimization of Dalit and their stereotyping.³

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STSTUE

From the black-and-white era to even now, there are several films that have been based around the caste system and the identity politics based around it. But has the representation changed over the one of the earliest movies that come to mind when we talk about the caste system is the 1936 film “Acchut Kanya”. It was the first movie based on the backdrop of the caste system. Produced by one of India’s pioneering film studio-Bombay Talkies —Achhut Kanya depicted the caste system and its realities under British India.⁴

Then it was ‘Ankur’ in 1974, filmmaker Shyam Benegal’s first directorial. In the movie we see a Dalit woman living happily with her deaf-mute alcoholic husband. But things go wrong when the rich landlord’s son comes back home and takes charge. One day he gets intimate with the Dalit woman and then she gets to bear the brunt of the humiliation and the accusations. The story revolves around how society, including the husband, treats the Dalit woman afterward. Actress Shabana Azmi, actor Sadhu Meher, and Shyam Benegal all won National Film Awards for this film.⁵

Another film that portrays caste and gender dynamics is ‘Bandit Queen’ (1994), based on the life of Phoolan Devi, a dacoit who was born to a ‘lower-caste’ family of fishermen. The movie portrays her child marriage, torture by her pedophilic husband, exploitation at the hands of upper caste Thakurs, subsequent humiliation and revenge. The representation of repeated rape scenes and assault portrays not just gendered violence but also caste-based construction of sexual hegemony by upper caste men, who assert violent sexual authority over lower-caste women.

Masaan (2015) shifts our vision to a relatively subordinated ‘smaller’ city like Varanasi. The city represents itself through the stories of five characters trapped while trying to discover/rediscovers themselves between the ancient that the city represents and the modern the city cannot reject.

The Harishchandra Ghat with its steady flow of dead bodies lit up by the raging flames of the funeral pyres with the doms (chandals) stoking the fires with sticks and beating up the bones and the skulls so that the bodies can burn quickly. One of these chandals is a young and handsome Deepak from a ‘dom’ family who studies civil engineering at night school and helps his father and uncle at the ghat burning dead bodies. He falls in love

with a college-going, sprightly, poetry-loving young girl Shaalu Gupta who is from a well-to-family from a higher caste. Does he become a civil engineer and walk away from his family profession. Masaan does not offer easy answers.⁶

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Suraj Yengde (2019) a Dalit scholar has analysed the relation between caste and caste narratives that have led to manifest caste sensibilities in his paper ‘Dalit Cinema’ as well in his book ‘Caste Matters’. He further looked at how social interactions in the films reflect the mainstream communities’ attitudes towards issues debated in the society. Continuous portrayal of dominant Hindu upper castes has alienated majority of the country’s population. His arguments explain that representation of Dalits to be limited only as victims. As a Dalit himself, he opens up about what it actually means to be a ‘Dalit’. He talks about ‘Dalit being’, ‘Dalit love’, ‘Dalit capitalism’ but most importantly talks about how upper castes continue to preserve and benefit from this system of hierarchy but rarely acknowledge it.

Rakesh Patel (2018) through his paper ‘Unconventional Bollywood: Constructing Cinema of Caste Pride’ explains how caste has become a medium to assert identity in Tamil films however, in Hindi cinema Dalit characters are continued to be sidelined. They are viewed with a lens of pity because they are seen as having less value. He says that South Indian films have started to show stories where voices from below are fighting against the system which is based on discrimination, atrocities and deprivation. These characters don’t need any upper caste to liberate them from thousand years of miseries and discrimination. He argues that Hindi cinema portrays caste issue in an idealistic form and depends on alteration in mind-set to erase caste-hatred. He also points that Bollywood is gradually moving towards a cinema of ‘lived experiences.’ It is necessary to represent these ‘lived experiences’ which will provide a perspective of those who are often muted in the mainstream Hindi cinema.⁷

Surinder Jodhka (2012) in his book ‘Caste’ studies caste covering economic, political and cultural aspects in contemporary rural and urban India. He breaks new grounds by exploring caste in urban spaces. He also

admits that due to various sectarian political influences and gains caste system continue to live in the country.

There are only few academic studies have been carried out on the representation of Dalit communities in Hindi films. The lack of systematic discussion that has been carried out regarding this issue is largely due to the fact that Hindi cinema lacks a strong central authority to guide research on this subject. Since limited academic work revolve around Hindi cinema and its relation with Dalit communities, direct work on caste cinema and discussion amongst Dalits communities brings a meaningful and socially engaged narrative.⁸

In the present study, we tried to capture the overall scenario of caste affiliation in the mainstream Bollywood film. We tried focus on particular incidents depicted in the movies to analyse the specific trends in the representation of downtrodden communities. We primarily emphasized on box-office successful movies as these covers a wider audience and have a significant amount of impact on the common people's perception. In many instances, such movies plays a crucial role in manipulating people's choice and creating a broken picture of the culture and society.

In our study we tried to include both types of movies which have connection with caste issues and which don't have. The purpose of it to study how Bollywood address the caste system which underlies on every space in our society.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To the study the representation of downtrodden communities, the methodology is divided into two sections. In the first section, a qualitative analysis of mainstream Bollywood films is done. The movies for the analysis were chosen through various steps. To delimit the scope of the study, only the 5top grossing movies in terms of worldwide Box-Office revenue of the years 2018–2021, which constitutes ten movies from every year, are selected, leading to the total number of 20 films. Since there was no funding for the present study we have chosen which were freely accessible. At the time of the study, the movies between 2018-2021 were freely accessible on different platforms. Hence those movies were selected. The movies were identified through web searchers specifically movie rating sites like Intenet Movie Data Base, Rotten Tomatoes, Wikipedia etc.

