

Negotiating Identity: Cultural Exchange and Resistance in Dalit Cinema

Chandra Prakash

Introduction

Dalit cinema has emerged as a crucial channel of expression for subaltern voices. It has challenged the hierarchies based on caste and developed a new consciousness among marginalized people. It caters to the claim for equal treatment in society on various parameters, such as social, economic, and political, with the help of the artistic revolution of cinema. This paper examines the concept of cross-cultural encounters and the assimilation of Dalit characters in regional and mainstream cinema, aiming to explore how these different films from various regions have portrayed Dalit characters through diverse social, cultural, and political narratives. The mainstream cinema is a Mumbai-based film industry popularly known as Bollywood, and regional cinema, on the other hand found differently in various states of the nation. The analysis presents two patterns: first, the organicity in the portrayal of the Dalit characters in regional Cinema, and the manipulation of the same in mainstream Cinema. This study deals with cinema as a space where meanings about caste are produced and contested. The focus is on how representation shapes public understanding, how dominant cultures soften caste realities for acceptance, and how subaltern voices struggle to be sustained in mainstream narratives. Chahat Rana, in the Indian Express news article, throws light on the same:

However, where *Sairat* delivered a realistic depiction of caste violence in India, *Dhadak* delivers a highly-diluted and sanitised iteration of it. To be precise, there are exactly two explicit references to caste in the movie, both made by the father of the film's hero, Madhukar. Beyond this, caste does not seem to affect the lives of *Dhadak*'s characters. (Rana)

Through this lens, *Sairat* is read as a form of resistance, while *Dhadak* illustrates the erasure of that resistance within Bollywood's commercial framework.

Historical Context and Resistance in Dalit Cinema

Dalit cinema in current times is not merely a genre; rather, it is a movement that significantly discusses its struggles, barriers, and aspirations. It articulates its voices for the marginalized people who have been historically oppressed. The prevalent culture of mainstream cinema has intentionally excluded the dignified Dalit narratives. The image of Dalit characters has been arbitrarily presented or compromised in mainstream cinema.

The nomenclature in mainstream cinema itself reveals the intentions of mainstream filmmakers, who are market-driven. For instance, in *Swades* (2004), a character named Mailaram has been introduced and represented as dark skinned and ready to serve the hero. The character is a Dalit, and his name also indicates the idea of filth. This fabricated portrayal of Dalits by mainstream cinema is contested by the regional cinema.

Research in cinema has gained pace in recent times, and through various academic modes the academic this section will outline the most recent academic developments, prominent literary outcomes, and literary advancement concerning Dalit Cinema. The research on Dalit cinema has led to much debate and critical responses from mainstream critics and writers. The existing literature assesses the key narratives and counter-narratives of Dalit representation in mainstream and regional cinema.

Dalit Yengde, in his research article entitled "Dalit Cinema" (2018), throws light on the concept of Dalit cinema and its evolution throughout the journey of cinema. Yengde highlights the disguised market-driven intention of mainstream filmmakers in producing films concerning Dalit issues. He also talks about the relationship between Indian cinema with caste.

Manju Edachira, in her research article “Anti-Caste Aesthetics and Dalit Intervention in Indian Cinema” (2020), recounts the arbitrary representation of Dalits in mainstream Indian cinema and the counter-narrative by Dalit filmmakers, opposing the stereotypical portrayal of Dalits and presenting them with a dignified image in regional cinema. Harish S. Wankhede, in his article “Examining the Process of Dalit Identity in Hindi Cinema” (2022), indicates the presence of a so-called upper caste protagonist as a savior of marginalized people.

***Sairat*: Realism and Caste based Atrocities**

Sairat (2016), directed by Nagraj Manjule, is a Marathi film set in rural Maharashtra. The film deals with caste issues in Marathi cinema, and the suffering of a Dalit character, Prashant (Parshya), son of a fisherman, falls in love with an upper caste Patil girl, Archana (Archi). The love story and so-called socially disproportionate match of the couple becomes unbearable for Archi’s family members, resulting in the brutal honor killing of the couple and their infant. The film revolves around caste based oppression and the false pride of feudal lords. The representation of the state of Dalit characters in such parallel film industries is unfiltered, unlike mainstream Hindi films.

