

Dalit Representation in Telugu Cinema: An Overview

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Abstract

It is no exaggeration to say that caste permeates every field in India. Film industry-particularly Telugu film industry-is no exception. Dominant castes continue to hold sway over all aspects of the Telugu film industry, from the staging of filmmaking to actors cast to releasing the movies. The kind of theme chosen more or less reflects the society from upper caste view. However, there have been a few exceptions where issues of marginalised, and more particularly Dalits, have been central themes of the films. Despite this, upper caste characters (actors) have emerged as 'saviours' of 'oppressed' lower castes in such films. More often than not, Dalit characters have been portrayed as comedians, villains, or sometimes playing second fiddle to protagonists. However, a very few films have even changed this kind of portrayal of Dalit characters, by making Dalits protagonists.

Keywords: Caste system, Dalits, Caste in Telugu Cinema, Dalits in Cinema, Dalits in Telugu Cinema, Dalits in Telugu Film Industry, Dalit representation in Telugu Cinema, Telugu film industry

Introduction

"In India, cinema and media have been used until now to perpetuate Brahmanical culture, values and it has thus led to the perpetuation of the caste-system" ^[1]. Caste is a unique feature of India, which cannot be seen or touched, but plays a gigantic role in the functioning of the Indian society. Basically, caste refers to a hierarchy-sometimes represented by a ladder. Therefore, caste system dictates that Brahmins, who are at the top of the ladder, should be honoured by Kshatriyas, and Kshatriyas served by Vyasyas whom are respected by Shudras followed by Panchama, the fifth varna, or untouchables known as Dalits. It is oblivious that who has power of caste status that is bestowed from of Manudharma, they own authority over all sectors such as lands, participation in ruling authority, media and cinema. Even film industry, where creativity is required, is no exception. Thus, it is simple that who belongs to influential caste-upper caste of Manudharma-they have power with lands, businesses and financial strengths to not only produce and make films but also cast artistes as per their wishes. In this connection, it is needless to say that glorification of socio, cultural and political aspirations of upper castes are evident.

The constitution of India accords Dalits 'Scheduled Caste' status while guaranteeing equality, liberty and fraternity on par with everyone. Having been untouchables and victims of the caste system, Dalits or oppressed or marginalised sections are bestowed some special opportunities to get education, employment and political representation in order to enter parliamentary system to compete with other communities and develop on their own.

Except the land ceiling act which merely states to cap, for the upper caste convenience, there is no rule or act that guarantees in the constitution that every man and woman in the country should have equal portion of land for house, agriculture and establishing factors to their livelihood. Dalits

who have been denied these rights due to caste system don't have huge tracts of land that upper caste people possess-this kind of unequal status is passed on from generation to generation, thus sustaining caste system.

In addition to land being used for cultivation, it helps to build a business in the agriculture sector. This eventually gives one push to set up businesses in other commercial industries, including cinema, media, among others.

"Cinema is envisioned as a profitable enterprise; hence, agricultural profits have flown into film making by the capitalist farmers" ^[2]. However, Dalits were not only denied accessing lands but also education, entering into temples in modern India too to keep them away from so called 'society'. Historically in the India lands enormously help education, socio-economic and cultural development to get quality education to compete with world, entering into various businesses and establishing industries to transform millionaires to billionaires which various castes or communities or families owned. Thus, the marginalised section or Dalit community is barred from entering the commercial industries like 'media', cinema to be financially sound.

"Now this historically marginalised section experienced some empowerment and representation in government sectors, where the quota system was in place, there exists no such similar system in the arts or cinema sector. There are the savarnas (Higher Castes), those with a traditional background of continuous education across generations, and on the other hand, the systematic exclusion of Dalits from education has resulted in a de-facto hegemony of cinema spaces by the savarnas. That has naturally led to Indian Cinema being 'casteist' at its worst and 'caste-blind' at the least" ^[3].

People from land owning, business owning and 'mind owning' castes occupied the "Especially when we look at Telugu cinema, it is quite surprising to observe that cinema in

this region has been structured and operated in terms of caste at various layers. Though this tendency cannot be traced to the beginning of Telugu cinema, it is germinated later as Telugu cinema and subsequently corroborated as an industry. To understand how modern technology like cinema is so part of traditionally rooted social structure, one needs to analyse the political, sociological and economical conditions of Andhra Pradesh”^[4].

Telugu film industry at the time when its inception in the country. Kamma, Reddy, Kshatriya, Vysya and Kapu castes are financially dominant in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana who set up film studios and production houses along with producing films and borrowing artistes-from here to a character artiste-from their own communities.

