

Introduction to the Special Issue on Caste and Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The following Introduction briefly traces, albeit in jarring cuts, the evolution of caste question and its relationship with Indian cinema. It also tries to point out some aspects of Indian film theory, its lacunae and hopes that some of the questions raised here may give rise to future works by other (better) theorists. Pre-Independence cinema in India rarely addressed caste question, and if it did, then it was through an abstract global humanist lens. This tendency to address caste through a hollow and empty shell of a theoretical model unfortunately has stuck around even in these times, and only found newer ways to reinvent itself in Neoliberal times. To understand the reason of Indian cinema's lack of addressing caste more directly and pointedly, it has to be seen as part of a historical process. Only then can we see the history of ideology that is "outside of itself", that is, in the material conditions that made possible Indian caste-society as well as its cine-culture. It also tries to raise questions about the film form, and its many possibilities of experimentation with the caste question (i.e. both in ideological and experiential possibilities). Lastly, it introduces some of the key works in this issue. Of course, with the hope that the readers will forgive and give respite to the many lacunas of the issue, as well as the Editor himself.

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The first Indian feature film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), was out for public viewing on 3rd May 1913 (later remade in 1917). The film was a mythic narrative of a king who overstepped his boundaries against a powerful Brahmin sage and had to pay the price for it by losing everything. The climactic point arrives onscreen when Harishchandra, almost like Abraham sacrificing Isaac, sets out to behead his wife as a sign of total loyalty to his “*dharma*” or duty and gets stopped midway between the execution by the timely arrival of Shiva. In reality, the tale of Harishchandra was a cautionary tale to keep the Kshatriya and the kings at bay, a priestly-caste fantasy to ensure loyalty to the structure of the caste system itself. However, perhaps the most important context of the film and our issue here is the off-screen presence of the mortician, or as is called in the title cards, the “Domb”, a misnomer where the director like many others thought an entire caste as born-morticians. The “domb” is absent and yet stays on the screen as the spectral presence of an injunction. The injunction is that the King with the greatest fall from status does the work of “domb” without *becoming* one, and that death is the regime of the King of the “dombs”. That is, at the tail end of Brahminism are the castes that take care of the garbage (both objectively really real and metaphysical) without whose participation in Brahminism, life does not complete the cycle of being. Dharma does not come to fruition without cremation, that is, a symbolic ordering of the last garbage of the human, the body itself. It is the same rule even for the fallen King; he might now have the trade of mortician, but he is not a *dom*, and therefore needs an affirmation from the “king” of the “dombs”. Unfortunately, this is also how most Indian cinema, its makers, critics and theorists have often dealt with caste. For the longest time, most of history has dealt with the question of caste as an off-screen presence in cinema and as an off-paper footnote in film theory. However, the absence fails to hide the brutal generational violence even with its elaborate metaphysical theatrics but instead haunts it by its very absence.

The first film that perhaps mentions the caste system directly is *Achhut Kanya* (1936) by Franz Osten. Once again, we see the literal ghost of Kasturi, a “Harijan” girl haunting the site of a planned murder, as well as the narrative structure of the film itself. The murder of a woman is foiled by the arrival of a ghostly narrator, one who narrates the ill-fated account of Pratap, a “sympathetic Brahmin” man who falls in love with

Kasturi, and is punished by the traditional moralist mob of the village. This archetype of a picturesque village with so-called traditional values and an otherwise simple life later becomes a permanent fantasy in other films produced by Bombay Talkies (Mukherjee). After Mannu, the jilted would-be husband of Kasturi rushes in to kill Pratap, Kasturi steps on the tracks to stop the train from running everyone over, including the ox-cart. What happens then is a sequence of shots moving between the train, the driver, the fight and Kasturi's running on the tracks, almost similar to *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) by DW Griffith. Kasturi gets killed by the train, and the disembodied voice of the ghostly narrator reminds us that a "mahanatma" or "great soul" can be present in anyone, meaning of course, in any member of any caste. The contention of modernity, as argued by noted scholar Ravi Vasudevan (Vasudevan, *Film Studies, New Cultural History and Experience of Modernity* 2811) seems to be an ideological project, but is not the only one. There are two important aspects in the film apart from the broad themes; firstly, this film (and many others after this) imagines the Indian village as a primarily conservative space yet redeemed by the simplicity of life. It is a European vision of an Indian Arcadia, dotted by occasional evils of caste, crimes of passion and repressed desire. Secondly, the fact that the vision of social reform in this film is that of a global humanist, and unfortunately, the echo of it continues to this day with Bollywood or many regional films' occasional onscreen representation of caste. One might wonder what is so wrong with the vision of a global humanist project. The answer is that the global humanist project is a fantastic idea borrowed from Europe, which was oblivious to the carnage Europe itself had caused across the world. That is, the reformist idea that the same machinery that creates the insufferable damage and violence can actually come up with a resolution to its resultant effects. Aimé Césaire was perhaps not using hyperbole when he noted that at "the end of formal humanism and philosophic renunciation, there is Hitler" (Césaire 37). Almost similarly, Frantz Fanon also denounced the project of humanism in his works, as well as the role of the bilingual elites in colonised countries (more on this later). The conviction with which I say this is not because Franz Osten himself became a member of the Nazi Party; that perhaps, only serves as an anecdote. The real reason one must lament (and change) Indian Cinema's involvement with caste is the 'formal humanism' with which it engages

the subject of a thousand-year-old caste system² and the ‘philosophical renunciation’ of caste in its making as well as theoretical engagement with cinema. After all, how does one show an audio-visual narration of events and time (i.e. cinema) to culture for whom being-in-itself is an illusion and for whom being-in-itself is subdivided by caste-based false-ontological positions? Lastly, how does one treat the idea of images moving in time in a culture for whom time in-itself is a method to follow caste-based labour as a religious duty (i.e. *dharma* or a teleological goal)? One might say that it is too broad a generalisation or that there are other religions and various practices across India. The structural aspect of caste has been so strong and resilient that it has more or less engulfed other religious structures and hierarchies in society by assimilating them. We shall try to explore some aspects of it in the coming paragraphs, and more so in this issue itself³.

The Indian experience with cinema was difficult in its early years and is more complex as of right now. It has within it multiple contradictions, and each of these contradictions is further a result of contradictions within them. Consider, for example, that the early cinemas were projected in tents, makeshift screens and viewing spaces. A space that was open to the crowd on the streets. In addition to that, ‘Cinema’ or ‘Bioscope’ (as it was often called colloquially) was a taboo for the upper-caste and upper-class morality. Just as the theatre was a space that was strictly associated with fall from grace, moral decadence, debauchery and a certain amount of disdain even from the bilingual elite, cinema too had a hard time gaining a viewership among the elites of the Indian society. Cinema halls in India for a long time, often altered between hosting films as well as staging plays. It took several decades to make up spaces for cinema halls as permanent setups; it took further still to convince the upper class and upper-caste audience to actively involve themselves as the audience. Their colloquial names varied between cinema halls, theatres, picture halls and other names over time. However, borrowing from the practice of dramaturgy, cinema halls were often called *Preksha-griha* in more Sanskritised spaces and cultural spaces in India. *Preksha* is vision but also

²Of course thousand years not in the same way, rather including the regimentation of it during medieval period through courtly practices, and formalization under colonialism and thereafter.

³This issue primarily focuses on feature films, cinema as language and fictions in general. The non-fiction film genre and its related problems require a separate discourse and temperament in case of Indian cinema and its relationship with caste question.

includes *sruti* or hearing, which roughly means that *Preksha-griha* considers the ambient detail and experience in its very formation as an architectural and cultural space. The contradiction yet again is that even with the steady formalisation of Capital and Sanskritisation of spaces, Indian cinema still continues to serve as the space of the people rather than the elites⁴. However, popular cinema serves as an ideological tool for the upper-caste and upper classes. It is extremely important for us to analyse the materialistic conditions which result in this particular ideological tendency of Indian popular films. The film and the viewership dynamics are both parts of the ideological setup, which tries the balancing act of resolving the goal of building citizens and consumers. This drive is to find a fruitful resolution in the narrative element of the film; however, the contradiction between a citizen and an enthusiastic consumer cannot be solved so easily as it is deeply rooted in the nature of Indian modernity, and more so in the history of Capital in India.

Dividual Members and Individual Audience

Ashish Rajadhyaksha, in his outstanding essay “Who is Looking? Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema”, argues that the ‘individual citizen’ comes into being through a series of complex relations of State policies, contradictions within modernity and some curious characteristics of the Indian understanding of the values of democracy, liberty and similar transcendental signifiers. It is through different complexities that the modern ‘viewer’ is born, and because of these reasons, it is impossible to analyse Indian cine-culture through the lens of the Hollywood dominated discourse found elsewhere. While it is a sharply put argument, there is a claim made by Rajadhyaksha that I would like to refute. Rajadhyaksha claims that

If India did not have a ‘developed individualist conception of society’, then it certainly does have one now. In fact it is demonstrable that the transactions that take place between the State and the agents of civil society on the one side, and groups, collectives and communities on the other, is precisely over the terrain of individual rights as India internalised these and as these came to reside in the nation and its hypothesised

⁴ The numerical majority of single-screen halls in any given city far outnumber the multiplexes. And one might not be too off the mark if they argue that the impact of the former kind has a bigger impact on the people, and of course, cater a certain kind of viewership.

citizen-subject. It is better, therefore, for our purpose, to regard the category of the 'individual citizen' as something of an omnibus category that works primarily as a transactional site, and a mechanism, for all the actions that collectively comprise what in India we call 'democracy'- in short, as precisely the beginnings of a structure of narration (Rajadhyaksha 178).