***Dhadak*: Adaptation and Erasure of caste**

Dhadak (2018), directed by Shashank Khaitan, is an adaptation of the regional Marathi film to mainstream cinema. The film is devoid (to a large extent) of a caste angle and remains merely a love story with an honor-killing plot. The storyline of the film is aligned with the Marathi film *Sairat*, except for the problem of caste. The caste of the characters is not specifically mentioned, and this is intentionally omitted by the filmmaker, considering the potential aftermath or consequences of including caste issues in mainstream cinema, which could result in social or political outrage among some people. The major aim of the film is to universalize the film for capital gain by sidelining the original caste and socio-political issue, and shadowing it with a tragic love story to play with the audience’s emotions. The tendency to negate the identity of Dalit characters by Hindi filmmakers for the sake of capital gain can be

seen very clearly here. These instances from the beginning of the century prompted Dalit filmmakers to use cinema as a tool for social critique and cultural assertion. Keeping the diversity of India in mind, the theme of cross-cultural assimilation raises a new area of exploration.

Negotiation of Identity and Exchange of Culture

Dalit cinema serves as a powerful medium of aesthetic representation of Dalit characters in regional cinema. The paradox of cross-cultural encounters of films concerning Dalit representation in regional cinema, and the tendency of mainstream cinema to adapt the plots and manipulate them. It, therefore, highly problematizes the idea of movies being visual texts and preserving regional values while promoting concerns regarding the Dalit communities. The transition from *Sairat* (2016) to its Hindi adaptation *Dhadak* (2018) epitomizes how Dalit subjectivity is often negotiated, or erased, within mainstream cinematic remakes. Directed by Nagraj Manjule, *Sairat* highlights the “politics of caste while embedding it into the cultural fabric of rural Maharashtra, enabling marginalized voices to resonate authentically” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 143). The film’s depiction of lived experiences, linguistic nuances, and the violent repercussions of caste wrongdoings directly addresses subaltern realities.

In contrast, *Dhadak*, shaped within Bollywood’s commercial framework, reworks the story into a more palatable romantic tragedy, replacing caste with class as the central axis of conflict. This shift diminishes the radical political charge of the original and reflects how mainstream Hindi cinema often appropriates regional narratives while softening their socio-political critiques for mass consumption. Such dilution resonates with Stuart Hall’s notion of “the politics of representation,” wherein marginalized identities are systematically reinterpreted or side-lined through selective cultural translation (Hall 64).

“The movement from the local specificity of *Sairat* to the national generality of *Dhadak* reveals the limitations of Bollywood in faithfully representing oppressed identities. It demonstrates how market demands and cultural capital override cinema’s responsibility to preserve marginalized voices” (Ganti 21).

Ultimately, this comparison underscores the enduring importance of regional cinema as a vital platform for articulating Dalit subjectivity and resisting homogenization within Indian film culture.

Resistance and Cultural Politics

Dalit representation in Indian cinema reflects a continuous negotiation between resistance and erasure, influenced by the cultural politics of both regional and mainstream film industries. Regional films like Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* (2016) serve as counter-narratives, focusing on the Dalit experience and expressing subaltern agency within highly stratified social frameworks. Conversely, Bollywood's adaptation *Dhadak* (2018) exemplifies the systematic erasure of caste, recasting structural inequality as class conflict and thus aligning with the Hindi film industry's broader inclination to evade confrontations with hegemonic social structures (Paik 2021; Kumar 2022). This transition underscores how regional cinema frequently acts as a site of resistance by emphasizing cultural specificity, while commercial Hindi cinema favors universality and marketability, often at the expense of marginalized identities.

The conflict between these two forms of representation carries significant implications for public culture in India. It illustrates how dominant media formats contribute to the normalization of caste invisibility, while regional narratives remain vital interventions that assert the visibility of oppressed communities (Yengde 2020). This interplay not only highlights the political importance of cinematic storytelling but also indicates the ongoing need for alternative cultural spaces where Dalit voices can resist assimilation and reclaim their representational agency. The tension between these two modes of representation has broader implications for public culture in India. It reveals how dominant media forms contribute to the normalization of caste invisibility, while regional narratives persist as essential interventions that assert the visibility of oppressed communities (Yengde 2020). This dynamic not only underscores the political stakes of cinematic storytelling but also signals the enduring necessity of alternative cultural spaces where Dalit voices can resist assimilation and reclaim representational agency.

Conclusion

The study of *Sairat* and *Dhadak* makes clear how differently caste is handled in regional and mainstream cinema. *Sairat* openly shows caste as part of everyday life and struggle, while *Dhadak* avoids it, turning the story into a softer tale of class and romance. This shift shows how mainstream films often sidestep uncomfortable realities, leaving Dalit voices unheard. The research underlines that meaningful representation can only happen when caste is faced directly, not hidden behind safer themes.

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