



THE IMPACT OF DALIT-CENTRIC CINEMA AND SOCIAL CHANGE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Indian cinema has long been influenced by the “upper-caste gaze,” where Dalit characters were either absent or depicted as objects of pity. However, in the last decade, some directors have challenged this perception. Gradually, a new consciousness began to develop among Dalits outside the cinema, and as a result, Dalit characters are now emerging not merely as victims but as rebellious and self-respecting protagonists. This study examines cinema centered on Dalit identity in present-day India, not just from the lens of representation, but also as a cultural and political intervention. It traces the shift from victimhood to agency, showing how these movies reclaim voice and challenge caste-blindness. This article will analyze how Dalit-centric cinema functions as a cultural movement that reshapes social consciousness, public discourse, and the politics of caste in India. This research will examine how these films are influencing societal perceptions and the caste system.

Keywords: Ambedkarite Aesthetics, Caste, Cinematic Agency, Dalit Cinema, Dalit Youth, Non-Dalit Spectator, Regional Cinema, Representation, Social Consciousness

Introduction

Cinema is not merely a medium of entertainment; it is also a mirror of society and a powerful tool for social change (Ghosh, 2025). Renowned sociologists and film critics believe that a society that does not tell its own stories becomes dependent on the definitions imposed by others (Mandal, & Kondekar, 2026). In the Indian context, ‘caste’ is a bitter reality that has controlled the social, economic, and cultural structure for thousands of years. Indian cinema, which from its inception has been influenced by middle-class and upper-caste values, marginalized the Dalit community for a long time. However, in contemporary times, especially after 2010, Indian cinema has witnessed a ‘revolutionary shift’. Now, Dalits are not only ‘visible’ on screen, but they are also telling their own stories on their own terms (Shcherbak, M. 2023).

In the early period of Indian cinema (1930-1980), the portrayal of Dalit characters was steeped in sentiments of ‘pity’ and ‘compassion’. From the 1936 film *Achhut Kanya* to the 1959 film *Sujata*, the stories often centered around an upper-caste protagonist who championed the cause of Dalits. This is referred to in academic terms as the “Brahminical Savior Complex” (Bhandari, 2019). In these films, Dalit characters did not determine their own path to liberation; instead, they were depicted as helpless and silent victims.

Actually, Brahminical Savior Complex is a phenomenon that reflects a socio-political dynamic in which members of dominant castes (*Savarnas*) position themselves as the primary agents of liberation or reform for oppressed caste groups (Dalit-Bahujans). From an academic perspective, this is viewed as an appropriation of ‘agency’; in this process, the so-called ‘saviors’ center their own moral or intellectual authority, thereby effectively relegating the lived experiences and leadership of marginalized communities to the periphery. Thus, during the early 20th century, the agency for the upliftment of Dalits in films lay solely and exclusively with the upper castes.

In the second decade of the 21st century, Indian regional cinema, particularly Marathi and Tamil films, shattered this framework (Balande & Ranganathan, 2024). Nagraj Manjule’s *Fandry* (2013) delivered a blow that shook audiences. The stone thrown by the protagonist at the end of the film struck not only the screen but also the viewers’ dormant consciousness. From here, a new grammar of ‘Dalit cinema’ begins (Atwal, 2018; Rai, 2022). The most significant characteristic of this new era is ‘agency’. The protagonist is no longer helpless. He is educated (like the protagonist of *Pariyerum Perumal*), he knows how to fight for his rights (like the characters in *Jai Bhim*), and he is proud of his identity. This cinema does not merely depict suffering; it

celebrates 'resistance'. This is the first and most crucial step towards social change—accepting one's identity and being proud of it.

Dalit-centric films have completely transformed the aesthetics of cinema. In earlier films, 'temples', 'holy rivers', and 'classical music' were symbols of purity. Modern Dalit cinema has challenged these symbols. The color blue (a symbol of Ambedkarite consciousness or a political colour) now features prominently in film posters and scenes. Folk music, drums, and 'songs' music, which were previously considered 'impure', have now become a voice of pride and rebellion. Musicians like Santhosh Narayanan have brought this music into the mainstream. In addition, the use of images of Buddha and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is not merely decorative but a political statement. It reminds the audience that the story is rooted in the 'Constitution' and 'justice'.

