
Portrayal of Dalits in Indian Cinema: A Critique of Two Tamil Films

Yatendra Kumar Nigam

Assistant Professor in the English Department of Raja Balwant Singh College, Agra.

Sanjay Kumar Misra

Professor in the English Department of Raja Balwant Singh College, Agra.

ABSTRACT

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Corresponding author :

amsn2521@gmail.com

The portrayal of Dalits, falls in two divergent streams in the Indian film industry, namely, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite. The Gandhian approach patronises, marginalises and appropriates the Dalit history and imagination and tries to maintain the status quo, moulding Dalits into Harijans. On the other hand, the Ambedkarites are against this appropriation. The Ambedkarite approach challenges the established aesthetic norms and portrays Dalits in flesh and blood and not as type characters. Dalit cinema democratises the screen space and challenge the hegemonic structure of collective imagination of people in the society. Dalit identity has been portrayed differently by Dalit filmmakers. The commercial success of Tamil films with Dalits in lead roles like *Kabali* (2016) *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Asuran*, (2019), *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), *Karnan* (2021), and *Jai Bhim* (2021) is a new phenomenon. This paper aims to study this new phenomenon of contestation of Dalit identity and their commercial success. The present paper is attempting a critique of the portrayal of Dalit identity in Indian cinema with specific focus on two Tamil films *Manusangda* and *Jai Bheem* which released in 2017 and 2021 respectively.

Often, the Hindi cinema is popularly recognised as the Indian cinema, which is not correct because the corpus and achievements of cinema in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Bengali, Marathi, and several other languages and parts of the country are considerably significant. But the fact remains that to the outside world, and also to certain extent, to the people of our own country, the term Bollywood is often used interchangeably for Indian films. It is also true that much of the academic writing about Indian films has the Hindi Cinema at the centre of its focus.

In today's world of advanced science and technology the regional identity of cinema has been getting obliterated and getting transformed into a pan-Indian identity. For quite some time, several big budget films from South India have been released in multiple languages with subtitles in English or the concerned regional language. We have shining examples of films like *KGF*, *RRR*, *Vikram*, and *Ponniyin Selvan* getting Pan India releases and doing roaring business all over. The modern means and facilities of circulation are also melting the regional borders. It is not uncommon to see nowadays the simultaneous release of a film at national and international levels, and also at OTT and social media platforms. It has diminished the chasm between the regional and the Bollywood cinema.

In its journey of more than a century, Indian film makers have, by and large, not given enough attention to portrayal of Dalits and their concerns. The Bollywood, in particular, in contrast to the regional cinema, seems to have conveniently given a blind eye to Dalits and portrayal of their concerns on the silver screen.

Cinema being a capital-intensive industry has remained in the control of upper-caste elites since the beginning. These elites ignored and misrepresented the life and culture of Dalits. In a general way, in the society, the culture, traditions, customs, and values of the upper caste people were presented as normal or natural way of life while the Dalit way of life was perceived as something unusual. Cinema too fell for this shortsightedness and came to present the upper caste/class gaze as the view and wisdom of the whole nation. The cinematic canvas has largely been focussed on the elite upper caste society. The elitist cinema appears to have sidelined the Dalit history, the collective wisdom of the Dalit society, their traditions, culture, values, and symbols. Their narratives appear to have deprived the marginalised characters of agency and dignity. Many studies have shown this bias of the elitist cinema to subdue and almost erase mass culture and portray upper caste culture as the national culture. A scholar of dalit studies says:

Cinema overtly separated itself from the issues related to the Dalits, Adivasis and other vulnerable communities and serves the political and class interests of the social elites. The post-independence cinema thus fabricates the idea of people, culture and nation by erasing the presence of socially marginalized groups. (Wankhede)

It was the herculean efforts of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar in the first half of the last century, which gave the first major stimulus to the rise of Dalits in public domain and discourse. The demand for separate electorates for Dalits (then called Depressed classes) by Dr. Ambedkar and three Round Table conferences brought the question of the representation of Dalits to the centre stage. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar are claimed to be the pioneers of the cause of representation and upliftment of Dalits. But on the question of Dalits, Gandhi and Ambedkar are often located on opposite praxis. Contemporary intelligentsia, writers, and filmmakers took the lead in establishing Gandhi as the sole representative of Dalits. His philosophical model for Dalits was followed in literature and films of the day. There was a sudden spurt in the portrayal of several Dalit protagonists in novels and films in the 1930s; for example, novels such as *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) to name a few.

