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To cite this article: Suraj Yengde (2018): Dalit Cinema, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848>



Published online: 03 Jun 2018.



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Dalit Cinema

Suraj Yengde

Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article offers introductory remarks on the position of the Dalit in Indian cinema. It starts with the observation that the Indian film industry is an inherently caste-based, biased, mechanised product of technological industrialisation in which Dalit inclusion is not a moral concern. The mainstream film industry in India delivers the desires and principles of market and society by excluding a Dalit framework outright—a problem now being addressed by the entry of an explicitly Dalit cinema. By briefly looking at two films, *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), both written and directed by Dalit film-maker Nagraj Manjule, I offer a critical reading of 'Dalit Cinema'. Taking the work of Manjule, a maverick film-maker who is establishing a new discourse of Dalit-centred socio-culturism, I demonstrate the extent to which caste narratives are absent in the Indian film industry.

KEYWORDS

Bahujan; Bollywood; caste; Dalit; 'Dalit Cinema'; Dalit relationships; Hollywood; Indian films

Introduction

The mainstream Indian cinematic sphere, with few exceptions, has been responsible for sustaining a dominant caste hegemony. Cinema, as a cultural product, form of expression and mass entertainment, appears to dutifully genuflect to an Indian Brahmanical order. In this piece, I offer a critical reading of contemporary Dalit aesthetic expression in cinema by analysing two vernacular films, *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), by award-winning Dalit director Nagraj Manjule. I see Indian cinema as a project that has failed to embody inclusion and diversity. I offer introductory remarks on Dalit resistance to mainstream cinema, suggesting an emergence of an alter-*imaginaire*—an explicitly 'Dalit Cinema'—an act of defiance leading to a sustained cinematic struggle. Compared to similar liberation or resistance movements since the 1960s, Dalit Cinema can be understood as a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, *relating* to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, and as a universal monument of time and space.

Critical Dalit responses to the mainstream regularly surface in Dalit and Dalit-Bahujan discourses by way of literary criticism, theatre, performing arts and social praxis.¹ Cinema, however, owing to its capital-intensive production and techniques, entrenched networks

CONTACT Suraj Yengde  suraj.yengde@gmail.com, surajyengde@fas.harvard.edu

1. 'Dalit-Bahujan' is used to define the subaltern caste groups of the Indian caste order. This includes the Shudra and Ati-Shudra—the two lowest groups in the hierarchy of the *varna* caste system.

and caste-modernist discourses, creates substantial structural blocks to Dalits trying to enter the domain of film-making. This article begins by locating the literature around the Hindi film industry, and then addresses the issue of Indian cinema's relationship to caste and caste narratives and how this relationship produces blatant casteist sensibilities. After proffering a socio-cultural analysis of the films under discussion as a political project, the article underscores the reasons for Dalits' estrangement from the cinema industry by looking at the operations of India's Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and the politics of the gaze espoused by the state. Finally, it constructs a theoretical formula of Dalit Cinema by looking at comparative cases of Third World and African cinemas.

Before we locate the Dalit in Indian cinemascesapes, it is crucial to stabilise the notion of 'cinema', which has vigorously changed its form and appearance since Walter Benjamin described it as an art form that records the 'dramatic changes in the very way we see the world'.² Film influences our perception (*Wahrnehmung*) of the intersection between the aesthetics of art and society. Academic discussion around cinema as a commodity has squarely placed the debate within spheres of consumption and modernity.³ Most critiques of popular media focus on the context of its production. The feminist critique argues for a critical reflection of female subjectivity in Bollywood⁴ that is defined neither by colour nor by corporatised class capital formations.⁵ Some critiques look at the Indian film industry's spatial and linguistic reach—the Mumbai-based Hindi and Marathi cinema, the Chennai- and Hyderabad-based industries, and the South Asian diasporic imagination.⁶ Others observe cinema as the neo-liberal project of the Western gaze, or understand it in the entangled relationships between other forms of media (radio, Internet, satellite television),⁷ or as the intersection of media enterprise with other forms of cultural expressions⁸ or, instead, think of it as an international outreach programme by 'Bollywood Diplomacy' that influences cross-border post-colonial thinking.⁹ The Mumbai-based Hindi film industry, increasingly known as 'Bollywood', is thus a globalised product¹⁰

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2. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 315.
 3. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (eds), *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000).
 4. Jyotsna Kapur, 'An "Arranged Love" Marriage: India's Neoliberal Turn and the Bollywood Wedding Culture Industry', in *Communication, Culture & Critique*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (2009), pp. 221–33.
 5. Daya Kishan Thussu, 'The Globalization of "Bollywood"—The Hype and Hope', in Anandam Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (eds), *Global Bollywood* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2008), pp. 97–116. For a relevant argument, see Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2003), pp. 25–9, doi:10.1080/1464937032000060195.
 6. Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Thomas Blom Hansen, *Melancholia of Freedom: Social Life in an Indian Township in South Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).
 7. Aswin Punathambekar, *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
 8. Christopher P. Campbell (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Race* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
 9. David Bosco, 'Bollywood Diplomacy', in *Foreign Policy* (10 Oct. 2006) [<http://foreignpolicy.com/2006/10/10/bollywood-diplomacy/>, accessed 28 Jan. 2018]; and Press Trust of India (PTI), 'Bollywood Can Be an Important Tool of Diplomacy: PM', *The Economic Times* (11 June 2008) [economicstimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/3120764.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst, accessed 1 Feb. 2018].
 10. Ravinder Kaur, 'Viewing the West through Bollywood: A Celluloid Occident in the Making', in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (2002), pp. 199–209, doi:10.1080/0958493022000030168. Rajadhyaksha, 'The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian Cinema', suggests cinema to be a state-sponsored event. Granting it 'industry' status assures the Indian government's participation in globalisation (Punathambekar, *From Bombay to Bollywood*). Thus, globalisation becomes a mediating suture connecting the cultural industry with the public.

that features caste only tangentially, if at all, producing a trope that I refer to as ‘Brahmanish’. Caste as a representational theme is compromised in the same way as is the construction of secularism in Bollywood films, where Hindu–Muslim relationships are fetishised in the service of constructing a liberal, post-colonial polity, as Chadha and Kavoori argue in their essay about the ‘othering’ of the Muslim in Bollywood.¹¹ Hindu–Muslimisation by the liberal and privileged caste nexus—*Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), *Bombay* (1995), *Earth* (1998), *Pinjar* (2003), *Veer-Zara* (2004), *Parzania* (2007)—negates a critical enquiry into the class, caste and gender dynamics existing within the Hindu and Muslim binaries as a theoretical construct.