When we talk about 'social change,' it doesn't just mean changing laws; it also means changing people's collective consciousness. Dalit-centric films are contributing to this in three ways:

1. **From Sympathy to Sensitization:** These films hold a mirror to non-Dalit viewers, showing them their own privilege. When a viewer watches police brutality in '*Jai Bhim*,' they are not just watching a film; they are questioning the system of which they are a part.
2. **Boosting Confidence among Dalit Youth:** Seeing heroes on screen who look like them and speak their language is a matter of self-respect for Dalit youth. It inspires them to carve out their own space in mainstream culture.
3. **Public Discourse:** Today, these films are debated on Twitter, in newspapers, and at tea stalls. Films like '*Article 15*' have made topics like reservations and caste discrimination a part of drawing-room conversations.

Relevance and Need for the Research

In present world, we live in an era of the "democratization of information." The advent of OTT platforms has broken down language barriers. A Hindi-speaking person is now watching Tamil or Marathi Dalit cinema. This is fostering a "Pan-India consciousness". But is this change merely superficial? Has the preference for "caste" in matrimonial advertisements decreased after people watched these films? Has caste-based violence decreased in rural areas? These are questions that require in-depth analytical research to answer. This research will not be limited to the films' storylines but will also delve deeply into their reception and social impact. In conclusion, Dalit-centric cinema has initiated a silent revolution in Indian society. This cinema breaks the silence and makes the invisible visible. Although cinema alone cannot change the entire world, it can certainly prepare the ideological ground for that change. This research is a humble attempt to understand this process—how these two hours of light and sound have the power to melt the centuries-old shackles of society.

Statement of the Problem

Is cinema merely a means of entertainment, or is it capable of challenging deeply ingrained casteism in society? The problem is that mainstream media often overlooks the agency of Dalits. This research will analyze how modern Dalit-centric cinema has transformed the image of the 'victim' into that of a 'warrior'.

Research Gap

Most research to date has focused on how Dalits are represented in films. However, there has been very little research on how the cinematic language changes when the film's director is from the Dalit community. Previous research is primarily based on films released in theaters. However, OTT platforms (Netflix, Prime Video) have given these films a global platform. Most research focuses on the content of the films (story, songs, and visuals). There is a significant lack of data on what non-Dalit audiences feel after watching these films. Often, research focuses solely on the 'social message,' neglecting the film's technical language (camera angles, lighting, and music). All this suggests that such research has a place in the field of how Dalit-centric cinema has evolved and its impact on Dalit and general audiences.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the historical shifts in the portrayal of Dalits in Indian cinema (from victimhood to agency).
- To examine whether these films evoke empathy or sensitivity in the mindset of non-Dalit audiences.
- To study the impact of the cinematic use of Ambedkarite ideology and symbols (such as the color blue and Buddha statues).
- To evaluate the political and social awakening among the younger generation brought about by these films.

Research Methodology of the Study

The methodology of this research is entirely analytical and library data-based, with the primary data being an in-depth analysis of the plots, scenes, and dialogues of selected Dalit-centric films (such as *Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, and *Pariyerum Perumal* etc.). This study will examine how cinema is raising public awareness about social justice and legal rights within the context of constitutional provisions (such as Articles 14, 15, and 17). Content analysis will compare the caste violence and conflict depicted in the films with existing legal frameworks and academic articles to understand whether these films are merely entertainment or are becoming a powerful medium for establishing 'Constitutional Morality' in society.

Hypothesis of the Study

The research is expected to demonstrate that these films are giving a voice to the marginalized sections of society and challenging the pretense of "caste-blindness" (a state or mindset in which an individual (often someone from an upper caste) claims that they

‘do not believe in caste’ or ‘do not see caste’) among the urban middle class. These films are not merely entertainment, but are functioning as a cultural movement.

Historical Shifts in the Portrayal of Dalits in Indian Cinema: Victimhood to Agency

The portrayal of Dalits in Indian cinema has undergone many changes over time, shaped by responses to shifting social realities, political movements, and struggles over representation. Analyzing these presentations of Dalits in cinema through a historical lens shows how Dalit identity has transformed from cinematic invisibility and victimization towards assertion and self-determination. The following discussion explores this transformation across different eras of Indian cinema (Chatterjee, 2023). In the initial phase of Indian cinema (1930 to 1980), the representation of Dalit characters on the screen was marked by pity, misfortune, and benevolent compassion (Kumar, 2021). From movies like *Achhut Kanya* (1936) to *Sujata* (1959), this presented the reality of an unequal society and the struggles of Dalits confinedly (Amarjit, 2021). But the cinematic narratives of these movies were narrow in that they didn’t present the protagonist as Dalit but as an upper-caste person, positioning their characters as very just and righteous, intentionally portraying them as moral reformers and protectors of Dalits (Yengde, 2018).

