

Intersectionality of Caste, Class, And Gender: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dalit Representation in New-Age Indian Cinema

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Abstract:

This study begins with the theories of intersectionality and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to understand the intersection of caste, class and gender in contemporary Indian cinema. Generally, Indian cinema has overlooked Dalit issues; and represented Dalit stereotypically and passively through the gaze of upper-caste. There is a definite shift towards more complex and politically astute representations in recent cinema. This research adopts Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, along with B. R. Ambedkar's ideas to analyse *Asuran*, *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Mandela*, *Kastoori*, and other films. Fairclough's CDA framework helps us to explore the discourse, imagery and narrative that produce and circulate meanings of Dalit. The study illustrates that there is a shift from stereotypical to more realistic and resistance-based representation. The book emphasises that caste is not only about caste discrimination but also economic and gender inequality, particularly for the Dalit women. Films are also a way to reflect on the current scenario. Although we have different characters and stories in these films, we have inequalities too. The study suggests that the film industry needs to shift and make more inclusive stories depicting Dalits.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Dalit Representation, Gender, Indian Cinema, Intersectionality.

1. Introduction:

Indian cinema, a huge cultural industry globally, has influenced ideas and strengthened traditional beliefs. Indian film have changed since *Raja Harishchandra* was released. It's gone through many phases, from mythological and nationalist films to entertainment and parallel cinema. Despite its diversity, the way oppressed groups, particularly Dalits are depicted often excludes, misrepresents or under-represents them. This exclusion isn't just a weakness of the film, it shows the deep caste inequality in Indian culture (Bharatvaraj,6).

This perspective informs narratives, characters and themes, legitimating upper-caste worldviews and ignoring Dalit experiences. Films once depicted Dalits as passive victims, loyal servants or virtuous martyrs. Rather than challenge caste-based discrimination, this only reinforced stereotypes. Such representations are in line with other social and cultural narratives that downplay caste privilege and accentuate Dalit oppression (Dev & N. 2024). Researchers claim that mainstream films do not commonly confront caste but tend to merge it with poverty or class. This invisible practice has led to "representational silence" where the authentic lives of Dalits are excluded from the dominant narratives. When it is

addressed, it is usually from a savarna (upper-caste) point of view and not as true or politically relevant (Dev)

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a rise in parallel film, which was totally different from before. This also involved realism and social and political commentary. It sought to resist marginalisation, but when it dealt with the topic of caste, it was often seen as trying to be paternal or reformistic. The characters almost always depicted Dalits as pitiful and not as independent, and this was more of a Gandhian rather than an Ambedkarite outlook. This meant that while parallel cinema raised awareness about issues, it did not get rid of the structural biases in representations of film (Kumar,5).

Recent studies show that the portrayal of Dalits in Indian cinema has changed. This is largely because of the emergence of filmmakers from marginalised backgrounds and caste critics. Film-makers like Nagraj Manjule, Pa. Ranjith, and Mari Selvaraj have revolutionised the film and storytelling process by foregrounding Dalit perspectives and critiquing existing systems. Their films explore topics such as caste discrimination, class inequities and social isolation. (Bunkar,315).

This study uses Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to explore these transformations. Intersectionality is an important way to understand how caste, class, and gender are interwoven in the construction of multiple forms of oppression. It's difficult to study caste in India without considering its links to economic and patriarchal relations. Intersectionality is a key concept in understanding the representation of Dalit women in film, who experience multiple forms of discrimination. This research has been influenced by the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar, particularly his notion of caste as an inequitable hierarchy. Ambedkar's emphasis on dignity, education and justice offers an avenue to explore the way current cinema has engaged with caste and representation. This is in contrast to earlier films that depicted Dalits as subservient (Kumar,172)

In the past, films would stereotypically portray Dalit characters. Recent films, however, are trying to show them as real people with dreams, emotions and political consciousness. For example, Fandry defies expectations by showing how the protagonist feels inside and advises him to stand up. Karnan also depicts how people may challenge systemic oppression by not just being a victim. This is an important argument for Article 15, which is about caste discrimination but has been criticised for its savarna protagonist as saviour. The movie demonstrates the effects of caste discrimination in institutions and invites viewers to think about who tells stories and who gets to tell them (Agarwal,15).

