



## **Dalits in Bollywood: From Endurance to Resistance- A Historical Approach**

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### **Abstract:**

Cinema reflects all the complexities of the society like other forms of art. The advantage with cinema is that it can reach out to wider audience and can influence their psyche. With this huge capacity cinema also bears the huge responsibility of seeking truth and providing platform to the marginalized people. In India Dalits are the most oppressed social group and their suffering has a long history. It is rooted in the ancient past. Indian film industry especially Bollywood makes continuous effort to put critical insight on the plight of untouchables and explores the root causes of their suffering. This paper takes a historical approach to trace the process of their subjugation. At the same time it focuses on the evolution of Bollywood movies in portraying Dalit issues with the transition in Dalit society.

**Key words-** Dalit, Cinema, Bollywood, Society, Aryans, History, Culture, Oppression, Plight, Resistance.

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To be an Untouchable in the Indian caste system is to be very low in, and partially excluded from, an elaborate hierarchical social order. Untouchables are persons of a discrete set of low castes, excluded on account of their extreme collective impurity from particular relations with higher beings (both human and divine).

(*Dalits in Modern India*: S. M Michael 16)

The term Dalit, like “Black”, has multiple connotations. Before analysing the present scenario of dalits we should at first study the “cultural and historical rootedness of the category Dalit (Michael 15).” Dalit oppression has a long, dark history which is rooted in the ancient past. Around 1500 B.C Aryans came to India through the North East region and uprooted the natives of the land. Ancient scriptures like Rig Veda support this view. As Aryans had much strong, skilled and well equipped army, the native peace loving people could not resist their invasion. After the victory Aryans formed a notion of cultural superiority. They treated the local inhabitants, “as culturally inferior and shunned as ritually unclean (Michael 17).” They were not willing to consider the locals even as humans, who were labelled as *amanushya* (*non- humans*) or *krishnavarna* (dark skinned).

Aryans looted all the resources, land and properties of the natives. They captured the centre and pushed the natives to the periphery. Geographically too, natives were not allowed to dwell in the main locality. When Aryans conquered the vast fertile land, they felt the need of skilled labourers. They forcibly made natives the work force. Those who accepted the slavery

were made life-time bonded slaves, and those who refused to surrender were brutally executed. Aryans treated woman as the cultural bearer and personal property. To maintain the purity of their own clan, they strictly prohibited the marriage with non-Aryans. But as they were in short of women, they made some relaxation in marrying native girl.

Ages come and pass away, dynasts change, but the slavery of Dalits continues over thousand years. Social, economic and cultural reasons are the root causes behind the doomed status of Dalits. They were deprived of their own resources. Innumerable attempts have been made to demean their culture and heritage. Ancient scriptures, mythical stories project them as demons and militants. Destruction of the pre- Aryans civilizations and the slaughter of the non-Aryans in the hand of Aryans have been justified as well as glorified. The contempt and hostility towards Dalits have been internalized so deeply and artistically that even today Indian society cannot embrace them whole heartedly. At the same time the conscience of society is indifferent towards the plights of Dalits and deaf to their cry.

Cinema reflects all the complexities of the society like other forms of art. The advantage with cinema is that it can reach out to the wide audience and can influence their mind. With this huge capacity cinema also bears the huge responsibility of seeking truth and providing platform to the marginalized people. Indian cinema has a rich cultural heritage and now it is considered as one of the most rich and popular film industries. But the most popular trends in Indian cinema mainly Bollywood are romantic and heroic. Indian mass movie goers mainly visit cinema houses for entertainment. So keeping the trend and marketing in mind filmmakers normally do not want to go beyond the set patterns. As a results the evils of society, naked truth, down trodden section, inhuman pathetic condition of the marginalised section do not reflect significantly in the movie

screen. The severe and complex problems of Dalits could not get much space in the mainstream commercial films. Still we cannot be completely critical about the approach of Bollywood. Even before independence while Bollywood was itself in its infancy, it handled the caste system with artistry which is, “the fundamental and core feature of India’s social structure (Narayan 20).” Especially the efforts of parallel movies, though not much in number are admirable. The issues these movies pick up and the artistic way they present them before the audience catch international attention and receive critical acclaim from all over the world.

