PORTRAYAL OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIAN FILMS

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Abstract: Caste has been a contentious issue in the pluralist Indian society for centuries. What started as a Varna division based on professions in pre Vedic period – Brahmins,Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras- had undergone a complete change as society developed , distorting the very character of this division, making it rigid and negative. The brutal realities of this social evil , in fact, are overwhelming even in contemporary, modern society, with all it education and technology. These marginalized groups have been pushed so far out of the periphery of the mainstream society that even after more than six decades of the efforts of the Indian Government and various other organizations, their space in the society is still not assured, especially in rural areas. A factor worth mentioning here is the condition of women in such groups, subalterns lower in rank even among subalterns. They are easy prey in every way for dominating forces within and outside their circle. Voices of 'protest' have risen from time to time and have received support from media and various art forms. One of the most prominent among them has been Indian cinema. Since its inception , cinema has endeavoured to highlight issues of importance for the masses, fully realizing it social responsibilities, from child marriage, degrading status of women to untouchability. As per the Indian Constitution also, there must be no discrimination on the basis of race, caste, creed, gender and so on. Everyone is equal before the law of the land. Indian films have been disseminating the message of awareness about the evils of casteism, not only through their work but also leading by example in their real life. Numerous actors and actresses have not only contributed financially to NGOs but also gone for inter caste and inter religious marital and other relationships. Films like Acchut Kanya, Sujata and the more recent Aarakhan and Shudra etc. have analysed various aspects of this problem like untouchability, reservation etc. However such portrayal are few and far between and as the multiplex cinema has slowly and gradually taken over and the Indian cinema has become globalised in nature, the subject matters have changed to become more urban and world centric, of class rather than caste , leaving the topic of subalterns somewhere on the margins or at least transforming its face. The present study intends to critically examine the entire gamut of the problem and its representation on the big screen.

Keywords- Varnas, reservation, marginalized groups, subalterns, untouchability, purism.

1.0 Introduction

The preamble of the Indian constitution assures for all its citizens , JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation and yet we need to have reservation, Minorities Commission and various laws to counter discrimination on the basis of caste in this country. Tales of violence related to caste abound in every nook and corner of the country. The varna system has been in existence in India for centuries. Remember the Shabri episode in Ramayana where Lakshmana is not very happy to eat fruits offered by the poor woman. So, thousands of centuries later this division, in the sense of hierarchy , of status , of power remains firmly entrenched in the minds of Indians to the point of hatred for another human being, for no fault of his. Yet the beginning of this division was more related to professions, a categorization rather than distinction to make the society function smoothly. When Aryans came, they were divided into warriors , priests and the common man, As Romila Thapar says,

"Professions were not hereditary, nor were there any rules limiting marriages within these classes, or taboos on whom one could eat with. The three divisions merely facilitated social and economic organization."1

However, with the Aryans treating Dasas as inferior on the basis of their colour or varna, a new class was added in the society. The manipulations and permutations in later time, made the priests secure the first place in the hierarchy and the classifications became rigidly compartmentalized. Manu espoused,

"Then, so that the worlds and people would prosper and increase, from his mouth he created the priest, from his arms the ruler, from his thighs the commoner, and from his feet the servant."2

For centuries , some sections of the society, economically and educationally backward, have been thrust to the peripheries and have been deprived of the advantages enjoyed by people in the mainstream , their voices throttled by the elite sections. The work of various social reformers and figures like Mahatama Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar against brought the issue of caste and untouchability into focus and was one of the prominent issues while drafting the Indian Constitution. It provided all the citizens of India equal opportunity before law , without any discrimination . However, the reality was otherwise as the caste system has become so engrained in the mind-set of people that it is difficult to uproot it. The Mandal agitation was a consequence of the chasm between two sections of the society, each with its own perspective. Reservation has since been on the agenda of the social and political experts. But a lot needs to be done , especially in rural and remote areas. Many religious and educational rights are being denied to them.

