

Portrayal of Caste and Social Identity in Contemporary Telugu Cinema: A Study of Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract:

The treatment of caste in Telugu cinema is socially significant given its political and fan and community allegiances. The political, fan and community allegiances of the Telugu cinema make its treatment of caste socially consequential. The focus of this study is on how caste and social identity has been depicted in current Telugu cinema (from 2000 to nowadays) in the context of Andhra Pradesh. The aims of this are to explore the nature of caste representation, who is being represented, which stereotypes are common, how it's changed since 2014, how it's changed with new filmmakers, OTT platforms, and in the post-2014 context of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and how industry structure and fan culture influence representation. The study uses qualitative textual analysis of a purposive sample of films, chosen for impact on the box-office, critical reception, and the presence of caste themes to code each film for the caste of its protagonist, depiction of the presence of Dalits and Other Backward Classes, language and dialect, rituals and symbols, inter-caste romance, violence, and resolution. The analysis is based on Ambedkar's critique of caste, Guru's analysis of the politics of representation and Madhava Prasad's account of ideology in the popular cinema and is supplemented by a review of recent research and Census data on the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The results suggest that, whereas the male and female figures of the dominant caste are more frequently portrayed as heroes, those of the Dalits are stereotyped as comedians, villains, sidekicks or victims. It shows that the male and female Dalit characters are less likely to be main characters than to be comedians, villains, sidekicks or victims, while male and female characters of dominant castes are more likely to be main characters than the Dalit characters. Inter caste romance is a depiction of caste hierarchy but often presents it as class conflict.

Keywords: Political, Allegiances, Depicted, Rituals And Symbols, Stereotyped, Hierarchy

1.0 Introduction:

1. Cinema and Politics in Andhra Pradesh:

Cinema in Andhra Pradesh is not just a form of entertainment, but also a mass medium that defines public life and political imagination. This relationship between screen and politics is quite direct. Known for his mythological and social work, N. T. Rama Rao (NTR) started the Telugu Desam Party in 1982 and served as the Chief Minister in 1983. One of the industry's biggest stars, Chiranjeevi, formed his Praja Rajyam Party in 2008 and joined the Congress and became a Union Minister. This tradition was

continued by Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party in the election of 2024, and he has been serving as Deputy Chief Minister since then. The crossover isn't restricted to male actors as Nandamuri Balakrishna, son of NTR, has been an MLA from Hindupur since 2014, while actors like Vijayashanti, Jayasudha, Roja and Jaya Prada have become part of the electoral fray.

This is a culture of fans that helps to maintain this connection. In fact, organised fan associations turn the worship of their hero/heroine into a social and political movement by bringing together their followers to donate blood, help the poor and support various campaigns, as seen by S. V. Srinivas (2009) in *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N. T. Rama Rao*. In many instances, fan clubs are established based on the stars and in many cases, community loyalty. Thus, films spread notions of honour, community and leadership to an enormous audience, and their depictions of social identity become public matters of concern.

2. Caste based discrimination in Telugu Society:

Caste plays an important role in the social and political life of the Telugus. The local communities which have a stake in land ownership and political power, particularly the Kammas, the Reddys and the Kapus, have historically influenced regional politics and have also played a prominent role in the production, distribution and exhibition of films (Srinivas, 2009). Many of the top stars and producers are members of or associated with these groups, and even when it's not mentioned in the film, it can still be included in the fan loyalty and film markets. On the contrary, Dalit communities like Malas, Madigas and Backward Classes are historically marginalized and deprived of access to land, education, public institutions and services. Their rivalry and demands have been a major dimension of Telugu politics including the long-standing demand for sub-categorization of the Scheduled Caste groups.

But these communities have been scarcely seen on-screen as protagonists with agency – they've been played more as servants, comic or victims. **Theoretical resources are used to guide this study:** Annihilation of caste (1936) by B. R. Ambedkar is a basic critique of the caste system and its propagation through culture and belief. Central to the question of whether dominant castes can represent the experience of the marginalised is who has the authority to represent who, as Gopal Guru (2009) puts it. The relationship between cinema, caste and power in Andhra Pradesh is worthy of a close study, and these ideas serve as an explanation for the same.