Later, with the emergence of the parallel cinema movement from 1970 to 1990, it led to a new medium for portraying Dalit characters in movies, partially freeing them from overt paternalism. Oscar-winning director Satyajit Ray, through his unflinching films such as *Sadgati* (1981), and Shyam Benegal, in *Ankur* (1974), presented a more raw and realistic depiction of Dalit exploitation and caste oppression. Though these movies were intended to be critical and also presented Dalits as protagonists, the narratives of sympathetic gaze persisted; Dalit characters remained objects of observation rather than subjects of resistance (Benegal, 2025; Chauhan, 2025).

Also, apart from the social perspective, films are never inclined to show the cultural universe of Dalit life—their traditions, customs, music, folklore, political language, histories of struggle and resistance, followed by the emancipatory icons such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar, and other leading social reformers—was conspicuously absent (Wankhede, 2023; Kumar, 2025). In Indian cinema, this symbolic annihilation led to a sense of perplexity, as realist cinema tended to depict the social condition of Dalits, making their sufferings visible. Still, their consciousness and self-articulation were largely silenced (Edachira, 2020; Wankhede, 2022).

Though this long time period of limited representation and symbolic absence hasn’t been undisputed, in the modern era of Indian cinema, particularly after 2010, there has been a spike in Dalit cinema, reflecting their consciousness (Wankhede, 2025; Balande, & Ranganathan, 2024). Initially, in the regional cinema—most notably Marathi and Tamil—decisively broke the historic unjust representational framework of Indian cinema. Starting with Filmmakers emerging from marginalized social locations, who began to reclaim cinematic authorship, deconstructing the paternalistic gloss that had always presented Dalit history in disguise (Rajak, 2023; Kumar, 2025).

Movies like *Fandry* (2013), directed by Nagraj Manjule, showcase the entrenched caste hierarchy, social exclusion, and the yearning for dignity amid poverty, while portraying a young Dalit boy, “Jabya,” as the protagonist who struggles with caste humiliation and social barriers. In the movie, one specific cinematic movement sends viewers into a grim epiphany when the protagonist throws a stone towards the camera, which wasn’t just a part of the movie’s story or narrative gesture but a valiant act of defiance that shattered the illusion of the audience as passive spectators. That stone not only hit the screen but also the dormant moral conscience of the audience. With this movie and this scene, a new cinematic grammar of Dalit cinema was established, rooted in confrontation rather than appeal (Ingle, 2017; Kapur, 2020).

The most important and defining feature of this new phase of Indian cinema for Dalits is the assertion of agency. Dalit protagonists are no longer portrayed as silent victims of oppression and characters waiting for the intervention, especially by the upper caste, to rescue them; they are politically conscious characters who recognize, articulate, and resist the atrocities and oppression. The movie *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), directed by Mari Selvaraj, presents a Dalit protagonist who is educated, conscious, self-aware, and intellectually empowered to fight caste violence rooted in institutional spaces (Naig, 2025). Similarly, in the movie *Jai Bhim* (2021), directed by T.J. Gnanavel, a protagonist is presented who centers legal literacy, constitutional morality, and the collective struggle of oppressed people as instruments of resistance and assertion rather than charity. This cinematic version just does not focus on documenting the sufferings of Dalits as victims; it actively celebrates dissent, self-respect, and political assertion. The film shows how Article 32 (Right to Constitutional Remedies) and the writ of *Habeas Corpus* can become a shield for an oppressed community. The film is not just the story of a hero, but rather shows how collective consciousness and organized struggle can change the system (Thakur, 2022). It is a cinematic translation of Dr. Ambedkar’s famous slogan, “*Educate, Organize, Struggle.*” The little girl reading the newspaper at the end of the film symbolizes that only education and awareness will pave the way for true “claiming” for future generations (Sharma & Choudhary, 2025).