Bollywood has successfully elided caste as a theme by subsuming it within categories of ‘the poor’, ‘the common man’, the hard-toiling Indian or, at times, the orphan (*Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* [1978] being one of the popular films in this category). This manoeuvre was promoted by parallel cinemas, such as art cinema and documentary film, which fused their own agenda of ‘populist stereotypes of the marginalized lives, hardly entering into the core debate of social realities’.¹² Films such as *Awara* (1951), *Naya Daur* (1957), *Hum Hindustani* (1960), followed by those from the decade of the 1970s—*Gopi* (1970), *Zanjeer* (1973), *Roti Kapada Aur Makaan* (1974), *Deewar* (1975), *Parvarish* (1977), *Khoon Pasina* (1977), *Kaala Patthar* (1979)—provide fitting examples of a popular cinema informed by the struggles of the downtrodden, in which caste might be extrapolated—although it is rarely overt—as one of the variables producing subalternity.

Thus, a critical reading of Indian cinema as a politics in and of Indian society in terms of Walter Benjamin’s analysis locates the political act of screening a film as an important event.¹³ Therefore, the social interaction depicted in films reflects the mainstream community’s attitudes toward issues debated in phantasmagorical society—society that is the bearer of horrid realities of brutalised existence.

Indian cinema’s relationship to caste

The decades after Indian Independence were defined by nation-building projects. The film industry participated in this dynamic by reflecting the forging of a celebratory agrarian-oriented society and espousing the depiction of loyalty to the nation embodied in the armed forces.¹⁴ This in turn reiterated the call for a conservative nationalism interspersed with religious forces. Hence, every movie started by paying homage to the gods and godly mediations were invoked throughout the movie.¹⁵ People often removed their footwear in the cinema theatre, a sign of respect to the gods that they anticipated would appear on the screen.

11. See Kalyani Chadha and Anandam Kavoori, ‘Exoticized, Marginalized, Demonized: The Muslim “Other” in Indian Cinema’, in Anandam Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (eds), *Global Bollywood* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2008), pp. 131–45.

12. Harish Wankhede, ‘Dalit Representation in Bollywood’, in *Mainstream*, Vol. LI, no. 20 (4 May 2013) [<http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4161.html>, accessed 26 Mar. 2017].

13. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3: 1935–1938, eds Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

14. *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), *Usne Kaha Tha* (1960), *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Lalkaar* (1972), *Aakraman* (1975), *Hum Hindustani* (1960).

15. Major companies in the Indian film industry—such as T-Series, UTV Motion Pictures, Tips Industries, Sun Pictures, Shree Venkatesh Films, Balaji Motion Pictures, Hari Om Entertainment, Sahara One, among others—introduce their films by offering homage to their deities: Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Mainstream Indian cinema is notoriously escapist, and many audiences attend it as a heavily invested time-pass activity in order to pass the time, while the darkness in the theatre offers a form of hiding from the pain of reality. Films tend to portray a dominant caste/dominant Hindu society, offering subaltern subjects only a limited form of escapism; through cinema, Brahmans and allied castes have actively imposed their hegemony on the medium of mainstream cultural expression. For example, celebrating a Brahman marriage, or exulting in *savarna* traditions¹⁶ in everyday films in no way relates to Dalit-Bahujan discourse or culture. By obscuring Dalit-Bahujan narratives, these films evoke an imagined utopia that does not speak to the majority of the population. The ability to participate in the utopia on screen is therefore limited by the project of graded caste hierarchy, and this arrangement further estranges Dalit-Bahujans from mainstream culture. B. R. Ambedkar, the anti-caste intellectual and leader of the oppressed classes, suggested this despicable system was ‘just like a tower which has many storeys without a ladder or an entrance. One who is born in the lower storey cannot enter the upper storey, however worthy he may be. One was to die in the storey one was born’.¹⁷

Indian cinema: Gang of casteists

If one goes as far back as *Achhut Kannya* (1936), one of the first films of Indian cinema to be acclaimed, one can see that it represented the stark reality of the endogamous nature of caste, which Ambedkar explored in his 1916 essay, ‘Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development’.¹⁸ Pre-Independence Indian cinema explored basic genres of caste-related issues; films such as *Chandidas* (Bengali, 1932) plotted the relationship between an ‘upper’- and ‘lower’-caste couple, while *Devdas* (Hindi/Bengali, 1935) portrayed caste difference as an insurmountable problem for a couple; subsequent remakes of *Devdas* (1955, 1965, 1979, 1982, 2002, 2010, 2013), however, framed the couple’s mismatch along class lines. The Telugu film *Malapialla* (*The Outcast Girl*, 1938) presented an inter-caste relationship between a Brahman and an untouchable as a form of resistance to orthodox Brahmanism.¹⁹ *Dharmatma* (1935) by V. Shantaram engaged with the social reform movements led by the saints of Maharashtra,²⁰ presenting a utopian vision of Saint Eknath who defended untouchables against the tyranny of the Brahmans.

The films produced in this era were strongly influenced by social reform movements in India, and exogamous relationships were the central subject of many of these movies. One could argue that this was in conversation with and responding to its time. The struggle for rights initiated by Ambedkar from the 1920s and the privileged-caste film-maker’s allegiance to a Gandhian vision of caste was one of the recognisable influences on screen production then. After Gandhi assumed the responsibility of national leadership, he declared his patronage of the Dalit socio-political movement by launching his anti-

16. *Savarna* is a categorisation of the four *varnas* of the Hindu social order which comprises Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. It is a reference to the dominant caste groups. Those not belonging to the *savarna* category are Dalits and tribals.

17. B.R. Ambedkar, ‘*Manogat*’, editorial, *Mook Nayak* (31 Jan. 1920), p. 1.

18. Vasant Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), pp. 3–22.

19. References to the movies are taken from Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 261–2.

untouchability programme. His approach was liberal in the sense that it affirmed a humanity within the Indian caste system, rather than suggesting its annihilation.

After Independence, films that addressed caste oppression were relatively rare. Nonetheless, films like *Sujata* (1959), *Ankur* (1974), *Diksha* (1991), *Bandit Queen* (1994), and some non-Hindi films such as *Balayogini* (*Child Saint*; Tamil/Telugu, 1936), *Nandnar* (Tamil, 1942), *Rudraveena* (Telugu, 1988), *Mukta* (Marathi, 1994) and *Kottreshi Kanasu* (*Kottreshi's Dream*; Kannada, 1994) played important roles in delivering alternative narratives around caste, frequently transgressing standard film business models and delivering social messages to audiences.

