

---

## REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL ISSUES IN INDIAN CINEMA: A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE CAUSE OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Rakesh Bawa

Asstt. Prof. (History) Guru Nanak Khalsa College Daroli Kalan Jalandhar, Punjab,  
India

---

### Abstract

*Indian Cinema has been witness to many social issues being raised from time to time. Various genres have been worked upon by the filmmakers to showcase their talent. Mythological, Socially relevant films, Escapist fare, horror, Islamicate and -parallel Cinema movement have been the genres, Indian film-makers have tackled with. Prominent film-makers who have raised the social issues in Hindi Cinema are V.Shantaram, Raj Kapoor, Mehboob, Guru Dutt, Bimal Roy and B.R. Chopra. These film-makers have raised concerns about various social issues like women issues, caste system, class difference and poverty in their Cinema. In this paper, issue of untouchability has been raised as shown specifically in films, Achhut Kanya, Sujata and Lagan*

**Key words:** Social issues, Cinema, untouchability, Achhut Kanya, Lagan

### Indian Cinema at a glance: Various Genres in Hindi Cinema including the representation of social issues

One of the most important inventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been the Cinema. The visual images have enthralled one and all since the making of first feature film in the world, **The story of the Kelly Gang (1906)**<sup>1</sup>. Firstly, the silent era of Cinema dominated the world and later on the talkies took over. India was not to be lagged behind and soon in 1913, first silent film, **Raja Harishchandra** made by Govindraj Dunderaj Phalke, popularly known as Dada Saheb Phalke hit the screens. The film made an instant connection with the masses as the story of Raja Harishchandra along with other mythological heroes had been embedded right there in the minds of Indians. The advent of silent era in Indian Cinema is dominated by Hindu mythological<sup>2</sup>. Various mythological produced in India left a great impact on the minds of Cine-goers. In the absence of sound, mythological gave a chance to the film-makers to play with the visual effects though the technology in that era was not so advanced. Revered gods who had become part and parcel of Indian psyche were now being beamed live on celluloid due to efforts of some enterprising film-makers of that era. The mythological laid the base for a thriving film industry in India and even in the modern era, in the digitalised age, the mythological have not lost its sheen as shown by the success of two serialized epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata in decade of nineties. Some of the important silent mythological produced during the silent era are as following: **Raja Harishchandra (1913), Mohini Bhasmasur (1913), Satyavan Savitri (1914), Lanka Dahan**

---

<sup>1</sup> The story of the Kelly Gang is a 1906 silent film made in Australia which traces the conflict between Bush rangers and outlaw Ned Kelly and his gang. The film was shot in and around Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> Hindu mythology consists of various stories related to Gods, Goddesses and demons and the basic premise of almost every story is to show the victory of good over evil. The epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata contain many such episodes and stories within the main story. Earliest decade of Hindi Cinema was much inspired by these stories.

(1917), **Nala Damayanti (1921)** and **Maya Bazaar (1923)**. Silent films were silent only in the name as these films were often accompanied by the musicians playing various musical instruments like Harmonium, Tabla, Sarangi and Violin. Soon the Silent era gave way to talkies being made in India.

1931 saw the first talkie film hitting the screens in form of *Alam Ara* made by Ardeshir Irani. The film also marked the advent of songs in the films. The film was released on March 14, 1931. Those were the days of big production houses. One of the prominent production house, The Imperial Movietone produced **Alamara**. The film starred Master Vitthal and Zubeida as main male and female leads respectively. The film also starred Prithviraj Kapoor<sup>3</sup>, who in the times to come was to become a major star of Hindi Cinema. The decade of 1930's and 1940's was important in the aspect that the decades saw socially relevant Cinema being produced in India along with the usual Hindi films based upon mythology and fantasy tales. 1930's and 1940's were the decades in India when the national movement in India was at its peak and some of the movements within the national movement were talking of social issues especially after coming of Mahatma Gandhi on the scene of freedom movement. This was the time when various social issues like Caste related problem, Class struggle, issue of poverty, communalism, marginalised society and untouchability were being tackled by the film-makers. The name of V. Shantaram can be rightly taken as the pioneer of socially oriented films. Starting his journey in the field of Cinema in Marathi language, Shantaram excelled himself in the social genre in Hindi language also. "**Duniya Na Maane**", "**Padosi**" and "**Do Ankhen Barah Hath**" are the films which took V. Shantaram to a higher pedestal. After Shantaram, came Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Bimal Roy and B.R. Chopra who were keen to put across the social message through this medium. It is pertinent to mention here that Nehruvian ideology was the motivating factor inspiring these film-makers all the time.

