

Portrayal of Dalit women in Hindi cinema: A Study of Two Representative Films *Prem Rog* and *Dilli 6*

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ABSTRACT

From History to Political science to the study of social exclusion and inclusion, films have become an important feature of such studies. It has been lately realized that any anthropological study is incomplete without the study and exploration of films, and lately cinema has caught the attention of academicians. While academic interest in Indian cinema has a slightly longer history, the publication of the works of Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Ravi Vasudevan and others, marked the beginning of a focus on cinema, not merely as a site for occasional forays by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and Indologists, but as a field with an institutional specificity that could only be ignored at the risk of a serious misreading of its cultural significance (Prasad, 1998). Though films came to India, almost a hundred years back they have always played an important role in the countries social, economic and most importantly the cultural fiber of the nation. If films in the 1930's talked about mythology and religion, the 40's and 50's saw a rise in nationalism being portrayed in Hindi cinema. After independence we see a steep rise in cinema projecting the optimism ushered in by independence during the Nehruvian era, they talked about socialism, equality, nationalism and secularism while denouncing caste distinction, zamindari system and women subjugation. Apart from portraying the stark realities of Indian society on celluloid, films have also successfully acted as catalyst in steering the society in a positive direction. It has successfully raised concerns surrounding our societies at a given point in time, never shying away from shouldering the responsibility of bringing a positive change in the country, of freeing itself from the age old shackles of prejudice and bias. Cinema has always been the voice of the voiceless, the oppressed and the subjugated. From the landless peasant dying in poverty to the unemployed educated urban youth, the marginalized have been depicted with pathos and empathy. Hence caste and gender are no exceptions – while Nitin Bose's *Chandidas* (1934) and V. Shantaram's *Dharmatma* (1935) touched upon the delicate theme of caste discrimination, it was Frank Osten's *Achhut Kannya* (1936), which fully explored the dynamics of caste distinction in rural Indian society. Another classic attempt to explore this theme was Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959). Some other noteworthy attempts are Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974) *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Aarohan* (1982), *Mandi* (1983), Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) and the more recent Prakash Jha's *Aarakshaan* (2011) and *Masaan* (2015). However in the paper an attempt has been made to analyze the way Dalit women has been portrayed not as a protagonists but as a side character in the sub plot. The two films that have been taken up for analysis are Raj Kapoor's *Prem Rog* (1982) and Rakesh Omprakash Mehra's *Dilli 6* (2009). The paper explores how the characters played by Bindu (Chamiya) and Divya Dutta (Jalebi), respectively. In spite of belonging to the Dalit or the untouchable caste they come across as assertive, strong and independent women. Their characters are bolder and courageous in comparison to women belonging to elitist or brahmanical class. The characters aptly portray the dichotomy where these women are looked down as being impure on one hand and at the same time they are used by upper class men for sexual gratification too.

Key Words : Dalit women, Hindi cinema, Prem Rog, Delhi 6

INTRODUCTION

Though films came to India, almost a hundred years back and still continue to play an important role in the social and economic fiber of the nation but still using them as narrative of the countries' political and social history has been recent. Media anthropology has become an important aspect of cultural studies. From History to Political science to the study of social exclusion and inclusion, films have become an important feature of such studies. It has been lately realized that any anthropological study is incomplete without the study and exploration of films, and recently cinema has caught the attention of academicians. Serious works of film scholars like Rosie Thomas, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Ira Bhaskar, Ravi Vasudevan, Ashish Nandy, Jyotika Viridi have opened up new vistas for research and discussions. Being ignored for more than a century and labeled as being low brow and non-serious, the sudden interest in film studies is a welcome change. The power that cinema exudes in a country like India has long been undermined and ignored. While academic interest in Indian cinema has a slightly longer history, the publication of the works of Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Ravi Vasudevan and others, marked the beginning of a focus on cinema, not merely as a site for occasional forays by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and Indologists, but as a field with an institutional specificity that could only be ignored at the risk of a serious misreading of its cultural significance (Prasad, 1998).

Apart from portraying the stark realities of Indian society on celluloid, films have also successfully acted as catalyst in steering the society in a positive direction. It has successfully raised concerns surrounding our societies at a given point in time, never shying away from shouldering the responsibility of bringing a positive change in the country, of freeing itself from the age old shackles of prejudice and bias. Cinema has always been the voice of the voiceless, the oppressed and the subjugated. If films in the 1930 talked about mythology and religion, the 40's and 50's saw a rise in nationalism being portrayed in Hindi cinema. After independence we see a steep rise in cinema projecting the optimism ushered in by independence during the Nehruvian era, they talked about socialism, equality, nationalism and secularism while denouncing caste distinction, zamindari system and women subjugation. From the landless peasant dying in poverty to the unemployed educated urban youth, the

marginalized have been depicted with pathos and empathy.