3. The study was warranted by the following need:

Telugu film industry is one of the largest film industries in India in terms of population and it has a significant influence on the mentality of people in Andhra Pradesh, political mobilization and popular culture (Srinivas, 2009). Glimmering stars have overstayed their welcome in politics and movies have transcended class, caste and region. Although this impact was felt, the depiction of caste and social identity in cinema has not been studied as much as the stars, fandom phenomena and box-office successes.

Ongoing work on Indian film has been largely on Hindi cinema (Madhava Prasad, 1998) and studies on caste representation in South India have been mostly on Tamil and Malayalam cinema. Telugu cinema, which has traditionally been dominated by dominant communities both in terms of production and patronage, has not been studied from a caste angle. This is a time that needs re-examination since 2000. The portrayal and discussion of identity has changed on account of the Dalit and Bahujan films, emergence of new generation directors, development of OTT platforms and the creation of the Telangana state in 2014. **This study is needed to:**

1. Analyse the voice of the dominant caste in the context of Telugu films.

2. Identify continuity and change in representation in the contemporary period.
3. Participate in media, caste and cultural studies in Andhra Pradesh.

1.1 Analysis: Patterns of Portrayal:

1. Dominant-Caste Normalization:

Many commercially successful Telugu films, though are not overtly referring to "caste" as a dominant identity, have been promoting unmarked "family", "honour" or "pride" as dominant-caste identity. Researchers note that Telugu movies in more than 30 years have briefly touched on the caste issue and extolled the pride of the dominant castes like Kammas and Kapus (Kumar, 2022). A reading from this perspective can be drawn from the movies like "Faction" and "Hero centred" films such as Samarasimha Reddy '99' and Simhadri '03', in which the dominant-caste values seem to be natural. In the same normalisation, Arjun Reddy (2017) has the caste linked surname in the title, without the questioning. Check each reading with the films.

2. The marginalisation and stereotyping of Dalits and Lower Castes is an issue:

In Dalit films, the upper caste hero becomes a savior even in films about the Dalits, and Dalit characters tend to be comedians or villains rather than heroes, finds Kongara (2022). Chandra sekhar (2019) ends up at the same conclusion from the historical perspective, that Dalit lives are constructed into stereotypes of a pop culture and suffering. You should document the frequency of your lower caste characters as servants, comic relief, or a victim, as well as whether they are given agency, dialogue, or an inner life.

3. Caste, Romance, and Honour:

Love is a frequent theme of the hierarchies at the site of the intercaste. The pairing of a fisherman's son and a landlord's daughter, and the father's violent reaction makes honour a key part in the film, a subject that can be debated whether it's named as caste or whether it's just class. (Uppena, 2021) While Love Story (2021) has a Dalit character, Kongara (2022) mentions that no one would usually explicitly mention a Dalit identity in a film. Sairat (2016, Marathi) is a helpful template for the presentation of honour violence without softening.

4. Emerging Counter-Narratives:

Recent movies bring to centre marginalised community. The Ambedkar imagery in Palasa 1978 (2020) and Narappa (2021) signals a sense of caste consciousness, but according to Kumar (2022) this can be tokenistic. Dasara (2023) can be studied in terms of its approach to caste in a working class context. A good comparison of a film on the marginalised community and legal justice would be Tamil cinema Jai Bhim (2021). In each film question whether the Dalit or tribal character is in control of the narrative or only symbolic.

5. Regional and Tribal Identity:

Caste appears in a different way in each region. While honour and kinship are linked to land in Rayalaseema films, caste and labour are foregrounded in the Uttarandhra settings in Palasa 1978 and Godavari settings in the Uppena, the same is with caste and occupation in coastal or Godavari settings like Srikakulam. Make a comparison of the dialect, landscape and livelihood in these regions and analyze how the Andhra and Telangana portrayals differ since 2014.

6. Gender and Caste:

Nadamala and Tripathi (2024) argue that while Dalit women have been erased from the past, they are given voice in selected recent Telugu films. Analyse if the female characters from Dalit and Bahujan

communities have their voices or other characters' voices, analyse whose desire is the vehicle of the plot, and how sexual violence and honour are used.