At its core, this cinema embraces a bold yet foundational premise: real social transformation starts with the recognition and affirmation of one’s identity. By rejecting shame and internalized inferiority and by embracing pride and autonomy in Dalit identity, movies in this era transform representation into an act of resistance. In this process, modern Dalit cinema moves beyond mere visibility towards emancipation – reshaping both the aesthetics of Indian cinema and the politics of social change.

This transformation in Indian cinema is important both narratively and in cinematic language (Lalitha & Pankaj, 2022). The inclusion of Dalit filmmakers and directors, alongside the emergence of Dalit-authored stories, brought to light new aesthetic codes, cultural references, and ideological agency historically absent from mainstream Indian cinema (Edachira, 2020). Dalit identity is no longer seen as the case study of subjects, maintaining the gap with viewers, just as with observers. It presented

raw, lived experiences, laying the foundation for cinematic storytelling (Vidushi, 2015). Through this shift, Indian cinema transforms and completes its historic portrayal of Dalits as silent victims of caste atrocities to representing themselves as conscious character, capable of resistance and self-articulation.

Therefore, this reconfiguration of Dalit representation in Indian cinema has shown a wide social and political transition in which, through cinematic visibility, Dalits gain a voice and a platform to replace sympathy with agency. These historical evolution checks the analytical objective of detecting how Dalit cinema has shifted from narratives of victimhood to emancipatory and assertive representations.

From Sympathy to Sensitization: Repositioning the Non-Dalit Spectator

Social transformation in any deeply rooted hierarchical society does not emerge solely through legal reforms; it also requires a change in public perception and moral awareness. In this social transition, especially in India, cinema plays a crucial role in defining how the viewers politically and emotionally respond to injustice. This part of the article analytically examines whether modern Dalit-centric movies shift the perspective of non-Dalit audiences from passive empathy to a moral sensitivity that includes discomfort, self-reflection, and an emancipatory ethical engagement with caste structures.

In older cinema, Dalit characters were only there to cry or garner sympathy. But today's films, like *Masaan*, *Sairat*, or *Dhadak*, depict Dalit characters as loving, dreaming, and having their own individual identities. This has helped non-Dalit audiences understand that behind the caste identity lies a flesh-and-blood human being with feelings just like their own. Films like *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* have forced urban, middle-class, and often 'caste-blind' audiences to consider that what they perceive as 'merit' or a 'normal life' is actually a result of their caste privilege. When the audience sees on screen a man risking his life to clean a gutter, they move beyond 'sympathy' and begin to 'introspect' on their own social status (Bunkar, 2024).

Contemporary cinema (especially the films of Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj) teaches non-Dalits that Dalits don't need to be "saved" or pitied, but rather that their equal rights and human dignity need to be acknowledged. This is a major step from "sympathy" to "empathy." Cinema has brought Dalit culture, their music, their deities, and their struggles into mainstream drawing rooms. When a non-Dalit audience watches *Pariyerum Perumal*, they are not merely watching a story, but feeling the invisible pain that society has suppressed for centuries. This cinematic experience is deeply ingraining social sensitivity in society. Today's Dalit-centric cinema is not just "for Dalits," but "for democracy." It is making non-Dalit society more sensitive, humane, and constitutionally aware (Bharatvaraj, 2024). In this process, contemporary Dalit cinema encourages non-Dalit audiences to shift their perspective from emotional empathy to critical sensitivity. This transformation marks a crucial shift in how caste is perceived, internalized, and debated in the public domain (Edachira, 2020).

When we study the impact of cinema, the change is not limited to the victim community only, but the 'process of change' is completed when the perspective of the exploiting or neutral society also changes. For example, has the understanding of caste changed among non-Dalit audiences after watching films like *Kaala*, *Kabali*, or *Jai Bhim*? To a large extent, people are now looking at caste beyond just the "reservation" debate and through the lens of "human dignity" (Bharatvaraj, 2026). Symbols (the color blue, Buddha statues, Ambedkar's portraits) that were previously considered exclusive to a particular class have been transformed by cinema into universal symbols of "justice and revolution." This current cinema challenges the *Savarna Savior Complex* and teaches non-Dalit audiences that they need not be "messiahs," but rather, become "allies," acknowledging and transforming systemic injustice.

