



Research Article

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Antyodaya: The Intersection of Cinema and Marginalized Communities

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ABSTRACT

Cinema has a vibrant role to play in every society. Cinema and society affect each other in many ways and are interdependent. It has been over a century since Hindi cinema ruled the people's minds. Being such a highly impactful medium, it constructs meaning and eventually leads to a culture people follow. India's cinema has always been more than just a form of amusement; it reflects the country's complex and varied social structures. Through the viewpoint of the concept "Antyodaya," a Sanskrit phrase that means the upliftment of the most oppressed, this study explores the relationship between Indian film and marginalized people and how over the years, Indian cinema has showcased the people from an underprivileged or of a section which is on the fence of the wall. Are such characters being there in mainstream popular cinema at all? And if yes, then how are they treated on screen? In addition to challenging preconceived notions and highlighting the transformational power of inclusive storytelling, it investigates the historical, cultural, and social aspects of film depictions of oppressed people. Through an analysis of Indian films, this research sheds light on the role of cinema in shaping societal attitudes and promoting social equity. This paper also attempts to understand the representation of marginalised communities in Indian cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema has immense reach, access, and influence in constructing public perceptions and realities of a social structure. Cinema, a strong mixture of art and technology, outlines culture and mirrors society. Also, it shows how it shifts the audience's outlook on the world (Galalite User & Galalite User, 2024). Films often change our perspective to look at situations. Dear Zindagi (2016) spoke about mental health and in a way tried to break the taboo around mental situations and the manner, in which a person can deal with them. Likewise, the film released in the same year titled Pink also raised quite a stir in dialogue in society and gave a new view on the issues related to women. Films have taken such central themes in cinema that were not spoken about much or not appropriate at the societal levels, here we can see the impact of such films in society quite explicitly. In the history of Indian Cinema, numerous amounts of such films have raised social

issues and shifted or created dialogues around certain rudimentary problems.

Indian Cinema for the longest time has showcased stories dominated by socially and politically powerful or in a way dominating sections of society that consequently lead to the ignorance of the issues and concerns of the people who are marginalised or in other words, less privileged part of society. This system has over time affected the quotient of diversity and participation of marginalized social groups in cinematic art. These social groups can be in the context of caste, creed, gender, or any other vulnerable section (Wankhede, 2024).

The concept of Antyodaya:

Antyodaya signifies the upliftment of the most marginalized. The word Antyodaya collectively states two Sanskrit words that are *Antya* which means the last and *Udaya* means to rise. Hence the concept Antyodaya states about the welfare of the last person in a population

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and the marginalised group. This philosophy was given by Pt. Deendayal Upadhyaya (Lall, 2024). The concept of Antyodaya also talks about minimising the difference between rich and poor, the right to good health, the right to access main goods, social security and the right to livelihood with pride (Kumar & Gajendra, 2021).

Antyaodaya suggests thinking about upliftment or development in terms of the development of the poorest of the poor. Also, it implies that growth has to be in all manners social, moral, economic and opportunity to the most vulnerable of society. Antyodaya is an ethical pledge to ensure that progress reaches each individual, predominantly the helpless segment of society (Lall, 2024). This paper explores how Indian cinema represents these groups and how these representations affect their identity. Also, this paper attempts to suggest a few important texts to expand the further study on the said topic.

Indian Cinema and Films on Marginalised sections of the society:

The first film that is counted as the initial movement of film noir in India is *Neecha Nagar* (1946) by Chetan Anand. It is a socially realistic film dealing with the class section of society between rich and poor (TNN, 2018). Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) was a film which showcased the rural poverty.

On the other hand, *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) represented class disparities (Halder, 2024). *Ankur* (1974) and *Nishant* (1975) both films directed by Shyam Benegal showcase the atrocities passed to the poor and powerless sections of the society and how they are treated (Kumar, 2025). Certain sections of the people in Indian cinema have often been depicted as victimized. In *Bandit Queen* (1994) challenges the system by a victim Dalit woman (Pal et al., 2021). Very recently, *Article 15* (2019) highlighted the enduring relevance of caste-based discrimination in India (Shanker, 2023).

