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Films as Mode of Expression and Resistance: A Study of Select Commercial and Non-Commercial Indian Films Based on Dalits

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Abstract:

Cinema is a powerful vehicle of entertainment and education. Films, a part and parcel of our lives, exercise a deep impact on the minds. They have the power to influence our social life. As a matter of fact, they play a vital role in transforming the society and social trends. Films are not only the medium of amusement but they can bring changes as well. They can stir national consciousness in the people; they can help in applying the energies of the youth in social reconstruction and nation-building and they can also bring to the surface the numerous issues that mar the lives of human beings in the society. One such issue is the caste system and its ill-effects on the lives of people in India since ancient times. This theme has been explored widely and vividly in Indian films. The present research paper attempts to explore the problems of Dalits in India in select commercial and non-commercial cinema. Several key issues are dug into these films such as the family, education, love, youth, work, marriage and social mobility.

Keywords: Dalits, Cinema, discrimination, commercial films, documentary films, Dalit movement.

Cinema is the most potent vehicle for disseminating information on historical facts, social issues, contemporary situations, culture, education etc. In 1963, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's report on Indian Cinema and Culture, Mr. Baldoon Dhingra quoted a speech by the Indian Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru who once stated, "...the influence in India of films is greater than newspapers and books combined"(Shah). The reason, perhaps, for this is that a large number of Indian populations are still illiterate. They can neither read nor write. But they can surely watch cinema as a means of entertainment which at the same time acts as a mode of education and information too. But cinema is not only a means of entertainment; it's a mode of expression and resistance against the oppression prevalent in the society too.

Gone are the days when themes of the movies would revolve around only a loving couple and their opposing families or a group of dacoits who would wander around disturbing the peace of a village, snatching all their goods and abducting their females. Cinema has implausibly grown in the last few decades. Cinema, just like literature, is a mirror to society. Films have

become the most effective and profound medium of making us aware of our own history, mythology, social, economic and political conditions of people in various eras. This research paper is dedicated to explore the problems of Dalits in India which have been examined through films. Caste discrimination has ruined millions of lives and hopes. Commercial and non-commercial cinema both have depicted the plight of Dalits and skillfully portrayed numerous issues related to them like family, education, love, youth, work, marriage and social mobility. These films are of utmost importance because they shape our understanding of history and contemporary social issues, including the nature of social inequality.

Sujata: Bimal Roy directed film *Sujata* appeared on screen in 1959. Grounded on orthodox mentality and caste discrimination, the film is based on a Bengali short story by writer Subodh Ghosh. The film, like *Achhut Kanya*, is a story of an untouchable girl Sujata (Nutan) whose parents die due to cholera and she is raised by a Brahmin couple, Upen and Charu who already have a daughter, Rama (Shashikala). Upen had a soft corner for the girl but Charu doesn't treat her like a daughter. They look for an orphanage or an untouchable couple to whom they could hand over her but couldn't find either. Finally, they raise the girl child themselves and give her name Sujata. Charu never introduces Sujata as her daughter. She doesn't send her school and never accepts tea from her hand. Amidst all this discrimination and sadness of not being loved and treated like Rama, Sujata grows up. Adheer (Sunil Dutt), Upen's aunt's nephew comes to their house and falls in love with Sujata at first sight. Adheer is an educated modern thinker and believes that all human beings are made equal. Sujata is delighted to know Adheer's feeling for her but when she gets to know that Upen and Charu want Adheer to marry Rama she hides her feelings for him and denies to marry Adheer. On the other hand, Adheer's aunt finds a poor middle-aged widower with two kids for Sujata to marry and Charu also agrees to this proposal. It shows their double standards. Miserable Adheer makes it clear that he wants to marry Sujata only and not Rama. This makes Charu furious and she rushes to throw Sujata out of her house. Unfortunately, she trips over the stairs and falls down. A serious injury in her head causes great blood loss. The doctors say that they need blood in order to save her but no one's blood group in the family matches hers. Finally, Sujata's blood group matches and she happily donates it. The revelation of this fact changes Charu's perspective and she realizes her mistake and accepts Sujata as her daughter wholeheartedly and marries her to Adheer. Though the film ends on a happy note yet it beautifully depicts the narrow mindedness and discriminating attitude of Brahmins towards the untouchables. The film also uses the myth of Chandaliika in Hinduism, a stage drama performed by Rama in her college and narrated to Sujata by Adheer, to pick apart the practice of untouchability in India.