In dealing with Dalit issues Indian cinema evolves a lot with the transition and evolution in the Dalit society as cinema, like “Sociology grows and changes continually in response to new phenomena within world societies, to discoveries and insights within the discipline itself and to the mandate for ever-increasing relevancy that comes from the very people whom sociologists study (Michael 13).” The earlier movies of this kind just present the plights and social obstacles they face in their life and society. Here Dalits characters are helpless, silent sufferers, worthy of getting sympathy. They do not have voice and courage enough to revolt and cross the social obstacles. But the Dalit characters of contemporary time mainly after 1990s hit at the root of social structure and attack the establishment. They critically challenge all the oppressive norms, social custom and value system which are responsible for the marginalised position of Dalits. At the same time they offer, “a new humanity based on the values of equality, social justice and human dignity (Michael 14).”

Dalits made their presence in Bollywood for the first time in the year 1936 with *Achhuth Kanya* (Untouchable Maiden), directed by Franz Osten, is the first attempt to gather some courage and present the conditions of Dalit women and inter- caste love affair. The movie turned

out to be one of the super-hits of that time. The dejected love affair of Kasturi (an untouchable maiden) with Pratap (a brahmin) and her tragic demise fills our heart with contempt. This is, probably, the first major effort to present the misery of the submissive Dalit woman on a big screen. Much later, movies like *Ankur* (1974), directed by Shayam Benegal provides a little broader view of Dalit women. Lakshmi(a Dalit woman), one of the main characters is brave enough to act according to her needs and whims, irrespective of the traditions and cultures prevailing in the society. Surprisingly, she is depicted more daring than Surya, the other leading character. The adultery she commits is a bold attempt from a Dalit woman in the conservative Indian society. She breaks the social taboos regarding female sexuality encoded in social institution and claims her demand on her own body. This movie is again embedded with the hypocrisy of the upper caste and class.

The cinema artists of Indian cinema did not overlook the sighs, pangs and the pathetic condition of Dalit women who are the worst victim of caste system. They were humiliated in every possible way. Socially they were treated as untouchable but upper- caste men do not leave their claim over their bodies. They were treated as sexual tool to gratify the lust of higher class men. Justice is a farfetched dream to them. On the contrary they are accused, humiliated, physically and mentally tortured and made outcast. Their lives and voices fade into oblivion. Indian cinema critically explores the mockery in the name of justice in society, dominated by upper- class. Here the culprits announce judgement and the victims are punished just because of their respective position in caste system. Movies also capture the resistance from Dalits which is sometimes violent. We cannot expect non- violent attitude from them when every door of justice is shut down. Indian cinema always supports their causes and tries to justify their approach. This

kind of movies startled the conscience of the audience. They are made to think from different angle.