1.1 Role of Media in Social Justice And Change

Social justice is defined in different ways by different scholars like it , "... promoting a just society by challenging injustice and valuing diversity." Or that it exists when "all people share a common humanity and therefore have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of community resources." The characteristic of social justice is that the people are "not be discriminated against, nor their welfare and well-being constrained or prejudiced on the basis of gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, age, race, belief, disability, location, social class, socio-economic circumstances, or other characteristic of background or group membership" (Toowoomba Catholic Education, 2006). 5

People like Socrates, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza and Tom Paine talked of this concept extensively. But the term came into active usage from 1840s when Jesuit priest, Luigi Taparelli, coined it. The revolutions of 1848 with the work of Antonio Rosmini-Serbatigave further boost to it. Progressive legal scholars, Louis Brandeis and Roscoe Pound, began using it liberally in the later industrial revolution. Since the early 20th century, it has been mentioned in international laws, starting with the Treaty of Versailles, 1919. The preamble to set up the International Labour Organization says that "universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice." In the later part of the last century, social justice was made central to the philosophy of the social contract, by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). In 1993, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action take social justice as a purpose of the human rights education.6

Media is not just a tool of entertainment and information for the masses but has played a significant role in bringing social justice and change. In a developing and pluralist country like India, the demographics demand a cautious approach. Changes cannot be drastic and cannot be made overnight. People have to be made aware of problems and their solutions. The mindset of the masses must undergo a transformation in terms of both attitude and behaviour. Media performs this role effectively. Campaigns like Green revolution, polio vaccination have been given a fillip by both print and electronic media. In fact, as the history of media testifies, media's introduction in India had the objective of social and economic benefit for the masses behind it. Justice cannot be provided in a society vitiated with divisions and schisms. The goal of media is to prepare a fertile ground for social justice and change.

2.0 Review Of Literature

Kirk Johnson in his study (2001), Media and Social Change: the Modernizing Influences of Television in Rural India, explores the role of television in rural life and the influence it has had on various social, economic and political processes working in the villages of India in the last few decades. Kirk has taken data from ethnographic fieldwork in two remote villages, Danawli and Raj Puri, in Western Maharashtra, which is presented in the context of development and social change. Television acts as the agent of cultural change. The response is ambivalent as some villagers see these processes as positive, others view them as negative. Village audience is an active participant in the use of media, which has implications for development both at the village level and beyond.7

As per a recent study in USA, reporting on issues of social justice accounted for only 3.6 percent of the overall coverage of news by major media organizations, underscoring the lack of information readily available to the public on these critical issues.8

3.0 Representation Of Caste System In Hindi Cinema

Among media, cinema has been in the forefront in highlighting and representing many issues concerning the nation since its inception at Watson Hotel in Bombay in 1896. From the silent era to the modern multiplex cinema, Hindi films have exerted their persuasive power over its audience to see and listen to its messages of social concern. India as the largest film producing country in the world has used this medium not just for entertainment but also as a catalyst for social upliftment. Cinema industry has also lead by example and always advocated peaceful coexistence among various communities. The industry has a cosmopolitan approach and nature with artists from different castes , religions working together. Marriages and relationships among people from different castes and religions is not uncommon in Bollywood, prompting the same among the audience and fans as well. This augurs well for the society and is a significant contribution of the film industry in forging national integration and harmony. The same message is conveyed through films.

Bombay Talkies film Achhut Kanya (1936) revolved around the love story between Pratap, a Brahmin and Kasturi, an untouchable leading to a tragic end. It brings to the fore the factors of rumours and mob violence and the extreme hatred of one human being towards the other on the basis of caste. The recent riots in Muzzaffarnagar and honour killing in states like Punjab and Haryana make the subject still relevant. The role of Kasturi was played by Devika Rani, who interestingly, was a Upper caste Hindu.

Panghat in 1943 draws out the caste differences through the concept of community well and love through mistaken identity.

