

# What is Dalit Cinema?

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## Abstract

### **What is Dalit Cinema?**

*There are divergent opinions on “What is a Dalit Film?” or “Mere presence of Dalit characters in the film makes it a Dalit film?” There are a few things one must look for in a Dalit film or cinema. The first and foremost thing in the Dalit Cinema is that it must portray the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Dalits. It challenges caste-based hierarchies and aims to authentically portray the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Dalit individuals. It rejects romanticized or superficial representations. It foregrounds Dalit culture, showcasing music, traditions, and customs that mainstream cinema often erases. Furthermore, Dalit films subvert Brahminic aesthetic norms, ensuring that Dalit characters retain their individuality rather than being reduced to stock figures. Dalit Cinema serves as a tool for resistance, empowerment, and social transformation. This paper explores the defining elements of Dalit Cinema and its role in fostering an equitable cultural discourse.*

**Keywords:** Dalit Film, Dalit Characters, Social Transformation, Superficial Representations, and Lived Experiences.

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## I. Introduction

Dalits constitute about one-sixth of India's population. They have been at the bottom of India's social pyramid for centuries and were denied basic human rights, such as access to drinking water from public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, freedom to choose an occupation (other than assigned by birth), freedom to keep property and education, and so on. They are practically invisible from every public domain, so much so that their identity itself has been stigmatised. According to Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a renowned scholar:

The term ‘Dalit’ forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root ‘dal’, which means to crack open, split, grind, and so forth, ... However, an identity marker, the term ‘Dalit’, emerged in 1972, when a group of Marathi writers-activists founded an organisation called Dalit Panther. (Mukherjee x)

Dalits were traditionally and conveniently kept away from film production and the Silver Screen. The entry of Dalits into cinematic space was a conscious and deliberate act, not a self-propelled organic one. Dalits' first engagement with cinema and literature could be observed in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The present study is an attempt to address the question, “What is Dalit cinema?”, “Does the mere presence of a Dalit character in the film make it a Dalit film?” “Does the realistic portrayal of Dalits make it a Dalit film?” and so on.

### **Dalits: At the Doorstep of Indian Cinema**

During the Round Table Conferences (1930-32), Dr. BR Ambedkar, a Dalit (then known as the Depressed Class), demanded and gained separate electorates for Dalits from the British government, identifying them as a minority community, separating them from caste Hindus. M.K. Gandhi vehemently opposed identifying Dalits as a distinct community and claimed to be the sole representative of Hindus, including Dalits. His advocacy failed to convince the British Government and members of the conference of his claim that Dalits as part of the Hindu community and that him being representative of Dalits. He couldn't substantiate his claim against Dr. Ambedkar in the conference(s). Later, he conceded it by using his trick, resulting in the famous Poona Pact of 1932.

MK Gandhi, an upper-caste Hindu, was revered in the upper-caste intelligentsia and artistic class. Contemporary critics, intelligentsia, novelists, and filmmakers took the onus on themselves to substantiate his claim as the sole representative of Dalits. They took the lead in establishing MK Gandhi's philosophical model that Dalits are integral parts of Hindu society. They tried to propagate and establish Gandhian philosophy by the different available means; novels and films are one of them. They propagated that Dalits would be assimilated into the Hindu social system by ‘complete submission to oppressors (upper-caste Hindus) and win the heart of

oppressor by good deeds' and not by the way of 'proportionate representation and equality before the law' as propounded by Dr. Ambedkar.

The Gandhian model was propagated and established by the critics, intelligentsia, and other artistic classes through novels, films, and other means of mass propagation. Journalistic writings and social activities are beyond the scope of this paper and hence excluded. This class succeeded in establishing Gandhian status quoits and reformist philosophy as the *only* way for the emancipation of Dalits. At the same time, the Ambedkarite model was pushed to the margins.