Hence caste and gender are no exceptions – while Nitin Bose's *Chandidas* (1934) and V. Shantaram's *Dharmatma* (1935) touched upon the delicate theme of caste discrimination, it was Frank Osten's *Achhut Kannya* (1936), which fully explored the dynamics of caste distinction in rural Indian society. Another classic attempt to explore this theme was Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959). Some other noteworthy attempts are Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974) *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Aarohan* (1982), *Mandi* (1983), Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) and the more recent Prakash Jha's *Aarakshaan* (2011) and newbie director Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015).

While *Achhut Kannya*'s Kasturi (Devika Rani) is in love with Pratap (Ashok Kumar) a Brahmin, she is shown as a submissive, docile and selfless woman. *Achhut Kanya* is not a triumphing love cutting across caste barriers and culminating in a union kind of love story but a subversive, inhibited and a controlled transgression by a Dalit woman that ultimately ends in a personal tragedy. *Sujata* (1959), is another incident of controlled transgression when Indian cinema returns to the issue of caste. The protagonist is again a voiceless, silent, passive woman, who cannot stand for her rights.

However by the end of the 70s, Dalit women had achieved some minimal levels of expression in Indian cinema. Some examples of this welcome change are Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), Jag Mundhra's *Bawandar* (2000), and Priyadarshan's *Aakrosh* (2010).

With the emergence of multiplex consumers and emergence of new wave directors, Hindi cinema is ready to explore and experiment and hence a shift has been observed in the age old stereotyping of characters and themes.

However in the paper an attempt has been made to analyze the way Dalit women has been portrayed not as a protagonist but as a side character in the sub plot. Such an analysis was deliberately chosen as the heroine or the female lead has more or less been a stereotypical portrayal. The heroine is supposed to be docile, pure, chaste, beautiful and submissive. Hence barring some honest attempts, the Hindi film heroine doesn't leave much to be explored. Secondly in the second fiddle or the side roles the film makers bias and opinions come out more strongly though in a subtle manner.

The two films that have been taken up for analysis are Raj Kapoor's *Prem Rog* (1982) and Rakesh Omprakash Mehra's *Dilli 6* (2009). The paper explores the characters played by Bindu (Chamiya) and Divya Dutta (Jalebi), respectively.

Prem Rog:

Raj Kapoor's *Prem Rog* was a scathing attack on the superstitions and useless customs and rituals of the upper caste. The story portrays the relationship between Manorama (Padmani Kolhapure) and Devdhar (Rishi Kapoor) and how their love triumphs all odds. Raj Kapoor had aesthetically depicted the double standards and hypocrisy prevalent in the upper caste families of rural India. The film was way ahead of its time and talked about widowhood and the inhuman treatment meted out to widows them, their sexual exploitation and social boycott.

Chamiya (Bindu) plays a potter woman, belonging to the Kumhar community, who are considered schedule castes. Her plunging necklines and glamorized look make her a typical Dalit woman, who is under the male gaze and looked upon as just a body to be used for pleasure and gratification. However she is bold enough to tell the upper caste Thakur that they use woman as wine bottles, to be thrown after use. She is audacious enough to try reasoning out with the Thakur to let her widow daughter marry Devdhar, a suggestion that even the Thakur's wife cannot dare to make. In the last scene also Chamiya makes a powerful impact through her speech directed toward the double faced, false traditions of the upper caste, who talk about being the custodians of religion and culture but in reality they are the ones who encourage corruption and exploitation in the society. Chamiya brazenly tells Chote Thakur that you have used and sexually exploited every women of the village and holds no right to give lecture on morality, religion and ethics. She is shot dead while trying to save the honour of the two lovers. Though Chamiya's role in terms of screen space is small but nevertheless it is powerful. It leaves a lasting impression on the viewer's mind and plays a significant part in taking the story forward. She is more assertive, bold and confident than the women of the Thakur household who comes across as meek, timid and submissive, as evident in the case of Choti Maa, who cannot take a decision even for the betterment of her daughter. Choti Maa even knows about her husband's sexual encounters but keeps quiet carrying upon herself

the so called burden of traditions and family honour.

Dilli 6:

Rakesh Omprakash Mehra's *Dilli 6* is a beautiful commentary on the old world charm of a city forgotten and an era bygone. The city is revisited through the eyes of Roshan (Abhishek Bachchan) an American returned youngster, who is back to his roots with his grandmother. The film talks about old school values of ancestral havelis, Ramlala, Inter religious marriages and so on. In the midst of all this Roshan tries to make sense of the new and emerging India and how these roots are connected to that very core of his own existence.

Amongst all this din, Jalebi's character (Divya Dutta) comes across as a culmination of all that is new in India but still rooted in tradition, bearing the weight of all that is still old and unchanged; the caste order. In the introduction scene of Jalebi itself, a mocking music and a hand pulled trash cart are enough to depict the very burden that the Dalit woman have been bearing for centuries. While the cart signifies trash and impurity associated with them the music signifies the sexual innuendoes associated. Even the name 'Jalebi' has a sexual inference attached. The jeers and voyeuristic glances that are thrown at her by the passersby are also a testimony to the fact that the body of a Dalit woman is to be regarded as a playground by the upper caste men. Jalebi is also famous for making 'men' out of boys and allegedly boys of that area have their first sexual encounter with Jalebi only, after which they are considered to have become men. When Roshan accidentally touches her, he is considered to have become impure and his dadi tries to purify him, which leaves Roshan questioning this age old custom and in the next scene itself the allegory of Shri Ram eating Shabri's half eaten fruit is evoked.