The intersection between gender and caste is a notable trope in popular film, in which the caste status of a woman is presented as a problem for the hero. Ironically, the intellectual thrust of most of the metro-based gender studies university departments—composed mostly of privileged-caste women—has institutionalised the way of Western liberal thinking about gender into Indian gender studies. This serves a dual purpose: to develop loyalty in/to the Western hemisphere and to escape the palpable crucibles of caste by hiding self-privilege.

There is strong intersectionality between caste and gender, and gender problems are mainly visible in the domain of sacred texts that demand the subjection of women. Insensitivity to these issues has only proved the lack of original discourse presented by predominant Indian feminist thought. As I have argued elsewhere, Indian Brahman academia, in the eyes of the dominant West, succeeds in presenting itself as marginalised; on the other hand, it commits un(ac)countable atrocities by evading the Dalit discourse and hiding the self-privilege in an oppressive caste society.²¹

The same applies to the entertainment industry. Former Miss World (2000) and Indian actor Priyanka Chopra, who is from a *savarna* caste, entered Hollywood by claiming affirmative action—the policy of representation and diversity due to her brown skin.²² In an interview with *Variety* magazine, Chopra lamented that Hollywood does not write as many roles as it should for women of colour and that she was not ready to ‘settle for parts which are less’, especially ‘as a woman of color’.²³ She wanted to ‘champion the cause of diversity in entertainment and media’ in America.²⁴ Yet she is not seen advocating for diversity in the Indian entertainment industry. Indian screen personalities do have causes they stand for—for instance, street dogs, women’s rights (usually limited to urban middle-class and elite women), displaced Kashmiri Pandits, education for low-income students, public health, sanitation and electricity.²⁵ All of these represent archetypical forms of neoliberal do-good ‘causes’ that align with a modern, humanist agenda (and, of course, donations to these causes and charities reduce the actors’ taxes). In the archives of film literature, one seldom stumbles upon a report of an Indian film celebrity speaking out about

21. Suraj Yengde, ‘Why Hinduism and the Violence of Caste are Two Sides of a Coin’, *The Huffington Post* (20 May 2016) [<http://www.huffingtonpost.in/suraj-yengde/why-hinduism-and-the-violence-of-caste-are-two-sides-of-a-coin/>, accessed 11 Oct. 2016].

22. Priyanka Chopra, ‘“The Girl Next Door Should Look Like the Girl Next Door”: Priyanka Chopra on Diversity’, *Elle* (16 Jan. 2015) [<http://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/news/a26052/priyanka-chopra-on-diversity/>, accessed 19 Oct. 2017].

23. Debra Birnbaum, ‘Priyanka Chopra on Feminism, Being “Fearless”, and Why Diversity Shouldn’t Be a “Novelty”’, *Variety* (10 Oct. 2017) [<http://variety.com/2017/tv/news/priyanka-chopra-feminist-power-of-women-1202585579/#article-comments>, accessed 10 Oct. 2017].

24. *Ibid.*

25. Shraddha Verma, ‘Here Are the Social Causes These 15 Bollywood Celebrities Are Promoting’, *Scoop Whoop* (9 June 2015) [<https://www.scoopwhoop.com/inothernews/social-causes-bollywood-celebrities/>, accessed 11 Oct. 2016].

the ills of Indian habitus—particularly caste and its portrayal’s absence from the entertainment industry. Dalit roles are frequently reduced to those of victims in film, and almost invariably played by non-Dalit actors—Saif Ali Khan, Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi, among others. To comprehend the active representation of caste in cinema and its effects, we now turn to a close examination of the Dalit-centric subjectivities glorified in *Fandry* and *Sairat*.

Fandry—a Dalit story; Sairat—in lieu of new subjectivity

Manjule is a Dalit film director, actor and screenwriter, and a poet from Western India. He started his film career directing a short film, *Pistulya* (2010), for which he won a National Film Award for Best First Non-Feature Film of a Director. He went on to direct *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016). His films draw upon his experiences as a Dalit in rural India, tackling issues of caste, class and gender-based discrimination. *Fandry* and *Sairat*, his two masterpieces, have garnered accolades from national and international audiences: *Fandry* received a warm reception from general audiences and in academic circles, provoking much-needed discussion on the marginalised Dalit community, while *Sairat* was the first Marathi film to make over Rs10 million profit in its first week of release.

Fandry provides an occasion to curse the caste system. It is the story of a family in a village in Maharashtra from the oppressed nomadic tribe, the Kaikadi, considered as Dalit and recognised as Scheduled Caste. It focuses particularly on the family’s youngest member, thirteen-year-old Jabya (Somnath Avghade), who attends a government school in the village and has a crush on a girl of about the same age, Shaalu (Rajeshwari Kharat), who is from a dominant agrarian caste. The story revolves around the life of Jabya, who is caught between his pursuit of education and helping his family make ends meet, and the possibility of pursuing a future with the girl he is infatuated with, which entails crossing rigid caste barriers. This village romance between the young Dalit boy, whose family raises pigs, and the girl from a dominant caste intersects with the reality of the struggle to survive in abject poverty. *Fandry* enjoyed critical success, being screened at several major American universities in 2014—Stanford, the University of California–Berkeley, Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, MIT, the University of Houston, the University of Texas–Austin, San Jose State University—and at international film festivals—the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, the New York Indian Film Festival—as a result of transnational anti-caste activism led by Dalit scholars and activists in India and the US. This group of individuals is part of a close-knit network of professionals, students and activists across the US. The film was received with a sense of recognition by the Dalit community, both in India and internationally: ‘We’ve been through this’ was a common reaction to the film in Dalit circles.