### Gandhian Dalits (Harijans): The Precursors of Dalits in Cinema

As discussed above, one could observe the sudden sprout of protagonists belonging to the depressed class (now Scheduled Castes or Dalits) in the novels and films of the 1930s. Novels like *Malapalli* (Telugu, 1922), *Untouchable* (1935), *Malapilla* (Telugu, 1938), and *Kanthapura* (1938) and films like *Chandi Das* (Bengali, 1932) and its remake *Chandi Das* (Hindi, 1934), *Dharamatman* (Hindi and Marathi 1935), *Achoot Kanya* (Hindi, 1936), *Malapalli* (Telugu, 1938), could be observed in a short period.

Certain common features could be observed in the Depressed Class (Gandhian Dalits or Harijans) portrayed in the novels and films. Only female characters are been portrayed and the Dalit concerns are subsumed in male-female relations. They were portrayed as meek and submissive to oppressions, deprived of agency, keeping their devotion to God and the societal system intact and waiting for exploiters to change their hearts, not to question the system but to accept it as preordained, and so on. The root cause of all the handicaps in their life is fate, and one must endure it without resentment, in the hope of a better life in the next birth. The only way out was a reformation of the upper caste by selfless devotion or death. There is no place for questioning the norms, resentment, rebellion, or even voicing their concerns.

*Chandi Das* (Hindi, 1934) directed by Nitin Bose is a remake of the same titled *Chandi Das* (Bengali, 1932) and was a commercial big success. Rami, a Dalit woman, meekly accepts that she is not worthy of being loved by a priest of the upper caste and believes that by loving her, he is showing generosity towards her. The same phenomenon could be observed in *Achoot Kanya* (The Untouchable Girl, Hindi, 1936) directed by Franz Osten. Despite her love for Pratap, she accepts that she cannot be the wife of Pratap. She never thought of breaking or questioning societal norms set for them.

In *Malapalli* (A Mala [Untouchable] Girl, Telugu, 1938), a film directed by Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, a Brahmin boy falls in love with Sampalatha, a Dalit girl. Failing to see the possibility of acceptance of their love in society, they eloped and got married. The father of Nagaraju was initially against them, but later accepted them due to the selfless dedication shown by the Dalits in saving his wife from the fire.

*Sujata* (Hindi, 1959) was directed and produced by Bimal Roy. It is a love story between Adheer, a Brahmin Man, and an untouchable woman, Sujata. Charu, Sujata's foster mother, never accepted her as a daughter as she was born in a Dalit family. Sujata's blood from a rare blood group saves her foster mother's life, who requires it due to an accident. This brings her a change of heart, and she willingly allows her to marry Adheer.

Dalits in novels and films, as discussed above, prominently show the Gandhian ways of dealing with the caste system. In some works, there is direct mention of Gandhi, like in *Untouchable* (1935) and *Kanthapura* (1938), while in the films, there are motifs and symbols of Gandhian philosophy. As in the film *Sujata* (1959), there is a complete submission to the oppressor without any remorse and selfless dedication, waiting for their heart to change. As mentioned in Wikipedia about the film:

The film has Mahatma Gandhi's fight against untouchability and the myth of Chandali in Hinduism as its subtexts, based on which it tries to criticize the practice of untouchability in India. (Wikipedia)

Another important point in this whole exercise of the introduction of the depressed class is that the critics, artists, and upper-caste intelligentsia conveniently kept writers and artists of the depressed class at a safe arm's distance and were able to shove their concerns safely and silently under the carpet, keeping their progressive faces intact.

### Later Gandhian Dalits in Indian Cinema

Cinema historically remained a capital-intensive industry and was controlled and dominated by a few wealthy upper-caste families. So, cinema in India reproduces the *upper* caste/class gaze as a metonymy for the whole nation. The upper caste names, Brahminical cultural rituals, and Hindu aesthetics were portrayed as the natural essence of the entire nation. Dalits are been *looked upon* but rarely *looked at*. They have taken advantage of these discourses while simultaneously depriving marginalised characters of agency and dignity by reproducing the same caste hierarchies on screen.