The Politics of Color, Sound, and Iconography in Dalit Cinema

In this era of new-style filmmaking, Dalit-centric cinema has not only emerged as social-reality content but also altered the narratives of movies (Kokate, 2021). But more importantly, it decisively transformed the aesthetic grammar of Indian cinema. In the cinematic universe, the aesthetic grammar plays a very important role in setting the tone of any movie. In earlier cinematic traditions, visuals and background music, such as temples, godly portrayals, holy rivers, Sanskritized chants, and idioms, were always presented as symbols of purity and legitimate culture. Contemporary Dalit cinema seeks to interrogate and dismantle these superficial hierarchies of taste and symbolism, displacing them with a contrary aesthetic rooted in dignity, resistance, and political consciousness (Bunkar, 2025).

In modern cinema, colours are not a neutral aesthetic choice; they function as a symbolic political language. Historically, in Indian cinema, colour green and saffron have been deliberately used to present the religious aesthetic of Hinduism and Islam, whereas colour *khaki* portrays the Indian police. In Dalit-centric cinema, the recurring use of colour blue is historically associated with Ambedkarite consciousness, egalitarian politics, and constitutional values. This blue in Indian cinema marks the emergence of contrary colour aesthetics other than those palettes, such as saffron-white-golden, that once dominated Indian cinema, portrayed as colour aesthetics of purity and supremacy (Swamy, 2025).

Actually, blue was Dr. Ambedkar's favorite colour, and he predominantly used this colour in his personal life as well. Blue was also the color of the flag of the party that was unfurled in 1942 by the 'Ambedkar Scheduled Castes Federation of India.' That flag was blue and featured the Ashoka Chakra at its center. Later, in 1956—when the previous party was dissolved and the 'Republican Party of India' was formed—it, too, was assigned the same blue flag. Another shade of blue is the color of the sky, symbolizing vastness—a concept that reflected Ambedkar's own vision. The Bahujan Samaj Party has also adopted this colour, and since then, it has become deeply intertwined with Dalit liberation. Even today, statues of Babasaheb Ambedkar invariably depict him wearing a blue coat; he is shown holding the Constitution in one hand, while a finger of his other hand points upward,

signifying the path of progress. Briefly, the color blue represented the sky—a symbol of universal accessibility and liberation from caste-based oppression—and, by breaking away from traditional political colors, helped establish an independent identity (Darapuri, 2018).

One of the raw examples of a Dalit-centric colour aesthetic appears in the movie *Fandry*, where blue is repeatedly shown in school uniforms, walls, and public spaces, thereby portraying Ambedkarite consciousness. Also, as mentioned earlier, the final stone-throwing scene gains additional depth, with a blue door in the background depicting the solidarity within Dalit resistance. Even in a mass movie like *Kaala* (2018), the use of blue is strategically employed, most visibly in flags and costumes, to embrace Dalit assertion within urban political struggles. Blue in this movie signifies collective resistance, forging it into a resilient ideological marker. In *Homebound*—a film directed by Satyajit P.R.—blue is used not merely as a visual aesthetic, but as a deeply political and identity symbol. Through these aesthetic cinematic choices, Dalit cinema redefines colour as a site of political intervention. Blue is no longer used only for decoration; it confronts viewers, asserting identity, justice, dignity, and constitutional belonging in spaces that once erased them (Rajan & Venkatraman, 2017).

In Dalit-centric cinema, music and background scores do not merely function as emotional ornamentation but go deeper, emerging as a crucial rhythmic symbol of political assertion (Bharatvaraj, 2026). Historically, Indian cinema has privileged classical and semi-classical music—Bhajan, Carnatic, Hindustani—as markers of ritual purity and cultural refinement. Contrary music, such as Folk rhythms, street music, percussion-heavy sounds, and other genres, was associated with vulgarity, nuisance, or moral disorder and relegated to the margins. The modern Dalit cinema decisively dismantles this superficial hierarchy by restoring these music traditions as an expression of dignity, pride, anger, and collective resistance (Rai, 2022).

For example, in the movie *Pariyerum Perumal*, the scenes of caste violence and humiliation were not set to soft, pitiful background music that portrays victimhood. Still, instead they are set to percussion-driven folk music, intensified with drum beats, that portrays the atmosphere of injustice, turning grief and sympathy into political rage. In mass movies like *Kabali* and *Kaala*, music is strategically politicized. Songs like ‘Neruppu Da’ (means ‘It is fire’) emerge in the context of Dalit assertion, merging street rhythms with revolutionary lyrics. Music composers such as Santhosh Narayanan play a crucial role in this transformation. By rendering folk percussion, raw vocals, and working-class musical forms, Narayanan seeks to deconstruct the aesthetic monopoly of classical music in Indian cinema. His work allows Dalit folks and voices to come forward and enter the mainstream cinema, not just as background noise but as a collective scream of affirmation (Ingle, 2023).