For example, while veteran actors like N.T. Ramarao and Akkineni Nageswarrao from Kamma caste were able to set up their own studios and producing films, and modeled for their children to be their heir to continue their legacy in the film industry Chiranjeevi who belongs to Kapu caste alone entered the film industry as an actor and got married to a woman who is the daughter of veteran actor Allu Ramalingaiah, from his own caste and later of the both families produced films as well actors.

In Telugu film industry producing films, acting in films, directing films are like hereditary. Films not only helped NTR but also gather his community, Kamma, to unite to enter into politics for capturing the political power which ultimately led him to form his government. As each upper caste has its own affinity the entry of Dalits who own nothing were ‘naturally disqualified’ to entry into the film industry. However, there are a few exceptions where Dalits show extraordinary talent on the silver screen could able to step in with hiding their identity.

Methodology

This paper discusses the Telugu film industry and its caste system, and the way Dalits and Dalit issues are represented by using primary and secondary data. Additionally, for the purpose of this paper, I have interviewed people from the film fraternity on various aspects of the film industry. I have also gone through various newspapers, journals, websites and research papers.

Depiction of Dalit issues and Dalit characters in Telugu cinema

Along with Indian cinema, Telugu cinema too has focused on social evils, such as caste system, untouchability, discrimination, child marriages, and dowry, among others. Especially, it has attempted to expose the dark side of caste system and untouchability through Gandhian lens. Untouchability and issues concerning marginalised, especially the Dalits, have been plots of various Telugu films from pre-independent era although not regularly. The 1938 film *Mala Pilla*, directed by Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, can be said the first Telugu film to have dealt with uneasy relationship between Brahmins and Dalits, over sharing of drinking water in the village. In addition to this, the film also brings to the fore a love story between a Dalit girl and a Brahmin boy.

Among other films where caste and oppression against the marginalised have been central themes are *Kaalam Marindi* (1972) directed K Viswanath, *Balipeetam* (1975) directed by Dasari Narayanarao, *Saptapadhi* (1981) directed by K Viswanath, *Swayam Krushi* (1987) directed by K Viswanath, *Osey Ramulamma* (1997) directed by Dasari Narayanarao, *Jayam Manadera* (2000) directed by N Shankar, *1940 lalo*

Oka Gramam (2010) directed by Narsimha Nandi, *Kanche* (2015) directed by Krish, *Sharanam Gachchami* (2017) directed by Premraj, *Nirmala Convent* (2016) directed G Naga Koteswarro, *Rangasthalam* (2018), *Dorasani* (2019) directed by KV Mahendra, directed by Sukumar, *Palasa* 1978 (2020) directed by Karuna Kumar, *Colour Photo* (2020) directed by Sandeep Raj, *Sridevi Goli Centre* (2021) directed by Karuna Kumar, *Uppena* (2021) directed by Buchibabu, *Love Story* (2021).

Although such themes have been explored in the above-mentioned films, filmmakers deliberately stayed away from explicitly revealing the identity of Dalits, fearing that the move may not do well, for it may not be accepted by everyone. Romantic relationships, honour killings, relationship between Dalits and non-Dalits, temple entry, socio-cultural-political oppression have been some of the themes explored in some of the films.

On the one hand, in some of the films, Dalit issues have been depicted as sub plots in which lead roles put themselves out there to solve issues being faced by victims while giving thrust to protagonist’s heroism.

On the other hand, there are hardly any Dalit characters in films, where they themselves revolt for their rights, self-respect and identity. And, there are also films where Dalits are portrayed as villains, comedians, and sidekicks to the protagonists or antagonists without naming their identity directly. The reason why this happens is because the producers or lead actors or writers belong to upper castes who often more than not manipulate the characters.

“While developing a character, the oppressor pours a bit of themselves into the so-called marginalized protagonist, reflecting their own social experience. Thus, we are given an essentially upper-caste protagonist who plays saviour to the marginalised and participates in the Dalit struggle, although their own privilege and social conditions do not warrant this fight. In this process, the history of the oppressed is appropriated and manipulated, and they are ousted from their own story, reduced to being mere receivers of justice. However well-intentioned, it is the oppressor-protagonist (or writer) “saving” and bringing justice to the marginalised in our visual and literary imagination. This is Indian literature and cinema in a nutshell, produced by Savarnas”^[5].

This is exactly similar to what Antonio Gramsci explains about ‘cultural hegemony’. Using Karl Marx’s theory, the dominant ideology in the society is a combination of beliefs, interests of the ruling classes. And, consent for this is achieved by the spread of ideologies-beliefs, assumptions, and values-through social institutions such as schools, churches, courts, and the media, among others. This is what forms the basis of society, in terms of what are accepted^[6].