However, this initial burst in inclusion of Dalits in art narratives was not sustained; the portrayal of Dalits was limited to parallel or art cinema. Barring tokenism in a few commercial films like *Sujata* (Hindi, 1959), elite filmmakers kept a distance from Dalits and their concerns. The works of Ambedkarite Dalits could not get much prominence in the remaining decades of the last century. The mainstream litterateurs and filmmakers kept a safe distance from Dalits and their concerns. The situation has changed for better in recent times. Creative works and artistic efforts by Ambedkarite Dalits are now visible all over, more prominently in the regional literature and films.

It is worth mentioning here that the portrayal of Dalits, falls in two divergent streams in the Indian film industry, namely, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite. The Gandhian approach patronises, marginalises and appropriates the Dalit history and imagination and tries to maintain the status quo, moulding Dalits into Harijans. On the other hand, the Ambedkarites are against this appropriation. The Ambedkarite approach challenges the established aesthetic norms and portrays Dalits in flesh and blood and not as type characters. Dalit cinema democratises the screen space and challenge the hegemonic structure of collective imagination

of people in the society. Suraj Yengde, a scholar of Dalit studies, observes in his article 'Dalit Cinema' the potential of Dalit cinema. He observes that Dalit cinema has the ability to join African and other marginalised cinemas in rejecting cinematographic hegemony. In his words:

Dalit cinema as a theoretical construct has an ability to transcend the issue of Dalit oppression by converging with artistic critiques of other oppressions. By introducing a paradigmatic format not shaped by modern capitalist logos, Dalit cinema has the potential to join African and other marginalised cinemas in breaking away from the mainstream cinematographic hegemony. (Yengde)

The present paper is attempting a critique of the portrayal of Dalit identity in Tamil cinema with specific focus on two Tamil films *Manusangda* and *Jai Bheem* which were released in 2017 and 2021 respectively.

NFDC and Gandhian Dalits

Film Finance Corporation (FFC) was established in 1960 by the Government of India as its funding body 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 with the mission of “fostering excellence in cinema and promoting diversity of its culture by supporting and encouraging films made in various Indian languages”. (NFDC: Cinemas of India)

As envisioned in its mission of promoting diversity, NFDC tried to promote diversity by including Dalit characters in some projects. However, this inclusion was mere tokenism for normalising Dalits in the Indian society; it had no genuine concern for their voice and aspirations. It is worth mentioning here that around 300 film projects on various social issues were funded directly or indirectly by NFDC, but not a single Dalit filmmaker was able to get funds for any project. There have been allegations that NFDC only promotes voiceless Dalit characters rather than strong Dalit characters with voices.

Though it was a mere tokenism, it helped Dalits find a place in the cinematic space. We can recall some of these films are: *Ankur* (Hindi, 1974), *Nishant* (Hindi, 1975), *Manthan* (Hindi, 1976), *Aakrosh* (1980), *Sadgati* (Hindi, 1981), *Paar* (Hindi, 1984), *Damul* (Hindi, 1985). Though these films have Dalits as lead characters, they don't have Dalits as directors nor do they have Dalit voice and their concerns getting dominance and prominence in these films' narratives. The Gandhian hangover on the government, intelligentsia, and filmmakers has not only hampered the natural portrayal of Dalits but has also helped in misrepresentation of Dalits.