Three years later, Manjule released *Sairat*, a story based in a small village ensnared in a rigid social hierarchy. Parshya (Akash Thosar) is a first-year college student who belongs to the fisherman caste. He has a crush on his classmate, Archie (Rinku Rajguru), who is the feudal landlord’s daughter from the dominant Maratha caste of rural gentry.²⁶ Predictably, their relationship is rejected by Archie’s family because of their differences in

26. Kancha Ilaiah attributed a ‘neo-kshatriya’ status to this group, which has sought to leapfrog from the Shudra caste to a higher status in the caste hierarchy: Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Kolkata: Samaya, 2007), p. 37.

status, which cross both caste and class, so the couple decides to elope and move far away from parental policing. They marry, have a child and live in the anonymity of the city. After they have been married for several years, Archie's male family members track them down and brutally murder them. This story resonates with lived Dalit experiences, where such reprisals are frequently explained away as 'honour killings'.²⁷

Cinematically, the story of *Sairat* is original, but the concept is yet to evolve to fit into both genres of film-making—that is, commercial cinema and parallel/art cinema, also known as 'socially conscious cinema'.²⁸ The music for *Sairat* was the first Indian movie score recorded by a symphony orchestra;²⁹ it is vividly felt throughout the movie, holding the viewer to the riveting narrative. The film critiques the cinematic flamboyance of the masculine Indian film hero. However, Archie transgresses gender boundaries when she rides a Royal Enfield motorbike and drives a farm tractor because both are usually attached to gender and class identity, performing dominant social hierarchies that are recognisable as the posturing of the Maratha feudal gentry.

A legal system that enables the easy inheritance of land between generations of rural Maratha landowners at the expense of those who till the land ensures the former's continuing dominance of socio-economic power relations. In the post-1990s era, liberalisation and the supposed accompanying transformation of the economy was intended to dismantle rigid caste structures; instead, we see it is being reproduced because in neo-liberal India, market influences have begun to favour labour structures that remain based on caste affiliations.³⁰ Thus, migration from rural to semi-urban areas has been contained by the traditional caste job hierarchy—such as tailors, cobblers and barbers remaining in their caste professions in the urban economy. This reproduction of modes of oppression through labour is the focus of *Sairat*.³¹

Maratha control over their labourers is depicted in *Sairat* by their flaunting of globalised consumer goods—cars, clothes, gold, smartphones/technologies—and a set of caste moral codes as markers of affluence. The oppressed-caste peasants, on the other hand, are denied self-sufficiency and individual agency. The result is that any assertion of lower-caste rights in the village is immediately read as a threat to the Marathas' position; they in turn cite religiously-inspired moral values to justify the violence that is used to maintain their position. *Sairat* highlights the discordance between a feudal hierarchy asserting its dominance through displays of the fruits of globalisation while simultaneously resisting liberalising social trends.

27. Jim Yardley, 'In India, Caste, Honor and Killings Intertwine', *The New York Times* (9 July 2010) [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/10/world/asia/10honor.html>, accessed 2 Dec. 2017].

28. Kaur distinguishes between 'art films' and 'popular films' as opposed to 'commercial or 'mainstream' films. See Kaur, 'Viewing the West through Bollywood', p. 203.

29. Zee Music Marathi, 'Sairat Movie: Ajay-Atul Recording with Live Symphony Orchestra in Hollywood', YouTube [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo4E0tWGcV4>, accessed 20 July 2016].

30. Geert De Neve and Grace Carswell, 'NREGA and the Return of Identity Politics in Western Tamil Nadu, India', in *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 205–10; Yogesh Kumar and D.C. Sah, 'Caste Hierarchies and Substantive Discrimination through NREGA', [http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/5659/1/AHRC_11%2C_Kumar_and_Sah_MP_Caste_%26_NREGA.pdf, accessed 22 May 2018]; and Ananth Krishnan, 'Caste Problems Plague NREGA Scheme', *The Hindu* (3 Aug. 2007) [<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/Caste-problems-plague-NREGA-scheme/article14808569.ece>, accessed 6 Feb. 2018].

31. Surinder Jodhka, 'Social Inclusion and Poverty Eradication: An International Workshop', 'Session 2: Caste, Indigenous and Racial Exclusion, Affirmative Action and Poverty: India', paper presented at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 17 Nov. 2016.

Parshya, like Archie, has an endearing personality—the archetype of a college-going Dalit boy—and is calm, hopeful and winsome. The handsomeness accorded to the Dalit protagonist challenges the conventions of beauty usually applied only to the privileged-caste prototype in the Bombay film industry.³² In mainstream films, the amalgam of caste, class and colour bias can be effectively seen being performed on screen, with the main characters' names uniformly from the dominant caste. No explicit reference is made to the low-caste identity of Dalit characters; their caste is only hinted at as the reason for their exclusion from society, derailment and subjugation. Instead, Dalits and other backward class characters have dark skin as a caste marker. They are presented as comical or violent, criminals or outlaws. By contrast, the main characters (hero and heroine) are fair skinned; main characters who have darker complexions are plastered with lightening make-up. Class is ubiquitous in Bombay films, with the main characters' last names marking them as capital-owning castes. The big stars on screen, Shah Rukh Khan, Ranbir Kapoor, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Sonam Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra, Ranveer Singh, Akshay Kumar, and so on, present the mutually reinforcing archetypes of dominant caste, class and fairness.

Besides ignoring Dalit creative or autonomous subjectivity, the Indian film industry fails to acknowledge or give expression to Dalit music, art, literature or food. The Dalit counter-public sphere, comprising various cultural elements, does not have recourse to the same tools of oppression as Brahmans do. Art forms such as Dalit theatre, *tamasha* as folk drama, *pwada* (panegyric poetry), *lawani* (ballads), *jalsa*, or the presentation of Dalit food receive no recognition in Brahmanical culture.³³ As Eleanor Zelliott notes, these art forms were undoubtedly 'produced by low castes, but [were] anonymous and never considered respectable'.³⁴ Dalit oral traditions remain undocumented; they are infused with a protest culture, a critique of Brahmanic world-views, as well as being celebrations of affect: loving kindness, the joy of life, ancestor worship and compassion toward others. This relationality calls for an attentiveness to vernacular and musical activities that are performed in Dalit localities. The unique and sonorous beat of clapping and stomping, the banging of a drum, hymns recited by humming in a peculiar tone, Dalit speech—characteristic of survival and protest—do not fit into the Brahmanical musical tonality, nor does the colourful pattern of clothes in the articulation of self-identity surrounding the spiritual embrace of community politics.³⁵ Marked as specifically Dalit, this vibrant culture remains marginal to the mainstream.

Manjule is an iconic director in part because of his risky experimentation on screen. He casts not only trained actors, but also everyday rural and urban Bahujans/subalterns in his films. In doing so, he makes a scathing critique of the predominant tropes of celluloid—of fair-skinned, well-built heroes and heroines who have dominant caste names. The stories

32. Natasha Shevde, 'All's Fair in Love and Cream: A Cultural Case Study of Fair & Lovely in India', in *Advertising & Society Review*, Vol. 9, no. 2 (2008), doi:10.1353/asr.0.0003 [<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241032>, accessed 11 Nov. 2016].