Indian Films has also shown social issues related to gender stereotyping in the social system and how women have urged and struggled for liberation for the longest time. The film *Thappad* (2020) and *Pink* (2016) asks extremely pertinent questions on the face of the audience with its several women characters and their social conditioning (Shukla, 2023). Similar to such themes a film titled *Parched* (2015) explored layered gender issues (Gahlot, 2019).

Indian cinemas particularly Marathi, Malayalam and Tamil have often showcased reliable storytelling. The films for example *Court* (2014) and *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) provide nuanced interpretations of marginalized lives and their respective struggle for basic amenities such as self-esteem, dignity and the right to have access to social resources in society (Wankhede, 2024).

Indian Cinema has created stories that show the life and struggle of the marginalised section of society over several

decades and in every Indian language. The problem here is no one film can bring social change, so it is required to keep making films around these topics so they can change certain ground realities.

This paper attempts to study the representation of underprivileged and marginalised sections of society in Indian cinema. To widen the spectrum, the researchers have taken three films from three different languages released over the last decade. This paper attempts to understand the depiction of characters and the themes that emerged from this narrative and how they are treated.

Review of Literature

Relegation in India is deeply rooted in situations related to caste, class, gender, ethnicity, and regional disparities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's writings provide a framework for understanding the socio-political dynamics of exclusion in Indian society. These frameworks are essential for contextualizing the cinematic portrayal of marginalized groups. In a paper titled 'The Portrayal of Indian Rural Women in OTT Platforms: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the film *Jai Bhim*', the author analysed the character of Sangini. It states that she is shown as a rural woman, less educated but a confident person who does not stumble to the circumstances and does all for her family. She is empowering in her ways (Pandey & et all 2023).

Indian Scholars such as Ashish Nandy and Ravi Vasudevan argue that films act as both mirrors and moulders of public consciousness. Theories of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci and the Encoding/Decoding model by Stuart Hall are particularly relevant in understanding the power dynamics inherent in cinematic narratives. In a paper titled 'Fandry and Sairat: Marginal Narratives and Subjectivities in the New Marathi Cinema', the researcher argues that marginal narratives and subjectivity in *Sairat* and *Fandry* are serious themes in the context of multiplex-centric, neo-liberal film culture (Ingle, 2017).

Interestingly, the studies highlight the dual role of Indian cinema in both spreading and thought-provoking stereotypes. Earlier films *Achhut Kanya* (1936) made pioneering efforts to address caste issues, whereas the more recent films *Article 15* (2019) confront systemic oppression. However, this situation between authentic representation and tokenistic portrayals is still significant (Chishti, 2019).

In the paper titled 'Caste and Cinema- a Sociological Analysis of Caste Representation in Indian Cinema', the researcher presented the historical background of the societal system over the decades in Indian cinema. It states that it will still take a long journey to represent the marginalised section in a significant way (Singh, 2021).

In a paper titled 'When Movies Matter: Emerging Adults Recall Memorable Movies' researchers observed that cinema plays a vital role in the social and emotional

development of adolescents and young adults (Greenwood & Long, 2014). Movies create an emotionally anchored critique and utopian view of the world and life (Axelson, 2017). Films related to sensible issues should be handled carefully.

In the research paper 'From Sujata to Kachra: Decoding Dalit Representations in Popular Hindi Cinema' the author argues that Dalit stereotypes and regressive representations align with mainstream culture. Popular Hindi movies portray Dalits as marginalized, meek, neglected, submissive, and under-confident. However, Dalits' ongoing struggle with caste oppression is often overlooked in Indian movie narratives. The study argues that such representations are related to cultural politics and discourses of power (Chauhan, 2019).

There are many studies, and research available online about the topic related to marginalized communities, minor sections and caste-power dynamics. Hence, it is interesting to understand the standing of characterization and theme patterns in films released in a relatively short time.

Theoretical Framework

This study will explore the aspects related to the representation of marginalised communities in Indian Films. Also, it can understand the construction of these communities through images and codes shown. For this purpose, Structuralist Film Theory will be deployed as a theoretical framework. This theory is rooted in Structuralism which is a movement influenced by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. This theory suggests that films shape the audience's understanding through cinema language and systems of signs and rules that shape audience understanding (Stoltz, 2019).

This theory underlines that films convey meaning through codes and conventions. In other words, the film is moving in time and must be analyzed in a framework that can consider its temporality. This is related to how the simple combination of shots can create an additional idea and meaning and how the use of mise-en-scene is used to convey using lights, props, camera angles, spaces, and another array of elements (Roshan, n.d.).

