Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2024, No.1
October 2024
ISSN 2229-3388

Contested Reforms: Dalit Women, the Public Sphere and the Cinematic Assertion of Caste

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ABSTRACT

The representation of Dalit women in early Indian cinema has been closely associated with broader issues of caste, gender, and social hierarchies, reflecting a complex interplay of reformist ideals and conventional cultural norms. This analysis, based on Nancy Fraser's critique of Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, highlights the ways in which cinematic narratives from the 1930s to 1960s both challenged and reinforced dominant caste ideologies. Rather than dismantling existing biases, these films frequently idealised Dalit women's suffering and submission and, hence, consolidated existing social structures. Situated within wider historical contexts marked by colonialism and nationalism, this article also critiques how Hindi didactic literature of the colonial era equally contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the shaping of cinematic portrayals of Dalit women. The paper contends that early Indian cinema worked not only as a mirror to society but also as an active participant in solidifying caste-based discrimination, complicating the progressive narratives of social reform.

Keywords: Representation, Dalit Women, Indian cinema, Public Sphere, Didactic Literature

The Indian cinema from the 1930s to the 1960s has been recognised and esteemed as a vibrant medium for societal change, situating itself at the crossroads of artistic expression and social advocacy during a pivotal era in Indian contemporary history. Both popular narratives and academic examination have found that the reformist aspirations of this period, as filmmakers deliberately addressed issues like untouchability, women's liberation, and social equity. Nonetheless, beneath the surface of what appeared to be progressive, there laid a considerably more complex and often troubling history—marked by ideological containment, selective inclusion, and persistent patterns of exclusion. This paradox is notably evident in the representational politics concerning Dalit women, whose presence in media and public discourse was both recognised and constrained.

This article aims to explore the complexities and nuances present in the representations of Dalit women within the realms of cinema and literature during the formative years of Indian cinema. This analysis engages with Nancy Fraser's foundational critique of the Habermasian public sphere—a notion that, on the surface, seems to offer a framework for democratic engagement and rational discourse, yet in reality is frequently marred by exclusions related to gender, class, and, particularly within the Indian context, caste. Fraser's intervention offers valuable insights for examining Indian cultural production, as it questions the belief that simply creating opportunities for dialogue or representation ensures true inclusivity. Instead, she reveals how prevailing groups persist in dictating the conditions of involvement, thereby sustaining their cultural and social dominance.

Utilising this theoretical framework, the paper examines the disparity between the reformist discourse of early Indian film and its actual representational practices. The prevailing narratives created by upper-caste, predominantly male, filmmakers were influenced by a complex interaction of colonial legacies, emerging

nationalist ideologies, and the changing expectations of the urban middle class. Films claiming to tackle social issues such as untouchability and caste inequality often focused on the moral dilemmas and redemptive arcs of privileged characters, while portraying Dalit women as mere objects of compassion or symbols of pain. The agency of Dalit women was seldom acknowledged or examined in such texts. Their suffering and endurance were exploited to bolster the perceived compassion or progressiveness of dominant social groupings, rather than to disrupt or contest systematic structures.

A similar trend can also be seen in the literary and instructional manuals of the era, as the 'ideal woman' was perpetually conceived as upper-caste, domestic, and subordinate, while Dalit women were either marginalised, stigmatised, or entirely excluded. The concept of social reform was consequently filtered via prevailing cultural ideals, which aimed to integrate, discipline, or control the subaltern subject instead of facilitating authentic transformation. Even when Dalit women were afforded narrative space, their experiences were frequently articulated in manners that reinforced prevailing power structures—depicting suffering as redemptive and inclusion as contingent upon the obliteration of difference.

This paper analyses the flaws of early Indian cinema's social reform initiative while emphasising the pressing necessity for innovative theoretical and creative frameworks that prioritise Dalit women's voices, experiences, and agency. It advocates for a progressive methodology in the examination of film and cultural history, emphasising the significance of representation politics and dedicating itself to envisioning more inclusive and transformational futures.

The Exclusionary Public Sphere: Context

Jurgen Habermas's influential concept of the public sphere is often cited as a crucial idea for comprehending the rise of democratic modernity. Habermas conceptualised the public sphere as a space within social life where private individuals unite as equals to participate in rational-critical discourse, thereby moulding public opinion and impacting the trajectory of governance. This envisioned space was fundamentally intended to be open, accessible, and devoid of hierarchy—a domain where social status, wealth, gender, or other distinguishing factors could be overlooked in the quest for rational discourse and shared advancement.