The golden age of Hindi Cinema started in real sense after India got freedom in 1947. Before India's independence, Lahore<sup>4</sup> was creative hub of film industry in North India whereas Kolhapur and Nasik were the cities where the film-makers from Maharashtra were satisfying their creative urges. Bombay was just emerging and developing as the site of film-making during that time and it became a melting pot for all the creative people representing various cultures and sensibilities and thus came forward some of the classic masterpieces being created in that era in the decade of 1950's representing both entertainment as well as social consciousness. The era also saw the flavour of various regions being incorporated in Hindi Cinema. The era saw the bringing of Bengali sensibility in Hindi Cinema in form of Cinema of Guru Dutt and Bimal Roy. Raj Kapoor brought boisterousness and loudness of Punjabi culture with music becoming an integral part of his Cinema. V. Shantaram was busy churning out Hindi Cinema of a subdued nature. Satyajit Ray marked his presence in 1955 with *Pather Panchali* (film in Bengali language). In the days to come, Ray was to be counted among the greats of world Cinema. Ray has been the only film-maker from India to get a

<sup>3</sup> Born on November 3, 1906, in Samundri, Punjab, India, and Prithviraj Kapoor started his film career with the Imperial film company and worked as a lead actor in the silent films made by the company. He also honed his skill as an actor in New Theatres, Calcutta. Meanwhile he established a touring theatre group, Prithvi theatres in 1944 and which staged many memorable plays like **Gaddar**, **Pathan**, **Deewar**, **Dahej** and **Kisan**. These plays were based upon socialistic ideology.

<sup>4</sup> Along with the establishment of Film industry in Bombay and Calcutta, Lahore, Punjab was also a major seat of film-making in India. This was the pre-partition phase where prominent film-makers like Roop Lal Shorey and Dalsukh Pancholi had established their studios. After partition, many talented film-makers and artists migrated to Bombay, Maharashtra, India.

lifetime Oscar. His Cinema has remained basically universal in nature made in Bangla language and he never tried to make his presence felt in the realm of Hindi Cinema apart from *"Shatranj Ke Khiladi"* and *"Sadgati"*.

The beginning of the decade of sixties saw the release of magnum opus *"Mughal-E-Azam"*, the film by K. Asif.<sup>5</sup> This decade also saw the blooming of Cinema based upon theory of escapism. Lifting music played an important role in the success of these films. These films were basically dreams which were sold by the commercial film-makers to the cine-goers though the meaningful Cinema as initiated by film-makers like V. Shantaram, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Mehboob Khan and Bimal Roy was still being made. But the star system had made its presence felt in this decade. It was the emergence of a star system now where star was all powerful entity whose name was instrumental in selling the film. For the first time, it was felt that music could be used to sell a film in an effective way. **Sunil Dutt's "Mujhe Jeene Do", Dilip Kumar's "Ganga Jumna", Raj Kapoor's "Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai" and "Sangam", Bimal Roy's "Madhumati" and "Bandini", B.R. Chopra's "Naya Daur", Manoj Kumar's "Upkar", Ramanand Sagar's "Aarzo" and Shakti Samanta's "Amar Prem" were some of the significant films of this decade.**