Rajadhyaksha claims here that an individual citizen in India, even though it works as an omnibus, is in flux and has a transactional economy to its characteristics. This idea, often reflected in similar works of film theory as well as social science has a tragic flaw that ultimately evokes itself on stage to undo all that was promised. The flaw here is adequate amount of understanding and measurement of caste-society, and its many manifestations that result and contribute to Indian modernity and the concept of a so-called 'individual citizen'. The idea that modernity and its related institutions have contributed to solving the formal and real, bourgeoisie and feudal, caste and class contradictions in India is at best naive. Instead, we have what sociologist Dipankar Gupta calls a 'mistaken modernity'. In his book *Mistaken Modernity: India Between Worlds*, Gupta claims that India's middle-class and bourgeoisie and never truly modernised either the economy or the culture (Gupta 23). These classes lack the vision of a revolutionary bourgeoisie or petite-bourgeoisie to reorient the economy according to its own image, but on the other hand, they wanted the same culture of consumption as the West, all the while keeping its privileges intact (birth rights, caste etc.) This makes these classes in India shallow in nature, only whetting their appetite for mimicking the West in its culture of consumption while keeping the overall structure of economy and culture deeply archaic and backward (Gupta 26). This is not a phenomenon that is divided between rural and urban spaces differently, as is claimed often by caste-apologists of various kinds, even if urban spaces for a time provided some refuge from the more repressive space rural spaces. It is present in the Hindu worldview, which eventually influences the legal, social, political and economic policies of the State as well as individual families. The pervasive nature of caste is also strong enough to infiltrate several other religious structures in India, as well as ethnic relations which forge themselves in quasi-caste structures under cultural pressure from Brahminism in one

way or another⁵. The argument here is not that all Indians are committed to one monolithic idea of caste-society; rather, it is a network of local and national beliefs that reinvent themselves constantly, with Brahmins and/or Brahminical vision at the top. The primary argument, however, is that it is impossible for structures that influence socio-political and economic relations, as well as the very idea of *being*, to not affect the formation of the 'viewers' of films. Apart from the political-economic problem, there is also the problem of Brahminical or the Hindu vision of the world.

To look at it in more detail, we can refer to Pauline Kollenda's work on the caste system in India. Kollenda revisits the works by sociologists such as Mariott and Inden, Louis Dumont, G S Ghurye and several other sociologists to look for a specific reason concerning ideas of purity and corruption in caste-society. She points out how these sociologists had come to the conclusion that Hindu mythology and its worldview divide people not into individuals but as 'dividual' (Kollenda 70). Roughly, this means that Hindus see themselves as an already coded body, since the original 'Codeman' was Brahma from whose different parts of the body came the different *varna*, thus the Hindu is already coded by God himself (Kollenda 69). The *jatidharma* or one's duty both as a caste and an individual is therefore hard-coded into the body itself, and can be maintained in harmony if only one follows the 'right conduct' for their caste. These coded particles (also *pinda*, literally meaning body) carried in sweat, hair, saliva, et cetera are easily transferred from one person to another, and, therefore must be regulated and be exchanged only with a higher caste than one's own than a lower-caste if exchange happens at all. It is because of this that a Hindu must work on not just avoid pollution but trying to continuously purify one's coding through right action (both labour and morality), right eating and right marriage (Kollenda 68-70). Therefore, one must insist here that there is no individual in India, only a member of a caste and how that caste situates itself in the world.

The argument above may seem like an imposition on the billion audiences who visit cinema halls or watch films on contemporary platforms. However, we must not forget that caste is an economic and political reality in India, as well as reinforced by

⁵This takes various forms in its role, from inventing or claiming Kshatriya or Brahmin roots by different tribes to re-inventing identities from history in relations to Hindu mythological figures.

religious structure. The fact that each year popular film's market and the number of film production keeps rising, and yet there are only handful of films which address caste and its related problems directly is of a great concern. One would imagine that the very absence of it would make film theorists and cinephiles be suspicious of the ideological and phenomenological reasons behind the lack of formal experimentation of cinema with caste, or even the lack of 'representation' of caste in cinema. The reason it does not happen is perhaps because both the rising number of cinephiles and the majority of film directors, reviewers, theorists and critiques are either from castes that have consolidated themselves historically to ignore the sheer vastness and depth of the caste system, or that they have wilfully not looked into this abyss for the fear that it might reveal to them things not just about Indian cine-culture but about their own fabrics of being. Caste is an aspect that serves not just as a socio-political and economic subject position, but also influences the worldview itself. For the average caste-Hindu, the system comprises and provides, to use borrowed terms, not just the *verfallen* but also the *Dasein* (of course, an inauthentic one)⁶⁷. The single most major religion in India has

⁶ The term is of course borrowed from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. To put into context, one must acknowledge the problem that Hinduism or Brahmanism puts forward. *Verfallen* or 'falling prey' is Heidegger's way of explaining the effects of idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity leading to deceptive understanding of the *Dasein*, thus leading to a sense of stupor which he calls *Beruhigung* and *beruhigend* or 'reassurance' and 'tranquilizing effect' respectively. However, *Dasein* itself is reflection of *being* by a conscious being that sees his *being-in-the-world* through a process of relating from within and outside. The problem of course is that often *Dasein* is relayed in terms of a pre-ontological or inauthentic mode. Brahmanism provides both the *verfallen* and the *Dasein*(inauthentic of course), because in its everyday ritual, social relations, idle talks, sensual understanding and everyday activities it provides a structure to tranquilise one's question of and regarding being while reassuring a common-sense understanding of being. However, there is a double movement of negation in it. In a way, caste is considered as a socio-political and religious duty (a limited *Mitsein* if you will) but at the same time considers *being* itself as *maya* or an illusion set up by a karmic puppeteer. Thus the negation propels this inauthentic *Dasein* towards realising the goal of its existence through fulfilling its duties as a caste member 'dividual', rather than as an individual. This inauthentic *Dasein* then finds itself completed when the body is set on fire by a descendent and burned by a 'lower-caste' man, thus ultimately joining the ancestors waiting their turn to be reborn (again becoming part of the limited *Mitsein*). This is perhaps one of the reasons why caste-Hindus find it so difficult to reject the structure of caste even as a principle (if they are willing at all). It gives them real political and social power, true, but at the same time it also is connected to their sense of history as dividuals and as a being-in-the-world. The veracity of this double negations of, *dharma*, caste, *maya* and *mokshā* can be found in several texts, as well as their internal contradictions. Notably the *Manusmriti* (ch 3, verse 201-204, 283-285 etc) and *Bhagavad Gita* (chapter on *sankhya*).

⁷This must be noted that the use of Heidegger's phenomenology is neither to bring in Eurocentric view of *being* nor to commit fully to Heidegger's method, but to introduce the necessary analytical terms to understand the spectrum of Brahminism better. In a way it is an exploration of political ontology of caste system or Brahmanism, rather than a study of *being* in general.

diverse practices, deities and beliefs that differ from one province to another but is unified in their *faith* in the caste system. It is not just for economic reasons alone, but because the average caste-Hindu finds himself immersed in caste from birth to death, with each and every decision they make. Ultimately the caste finds its release or completion upon death, wherein not just the individual but the entire caste finds its teleological goal completed. Against such a force, the qualitative absence of caste in cinema speaks far more than its occasional mention in cinema; and it is the same with Indian film theory.

Within the same context, one must ask the question as to who is allowed in the said ambience of cinema halls. While, in some cases, cityscapes have been more accommodating to people from the 'lower castes' than the clinically precise village habitation patterns, one must not forget that caste exists as strongly as possible in rural and urban spaces. The urban settlement pattern, along with the development of capital, has clearly shown that Ambedkar's suggestion to move to cities and towns does not work anymore, especially in the neoliberal times. In a way, one might argue that because of colonial intervention⁸, the cityscapes in India had developed a newer model of segregation and exploitation of caste groups (Gooptu 146-147). Therefore, the entry into this hallowed space of a cinema hall and cinema as language itself was to an extent dominated by upper-castes because of political and economic reasons for a long time, but has also acted as the colosseum for the minorities. What we can see is that it has taken a long while for cinema halls to accommodate a steady flow of dominated castes as audience and be accepted as a medium. This contradiction has lost much of its tooth and nail under neoliberal spaces and cultural logic, and instead has turned upside down into a *ressentiment* against the "filmy people" and "Bollywood people"⁹. We can at best say that since the single most majority in India (and wherever they settled) are themselves individuals, 'individual audience' is at best an unstable contradiction, and at

⁸Intervention here includes the labour market and migration pattern in Bihar, the forced migration of tribal populations along the plantation economy, partition of Bengal and Punjab and various other criteria.