33. Noted Dalit writer Tukaram Bhaurao (Annabhau) Sathe reintroduced Dalit art forms as articulations of pride and zeal. His presentation of Dalit female characters in *tamasha*, *lawani*, plays and poems subverted the menial status attributed to Dalit women. He radicalised Dalit arts so that they would uphold the virtues of Dalit culture by removing it from the clutches of Brahmanical dominance that saw Dalit art as mere entertainment: Kishore Dhamale, '*Annabhau Jaivik Bud-dhijivi*', in *Lokshahir, Sahityasamrat, Annabhau Sathe Gaurav Granth* (Pune: BARTI, 2015), pp. 39–42.

34. Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015), p. 269.

35. One way to look at this is to analyse the Dalit aesthetic in the storylines of films such as *Ankur* (1974), *Damul* (1985), *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) and *Madras* (2014).

he portrays are personal, largely drawn from his own experiences as a Dalit in rural Maharashtra, augmented by strong screenplays and sharp editing. His use of intimately connected script, music and locations empowers his characters in the drama-scape of the story, a technique that extends the storyline. *Sairat* makes no explicit mention of caste, unlike *Fandry*. Nevertheless, *Sairat* is a socially conscious, commercially successful movie that differs from movies like *Fandry* due to its shift away from strong caste-centred themes.³⁶ Movies about a couple's quest to win over their family have long dominated Indian cinema. *Ek Duuje ke Liye* (1981) was one such example; it sparked a wave of film love stories among the youth of the era. However, what stands out in *Sairat* is the subtle depiction of caste as an overarching factor in society, a depiction handled so meticulously that it escaped the CBFC, an issue I return to below.

Sairat's success in the market has demonstrated Manjule's ability to present a drama in such a sensitive form as to *overturn the technical aspects of caste hegemony*. The movie does this by focusing on caste and exhibiting it to the audience, but the aesthetics of the oppressed castes are generally presented without documenting the details of Dalit households. Instead, the portrait of Ambedkar is generally seen on the walls of police stations alongside those of Gandhi and Nehru. Ambedkar is also seen presiding over court proceedings in heart-wrenching scenes. However, Ambedkar's portrait hanging on the walls of Dalit households, a widespread phenomenon, is seldom portrayed in the film. The depoliticisation of Ambedkar and of Dalits as the subjects of *Sairat* remains cardinal to understanding the 'de-Dalitising' of the Indian habitus. The mute Ambedkar is a ubiquitous and appealing character, yet there is no portrayal of the radical Ambedkarite movement. Except for a few mainstream movies like *Papilio Buddha* (2013), directed by Jayan Cherian, which explicitly alludes to Dalit political action, Indian cinema does not challenge the view of Dalits as voiceless and oppressed victims of dominant-caste violence.

Sairat's relevance to a caste-conscious society was confirmed by the reaction to it. Just after the release of the movie, incidents of caste-infused honour killings were reported, as if to confirm the existence of a psycho-social disorder.³⁷ *Sairat* is a representation of the fact that the occurrence of innumerable caste-based attacks is a dreadful reality in present-day India, one that many do not want to acknowledge. Manjule might have been able to strengthen his message about caste by rolling data on the ubiquity of caste-based inequality and honour killings at the beginning or end of his film.

Manjule's genius lies in the content he produces in the genre of parallel cinema. However, his attempts to depict social realism in the mainstream have inspired the media to refer to his work as 'new mainstream',³⁸ a genre seen in his national award-winning short film *Pistulya* (2010). Manjule has the potential to be decisively influential in the art of international film-making if he works within the new genre of film that has been experimented with by legendary black film-makers such as Oscar Micheaux, Spencer Williams, Ousmane Sembène, Souleymane Cissé, Moufida Tlatli, Sarah Maldoror and Spike Lee.

36. Alaka Sahani, 'Discrimination Exists Everywhere in India: Nagraj Manjule', *The Indian Express* (6 Mar. 2016) [<http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/regional/discrimination-exists-everywhere-in-india-nagraj-manjule/#>, accessed 20 Oct. 2016].

37. Ajanta Chakraborty, 'Honour Killing in Bengal', *The Times of India* (20 June 2016) [<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Honour-killing-in-Bengal/articleshow/52838069.cms>, accessed 20 July 2016].

38. 'The Rise of the Dalit Aesthete in Marathi Cinema', *The Hindu* (12 Sept. 2016) [<http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/The-rise-of-the-Dalit-aesthete-in-Marathi-cinema/article14636498.ece>, accessed 20 July 2016].

This experimentation could fit the narrative of Wole Soyinka's take on cinema as being the 'arhoushes of the future' rather than a by-product of 'material grossness'. Manjule ends *Sairat* with a suspenseful, gripping climax that stuns audiences and forces reflection: 'I was numb for the whole day and so was my family, we were stunned and frozen in our thoughts. No one uttered a word after we returned from the movie', reported one Dalit youth on social media.

Arguably, *Sairat* shocks audiences through its stark social realism, not by projecting a positive Dalit subjectivity. But why does Dalit assertion in cinema remain elusive? The answer lies partly in (1) the demographic under-representation of Dalits on the screen; and (2) censorship of caste as a 'sensitive' issue by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC).³⁹ By rejecting films that depict Dalit individuality and Dalit views that are not shaped by the hegemonic narrative of the dominant castes, the CBFC continues to manifest the casteist nature of autocratic demagoguery. In *Papilio Buddha*, Cherian was forced to cut dialogue and scenes that depicted Dalit disagreement with the dominant-caste narratives about Dalits because the counter voices from below are seen as a danger and so are suppressed.⁴⁰ The CBFC began under the Cinematograph Act of 1952, which embodied colonial legacies and was modelled on the English Cinematograph Act of 1909. The CBFC has controlled cinematographic creation, production and distribution since its inception; its influence is palpable throughout Indian cinema. Its rules and decisions are made by a few government-appointed members, many of whom are politically connected with or sympathetic to the governing party, and who do not necessarily have any cinematographic expertise.⁴¹

A 2015 study by *The Hindu* revealed that Dalits, who number nearly 200 million in India, were non-existent in Indian cinema. Of the 300 Bollywood movies released in 2013 and 2014, only six of the lead characters were backward caste characters, and none were Dalits.⁴² The bowdlerising of historical and contemporary reality is indicative of a denial of the nature of the caste system. There are no '#casteistbollywood' counterparts to the '#whiteoscars' or '#ocarssowhite' protests led by African-American celebrities in the US.