1.2 Need of the Study:

Cinema is one of the most powerful cultural institutions in Andhra Pradesh that has affected public opinion, aspirations and social attitudes of all classes, castes and generations. Storylines of the Telugu films resonate with and reinforce existing social hierarchies, in urban multiplexes and single-screen rural theatres alike, and the films also appeal to a large audience. Given the importance of caste as a political mobilisation tool, as an economic opportunity and as a social status, it is timely and necessary to study the representation of caste identity in cinema in a state where caste is still an important aspect of political mobilisation, economic opportunity and social status.

There have been contrasting trends in modern day Telugu movies. On the other hand, many films have been produced that misrepresent the marginalized groups – Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi – or have been written in a way that denies their existence. In one hand, the films have been using a hero-centric and factional narrative to portray dominant castes, and in the other hand, they have been invisibilizing Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi characters or treating them in a stereotypical way. In another vein, films have started to critically address issues of caste discrimination, land conflicts and social exclusion in recent years, marking a change in the representational scene. It is important to have an understanding of which of these tendencies dominates and how they affect the perception of audiences, in a systematic way. There has been very little scholarship available on Indian cinema and caste that has addressed Telugu cinema, as opposed to Tamil, Hindi, and Malayalam cinema or Andhra Pradesh in particular. The socio-political history of the region, with a predominant caste system, fan culture, and relationship between the film stars and political power requires an enquiry that is context specific.

1.3 Scope of the Study:

The aim of this research is to discuss the depiction of caste and social identity in the modern Telugu film from 2000 to the present day. This is the timeframe selected because there are key shifts in the movie-making and distribution processes, audience markets, and the introduction of OTT services. Geographical scope: It is a study which is based on Andhra Pradesh and considers Telugu cinema as one industry with Telangana. The study also considers the regional identities and the dialects and the political themes that have split since Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated in 2014. The scope of the content: A purposive selection of Telugu feature films that have made a strong impact on the box office, garnered significant critical interest or directly addressed caste concerns have been included in the analysis. The book examines the caste origin of actors, how Dalits and Backward Classes and the dominant community are represented, language and dialect, romance across caste, violence, and gender. Methodological approach: The study employed qualitative text analysis of films, and supplemented with existing literature on cinema, caste and fan culture.

1.4 Objectives of the Study:

1. To analyse the representation of caste and social identity in the Telugu films of the present time period (since 2000).
2. To examine whose voice is heard and whose voice is ignored in caste related stories and how dominant and marginalised communities are portrayed.

3. To recognize stereotypes, theme and patterns in portrayals of Dalits, backward classes and dominant castes.
4. To analyze the continuity and change in the representation of castes from the emergence of a new generation of film makers, OTT platforms and the changed scenario since 2014 in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.
5. To analyze the connections between the caste system of the film industry, fan culture and the representation of social identity.

1.5 Significance of the Study:

1. Academic Significance:

This research has also contributed to the work of media studies and caste studies as Telugu cinema has been neglected in comparison to Hindi, Tamil or Malayalam cinema (Madhava Prasad, 1998) from a caste perspective. It is an extension of the existing research on stars and fan culture which focuses on star worship rather than representation of social identity on screen (Srinivas, 2009). The study also builds on the concepts of Ambedkar (1936) on the caste hierarchy and Guru (2009) on the politics of representation in a regional film context, and creates a framework that can be adapted by other researchers in other languages, time and genres. It traces the changes in representation in the post-2000 period, which reflect the changes in the production and distribution of representations.

2. Social Significance:

Cinema constructs community, honour, and social hierarchy in various ways. The study illustrates how films normalise, stereotype and invisibilise certain castes, so that viewers can read films more critically and understand how prejudice can be disguised as pride or tradition. It is also a celebration of Dalit and Bahujan voices that are not a part of the mainstream voices and whether they were given a real agency or symbolic visibility in recent films. Such scrutiny is particularly crucial in a society closely intertwined with cinema and politics for a democratic debate.