In one of the scene the police man of the area also mockingly call Jalebi an untouchable and instead of taking it lying down, Jalebi is seen retorting back and telling him that though he may consider her an untouchable but he still goes to her in order to seek sexual gratification. Instead of being meek or submissive, Jalebi is seen as being independent, assertive and capable of taking care of herself. She even has the guts to refuse the police man's sexual advances. Also the police man's treatment of Jalebi demonstrates the age old way of taming a woman and yielding power over her through sexually exploiting her.

Jalebi's character however differs in the regard that

unlike the Dalit woman portrayed in other movies; she does not pine and feel sorry for herself. Instead she takes her own decisions, has the confidence to call a spade a spade and is confident enough to fight for something which she considers right or just.

Conclusion :

In spite of belonging to the Dalit or the untouchable caste Jalebi and Chamiya come across as assertive, strong and independent women. Their characters are bolder and courageous in comparison to women belonging to elitist or upper class. The characters aptly portray the dichotomy where these women are looked down as being impure on one hand and at the same time they are used by upper class men for sexual gratification too. As the Thakur's wife laments in *Prem Rog* that even though you cannot drink water from the hands of a lower caste and consider it impure still you can easily establish physical relationships with their women. These women are in total contrast to the woman of upper caste households, who are subjugated and dominated on the false pretext of saving the family name, culture and traditions.

Another important observation was though these women are courageous enough to speak against societal bias and prejudices, they are not able to save themselves from the sexual exploitation that is meted out to them at the hands of the upper caste men and they have started taking this exploitation as a part of their daily existence.

Hence we see that apart from these feeble attempts Bollywood has not been just in the portrayal of the Dalit women in mainstream cinema. This theme has failed to catch the imagination and fancy of film makers. However with the growth of multiplex cinema and coming up of new age directors, one may hope to see a varied and honest depiction of the same.

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Filmography

- 1) **Prem Rog**. Hindi. 1983.
Director: Raj Kapoor |Production Company :R.K. Productions| Lead Actors: Shammi Kapoor, Rishi Kapoor and Padmini Kolhapure
- 2) **Delhi-6**. Hindi. 2009.
Director : Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra|Production Company: Showman Pictures| Lead Actors: Abhishek Bachchan and Sonam Kapoor
- 3) **Chandidas**. Hindi. 1934
Director: Nitin Bose |Production Company: New Theatres| Lead Actors: K.L.Saigal and Uma Sashi
- 4) **Dharmatma**. Hindi. 1935.
Director: V.Shantaram| Production Company: Prabhat Film Company | Lead Actors: Bal Gandharv and Chandra Mohan
- 5) **Achhut Kanya**. Hindi. 1936.
Director: Frank Osten| Production Company: Bombay Talkies| Lead Actors: Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar
- 6) **Sujata**. Hindi. 1959.
Director: Bimal Roy| Production Company: Bimal Roy Productions| Lead Actors: Sunil Dutt and Nutan
- 7) **Ankur** . Hindi. 1974
Director: ShyamBenegal| Production Company: Blaze Film Enterprises| Lead Actors: ShabanaAzmi and Ananth Nag
- 8) **Nishant**. Hindi. 1975
Director: ShyamBenegal| Production Company: Blaze Film Enterprises| Lead Actors: GirishKarnad and SmitaPatil
- 9) **Manthan**. Hindi. 1976.
Director: ShyamBenegal| Production Company: Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd. |Lead Actors: GirishKarnad, SmitaPatil and Naseruddin Shah
- 10) **Aarohan**. Hindi. 1982.
Director: ShyamBenegal. |Lead Actors: Om Puri and Victor

Banerjee

- 11) **Mandi.** Hindi.1983.

Director: ShyamBenegal| Production Company: Blaze Film Enterprises| Lead Actors: SmitaPatil. Naseruddin Shah and ShabanaAzmi.

- 12) **Aakrosh.** Hindi.1980.

Director: GovindNihalani| Production Company: N.F.D.C| Lead Actors: SmitaPatil and Naseruddin Shah.

- 13) **Aarakshaan.** Hindi.2011.

Director: PrakashJha| Production Company: PrakashJha Productions| Lead Actors: Amitabh Bachchan and Saif Ali

Khan

- 14) **Masaan.** Hindi.2015.

Director: NeerajGhaywan| Production Company: Drishyam Films, Phantom Films| Lead Actors: RichaChaddha and Vicky Kaushal

- 15) **Bandit Queen.** Hindi.1994.

Director: ShekharKapur| Production Company : Kaleidoscope Entertainment| Lead Actors: SeemaBiswas

- 16) **Bawandar.**Hindi.2000

Director: Jag Mundhra|| Lead Actors: Nandita Das