Nevertheless, from the beginning, academia has challenged Habermas's formulation for neglecting or downplaying the exclusions that were, in reality, fundamental to this particular space. Nancy Fraser, in her influential work, compellingly illustrates that the purported 'bourgeois public sphere' was never as inclusive or egalitarian as it to be. She contends that important demographics—particularly women, the working class, and, in the Indian context, lower-caste and Dalit communities—were systematically excluded. Engagement was governed by both nuanced and explicit mechanisms of social control, including standards of communication, decorum, and cultural assets, which favoured the perspectives and experiences of a particular minority group. During the colonial period in India, this minority comprised upper-caste, Anglicised, urban men who not only defined the parameters of discussion within social reform movements but also dominated the growing fields of print culture, journalism, and literature.

This pattern of exclusion significantly influenced the development of public life in India. The social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—often hailed as progressive—were primarily carried and influenced by upper-caste elites who, despite their commitment to inclusivity, often overlooked or neglected the unique needs and aspirations of Dalit women. Rather, their endeavours frequently focused on integrating the marginalised into a polished conception of national advancement, which unintentionally bolstered prevailing hierarchies.

The early Hindi film industry, was a reflection of these societal and cultural domains, and profoundly intertwined with this framework of exclusion. The individuals involved in filmmaking, including scriptwriters, producers, and critics, shaped the industry by infusing it with the values, biases, and concerns characteristic of the urban, upper-caste middle class. Their contributions, although occasionally aimed at reform, often mirrored the hopes and anxieties of their surrounding environment. The resulting representational landscape was characterised by the filtering, management, or erasure of the experiences of Dalit women and other subaltern groups, all to conform to narratives of redemption and modernity that prioritised dominant identities. Consequently, the cinematic 'public sphere' operated not so much as a democratic arena of diversity but rather as a reflection and magnifier of prevailing disparities, all while presenting itself as a means of national and social advancement.

Caste, Gender and Reformist Discourse

The colonial encounter in India was marked by transformative era characterised by continuing legal, economic and educational changes that reshaped the nation's social landscape. The British brought new bureaucratic and administrative systems to India, which marked the beginning of Western-style professions and changes to the law. The goal of organising legal frameworks in a systematic way and getting rid of certain traditional practices was to help society move forward and become more modern. The changes that were talked about earlier were closely related to the establishment of institutions that taught English and the rise of a vibrant print culture. Because of this, a new group of educated city-dwellers, known as the urban intelligentsia mostly hailed from capitals like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

Within the rising public sphere, women's issues gained prominence, mostly because of the work of well-known social reformers. For example, Rammohan Roy was very against sati and fought for women's property rights, making the issue of women's status a top priority for social progress (Chatterjee 116–19). Mahatma Gandhi then also stressed how important it was for women to be part of the nationalist movement, saying that they inherited the qualities of self-sacrifice, patience, and moral endurance were necessary for the country's freedom (Rege 34; Sarkar 182–83). Even though this progress was clear, the main focus was still on raising the status of upper-caste women, whose involvement in education, social organisations, and nationalist politics was seen as a sign of modernity.

Dalit women, on the other hand, were mostly left out of the benefits of these reforms and of being involved in public life (Gupta 5; Rege 36–39). This is because they were at the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Their exclusion wasn't just a coincidence; it was caused by structural factors. The priorities and concerns of upper-caste groups shaped the conversation about social reform. Gandhi's ideas changed a lot of things, but they often framed the oppression of Dalit women as a sign of their virtue and strength, focusing on their suffering instead of the systems that caused it (Rege 37–38). Upper-caste women were seen as powerful reformers, while Dalit women were often seen as needing discipline and guidance or as objects of upper-caste sympathy. They were rarely seen as agents, thinkers, or political actors in their own right (Gupta 5; Chatterjee 124).