3. Industry and Creative Significance

The results can contribute to the creation of more responsible and inclusive films, scripts and productions. They can also help new generation directors and OTTs that are exploring themes of caste, to figure out which scenes break the cycle of stereotypes and which are reinforcing them. These patterns can be used to review casting, dialogue, and character building choices.

Policy and Educational Significance

The study can provide inputs to the audiovisual media literacy programmes, film studies curriculum and public discourse on representation and social justice in Andhra Pradesh. It also serves as a benchmark for future comparative analysis within and between regions and languages, and for institutions that track and/or regulate media content.

1.6 Review of Literature:

1. Suresh, A. V., & Subramani, R. (2024): Discuss the Tamil film 'Pariyerum Perumal' by Mari Selvaraj and demonstrate how caste identity is visualised in the film. The movie traces the life of a Dalit law student named Pariyan who is suffering from loneliness, disrespect and brutality from upper caste students living in a village environment. The authors note that prior to the advent of Dalit oriented movies, the cinema reinforced the castes and took a negative look on Dalits. They say that the film calls into question the idea of caste superiority and raises awareness of prejudice even among what they

consider a progressive group of people. The study provides a valuable comparative yardstick for analyzing newer Telugu films whose theme is the same as the one presented in this study.

2. Deivendra Kumar (2023): Examines Sarpatta Parambarai as a narration of boxing culture, politics and subaltern identity in North Madras in Chalachitra Sameeksha. It states that for the last 50 years, Tamil cinema honoured the supremacy of the dominant and intermediate castes, but not Pa. Ranjith, 2012, started to rework it in terms of Dalit stories. The present study demonstrates how a sports genre can have a subaltern identity. It assists with this research to compare the rate of change in Tamil films with Telugu films.

3. Kongara (2022): Kongara gives an overview of Dalit representation in Telugu cinema in the International Journal of Research in Academic World. He believes that it is a caste hierarchy that dominates the filmmaking, the casting and the release of films, and themes are generally upper caste perspectives. In cases where marginalized issues are at the forefront, upper-caste characters are generally heroes, while Dalit characters are frequently comedians, villains, or sidekicks. There are very few films in which Dalits are the protagonists. This directly relates to the present study which aims to study the perspective of the centering in the Telugu caste narratives.

4. Kumar (2022): Explores how iconic images – Gandhi and Ambedkar – are layered in Telugu films in the Economic and Political Weekly. He compares and contrasts Palasa and Narappa (2021) with Rudraveena (1988) and claims that Telugu films have been dealing with caste in an episodic and tokenistic manner. He also discovers that movies have reinforced the sense of caste pride of the dominant communities like Kapus and Kammass. The article demonstrates the role of visual symbols and the pride of the dominant caste in the portrayal of cinema in Telugu cinema.

5. Swetha (2022): The Journal of English Language and Literature 2022 paper by Swetha (2022) looks at the portrayal of caste identity in the contemporary Tamil film. She adds that although in Indian cinema, caste was regarded as economic backwardness, today popular and commercial cinema is addressing caste and gender issues. Tamil cinema, shaped by the politics of Tamil Nadu as well as Dalit themes in films directed by the Dalits, is claimed to be particularly rich in Dalit representation. It's a good comparative measure for the Telugu cinema.

6. Edachira (2020): Writing in Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) has done his study on the cinema of Dalit filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule and Pa. Ranjith. The article states that they "fight the stereotypical representation" of their films using innovative visuals, sound, music and cinematography, thus developing an anti-caste aesthetics: and they establish expressive archives. It's not necessarily about Telugu films but just an indicator to determine whether Telugu films only have Dalit characters or they are anti-caste in nature and view.

7. Chandra Sekhar (2019): Has written a chapter in the Routledge book Dalit Text which speaks about the representation of Dalits in the Telugu cinema during multiple decades. The chapter suggests that most films are written, produced and directed by dominant groups and that the lives of the Dalit community are represented in the form of popular stereotypes, not in the form of social debate. With Malapilla (1938) that portrays the "Harijan" as dependent, it discusses Jayam Manadera, where Dalits are presented as submissive victims. It provides a historical context to compare changes in representation since 2000.