Formally named as Film Finance Corporation, National Film Development Corporation, a central agency was set up to promote quality Cinema in India. It was felt that Hindi Cinema had been successful in making commercially viable Cinema and had struck a chord with the film-goers, but somewhere, this Cinema did not represent the true culture and issues ailing India. The Cinema was not portraying real issues in an effective manner as it should be. Thus, this agency was born and a new parallel cinema movement started in India under its umbrella. Film-makers like Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Jabbar Patel, Kumar Shahani, Mani Kaul, Sai Paranjpe and Utpalendu Chakraborty were able to make films with financial help from NFDC though later on some private enterprises also helped these film-makers in their effort. But this parallel Cinema movement also called as new wave cinema failed to capture the audience's eye and soon fizzled out of the scene. Some of the important films made under this movement are **Shyam Benegal's "Ankur", "Nishant" and "Manthan", Govind Nihalani's "Aakrosh" and "Ardhasatya", Sai Paranjpe's "Katha" and "Sparsh", Mrinal Sen's "Bhuvan Shome", Mani Kaul's "Uski Roti" and Kumar Shahani's "Tarang".**

1970's was the decade of emergence of a new phenomenon of angry young man in the form of Amitabh Bachchan and anti-establishment formula became new "mantra" of film-makers to make their films successful. Political emergency was declared by the former Prime minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi produced a mass reaction on the streets of India and this reflected in the Cinema also. This decade was a sort of death knell for the romantic, musical and escapist cinema.

After the decade of seventies, crass commercialization had dominated Hindi Cinema more or less and Hindi Cinema worth its name was very rare to mention. The story of commercialization continued in the decade of nineties and thereafter also. The coming of multiplexes have initiated a new trend of independent cinema backed by corporate houses

<sup>5</sup> Born as Asif Karim in Etawah, Uttar Pradesh, India on June 14, 1924, he became famous in film industry as K. Asif. *Mughal-E-Azam* is his magnum opus Based upon the love story of Prince Salim of Mughal Empire and Anarkali, a courtesan. Apart from this film, he was also associated with films *Phool* and *Hulchul*. He started a project called *Love and God* which was later completed by K.C. Bokadia.

and to some extent cinema produced by production houses assembled by young enthusiastic film-makers. These films are known as Indie films.<sup>6</sup> These film-makers are keen on experimentation in Hindi Cinema though within the basic parameters and pattern of film-making which had been going since the inception of Hindi Cinema in India. Very few film-makers have been able to break the conventional mould of film-making. Styles have changed, film-makers have come and gone, slight difference in the pattern of film-making has been there and despite a lot of entertainment options now available to the people, Indian Cinema is still going strong and has lately able to mark its presence felt at a global level also.

### **Representation of issue of untouchability in Various Forms of Expression.**

Untouchability as a social issue is a curse in Indian system and has been deep-rooted in the Indian social system since ages. The Varna system or the caste system has been associated with the religious values. The complexity of this system also involves the Economic issues also. There has been various interpretations of this complex social system which is unique to Indian society. The issue of untouchability has found a place in various arts forms and literature from time to time. The artists, authors and the reformers have tried to make an impact on the masses and to make the society aware about this inhuman system through the means which they know better. The words, the colours, the paint brushes, the theatre movement and the medium of Cinema have been used as a tool to reform the society in this aspect.

Writers like R.K.Narayana, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao have been instrumental in bringing the core social issues in their writings in their times. These writers belong to an older era and their writings still create waves in the literary circles. Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Untouchable* is renowned for the portrait of Bakha, a sweeper, just eighteen years old, in the colonial India. The story represents and examines the relation between various classes of the society (untouchable downtrodden people, upper caste Hindus, Muslims, Britishers). The relationship is a tense one, *per se*. One can name Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy and Rohinton Mistry to name a few who have tried to raise various social issues and raise the voice through literature in favour of depressed and downtrodden classes in today's times. The novel *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry is an example of telling the story of underprivileged classes. The novel looks at the curse of untouchability and poverty of the lower class people in the villages and cities in the colonial and free India. Gandhian concept of social reforms is full represented in these works. Apart from the Indian writing in English, these classes are also represented in full force in the vernacular literature. Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* has also raised the issue of underprivileged and downtrodden classes.