Didactic Literature and the Construction of Dalit Femininity

Colonial Hindi didactic literature—comprising etiquette guides, home manuals, and moral treatises—was instrumental in shaping the archetype of the ideal woman as upper-caste, domestic, and dependent. Dalit women were either completely excluded or mentioned solely in connection with marginalized professions (*chamarin*, *dhobhin*, *dai*, etc.), acting as contrasts to upper-caste respectability. These instructional guides propagated prejudices that legitimized the social and marginalization of Dalit women, depicting them as morally dubious and

socially perilous. The notion of 'femininity' became inextricably linked to caste, as only upper-caste women were perceived as genuinely capable of embodying household values. Simultaneously, the economic contributions of Dalit women, vital to upper-caste homes, were diminished and more vilified.

The instructional texts in question failed to incorporate Dalit women into the notion of the ideal, while simultaneously contributing to the formation and propagation of stereotypes that rationalized and perpetuated their exclusion from the spheres of respectability and femininity. The manuals repeatedly advised their readers to avoid establishing intimate relationships with women from lower castes, portraying them as potential sources of moral and ritual contamination, as well as possible catalysts for social unrest. The depiction of Dalit women as assertive, strong, or sexually liberated sharply contrasts with the attributes typically linked to upper-caste women, which include submissiveness, modesty, and religious devotion (Orsini 156; Rege 65). The message was clear: the connection between caste and gender was profoundly linked, and the stability of the household depended on the oppression and marginalization of Dalit women.

It is worth noting that the economic contributions of Dalit women played a vital role in the daily functioning of upper-caste households. In their capacities as washerwomen, sweepers, midwives, and manual scavengers, these individuals were persistently situated within the private spheres of the household and undertook essential yet frequently overlooked labour. The proximity of this relationship generated a sense of unease in educational literature, which often delineated strict boundaries and practices to 'manage' the vital yet 'intimidating' presence of Dalit women. Their labour was devalued and viewed as an inevitable outcome of their caste status, thus perpetuating their subordinate role and justifying their exclusion from the domain of idealized femininity (Gupta 9–11).

The utilization of these literary strategies in colonial manuals effectively reinforced the Brahmanical order while simultaneously enabling the symbolic and social marginalization of Dalit women across successive generations. The concept of 'femininity' in modern Hindi discourse has progressively conformed to the ideals of the upper caste, which are defined by traits such as domesticity, passivity, and purity. This alignment has concurrently marginalized the perspectives of Dalit women, whose lived realities are frequently neglected or depicted in a pathological light. As a result, didactic literature functioned as a complex and impactful mechanism of social regulation, strengthening the frameworks of both caste and gender at the same time positioned itself as a source of moral and domestic instruction.

From Stigma to Sympathy: Reformist Shifts and Their Limitations

The early twentieth century marked a significant shift in the representation of Dalit women within the discourses of Indian reform and nationalism. In contrast to the overt stigmatization and exclusion that defined the Brahmanical order of the nineteenth century, numerous writers, social reformers, and public intellectuals started to articulate a politics of liberal sympathy for the so-called Depressed Classes. This transition did not arise from a recognition of the subjectivity or agency of Dalit women; instead, it stemmed from an increasing concern regarding national unity, social justice, and India's reputation on the global stage, especially in light of colonial criticism (Gupta 13-15). The newly emerging middle classes, influenced by colonial critiques of Indian backwardness and motivated by the reformist spirit of the era, felt a strong obligation to publicly exhibit benevolence and modernity.

This new narrative presents the plight of Dalit women as a public moral spectacle, designed to evoke feelings of pity, compassion, and a sense of obligation among the upper-caste and middle-class audience. Reformist novels, social tracts, and films have started to illustrate the suffering of Dalit women as a symbol of India's unfinished

modernity, presenting it as a societal affliction that necessitates healing through acts of kindness, charitable efforts, or gradual reform. However, this empathy was frequently filtered through the perspective of those in positions of privilege. Dalit women seldom had the opportunity to articulate their own experiences or assert their rights as citizens; rather, their suffering was often aestheticized, serving as a backdrop for the moral development and progressive identity of upper-caste protagonists to be portrayed (Rege 44; Paik 50-52).