The Gandhian Dalits are those who accept the societal norms set for them, who do not rebel, and who wait for the upper caste to reform and change their heart. They seem to believe that one should not protest against the injustice meted out on him/her and meekly try to win the heart by good deeds. In this world view, Dalits are imagined in a wretched state, deprived of any dignity and subjectivity. This can be seen in the portrayal of Dalits in most of the films produced in the last century. The Gandhian portrayal of Dalits became the norm for the filmmakers who chose to make films on Dalit issues. A critic observes that Dalits have been misrepresented and their portrayal has been stereotyped:

Indian cinema has often approached caste issues through economic and romantic lenses, ignoring the cultural and social aspects. Dalit language, culture, and customs were frequently portrayed in a derogatory manner. Movies typically depicted Dalit problems being solved by upper-caste heroes, leading to Dalit communities idolizing them. Rarely

have powerful Dalit protagonists fought for their rights; instead, Dalits were shown either as criminals or helpless individuals requiring external assistance. (Gomathi)

Ambedkarite Dalit

The Ambedkarite Dalits challenge the Gandhian upper caste aesthetics. They challenge the 'normal' (Gandhian) aesthetic gaze. Irrespective of their stark poverty and slum areas, Dalits are not that pathetic. They are humans who are full of human sympathies and deserve dignity. Dalits want to resist oppression; they have determination to fight against odds; they are not meekly submissive. They have their celebrations, aspirations, and also their imagination to live life like other humans. Dalit filmmakers want to expand the existing artistic canvas for presenting life-like depictions through innovative techniques in visuals, sound, music, and cinematography. They present the vibrant life of the downtrodden from the inside in contrast to their pitiable life seen from the outside. In this regard, the following comment on the film *Kaala* by a cinema researcher makes thoughtful reading:

Kaala (2018), the title of the film, does the same reversal of meanings. Kaala in Hindi or Sanskrit refers to the colour black, which is often associated with darkness in Hindu mythology. But Ranjith employs a different hermeneutic to deconstruct and reconstruct the name Kaala. When Hari dada (the villain) asks sarcastically, "Kaala, what sort of name is that?" Kaala replies that black is the colour of labour. ...But unlike other popular films which depict only the negative aspects of slum life, Ranjith highlights their life, struggles, and celebrations. From the act of naming, these films offer an anti-caste aesthetic that is also an oppositional gaze to mainstream Indian cinema. (Edchara 49)

The Ambedkarite idea of the portrayal of Dalits could not gain prominence until the birth of the middle class which could produce and sustain an artistic class in the Dalit community. In the 21st century, we can easily and frequently see Dalits and their issues getting attention and depiction in Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, and other regional cinemas. Comparing the imagination of Dalits, an academic from JNU writes in his article titled 'Dalit Representation in Bollywood':

The representation of Dalit persona and his/her ideological and moral characteristics reflect the Gandhian visualisation of the 'Harijan', that is, dependent (*Sujata* 1959), submissive (*Damul* 1985), and suitable to the ethics of socio-cultural Brahmanical values (*Lagaan* 2001). ...robust independent 'Political Dalit' has almost no representative narrative available in the mainstream Bollywood films. (Wankhede)

In recent years, Tamil cinema has seen a good rise in films made on Dalit issues by Dalit filmmakers. Dalit filmmakers associated with 'Madras Talkies' have been rebels who have paved a new way for presenting Dalits in Tamil cinema. This new Tamil cinema has boldly presented grim realities of human life involving caste and tribal politics. The oppression and stigma faced by the people belonging to the bottom rank of society have been poignantly depicted in recent Tamil hits such as *Madras* (2014), *Manusangada* (2017), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Asuran* (2019), *Maadathy: An Unfair Tale* (2019), *Irاندام Ulagaporin Kadaisi Gundu* (2019), *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), *Karnan* (2021) and *Jai Bhim* (2021).