Theatre is a very potent medium of social change. Many personalities associated with theatre have used the medium of theatre to usher a change and raise various issues in order to have some social justice in the society. The downtrodden, underprivileged and people belonging to lower castes have been found a mention prominently in the theatre movement in India. Dalit theatre in Maharashtra has been very active in bringing the social issues concerning them on the forefront. Various issues like Violence towards women, illicit behaviour of men, immorality, human trafficking and untouchability have found mention in

---

<sup>6</sup> Indie films or Independent films are the films which are made without any major studio backing. The films are independent ventures of some individuals who fund their cinema with the backing of corporate houses. With the advent of multiplexes, the trend of Indie films has got a boost. This trend has helped many film-makers in India like Anurag Kashyap, Vikas Behl, and Vikramaditya Motwane etc.



the plays, both in vernacular as well as English language from time to time. Not going in detail, one can have a look into the plays of prominent Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar only to gauge the social responsibility of the theatre movement. His play, **Silence, the court is on** represents the life of a woman who is being abused physically and psychologically throughout. The play **Kamla** by the playwright is based upon the issue of human trafficking especially of the people belonging to the second sex. Kamla represents the issue through the eyes of a tribal woman who has been sold. His play **Kanyadan** is based upon the theme of the marriage of a Brahmin girl and a Dalit man.

### Representation of Dalit Issue in Indian Cinema:

Similarly, the Cinema is also instrumental in raising the voice in favour of Untouchables from time to time. Some of the prominent films made in India to represent the issue of untouchability are **Achhut Kanya (1936)**, **Sujata (1959)**, **Fandry (2014)**, **Jait Re Jait (1977)**, **Lagaan (2001)**, **Anhe Ghore Da Daan (2012)**, **Sairat (2016)**, **Paar (1984)**, **Ankur (1974)** and **Ghulami (1985)**.

Main methodology adopted to write the research paper is first hand viewing of the films which form the content of this research paper. Apart from it secondary sources which are the books based upon Cinematic studies have been consulted.

In this paper, the issue of untouchability has been analysed through three films only; **Achhut Kanya**, **Sujata** and **Lagaan**.

#### 1. Achhut Kanya (1936)

The Hindi film, **Achhut Kanya** is basically a love story between a Brahmin boy, **Pratap** (Ashok Kumar) and a Dalit girl, **Kasturi** (Devika Rani). The film was made under the banner of prominent production house, Bombay Talkies and was released in 1936. The film was revolutionary step in the history of Indian Cinema at that time. Mahatma Gandhi had been in the forefront in the freedom struggle and was vying for various social reforms also in the decade of 1930's. The issue of untouchables was very close to the heart of Mahatma Gandhi. Himanshu Rai (the owner of Bombay Talkies) and Franz Osten (The German director) decided to put the story of inter-caste love on the celluloid. The film was first of its kind in which the director used the force of mob violence to stop the male protagonist marrying the female protagonist belonging to a lower caste. It is mob which is instrumental in bringing the traditional morality on the forefront. The film was successful commercially. It had a tragic end to it. The love story of a Brahmin boy and a Dalit girl was accepted by masses and filled the heart of the audience with contempt. The film made Ashok Kumar, a star in his own right. The theme of inter-caste love and mob mentality to oppose this love is still relevant today.

#### 2. Sujata (1959)

Released in 1959, **Sujata** is based upon a Bengali short story of the same name by Subodh Ghosh. The film is a social realistic film based upon the issue of caste system. The film was the official entry to the international Cannes film festival in 1960.

**Sujata** in the eyes of famous film-maker from Assam, Jahnu Barua, is the most interesting film of Bimal Roy's career. He finds the subject very true and near to the lifelong mission of Mahatma Gandhi to remove untouchability. The film is a passionate statement made by Bimal Roy on celluloid condemning 'untouchability' as a crime against humanity.