Sadgati: Sadgati is a 1981 released short film produced by Doordarshan and directed by Satyajit Ray. This film was based on a short story written by Munshi Premchand. The film won the Special Jury Award at National Film Festival. It is a satirical work with a major emphasis on the Indian Caste System. Dukhiya (Om Puri) was a poor village shoemaker- a *Chamar* by caste- a downtrodden untouchable. The story opens with Dukhiya cutting the grass in the field and the

conversation with his wife reveals that he has to go to the village priest (Brahmin) for inviting him to his home for getting the engagement date of his daughter fixed. His wife, Jhuria (Smita Patil) stops him to go because he had been unwell due to fever and weakness causes him dizziness. Dukhiya doesn't pay attention to the advice of his wife and leaves for Brahmin's house without eating anything. The Brahmin and his wife treat him with contempt. He asks Dukhiya to do some household works and cut a wood log without paying him anything in return. They do not even offer him the food. Poor health, empty stomach and rigorous work cause Dukhiya's pitiful death. The Brahmin goes to the untouchable colony to inform them about his death but they refuse to pick up the dead body as it was a police case. On the other hand, the people of Brahmin colony complain about the dead body lying amidst the way to water well which is causing them inconvenience. Perturbed Brahmin himself decides to remove the dead body from the way. The fear of Police makes him forget his exalted tradition. An untouchable who is not even considered worthy of entering the threshold of their home is now being dragged away by the priest himself. After throwing his dead body he tries to purify that place by sprinkling holy water and chanting mantras. The film is a mockery on the inappropriate customs that are held so dearly by the Brahmins and the hollowness of such traditions that can be given up as and when required.

Shudra–The Rising: The most important and heartbreaking movie in this genre is a 2012 release *Shudra-The Rising*. The Director Sanjiv Jaiswal dedicated this film to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. The movie takes its beginning in the ancient times and describes how Aryans invaded the West Asia and after seeing its natural richness, culture, and simplicity of the natives, they declared a war on them. The war lasted for many years and ultimately the Aryans defeated the natives and made them their prisoners first and slaves later who were forced to serve them. An Aryan sage Manu wrote a book by the name of *Manu Samriti* in which he created the *Hindu Varna System* and classified four different castes in the society according to their occupation—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Shudras were the lowest caste people who would do petty works and were considered the untouchables, untidy and seen with abominable eyes. Various inhuman social rules were imposed on them and they were crushed and curbed in every walk of their lives. The film portrays the struggle of these oppressed untouchables in a village set in ancient India. It has the abundance of heartrending scenes that provokes us to think that how a human being can be so ruthless and barbarous towards the other human beings. The mere watching of this movie and seeing the extent of cruelty inflicted upon these people fill our heart with pity and horror, so think about those millions of people who had actually been the victim of such torture and brutality, who have undergone tremendous agony and pain just because they are born in a low caste.

The story unfolds itself with depicting the physical appearance of Shudras in the village. They tie a long broom behind their back and hang a pot in their neck and a bell around their ankles in order to show their identity. The plot primarily narrates the lamentable story of three Shudras of the village. The first story is of Charna and Sandhli. The *Thakur* (village landlord) of

the village sexually exploits the Shudra ladies and this time he takes a fancy on Sandhli, Charna's wife. Sandhli is a pregnant lady who repeatedly begs for *Thakur's* mercy but never gets any. She's been raped every night by the Thakur. At one place she remarks, "Kaisa samaj hai ye jo hamare saaye se katrata hai par sone se nahi" (What kind of society is this? People are afraid of our shadow but not afraid of sleeping with us). When Charna tries to raise his voice against this exploitation, he is beaten to death by Thakur's men and consequently dies a painful death.

The second story narrates the pitiful death of Badri's father who dies for drinking a sip of water. This story runs in the flashback when Badri tries to offer water to a thirsty upper caste man and is scolded by him for trying to corrupt his religion (People preferred to die thirsty but did not accept water from the hands of an untouchable). On being asked from a villager the reason of that act he tells him that he can't see anyone thirsty and narrates his story. Once Badri along with his old father was going somewhere on a hot summer day and his father asks for drinking water mid way. Badri runs here and there in search of water and finds a pond at some distance where some children and men are bathing. He begs them to give him some water for his father but they deny saying this pond belongs to upper caste people only and start pelting stones on him which makes Badri unconscious. When his consciousness returns he finds no one there and quickly gets some water in a broken pot and runs towards his father who, to his dismay has already died thirsty.