⁹ This does not mean the contradiction is resolved, but only that it has gained a new variable. Perhaps India is the only place where so many actors and film-related personnel have such a great hold over public opinion, to the point that political parties regularly recruit them in their fold.

its worst, is a fantastic oxymoron designed to satiate the collective 'renunciation' of truth.

Caste representation is a difficult process that takes time and is subject to several distinguishing characteristics. Several authors in this issue have discussed key problems regarding the problem of representation, and this introduction can highlight only a few of them. What is important is to establish some historical problems that come with the discourse on representation. Let us take, for example, the case of *Sujata* (1959) by Bimal Roy, a film that was sent as a nominee to 1960 Cannes Film Festival from India. While the echoes of formal humanism continue in this film, there are some interesting things to note in the film as well. The humanism part can be referred largely from the notion that Sujata, an adopted Dalit girl (referred to as 'neechjaat'), has to ultimately pay off the debt she owed the household with her blood. Even if one thinks of trying to whitewash it with the notion that the blood donation was a way of sharing blood with the family, in a literal and metaphorical sense, there is no denying that the dialogue by Upen literally states the 'paying off' the debt they are owed. However, perhaps the most elaborate example of the humanist worldview is the quick cuts and juxtapositions of images during the introductory birthday celebration scene. The music box opens and starts playing a set of notes that are as calm and pacific as a lullaby, the images keep changing to various people enjoying, lights, a baby with ceremonial makeup and a few plump and well fed children; this is cut short by a balloon bursting at the accidental touch of a cigarette. It is a dreamy montage broken by an explosive awakening of the newly formed Indian liberal, a rude call-to-arms for the sake of the downtrodden of the newly formed Nation. It is strikingly similar to the rude awakening of bourgeois lovers we keep finding in Luis Bunuel's *The Golden Age* (1930), and his later works like *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). In a way, Bunuel points out how the bourgeoisie cannot make love or enjoy sexual pleasure with its insufferable baggage of morality and customs (and fetishes). Bimal Roy here also seems self-reflective and points out that the nationalist liberal of the newly formed India cannot enjoy a guiltless celebration without diffusing the inherent anxiety of their

position as the upper-caste, petite-bourgeoisie or the labour aristocracy¹⁰. This element of a combined sense of formal humanism, nationalism and faith in the newly formed bourgeois democracy kept dominating almost any discourse on caste question.

In the following years, some other films followed more or less similar humanist ideals and nation-making exercises. Among them would be *Hospital* (1960) by Sushil Majumdar, *Baba Ramdev* (1963), where the Brahmin gets pestilence (or pustules at least) as a result of following *jatidharma* instead of a more egalitarian *manavdharma*¹¹, *Samskara* (1970) by Girish Karnad and its nearly identical twin but politically sharper *Grahana* (1978) by T. S Nagabharana, both films exploring the politics of burning the dead body of a Dalit man and the politics of ritual sacrifice. However, most of these films deal with the problems of caste through a humanist lens, the politics too suffers from the inconsistencies of liberal humanism¹². The one film that breaks the sheer banality of the reiterating humanist litanies is *ChomanaDudi* (1975) or *Choma's Drum* by B.V Karanth, adapted from a novel by the same name. The film begins with a group of torch-bearing rally moving towards the camera from pitch darkness, with occasional embers flying around from them. Over a hillock, the procession comes into view, the low angle shot conveys their status, and the group look towards a scene of dance and drum beats. The camera points to the people huddled together around a fire, dancing fiercely to a song and vigorous drumbeat; from the longshot in the darkness and the closer medium shot, we see most of their bodies covered in darkness but glistening with sweat and motion. The dance they are performing is not a graceful dance learned in the Indian classical art but the furious dance of possession and channeling of repressed violence. This opening sequence of events sets the tone for the rest of the film, which is

¹⁰A term mentioned by Lenin in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, but recently developed in more radical detail by J. Sakai and Bromma.

¹¹Interestingly it is the idol itself that squirts this pestilence juice on the BrahminYogiraj, a choice of disease which does point to a political problem in more ways than one. What is a facial pustule but an injunction against touch or contact by an unscientific and conservative society? Perhaps, this reveals the anxiety of casteism itself, the primary fear of the Brahmin is corruption through contact.

¹²A notable difference is perhaps the case of *Grahana*. Even if the Brahmin hero trope is there in the film, it seems that the contradictions of this humanitarian effort broke forth at its seams and revealed itself. The film explores how in caste society there is no respite, no recognition for caste-traitors. The montage shot of Puttaswamy's dead body, his sacred thread, and the rituals continuing as usual points out to some reasons behind the persistence of caste. The fact that caste is not class, because there is no reward for upward mobility but surely punishment waiting for people trying to de-caste themselves is a laudatory point in the film, along with this the fact that the film finds its conclusion acrid pessimist ending is truly masterful step towards an anti-caste politics in cinema.

sharply political and beautifully bleak. The dance and the drum alone (which keeps repeating) reflect the inherent violence and historical nature of repression in the film, almost echoing the analysis of Frantz Fanon. Fanon, in his famous treatise on the violence of the coloniser and their native agents, says that dance, song and possession are integral to the anticolonial struggle. He says,

Any study of the colonial world therefore must include an understanding of the phenomena of dance and possession. The colonised's way of relaxing is precisely this muscular orgy during which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence are channeled, transformed, and spirited away. The dance circle is a permissive circle. It protects and empowers. At a fixed time and a fixed date men and women assemble in a given place, and under the solemn gaze of the tribe launch themselves into a seemingly disarticulated, but in fact extremely ritualised, pantomime where the exorcism, liberation, and expression of a community are grandiosely and spontaneously played out through shaking of the head, and back and forward thrusts of the body. Everything is permitted in the dance circle. The hillock, which has been climbed as if to get closer to the moon, the river bank, which has been descended whenever the dance symbolises ablution, washing, and purification, are sacred places. Everything is permitted, for in fact the sole purpose of the gathering is to let the supercharged libido and the stifled aggressiveness spew out volcanically. Symbolic killings, figurative cavalcades, and imagined multiple murders, everything has to come out. The ill humors seep out, tumultuous as lava flows (Fanon 19-20).

Fanon points out here that dance (and by extension, music of dominated people), in the context of extreme repression, works as a violent and convulsive expression of will-to-power. The sweating and glistening bodies are barred from expressing dissent, desire, displeasure or rebellion against power structures. With this pent-up frustration, dance becomes a raging expectoration of all repressed desires and anxieties; as if a collective *jouissance* has possessed the body to release the same emotions into the world. In *Chomana Dudi*, Choma breaks into a burst of such possession and plays his drum,

sometimes forcing his children to dance along with the beats. Apart from the brilliant plot and skilled filmmaking, the film achieves something greater than the sum of all its parts. Choma does not play the drum to celebrate but to put himself on a trance and the world he is thrown in. The film explores the atrocity of Brahmins and upper-caste people on the Dalits, and shows the relentless sexual coercion and exploitation of Dalit women. However, perhaps the most intense engagement of the film with anticaste politics is with its commitment to pessimism. Although there are few things that looks humanist in its cinematography, like the repeated low-angle shots of Choma, Choma's groveling for the land against the violent back and forth shot with the landlord (also secretary) and the long sequence of walking by the sons to find a place where they are exploited in just another manner, yet the film does not posit a humanist politics. The absolute commitment to despair and pessimism has freed the narrative quality of both the story and the plot¹³ from any other commitments it had politically. The film's pessimism makes *Chomana Dudi* more radical in its approach than several well-meaning progressive films before or after it. The film produces the effect where it becomes clear that Choma's faith in Hinduism, his landlord, villagers, his children and even in his God is false. His suicide is not just a coerced murder of a man by caste exploitation but also a rejection of optimism. Even Choma's God comes to him as a capricious god in the field through a *danse macabre* of folk performers, who curses him for thinking about conversion. Thus, Choma, with his last stand, frees himself from all his desires by freeing his buffaloes and breaking the plough and dies while beating his drum like one last frenzied war cry. The final shot is that of the drum on the floor with a disembodied drumbeat, the disembodied drumbeat is a call to stir up the entire world from the stupor of optimism and faith in the current system. An exact opposite use of disembodied voice/music can be seen in Glauber Rocha's *Terra em Transe* (1967), where the first sequence overlooking the forests from a helicopter is accompanied by chants to put the world into a trance. The film overturns the humanist narrative and optimism with a rational pessimism; after all, what has been more harmful to the Dalits and minorities

¹³Plot refers to the events, *story* in cinema would be the sum total of audio-visual style and techniques used to explain the plot. An example would be the statement "a house is on fire", a story would be the sequence of shots, cuts, montage, camera angle/movement et cetera to make the house, the fire and the context to visually come alive onscreen..

than believing that there would be justice within the current folds of religion, laws, social structure and political society¹⁴? And even if there is a deliverer in the so-called progressive politics, so long the leadership is not of them, what guarantee is there that it is not a mere change of guards and exchange of one capricious God and Master for another? Truly, *ChomanaDudi* achieves a dark but sharp effect in Indian cinema's engagement with caste that would pale several other attempts for years to come.