Untouchability as a theme had not been exploited in a large number of Indian films. *Achhut Kanya*, made under the banner of Bombay Talkies is perhaps a prominent film on this issue. Bimal Roy through *Sujata* has tried to challenge the Brahmanical order. The theme of untouchability and caste issues, with the lapse of time has not become defunct albeit the perils of the caste system still exists and in a more rigid form in some of the areas of our country. Out of all the social issues which Roy raised through his films, the issue of untouchability and casteism remains the most relevant in the contemporary times also.

The only notable film based upon the issue of untouchability before *Sujata* was *Achhut Kanya* made in 1936. The film starring Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani as a lead pair was a big hit. It was produced under the banner, Bombay Talkies, directed by Franz Osten. Making a film on the issue of untouchability in 1936 was quite unconventional. Nitin Bose's *Chandidas*, released in 1934 and V. Shantaram's *Dharmatma* had also raised the issue of untouchability. *Sujata* is an attempt by Bimal Roy to tackle this all important issue of untouchability.

### **3. Lagan (2001)**

Released in 2001, *Lagan* is basically a movie based upon the game of cricket and the issue of high taxation has been raised in the film which the poor peasants are not in a position to pay to the Britishers. The issue of untouchability in the film has been raised through the character named Kachra.

Based on the premise that the Britishers would waive of the tax to be collected from the villagers of Champaner if they win the cricket match to be played between the village team and the British team. The villagers do not know at all about the game of cricket. Elizabeth, sister of Captain Russel (Captain of British team) helps Bhuvan (Aamir Khan) and his boys in their quest to win the game. She trains them. The entry of the character named Kachra (Aditya Lakhia) is quite accidentally. While practising the game, a ball goes towards Kachra who is standing on the outskirts of the ground with a broom in his right hand. Bhuvan goads him to throw the ball. Kachra is petrified but when compelled; he throws the ball with his left hand which is disabled. The ball spins much and Bhuvan's eyes catch this talent of Kachra and is hell bent to include him in the team as the eleventh player. The entire village including the Mukhiya, the Vaid and other persons belonging to the upper castes oppose this move vehemently. For them even the issue of paying thrice the tax vanishes in front of inclusion of a Dalit in the team. For them, this Varna system was deeply connected with the religious system and nobody was to mess with the system, not even Bhuvan who is trying hard to save the villagers from the clutches of the Britishers. It is pertinent to mention here that the talent of Kachra is found accidentally and it is not the selection of Kachra in the team on the basis of merit alone. Kachra, being part of the Village system remain outside the system, is clear from the fact that he was not been considered to be included in the team in the initial stage. Nobody was keen to judge his talent for the game just because he is a Dalit. Further, it is his disability that has attracted Bhuvan. Bhuvan makes disability of Kachra, his weapon to win the match against the Britishers. Villagers are won by citing the episode of Lord Rama and Shabri.

The caste of other members of the team is not disclosed. It is the character of Kachra only whose caste has been made clear to the audience. The way, the untouchability factor of Kachra becomes visible on the screen, it indicated towards an unseen struggle within the

team itself. The Brahmanical elements in the team are in opposition to the inclusion of an untouchable in the team and for them this struggle becomes issue of life and death than fighting the Britishers.

## REFERENCES

1. [https://www.researchgate.net/.../263132368\\_Portrayal\\_of\\_cast\\_in\\_hindi\\_cinema](https://www.researchgate.net/.../263132368_Portrayal_of_cast_in_hindi_cinema)
2. Bose, Amit. (2009). Remembering Bimal Da. In Roy, Rinki (Eds.), *the man who spoke in pictures, Bimal Roy*. (pp.29). New Delhi, India: Penguin Random
3. Chakraborty, S. Sumita. (1998). *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947- 1987*.
4. New Delhi: Oxford University Press
5. Gokulsing, K.M. and Dissanayake, W. (1998). *Indian Popular Cinema – a narrative of*
6. *Cultural change*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited.
7. MotiGokulsing, K. and Dissanayake, Wimal. (2016). *Women and their portrayal in Indian Cinema*. Retrieved from <https://www.ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/article/download/671/605>