In other words, how the simple combination of two shots can create meaning and even additional meaning to a simple scene. This is created through an expression on the character's face or through makeup and costume or lighting and music. These juxtapositions of scenes convey complex situations in a way that an average audience can get perfectly (Andrew, 1984).

Here, in this paper three films of different languages have been taken into consideration to study the depiction and impact of films on marginalised people along with the use of film as a potential tool. These films can be studied from the point of view of this theory and his

films convey messages through code and symbols. This approach eventually led to making cinematic language in this regard.

Furthermore, Structuralist film theory can be a powerful tool for understanding the relationship between media and identity. By highlighting the active role of media in shaping meaning, the theory challenges passive interpretations of media consumption and underscores the importance of critical thinking in decoding representations. His ideas continue to shape contemporary media studies, emphasizing the role of representation in constructing social reality.

Research Questions

- How the depiction of marginalized communities in Indian cinema is created and its impact?
- Is Indian cinema potentially able to contribute to the development of marginalised social groups?

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative approach through narrative analysis focusing on story structure, characters and themes of the story. This paper also examines how a narrative conveys messages through the story and how certain characters are showcased (whether they are submissive, stereotyped or empowered).

This paper has taken three films into account of study from different languages. These films are directed by respective filmmakers themselves coming from marginalised sections of society and how have they depicted the presence of such characters in the story? The films are as follows: *Masaan* (2015, Hindi), *Sairat* (2016, Marathi) and *Jai Bhim* (2021, Tamil). All these films are highly critically acclaimed and did well at various national and international festivals. So, these films have represented India on many levels. This paper delves into the narrative of these films and tries to understand how the story, narrative and themes emerge from the narrative of these films and how the representation is done.

Sampling

The films are selected through the purposive sampling method of research.

Masaan (2015)

Masaan is a story of human struggles, societal norms, Individual aspirations, and the intertwined relationship of the caste system in the community. The story is set in the city of Varanasi, where a character in the film, is culturally vibrant and conservative at the same time.

The film presents a subtle portrayal of caste and socio-economic differences. It also talks about social hierarchies. The themes of the film are counted under the ambit of larger social issues for example: the burden of a social system leads to curbing the individual's aspirations.

Table 1: Narrative analysis of the films

S. No.	Name of the film	Year of the release	Language	Duration (in min.)	Director of the film
1.	Masaan	2015	Hindi	90	Neeraj Ghaywan
2.	Sairat	2016	Marathi	174	Nagraj Manjule
3.	Jai Bhim	2021	Tamil	164	T.J. Gnanavel

**Figure 1:** Masaan (2015)

Characters

The film opens with a young woman Devi Pathak, who is caught being involved with her boyfriend and later, she and her father (Vidyadhar Pathak) are blackmailed by a corrupt police officer. The story reflects the situation of a woman and her parents in social structure how their respect and self-esteem are judged and the fear of getting a bad image of a girl is the biggest nightmare of a father. Her tale reflects the suffocating moral policing faced by women in conservative societies. The father is shown so helpless in front of the situation that he pleads in front of the police officer with unreasonable demands. On the contrary, Devi is unapologetic and courageous to challenge societal norms quite quietly. She refuses to accept the set of rules for women. The story showcases a nuanced tale of father-daughter dynamics,

Furthermore, the other story lies with Deepak who belongs to a lower caste system and his family works at

cremation ghats. He is a student and in love with a girl from the upper caste, Shalu. This story brings a system of caste-based prejudices into light which is still prevalent in India. The tragic twist in his romance shows as a reminder of how deeply caste barriers prevent the option of upward mobility and inter-caste harmony.

Themes

The portrayal of caste and the underprivileged is subtle and intense. Without the explicit drama, rather the director chooses the silence to speak. In the last scene itself when the two stories meet, Devi and Deepak don't say anything, but their silence says volume. The ghats of Varanasi are used as a metaphor for life's cycle. The film also represents the resilience of those marginalized by caste and poverty.

Masaan is an extremely humanist film that shows the lines of caste, gender, and economic disparity while celebrating the human spirit.