Red Screen

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr B R Ambedkar poses a few questions against the socialists and by extension, the future of communist movements in India. He asks if the proletariat in India, although extremely poor, accepts class as the only difference between people. Ambedkar also asks a question following it that still haunts the Indian class struggle, he asked, with all his political seriousness, if the class of Indian proletariat can ever mount a revolution with the unified front that looks terribly bleak because of the persistence of caste system and its practice across classes (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 36). This problem is further fleshed out in his series of essays and speeches throughout his life, that is, the problems with communists regarding their understanding of the caste question, as well as their practising of caste within trade unions and factory floors. The question still haunts us today across the spectrum of progressive politics, whether among Marxists or Ambedkarites. The early communists in India, who were mostly Brahmins and upper-castes, disregarded the caste question in their analysis of the class society in India. They saw caste as a superstructure while the economic relations as the base, and yet Marx had at no point suggested this as a depth model with economy at the base. Marx himself never suggested such a distinction, in fact his critique of the idyllic village and its inherent violence, the violence of the caste system and the British colonial influence in changing the Indian socio-economic structure was one of his primary arguments about India¹⁵ (Marx, *Karl Marx on India* 16-17). The other important point to be noted is that Marx himself

¹⁴Such a rational pessimism is rarely seen in cinema or even in literary works. This is not the pessimism of inaction, but pessimism through the rejection of an ideal that was imposed by history and culture. One may concur that it echoes more with the philosophy of pessimism of Thomas Ligotti in his rejection of optimism, than the 'cosmic pessimism' of Eugene Thacker.

¹⁵Variations of this primary argument span throughout his critique of Indian political economy even in other places. Some of which, as we know today, seem Eurocentric.

refrained from imposing his analysis or methods to other geopolitical spaces and their history of capital, going as far as suggesting that his entire life's work is an analysis of capitalism in Western Europe, and not a *marche generale* (general rule) imposed by fate or some other power (Marx, Letter from Marx to Editor of the *Otecestvenniye Zapisky*). However, earlier Indian communists did not take Marxism as a method but as dogma when it came to the caste question. As Anand Teltumbe, the renowned scholar points out in his work, the specters of a Russian and dogmatic understanding of the caste system continued to undermine the possibilities of a communist understanding of the caste question (Teltumbde 97-99). The reflections of this could be seen in early communist political thought as well as their praxis, thus leading Ambedkar and his movement thereafter to maintain a cautious distance with communists. Ambedkar was not wrong altogether as later history of communist parties with upper-caste leadership proved him correct through their apathy and hatred of downtrodden castes, much like the desertion of Telangana struggle by CPI and the actively organized massacre of Dalits and bahujans in Marichjhapi by CPI(M). In addition to that, one must take note of the alarming numbers of custodial deaths and tortures (where a chunk of names are of working classes and "denotified tribes") during Jyoti Basu's reign (Amnesty International), and further repressive actions taken by CPI(M) in Nandigram, Singur and Lalgarh against Dalits, Muslims and Tribal people. The detachment from real class-caste conditions and Brahminical hubris it takes to commit these crimes are also reflections of the communist organisations' failure to understand caste question seriously. The reflections of this problem can also be seen in Indian cinema and its experimentation with Leftist politics. One cannot discount the enormous role played by different communist organizations in the political imprints it left on Indian popular cinema, and yet we see that there are only a handful of films where the caste question is explored in depth along with the class question.

The reflections of this problem of not seeing caste questions by the Left with adequate importance can also be seen in Indian cinema. However, the Naxal movement starting from the late 1960s changed the structure and polity of several communist parties. The influx of new analytical models and the impetus to study Indian class-caste society instead of borrowing theoretical models from elsewhere, forced the naxal

movement to dismantle older understanding of caste and change it accordingly. The transition of the old communist dogma and the newly revitalized Indian communist theory can be seen in films as well. Consider for example, how films like *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Jana Aranya*(1976) or *Ganashatru* (1990) by Satyajit Ray are all from the vantage point of upper-caste but middle-class people struggling with economic and social problems. Among Satyajit Ray's films, the only film that directly addresses the caste-class question together is *Sadgati* (1981), which was produced by Doordarshan. In *Sadgati*, there is of course the iconic last few shots where the Brahmin man drags off the corpse of Dukhiya, a dalit peasant. The long shot of the Brahmin dragging the body and then over the hillock is almost similar to the extreme long shot *Dance Macabre* at the end of *The Seventh Seal* (1957). However, the most important sequence perhaps is the Brahmin explaining a passage from *Bhagvad Gita's* chapter on *SankhyaYog* or transcendental knowledge. While he explains the transitory nature of the body and the ineffable mysteries of the *atmā* to convince a man to remarry, the slow zoom out from a low angle with the Brahmin as a subject, and the quick cuts return to show Dukhiya sitting and sweating in hunger and pain. The tempo between the cuts keeps getting shorter and it finds its completion in an over the shoulder shot of the Brahmin asking Dukhiya about the progress of his work. In a way, this sequence is but a tell-tale symbolism as well as the depiction of pain behind the "theoretical Brahmin and empirical shudra" dynamic, as discussed by Gopal Guru in the context of educational institutes and pedagogy(Guru). Mrinal Sen's *Mrigaya* (1976) also explores the context of Adivasis, except that it bases its plotline during the British Raj. A casual look through the history would tell us that the same film without the context of the *Saahib* would make Sen not just an eyesore for the Indian State but also his contemporary parliamentary left with its Bhadrlok leaders, at least in Bengal. While it is true that a lot of this discourse of the left has to be seen dialectically where one question addressed reveals more problems related to the socio-political situation, yet the willful denial of caste question in Indian left politics as well as films cannot be ignored. The range of intellectual gymnastics it takes to prove the 'inherent addressal' of caste question through class question is a telling feature of the denial the former question has seen in Indian Left films.

In the context of Leftist cinema, the two filmmakers who tried to deal with it the most are perhaps John Abraham and Ritwik Ghatak. Of course, Abraham himself was greatly inspired by Ghatak. One of the most powerful films by Abraham is *AgraharathilOruKazhuthai*(1976)or *Donkey in a Brahmin Village*, which takes on a sharp but humorous political critique of Brahminism and its practice. The film faced enormous flak from Tamil Brahmins as well as mainstream press, so much so that its scheduled telecast on Doordarshan was cancelled ten years after its release. Apart from the politically aggressive plot, the film also has some of the most brilliant filmmaking experiments done in cinematic form with the context of cast in mind. The film visualizes, or rather, brings forth visually the journey of a Brahmin professor from robust eclecticism to despair and an acerbic pessimism. The sequence of killing of the older donkey at the beginning reminds us of lynching while the lynching of the younger donkey brings about a radical change to the entire cinematic language. From the moment the donkey starts getting worshipped, the screen itself becomes the site of Uma and Naryanaswamy's all-encompassing despair and pessimism, with almost onerous sequence of long shot temples, closeups of Uma and the professor and vast landscape around them. Much before the actual fire on the village, this projection of politically charged pessimism and an acerbic faithlessness sets the screen ablaze with a radical disdain not just against Brahmins there but the entire landscape designed to serve Brahminism. In this sense, it is truly a pioneer work of anti-caste cinema, because it explores audio-visually the historical nature of caste-atrocities against the phenomenological framework of an apolitical humanism of the Brahmin saviour. In a way, the film provides a mathematically precise argument to show that Brahminical values of life and living beings, of purity and pollution, and of power itself is based on the apotheosis of structure of casteism itself; what it cannot accept becomes vilified and killed, what it cannot understand gets assimilated into its doctrine of falsities, and against something so evil only a politically charged pessimism and fiery anger can sustain itself. The fire at the end is not just a "magic real" event or metaphor, or the *ressentiment* of the slaves, but the birthpang of new man through the purification of fire, purification as repeated by the voiceover repeatedly. A reflection of something similar is also seen in Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* (1965), where punishment seems

to be a repeating theme throughout the film. There are series of punishments for different reasons, punishment for inter-caste marriage is ostracism of the couple, the punishment for the Dalit man is being lynched to death, punishment for the runaway daughter is to commit suicide at the sight of the brother as a client in her makeshift brothel, ultimately the punishment for Ishwar is to see his own sister cut off her head and all promises of posterity (a symbolic castration from a mother figure). Ultimately it ends in a bleak landscape while marching towards an unknown future, once again an acerbic pessimism derived from a series of crimes committed by the characters as well as the society itself. The other important aspect is that Ghatak's cinematic language explores the emotional charge and a range of 'ownerless emotion' felt by characters, as well as history itself, and releases it upon the world (Biswas 156-158, 161-162). The bleakness of *Subarnarekha* and furthermore in *JuktiTokkoGoppo* (1977) does not make up for Bengali filmmakers otherwise inertness to address caste question, but it does add a clear engagement with it, without the need of intellectual acrobatics.

The argument that cannot be surmounted by occasional mention of Leftist films and filmmakers addressing caste question is this—just like the upper-caste communists had serious lack of engagement with caste in their understanding of Indian society, much of Leftist films had the same problem. As Teltumbde points out, the continued insistence of upper-caste communists to not see caste question as part of the socio-political and economic structure, but to defer it as part of the superstructure lead to a great schism that is yet to be mended. On the other hand, the repeated thwarting of efforts by Ambedkarite and anticaste activists from communist leaders lead them to close up to the class question as well (Teltumbde 110-113). The loss here is larger than individual progressive ideologies but of entire movements. Although in paper, and as praxis in some places, much of the contradictions are being addressed (whether or not answered) after the Naxalite turn in Marxist-Leninist politics, it still has to make a large effort in filmmaking practice. We can only imagine the loss we endure because of lack of formal, cinematic experimentations with caste. The problems of class, gender, race and sexuality had each given rise to several formal breakthrough in cinema, both at the level of production and at the level of cinematic language. Indian cinema had spent

much of its time looking away from caste, while it should have been experimenting with its affective and formal intervention on cinema.