Through this music reconfiguration, Dalit cinema turns music into a weapon of dissent. Music centered in the hierarchy of superficial purity deconstructs into the voice of Dalits. Drums replace devotional hymns, local songs replace romantic melodies, and rhythm itself becomes a form of protest. In this process, Dalit cinema challenges institutionalized hierarchies of cultural legitimacy and assert its resistance through its musical agency.

In contemporary Dalit cinema, political symbols or iconography are not only used for visual appeal or decoration, but also function as ideological and political messages. Ideals of figures such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Buddha redirect cinema’s focus towards constitutional morality, rational humanism, and histories of anti-caste struggle. These images assert that the narratives unfolding on screen are anchored not in charity or reformist sympathy but in justice, rights, and political consciousness. Ambedkar’s image has been prominently used to highlight collective identity; in the movie *Jai Bhim*, his portrait acts as a symbol of community assertion within legal and domestic spaces. This symbolization, alongside aspects such as constitutional rights, underscores that law is a living instrument of emancipation rather than a distant abstraction. Ambedkar’s image serves as moral and ideological guidance, underscoring that justice is fundamentally grounded in constitutional guarantees.

Also, in the movie *Kaala*, Ambedkar’s iconography provides a strong foundation for urban resistance. Cinematically, statues, posters, and a blue flag appear during moments of political mobilization, portraying the struggle over housing and land with an Ambedkarite feeling of dignity and social equality. This movie is an example of how iconography transforms the public sphere into a site of collective political memory and assertion (Bharatvaraj, 2024).

Similarly, the rejection of practices such as caste hierarchy and ritual purity is evident in Buddhist images in many Dalit cinemas, which promote the ideals of equality, rational ethics, and compassion. While providing a counterpoint to Brahminical symbolism, it also strengthens cinema’s role in reflecting political memory by reconnecting Dalit affirmation to the historical memory of dissent and reform.

Modern Dalit cinema, through such visual strategies, transforms iconography into political speech. Portrayals of Ambedkar and Buddha do not contextualize the narrative; they challenge viewers by foregrounding the ideological foundation of the Dalit struggle being depicted (Kant, 2014). This section analytically examines how these movies imprint anti-caste struggle and constitutional values directly into the visual language of Indian cinema.

Dalit-centric cinema has made a profound “sensory intervention” into the consciousness of non-Dalit audiences through the strategic use of color, sound, and iconography. While the visual use of blue has now become a symbol of Ambedkarite pride and constitutional assertion rather than “poorness,” the sound of instruments like the “parai” has challenged mainstream cultural prejudices by transforming the noise of the marginalized into “music of resistance.” Iconography, such as images of Buddha and Ambedkar, has established new heroes and new aesthetics on screen, forcing non-Dalit society to introspect on their “invisible privileges” and view Dalit life not just through sympathy, but through the lens of human dignity and equality.

Sociological studies show that when non-Dalit audiences' watch films that directly attack casteism, they feel a kind of subconscious guilt. They don't want to see themselves or their ancestors portrayed as villains or exploiters on screen, so they prefer caste-blind masala films for entertainment. Non-Dalit audiences often dismiss such films as mere agendas or propaganda. In their view, these films widen social divides (Nigam, 2020). A major reason for the success of films like *Article 15* was that their protagonists were upper caste, making it easier for non-Dalit audiences to connect. In contrast, films like *Kabali* or *Karnan* were often labeled as "class-only films." Mainstream audiences seek escapism in cinema. The harsh realism of Dalit cinema disturbs them. For example, Nagraj Manjule's films often have very tragic or thought-provoking endings, which may not appeal to audiences accustomed to happy endings. Evidence also suggests that films by Dalit directors often don't receive as many shows or prime time in multiplexes as big-budget commercial films. This is part of a systemic exclusion that prevents films from reaching the general audience (Viduthalai, Divakar, & Natarajan, 2017). Still, the film director wants to make a movie that breaks caste, in the words of Pa. Ranjeet: "Cinema is so influential it can change perspectives ... If cinema can make people believe ... that snakes can drink milk ... then they can also believe when we speak about 'the annihilation of caste'" (Singaravel, 2020).