Sairat (2016)

Sairat is a love story set in a backdrop of caste and socioeconomic hierarchy in a rural part of India. A heart-wrenching tale with a dark reality of social inequality. The film throws light on the struggles faced by individuals who challenge societal norms. Sairat is a movingly realistic portrayal of love in the situation of caste-based domination.

The narrative is around a love angle between Parshya and Archi. Both belong to extremely different backgrounds in every sense socially, and economically. It can be stated that they belong to two different worlds, yet they fall in love. Their love story begins as an innocent romance but soon crashes with the dark realities of caste-based discrimination and societal situations.

Characters

Parshya is an innocent boy who besides being from a lower-caste background, is daring and aspires to dream of a life beyond his caste. On the other hand, Archi is from a wealthy background he dares to dream of a life, but she also challenges the gender norms of his community. She takes a bold stand in her action which is as small as riding a bullet. So, in that way, both characters were similar. Both highlight personal agency and conflict with the social system in their community.

The film brings a critique of caste oppression with powerful moments in its constant portrayal of violence and systemic injustice. The rural setting is with the undercurrents of caste-based dominance and the threat

Table 2: Masaan

Character	Characteristics	Theme
Deepak	Vulnerable, striving for equal respect and dignity, determined	
Devi	Courageous, fearless and striving for liberation, challenges the social norms.	Redemption, grief, casteism and liberation
Vidyadhar Pathak	Oscillating between moral and social compass, a father with the social pressure to save respect and also stung the love for his daughter.	



Figure 2: Sairat (2016)

of honour killing. The girl’s family’s cruel opposition to their relationship conveyed the ruthless reality of caste pride and how social positioning is so important in this whole situation. The disastrous end of the film shows the disturbing repercussions of challenging the deeply rooted systems of society.

Themes

The film depicts the struggles of the underprivileged. Parshya and Archi’s elopement and attempt to build a life show the hard reality of breaching societal constraints. Their journey highlights the instability of life for those who break the safety net shell of privilege and norms. They faced it all from financial scarcity to isolation, a constant threat and finally, they lost their life to the system. But somehow in the end the heart-wrenching scene where their one-year-old son comes out of their houses with blood on his foot leaving the impression of his feet behind where both his parents were lying dead showcases the life coming out of that situation and can be read as that there will be people who will keep challenging the system. The film’s raw emotional power and unvarnished social critique make it a landmark in Indian cinema.

Table 3: Sairat

Character	Characteristics	Theme
Parshya	Aspiration for dignity and respect	love, rebellion, and systemic oppression
Archi	Assertiveness, rebellion, unapologetically	Dark sad reality of social supremacy

Jai Bhim (2021)

The film is a hard intense courtroom drama that deals with the oppression of a marginalised section of society in the context of tribal and certain castes of the community. The film is set in a remote village in Tamil Nadu, where a small tribal community is living a happy life until it takes a severe turn to fateful circumstances.

A villager Rajakannu got caught in a crime which is primarily not done by him which led to his custodial torture of all kinds and finally disappearance. The fight for justice is taken by his wife Sangini very relentlessly. She approached a lawyer Chandru who fought the case for justice. The family belong to the tribal community and their lives are dominated by poverty and neglect. As they were still happily living their lives with children, they were caught in the trap of the system. The film very brutally shows how the existence of tribal people is so invisible and voiceless that even if there is a man’s disappearance and his wife’s efforts make no stir in the circumstances. Nobody is hearing them at all as if they don’t exist and how they are so vulnerable to violence. The wrongful arrest of Rajkannu and his life-threatening torture represent the level of systematic bias and lack of empathy.



Figure 3: Jai Bhim (2021)

Characters

Advocate Chandru symbolizes hope and the prospect of change. He is the character who believes in the potential of justice in the country and the signs of equality that the judicial system provides even to the marginalised section of society, even to the last person in the row. His unwavering support to the tribal community, especially to the Rajkannu family stands for equality, support and integrity.

Furthermore, Sengini, Rajkannu’s wife is shown as a woman of perseverance and strength. She didn’t give up on the search for her husband even after no support from the system she was also threatened by the police to go away, but she stood up. She shows incredible strength in the character. Despite her trauma and grief, she challenges and denies to surrender. Whereas her husband is shown as a quintessential person who is voiceless, powerless, and the most vulnerable man. Who doesn’t stand for himself and easily surrenders to the situation stating it as his fate. He is more concerned about his wife and children that they should not waste their little money and work on his side, but rather accept their fortune and move forward in life.