The movie *Eklavya* by Vidhu Vinod Chopra is a 2007 Bollywood Drama Film based on the history of Dalits. The story spins around Eklavya the royal guard, whose *Dharma* is to protect his king and the dynasty. Here the character Pannalal Chauhan (Sanjay Dutt), an untouchable, as a DSP justifies the need of education for the uplift of Dalit community. His critical attitude towards the feudal mentality of the king is worth appreciating. He expresses the agony these untouchables undergo, “jis tarha tum naye gharon ke udghatan ke liye nariyal phodhte ho na, usi tarha ye log humara sar phodh diya karte they taaki kisi ki buri nazar na lage” (the way you break coconut on the inaugural ceremony, these people used to break our head to avoid the evil eyes). When his assistant was worried about entering the royal fort of king Ranapratap, Pannalal says, “Ghabra mat. Ye democracy hai. Ab ye sirf apne ghar ke raja hain. Humara ye danda inki talwaar se zyada mazboot hai” (don’t worry. It’s a democratic country. Now they are the kings in their fort only. Our stick is more powerful than their swords). This statement echoes the drastic change in the attitude of the lower castes. Pannalal Chauhan, a mouthpiece of Vinod Chopra, though rarely appeared in the movie is constantly reminding the society about the law of equality. He sits in front of the king without his consent. When Ranapratap was about to call him *Chauhar* (untouchable), Pannalal warns him of the crime the king will commit by calling him Chauhar, “chauhar mat boliye Ranaji. Democracy me Chauhar ko Chauhar bolna jurm hai.” (Don’t call me Chauhar. In democracy, saying Chauhar is a crime). When Ranapratap says “pushton se jhuth sach ka faisla hum karte aa rahe hain... jaante ho, tum jis Rana sahab se baat kar rahe ho unki umar 2000 saal hai”( through generations we are defining virtues and vices. The person you are talking with is carrying the authority for 2000 years), to

this Pannalal replies rudely “aur meri 5000 saal hai... mai un achuthon ka bachcha hu jinke hanth sirf isliye kaat diye jaate they kyuki unhone Vedhon ko chua hai” ( and mine is five thousand years and I belong to those untouchables whose hands were cut just for touching the scriptures). This arrogance and resentment of Pannalal expresses the deeper anguish which is suppressed since centuries. At the time it challenges the hegemony of the upper- caste and questions the authority, which is beautifully reflected in the words of Narayan, “In the recent past, however, there is a visible upsurge in the assertion of Dalit identity, which challenges the humiliation that they have faced for centuries. There has emerged a strong urge among these marginalized groups throughout the country to assert their identity and self-respect through their own cultural resources and challenge the cultural hegemony of the upper castes (20).”

*Arakshan* (2011), which literally means reservation is a socio-political movie primarily based on the policy of reservations for the downtrodden. Though the entire story revolves around the tuition system but the movie focuses mainly on the need of reservations for the uplift of these humble lots. When Mithilesh, a professor from the upper- caste pass sarcastic judgement on the reservation system, saying, “humare bachche din raat ragad-ragad ke padhte rahen aur jab admission ka mauqa aae to khairaat loot lijye aap log. Darr lagta hai na mehnat karne se?!” (Our students work hard day and night and when the time of admission comes, you loot it alike a charity. Are you afraid of hard work?!) To this Deepak Kumar, an untouchable, replies vehemently, “Ok! So you are teaching us the lesson on hard work? If you have forgotten, go and read your history again. Then you know who slogged and who looted it like it was their birth right. For centuries you people filled up your coffers with handout and you accuse us of living on charity? We ploughed fields, we reaped your corn, grazed your cattle, we carried your daughters

and wives in palanquins, we cremated your corpses, stitched your shoes, drove your oxen, rowed your boats, cleaned your filthy drains and we even carried your shit on our heads, and now you will teach us about hardworking.”

The latest movie *Manjhi* (2015) by Ketan Mehta once again turns out to be the most daring step to this modern yet orthodox Indian society, when Dalits are concerned. Exploitation on various levels and dimensions is the major concern in this movie. The story revolves around Dashrath Manjhi, the ‘Mountain Man’, who proves that the inner strength and endless vigour of the common man can never be suppressed. Dashrath becomes the messiah of the common lot and make them proud. The movie has succeeded in rendering the journey of Dalits from endurance to resistance. Caste and Class distinction plays a major role here. Dalits are the most deprived class that suffers social oppression, sexual harassment, economic exploitation and cultural degeneration. But the women of this community are the worst sufferers. They are triply marginalized, first for being women, second for being Dalits and third by the women of the upper caste. These atrocities on the poor humbles are depicted, to some extent, in the movie *Manjhi*. In the very initial scenes we encounter an act of social oppression on a man from the downtrodden community who had the courage enough to wear shoes. The Mukhiya, enraged by such act of bravery punished him by nailing a horse shoe on his toe. He says, “juta pehan ke laatsahib banega? (you want to wear shoes and feel like a lord?)”, “isko aysa juta pehnao ke jindagi bhar jute ki jaruat na pade (make him wear such shoes that he doesn’t need them over again)”.