The Dalit Assertion and Identity

It is evident that portraying Dalit issues or Dalit characters either victimised or redeemed by the upper caste protagonists are often seen on Telugu silver screen. “The assertion of the marginalised has hardly made it to the pre-and post-independence Indian cinema”^[7] However, a few films are exemption for this. Though upper caste film makers and protagonists are portrayed in Dalit characters they are reflecting Dalit aspirations. “Our hand should be on the top. You have to work really hard for that. House, land, job, mindset...whatever it is we have to lead a better life. Our hand must be a giving hand, not a begging one”^[8] a Dalit character in a film, ‘*Love Story*’, directed by Shekar Kammula, released in 2021, teaches her son to rise

independently and assert their identity. *Swam Krsuhi* (1987) in which Chiranjeevi plays lead role, Sambaiah, as a cobbler who rises rags to rich, and Vijayashanti plays lead role in *Osey Ramulamma* (1997) who is raped by a feudalist, resorts to *Naxalism* for revolting against the feudal system, *Palasa* 1978 (2020) Rakshit and Tiruveer play Dalit brothers Mohanrao and Rangaro revolt to the upper caste politicians to assert their identity, *Nirmala Convent* (2016), and Roshan plays Dalit boy Samuel who helps his father to retain their small piece of land, and *Love Story* in which Nagachaitanya plays a Dalit youth, Revanth, who falls in love with an upper caste girl and to assert to rise from a laborer's son to run a Zumba dance for his better future. The socio-culture of Dalits and actors from Dalit community for donning their own lead roles is yet seen in Telugu films.

A Herculean Task for Dalit Aspiring Film Makers

Though it is said to be creative and talent-based industry, caste and nepotism play significant roles. It is generally said about film industry is that whoever is talented and has the money, they get opportunities to act and make films. "But irrespective of talents we have, states, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and regions, we come from it is a herculean task to get an opportunity not direct a film but to work as assistant director for getting field experience at technical side. And, having bound scripts, commercial genres, even if get the opportunity to under work a director and get experience I am sure that I can get a producer who can invest for my stories to take page to screen" [9], says Ravi, a 30-year-old young postgraduate in theatre arts who has handful of scripts to make films and has been trying to enter the Telugu film industry for five years.

This is not only Ravi's experience but also many Dalit aspiring film makers who have talent to prove in various fields in film making. It is also the same task for Dalit filmmakers who entered the industry who had gone through to take his next script to be materialised. Premaraj, the director of *Sharanam Gachchami*, and Sheru Tirupati, director of *Uttara*, are waiting for producers to get their stories signed for direction. However, who have got name and fame in literary, cultural and political arena, it may offer to pen lyrics. For example, Jaladi, Boyi Bhemanna writers and lyricists, Gantadi Krishna who worked for more than 10 films as music director and lyricist, Gaddar know as a balladeer, Andesri and Gorati Venkanna have penned and voiced for songs in a few films in Telugu. And Gaddar got the Nandi award, a state film award for play back singing, Podustunna Poddumeeda, song, for *Jai Bolo Telangana* (2010).

Having political affinity and financial strength a few Dalit producers like Chengala Venkatrao who served as an MLA in united Andhra Pradesh produced *Samarasimha Reddy* starring Balakrishna and Narasimhudu starring Jr NTR, and Rasamayi Balakishan who is serving as an MLA in Telangana, is an actor, director, singer, lyricist and producer, produced *Jai Telangana* (2012), *Thupaki Ramudu* (2019), and Bommak Murali who produced *Sharanam Gachchami* (2017), *Itlu Amma* (2021) have come forward. Yet, except the former, Chengala Venkatrao, the later Rasamy Balakishan and Bommak Murali are waiting for their success in the production arena. With no money and influence, Dalits like other backward castes are employed with menial jobs in the production side and assistants to star actors and other film makers without claiming their 'identity'.

This was well explained by Dr. BR Ambedkar, "A man may be free to enter any vocation he may choose....yet if he is

deprived of security in employment, he becomes a prey of mental and physical servitude incompatible with the very essence of liberty....The perpetual fear of the morrow, its haunting sense of impending disaster, its fitful search for happiness and beauty which perpetually eludes, shows that without economic security, liberty is not worth having. Men may well be free and yet remain unable to realize the purposes of freedom" [10].

Are there any Dalit artistes in Telugu Cinema?

To answer this, yes, there were and there are Dalits in Telugu cinema, but the number comparing to the people from non-Dalit communities or upper castes is meager, who can be counted on fingers. It is noted that even if Dalits enter films as actors for 'good roles' or lead roles, they fade out in no time if they let their 'identity'. In the Indian casteist society, it is easy to know who belongs to which caste, by name, by surname, by place of birth, by village or by region etc. "Still, Indians conduct their social lives largely within caste hierarchies. A majority of Indians say that their close friends are mostly members of their own caste, including roughly one-quarter (24%) who say *all* their close friends are from their caste" [11]. Till 1990s, the Telugu film industry functioned from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, along with Tamil film industry which is also the upper caste dominant industry. Telugu and Tamil actors and other fraternity of film sector used to go hand in hand as they belong to the same 'family', caste. Tamil cinema is no exception to caste. "Though many humanist narratives of cinema were made in the history of Tamil cinema, yet they have not helped to eradicate the forms of untouchability and discrimination against the people of lower castes. Rather, Tamil cinema has reflected the popular mind showing the dominance of the castes on the screen" [12].