This phenomenon was especially prominent in print media and cinema, where narratives of Dalit struggles were utilized to substantiate the necessity for social reform, yet there was a lack of authentic engagement with the violence, exclusion, and systemic inequalities that gave rise to such suffering initially. Printed materials—ranging from pamphlets to novels and editorials—consistently portrayed the Dalit body as a locus of contamination and fragility, highlighting the filth, hardship, and marginalization experienced by Dalit women. In these narratives, the proposed solution was consistently one of upliftment—characterized as a gradual assimilation into upper-caste standards of hygiene, morality, and domesticity—rather than a genuine engagement with structural transformation, economic redistribution, or collective resistance. (Gupta 14; Paik 56)

This approach, although appearing to be forward-thinking, ultimately functioned to reinforce the dominance and control of the elite classes. Through the strategic framing of themselves as benefactors, upper-caste reformers reinforced their own image of benevolence and moral authority, while simultaneously sidestepping the more profound and unsettling inquiries regarding their role in sustaining caste and gender hierarchies. The expression of sympathy towards the suffering of Dalits evolved into a mechanism for absolution instead of fostering accountability, resulting in the genuine experiences, voices, and aspirations of Dalit women being predominantly marginalized or reinterpreted through the lens of upper-caste reform.

The constrained nature of this empathy is particularly evident when analysing the didactic literature of the period, which—despite its reformist rhetoric—continued to be concerned with maintaining the limits of respectability, purity, and social order. Manuals like Shiv Prasad's *Stri Subodhini* (1888), Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Stree Niti Shiksha* (1882), and Padmakant Malaviya's *Nari Shiksha* (1917) provided comprehensive guidelines for the concept of 'ideal' womanhood, which inherently assumed an upper-caste identity (Orsini 149). In instances where Dalit women were represented, it was often in a negative light: their labour deemed essential, yet their societal presence considered perilous, with their bodies conceptualized as arenas of both necessity and contamination. The approach presented by these texts did not advocate for social justice or transformation; rather, it emphasized containment and discipline.

This contradiction was reflected in the early cinema of India. Films such as *Achhut Kanya* (1936), although seemingly empathetic towards the struggles of Dalit characters, ultimately focused on the transformative arcs of upper-caste protagonists. Dalit women, exemplified by Kasturi, are portrayed as tragic figures whose purity and sacrifice serve to elevate the moral awareness of the dominant society, yet seldom confront its underlying structures (Datta 73; Dwyer 62-63). According to Sangeeta Datta, these films depict the Dalit woman as a locus of emotional transformation rather than as an individual possessing political or narrative agency (Datta 74). The enactment of sympathy enabled upper-caste audiences to acknowledge the suffering associated with untouchability, all while maintaining their position as judges of reform and moral advancement.

The story of empowerment—whether conveyed through written words or visual media—has consistently placed the issue of Dalit women's autonomy beneath the interests of the prevailing social order. Despite the calls for inclusion, these were frequently based on the expectation that Dalit women would conform to upper-caste standards of hygiene, modesty, and conduct, thereby overlooking the unique aspects of their experiences and the transformative possibilities inherent in their fight. Sharmila Rege compellingly asserts that this process represents "an appropriation of pain for the ends of privileged reform, rather than a challenge to the system that inflicts it"

(Rege 54).

In order to look beyond this framework, it becomes imperative to critically study the sentimentalization of suffering and the constraints of liberal sympathy. This entails emphasizing the actual experiences, resilience, and perspectives of Dalit women—be it through personal narratives, activist literature, or the infrequent cinematic instances where their autonomy transcends the limits of traditional storytelling. Only then can Indian social reform and cultural production start to confront the genuine extent of structural violence and the pressing need for transformative justice.

Literature as Precursor: The Suffering Dalit Women

Progressive Hindi literature, primarily during the early twentieth century, played a crucial role in shaping the cultural imagination particularly concerning around caste and gender. Foremost amongst its stalwarts was Munshi Premchand, whose works and contributions are appropriately acknowledged for their incisive social critique and deep compassion for the marginalized. However, a more nuanced examination uncovers the ongoing intertwining of progressive aspirations with the sentimentalization and confinement of Dalit suffering, particularly in the portrayal of Dalit women.

Prem Chand's short stories, including "Mandir," "Thakur ka Kuan," and "Dudh ka Daam," are often recognized as groundbreaking literary explorations of the complexities surrounding caste violence and the exploitation prevalent in rural settings. In "Mandir," the aspiration of the Dalit protagonist to access a temple—an act considered commonplace for others—transforms into a tableau of humiliation and violence, revealing the harsh realities of daily untouchability. Nevertheless, the emphasis of the narrative shifts away from collective mobilization or the protagonist's assertion, instead centring on her endurance and resignation, which effectively underscore the moral shortcomings of the upper castes.

