

Development of Dalits and Gandhi in Indian Cinema: A Study from Dalit Perspective

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Abstract

*During the pre-independence period in India, Dalits were marginalized with little socio-political representation. The Round Table Conferences saw MK Gandhi opposing separate electorates for Dalits, as demanded by Dr. Ambedkar. Despite Gandhi's resistance, the Poona Pact of 1932 was reached. Gandhi's philosophy of assimilating Dalits into Hindu society through changing upper-caste hearts, rather than legal equality as proposed by Dr. Ambedkar, influenced literature and films. Works like *Malapalli*, *'Untouchable'*, and *'Achoot Kanya'* included Dalit characters but often depicted them as submissive, waiting for oppressors' generosity. This inclusion was seen as tokenism, lacking genuine concern for Dalit voices and aspirations. Hundreds of film projects funded by the NFDC on social issues did not support Dalit filmmakers, perpetuating stereotypes of Dalits as passive and self-inflicting individuals, devoid of vision or dreams. The Gandhian model overshadowed the revolutionary model proposed by Dr. Ambedkar.*

Keywords: *Dalits Portrayal, Poona Pact, Submissive Portrayal, Tokenism Portrayal, and Dalit Portrayal*

I. Introduction

Dalits constitute about one-sixth of India's population. For centuries, they have been at the bottom of India's social pyramid. They were denied basic human rights, such as access to drinking water from public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, freedom to choose an occupation (other than assigned by birth), freedom to keep property and education, and so on. They are practically invisible from every public domain so much so that their identity itself has been stigmatised.

Dalits were traditionally and conveniently kept away from film production and the Silver Screen. The entry of Dalits into cinematic space was a conscious and deliberate act and not a self-propelled organic one, as in the case of other performing arts in India. Dalits' first engagement with cinema and literature could be observed in the last century's late twenties and early thirties. Their entry into cinematic space was a means to some sociopolitical ends rather than giving space to a considerable population. Barring a film or two, Dalits again went into oblivion for the next four decades. Again, with the conscious efforts of the government through NFDC, they could be seen.

The new millennia Dalits witnessed changes in the socioeconomic condition and the emergence of a small middle class. Few liberal filmmakers also gave space for Dalit characters and filmmakers. The growth is natural and self-sustaining and not motivated by some sociopolitical ends. The growth is somewhat erratic, but it is steady, self-propelled, and wide social spectrum.

Dalits in Indian Cinema: A Gandhian Perspective

Dalits were on the margins in all aspects of life and were insignificant in socio-political and other domains of public life. The question of Dalits first gained prominence during the pre-independence period, when the British Indian government called the Round Table Conferences in London to resolve the issue of representation of various communities including the Dalits. MK Gandhi vehemently opposed identifying Dalits as a distinct community and rejected the demand for separate electorates as advocated by Dr. Ambedkar, a Dalit (then known as the Depressed Class). The former also claimed to be the sole representative of Hindus including Dalits, but failed to substantiate his claim against Dr. Ambedkar in the conference. Later on, it was conceded by him by the famous Poona Pact in 1932.

MK Gandhi, an upper-caste Hindu, was much revered in the upper-caste intelligentsia and artistic class. The contemporary intelligentsia, novelists, and filmmakers took the onus on them to substantiate his claim as the sole representative of Dalits and took the lead in establishing MK Gandhi's philosophical model that Dalits are integral parts of Hindu society and they will be assimilated into the Hindu social system by changing the heart of upper-caste Hindus and not by the way of propionate representation and equality before the law as propounded by Dr. Ambedkar, a Dalit.

The Gandhian model of 'complete submission to oppressors and win the heart of oppressor by good deeds' was propagated by the intelligentsia and other artistic classes through novels, films, and other means of mass propagation. Journalistic writings and social activities are beyond the scope of this paper, and hence excluded. Though started as a political debate, soon it entered other realms of arts. Writers and film producers who henceforth, were a blind eye towards Dalits and conveniently kept them at an arm's distance; suddenly started embracing them.

The novels that denied even the existence of Dalits suddenly found Dalits in central narratives. The films that were blind eye towards Dalits and Dalit filmmakers suddenly started producing films keeping Dalit characters in the central position although maintaining a safe distance from Dalit artists and filmmakers. This class succeeded in establishing Gandhian status quo and reformist philosophy as the way for the emancipation of Dalits. At the same time, they were able to push the Ambedkarite revolutionary model to the margins.