In the second section, to study the representation in particularly caste-based narratives, content analysis of such films has been done. In the time period of 2018-2021, only two Bollywood movies came into the surface where caste and oppression of the downtrodden communities play a pivotal role in the storyline. The first one is Dhadak(2018) which is a remake of the famous Marathi Dalit filmmaker N. Manjule's Sairat(2016) and the other one is Anubhav Sinha's Article 15(2019).

Furthermore, a random sample survey of 120 people who are frequent watchers of mainstream Bollywood movies and have brief knowledge about the Caste system in India in a close-ended questionnaire format has been taken to scrutinize the research finding and validate the study.

V. CONTENT ANALYSIS

1.Andhadhun

Release date: 5 October 2018 (India)

Director: Sriram Raghavan

Box office: est. ₹456 crore

Budget: ₹32 crore

Produced by: Sudhanshu Vats, Ajit Andhare, Gaurav Nanda, Ashok Vasodia, Kewal Garg, Sanjay Routray, Odette Mayfair-Joy.

Synopsis: A pianist who pretends to be blind for inspiration, witnesses a murder and has to deal with the murderer wife of the victim and her boyfriend. During his ordeal he loses his eyesight for real and struggles save his life from the murderous duo.



2.Baaghi 2

Release date: 30 March 2018

Directed by: Ahmed Khan

Budget: ₹59 crore

Box office: est. ₹253 crore

Produced by: Sajid Nadiadwala

Synopsis: Ronnie is serving in the Indian army. He gets a call from his former lover Neha as she is clueless about her missing daughter. Upon reaching Goa Ronnie sees that Neha is very disturbed by the event and cops are not taking the missing case seriously. Ronnie then



starts his own investigation and finds that there is no truth in Neha's story as such thing never happened. But Neha is adamant that her daughter has been kidnapped. After lots of toil it is revealed Rhea is Ronnie's daughter. In the end, they get together and live happily ever after.

3. Bharat

Release date: 5 June 2019 (India)

Director: Ali Abbas Zafar

Box office: est. ₹325 crore

Budget: 100 crores

Producers: Salman Khan, Alvira Khan Agnihotri, Atul Agnihotri, Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar, Nikhil Namit



Synopsis: During the Partition of India in 1947, a young man is separated from his father in the promise that he will protect their family and lead the household. A young boy Bharat joins the The Great Russian Circus in 1964 and further joins the Indian migration to the Gulf territory during the discovery of oil in the region during the 70's. He falls in love with the chief engineer and also leads the immigrated group of Indians to justice. Throughout his life spanning from 18 to 70 years of age, he struggles to keep his father's promise and holds the family together.

4. Malang

Release date: 7 February 2020 (India)

Director: Mohit Suri

Box office: est. ₹84.50 crore

Budget: ₹64 crore

Produced by: Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar, Luv Ranjan, Ankur Garg, Jay Shewakramani

Synopsis: Advait and Sara meet at a rave party in Goa and their brief fling blossoms into love. Extreme opposites of each other, they both live it up together. But pregnant Sara get killed by Agase and Michel and Advait went to jail. After coming from the jail he started killing those men one by one, taking his revenge.



5. Antim: The Final Truth

Release date: 26 November 2021 (India)

Director: Mahesh Manjrekar

Box office: 59.11 crores

Budget: ₹48 crore

Produced by: Salman Khan

Synopsis: After witnessing the pain and suffering his family went through, a farmer's son rises to power as he starts his journey as a gangster and spirals into a dark game of politics and power, meanwhile a strict cop starts following his trail to stop him before he becomes all powerful in the city.



6. Roohi

Release date: 11 March 2021

Director: Hardik Mehta

Box office: est. ₹30.33 crore

Budget: ₹20 crore

Produced by: Dinesh Vijan; Mrighdeep Singh Lamba

Synopsis: Two friends Bahura Pandey and Khattani work for a goon Guiya Shakeel who kidnap brides and forced to marry them with the one who loves her. They get a job to kidnap Roohi and later it was found that Roohi is not a normal but a possessed women. Bahura falls in love with innocent Roohi, while Khattani falls for possessed Afza. When Shakeel orders them to kill Roohi, Bahura decides to go against him and free Roohi from the spirit.



VI. CONCLUSION

Cinema being a medium of entertainment, does not necessarily depict the broader social realities, but on the contrary, being an art, cinema needs to be socially sensitive due to its influence on society. The depiction of caste in the contemporary Bollywood cinema was the subject matter of the present study. Our analysis sought three answers. The first one was how mainstream Bollywood movies depict the caste system. It was evident from the analysis that the realities of the prevailing caste system and its negative repercussions are largely neglected in mainstream Bollywood movies.

Instead of proclaiming the voices of the Dalits and other backward castes on the social toils they undergo, the Hindi cinema has marked lenience toward the dominant caste issues and narratives. The analyzed movies are maintaining dominant caste hegemony, where movies have been used as an expression of views and stories of the dominant caste communities. The second answer we found from the study is that explicit and implicit indications of caste and caste system are evident in contemporary Bollywood movies. The portrayal of characters is highly caste oriented, and attempts were made to manifest it explicitly and implicitly. The implicit depiction is done tactically to highlight the dominant caste values and Brahminical order. The protagonists of the majority of the mainstream Bollywood characters are carrying the dominant caste surnames, and their occupational roles have been designated in accordance with the traditional caste based division of labor. The exclusion of Dalits and oppressed caste characters in the movies, especially in the lead or important roles, are also evident. The third question we sought to unveil was the nature of reinforcement and validation of caste stereotypes in Hindi cinema.

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