But films with more nuanced critiques of oppression include Court and Jai Bhim. Court employs a simple narrative to explore the relationship between class, caste and the justice system, revealing the inequity of the system. In Jai Bhim, the main characters represent marginalised groups in their fight for legal equality. As per the Ambedkarite principles of constitutional justice, the latter is concerned with the repressive and emancipatory potential of the law. Film studies can help us better understand how intersectionality is depicted in films. In the intercaste love story that ends in honour killings, Sairat illustrates the intersections of gender, class and caste. The film shows that men might end up deciding for women because of concerns about caste purity. Unlike the focus on collective defiance and assertion in Karnan, Fandry highlights how people internalise caste (Edachira,50).

Research to date shows there is a slow but evolving discourse on Dalits in Indian cinema. While contemporary films have a critical approach to gender, class and caste, older films often obscured or stereotyped characters. However, we still need to understand the relationship between these elements in cinematic discourse, particularly in relation to contemporary films. This research attempts to rectify this gap by adopting Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how particular films approach issues of the

construction and negotiation of Dalit identity. Drawing on intersectionality and Ambedkarite thought, this work aims to offer a holistic perspective of the ongoing discourse about caste in Indian cinema. Though modern film has enabled the possibility of various narratives, the struggle for representation and institutional reform is ongoing, it concludes (Rai).

2. Ambedkarite and Anti-Caste Thought:

The anti-caste philosophy and Ambedkarism add to this study's theoretical framework. B. R. Ambedkar should be part of any research on caste in India. As Ambedkar put it, "graded inequality" is the essence of caste; it's a system of social hierarchy that's perpetuated by institutionalised discrimination and rigid boundaries. He provides a strong platform to assess the current representation of the Dalits with his advocacy for the eradication of caste, education, equality and self-respect. Ambedkarite ideas reject pleas for change based on Dalit vulnerability. Emphasis is on action, resistance and self-understanding. Significantly, it is increasingly reflected in contemporary Indian films, where Dalits are depicted as liberators.

However, Dalits were typically shown in Gandhian films as helpless victims of the generosity of higher classes. Without addressing the root cause of inequality, the "victim narrative" advocated for peace and morality. As sympathetic as these images were, they served to maintain the status quo by reducing the influence of the Dalits. Consistent with Ambedkarite principles, new-age films increasingly feature acts of resistance and self-assertion. The protagonist's rebellion against social injustice is justified, according to Karnan. The act of surviving and fighting is portrayed by *Asuran* as a form of resistance to the brutality of caste. In cultural contexts, Ambedkarite ideology prioritizes both representation and dignity. Films' powerful depictions of marginalized communities shape public perceptions of those communities. According to Maity and A. (2026), new-age films present Dalits as multi-faceted people with

3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on the relationship between language and representation and social reality and power. This was suggested by Norman Fairclough. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is premised on the belief that discourse is not neutral but shaped and shaped by ideologies which affect social practices. Cinematic discourse can be words, images, narrative, characters and symbolism. Cinema is a cultural text that displays and changes norms. Therefore, film is a great medium to learn about power and how it is exerted and resisted. CDA theorises that meaning is constructed through the use of words and images. Films such as *Fandry* employ both visuals and words to communicate. The portrayal of pigs emphasises the animalistic nature of Dalits. Our protagonist's silence indicates her acceptance of injustice. These scenes show how film techniques can be used to present more nuanced ideological notions. The storylines of such films usually only address ideological concerns that confirm existing beliefs. On the other hand, modern films do not follow these conventions by offering different viewpoints. Karnan's story transforms from the plight of a single protagonist to a collective fight. This is in contrast to the typical victimisation of Dalits. Furthermore, CDA speaks of the link between language and power. Films such as *Article 15* show how, despite efforts to change the status quo, institutional discourse can reinforce caste. The protagonist, a savarna, highlights challenges of representation and challenges audiences to think critically about the role of storytelling about minority viewpoints. To analyse the role cinematic texts play in the construction of Dalit identity, this research uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the underlying ideologies. Critical discourse analysis of cinematic text and subtext can help us comprehend

cinema as a site for ideological contest. (Kirasur).

dreams, feelings, and political consciousness, which challenges conventional wisdom and promotes societal transformation (Maity).