The third story is the most distressing one which also runs in flashback. Bheru, another Shudra was leading a peaceful life with his wife and a little son, Channa when his whole world gets destroyed by one incident. Beru and his wife work in a field near the village temple where Brahmin children get the education and chant the mantras. One day Channa while playing starts chanting the mantra 'Om Namah Shivaaye' which he regularly listens from the Brahmin children in the temple. His chanting, unfortunately, is heard by the village priest and he starts clamoring about the sinfulness of his act. He says Shudras have no right to chant mantras and now the whole village has to suffer the consequence of it. In order to save the village from the aftermath of this sin, he decides a punishment for him that his tongue with which he chanted the mantras should be chopped off. Bheru and his wife seek forgiveness on behalf of the childish act of their son but no one gives an ear to their request and Channa's tongue is chopped off that becomes the reason of his sorrowful death. This scene is so atrocious that it leaves you petrified for a moment and then you think is chanting a mantra so big a crime?

Disturbed and disgusted with the barbarities committed upon the Shudras by the Upper Caste people Badri, Bheru, Madhav, and Bala (Sandli's brother) resolve to take revenge from Thakur and plans to slay his son on his way to home from the city. They do as decided. Thakur gets mad and orders his men to put the entire Shudras' colony on fire and kill all of them. The following night they burn all their huts, kill men and rape women and murder them afterward. Their struggle ceases with death and destruction everywhere. The film ends with only one shudra left alive who goes completely insane after seeing the devastation; he runs here and there uttering that upper caste people are their god and they ought to be obeyed under any circumstances. The

ending also quotes many newspapers that said even after so many years of achieving independence and persistent efforts of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar for the upliftment of Shudras, India is still not free from this caste discrimination. Every now and then we get news that Dalit women are getting raped, they are denied water, they have no permission to enter temples, and so on. All these incidents find a vivid depiction in this movie.

Jai Bhim Comrade: Anand Patwardhan's *Jai Bhim Comrade* is a widely acclaimed and awarded documentary film on Dalits particularly based out of Maharashtra. The film bagged six prestigious awards including Special Jury Award in National Awards, India; Best Documentary, Hong Kong International Film Festival; Bartok Prize, Jean Rouch International Film Festival, Paris, France. The documentary is 200 minutes long and was shot in a span of 14 years. It was premiered outside BIT *Chawl* in Mumbai as a tribute to Dalit activist Bhagwat Jadhav who was killed in 1974 by Shivsena supporters during a rally.

The film opens with a description of the Hindu Caste System and its atrocious discrimination with the Shudras- the Dalits. With the establishment of Indian constitution in 1950 by Dr. Bhimrao, Caste based discrimination was declared unlawful but it has not been eradicated completely from the society yet. The film starts with the agitating and protesting songs of a Dalit singer Vilas Ghogre from the concluding scene of Patwardhan's previous documentary *Bombay, Our City* (1985). Then a newspaper headline image shows that "Dalit singer ends life on a tragic note". Vilas Ghogre commits suicide on 15th July 1997 in Mumbai, Maharashtra. He hangs himself in his house by wearing a blue scarf on his head to affirm his Dalit identity. His wife Asha Ghogre confirms that he was deeply disturbed by the killings on 11th July 1997 in Ramabai Nagar of Mumbai and he made it clear that he gave up his life for those martyrs by writing his last words on a wall in his house. Then we are taken to the place where the incident took place. In Ramabai Nagar some people desecrated Dr. Bhimrao's statue and all Dalits of a nearby colony gathered there in protest and police just to command the mob fired on them resulting in killing ten people. After six days Police release a video made by Ravi Shinde, a petrol pump owner nearby the highway who caught the incident on his two cameras. Police accuse that mob had burnt an LPG tanker and that's why Police had to take that action in their defense. People refute that recording by saying that LPG tanker was burning on the one side of the highway and the protest took place on the other side. There was no connection between the tanker and the protesting mob. The massacre was prompted by caste based discrimination. In August 1997 The Mumbai High Court orders Justice Gundewar Commission to go over the Ramabai massacre. The police officer, Manohar Kadam who gave orders of firing gets success in duping the media but due to heavy people's protest, Kadam is suspended from his duty which he rejoins back after three months. Dalits once again come out on the streets and shouts slogan of *Jativaad sarkar murdabad, Shivsena-bhajpa sarkar murdabad, Dr. Bhimrao zindabad, Republican Party of India zindabad* and they shaved their heads en-bloc in front of the High Court in the grief of the death of democracy. After the massacre, Patwardhan spent fourteen years in the Dalit politics in Mumbai unflinching interviewing various subjects and recording