As discussed above, the sudden sprout of Dalit protagonists in the novels and films could be observed in the 1930's. Novels like *Malapalli* (Telugu, 1922), *Untouchable* (1935), *Malapilla* (Telugu, 1938), and *Kanthapura* (1938), and films like *Chandi Das* (Bengali, 1932) and its remake *Chandi Das* (Hindi, 1934), *Dharamatman* (Hindi and Marathi 1935), *Achoot Kanya* (Hindi, 1936), *Malapalli* (Telugu, 1938), could be observed in a short period.

Certain common features could be observed in the portrayal of these Dalit characters. Only female characters are been portrayed and the question of Dalit is subsumed in male-female relations. They were portrayed as meek and submissive to oppressions, deprived of agency, waiting for exploiters to change their hearts, and keep their devotion to God and the societal system intact, not to question the system but to accept it as preordained, and so on. The root cause of all the handicaps in their life is fate and one must endure it without resentment. They must wait patiently for generosity and a change of heart from the higher caste subjects. The only way out was a reformation of the upper caste by selfless devotion or death. There is no place for questioning the norms, resentment, rebellion, or even voicing own concerns.

Chandi Das (Hindi, 1934) directed by Nitin Bose is a remake of the same titled *Chandi Das* (Bengali, 1932) and was a commercial big success. Rami a Dalit woman meekly accepts that she is not worthy of being loved by a priest of the upper caste and believes that by loving her he is showing generosity towards her. The same phenomenon could be observed in *Achoot Kanya* (The Untouchable Girl, Hindi, 1936) directed by Franz Osten. Despite her love for Pratap, she accepts that she cannot be the wife of Pratap. She never thought of breaking or questioning societal norms set for them.

In *Malapalli* (A Mala [Untouchable] Girl, Telugu, 1938), a film directed by Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, a Brahmin boy falls in love with Sampalatha, a Dalit girl. Failing to see the possibility of acceptance of their love in society they eloped and got married. The father of Nagaraju was initially against them but later accepted them due to the selfless dedication shown by the Dalits in saving his wife from the fire.

Sujata (Hindi, 1959) directed and produced by Bimal Roy. It is a love story between Adheer a Brahmin Man and an untouchable woman, Sujata. Charu, Sujata's foster mother never accepted her as a daughter as she was born in a Dalit family. Sujata's blood from rare blood groups saves her foster mother's life who requires it due to an accident. This brings her a change of heart and she willingly allows her to marry Adheer.

Dalits in novels and films, as discussed above, prominently show the Gandhian ways of dealing with the caste system. In some works, there is direct mention of Gandhi like in *Untouchable* (1935) and *Kanthapura* (1938) while in films there are motifs and symbols of Gandhian philosophy. As in the film *Sujata* (1959), there is a complete submission to the oppressor without any remorse and selfless dedication, waiting for their heart to change.

Another important point in this whole exercise of the introduction of Dalits in novels and films. The upper-caste intelligentsia kept Dalit writers and artists at a safe arm's distance and were able to shove Dalit concerns under the carpet keeping their progressive faces intact. The absence of Dalit artists and filmmakers makes their portrayal artificial and unconvincing, devoid of any depth in characters. Their portrayal was seen as an entirely alien phenomenon and out of this world. The same concern has been pointed out by well-known film scholar MK Raghavendra:

To all appearances the portrayal of Dalits has been 'theory down', victimhood made the essence of Dalit life. This is a view from above since a Dalit would be aware of more aspects of their experience—while someone from above would only take note of what their own class has inflicted upon the Dalit. Most films about Dalits have come from upper-caste filmmakers and one could cite a series of films where Dalit/Adivasi portrayals are patently unconvincing: Devika Rani in *Achhut Kanya*, Shabana Azmi in *Ankur*, Smita Patil in *Aakrosh*, Nutan in *Sujata*; still, there is more to it than unconvincing character portrayals. (Raghavendra)

So, it can be concluded that the portrayal of Dalits in novels and films started with the discussion on the question of representation in Round Table Conferences and died once the question was settled. It is argued by critics that, it was a conscious effort to establish Gandhian ideals and philosophies by the upper caste elite and artistic class. It also kept Dalit writers and artists at a safe arm's distance. Although screen space was breached

by Dalit characters, Dalit artists and Dalit concerns did not find any place in the whole exercise. It was the result of the dedicated effort of upper-caste novelists and filmmakers to substantiate Gandhian claims as the only way of upliftment and emancipation of Dalits.