In a parallel narrative, "Thakur ka Kuan" focuses on Gangi, a Dalit woman compelled by her child's affliction to draw water from the well belonging to the dominant Thakur family. Gangi's plight is depicted with profound emotional resonance: she endures the potential for public humiliation and even bodily danger for the fundamental act of satisfying her child's thirst. Although the narrative's strength is rooted in its intricate realism and profound emotional impact, Gangi persists as a victim whose suffering elicits sympathy from readers, yet seldom suggests avenues for systemic change or collective action (Premchand 113–18).

Likewise, the story, "Dudh ka Daam" maintains its narrative style. In this scenario, Sona, a Dalit woman who supplies milk to a family of higher caste, faces false allegations of theft and endures degrading treatment. The portrayal of her innocence and suffering, though prominent, ultimately serves as a catalyst for the moral awakening of the upper-caste characters, rather than as a platform for expressing Dalit identity or autonomy. Throughout these narratives, Premchand's clear compassion for the marginalized is conveyed through a lens of moral indignation—his tales call for empathy from a middle-class, upper-caste readership, yet seldom challenge the narrative norms that confine Dalit characters to positions of passive endurance or redemptive suffering.

This literary framework extends beyond the works of Premchand. Jainendra Kumar's narratives, like "Apne Log" ("One's Own People"), alongside Yashpal's "Parda" ("The Veil"), utilize the plight of Dalit women to reveal societal hypocrisy and the shortcomings of the reformist agenda. Jainendra's narratives frequently utilize Dalit women as examples to examine the moral awareness of the educated elite, delving into their experiences of humiliation and resilience within a patriarchal, caste-dominated society. Nevertheless, in these pieces, the pain experienced by Dalit women is portrayed in a personal and emotional manner. Opportunities for structured opposition or narrative prominence are seldom afforded to them; rather, their suffering acts as a moral spectacle,

prompting self-examination and possible change in others (Gupta 112)

A comparable trend can be noted in the wider realm of Hindi social novels and narratives—like Bhagwati Charan Verma's "Chitralekha" and the social fiction crafted by Mahadevi Varma. These works, although they critique the harsh realities of caste, often suggest that the remedy lies in individual acts of kindness or awareness from the upper caste, rather than in systemic transformation. The plight of the Dalit woman is acknowledged, yet it is often only in relation to how her struggles can elicit a response or emotional reaction from those in positions of privilege.

The emotional portrayal of Dalit suffering was further intensified in the instructional literature and reformist writings of the colonial era. Works such as Padmakant Malaviya's Nari Shiksha and Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Stree Niti Shiksha* established a standard of upper-caste femininity—characterized by chastity, domesticity, and purity—against which the Dalit woman was consistently defined as different: engaged in labour, present in public spaces, and viewed as morally questionable (Gupta 105; Orsini 148). Although the struggles of the Dalit woman were employed to highlight the necessity for change, she continued to exist beyond the realm of 'ideal' womanhood, her identity overshadowed by the expectations of the prevailing perspective.

The narrative structure in much of this literature limits the potential for Dalit agency. The experience of enduring hardship—whether quietly or with restrained dissent—forms the boundary of Dalit women's reality, while the upper-caste reformer or observer is seen as the genuine catalyst for transformation. According to literary critic Sharmila Rege, this framework leads to "an appropriation of pain that serves to legitimate upper-caste benevolence without disturbing the structures of domination" (Rege 54). The voices of Dalit women, when they do surface, are frequently filtered or expressed through the lens of a reformist or progressive narrator, which diminishes their ability to define themselves.

It is crucial to acknowledge that there are instances—though infrequent—where Dalit women in progressive literature strive to transcend these limitations. Gangi's bold choice in "Thakur ka Kuan" to draw water, despite the potential dangers, suggests the beginnings of a claim to her own power. Nevertheless, in this instance, the narrative conclusion retreats from unified defiance, reinstating the existing order and emphasizing the solitude of the Dalit woman's plight.

