

The Voice of the Marginalized Reflected in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Indian cinema has traversed a protracted historical evolution from the silent era to the present era of digital filmmaking. Dadasaheb Phalke's pioneering contributions established the foundation for the Indian film industry, while Ardeshir Irani's Alam Ara (1931) heralded the advent of sound films. Indian cinema underwent technological, thematic, and aesthetic changes while engaging with marginalized communities.

Mainstream cinema often reinforced dominant ideologies, but new wave filmmaking introduced alternative narratives that highlighted subaltern experiences. These films challenged caste hierarchies, economic inequalities, gender discrimination, and social exclusion. The article analyzes select Indian films to show how cinema reflects and amplifies marginalized groups' concerns.

Keywords: Marginalised, Film, Caste, Indian Cinema, Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, Women

Introduction

Marginalization is the process through which specific groups are socially excluded and compelled to reside at the periphery of society. This process is facilitated by discrimination, subjugation, and domination. Scholars often define marginalization not only as a condition but also as an outcome of historical, economic, cultural, and political forces. Globalization, modernization, capitalism, colonialism, and social transition have significantly altered the nature of marginalization in India. These forces have engendered novel forms of inequality, established novel social hierarchies, and transformed traditional identities.

In India, caste-based exclusion has been a central marker of marginality for centuries. Dalits, Adivasis, women, religious minorities, and economically weaker groups have faced systematic discrimination. Classical Hindu society placed outcastes outside the Varna system and assigned them occupations considered impure. B. R. Ambedkar describes them as "broken men" forced to survive at the margins of society (*The Untouchables* 23). These stigmas later extended to tribal communities and minority groups.

Cinema has the power to document these realities and reshape public consciousness. It creates social meaning through images, dialogues, symbols, and narratives. Scholars like Rachel Dwyer argue that Indian cinema has always reflected the "tensions between the sacred and the social structures of modern India" (Dwyer 54). Through character types, plot patterns, and visual metaphors, Indian films reveal deep social structures.

The following sections examine how Indian cinema engages with marginalized voices. The study focuses on Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, and Tamil films that depict caste, class, gender, religion, and tribal identities.

Marathi Cinema: A Marginalised Experience of Romance

Marathi cinema offers a powerful critique of caste through realistic storytelling. Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairaat* (2016) present inter-caste romance as a deeply tragic and socially dangerous act. Romance becomes a site where caste power operates with full force.

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In *Fandry*, Jabya comes from a lower-caste family that performs stigmatized labour. His admiration for Shalu, an upper-caste girl, remains unspoken because caste structures do not allow such interaction. Manjule uses rural Maharashtra as a setting to show how caste operates in everyday life. The village of Akolner becomes a living map of caste boundaries. The topography of the village reflects social hierarchies, and the physical spaces symbolize exclusion and humiliation.

Sairaat expands this critique. It shows how romantic love collapses when caste pride asserts itself. The film's brutal ending reflects the persistent reality of honour killings in India. Manjule moves beyond storytelling and questions the cultural politics of social legitimacy. Critics note that these films unsettled dominant groups in Maharashtra because they exposed caste violence hidden beneath romantic narratives (Joshi 112).

Another Marathi film, *Gulabjaam* (2018), raises questions about caste and food culture. The film portrays "authentic" Marathi vegetarian food as a moral marker. Scholars argue that such depictions reinforce upper-caste values that link purity, goodness, and vegetarianism (Dixit 17). The film's moral symbolism around food creates subtle hierarchies that often vilify Muslims or meat-eating communities.

These films demonstrate that Marathi cinema uses realism to challenge caste-based oppression and interrogate cultural hegemony.

Dalit Representation in Hindi Cinema

Hindi cinema has historically failed to represent Dalit experiences authentically. Early films either ignored caste or portrayed Dalit characters through stereotypes. Recent films, however, have attempted to depict caste oppression more directly.

Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019) deals with caste-based atrocities. The plot draws inspiration from the 2014 Budaun rape and murder case. Although the film received praise, critics argue that it frames the narrative through an upper-caste saviour figure. Ayan Ranjan, the Brahmin IPS officer, becomes the moral centre of the story. This perspective shifts attention away from Dalit agency. Critics such as Anmol Baruah observe that the film presents caste as a rural problem and ignores its urban presence ("Cinema and Caste"). The film reassures upper-caste viewers by making them spectators rather than participants in caste violence.

Gully Boy (2019) explores another form of marginality. The protagonist Murad comes from a lower-middle-class Muslim community in Mumbai. He uses rap as a tool to resist religious discrimination and economic inequality. His songs refer to lynchings, unemployment, and structural injustice. The film introduces the voice of urban minorities in a global art form.

Films like *Kaala* (2018), although made in Tamil, influenced Hindi film discourse. The film addresses land rights and portrays Dalit resistance through visual symbolism and mass-appeal storytelling. It positions the urban slum as a political space where marginalized communities negotiate identity and power. Together, these films broaden the scope of Hindi cinema by placing caste, religion, and class at the centre of narrative exploration.

Folk Culture and Marginality in Kannada Cinema

Kannada cinema has recently witnessed the rise of culturally rooted storytelling that foregrounds folklore, ecology, and indigenous communities. Rishab Shetty's *Kantara* (2022) is an important example. The film draws heavily from Bhoota Kola, Yakshagana, Paddana, and other folk traditions of coastal Karnataka. It presents a narrative in which land, nature, and ritual become symbols of community identity.

Kantara depicts the suffering of tribal groups who face exploitation from feudal lords and state systems. The land dispute at the centre of the film highlights how indigenous communities navigate bureaucratic and caste-based oppression. Shetty uses the forest as a cultural and spiritual space where

tradition conflicts with modern economic interests. The film shows how tribes preserve their dignity through ritual, memory, and belief.

Critics argue that *Kantara* renews interest in regional storytelling by presenting folklore as a mode of resistance (Raghavendra 87). It shows the tension between modern development and the rights of indigenous communities. This makes the film a significant contribution to the cinematic representation of Adivasi identities.

Tamil Cinema: Asuran and the Politics of Caste Violence

Tamil cinema has a strong tradition of socially conscious filmmaking. Vetrimaaran's *Asuran* (2019), based on Poomani's novel *Vekkai*, offers a layered narrative on caste conflict. The film shows how caste gradually transforms into class but continues to operate through violence and segregation.

The story follows Sivasamy, a lower-caste farmer, and his family. Their conflict with the upper-caste landlord Narasimhan arises from a land dispute. When Sivasamy's son kills the landlord in retaliation for earlier acts of violence, the family is forced to flee. The film uses the survival-thriller format to show the tension between power and vulnerability.

Vetrimaaran uses flashbacks to show how the protagonist once engaged in armed struggle. This backstory explains his pacifism in the present. The second half highlights structural violence, including economic deprivation, denial of education, and humiliation. The film depicts how caste oppression becomes normalized in everyday life through institutions like the police and local governance.

Critics note that the film "lets the socio-political aspects simmer underneath the thriller" (Times of India Review). This narrative approach makes *Asuran* both artistic and politically relevant.

Conclusion

Cinema serves as a crucial cultural space where society confronts its inequalities. Indian films have the power to reshape public thought, challenge dominant ideologies, and amplify silenced voices. The representation of marginalized groups in Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, and Tamil cinema shows a gradual shift from superficial portrayals to more authentic and critical narratives.

Contemporary filmmakers experiment with realism, folklore, music, and regional identity to express the struggles of Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, women, and the poor. Global audiences now recognize these films for their aesthetic quality and socio-political depth. As India moves forward, its cinema will continue to evolve into a space where marginalized voices can speak with dignity and creative force.

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