Dalit Cinema, Ideology and Form

Let us first clear out particular sets of criticisms that may come against the term “Dalit Cinema”. Firstly, the people who seem to argue anything on the lines of an ‘apolitical art’ or ‘apolitical cinema’ since the turn of the last century generally have seen a steady decline, however, to say something of the sort in the context of India is at best extremely disturbing. A third-world country trying to place its art in front of the world cannot be apolitical, at best it can be something that is either supporting or oblivious to status-quo of power relations in the society as well as the world. Secondly, to say “X__ cinema”, where X is some minority community, is not to see the representation of X bodies on screen. It is rather a move to replace the logos or the vantage point of one particular ‘political species’ with another ‘political species’, and in case of India it would also add in the aspect of decolonisation. Thirdly, the X in “X__ cinema” is not just the political ambition to show X bodies or objectified images onscreen, but to show the art itself from the vantage point of that X member as a conscious being in history. The possibility of ‘Dalit Cinema’ is as much as Black Cinema, Queer Cinema or Feminist cinema. At least it should be seen as a long-drawn Film Movement, and at best it should be seen as the contradiction of an artform with the unraveling effort of a conscious species-being thrown in the world.

There is a problem, however, about usage of the term “Dalit Cinema’ without specific context. Caste is neither race, nor gender, nor sexuality or class for that matter; it is related to all these other categories but it is unique in its own formation. Let us consider a few cases of each in the following sections. Writing about Oscar Micheaux and Black American Cinema in general, critic Manthia Diawara says that the foremost engagement by Micheaux was his composition of shots with the Black subject in mind, and yet the struggle was not just to ‘show’ Black people onscreen but to challenge the production process of Hollywood itself(Diawara 5-7). Diawara however points out the struggle Black American Cinema had to go through to make space for itself, from Micheaux selling off his property to make his films to the cut throat competition to book slots in cinema halls, they had been molded and remade by the struggle and blockades

put against them. The films produced under this large banner called Black American Cinema did not subscribe to one singular political ideology either, they were in constant dialectical tension between “cultural nationalism of the Black Arts Movement and the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party”, thus proving that the film movement in general and Los Angeles School of Black Cinema became a site for a political exchange (Masilela 109-110). While the problem regarding involvement of the State, censorship and production challenges are somewhat similar to Dalit question in cinema, as in the US and India does not make subsidized viewership like France does for *cinema d’art et essai* by imposition of taxes on commercial cinema, and from an experiential or affective vantage point there are certain similarities between untouchability and bonded labour in India and slavery in America. However, most of these similarities are tangential or at best on a surface level. Caste is not race, nor does the logic of “independent cinema” of the US work in the context of Indian heterogeneous film production module. The screen and the audience immediately identify a Black actor from their skin, and if done correctly then their representation relates to the audience the conditions under which the story unfolds. In short, the primary concern for representation is to relate to the audience the vantage point of historical, economic and socio-political context of skin in cultural hierarchies. In the case of caste, this cannot happen. Caste societies function as “graded inequality”, as discussed by Ambedkar multiple times. A Dalit character can be played by upper-caste actors, and this has happened as a norm in India. The history of untouchability, the history of bonded labour, the history of rape and socio-economic ostracism does not translate onscreen through the colour of skin. Although Bollywood has often made sure to show poverty and professions of physical labour repeatedly through ‘Brownfacing’, earlier it was there in select films but has established itself as a norm in contemporary Neoliberal cine culture (Bhagchandani). Therefore, in the representation of caste it becomes difficult in a different way, and the problems way more complex.

In case of feminist film theory, or feminist intervention in film theory, we often see that it espouses characteristics that seem highly important to analyse caste as well. Cinema as language is born from materialistic relations of various technical and political-economic processes and internal contradictions, thus it also espouses certain

ideologies, not just onscreen but also at the level of production(Comolli 193-196). Patriarchy tries to establish itself in every nook and corner of political relations, one among them is visual pleasure and identification with the "gaze" onscreen. Mulvey argues that Hollywood narrative cinema posits the female body through the 'male gaze' and that the camera's positioning of the female subject in this very form is 'implicitly male' with a specific penchant for "fetishistic scopophilia", this is why Hollywood narrative cinema is suited to the spectatorial habit of the male audience(Mulvey 47-50). The bearer of phallus both onscreen and in the audience becomes the spectator, and the female becomes the objectified image. While this is a brilliant analysis and political usage of psychoanalysis (barring the criticism by Joan Copjec), it still fell short to further analyse the division of women across racial and other parameters. The work by bell hooks takes the criticisms of Diawara and Mulvey further ahead, and focuses on dissecting this scopophilia and problem of identification. hooks argues that Hollywood narrative cinema serves and produces the spectatorial pleasure tailor made for White male subjects, and the 'woman' generally is divided further as a category into an idealized White Woman (an example of Blonde women) and further peripheral Black women(hooks 100-101). However, this is not all that there is to it in her argument. In fact there are various other things that we can draw from her essay to help us understand the context of caste better. Consider for example the case of 'looking' as a defiance and site of contention in the context of Black people's history(hooks 95-96), much before the Black people could visit cinema halls, they were already ridden with the generational trauma of learning not to look at the White man and woman. As already stated before, caste is not slavery but has traces of it. In case of Dalits, looking was not the only act of defiance, but walking, casting a shadow, touching, eating and various other methods of contact were prohibited and punishable by Brahmins and Brahminism (some of them similar to the racist American society). Therefore, in case of Indian cinema, the Dalit man is moved to a peripheral condition as a stereotypical function, and the Dalit woman is further removed from it as a receptor of "gaze" than have any influential role in the narrative. While the criticism to Hollywood narrative cinema does not sit *in toto* with Indian cine culture, primarily because of its heterogeneous nature of its production (Vasudevan, *In the Centrifuge of History*) as well

as its spectatorship (Rajadhyaksha); nonetheless similar forms of fetishistic scopophilia exists in Indian spectatorial cultures as well. Thus, it is extremely important to dissect who does the popular Indian cinema identify as its audience, or more precisely, how does caste play a role in formation of a possible 'fetishistic scopophilia' within the ambit of Brahminism¹⁶.

Let us then try to explain Brahminical Patriarchy briefly. First, it is the form of patriarchy that tries to ensure the control of women and "lower castes" through systematic manipulation of society and political-economic power through endogamy. Thereby reproducing the conditions under which endogamous circles reproduce themselves, of course, with the ambition of marrying into a higher (sub-)caste and moving away from the "lower castes". Secondly, it is the control of sexuality with sets of rituals and norms, with the measures getting severe the higher you go up the pyramid of power relations. Lastly, it is an ideology and religious order which tries not only to produce an ideal version of mother-daughter by valorising and deifying the social values which repress female sexuality, but also produces mass consent among women to partake in the economy thereby reproducing the system through consent and coercion (Chakravarti 33). In short, it is the form of patriarchy that has its existence in the authoritative power of Brahminical texts and doctrines, ultimately to meet the demands of reproducing the conditions of production of the caste system and the order of division of labour among society, albeit through the exchange of women as quasi-commodities. Thus, in Brahminism, women are supposed to have an essential characteristic of *strisvabhava* or innate nature of women, which is but a sum total of lust, fickleness, greed and destructive impetus. Against this *strisvabhava* there is but only one cure in Brahminism, and that is *stridharma*; a set of rules of conduct and conditioning that is at first duty of the father and then the duty of the husband (Chakravarti 69-70). One of the essential characteristics that women needed to have according to Brahminical ideology is the idea of the '*Pativrata*' woman; that is, a woman solely dedicated to the husband (Chakravarti 70-71). There are several examples of both kinds of women who follow the code and are exemplars of the code of

¹⁶This must be noted here that it is at best a step towards an analysis, the more dense work regarding psychoanalytical terminology and Brahminical patriarchy cannot be achieved in such a short work.