The impact of these literary conventions has endured, shaping not only later literary works but also the visual language of early Indian cinema. In this context, the suffering Dalit woman emerged as a recurring character, frequently portrayed in a sanitized and idealized manner, ultimately confined within the framework of upper-caste redemption (Dwyer 62). The task for subsequent Dalit authors and filmmakers has been to transcend this emotional framework and to assert narrative space for the expression of Dalit women's unique voices, histories, and aspirations for justice.

Lastly, although the progressive Hindi canon significantly highlighted the issues of caste and gender oppression, it simultaneously imposed restrictions on the narratives that could be expressed and the conditions under which they were presented. The portrayal of the Dalit woman—personalized, emotionally charged, and ultimately submissive—transformed her into a representation of social awareness while simultaneously serving as a tool for upholding current power structures. The challenge for modern academia is to reveal these dynamics and to create opportunities for innovative storytelling that positions Dalit women not merely as objects of sympathy, but as active participants in history.

Achhut Kanya: The Problem with Reform

Achhut Kanya (1936) is a landmark in Indian cinema and an early example of the reformist spirit that swept through the 1930s. The film's story is both emotionally powerful and ideologically charged, and it is influenced by Gandhi's ideals against untouchability and the rhetoric of Harijan uplift. The tragic love story at the centre of

it all is between Pratap, a Brahmin boy, and Kasturi, a young woman who is an untouchable and is pushed to the edges of society. Their story is a clear meditation on how love can't go beyond the caste divide, which shows how strong social boundaries are in the Indian mind.

People often praise the movie for its progressive point of view, and it does not shy away from showing the wrongs done to people who are considered untouchable. But when you look more closely, its criticism is limited by the very things it says it is going to change. The legitimacy of the upper-caste reformer, represented here by Mohanlal, is unequivocally established. The benevolent reformer and the village's collective conscience are the ones who have the power, not Kasturi, who is destined to be sacrificed for the sake of social harmony. Kasturi's suffering, depicted with profound pathos, serves as the catalyst for the restoration of order and the redemption of the upper-caste community. Her martyrdom does not disrupt the caste hierarchy; instead, it reinforces it, supporting the rationale of endogamy and the persistence of caste boundaries.

The film *Achhut Kanya* holds much significance especially because it sets the standard for how Dalit women will be portrayed in cinema in the future. Kasturi is portrayed in an exceptionally pure manner, her romanticized image is so thoroughly polished that the stark truths of Dalit women's realities—poverty, violence, sexual exploitation—are almost erased. Her narrative is one of perseverance and achievement, rather than resistance or transformation. The film transforms a potential avenue for societal critique into an uplifting experience that leaves viewers feeling more positive rather than negative.

Achhut: Depoliticization and Marginalization

Released three years later, *Achhut* (1939) reflects and, in certain aspects, amplifies the reformist contradictions found in its predecessor. The film begins with a striking scene: Lakshmi, a Dalit girl, is forcefully prevented from accessing water at the temple well—a moment that echoes the lived experiences of countless individuals and serves as a significant reference point in the narrative of Gandhian ideals. What follows, however, is a narrative trajectory that diverts attention from the harsh realities of untouchability to the potential for redemption found in the kindness of upper-caste individuals.

As the narrative progresses, Lakshmi finds herself taken in by Seth Haridas, a benefactor of upper-caste status, who provides her with guidance and a safe haven. The pivotal moment unfolds as; after facing countless challenges, Lakshmi emerges as the catalyst enabling her community to access the temple. At first glance, this seems to be a bold act, a significant challenge to the segregation of caste systems. However, as noted by Swathy Margaret and other analysts, the political themes of the film lean towards conservatism. The challenge of untouchability is reframed as an issue of individual ethics and spiritual awakening, instead of being viewed as a shared, political struggle for justice and rights. Lakshmi is stripped of genuine autonomy. She functions more as a catalyst than as a subject, driving the ethical and spiritual transformation of her upper-caste patrons. The film fundamentally revolves around their transformation-from a state of unawareness to one of kindness.

Through the voluntary opening of the temple gates, the film highlights the role of the dominant caste as key figures in determining social inclusion. The agency of the Dalit woman is diminished on two fronts: initially, as an individual with her own aspirations and intentions; subsequently, as a potential symbol of political activism and defiance. The shadow of shared effort is replaced by emotional elevation and ethical salvation. The result is a filmic tribute to unity, realized under the conditions set by the powerful—a rationale that reflects the constraints of Gandhian reform and contrasts sharply with the bold critiques put forth by Ambedkar and subsequent Dalit feminist theorists.