NFDC and Indian Cinema

After gaining independence from the British, India became a democratic country. From the early years, the government was aware of the role and potential of cinema in unifying India into a nation while giving it a unique identity at international forums. Cinema being a capital initiative industry requires capital, so the Government of India established the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1960. It was primarily a funding body of the Government of India for funding and promoting films. Later in 1975, it was reconstituted as NFDC (National Film Development Corporation of India) as a PSU (Public Sector Undertaking) under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

As per the report of review by the Government of India tabled in the parliament for the year 2012-13. The purpose, vision, and working of National Film Development Corporation Limited for the year 2012-2013 it has been reported:

National Film Development Corporation Limited is a Public Sector Undertaking established to encourage the good cinema movement in the country. The primary goal of the NFDC is to plan, promote, and organize an integrated and efficient development of the Indian Film Industry and foster excellence in cinema. (Ministry of State for Information and Broadcasting)

As mentioned in the report and the government's concern in the functioning of NFDC; in a highly unorganised industry like the film industry role of the NDFC is like a lighthouse that always shows the way to navigate, at the same time it also guides the industry in a particular direction i.e. in the democratic country, democratising the cinematic space and integration of Indian culture. The NDFC is working with the mission of "... fostering excellence in cinema and promoting diversity of its culture..." (NFDC: Cinemas of India)

NDFC and Dalits in Indian Cinema

As envisioned in its mission of promoting diversity, NFDC tried to promote diversity on various levels, like gender, social, lingual, regional, and so on; but my study will be limited to studying the role of NDFC in promoting social diversity and diversity in the portrayal of Dalits in particular. It is worth mentioning here that around 300 film projects were funded directly or indirectly by NDFC on various social concerns but a few projects for the portrayal of Dalit characters are been taken up.

Some prominent and well-known films supported/produced by NDFC that have Dalit characters are *Ankur* (Hindi, 1974), *Nishant* (Hindi, 1975), *Manthan* (Hindi, 1976), *Aakrosh* (Hindi, 1980), *Sadgati* (Hindi, 1981), *Paar* (Hindi, 1984), *Damul* (Hindi, 1985), *Antarjali Jatra* (Bengali, 1987), *Diksha* (Hindi, 1991), *Lagaan* (Hindi, 2001), *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (Punjabi, 2011), *Chauranga* (Hindi, 2016), Let us see how the Dalit characters are been portrayed in the above films.

Ankur (The Seedling, Hindi, 1974), directed by Shyam Benegal's Kistayya, a Dalit is portrayed as meek and submissive without any self-respect. He is portrayed as a drunkard who in his olden days was industrious but now dependent on his wife. He was to run errands by the landlord's generosity but was thrown out due to his habit of drinking. Despite the injustice inflicted upon him, he was submissive throughout and never even thought of retaliating.

In his other film *Nishant* (The End of Night, Hindi, 1975) again an unnamed character played by Sadhu Meher was falsely implicated and jailed for stealing temple jewellery. He is again portrayed as a drunkard and victim. He lacked agency and was part of the crowd prepared and led by a higher caste priest and school teacher, who rebelled against the powerful and unjust Zamindar. He did not act on his own against the injustice but merely witnessed the justice from outside. He was unnamed and unseen throughout, his plight meant nothing to villagers, practically he was invisible.

The same phenomenon could be observed in the portrayal of Lahanya Bhiku in the award-winning film Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (An Outrage, Hindi, 1980). Lahanya is a low-caste, poor, and illiterate tribal, falsely implicated on the charge of murdering his wife, Nagi. He is portrayed as a victim. Lahanya was voiceless and never tried or thought to seek justice for the death of his wife. He also killed his sister after the death of his father to save her honour. He meekly surrendered before the system and did not utter a single word. His father was portrayed in the same stereotype, drunkard, victim, submissive, and defeated.

In the film *Damul* (The Noose, Hindi, 1985), a Dalit Sanjeeva is again portrayed as a victim of politics between two higher castes, again lacking agency and voice. Though he is rebellious at some point, he lacks means, agency, and conviction and gives in to the landlord's wishes once pressure is put on him. He is again portrayed as meek, impulsive, and a victim.

Antarjali Jatra (The Ultimate Journey, Bengali, 1987) directed by, Baiju is portrayed as a drunkard and impulsive, and cannot come out of the role assigned to him by society. He saw that Yashobati, the new bride was

going to become *Suttee*. Her becoming *Suttee* seems to be almost inevitable, as her husband is very old and on the deathbed. He strongly and repetitively suggested, the new bride to run away but never thought of himself, he was content with his life, defeated and submissive.

Diksha (The Initiation, Hindi, 1991) is produced by NFDC. It portrays the Gurukul somewhere in Karnataka. Koga, a Dalit, is again portrayed as submissive, weak, and voiceless. He never thinks of emancipation from age-old caste clutches and internalises the pain and suffering as part and parcel of life. However, having a prominent character played by a prominent actor has nothing to do with Dalits and their concerns. It is more of a commentary on the *Gurukul* system than on Dalits.