39. The CBFC refused to grant certification to a Telugu-language movie, *Saranam Gacchami* (2017), directed by Enumula Prem Raj, written and produced by Bommaku Murali, a former CBFC member, about the life of a Dalit PhD student and his quest to find out the truths of the reservation system. *Saranam Gacchami* was the first Telugu film to be rejected by the CBFC. It was a most descriptive and politically-charged movie that depicted caste honour and caste violence in society by explicitly giving it a caste name without hiding behind the euphemisms of poor, labourer, working class: Srinivasa Rao Apparasu, 'CBFC Denies Certification to Telugu Film in Caste-Based Quota, Says It May "Disrupt Peace"', *Hindustan Times* (26 Jan. 2017) [<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cbfc-denies-certification-to-telugu-film-on-caste-based-quota-says-it-may-disrupt-peace/story-B112YMzSpPovCquqdFkzTL.html>, accessed 1 Oct. 2017]. Bommaku Murali told me about the threats and denials by the Telugu film industry: 'There are six actors who belong to the Kamma, Kappu, Reddy caste who determine the fate of Telugu film-going audience. Anything alternative to this is unwelcomed and it is heavily protested either in the Censor Board or on the streets'. He was referring to a protest march by caste Hindus against his film that explored the reservation system. 'We want to write our own films and produce it for the audience', said a hopeful Murali discussing his next film project. He wants to own the distribution cycle too so that his films will be shown in cinemas; currently, films that centre exclusively on caste issues like *Shudra: The Rising* (2012) and *Saranam Gacchami* (2017) find trouble getting a cinema release: interview with Bommaku Murali, 18 Jan. 2018, Hyderabad, India.

40. Divya Trivedi, 'The Butterfly Effect', *The Hindu* (1 Oct. 2012) [<http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/The-Butterfly-effect/article12541189.ece>, accessed 19 Sept. 2017].

41. Mayank Shekhar, 'An Insider's View of the Film Censor Board', *The New York Times* (19 June 2012) [<https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/an-insiders-view-of-the-film-censor-board/?mcubz=3>, accessed 29 Sept. 2017].

42. Rukmini S. and Udhav Naig, 'In Bollywood, Storylines Remain Backward on Caste', *The Hindu* (28 June 2015) [<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/in-bollywood-storylines-remain-backward-on-caste/article7362298.ece>, accessed 2 Aug. 2016].

The privileged castes who continue to dominate the Indian film industry are unable and/or unwilling to use cinema as a channel to bring about change in the caste system. The achievements of black cinematic figures in other countries are overwhelmingly impressive when compared to the nearly invisible Dalit presence in the cinemato(po)graphy of Indian cinema. The success of black cinema can be attributed largely to the support and demands of black middle-class audiences. Natrajan argues that adding *cultural* significance to caste theory exposes the prevalence of casteism.⁴³ Culture as a modernist tool that can uphold ‘differences’ as markers of diversity is seen as a positive marker in a Western society that is only now coming to terms with its past. Mainstream Western culture promotes diversity only to a certain extent, seeing ‘othering’ as the product of an individualistic rights-based regime. However, a group rights-based approach to exclusion and violent suppression would be more powerful than an individual rights-based approach, which champions rights to religion, association and inclusion.

Thus the extension of historical exclusion in modern forms of expression—the screen being one of them—is more visible than ever. It would be interesting to find out if there are any indications of Dalit assertion or Dalit support expressed by mainstream cinema figures. Only a minuscule number of movies are made by Brahmanish directors and casts that embody a Dalit-centric subjectivity.⁴⁴ The exposition of the Dalit position remains central to the cinematic articulation of the Dalit cause. Walter Benjamin referred to the function of film as a medium to train human beings in the ‘apperception and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus’.⁴⁵ The archaeology of caste in India exemplifies Benjamin’s ‘vast apparatus’.

Indian films in the 1970s showed angry masculine characters trying to defend themselves and their families from—and taking revenge for—atrocities perpetrated by various oppressive stakeholders in society such as corrupt policemen, government officials, politicians and the feudal Thakur, a bourgeois Baniya business magnate trying to demolish the poor man’s *basti* (ghetto).⁴⁶ As a way of depicting the creation of early post-agrarian neoliberal societal conditions, most films of this era manifested a mostly undifferentiated caste and socialist perspective that advocated class war. In these films, the protagonist confronts class-based oppression—caste is therefore subsumed by class. The hero’s success is signified by his assimilation as a working-class character into the bourgeois world. Such movies never suggested one of the primary causes of the protagonist’s oppression was the caste system. Issues of caste were repressed even in films in which the protagonist belonged to a humble caste. For example, *Paar* (1984), a national award-winning film, was about the lives of oppressed-caste families in a feudal caste-dominated village, but the film-maker avoided any possible hint of caste rebellion led by the ‘lower’-caste protagonists. The same phenomenon occurred with regard to the docile expression of an untouchable labourer in Satyajit Ray’s *Sadgati* (1981). In spite of clearly visible Brahman

43. Balmurli Natrajan, ‘From Jati to Samaj’, *Seminar* (6 May 2012) [http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_balmurli_natrajan.htm, accessed 23 Mar. 2017].

44. See, for instance, *Chauranga* (2016), *Court* (2014), *Papilio Buddha* (2013), *Aarakshan* (2011) and *Damul* (1985).

45. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 107.