Symbolic Recognition and Political Awakening among Dalit Youth

Dalit-centric cinema does not influence the perception of non-Dalit audiences; it has also profoundly impacted Dalit youth themselves. Dalit-centric cinema becomes crucial when a whole generation has long been denied visibility, voice, and dignity; its cinematic representation provides an important site for Dalit youth to engage in political and social awakening. One of the most crucial impacts of Dalit-centric cinema falls in its influence on Dalit self-perception (Yengde, 2018). Throughout the history of mainstream Indian cinema, the presence of Dalits was used to erase or portray them as powerless, voiceless, and dependent. On the contrary, contemporary Dalit cinema performs a powerful symbolic act by placing Dalit protagonists at the centre of the narrative, filming characters who appear to be Dalit, speaking their words and inhabiting their social and cultural worlds, all with a sense of pride and dignity, without apology (Kashyap, 2025).

In movies such as *Pariyerum Perumal*, a young Dalit character is educated, politically conscious, and capable of resistance. The presentation of such a protagonist challenges the long-standing cinematic portrayals of inferiority and silence, displacing them with confidence, moral courage, and self-awareness. Most importantly, these portrayals allow Dalit youth to visualize themselves not as object of pity or sympathy but as subject of history and agents of change and resistance.

Such portrayals in movies play a crucial role in nurturing confidence and self-respect among Dalit youth. By visually normalizing their presence in spaces such as schools, universities, courtrooms, and other public domains, these movies encourage Dalit youth to visualize themselves as legitimate and rightful participants in mainstream educational, cultural, and political life. In this process, Dalit cinema seeks to create a slow but meaningful impact, fostering psychological emancipation alongside social transformation (Wankhede, 2022).

In this way, contemporary Dalit cinema provides not only cultural visibility but also the formation of political subjectivity among Dalit youth. By reinforcing agency, dignity, and belonging, these movies engage in the gradual but very crucial process of social transformation from within the community (Verma, 2025).

Cinema as Social Intervention: Dalit Narratives in the Public Sphere

Moving just beyond individual perception and identity formation, Dalit-centric cinema has also decisively intervened in the public domain. By circulating caste issues and their narratives across media platforms and everyday spaces, Dalit-centric movies have transformed how caste is acknowledged, discussed, and debated within modern Indian society.

The contemporary Dalit-cinema has significantly expanded its domain in public debate by forcing caste issues out of silence and into everyday conversation. In recent years, movies addressing such issues are no longer confined to cinema halls or academic circles; they are widely circulated across social media platforms, television debates, newspaper columns, university classrooms, and other public places such as tea stalls and local discussions. In this process, these movies break the long-standing social tendency to treat caste issues as either a private matter or an outdated concern.

Movies such as *Article 15* (2019) have sparked uncomfortable but necessary discussions on caste discrimination, reservation, and constitutional equality in the public sphere. Even though such movies are contested, debated, or criticized, their primary purpose is to make their circulation politically productive. Also, critique does not directly constrain the issue but provides broader coverage, thereby sustaining discussions and ensuring that caste issues remain visible in public consciousness.

All together, these interventions show how Dalit-centric cinema functions as a catalyst for social change—not just by depicting immediate solutions, but by reframing how injustice is recognized, internalized, and discussed in society. By changing perceptions, affirming confidence, and challenging public discourse, these movies participate in the slow yet very crucial process of altering social consciousness. In this way, Dalit cinema emerges not just as a way of representation, but as an ongoing transformation in the moral and political discourse of Indian society.

Films by directors like Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj have proudly established Dalit symbols in the mainstream. For example, in the films "*Kaala*" and "*Kabali*," Rajinikanth was shown in a blue suit and with images of Buddha and Ambedkar. This sent a message to the youth not to hide their identity but to be proud of it. As a result, today's youth do not hesitate to create their profiles on social media with slogans like "*Jai Bhim*" and the color blue. Moreover, Films have begun to emphasize "rights" rather than "pity" (Pugalendhi, 2021). For example, the film "*Jai Bhim*" demonstrated how injustice can be fought through legal knowledge and the proper use of the Constitution. It reflected Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy of "*Educate, Organize, and*

Struggle/Fight.” The effect has been an increase in legal literacy and curiosity among young people about their fundamental rights (Swetha, & Annem, 2024).