Veteran actor Sudhakar Betha from Markapuram in Andhra Pradesh started his career in Tamil films as a hero, lead role and later turned to be a popular comedian, acted as many as 600 films including Telugu and Hindi films. For his best performances in *Peddarikam* (1992) and *Snehitulu* (2012), he got Nandi awards. He produced two films one of which with star hero Chiranjeevi who happened to be his roommate way back in 1980s when the duo was trying to enter film industry. In an interview he said, "Some politics in Tamil film industry made me come to Telugu films" [13].

It seems that the Telugu cinema welcomed him sympathetically with offering comedian roles.

Nearly 37 years of acting experience Jeeva, a Dalit Chirsitan, Telugu actor, could not get the much important roles as he got in Tamil and Hindi. About caste in Telugu film industry, he says, "It is very much there here. In the beginning of my career, I was told that caste discrimination here is a lie" [14].

On the secondary information, this researcher reached out to the film actors to know whether they belonged to Dalit community. Most of them did not reveal their 'identity', and they mum as it is 'sensitive issue'. After seeing the senior or fellow artistes who came from their 'back ground', it is understood that the fear among them is that if they are known to the world, they will not get the opportunities. Veteran comedian actor and former minister for state of erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh Babu Mohan who portrayed beggar in *Mamagaru* (1991) stole the hearts of the audience. But majority of the films in which he is seen to be beaten or mocked by the fellow actor's characters. In his time, his characters meant to be laughed at.

"Savarna society hailed Dalits as the lowest of the low and the same belief has been replicated in their movies" [15], Veteran

Telugu actresses like Madhavi (*Khaidi*-1983), Matru Devo Bhava (1993), Archana (born as Sudha) who excelled her acting in *Nireekshana* (1982), *Daasi* (1988) for which she got National Film Award for Best Actress and Nandi Special Jury Award won the hearts of Telugu, Tamil, Malayam, Hindi and other languages too. Divya Bharti who acted in Telugu and Hindi films from Mumbai, Maharashtra, also was from a Dalit family. Surprisingly after these, lead actors and actresses there has been complete absence of Dalit representation for 20-25 years now.

Dalits are forced to watch films if they are made with their stories. When *Palasa 1978* was released in March 2020, in first week of its release, it failed to grab the attention of audience which made the film makers like Tammareddy Bhardwaj who is in the industry for the past 40 years to come forward for “emotionally blackmailing” Dalits. “People ask for good films with good ratings, and this is the film that is well made, rated well and made for the Dalit community. Why aren't they watching this film? They have questioned their absence from the films and this is the movie that is made for them to address their issues” [16]. Yet the industry is averse to make efforts for inclusive of Dalits to be part of it. This attitude may be treated as the perfect example of how caste plays with human minds when it is needed for their purposes.

Conclusion

In recent times Tamil, Marathi and Malayalam, “educational awareness had influence upon many Dalit artistes to move forward in their career and achievements in their personal and cinema careers and improvements” [17]. Dalits are waiting for rewrite the history with their acting, writing, directing, scripting and so on. Though the industry like Tamil where “the scenario has slowly changed, and the identity of Dalit characters in cinema-directed by a Dalit (and a few non-Dalit) filmmakers-has become explicit, transcending boundaries of caste and class. These filmmakers have helped shape visual storytelling that combines “justice with aesthetics. Justice with aesthetics” was rarely present in cinema made by savarnas, or it was seldom honest. Dalit-Bahujan filmmakers have filled this gap, while creating a new wave of cinema that is more appealing to a Dalit-Bahujan audience” [18].

Unlike Tamil cinema where Dalit stories with culture, authority, assertion and identity are told through Dalit film makers' lenses, where *Kabali*, *Kaala*, and *Asuran* taught Ambedkar ideology: educate, organize and agitate the great 100 years old Telugu cinema which often proclaims proudly that ‘the art’ has no caste and no frontiers discriminates Dalits explicitly. The caste-dominated Telugu silver screen is yet to touch the true lives of Dalits and their culture, their movements to retain their rights identity. One hand it is, it seems, a dream that India cinema hires a Dalit as lead to portray his or her story through their own life experience and depict non-Dalit scripts, and the other hand, there is a hope that the Telugu cinema too gets ‘black and blue’ colored with young film makers like Pa Ranjith of Tamil Nadu, Nagarj Mujale of Maharashtra to tell untold stories to the world.

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