Sujata (1959): Social Hierarchy and Contemporary Society

Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959) shifts the issue of caste into the intimate setting of post-independence urban India. The narrative centres on Sujata, a Dalit girl who is adopted and brought up by a Brahmin family of higher caste. The love they have for her is consistently intertwined with a sense of unease and acceptance that is contingent upon certain conditions. Sujata's experience is characterized by a process of integration—her appreciation, compliance, and goodness are highlighted as essential conditions for being embraced by the family.

Roy's film has frequently received acclaim for its nuance and compassion, yet the fundamental dynamics continue to align closely with the trends set by previous works. Sujata's perspective is shaped by her readiness to diminish her uniqueness, embracing the values and sensibilities of the family that saved her. The film's narrative progression does not focus on Sujata's self-assertion; rather, it centres on the gradual moral awakening of the family, culminating in their acceptance of her as a true daughter. The moment of acceptance is portrayed as a victory of individual merit and the goodwill of the privileged, rather than a rejection of the systems that render such acceptance dependent from the outset.

What is ultimately at stake in *Sujata* is not the elimination of caste, but rather the potential for inclusion—provided that the Dalit subject conforms, assimilates, and does not challenge the established order. Her uniqueness is neither honoured nor politicized, but rather controlled and subdued. Thus, the film, akin to its forerunners, reframes the profound injustices of caste as issues of personal bias and morality, masking the necessity for systemic change.

In these films, the portrayal of the Dalit women leans more towards being a means for upper-caste redemption rather than a political entity, with her suffering depicted as both essential and ultimately confined. The outcome is a film that provides comfort and reassurance, even while asserting its intention to challenge and transform. In this regard, the portrayal of caste in cinema serves not so much as a form of defiance but rather as a nuanced, ongoing endorsement of the limits it claims to confront.

Conclusion

The early phase of Indian cinema held a complex and contradictory role within the cultural consciousness of the country. On one hand, it positioned itself as a proponent of reform, engaging with current discussions surrounding untouchability and gender oppression. Conversely, it solidified social hierarchies by presenting the suffering of Dalit women as both a spectacle and a moral lesson. Films such as *Achhut Kanya* and *Sujata* reinterpret social injustice through the lens of individual virtue and resilience, positioning the suffering Dalit woman as a representation of societal conscience rather than as the protagonist of her own story. This methodology served not merely as a reflection of established perspectives but as a significant force in influencing societal comprehension of caste and gender, thereby normalizing the subjugation of Dalit women and rendering their marginalization appear both unavoidable and redemptive.

The reformist impulse evident in these films, though noteworthy for the era, possessed intrinsic limitations. Instead of fostering agency or expressing structural transformation, it depended on emotional clichés and the goodwill of upper-caste characters. The inclusion of Dalit women appeared to be primarily symbolic, dependent on their adherence to prevailing standards of purity, passivity, and sacrifice. Their suffering did not serve as a catalyst for radical action; rather, it functioned as a reaffirmation of the moral superiority and paternalistic tendencies of those in privileged positions.

Nancy Fraser's analysis of the public sphere offers valuable insights in this context. Although Indian cinema

seemed to promote inclusive representation, it effectively controlled participation, permitting the voices of Dalit women only to the extent that they did not challenge existing power dynamics. The screen transformed into a controlled environment, governed by the principles of respectability and the concerns of the prevailing group. The phenomenon that presented itself as progressivism frequently concealed the ongoing perpetuation of exclusion, thereby guaranteeing that the fundamental hierarchies of caste and gender remained largely unaddressed.

In conclusion, early Indian cinema should be regarded as both a reflection and a precursor of societal perceptions regarding Dalit women. The reformist rhetoric, although significant, was ultimately constrained by a greater commitment to preserving social order. In order to progress past mere symbolic inclusion and superficial expressions of suffering, Indian cinema must establish authentic avenues for the agency, voice, and self-representation of Dalit women. It is only through these efforts that it can initiate a transformation of the hierarchies it has frequently contributed to maintaining.

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