Bimal Roy's Sujata in 1959 takes the story forward. In the two decades that had elapsed, a few changes had, indeed taken place. A reluctant acceptability is there as the couple , Upen and haru , bring up the untouchable orphan girl, Sujata , who is later wooed by the Brahmin boy, Adheer. It is a family emergency and personal gratitude as well as the progressive ideas of the male characters, which is interesting, that brings the situation to a happy conclusion. Humanity triumphs over age old fetters of untouchability. The heroine learns the bitter truth about her birth much later.

Shekhar Kapoor's Bandit Queen (1994) is a stark and brutal depiction of the exploitation of a woman, both on account of her gender and her caste. The low caste Mallahs are the targets of high brow Thakurs , who have a hold on the police and the legal system and commit crimes with impunity. The barren and hostile ravines of Chambal expose the inhuman behavior of a particular section of society towards Phoolan who ultimately has to resort to arms. She has no succour anywhere , even with police or the legal system. Caste again is the defining factor in deciding the fate of a human being, his very existence, his dignity is questioned. The rebellion of Phoolan is against the entire system, leading to the carnage and revenge against the perpetrators themselves.

 "But gender and caste could not be separated," says Farrukh Dhondy, who wrote the film. "The fact is that Devi was raped because she was lower caste and those men thought they could get away with it. A woman's life in India is very much defined by caste." 9

Prakash Jha's Aarakshan (2011) takes off from the Mandal agitation and the reservation issue in the context of the education system in India. Deepak as a Dalit student – professor , is at the centre of his respect for Principal Anand and love for his daughter and his bonding with his fellow community members which clash. Prakash Jha has been criticized for sitting on the fence and diplomatically handling the theme rather than boldly coming out in open on the subject. But, it definitely set off a debate on caste system which had become redundant for a long time. As Saibal Chatterji says,

"Prakash Jha's highly anticipated film isn't really what the title might suggest: a sledgehammer drama about a simmering political issue that has never been addressed before in a mainstream Hindi film. Instead, it's a rather safe, superficial and simplistic take on an extremely complex theme. The film lets off steam, and generates some smoke, but the fire is missing." 10

The steam, however , needs to be let on regular basis on this and such like issues. Jha simply veers off to another pertinent issue but what needs to be understood is that films cannot really pass judgements on problems which have multiple perspectives.

Shudra – The Uprising (2012) gives a historical perspective to the caste system. It relates the rebellion of the lower castes because of their continuous and abject humiliation at the hands of upper caste feudal lords. The film is dedicated to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. This film endeavours to go to the roots of the problem.

Shyam Benegal's Ankur was another tale of double exploitation, gender and caste; the story of how the oppressed may finally rise to protest against the landlords and thus sow the seedling of rebellion. The landlord's 'legitimate' son Suraj , who arrives to supervise the land has a Dalit couple, Lakshmi and her alcoholic husband, Kishtayya, work for him. In the absence of Kishtayya, he developed physical relations with Lakshmi. But does not have courage to own it and fearing revenge , publically whips the husband to the outrage of Lakshmi who curses him. The last scene shows a child throwing a stone at Surya's window. The progressive façade of the protagonist fades away to reveal the centuries old mindset.

Films have also taken up the conditions of Devdasis in films like Mahananda (1987). Women from lower caste have been at the receiving end on all sides. Religious fear and sanctions are used to subjugate them, physically, sexually and psychologically.

The study has not been able to take up regional cinema which can be another comprehensive field for research on the subject .

4.0 CONCLUSION

Such portrayals are few and far between and as the multiplex cinema has slowly and gradually taken over and the Indian cinema has become globalised in nature, the subject matters have changed to become more urban and world centric, of class rather than caste, leaving the topic of subalterns somewhere on the margins or at least transforming its face. Even in urban areas, though, the subtle nuances of the caste system need to be explored. Film makers also need to explore the matter further and look at its implications for the society. The situation of subaltern India must be taken into account if one really wants a rejuvenated and resurgent India. In this digital age, where geographical boundaries have blurred, such divisions really have no place and are not relevant at all.

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