conduct and cautionary tales of women who have violated the code of being *Pativrata*. The mythologies provide the narrative to justify the ideological goal of the *Pativrata* ideal, and it is to maintain the order of women and the castes in the hierarchies of things. The case of the Dalit woman therefore is further removed from the discourse, as she is both a receptor of violence by caste society in general and of sexual exploitation by upper-caste men. Dalit women are therefore doubly removed from the ambit of spectatorship and process of identification. To put it into perspective, we can revisit the brilliant analysis of ideology of Hindi cinema by Madhava Prasad. Prasad begins with an exposition of the contradictions between formal and real subsumption in his book, but more so his analysis of the feudal family romance (Prasad 65-67) and the unsettling contradiction of traditional and modern values shed a light on the ways in which gender roles become a constant site of anxiety for the State as well as the audience. An extension of this argument would be the comparison of traditional values of the 'good woman' and the unruly 'modern woman' trope with the ideals of *stridharma*. In short, it can be said that the popular Indian cinema, even with its heterogeneous mode of production and spectatorship, or with the unsettling contradiction between modern consumer and traditional morality, ultimately provides the modus for identification for only caste-elite males. We can see some reflections of it in contemporary films such as *Article 15* (2019), where the goal seems to be some kind of reformism and reaffirmation of State machinery and judiciary. However, the identification here is not for the Dalit women in the audience even if it is a Dalit women who are the receptors of violence in the narrative, but of an adventurous upper-caste police officer who finds it difficult to get justice within a casteist society situated in a village. The gaze here is once again of a global humanist, but more so of its sordid side-effect—orientalism. Right from the introduction to the village from the vantage point of Ayan (Ayushman Khurrana) to the final rescue of the missing Dalit girl, the entire plot seems to echo the orientalist narratives of lone hero saving the damsel in distress in some sultanate. The cinematic form continuously follows a light and dark colour palette to show the contrast between Dalits' and Ayan's own world, only merging once in a while. However, the film does not give the necessary amount of time to develop any of the Dalit characters and their knee-jerk reactions to complex problem, the screen time focuses on solving the puzzle of

interpersonal relationships and bureaucratic jigsaws then develop characters. The cinematic form itself is a telling reference of the logic of mainstream cinema, and its ideological goal to rope in the Dalit question back into the ambit of State machinery and legal justice. There are few films that bring in the question of Dalit women in popular cinema, and unfortunately it cannot get rid of its humanist and caste-elitist doctrines. The Dalit man cannot identify with the spectatorial logic of mainstream popular cinema nor can the Dalit woman place herself in it. Perhaps a more trained Dalit feminist and Lacan-Millerian can do justice to the problems mentioned above. The fetishistic gaze is not seen uncritically by women and more specifically Dalit women, some of the proof lies in the articles of this issue itself.

We can take cues from Queer Theory and Queer cinema in the context of caste. It does not need special mention to differentiate between sexuality and caste. However, to put it into context, without addressing the specific case of Brahminical patriarchy, without addressing caste as an injunction on the choice of love and sexual partners, there cannot be an independent Indian queer theory. Queer Theory, however, has much to teach us regarding some of its radical steps, and to teach some of the things anti-caste activists and filmmakers ought not to do. Firstly, queer movement in circa 1980s-90s in America (and Europe) took a different radical step than its predecessor movements in terms of its political vision. They decided to not wait around for them to be “accepted” in so-called mainstream society, and to overturn the very idea of “normal” or normative heterosexuality as something abnormal in society. Secondly, they refused to make excuses or be apologetic about the politics of desire and body involved in queer identity. It seemed unlikely for activists, thinkers, and members of the community of that era to discount the repressive nature of the State and society on the many aspects and politics of desire (Nowlan 3-5). The politics and progressive aggression in the movement also influenced queer cinema in turn. Thus, queer cinema right now professes a kind of open yet firm political demand from the independent as well as mainstream filmmaking. Film theorist Bob Nowlan points (reflecting Michele Aaron) out that queer films can be films that are seen, directed, produced, written or identified by queer people; so much so that there can be interpretations of characters that seem queer onscreen on an otherwise normative popular narrative cinema (Nowlan 5-7).

Queer cinema today is identified as queer if it is written, produced, directed, acted or portrays queer people. At the same time, almost as a contradiction, it is also considered queer if queer people watch the film and analyse it 'against the grain' as was meant by the authors (Nowlan 10-11). In a way, Queer theory here celebrates the authority of the reader as well as the author, often as a site of contradiction. Lastly, Nowlan also says that certain film genres carry out an extension of the normalised sexuality by including several other possibilities beyond the normative. Genres like horror, crime fiction, documentaries, science-fiction, avante-garde film and other independent films often fall in this category. While queer theory and queer cine culture seems to have developed an open yet disciplined struggle for representation on Cinema, it must be noted that several of these arguments veer around the bourgeoisie logic of reformism or inclusion in bourgeoisie democracy. Another aspect that is important here is that struggles for queer politics in this nation is also related to the materialist conditions of *being* and formations of caste-society. Caste is neither a gender nor a sexuality, but it governs both with its intrinsic networks of power in a caste-society. The same logic that might work for queer theory will not help us much in theorising Dalit cinema, nor will the same queer theoretical model work for queer cinema here in India. What can be said, at best, is that tremendous lessons can be drawn from all these parallel struggles. Perhaps by a dialectical method of short-circuiting one with many and many with one, we may arrive at a primary contradiction in case of Dalit cinema.

As of yet, we have looked into different film theories and political movements to understand that "Dalit Cinema" or "Dalit-Bahujan Cinema" is a completely logical and rational term. It is as sanguine as any other minority's struggle for power. However, there are some limitations that are specific to Dalit Cinema. Let us try to sum up some of these problems here,

1. Caste is not race. The simple change in skin colour onscreen cannot tell the audience the caste politics itself. At best it can be symbolic or mnemonic reference of the caste struggle, but it would be an inference rather than definite political conviction if it is not relayed out in the story or the plot. This is also a loophole through which Indian Cinema has often avoided mentioning caste while portraying orphans, 'poor people' and 'common man' right from its early

phase of Raj Kapoor directed film as *Awarai* (1951) and the “Angry Young Man” genre of films like *Zanjeer* (1971), *Deewar* (1975), *Kaala Patthar* (1979) et cetera.

2. The surname alone might not be able to tell someone of their caste either. Similar surnames can share upper or middle or lower caste positions across the landscape of India. In addition to that, a local caste surname might be totally new to people from two provinces away. Without direct political mention and *motivated* cinematic image, the logic of inference is a copout from dealing with the problems of caste society.
3. Dalit Cinema, if is used then can be ascribed to films directed, produced, written or acted by Dalit individuals. The only problem here is that it would feed into the logic of liberal-bourgeoisie cine culture and authorship practices. Cinema is neither painting, poetry, novel or play that can be brought to existence by one person alone. It is always done with a collection of people. To give primary importance to director, producer or writer and therefore calling it “Dalit Cinema” would be reducing the possibilities it can achieve. Then it will become one more tokenism in the long line of tokenisms that Capitalism, especially neo-liberalism and Indian Caste-Capitalism is so fond of.
4. One of the primary problems in the path of making films against casteism is that films require huge labour and related costs of production. Suraj Yengde’s work on Caste-Capitalism shows us that there is a great divide between Dalit people’s venture into capitalism against the already established and biased presence of Caste-Capital (Yengde, *Caste Matters* 193-195). The same logic applies to production of films as well. To make Dalit Cinema, while trying to keep the political sharpness alive onscreen is a huge risk that can only be taken by producers who would like to invest on it. The role of ideology is as strong in the things represented onscreen as much it is in the production process of the film, thus granting cinema a site of constant struggle (Comolli 153-154, 167-168). Therefore, without a positive support from anatagonistic anti-Brahminical bourgeoisie (regional or national) or active organisational crowd funding while its production process, Dalit Cinema will face severe discrimination at the open hands of market. There are of course examples of several films which were picked

up by large production houses, but only when critically acclaimed in different Film Festivals. Thus, Dalit Cinema, is a work that is as political-economic struggle and ideological struggle at the same time.

5. As Suraj Yengde has pointed out regarding discussion on *Sairat* (2016) that “Arguably, *Sairat* shocks audiences through its stark social realism, not by projecting a positive Dalit subjectivity. But why does Dalit assertion in cinema remain elusive? The answer lies partly in (1) the demographic under-representation of Dalits on the screen; and (2) censorship of caste as a ‘sensitive’ issue by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). By rejecting films that depict Dalit individuality and Dalit views that are not shaped by the hegemonic narrative of the dominant castes, the CBFC continues to manifest the casteist nature of autocratic demagoguery. In *Papilio Buddha*, Cherian was forced to cut dialogue and scenes that depicted Dalit disagreement with the dominant-caste narratives about Dalits because the counter voices from below are seen as a danger and so are suppressed” (Yengde, *Dalit Cinema*). The notoriety of Indian Censor Board is quite well known among film scholars and especially among Dalit independent filmmakers. Barring the painstaking and Kafkaesque process of application for censor certificates, virtually anything that is even slightly falling under the broad terms of “objectionable” and “inciting” can be turned down by the board. Several independent filmmakers therefore choose to produce or direct films specifically made for Film Festivals than a wider reach of commercial audiences. If at all their film is done in some way, they are then compelled to release it to some paid website for a wider viewership or release it for free on any digital platform. Dalit Cinema, thus, becomes an anti-censorship and anti-capitalist project in its ideological process, at least on the production floor, whether or not in its narrative content.

While these above problems are there, it still must be acknowledged that Dalit or minority community Filmmakers making films should be considered as Dalit Cinema or Dalit-Bahujan Cinema. However, it must be acknowledged as well, that the term then isolates the formal labour and engagement of other people involved in the production of filmmaking; which is another way of saying that it then follows another bourgeoisie-

liberal logic of “authority of the author”. It would thus be easier to acknowledge Dalit and Bahujan filmmakers as *Auteurs* than put their entire film in one bracket following the caste-society bourgeoisie discourse.