The artificial, unconvincing, and out-of-world portrayal of Dalits could not be sustained for long. Gandhian stream of portrayal did not die, but their portrayal turned sophisticated with time from shallow to deep, from romanticised to realistic, and so on, but it lacked authenticity, genuineness, and vision. Understanding the potential of cinema in unifying a diverse country and the importance of good cinema for society, the Government

of India established the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1960. Later in 1975, it was reconstituted as NFDC (National Film Development Corporation of India) as a PSU (Public Sector Undertaking) under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

Some prominent films funded, supported, or influenced by NDFC that have Gandhian Dalit or Harijan characters are *Ankur* (Hindi, 1974), *Nishant* (Hindi, 1975), *Manthan* (Hindi, 1976), *Aakrosh* (Hindi, 1980), *Sadgati* (Hindi, 1981), *Paar* (Hindi, 1984), *Damul* (Hindi, 1985), *Antarjali Jatra* (Bengali, 1987), *Diksha* (Hindi, 1991), *Lagaan* (Hindi, 2001), *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (Punjabi, 2011), *Chauranga* (Hindi, 2016), *Maassab* (Hindi, 2021) and *Guthlee Ladoo* (Hindi, 2023). This is just a suggestive list, and several films still could be added to it. Let us see how Gandhian Dalits and Harijans have been portrayed.

*Ankur* (The Seedling, Hindi, 1974), directed by Shyam Benegal's Kistayya, a Dalit, is portrayed as meek and submissive without any self-respect. He is portrayed as a drunkard who, in his olden days, was industrious but is now dependent on his wife. Despite the injustice inflicted upon him, he was submissive throughout and never even thought of retaliating. In his other film, *Nishant* (The End of Night, Hindi, 1975), again, an unnamed character played by Sadhu Meher is portrayed as a drunkard and victim lacking agency. The same phenomenon could be observed in the portrayal of Bhiku in Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (An Outrage, Hindi, 1980). Lahanya is portrayed as a voiceless victim who never tried or thought to seek justice for the death of his wife. His father was portrayed in the same stereotype: drunkard, victim, submissive, and defeated.

In the film *Damul* (The Noose, Hindi, 1985), a Dalit Sanjeeva is again portrayed as a victim of politics between two higher castes, again lacking agency and voice. He is again portrayed as meek, impulsive, and a victim. *Antarjali Jatra* (The Ultimate Journey, Bengali, 1987) directed by Baiju, is portrayed as a drunkard and impulsive, who cannot come out of the role assigned to him by society and is content with his life, defeated and submissive. *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (The Land Revenue, Hindi, 2001), *Kachara* is the only Dalit character, whose name itself means 'filth' or 'dirt'. He is crippled and portrayed as voiceless and submissive.

*Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse, Punjabi, 2011) again portrays Dalits as poor, landless, and marginalized characters such as Melu, his Bapu, his Chacha Pratap, etc. lead banal and uneventful lives, which are not even worthy of a description, let alone artistic treatment. It again portrays sympathetic, voiceless victims. *Chauranga* (The Four Coloured, Hindi, 2016), directed by Bikas Ranjan Mishra, naturalised exploitation and toleration. Dalits are again portrayed as voiceless, victims, and submissive.

*Mukta* (Marathi, 1994), directed by Jabbar Patel only seems to be an exception to this. It is the story of an upper-caste Maratha girl and a lower-caste boy who struggle against the contradictions of their caste. Milind Wagh, a Dalit poet and student leader, is portrayed as vocal and strongly asserts his Dalit identity. He seemed to be inspired by the Dalit Panthers movement of the 80s in Maharashtra. He seems to be the only vocal and strong Dalit portrayed in the films supported by NFDC.