46. Sudhavana Deshpande, ‘The Consumable Hero of Globalised India’, in Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (eds), *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), pp. 185–203; and Dinesh Bhugra, ‘Mad Tales from Bollywood: The Impact of Social, Political, and Economic Climate on the Portrayal of Mental Illness in Hindi Films’, in *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, Vol. 112, no. 4 (2005), pp. 250–6, doi:10.1111/j.1600-0447.2005.00598.x.

oppression, the untouchable, Dukhi (played by Om Puri), dies without rebelling; his wife (Smita Patil) does not demand social or religious justice for the wrongs done to her husband. Thus the film provides a glimpse of the reality of caste relations without actually dissecting or examining their nature.⁴⁷

The twin suppression of gender and caste

Subaltern women characters in Indian cinema are often subjected to humiliation. The archetypical female character is frequently presented as loyal, fasting for the welfare of her husband, but she is also overly dramatic, deceitful, conceited, a scaremonger and a cheat who is very competitive with the other female characters. Such a portrayal might accurately describe some women living in dominant-caste households, subject to the negative effects that their class status and self-centred habitus have in widening the interpersonal familial gap; however, women in Dalit *bastis* have very little in common with that cinematographic stereotype. Having to live in close quarters with others and needing constant interactions to meet their needs, Dalits must assimilate with other households in order to survive. Their basic needs go beyond material exchanges to encompass the cohabitation required to live in a world in which they are despised and in which they lack facilities and amenities, as well as access to hospitals, schools and other public spaces. Dalits live in poverty in ostracised communities outside villages or in urban ghettos or *waadas*.⁴⁸ Kancha Ilaiah makes a case for a Dalit-Bahujan discourse, presenting a matriarchal culture among Dalit-Bahujan households which have a non-Hindu tradition.⁴⁹ Reverence for the female, manifested in ritual performances and dutiful obligations, is a central feature of 'Dalit-dom', and very different from the images shown on the screen. The Dalit is a universal conversation; it is a global narrative of suffering.

In *Against the Madness of Manu*, feminist scholar Sharmila Rege argues for serious treatment of the booklet and ballad cultures of the Dalit tradition;⁵⁰ she credits these cultural forms as being responsible for the reification of the Phule–Ambedkarite social movement. However, the idea of film as a medium for Dalit affirmation is absent from her work. That absence is empirical evidence of Dalit invisibility, as demonstrated earlier.

Love and affect in Dalit households

Inter-community violence often manifests itself in inter-caste marriage killings. In such killings, pain is not individualised, but, rather, transmitted to an entire group. Reports of Dalit neighbourhoods being burnt to ashes in reprisal for social transgressions of this

47. This is not unrelated to Premchand's counter-insurgent approach to caste in his writings. See Shailendra Kumar Singh, 'Premchand's Prose of Counter-Insurgency in Colonial North India', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 1 (2016), pp. 29–46 [<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00856401.2016.1122561>, accessed 25 April 2018]. Premchand focused on the 'rural' peasantry by placing the lens of exploitation between the *zamindari* and *sahukari* systems as a class struggle rather than a caste one.

48. On the arrangement of segregated Indian villages and ghettos, see B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghettos*, in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989), pp. 3–126.

49. Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*.

50. Sharmila Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahminical Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013).

nature appear regularly in the press. In retaliation for one individual's action, an entire community is subjected to violence, devastation and loss of life. In one incident in *Sairat*, Parshya's Muslim friend, Salya, urges Parshya not to offend the oppressor caste group, for to do so would harm not only them individually, but also their families. Parshya's father, a daily wage labourer, also sees his life under threat owing to caste–community tensions.

Law and order is non-existent in the feudal structure of casteism. Land-owning castes continue to impose a sadomasochistic set of rules in their fiefs. The harsh disciplinary measures used to enforce these rules extend beyond the fiefs and into the everyday habitat of subordinate groups. The police and the other arms of government that are supposedly organised to promote the welfare of the entire community are instead co-opted into serving the interests of the land-owning castes.

The normative language of love in Indian society carries a condescending term, *lafda*, which has a negative connotation. *Lafda* is generally used to describe unacceptable behaviour in society, according to a dominant, conservative construction of love.⁵¹ Education is suspected of encouraging a penchant for undesirable behaviour among the young, introducing new, liberal and individualistic concepts to the educated subject. In neo-liberal India, going to college is fetishised for youth sexuality, but it is also an occasion for close scrutiny in case it nurtures *lafdas* which threaten the social fabric of the extended family household.

On the other hand, being in love in a Dalit household is not necessarily considered to be a form of *lafda*. Instead, it is an accepted way to demystify the delirium of an individual's affection for another. Being outcastes, a Dalit's level of affection for and relationship with another Dalit is often built on solidarity; this contradicts Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' which is based on the notion of bourgeois sociability. According to Foucault, other forms of pleasure known to humankind were suppressed by bourgeois standards.⁵² The bourgeoisie maintained a monopoly on the pleasure of certain acts, thereby denying the proletariat pleasurable experiences that otherwise would be accessible to them at no cost. Sexual expression based on consent is a form of pleasure-seeking, but bourgeois standards of 'normalcy' created a social order that was designed to stigmatise the sexual relationship between two people.

In India, couples continue to elope out of fear that it is the only way to maintain their love for each other. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*,⁵³ Foucault aims to understand society's methods of discipline. Torture, punishment, imprisonment and execution are inflicted on the body of an individual who can thus be controlled, supervised and dominated. The body becomes a public realm where violence upon it defines society's control over it. Disciplining enters 'abstract consciousnesses', thereby generating a sensational spectacle of the inter-relationship between power and the body. Power, then, is equated with violence. Sexuality is also a demonstration of power built on violence over

51. Love is generally ascribed to the relationship between a couple that could eventually culminate in marriage, thus described as a 'love-marriage'. A study in West Bengal found that acceptable inter-caste relationships were primarily the outcome of love relationships. Lauren A. Corwin, 'Caste, Class and the Love-Marriage: Social Change in India', in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 39, no. 4 (Nov. 1977), pp. 823–31. A detailed and analytically rigorous description of the social aspects of emotions in Indian society can be found in Owen M. Lynch (ed.), *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

52. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

53. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

other sexualised bodies.⁵⁴ The control of political power over the economy of bodies in order to subjugate them results in ‘docile bodies’.⁵⁵ By extension, the extraction of power from docile Dalit bodies ‘diminishes...(and) dissociates power from the body’,⁵⁶ and thus it loses agency. Dalit bodies remain present on the screen as abstract labour, but the Dalit experience does not enter into the film-making ecology of Indian cinema.

Dalit Cinema

Indian films are chaotic trans-imagery indicating the current desires of a disordered India that tease the subaltern by offering the promise of unreachable dreams. There is a strong case to be made for a discursive Dalit cinema. A pan-Dalit movement needs a common discourse of resistance to fight caste inequality. A collective approach by Dalits involved in the entertainment business could strengthen the effectiveness of Dalit films in combatting caste differences, caste distance and caste oppression,⁵⁷ but a co-ordinated effort to use Dalit cinema to address caste-conscious gaps in Indian cinema occurs only sporadically.⁵⁸ Similarly, a pan-Indian cinematic movement comprising academics, artists from across the region, subaltern consumers and oppressed minority communities could address the ancient faults committed by the beneficiaries of the caste system. The cinematic experience can become a transformative moment whereby the audience propels the dialectics of social change.⁵⁹

Dalit cinema has the potential to offer performatory 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 more generally. 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. The ‘Third Cinema’ that emerged during the 1960s in Latin America echoed the popular resistance movements of the period, presenting effective critiques of the profiteering purveyors of elite film-making and, by achieving prominence in regional circles, challenged the American and European cinematic presentation of white characters as indomitable.

