

Dalit Portrayal in Marathi Cinema *Fandry*: A Search For Identity

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Abstract: *The caste system in India, which was created as a massive project over 3,000 years ago in the Hindu Varna system, is surviving and thriving even now. The Indian Cinema industry has now completed 100 Years - creating lakhs of films. But in this 100-year-history, on how many instances can you recount where the lead actor/actress has been portrayed as a Dalit character? It must be admitted that some movies, in the 'Parallel Cinema Movement', which was largely inspired by the Left-Marxist thought, do portray Dalit characters as central figures in their films, on some occasions. Indian Marathi Language film Fandry by debut director Nagraj Manjule carved a niche by depicting the character from downtrodden Dalit society. The movie realistically depicts the pathetic and subhuman condition of people living on the fringes of the village shows how the second generation of these outcaste population raises voice against the social exclusion, humiliation that caste allied jobs have brought to them since ages.*

Key Words: *Dalit Community, Marathi Film, Inclusive Development.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Though India becomes a liberal, progressive nation in all aspects with inclusive of developing views and practices, still there are many communities suffer the brunts of low caste marginalization. This community is entitled as Dalit which has a long history of suppression, marginalization, isolation and exploitation which do not allow them to be the part of main stream society. Dalit reform movements had been in India since ancient period right from Gautama Buddha. Still it is in course of reforming state by creative efforts of social reformers. But it was Dr. Ambedkar, a great modern visionary, renaissance leader, the architect of the constitution of India and an ardent critic of the caste system, who demolished the myth of divine origin of caste hierarchy. He inspired and initiated the creative minds of India to enforce the socio-cultural upsurge for the total emancipation of the Dalits. Suppressed, crushed, downtrodden people in Maharashtra were considered Dalit and they were deprived of all the essentials of human life; rather their life was worst than animals. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar taught these people the life of dignity by leading them towards emancipation and 14th October 1956 Religion Conversion is the step towards honoured and life of dignity which also threw the shackles of religious hegemony.

It is said that films are mirrors of a society. But still, caste conflict is not reflected adequately in cinema. Every year thousands of movies are made in India but the protagonist is hardly ever from a lower caste, which is the majority of the population. One could say that since the majority of the stakes in the film industry is held by higher castes, their films portray a very elitist image and way of life. A good film creates a debate over an issue. Though the eminent director Satyajit Ray has said that the films cannot change the society, he has accepted that films have a role to play. Shoma Chatterji, a film critic, talks about caste and cinema in her article '*The Dalit in Indian Cinema*'. She talks about caste and the portrayal of Dalits in Hindi cinema beginning with Bombay Talkies *Achhut Kannya* (1936) to Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959) followed by many mainstream films like *Aarakshan*, *Akrosh* and *Eklavya*, and the small-budget, low-key ones like *Masaan*, which have focused on this significant social issue during the past so many years.

Indian cinema has either been unable to represent Dalit life and concerns on the big screen or has willingly chosen not to do so. The Indian Cinema industry has now completed 100 Years - creating lakhs of films. But in this 100-year-history, on how many instances can you recount where the lead actor/ actress has been portrayed as a Dalit character? It must be admitted that some movies, in the 'Parallel Cinema Movement', which was largely inspired by the Left-Marxist thought, do portray Dalit characters as central figures in their films, on some occasions.

Indian Marathi film *Fandry* (2013) by debut director Nagraj Manjule carved a niche by depicting the character from downtrodden Dalit society. The movie realistically depicts the pathetic and subhuman condition of people living on the fringes of the village shows how the second generation of these outcaste population raises voice against the social exclusion, humiliation that caste allied jobs have brought to them since ages.

A critique of caste based discrimination is at the centre stage in *Fandry* – a story beautifully interspersed with love, power, anger and ambition. Set in a remote village in Maharashtra (Akolner near Ahmednagar), *Fandry* starts off as a story of the boy next door – Jabya Mane (played by Somnath Awghade). The story of Jabya's family — his parents and two sisters, one of whom is back from an unsuccessful marriage; the other of marriageable age, is a struggle for survival. The parents, oblivious to Jabya's dreams and ambitions to make it big are busy carving out a living through odd jobs in the village. The family stays at the fringes of the village (away from the mainstream) signifying their low status in the hierarchical caste order. Jabya's father Kachru Mane (Kishor Kadam) is responsible for catching pigs that stray into the village, thereby not letting the pig menace affect upper caste families. *Fandry* – Maharashtra slang for 'pig' is used derogatorily by upper caste villagers to demean Jabya's family and the job that they are engaged in.

Fandry addresses the issue of caste through a love story that develops between Jabya and his classmate Shalu (Rajeshwari Kharat) who belongs to a well-off upper caste family in the village. That difference does not deter Jabya from falling in love with her, being mesmerized by her beauty and remaining lost in her thoughts. It is through Jabya's desire and expression of love for Shalu that the film mocks the way our society treats the lower caste and shuns them to a life of marginalization and despondence. Though aware of his social inferiority, Jabya's desire for love is strong enough to make him forget that he isn't a match for Shalu as per the standards set by the society. He defies his caste identity at every moment – be it through his desire for social mobility by buying a pair of jeans – which his parents neither seem to be able to understand nor fulfill — and his obsession with the magical black sparrow that is supposed to bring him luck but is actually a metaphor for his ambitions. Jabya does everything he can to remind himself that his caste cannot be a barrier – he tries to impress Shalu by wearing ironed clothes even as a pair of jeans and shirt is a luxury for his family who are busy pooling in money for their daughter's dowry. The humiliation that Jabya faces in front of the entire village as the lowly work done by his family is revealed in front of Shalu, stands true for not just rural but urban parts of India as well – where inter-caste marriages are looked upon with contempt, where honour killings are rampant and where modern and educated people still keep separate vessels for their lower caste servants. With contempt, where honour killings are rampant and where modern and educated people still keep separate vessels for their lower caste servants. *Fandry* successfully addresses complex issues related to caste, identity, love, emotions, power and social status in a manner that hits the bulls eye, yet makes one guilty and conscious of the hypocritical times that we inhabit – the dichotomy most evident when Jabya's school teacher is teaching students about values of equality and justice, even as they mock at his (Jabya's) lower caste status.

The protagonist Jabya (Somnath Avaghade) in *Fandry*, frustrated by the humiliation, the rigid caste hierarchy and traditional caste allied jobs has brought to him, angrily strikes back by throwing the stone. Yet, the stone is not unidirectional. It is not directly thrown towards the villagers, who are making fun of him while he is helping his father to catch the stray pigs in the village, but rather suggest striking back to the existing socio-political, economic and educational systems which after seventy years of Indian Independence are unable to bring people out of the feudal mindset. Quite in tune with the established caste order, the lowest rung of jobs in the village are reserved for Dalits (untouchables), as they are dominated and humiliated by upper castes owing to hegemony of power, position and resources.

2. Conclusion:

As a critique of the caste system and the double standards of our society, *Fandry* drives home the powerful message that the vision of our Constitution makers, of a fair, equal and just India is far away from realization as long as

the dreams of Jabya and his folk continue to be crushed in the name of caste. *Fandry* also ably demonstrates the power and creativity of regional cinema in striving from entertainment towards social change, a process that began in Marathi cinema and demands inclusive development of marginalized section of the society.

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