Mukta (Marathi, 1994), Directed by Jabbar Patel, is the story of an upper-caste Maratha girl and a lower-caste boy who struggle against the contradictions of their caste. Milind Wagh, a Dalit poet and student leader, is portrayed as vocal and strongly asserts his Dalit identity. He seems to have been inspired by the Dalit Panthers movement of the 1980s in Maharashtra. He seems to be the only vocal and strong Dalit portrayed in the films supported by NFDC.

Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India (The Land Revenue, Hindi, 2001) is directed by Ashutosh Gowariker and produced by Aamir Khan. The film is set in the pre-independence India. It is about the wager on the cricket match between British officials and villagers. If the British won, the villagers had to pay triple the land revenue; if they won, they would be exempted from paying the land revenue for three years.

In the film, *Kachara* is the only Dalit character, whose name itself means 'filth' or 'dirt'. He is crippled, on the one hand, that is why he happens to be a good spinner. He was persuaded to join the cricket team because of his ability to spin. Critics point out that he was not going to gain anything or lose anything from the match. Ironically playing with him in the match was shown as an act of generosity from villagers, rather than the other way round. He is again portrayed as voiceless and submissive.

Anhe Ghore Da Daan (Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse, Punjabi, 2011) is a film directed by Gurminder Singh and produced by NFDC. It is based on the novel of the same name by Gurdial Singh. The description of the title is given by the publisher of the novel.

...[T]hat derives its title from an ancient myth associated with the Churning of the Ocean, in which Lord Vishnu had been less than fair in his dispensation to the Asuras, supposedly the progenitors of latter-day Dalits. Through this novel, Gurdial Singh emphasizes that just as the Asuras had to depend upon the arbitrary dispensation of the Lord, in the same way, the modern Dalits have to depend on the mercy and compassion of the village overlords. On the day of the lunar and solar eclipse, they still go around asking for the alms in the name of the blind horse. (Rupa)

The film again portrays Dalits as poor, landless, and marginalized characters such as Melu, his Bapu, his Chacha Pratapa, etc. who lead banal and uneventful lives, which are not even worthy of a description, let alone artistic treatment. It again portrays sympathetic, voiceless victims. It is just a close description of Dalit lives but lacks any vision or some way out of it. They seem to have internalized the atrocities as part of their lives and no way out from them.

Chauranga (The Four Coloured, Hindi, 2016) directed by Bikas Ranjan Mishra and supported by NFDC. Dalits for whom exploitation has become part of it and they have naturalised exploitation and toleration. Dalits are again portrayed as voiceless, victim, and submissive. Dhanika, the Dalit woman has a secret liaison with Dahval, the landlord. She was normal with it, also she was passing her submissiveness to the next generation.

It is worth mentioning here that around 300 film projects were funded directly or indirectly by the NDFC on various social concerns in various Indian languages (the NDFC after keeping funding to a minimum stopped funding and financing in 2013). Still, not a single Dalit filmmaker could get funds/finance for any project. There are allegations that NFDC only promotes voiceless Dalit characters envisioned by the upper-caste elite artists, rather than strong characters with voices envisioned by Dalit filmmakers.

The Gandhian hangover on the government, upper caste elite, intelligentsia, and filmmakers during the Second Wave has hampered the natural portrayal of Dalits. The focus was limited to portraying their plight, suppression, humiliation, dilemmas, victimhood, exploitation, vulnerability, and lacking any vision or dream.

Their portrayal cannot recognize, reflect, and reorganize for effective and purposive action, both as individuals and as part of a larger community. Their portrayal is limited to the largely monolithic vulnerable community; their social, economic, religious, and political dimensions did not find any place.

However, this inclusion was mere tokenism for normalising Dalits in society; it lacked any genuine concern for their voice and aspirations. Around 300 film projects were funded directly or indirectly by NDFC on various social concerns. None of these are directly funded and supported by the government, but they started a trend that other filmmakers have followed. Though they have Dalits as lead characters ironically neither of them has Dalit artists or filmmakers nor do they have Dalit voice and their concerns.

Though it is difficult to assign any date to it, roughly it culminated with the liberalisation of the economy. As the government started pulling out its hand from the non-core areas. In fact, on the surface, it seemed an act of

inclusion and diversity but underneath it creates a stereotype of Dalits and a fossilised image of an alcoholic, victim, passive, irrational, and self-inflicting individual.

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