The casteism project, by countering aestheticised caste dogmas, is an appropriate response to normative caste ideals, and an example of what Benjamin means by

54. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*.

55. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

57. The first Dalit to act in a film as a lead actor was P.K. Rosy (1903–75), who can be considered as the pioneer of the Dalit film world. She was the first female actress in the Malayalam film industry, and gave an acclaimed performance in *Vig-athakumaran* (1928). However, upon discovery of her caste, she was heckled by casteist forces and forced to flee. Her family was ostracised and her hut was torched. She was forced to live in hiding in Tamil Nadu. Her legacy, which would have acted as an inspiration to Dalits as well as to subaltern women, was immediately erased: Saju Chelangad, ‘The Forgotten Star’, *The Hindu* (24 Nov. 2013) [<http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/the-forgotten-star/article5383387.ece>, accessed 11 Dec. 2017].

58. For example, the films *Bandit Queen* (1994), *Khap* (2011), *Masaan* (2014), *Kabaali* (2016) and *Saranam Gacchami* (2017).

59. Thomas Y. Levin, ‘Film’, in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 319–20.

‘politicizing art’.⁶⁰ Dalit cinema could allegorically embolden efforts to immortalise the experiences of the marginalised by incorporating formerly unrecognised identities into its subject matter. In refusing to assimilate with mainstream cinema, it could produce a profound theoretical critique of mainstream activities. Ilaiah maintains that creativity is born out of productivity.⁶¹ The productions of Dalit cinema are an outcome of the labour performed by Dalit-Bahujans, and not of the accumulated social, cultural, economic, political and philosophical capital inherited and enjoyed by Brahmans and allied castes. Here, creativity would act to prevent exploitation of subaltern production by the elites. The film industry, like Indian society in general, expropriates the productive aspects of the generational knowledge that is itself a product of the improvisational creativity of survival in a repressive order. Production as a critique signifies its ownership by subalterns—the Dalits.

Thus, the critique of pale skin, caste hegemony, heterosexual normativity and the imperialistic pronouncements by Indian elites could signal the dawn of a new era of cinematic resistance. Capital, however, remains a problem, although the modern media—social, visual and telephonic—has deftly reinvented the articulations of film-making. Social media platforms have developed new genres of short film-making that have thrown out a challenge to traditional norms of film-making, and this growing genre demands a centralised space for itself. Soyinka suggests that there could be an independent television channel for film-makers who produce content without mainstream sponsorship.⁶²

The cinematic citizenship of Dalits is thus reinvigorated via new mediums of visual resistance. The parallel reel universe of Dalits and other oppressed groups speaks to larger audiences interested in the intersections of oppression; thus Dalit cinema as a theoretical construct has an ability to transcend the issue of Dalit oppression by converging with artistic critiques of other oppressions. By introducing a paradigmatic format not shaped by modern capitalist logos, Dalit cinema has the potential to join African and other marginalised cinemas in breaking away from the mainstream cinematographic hegemony.

Conclusion

With foreign capital being invested in Indian cinemasces, the Indian–Hollywood film nexus is now producing movies for Indian audiences with big Hollywood labels; companies such as Warner Brothers, Fox Star Studios, Sony, Walt Disney, Viacom18 and UTV Motion Pictures now have a major presence in the Indian film market. However, the Indian film market, which tends to take its cue from the overseas market, has been unwilling to follow the diversity model present in Hollywood. In Indian cinema, the social realities of the caste system are hidden beneath a narrative of discomfiting, self-effacing experiences, or what Hamid Dabashi refers to as ‘self-conscious work[s] of art’.⁶³ Indian cinema is trapped in the modelling of caste-ego on screen by misdirecting reality into myth.

60. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, p. 4.

61. Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*.

62. Wole Soyinka, ‘From *Aso Ebi* to N****YWOOD’, Richard D. Cohen Lectures, ‘Beyond Aesthetics: Use, Abuse and Dissonance in African Art Traditions’, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 16 Nov. 2017 [<http://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/events-lectures/events/november-14-2017-400pm/wole-soyinka-richard-d-cohen-lectures-1-3>], accessed 21 May 2018].

63. Hamid Dabashi, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Crude Capitalism’, Al Jazeera (26 Mar. 2017) [<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/work-art-age-crude-capitalism-170323131418503.html>], accessed 26 Mar. 2017].

Almost every commentary on the Indian film industry talks about diversity and heterogeneity: diaspora, globalisation, the interrelations of culture and values, and the social and political reach of class dynamics, and these broad brushstrokes colour almost everything written about Indian cinema. What is missing is a deliberate discussion about the intra-personal relationships of caste. Nowhere in the voluminous analyses of Indian film is there a rigorous discussion about the lack of diversity within the film-making fraternity. While a few Dalit-centred films have long been in the market, Dalit-directed genres are yet to become prominent in Indian cinema. The politics of unrecognised denial constitutes, in Benjamin's phrase, 'the political position' of Indian cinema. What is needed is, again in Benjamin's words, the 'political position being transformed—as if on its own—from a deeply hidden element of art into a manifest one'.⁶⁴

Dalit films as a meta-genre in contemporary Indian cinema have the potential to act as a theoretical entrée into media and communications studies. However, in India's current cultural and social context, the role of cinema as a medium of instruction is not promising. The preponderant and dominant analysis of and enquiry into class, gender, communalism (religion) and, to some extent, sexuality is embraced though the canons of Western critique. Indian film criticism has demonstrated its elitism by ignoring the social restraints in Indian society, thus becoming a revised form of cultural tourism in marginal caste societies. This, as I indicated at the beginning of this essay, is due to a callous silence about the caste privileges enjoyed by most cinema practitioners, critics and commentators.

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to the indomitable spirit of Milind Vishwanath Yengde, a social actor from Nanded, Maharashtra, who believed in the potential and possibilities of cultural arts movements. The author also acknowledges the comments of the anonymous *South Asia* reviewers and the editor, Kama Maclean, for her invaluable feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

64. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, p. 329.