In old cinema, Dalit characters only cried, but in new cinema, they ask questions. For example, the films ‘*Masaan*’ and ‘*Sairat*’. In ‘*Masaan*’, Vicky Kaushal’s character Deepak changes his destiny at the cremation ground through his education whereas ‘*Sairat*’ presented the brutal reality of inter-caste love and the violence that follows (honor killing) before the youth. The effect has been that the youth have started questioning caste discrimination and the mentality of superiority and inferiority, due to which the social status quo is breaking. Recent films demonstrate that suffering injustice is not a virtue. Examples include “*Asuran*” and “*Karnan*.” These films address land rights and collective resistance against police repression. They demonstrate that marginalized sections of society can also fight back. The impact has been an increase in the participation of Dalit youth in student politics (Swamy, 2025). Such cinematic discourses have infused cultural energy into movements such as those following cases like the Rohith Vemula case. Dalit-centric cinema has taught young people that their struggle is not just economic, but a fight for dignity. It has acted as a catalyst in shifting youth from the “Satyanarayana story” to the “philosophy of Ambedkar.”

Apart from this, Dalit symbols were previously marginalized in mainstream media and films, but new films have established them as symbols of “power” and “resistance.” After the films “*Kaala*” and “*Kabali*,” blue has become not just the color of a community, but a global symbol of “rebellion against injustice.” Now, whether it’s the CAA-NRC protests, and the farmers’ movement or Dalits’ Protest in support of University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, blue flags and blue turbans are proudly visible. Babasaheb’s wearing of a suit and tie symbolized his intellectualism and modernity. Films popularized this image so much that it is now adopted as a symbol of “dignity” in youth movements (Waghmore, 2013).

Cinema has transformed the slogan “*Jai Bhim*” from a mere greeting into a political tool. After the film “*Jai Bhim*” (starring Surya), the slogan reached even those not directly involved in the Dalit movement. Now, it has become a part of every movement, big or small (such as student union elections or environmental movements), that calls for human rights, police repression, and constitutional dignity (Wankhede, 2024).

In modern cinema, Buddha statues and symbols of peace are often depicted against the backdrop of conflict. This conveys to young people that Ambedkarism is not merely a protest, but an alternative way of life and a peaceful revolution. Images of Buddha and Ambedkar now appear together on movement posters and banners, demanding “justice.” Cinema has established that Ambedkarite ideology means “the supremacy of the Constitution” (Venkatesan & James, 2017). When films depict protagonists demanding justice with the Constitution in hand, the effect is that in contemporary protests, young people are seen reading the ‘Preamble of the Constitution’ instead of picking up stones. Ambedkarite symbols are now being used as “Guardians of the Constitution.”

Conclusion

Thus, Dalit-centric cinema has become not just a source of entertainment but a cultural movement. In earlier films, Dalit characters were often portrayed as helpless, poor, or objects of pity. However, contemporary cinema presents them with self-respect and rebellion. This movement has given rise to new symbols on the silver screen that were previously absent, such as the color blue, which has emerged as a symbol of resistance and self-respect. Images of Baba Saheb or statues of Buddha in the background of films now convey a clear ideological message. The slogan “Educate” is strongly reinforced in films through scenes of books and libraries. Previously, stories about Dalits were written by those who did not belong to that community. Now, Dalit stories are written by those who belong to that community. Directors like Ranjit, Nagraj Manjule, and Neeraj Ghaywan come from that very society. When a person has lived through that pain, their story is not about sympathy, but about empathy and truth. No external “messiah” comes to the story to rescue Dalits; instead, they fight their own battles. Thus, the upper caste savior complex has been eradicated. These films have begun to address issues often suppressed by society, such as discrimination in education and employment; the struggle for land and respect; and the hidden casteism in cities and modern society. This cinema is no longer just a film, but a document. It is giving voice to the oppressed and holding a mirror to the privileged class. It is a cultural revolution that has the power to change the mindset of society. As a cultural movement, it unsettles silence, reclaims narrative authority, and lays ideological groundwork for border social transformation. By merging representation with resistance, aesthetics with politics, and storytelling with confrontation, these movies restructure cinema’s role in Indian society. Therefore, Dalit-centric cinema not only reflects social change but actively participates in its making.

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