Theme

The major theme of the film is explicitly the deep-rooted tyranny of certain sections of society and dehumanizing marginalised communities. It shows how underprivileged communities are deprived of everything, as basic as justice. The police, judiciary and local authorities no one is listening to them. The film extremely clearly shows the difference created on the surface level. In the very first scene, where a police constable is releasing the prisoner who has completed their term of punishment. In the scene, on the face, he is asking the caste. Releasing those who are from the upper system and keeping aside those who are from a lower caste. Those prisoners from lower castes the taken to another jail so that they can be treated as scapegoats for solving their unsolved other cases. This chilling reality is very saddened. This raw depiction forces audiences to meet the systemic failures and lets them see such injustices persist. The film represents the tribal community’s daily struggles, creating a contrast between the ideals of justice and the harsh realities of systemic inequality.

Table 4: Jai Bhim

Character	Characteristics	Theme
Chandru	Compassionate, fighter, epitome of hope and empathy	Caste discrimination and injustice, the submissive situation of the underprivileged.
Sengini	Perseverance, Resilience, Strength and core of her family	
Rajkannu	Vulnerable and victim of the system, helpless, voiceless.	

The Finding of the Study

- The films are blended with the personal stories with the social-cultural-economic situations of the communities.
- All films have showcased strong women characters. Whether it is Devi (Masaan), Archi (Sairat) and Sengini (Jai Bhim). These films also highlighted that women even though they are not from the marginalised system of society, still fighting with gender stereotypes and self-liberation.
- Jai Bhim (2021) is quite an on-the-face kind of film where it shows how systematic suppression is done to the marginalised people whereas Sairat (2016) and Masaan (2015) showcase with interpersonal relationship between the characters.
- The characters of the marginalised system are shown with characteristics of aspiration. They are happy in their life whether it is Rajkannu (Jai Bhim) Deepak (Masaan) or Parshya (Sairat), they are all happy in their world, yet aspire to break the shell of their caste and inequality and urge to be in the so-called mainstream of the society.
- The women of Marginalised communities are shown stronger and with greater strength. For Example: the character of Sengini in Jai Bhim shows incredible perseverance.
- Interestingly the portrayal of marginalised people on screen has changed. Earlier they were shown as submissive, but in these films, such characters were represented as strong, having aspirations and resilient people. Here, it can be said that the depiction has changed overtly.
- All these films’ narratives presented a similar conversation around power dynamics in society, caste system, gender stereotypes, social structure and consequences of breaking the set rules of this structure.
- All these films are highly respected and create a dialogue in their time and space. Hence it can be said that Indian cinema has huge potential to create a space for underprivileged and marginalised communities, but they need to keep making such stories.

CONCLUSION

Indian cinema has endless potential to keep its reach and impact on the social and cultural system of India to bring change. The filmmakers can create stories which are thought-provoking similar to Jai Bhim (2021) and present harsh-dark reality as it is. Sairat (2016) is a great example of this where the filmmaker chooses not to give a happy ending but rather says most brutally. By implementing the principles of ‘Antyodaya’, directors can make narratives that empower marginalized communities and challenge systemic inequalities. Although, this is also true that such stories on celluloid are counted as very



few, but still the prospect is seamless. These films jointly back to the mounting of such cinema that challenges traditional narratives, compelling audiences to confront uncomfortable realities about caste, class, and social system in India. Furthermore, it is said that there is also a need to explore the academic focus on such cinema that can stir further dialogues and space for such stories and public discourse.

Implication of the Study

This study has implied that the potential of cinema as a medium or tool can be significant for the welfare of people from communities that are deprived. It showcases that the representation of the section of people has been minimal and shown in a background with their social identity. However, cinema has worked limited in this section it can be used as a great measure of a system where it can bring changes in the lives of communities.

In a conversation with a filmmaker, he stated that cinema can only bring change if it consistently shows stories or characters around the same. Similar to in Tamil Cinema. A standalone film can stir the conversation for a short period, but cannot contribute to the change majorly.

Limitations and Suggestions of the Study

This study has taken three films of different languages which is a small sample size. This is only due to the lack of time and constraints related to a research paper. Moreover, this study encourages further study on this topic and includes more similar films.

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