The fear of equality, of losing power over these destitute, still exists in the hearts of many Mukhiyas. Caste system has been abolished long ago but this oppressive custom is still dominant in the villages like Gehlore. It is not yet eradicated from the minds of the ‘upper’ caste Hindus. In one of the similar scenes we see the Mukhiya of the village ‘Gehlore’ terrified about the



disaster this new rule of equality, of abolishment of power would bring with it. His hysteric mood was soothed when one of his party members says “kanoon bakhare se ka hota hai? Laagu koun karega?!” (What if the law is made? Who will implement it?!) This is yet another visage of the Indian society where laws are implemented according to the convenience.

Dashrath Manjhi, the protagonist of the movie ‘Manjhi’ represents the entire Dalit downtrodden. He belongs to the community of ‘Moosahar’ or the ‘Rat Eaters’, which is lowest of the low caste. The village ‘Gehlore’ is the representative of all those deprived villages that still exist in India. It lacks even the most basic amenities like school and hospital because of the Mountain which surrounds it. Mountain here becomes the hindrance in their progression. The constant conversation of Manjhi with the huge mountain fills the viewers’ heart with pity. This huge mountain symbolizes the cold-blooded power holders in the society for whom these humbles are no better than the beasts and savages. Perhaps the mountain represents the power of the Creator for whom every living being is so fragile. This struggle between the powerless (Dashrath Manjhi) and the powerful (Mountain) represents the inner struggle every Dalit endure. The opening scene of movie ‘Manjhi’ makes it clear that their submissiveness has given birth to resistance. Manjhi, enraged by the huge mountain which took the life of his beloved Phaguniya, says, “bahut bada hai tu?” (You think you are too big?), “bahut akad hai tora me?” (you are too proud?), “bahut jor hai?” (too powerful?), “arey bharam hai, bharam” (it’s all illusion). This questioning of the powerless to the powerful is a vigorous attempt taken up by the Indian Cinema. “Tune humri jindagi ko kharab kiya hai, hum torako cheer ke rakh denge (you ruined my whole life, I will break you)”, this rebellious statement by Dashrath to the Mountain makes it clear that the subservient lot has risen up to fight against the oppression. Again the scene of

adolescent Dashrath breaking away from the clutches of the Mukhiya to avoid the life time bondage is a step for revolution taken up by the Indian film makers. The director has succeeded in creating a village which is the representative of all those villages that are in the grasp of these mukhiyas. Ketan Mehta has depicted the journey of humble Dalits from the endurance to defiance. When 'Bhura', a friend of Manjhi fall in the fire while working in the brick house, the son of the Mukhiya did not allow them to save him because the destruction of the bricks would bring him a great loss than the life of Bhura.

“It will not be an exaggeration to say that one of the profound changes in contemporary Indian society has been the Dalit transformation of our times (Michael 13)”and this transformation and evolution have been captured through lens and reflected on the screen beautifully. Fighting against the evils of caste system, abolishing the age old oppressive caste system, questioning the biased value system are the most sought social movement in contemporary India. In this historic movement Indian cinema plays a vital role. It displays the plight of dalits, goes to the root and explores the causes, exposes the hypocrisies of the society and decodes the cultural politics of the upper- caste to dominate over them and maintain the hierarchies. At the same time it manages to draw support from Indian mass and develop a thread of brotherhood with them. Now the term Dalit neither evokes contempt, nor it is derogatory to dalits, “‘Dalit’, which, as shown earlier, means ground down, downtrodden, oppressed, is now being used by the low castes in a spirit of pride and militancy (Michael 33)” and in this historical social victory Bollywood can claim certain share.

**Note:** All translations of the movie dialogues from Hindi to English are by the authors.

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