It is worth mentioning here that around 300 film projects were funded directly or indirectly by the NDFC (government) on various social concerns in various Indian languages (the NDFC, after keeping funding to a minimum, stopped funding and financing in 2013). Still, not a single Dalit filmmaker could get funds/finance for any project. The absence of depressed-class artists and filmmakers makes their portrayal artificial and unconvincing, devoid of any depth in characters. Their portrayal was seen as an entirely alien phenomenon and out of this world. The same concern has been pointed out by well-known film scholar MK Raghavendra:

To all appearances, the portrayal of Dalits has been 'theory down', victimhood made the essence of Dalit life... Most films about Dalits have come from upper-caste filmmakers, and one could cite a series of films where Dalit/Adivasi portrayals are patently unconvincing: Devika Rani in *Achhut Kanya*, Shabana Azmi in *Ankur*, Smita Patil in *Aakrosh*, Nutan in *Sujata*; still, there is more to it than unconvincing character portrayals. (Raghavendra)

Critics argue that NFDC only promotes voiceless Harijan or Gandhian Dalit characters envisioned by the upper-caste elite artists, rather than strong characters with voices envisioned by Dalit filmmakers. The films are produced and propagate the upper caste gaze.

### What is Dalit Cinema?

Scholars have divergent opinions about "What is a Dalit Film?" or "Mere presence of Dalit characters in the film makes it a Dalit film?" The first and foremost thing one could find in the Dalit Cinema is that it must portray the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Dalit individuals and not a romanticised out-of-the-world presentation for the sake of aesthetic appeal. It shouldn't smooth the rough, harsh expressions in the name of artistic liberty and shy away from the stark realities in portrayal. The portrayal should be authentic and convincing.

Dalit cinema emerged as a rebellion against the dominant caste hegemony perpetuated by mainstream cinema. It aims to break away from stereotypical portrayals and present multidimensional, true-to-the-world characters. A film that doesn't oppose caste supremacy, promote or support the status quo approach, and accept

a non-egalitarian social structure, can't be accepted as a Dalit film. The role of fate should be limited. It must have a vision for the betterment of society and humanity. As argued by Suraj Yengde, an author and cinema critic:

Dalit cinema has the potential to offer performative resistance to the interwoven threads of the caste-capital nexus. By critiquing caste, gender, class, and other forms of oppression, Dalit cinema could foreshadow a cohesive battle against hegemonic caste supremacy. It would then be possible to argue against the dominance of oppressor castes in Indian cinema. Dalit cinema as a resistance movement definitely has the potential to be among the pioneers of modern artistic resistance; that potential could be harnessed by departing from traditional forms of art. Realism, impressionism, and post-impressionism were the modern art forms that rejected the bourgeois romantic versions of the world. (Dalit Cinema)

The upper-caste gaze is another important benchmark. Dalit Cinema explores a wide range of themes such as love, identity, politics, and everyday life through the lens of Dalit characters. It must challenge and invert the upper-caste gaze. Margaret, in her study, pointed out that the portrayal of Dalits by a certain gaze takes out the very essence of humanity from them and distorts them to the extent of caricatures. In her article, she points out:

The untouchables are represented as drunkards and as prone to self-destruction because of their habits, customs, and festivals. They are portrayed as a dehumanised bunch of people and termed dirty, uncivilised, and barbaric because they do not follow Hindu culture. The notion that they are themselves responsible for their degraded existence, that is, their habit of drinking alcohol, eating meat, animal sacrifice, and dancing that makes them beyond redemption, recurs repeatedly. (Cultural Gandhism: Casting Out the Dalit Woman)

Dalit cinema believes in a democratised and inclusive cinematic space. With its inclusive spirit, it relates itself to other marginalised traits of the world, like marginalisation based on colour, ethnicity, religion, etc. It posed a challenge to the hegemonic and exclusive existing structure. It expands the collective imagination of the people. Suraj Yengde, a well-known scholar of Dalit issues, has written about the writes about the potential of Dalit cinema. He observes:

Dalit cinema as a theoretical construct can transcend the issue of Dalit oppression by converging with artistic critiques of other oppressions. ...Dalit cinema has the potential to join African and other marginalised cinemas in breaking away from the mainstream cinematographic hegemony (Dalit Cinema)

The next important point is foregrounding the rich Dalit culture, the songs, the music, the customs, the traditions, the foods, etc. The rich and diverse Dalit culture did not find a place in mainstream cinema and remained obscure in shared imagination. The upper-caste film producers purposefully used techniques that "other", silence, and appropriate the history, wisdom, and symbols of the marginalised populations. It should highlight Dalit perspectives, create a space for artistic expression that resonates with Dalit communities, and display the rich culture of Dalits from the *inside*. A Dalit critic, Nagpal, quoting Tamil Dalit director Pa Ranjit, states that:

There have been films in the past that depict Dalit characters and lives. They were made by non-Dalits, who view us through a lens of pity. Our world is shown as colourless and poverty-stricken. Yes, we are economically poor, but not culturally so. Where is the depiction of our vibrant culture, music, and food? Why is our world shown bereft of it all? (When Dalit filmmakers embrace their identity and reclaim their stories)

The next is inverting the usual Brahminic aesthetic gaze. The Dalit film should challenge and invert the usual Brahminic aesthetic gaze, which takes out the vitality and individuality of Dalit characters and reduces them to mere stock characters. It should challenge stereotypes, provide visibility, and empower Dalit voices through the medium of cinema. The portrayal of poverty and handicaps should be taken as an opportunity to prove determination and resilience. It must try to redefine the aesthetics of gaze. In the words of Manju Edchara:

Kaala (2018), the title of the film, does the same reversal of meanings. Kaala in Hindi or Sanskrit refers to the colour black, which is often associated with darkness in Hindu mythology. But Ranjith employs a different hermeneutic to deconstruct and reconstruct the name Kaala. When Hari Dada (the villain) asks sarcastically, "Kaala, what sort of name is that?" Kaala replies that black is the colour of labour. The movie itself is a story of an urban slum community. But unlike other popular films, which depict only the negative aspects of slum life, Ranjith highlights their life, struggles, and celebrations. From the act of naming, these films offer an anti-caste aesthetic that is also an oppositional gaze to mainstream Indian cinema. (Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema)

### Emergence of Dalit Cinema

Cinema historically remained a capital-intensive industry and was controlled and dominated by a few wealthy upper-caste families. Technological advancement and post-liberalisation have reduced the cost of filmmaking. The government's Affirmative action in different sectors led to a small middle class of Dalits that could sustain the Dalit films. Initially, some strong Dalit characters were observed in certain films, ultimately giving way to Dalit films that could strongly portray Dalit concerns.

All films with strong Dalit characters cannot be termed as Dalit films. As discussed in the section above, it must address Dalit concerns and should have a reversal of the normal aesthetic gaze. But, at the same time, their importance can't be denied; they are precursors of Dalit films. They have created space for Dalit films. Their commercial success has paved the way for Dalit and other filmmakers to venture into Dalit filmmaking. A few of the commercial films portraying strong Dalit characters are: *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (Hindi, 2007), *Aakrosh* (Hindi, 2010), *Aarakshan* (Hindi, 2011), *Court* (Hindi, 2014), *Article 15* (Hindi, 2019), *Ozhivudivasate Kali* (Malayalam, 2015), and *Kathal* (Hindi, 2023), and web series *Dahad* (Hindi, 2023).

But only a handful of films could be considered as Dalit films. Some commercially successful films on Dalit concerns in different languages are: *Shudra: The Rising* (Hindi, 2012), *Fandry* (Marathi, 2013), *Papilio Buddha* (Malayalam, 2013), *Madras* (Tamil, 2014), *Masaan* (Hindi, 2015), *Sairat* (Marathi, 2016), *Kabali* (Tamil, 2016), *Manusangada* (Tamil, 2017), *Pariyerum Perumal* (Tamil, 2018), *Kaala* (Tamil, 2018), *Asuran* (Tamil, 2019), *Palasa 1978* (Telugu, 2020), *Karnan* (Tamil, 2021), *Jai Bheem* (Tamil, 2021), and *Jayanti* (Maharati, 2021), *PADA* (Malayalam, 2022) and *Quota: The Reservation* (Hindi, 2022).