8. Yengde (2018): In this article, Yengde has looked at the concept of Dalit cinema with a focus on the works of Nagraj Manjule, in the South Asian journal. He argues that Dalit cinema can provide performative resistance to caste-capital nexus and an examination of caste, gender and class, can

facilitate a broader fight against caste supremacy. He compares it to the Dalit literature which is already there and can be used. This can help readers to understand that the Dalit community has a limited number of filmmakers in Telugu cinema as compared to the film culture of other communities.

1.7 Research Gaps of the Study:

1. Limited Telugu-Specific Studies: There are not many studies that have been done about the caste in the cinema except for the Tamil, Hindi and Marathi films (Swetha, 2022; Suresh & Subramani, 2024; Yengde, 2018). The work is limited Telugu and mostly features Dalits while there is limited focus on the representation of broader caste and social identity. There is limited representation of broader caste and social identity, and the work is mostly confined to the portrayal of Dalits (Kongara, 2022; Chandra Sekhar, 2019).

2. The weak link between industry structure and screen representation: The short essays by Kumar (2022) and Kongara (2022) address the issues of dominant-caste control and caste pride in the Telugu film industry but neither of these have framed them in relation to industry ownership, fan culture, and on-screen representation. That connection is explored in this study for the post-2000 era.

3. Lack of Analysis of Continuity and Change Across Theatrical and OTT Films: There is little research that has focused on the representation of castes in Telugu films since 2014 bifurcation or looking at the difference between theatrical and OTT releases. The portrayal of Dalit women on both the platforms is particularly under researched.

4. Concentrate only on Single Films or on Dalit Themes: The previous studies have focused on individual films or themes related to Dalits (Chandra Sekhar, 2019; Suresh & Subramani, 2024). There have not been comparative studies of the portrayal of dominant caste, backward classes and dalits in different Telugu movies. This study tackles that question.

Statistical Tables

Table 1: Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Population in Undivided Andhra Pradesh

Year	Scheduled Castes (population)	SC share of state population	Scheduled Tribes (population)	ST share of state population
1961	4.9 million	13.8%	1.3 million	3.7%
2011	13.9 million	16.4%	5.0 million	5.6%

Source: Census of India, as reported in a study of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in Andhra Pradesh (MPRA Paper 48186). Figures are for the undivided state, before the 2014 bifurcation.

Interpretation: Between 1961 and 2011, Scheduled Castes rose from 13.8% to 16.4% of the population and Scheduled Tribes from 3.7% to 5.6%. Dalits, however, are seldom protagonists in Telugu films (Kongara, 2022), so examining how they are portrayed is clearly justified.

Table 3: Coding Frame

Variable	What is coded
Protagonist's caste	Named or signalled through surname, occupation, ritual or family setting: unmarked identity is also recorded

Variable	What is coded
Role of Dalit, OBC and Adivasi characters	Protagonist, antagonist, comic relief, sidekick, victim, servant, or other: who is present but silent
Agency and interiority	Whether the character drives the plot, has dialogue of substance, and is given an inner life
Language and dialect	Regional dialect, register, and whether dialect is used for comedy
Rituals and symbols	Surnames, temples, festivals, Ambedkar and other icons, costume, music
Inter-caste romance	How hierarchy is shown, and whether it is named as caste or recast as class
Violence	Who inflicts and who suffers it: honour violence: how the narrative treats it
Gender	Whether Dalit and Bahujan women have voice: whose desire drives the plot
Resolution	Who resolves the conflict: whether an upper-caste saviour appears

Table 3: Reach of Telugu Cinema (Recent Indicators)

Indicator	Figure	Year
Telugu film tickets sold	23.3 crore (highest among Indian film industries)	2022
Telugu film in India's top-10 grossers: <i>Hanu-Man</i>	243.2 crore (rank 10)	2024
Telugu film in India's top-10 grossers: <i>They Call Him OG</i>	228.40 crore (rank 9)	2025

Sources: ticket sales as reported in a Telugu cinema overview: 2024 grossers and 2025 grossers from Wikipedia's India box-office lists.

Interpretation: Telugu cinema reaches an enormous audience: 23.3 crore tickets in 2022, the highest among Indian industries, and Telugu films remain in India's top ten grossers. Such wide reach makes the caste messages it carries highly socially consequential for Andhra Pradesh audiences.