3.1. Dialogues and Language

Dialogues and language play an important part in the analysis as they reveal how films make, accept, and sometimes reject caste hierarchies. This methodology aims to highlight the enduring power dynamics in day-to-day language through the analysis of language use such as tone, words, and speech patterns. Derogatory, code-switching and caste markers which indicate, reveal or comment on hierarchy are all given paramount attention. Who talks, who is interrupted, and who's silent are some of the ways in which this manifests in dialogues, which this analysis explores. Body language and silence are also important channels of communication, which can express how oppressed and rebellious one is. Dialogues, as this analysis does, are important ways of spreading and challenging caste-based ideas; they are not just a narrative device.

3.2. Visuals and Symbolism in Cinemas

A Cinematic symbolism and imagery is a key sub-discipline of film analysis as films communicate through both verbal and visual elements. Images shape perceptions of class, power and caste, which are considered to be important vehicles of ideology in this analysis. We examine emerging housing trends, village plans and the segregation of living areas to infer the visual representations of caste discrimination. Thematic imagery, which includes objects, colours and animals, are explored to discern the deeper meanings of marginalisation and identity. We also explore technical elements such as camera angles, framing and composition, to study how visual placement depicts power relationships. These usually accord secondary or minor roles to those not prominently represented. In this frame, the visuals are considered a vital part of filmic discourse that can serve to reinforce and challenge ideologies.

3.3 Character Construction

A character building analysis is deployed to explore the way in which the film depicts, negotiates and develops Dalit identities in the story. Through characters' ambitions, relationships and development, we can determine whether they are depicted as victims or change agents. The study will explore the tension of helplessness and agency through the tendency to depict the characters of contemporary films as rebellious instead of passive. In order to comprehend the way gender, class, and caste shape people's lives, character analysis adopts an intersectional approach. It is important to understand the portrayal of Dalit women who are marginalised in society. This research considers character development in contemporary Indian movies from a variety of perspectives to demonstrate how it contributes to broader debates about identity, dignity and resistance.

3.4. Caste as Structural Violence

Rather than being depicted as an isolated or random injustice, caste is depicted in contemporary Indian cinema as a system of structural violence that impacts daily life. Regular instances of this kind of abuse make victims feel inferior, isolate them, and strip them of their dignity, all of which normalize it in society. Caste hierarchy is illustrated in *Fandry* by the main character Jabya's humiliations, particularly when he is compelled to catch pigs. Caste violence involves more than just physical manifestations; it also encompasses emotional and symbolic aspects, as his silence and yearning show. Having land and money is a sign of caste, which *Asuran* demonstrates as well. The violent clash between landowners of the dominant caste and Dalit farmers exemplifies how the ownership of resources allows caste oppression to persist. These films demonstrate how institutional and social forms of caste violence are interconnected

and pervasive (Kumar,3).

4. Intersectionality:

The concept of intersectionality proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw is one significant way to examine the intersectional nature of oppression. This term has been used to analyse different forms of oppression in numerous social and cultural settings; it emerged out of discussions between African American feminists. In India, caste and class and gender inequalities are very closely linked. Caste, which is not just a cultural or psychological aspect, is a defining factor of who gets what, and who gets ahead. Low-class communities with economic and class problems face more challenges in moving up the social ladder. For low-class Dalit women, this is further influenced by their gender. A victim of "double" or "triple marginalization," they are discriminated against because of their caste, their class status, and patriarchy. Such forms of discrimination are being depicted in a growing number of recent Indian films. The romance between an upper-caste girl and a Dalit boy in *Sairat* demonstrates the impact of gender and caste on behaviour. The hero (a man) is a victim of prejudice because of his caste, and the heroine (a woman) symbolises patriarchy because her freedom challenges the notion of caste purity. *Jai Bhim* shows a Dalit woman's fight to deal with institutionalised oppression. It also illustrates how gender and caste intersect the social and legal order. Therefore, this research is able to move beyond mono-dimensional approaches and examine the working of power structures in film dialogues because of intersectionality. It helps us comprehend the representation of the Dalits by situating them in the broader context of gender, economics and society (Nadamala,105).