Dalit Auteur and Anti-Caste Cinema

Introduced earlier in the context of French New Wave, the term *Auteur* is a reference to directors as authors of films rather than agents who complete a given script of an already pre-ordained filmmaking practice. While Andre Bazin’s argument was specifically a critique in favour of directorial vision, Andrew Sarris on the other hand makes a critique against such a “Ptolemaic constellation’ of categorisation. Sarris points out the three problems in the European auteur theory as the problem of the director’s technical competence, stylistic experimentation and inner meaning in the film. Furthermore, he also points out that all of these can be circumnavigated because filmmaking itself is a joint and collective effort. Although the auteur theory is not a conclusive argument to polarise between the figure of the director as a function or an all-encompassing author, we can argue here that modern auteur theory can be summarised as having less to do with technical competence and more concentrated on stylistic consistency, as well as acknowledging the challenges of the director within a cine-industry without deploying the bourgeoisie diktat of authority of the author. In addition to that, the film production process in India is heterogeneous in nature and does not abide by the logic of one singular or a set of monolithic production companies. Therefore, a Dalit auteur is one who can work within the challenging conditions of Indian cine-industry, while simultaneously establishing his own manner of stylistic and conceptual imprints on the films. Taking Yengde’s argument further, I would suggest that Nagraj Manjule is an example of a Dalit auteur who has established himself within Indian cine culture while navigating the difficulties of producing films which directly confronts the caste system. Manjule’s films like *Fandry* or *Sairat* were both taken up by the Zee Studios, but the initial work and filmmaking was done by him. Manjule’s struggle with censorship and trying to circumnavigate it. Dalit auteurs are not just a product of cine-industry but born out of constant state of anxiety that exists in the everyday life of Dalits.

There is then a related category that needs to be spelled out in the context of caste-society and Indian cinema. The immediate materialistic nature of struggle of Dalit people is different from the other marginalised castes, or the context of tribal people and of Muslim identity, and yet the struggle against Brahminism and the specific nature of caste-capitalism combines these struggles quite so often. The context of gender and sexuality also share similarities with that of caste. As Uma Chakravarti has pointed out, no struggle against the diktat of *stridharma* deployed by Brahminical patriarchy is possible without addressing the specific nature of patriarchy that is inherent to this land (Chakravarti 69-70). No struggle for sexuality is possible without addressing the repressive nature of Brahminism in the context of gender roles and preordained stations within heteronormative society. There are films and filmmakers who often are politically sharp enough to critique these conditions, and yet are not dalits. This exercise of honestly addressing the multifaceted repressive nature of Brahminism and caste-capitalist exploitation in films can thus be put under the broad banner of Anti-Caste Cinema.

Taking cues from Meena Dhanda's work on the philosophy of anticasteism, specifically the challenge of inclusivity that is inherent in anticaste struggle and the demand for a common fraternity to all repressed groups, we can visualise a filmmaking style that challenges the notions of Brahminism in both its ideological, repressive and political-economic categories. We can also take lessons from analysis of ideologies of Indian cinema and Indian society by scholars as Madhava Prasad, Dipankar Gupta and several other scholars to formulate an understanding of the common ideological trend of Indian political and cine-society, and act as a challenge to it. The combined effort is not just to reach a level of inclusivity but to posit a joint 'formal' challenge to the logic of Indian caste-societal praxis.

This part is especially important to me (perhaps others as well), both as a film scholar, and as a Dalit scholar. To reduce the cinematic medium to the mere logic of bodily representation is reducing its possibilities. Cinema is a form that is like no other, and still is one of the most revolutionary art forms even a century and more after its genesis. Consider for example Chaitanya Tamhane's film *Court* (2014), the film itself has Veera Sathidar in the lead role, he was a noted Ambedkarite activist and Dalit voice

against oppression, while Chaitanya Tamhane is not a Dalit. Should the struggle of the person who dies in the manhole while doing a scavenging job in the narrative framework of the film be not treated as the tale of oppression? Should the Pawar surname of the dead worker and him being from the Koli caste outdo the death, humiliation and injustice faced by him (later his wife)? The 'grocery list' format of division will reduce this film into an atomic identity that will reduce the possibility the film itself produces. The film attacks caste system directly, and takes the modern audience somewhere where very few people had wanted to look— the harrowing nature of judiciary itself (which the caste-society and liberal bourgeoisie pretends to be a transcendental platform away from caste-society) when it comes to Dalits and Bahujans and working classes, in other words, the absolute lack of respite for the *les damnés de la terre* or the 'wretched of the Earth'. The rarity of wide angle shots which could have come as a moment of respite for the audience, the claustrophobic boxing of characters while being cross-questioned, and the stillness of the camera without moving from the dias are all formal examples of how the cinematic craft itself becomes an anticaste weapon. There were many courtroom dramas before, but this film explores the camera movement, angles as well as the *mise en scene* to explore the harrowing condition of people in a space where they are supposed to get justice. Another example would be Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018), while Rajnikanth is not a Dalit, the filmmaker is Dalit. However, beyond the narrative content of the film, the most subversive and ante-homogeneous shot would be the last one. In a world that is suffering from the neoliberal malady of droneshots, which is but a vantage point of a cartographer God or a disembodied Capitalist (a modern Columbus) disciplinarian, the drone shot at the end of *Kaala* is a justice. It has the geometrical symmetry of a *chakra* or circles within circles, but the introduction of sequence of colours overpowering the centre with black, red and blue symbolises the ultimate victory of the repressed over the brittle centre. This vision of breaking the monotony, conservative fantasy and the disciplinarian's lust for symmetry, such as in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) has been done repeatedly throughout many films, and this particular scene achieves some of that as well. Though the machismo and masculine overtures often overpowers the filmic narrative, yet one can see Ranjith's struggle as well as his skill in his filmic language and establishing himself as an auteur

within the ambit of mainstream cinema. Vidhu Vincent's *Manhole* (2014) explores the horror of manual scavenging jobs still done across India while the government denies its existence. In her film, the frames often reveal very little of the background and feels symptomatic with the claustrophobic lives of Dalits and Bahujans in a caste-society, which finds its ultimate injustice in the long end of a disembodied hole away from the camera. The disembodied hole at the end is not a Platonic tunnel-vision of ignorance, but centuries of injustice thrust upon people by placing them against a toxic and breathless crater—a literal repression of a people. There are many such films with brilliant scenes and filmic images, and they show the possibilities of cinema as an art form that can be turned into a political weapon. It is not an aesthetic exercise but a political act against agents of power and repression. We can look at history of similar projects in Soviet Films, or Latin American “third cinema,” as well as brilliant works of defiance like “Aesthetics of Hunger” by Glauber Rocha. To try to find in cinema just the basic checklist of Dalit director or actor is reducing the possibilities of cinema, as well as discounting the ideological crimes that can be played with tokenism by caste-capitalist agents.

While cinematic form is an absolute necessity to explore in filmmaking, the other end also holds an equal amount of truth. It does not matter if one agrees or disagrees with filmmaking lessons from great directors. It does not matter if it is an aesthetic masterpiece exploring the limits of cinema as a neo-Godard from India, or a chamber drama mastermind as Bergman, or practice resistance in cinematography like Bresson. Without political sharpness, honest critique and organised truth against a regime of false images, anticaste cinema cannot exist. Mere subversive elements in films does not qualify much as an anticaste cinema, because it is after all, an escapist tendency that has been practiced by caste-Hindus for the longest of time. Anticaste cinema, therefore, should be rebellious in its images as well as its representation of marginalised people's history and their lives. But most of all, anticaste cinema cannot be an endless litany of images and narrative logic of toothless liberal humanism.

Lastly, we must also keep in mind the political ontology offered by the caste system, and the relationship it has with the audio-visual narrative device of cinema. For the most part, Indian film theorists have hitherto analysed the language, production

and distribution of cinema and its formal structures, or its ideological formations. While those are the most important aspects of modern film studies, one subtle aspect is missing. That is the political ontology of cinema when it comes to Indian viewers. We have hitherto discussed that caste turns people into individuals, which is why Indian capitalism itself has a caste character and Indian modernity too is a site of contradiction between Capitalist version of *Individualist Subjectivism* and *Dividual Traditionalism*. We have also alluded (footnote 5) to the problem of caste being part of the everyday encounter of the people (*verfallen*) and the idea of a completed life upon death (an inauthentic *Dasein*). We must therefore look a bit at the problem of Indian cinema and its relationship with the caste system. We understand that images, even if they move through time are *ontic* in nature, that is, they only point to a *thing* and are explanatory in nature. Cinematic images, like photographic images, are motivated in nature, and are *ontic* in nature only pointing towards a concept of an ontological position. Painting or similar artforms have a distinct trace of the artist in them, with every brushstroke and with every moulding. On the other hand, as Bazin claims, photographic image has a “mummy complex” where a thing is preserved and embalmed in the image forever, in addition to that, the mechanical process removes the specific imprint of the artist and makes it seem almost like a natural occurrence¹⁷. The mausoleum quality of photographic image has been also explored deeply by thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, John Berger and various others. What is important to note is that the photographic image moving through time gives us a surrogate vantage point, thus freeing us from real space and time. Cinematic image thus becomes radically experiential. A critique of it is also true, that this above idea comes from a quasi-Christian faith on the image, and that images are always subject to manipulation by the contemporary political-economic and social formations. Cinematic images are ideological because they are shot, made, spliced, rearranged to convey different ‘meanings’ in the realm of audio-visual arts. While an analysis of the ideological characteristics in films and film production is perhaps the best possible way to do a materialistic interpretation of cine-culture, it still lacks a crucial category in it. Analysis