Contextual Data:

Table 4: Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population in undivided Andhra Pradesh

Year	Scheduled Castes	SC share of state population	Scheduled Tribes	ST share of state population
1961	4.9 million	13.8%	1.3 million	3.7%
2011	13,878,078 (about 13.9 million)	16.4%	5,918,073 (about 5.9 million)	7.0%

Sources: 1961 figures as reported in Venkatanarayana (2013, MPRA Paper 48186): 2011 figures from the Census of India 2011 (total population of the undivided state: 84,580,777). Figures are for

the undivided state, before the 2014 bifurcation. The MPRA paper gives 5.0 million and 5.6% for the 2011 Scheduled Tribe population: the Census figures above differ and are used here.

Interpretation: Between 1961 and 2011 the Scheduled Caste share of the population rose from 13.8% to 16.4%, and the Scheduled Tribe share from 3.7% to 7.0%. Because Dalits are seldom protagonists in Telugu films (Kongara, 2022), a demographic presence of this size makes the question of how they are portrayed important.

Table 5: Reach of Telugu cinema (recent indicators)

Year	Indicator	Source
2022	Telugu films were the second-biggest language category, with about 2,145 crore in gross collections and a 20% share of the national box office (up from 13% in 2019): Telugu cumulative footfalls crossed 20 crore	Ormax Media (2023)
2024	Telugu cinema crossed 2,000 crore in domestic gross collections for the third year running: <i>Pushpa 2: The Rule</i> and <i>Kalki 2898 AD</i> ranked among the three highest-grossing Telugu films of all time	Ormax Media (2025)

Note: Ormax figures are industry estimates. The figures above are those reported in the cited Ormax summaries and should be checked against the full reports before publication.

Interpretation: Telugu cinema reaches a very large audience, and its films are among the highest-grossing in India. That reach makes the caste messages it carries socially consequential for audiences in Andhra Pradesh and beyond.

1.8 Methodology:

1. Research Design: This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design based on textual analysis. Each film is treated as a cultural text, and its plot, characters, dialogue, songs, visuals, and resolution are examined to understand how caste and social identity are represented. The focus is on on-screen representation rather than audience behaviour, which makes textual analysis an appropriate approach.

2. Period: The study covers Telugu feature films released between 2014 and 2024, the period following the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh and the growth of OTT platforms. Industry ownership and fan culture are considered in the wider post-2000 context.

3. Sampling and Selection Criteria: A purposive sample of 8-10 films will be selected on the following criteria:

1. Box-office success and audience reach, reflecting wide cultural influence.
2. Caste or social identity as a central theme, either overt or implicit, as in *Palasa 1978*, *Narappa* and *Love Story*.
3. Diversity of representation, including films centred on dominant castes as well as Dalit and Bahujan narratives.
4. Mode of release, including both theatrical and OTT films, to examine continuity and change.

4. Method of Analysis: Each film will be viewed in full and coded for themes, character portrayal, language, symbols, and narrative resolution. Particular attention will be given to the portrayal of

dominant castes, Backward Classes, Dalits, and Dalit women, and to differences between theatrical and OTT films.

5. Data Sources:

- **Primary Data:** The primary data consist of the 8-10 selected Telugu feature films released between 2014 and 2024, viewed in full through theatrical releases and OTT platforms. Dialogue, scenes, songs, costumes, visuals, and narrative resolutions will be recorded and coded to examine how caste and social identity are represented on screen.
- **Secondary Data:** The secondary data include film reviews, filmmaker interviews, journal articles, and books on cinema, caste, and fan culture. Census of India data will provide the social and demographic context of caste groups in Andhra Pradesh. These sources support interpretation of the films and help place the findings within existing scholarship.
- **Ethical Considerations and Limitations:** The study analyses publicly available films and involves no human participants, so no consent or personal data issues arise. Sources will be properly acknowledged. As a qualitative interpretive study with a small purposive sample, its findings are indicative rather than generalisable to all Telugu cinema.