4.1 Intersection of Caste and Class

Class-caste relationships demonstrate the economic marginalisation that keeps the caste system going. The lack of capital, shown in many films, is a consequence of caste oppression, and prevents social and economic mobility. *Mandela* makes fun of this moment by showing a Dalit barber who becomes a power broker during elections. During his short stint as the president, he showed the world how democracies take advantage of the weaker sections of society without dealing with the root causes of inequality. Another example is of poor youths from slum areas who are poor because of social exclusion through caste. Given the link between the two, these cases show that social mobility alone will not end caste injustice (Agarwal,16).

4.2 Intersection of Caste and Gender

Caste and patriarchy combine to discriminate against Dalit women, with caste oppression being highly sexist. *Sairat*'s female protagonist destabilises patriarchal norms, which ends in a deadly punishment for her independence based on caste ideologies. The movie shows how society ensures the maintenance of order and purity in the caste system through women's bodies. Sengeni personifies the virtue of resistance in *Jai Bhim*, as she fights institutional oppression both through caste discrimination and state violence. No single framework can explain the lives of Dalit women; her battle is a stellar example of the intersections of gender, caste and institutional power. These films demonstrate the importance of an intersectional approach to better understand the mechanisms of caste oppression (Edachira,52).

4.3. Love, Sex and Caste

In *Pariyerum Perumal*, when members of different castes become friends or start dating, the dominant caste members become infuriated. There is a cycle of violence and estrangement. As this film suggests, caste affects not only social and interpersonal relations but also personal relationships. In *Sairat*, there is an honour killing due to a tragic romance between people from different social classes. The strict nature

of the caste system is highlighted. Love and passion, as depicted in these films, take on a political dimension in a caste society in which defying the rules can be fatal (Paunksnis,271).

4.4 Education and Social Mobility

Education is sometimes seen as a pathway to empowerment, but in a caste-based society, it can also be a site of discrimination and exclusion. In the story of a young, Dalit child, *Kastoori* shows us that caste discrimination is rife in schools. The main character of *Pariyerum Perumal* is a Dalit woman who experiences discrimination and degradation during her law degree. As the above anecdotes show, schools are both a place where the caste system is reproduced and a tool to fight it. While education offers opportunities to move to more favourable circumstances, ingrained biases often limit its positive potential.

4.5 Law, Justice and State Power

The representation of the laws and state institutions in the fight against caste injustice is complex and controversial. Article 15 is an example of institutionalised prejudice in the law. To that end, it condemns the historical prejudice against people of certain castes in the police force. But the state can also be a jurisdiction of liberty and justice for those who fight for it, as demonstrated in movies like *Jai Bhim*. Constitutional rights and legal recourse are needed to fight injustice, as is the case in *Jai Bhim*. All these images show how the state can be a haven of liberty, as well as a cage (Paunksnis,270).

4.6 Assertion, Resistance and Identity Politics

Recent Indian cinema has transformed the portrayal of the Dalits from passive victims to active agents of resistance for equality and self-empowerment. The defiance of the protagonist against oppressive powers in *Karnan* is a symbol of the struggle against injustice and the encouragement of self-esteem. Resistance is portrayed as an acceptable response to systemic injustice, and challenges the notion of passive victimhood. *Asuran* shows that survival and resistance in the face of caste violence is possible. These stories are in line with the teachings of the Ambedkarite movement, which stress the importance of dignity, self-help and resistance to hierarchical oppression. Marginalised groups are putting up their hands to reclaim their histories and a place in contemporary society.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary Indian cinema depicts the complexity of and political awareness among Dalits in a way that goes beyond stereotypical depictions. *Fandry*, *Asuran*, and *Karnan* put a focus on resistance, identity and lived experiences in their critique of caste systems. These films have provided an opportunity for new conversations about film that centre Dalit representation. However, inequalities remain in society and in the film industry. Representation is important but not enough to combat inequality. Accessibility, inclusion and storytelling must be constantly worked towards. The study found that representations of Dalits in Indian film must do more than just represent them to address systemic problems. Films can only change their production and narratives if they are to promote equality and social justice.

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