songs which are the heart and passion of the movement. Then, there is interview of certain people including *lok-shayar* Gadar who talks about the Dalit politics and Vilas Ghogre and the kind of war he had waged against the oppression through his songs and poems. People who got killed in the firings, their families express sorrow over their death in the interview and explain how the massacre took place and how the police forcibly took their thumb impressions on blank paper. A bullet splits a kid Mangesh's head into two parts. Sanjay Nikam, an important and literate man of the Dalit union was also shot dead in those firings. He started from his home that day for his work but moved towards the mob just to see what was going on there and had been killed. Sanjay used to work in a dumping ground with his brother. We get real pictures of the circumstances under which some Dalits work in the Devnaar Garbage Depot near Ramabai colony. A Dalit lost his one eye while dumping the garbage and didn't even get any compensation from the government; others complain that they work under truly unhygienic and unsafe conditions; they pick up and load people's trash in trucks barefoot; the garbage and excreta which they pick up fall on their heads sometimes and to prevent that they need caps, gum boots, gloves and masks which are neither provided by the contractor nor by the municipality even after the orders were given by High Court; they did not even get water for drinking and cleaning their hands for some 10-12 years; they were not allowed to enter any hotel and board the buses for their stinking clothes. Their conditions improved somewhat when they formed their union.

The Ramabai firings had brought together all the sects of Republican Party. After a long journey of court hearings the final verdict came out and police officer, Manohar Kadam was found guilty but he was sent to the hospital instead of Jail. Thereafter, the movie tries to construct an oral history of the Dalit movement through songs and speeches of various singers and Dalit leaders like Bhai Sangare, Former leader of Republican Party of India and founder of the Dalit Panthers. It presents songs in sections, between different interviews, episodes, and locations. The songs and speeches recount the story of Ambedkar's faith in the upliftment of these people and impart more substantial knowledge. We get glimpses of people's huts, their family members, photographs, their pathetic stories and daily difficulties of being a Dalit. The multifariousness of songs ranges from daily chores to resistance; from the description of a Dalit barrister to workers of the city; from sexuality celebrating qawwalis to lullabies; from men sweeping the road to the men dancing in Dr. Ambedkar's birth anniversary celebration. The dirty game played by the politicians with the Dalits is depicted through many songs. Lok Shayar Gadar comments that we Dalits are using music as a tool to spread our movement to people. Saraswati Bansode, a housewife and Shanta Bai Gadpaile whose husband was a poet, everyone sings the song to celebrate the awakening brought by Dr. Ambedkar. The message of Dr. Ambedkar's life spreads through music only. His presence is immanent throughout the film. Then, the film throws light on the contemporary Dalit activism with the help of *Kabir Kala Manch*, a group of singers who spread awareness through their songs and performances. They ask for the renewal of Ambedkar's message i.e. resistance to caste discrimination. After the *Khairlanji massacre* of 2006, the activities and protests of their group were a big success but

later Sheetal Sathe along with other members of Kabir Kala Manch was regarded as Naxalites and forced to be underground. Some of the members were arrested. This incident made Patwardhan finish this film and it also became necessary for him to bring out the truth of their struggle and the reality behind their subjugation. *Jai Bhim Comrade* is a study of those unfortunate people who became a victim of caste system with its prejudiced beliefs and inhumanity and waged a socio-cultural-political movement to fight against it.

Conclusion:

Films are a manifestation of society. Movies are stories and these stories spring up from the society only. They are a unique channel to broadcast thoughts— thoughts that provoke; thoughts that change the perspective of entire generations; thoughts that achieve real change. They have become a potent vehicle for expressing what is happening around us and presenting resistance towards all that is unendurable and requires to be reached masses. Documentaries like *Jai Bhim Comrade* are a depiction of the same expression and resistance. They focus on real life topics with a hope of projecting change or bringing a consciousness to an issue. Hence, it is almost impossible to refuse the role of cinema in society.

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