1.9 Findings of the Study:

1. **Dominant-Caste Normalization is still ongoing:** The sense of pride in the dominant caste is generally not a discourse of dishonour or heroism in the context of commercial Telugu movies. Surname glorification and rural authority are natural: caste is visible, but barely so, and has an impact on the social status and fan loyalty of the hero.
2. **Dalits are still a marginal character:** There are more and more Dalit characters who are comedians, villains, sidekicks or victims as compared to protagonists and upper-caste heroes still play the role of a saviour. While not all films are hostile towards Dalits, rarely do they allow Dalit characters full agency or a nuanced interior life.
3. **Romance Reveals The Hierarchy Of Caste.** Caste hierarchy emerges at an intercaste romance. The depiction of family honour and violent resistance allows caste to be presented as class or unmentioned, thus blurring social discrimination and not addressing it head-on and outright.
4. **Counter-Narratives are coming into existence but not yet uniform.** Examples of such films are Palasa 1978, Narappa which bring the marginalised communities closer to the centre and Ambedkar imagery. But such moments can be rather tokenistic and at the regional and tribal level, and genderly level, perspectives are unevenly developed overall .
5. **The portrayal of industry structure is shaped:** Production, casting and release is dominated by a dominant cast which promotes safe stories based on dominant perspectives, and star-centred fan markets further promote safe stories. Although the OTT platforms and new generation filmmakers may be expanding the space, their true measure will be yet to be seen.

1.10 Discussions:

1. **Normalisation vs. Resistance:** In the patterns a balance between normalisation and resistance is illustrated. Pride of the dominant caste is still prevalent in commercial films while films such as Palasa 1978 and Narappa have references to Ambedkar images, but only in a tokenistic manner (Kumar, 2022). Resistance is there, but is the exception in the main stream film.

2. **Structure of the Industry:** The production, casting, and release are dominated by dominant castes (Kongara, 2022), and there exists a partial congruence between stars' fan base and community loyalties (Srinivas, 2009). Producers, therefore, prefer safe stories where the central figure is a Dalit, and prefer to avoid critical themes of caste and instead keep Dalit voices in the background.
3. **The influence of the OTT platforms and new-generation filmmakers:** New generation filmmakers and OTTs can create room for caste-centric films. Streaming helps to reduce dependence on theaters. In this search for new Dalit characters on OTT, the question is whether it is a shift towards agency or symbolic visibility in Telugu films? Wankhede (2022) explores this issue.
4. **The relationship between findings and theory:** The findings validate the thoughts of Madhava Prasad (1998) who asserted that popular cinema reproduces dominant structures and Ambedkar's criticism on the caste hierarchy. The dominant-caste authorship of "Dalit voice" is explored in Guru's 2009 question, who represents whom? but there is some deviation from this in counter-narratives.

1.11 Conclusion:

The present study aimed to explore the depiction of caste and social identity in the mainstream Telugu films in which the voice of the social community is dominant and how it has evolved. In the analysis, it is found that caste is manifested in two broad ways in the first question: unmarked dominant-caste pride (as family honour or heroism) and marginal Dalit presence (where characters are comedians, villains, sidekicks, victims). The second day is the dominant-caste day: the gaze is still centered, industry owned, star-fanned and upper-caste saviour. On the third, change is for real, but uneven. The portrayal of marginalised communities closer to the centre as in the films Palasa 1978 and Narappa, can be tokenistic and the regional, tribal and gender perspectives are not equally developed. In general, Telugu cinema remains somewhat deaf to caste, and mainly addresses it from a perspective of dominant communities.

The study adds to the students of media, caste and culture by bringing Ambedkar's critique of caste, Guru's question of representation and Madhava Prasad's perspective on popular cinema's ideology to the regional context and also by connecting on-screen portrayal with the structure of the industry. Limits are a small purposive sample, and focus on representation rather than reception. Future studies could therefore look at audience studies and interviewing with the viewers, fans and filmmakers, comparing Telugu cinema films with Tamil, Malayalam and Marathi films, where the Dalit presence in cinema is more visible and also study the digital media including OTT films, social media and fan discussions to see whether these new platforms provide actual agency to the marginalised or just symbolic visibility.

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