¹⁷ Consider for an example that the photographer is not responsible for individual dots in the DPI or every individual pixel in the digital photograph.

of ideology by film critics in India mostly reduces the specificity of Indian capitalism into a traditional view of class contradictions. Perhaps it is because Marxian thought provides the ontological positioning of the class alone, of course, with other categories present in them, or perhaps because caste-ism has not been experienced as a socio-political and empirical (“objectively really real”) reality by the upper-caste South Asian academia¹⁸. In either case, what gets left out is the specificity of Indian cine-culture and socio-political process. This is why I would like to argue that the Indian audience, primarily caste Hindus, are themselves or *in-itself* suspended in an inauthentic *Dasein*. To be precise, it is where the population is deeply immersed in casteism in its everyday mundane realpolitik as well as finds their goal completed in the absolution granted at the teleological end of successfully completing caste-duties until death. In addition to that, reality of the world, encountered as a conscious being is constantly negated as a realm of illusions, namely *Maya*. The automatic aversion of *Maya* creates this suspended state of experience which accepts neither the angst of death nor does it experience life as an individual. For the Indians, I would like to argue, cinema is a *Maya* that is the site of moral and ideological contradiction. We can see the tug and pull of these contradictions often in cine-culture. Popular Cinema is often demanded to become allegorical and at the same time as something that corrupts the people, the images are revered and at the same time vilified, actors often become substitute deities and also become projected public enemies; these and many more contradictions are quite aptly described through careful analysis by other scholars. What I would like to add is that the ‘ideological subject’, ergo the Indian audience, themselves experience the world as a suspended category of quasi-reality. This partially explains the reason why such a large audience in India often finds it hard to make a clear division between the narrative logic of cinema and the empirical reality of the world. Perhaps it is among the few primal horrors that were left out by Indian film critics and thinkers, an abyss that cannot be looked at without winking or shying away. It is not that the Indian audience is “immature” as was claimed by filmmakers and critics in the past about Indian film

¹⁸ Here I would like to add to Ashish Rajadhakshya’s point about “the category ‘Indian’ may no longer be limited to national boundaries” by reiterating it in a different manner. Caste is now a global problem, wherever Indians are and wherever the screen selects and deselects a set of signifiers. Just as Ambedkar warned us once.

culture, but the fact that life itself is seen as a suspended animation— Cinema then becomes as “real” as the suspended animation of life itself. Therefore, anticaste cinema has an injunction on it, an injunction to show the truth as closely, empirically and formally possible, both with its narrative and its cinematic forms.

Brief Overview of the Articles

This issue has brought together many different works of scholars and thinkers from various parts of India. There are works that look at specific history of a cine-industry (like Neelotpal’s work), or a philosophical problem within the context of cine-praxis terminologies (like Rahee’s work on *Prayoga*). There are also papers that specifically look at different problems and limits of representation regarding aspects of caste and gender. I shall try to briefly introduce some of the papers here, which of course, would leave much of it unsaid if not read together with the specific articles.

Rahee Punyashloka’s article on the Brahmanical discourse of ‘Cinema of *Prayoga*’ is a brilliant attempt at unraveling the problems that an alternative theoretical model for cine-culture carries within the context of caste-society. We often find that several concepts borrowed from Indian philosophy are thrown around without isolating the specific formal problems that were revealed in them, as well as in a society that has changed its discourse on socio-political formations. A scholar of Aristotle from the West does not need to hide Aristotle’s deplorable view on slavery when talking about *Nichomachean Ethics* or the fact that he was an individual at the upper ring of slave-society. However, most South Asian academics seem to be weighed down by the double burden of anticolonial thought and keeping traditional caste-class privileges and gendered worldview alive. The contradiction in them has created a plethora of works that are neither true in their own discipline nor an experimental attempt in speculative philosophy. A recent book by Prachand Praveer tries to read cinema through *Rasā*, but completely ignores the inherent discriminatory ontological positions of the subject and related histories, where some castes are allowed some *rasā* and the others are not. Even stalwart scholars as Arindam Chakrabarti¹⁹ made such a critical error by completely ignoring the caste imperative in *rasātātvā* or *rasā* theory. The same is true for “thinkers”

¹⁹ “Refining the Repulsive: Toward an Indian Aesthetics of the Ugly and the Disgusting” published in 2018, in the book *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*.

and “practitioners” of *Prayogā*. Without addressing the inherent lacuna in a reading that comes from Brahminical texts from several centuries ago is not only a political dishonesty but also is dishonest to the very (*chintan*) thought one is trying to promote. It has the same passion and rigour as pointing out that indeed we are the light of Asia by burning down one’s village to the ground. Without the political clarity and addressing the contradictions that a theory itself produces, it will eventually fall back on the orientalist logic of *mystic* Orient devoid of rational thought. Rahee’s work highlights such contradictions in a courageous yet redemptive manner, his writing style too is that of a convinced philosopher rather than a complainant. Neelotpal’s study of NTR’s iconisation and the influence of Kamma community in shaping the Telugu film industry is an astute article exploring the different trends of non-Brahmin ascendancy in regional film production and distribution. It also opens up doors to understand the logic behind the “Pan Indian-isation” of Telugu cinema since the success of *Bahubali*, and its inherent contradictions. While Deepthy’s work is a broad overview of Tamil cinema spanning over two decades, most writers here have touched on Tamil cinema and its history of struggle against caste-society. Milton Raja’s work on Tamil cinema explores the formal cinematic images as well as subtle folk-cultural and non-Brahminical traditions in narrative cinema. Milton’s analysis of colours in *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Kaala* (2018) is an analysis of formal experimentations by a Dalit auteur²⁰ in an otherwise mainstream narrative cinema. His arguments about non-Brahmin cultural praxis coming alive onscreen as a subversive and rebellious act is also a good exploration of narrative traits in cinema, which is strictly not trying to analyse just plot points. Prachy’s work on Tamil cinema, however, takes on a more critical theory approach by introducing terms as “*savarna gaze*”. Whether or not the term itself finds its reified or crystalised foundation within the ambit of Lacanian usage of “gaze” is not the issue here, rather the primary importance is to focus on the ways in which the historical nature of caste-capitalism has shaped the aesthetic vision in India. We understand that the convention of framing in cinema²¹ owes a lot to Bourgeois

²⁰ Though he does not use the term himself.

²¹ As we know square or rectangular frames in cinema are conventions borrowed from European bourgeoisie aesthetics (paintings). It has little to do with geometric proportions or being able to see better in rectangular frames.

aesthetics, or the way in which camera is considered “implicitly male” in Hollywood narrative cinema, in a similar manner there needs to be newer discourse on the specific nature of Brahminical aesthetics that overflows into cinema from all around us. Prachy’s article also delves deeper into the formations of caste while exploring “reification” and reclamation of DBA identity in cinema. That is, a practice where there is a recognition of the specificity of identity without falling too much into an essentialist dogma regarding the same. Tanuja’s analysis of desire and sexuality in an otherwise anticaste film is remarkable because of her arguments as well as varied theoretical premises explored in her work in order to reach her own argument. Tanuja focuses on the ways in which desire, especially desire for the other which often does not follow the dogma of the societal apparatus, is show onscreen through exploration of spaces. Much like Johann Huizinga’s notion of “play” as a decisive factor in evolution of human species, desire here is related both through rebellious confrontation of repressive forces in society, as well as play of spaces, camera angles, cuts and play of desire itself. All the articles are varied and inclusive in their engagement with the caste question, but at the same time expects the current discourse to go further ahead in an otherwise banally indifferent or actively conservative academia.

Conclusion

While this issue may have some limitations because of certain editing and linguistic challenges, the issue focuses on different aspects of the relationships of caste and Indian cinema. There are several articles that engage deeply with specific problems in the field, while the others are broader and open up the space for further engagement in future. My own Introduction to the current issue is rather a broader analysis of the relationships between caste and cinema, and there is very little I could introduce in terms of individual works. Partly, because this issue has various articles from different fields which makes it such a wide field, and partly is because of the shortcomings on my part as a scholar. The individual articles, even with their limitations, have opened up a field for me that I had previously not thought about even as a film scholar. I would therefore earnestly request our dear readers to do better justice to the articles than I could do myself. Lastly, instead of an optimistic note that generally ends academic articles looking towards a brighter future, I would like to do the exact opposite considering the

deplorable state of conditions of Dalits and other minorities in the country, the horrors of economic exploitation, the rising gap between the rich and the poor and the constant state of socio-political anxiety around us that Indian narrative cinema only partially explores and film theorists rarely discuss in detail. I would rather like to state that the current state of academic engagement regarding limits of representation (of the oppressed) in films, and experimentation of film forms against caste-society, points towards the fact that the present is bleak with only a shimmer of hope once in a while. Perhaps, with regular engagements, such as this issue does, at least in the theoretical front, it might become bleak but with a difference in future.

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