Critique of *Manusangada* (2017) and *Jai Bheem* (2021)

Manusangada (2017) is a drama directed by Amshan Kumar. 'Manusangada' means 'We are human too'. It is the title of a poem by a poet named Inqilab. The film is based on a true story of a Dalit man's struggle for honourable last journey of his father's dead body. The story

opens with the news of the death of the father of Kolappan who is a worker in a steel factory in Chennai. The film [follows Kolappans struggle against injustice](#). Kolappan belongs to a lower caste. He [is denied the use of the public road for the funeral procession of his fathers body to the cemetery](#). Failing to get any support from the local administration, he seeks the intervention of the Madras High Court. But he fails to do what he wants to do despite the High Court ordering the local administration to give him police protection while using the public path for the funeral procession for the body of his deceased father. The film was well received by the critics and the audience. It won the awards of the best film at the 20th International Film Festival of India and the best Tamil Film at the 65th National Award in India.

Jai Bhim (2021) is a legal drama directed by T. J. Gnanavel. The title means 'Victory to Bheem', which is a kind of salutation used by the Ambedkarites to greet each other. Superstar Suriya plays the lead role in the film which deals with the subject of police bias and state violence against the marginalised community. Based on a true incident in 1993, it revolves around the lives of a couple from the Irular tribe, who work as labourers in the fields of feudal lords controlling rat infestations and catching venomous snakes. They are arrested tortured and by the police to admit to burglary for which they have been falsely implicated. Due to excessive torture Rajakannu dies. The police try to hide their crime. Sengeni, the wife of the deceased Rajakannu determines to seek justice for her husband. Her fight against injustice is taken up by Suriya who plays the role of a conscientious lawyer fighting cases for tribal communities. After a long and hard-fought battle in the court, justice is served to the tribal people. The corrupt and criminal police officers are arrested and the oppressed and traumatised tribal woman, Sengeni, whose husband, Rajakannu, was killed in police custody, gets money and land as compensation. The film received universal acclaim from critics, who praised the story, acting, direction, and social message conveyed by it.

Both the films brilliantly showcase the emergence of Ambedkarite Dalits. Kolappan is a simple poor human being who recalls the dishonour his community faced in the past when they were denied to take funeral processions through the public road. He vows to fight for the basic honour a human being deserves. He doesn't have ways and means to directly fight with the upper-caste feudalistic villagers because the local police and administration favour the feudal lords. Even an order of the High Court fails to provide justice to him. But he does not accept compromise or defeat even though he is unsuccessful at the end. Similarly, in *Jai Bheem* Rajakannu is a courageous and righteous person who despite being very poor does not get tempted by the golden jewellery while catching the snake. He is given excessive torture by a corrupt police officer, but he would rather die than admit the crime he did not commit. His wife Sengeni comes out as a strong character. Though she was pregnant, had a small daughter and was in a vulnerable state, she stood like a rock in her determined fight for justice for his deceased husband braving against all kinds of threats and enticement by the police and the administration. Adv. Chandru is also a powerful and inspiring character fighting for the marginalised community.

In both the films, the lead characters are poor and lack resources; they are common people; they don't have superhuman power to resolve all problems or fight single-handedly with criminals and wrong-doers of the society. But these characters are strong-willed and determined. When it comes to their dignity and justice, their poverty and lack of resources are not excuses for them to surrender and succumb to repressive elements.

An important point in these films is the visibility of Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar's

Constitution of India is a great source of power to the characters. These films also emphasise upon the visibility of Ambedkar's statues and portraits which, interestingly, are used profusely in Ambedkarite Dalit films but are almost blacked out in the films portraying Gandhian Dalit.

It can be said therefore on the basis of discussion presented above that in the initial years of the development of Indian cinema, Dalits were neglected by filmmakers who happened to be from the upper caste. Earlier, the Gandhian approach of representing Dalits won the day. Dalits' presence was limited to parallel and art cinema or projects funded or financed by the government. They were represented as meek, voiceless, wretched, drunkard, violent, submissive, and condescending. But, now, in the current century, the Ambedkarite representation of Dalits is strongly finding its way into commercially successful cinema and is not limited only to parallel cinema or art cinema as a kind of tokenism. The visibility of Dalits and Dalit filmmakers is seen much more prominently in regional commercial cinema like Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil, etc. Yet, it is still a long way to find its way into mainstream commercially successful Bollywood cinema.

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