## II. Conclusion

According to Dr. BR Ambedkar, India is governed by two prominent ideologies. The ideologies that guide our life, culture, gaze, and worldview. The backward-looking, regressive, orthodox, and feudalistic society that tries to maintain the status quo. The other believes in an egalitarian and humanistic society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. In the Indian context, Gandhian ideology aspires to bring Ram Rajya, which divides and segregates society based on Varna Dharma. On the other side, Ambedkarite ideology envisages bringing democracy following liberty, equality, and fraternity. Narake, quoting Dr. Ambedkar, writes:

Indians today are governed by two different ideologies. Their political ideal set in the preamble of the Constitution affirms a life of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Their social ideal, embodied in their religion, denies them. (Dr. Babasaheb: Writings and Speeches)

Dalits were never part of any discourse and were practically invisible in every field. Certain political conditions of the last century's late 1920s and early 1930s brought the question of Dalits to the forefront. The political question of the representation of Dalits brought Gandhi and Ambedkar to opposite camps. Gandhi and Ambedkar had their ways and means for the emancipation of Dalits. On the one side, Gandhi believed that Harijans (Dalits) would be assimilated into the Hindu social system by 'complete submission to oppressors (upper-caste Hindus) and win the heart of oppressor by good deeds', and on the other side, Ambedkar strongly envisages that the emancipation of Dalits is possible only by the 'equality before the law' and by the way of 'proportionate representation and affirmative' action by the government.

The portrayal of the Dalits in novels and films started with the discussion on the question of representation in the Round Table Conferences. The upper-caste intelligentsia and other artistic classes took the lead in establishing Gandhian ideology through novels, films, and other means of mass propagation. In this whole exercise, they kept Dalit writers and artists at a safe arm's distance. So, from the beginning, Gandhian ideology became the norm in Indian Cinema, and Ambedkarite ideology was relegated to the background. Only Dalit characters were able to breach screen space, and Dalit concerns were conveniently shoved under the carpet, keeping a liberal face intact.

The focus of Gandhian philosophy was limited to portraying their plight, suppression, humiliation, dilemmas, victimhood, exploitation, vulnerability, and lack of vision or dream. Their portrayal cannot recognize, reflect, and reorganize for effective and purposive action, both as individuals and as part of a larger community. The Gandhian hangover continued to direct and guide later governments' policies. The post-independence policies of inclusion of Dalits by the upper caste elite, intelligentsia, and filmmakers resulted in hampering the natural portrayal of Dalits. It was the result of the dedicated effort of upper-caste novelists and filmmakers to substantiate Gandhian claims as the only way to uplift and emancipate Dalits.

With the affirmative action of the government and the growth of the small middle class among Dalits, few filmmakers have ventured into Dalit filmmaking. It started with the breaking of stereotypes in the portrayal of Dalits by portraying strong Dalit characters. Many of them were accepted by audiences, gradually breaking the stereotype of Dalits being a monolithic, vulnerable community.

Bollywood audiences and filmmakers are still reluctant to adopt and accept the Dalit concerns. Films like *Aakrosh* (2010), *Masaan* (2015), *Kaala* (2018), *Ajeeb Dastan* (2021), and a few others that tried to address Dalit concerns were not commercially successful, hence discouraging new projects. On the other side, regional cinema audiences such as Marathi, *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016), and *Jayanti* (2021), Malayalam films such as *Papilio Buddha* (2013) and *PADA* (2022), Telugu films such as *Palasa 1978* (2020), etc. loved the Dalit hero and Dalit concerns. So, Dalit films are commercially successful in regional cinemas. Along with their commercial success, these films were lauded by critics nationally and internationally.

Dalit presence could be felt strongly in Tamil cinema. Tamil films address Dalit concerns strongly. These are accepted and loved by audiences as well. Films like *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), *Manusangada* (2017)

*Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Kaala* (2018), *Asuran* (2019), *Karnan* (2021), and *Jai Bheem* (Tamil, 2021). Dalits in Tamil cinema are not exceptions but have become a trend. Tamil Dalit cinema is generating a new grammar in the cinematic world. Once the films are box office successes, they are dubbed and remade in other South Indian languages and repeat their story many times. Tamil Dalit cinema is redefining the Indian cinematic landscape.

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