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ON KAALA AND DALIT CINEMA

by SURAJ YENGDE

How often does an oppressed subject get to see, view and claim himself on the screen? The appropriation of subjectivity by the material usurper - the Other - is a commonly shared power narrative. The oppressor re-shifts the locus upon himself to grant agency and power to the oppressed subject on the oppressors' terms. In this power play, the oppressed is forced further downwards to the most vulnerable position giving little or no escape from the thralldom.

Therefore, the question: how many times have you stumbled upon the *Jai Bhim* [Hai! Ambedkar] cry [1] in Indian films? How many times have you heard the name of Bhim Nagar and expected it to be presented as a criminal den? How many times have you seen the Mumbai police being shown as a singular oppressor? Well if the answers are incommensurable then be ready to be surprised by a Mumbai police Havaldar (constable) standing amidst protesting crowds from the Dharavi slums calling out the rich and politicians' hypocrisy and ending his soaring speech with a surging "Jai Bhim!" and the crowd reiterating with equal fervor. The film's last frame ends with the blue flag of the Ambedkarite Republican party hovering above the Indian flag reprinting the political and social importance of Ambedkar and his community in the social fabric of India.

The film *Kaala* (2018) directed by a Dalit director Pa Ranjith and decorated with the "Superstar" Rajinikanth and critically acclaimed, everyman actor Nana Patekar [2], is a welcome addition to the genre of Dalit Cinema in particular and modern film making at large.

The profundity of the Dalit Cinema is to be real and critical in the celebration of Dalit-self. The creativity of the suppressed and thereby unexpressed is slowly finding its footing in the reel and real world. As I've argued elsewhere, Dalit Cinema is primarily "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". The ownership of one's self on one's own terms without capitulating to the structures of caste capital is the *raison d'être* of the Dalit Cinema project [3].

This movie, like the director's earlier work, has a strong baseline of migration, urban poor, the yearning for a distant homeland, caste, communalism, poverty and feudal oppression. *Kaala* is a Dalit story. It has an Ambedkarite consciousness. And it is proudly based on the radical maxims of Buddha-Phule [4].

Kaala, the protagonist, directs the people's struggle for dignity, human rights and land, operating out of his base in Bhimwaada. Localities like the one depicted in the film are omnipresent in all the villages and urban centers of India. These are the worst victims of the government's negligence. And so it is from here that rebels emerge to show India a cracked mirror of its failed development politics. But often, an act of Dalit rebellion is designated as an act against the nation by the security state and therefore being a Dalit is equivalent to being a "deshdrohi" (national traitor). This notion is powerfully put to question in the film, by highlighting the manner in which such a charge is hurled routinely against Dalits.

Caste gangsterism, and the anti-poor, anti-Dalit development politics of modernity

The film astutely contrasts conundrums of development vis-à-vis backwardness. What qualifies as development is questioned outright through the depiction of 'sky-tower slums'. The families evicted from slums and relocated into the high tower edifices of infrastructure, may well be living in the storied 'sky-towers' advertised by the state and sponsored by the real estate corporate lobby. Their life, however, continues to be one of object poverty and overcrowdedness, eventually becoming subject to the violence and thuggery of the state and society. But working class resentment and dissent is often framed as seditious, and their actions against structural oppression outlawed as criminality. Thus, our collective failures are channeled into the convenient scapegoat of the (low-caste) gangster.

There have been gangster movies in India modeled on the *Godfather*. Some movies have valorized gang violence while some have deified the protagonist of the underworld. Many famous gangsters in the Mumbai underworld come from Dalit or the "lower caste" Shudra fold and gangs are based on strict caste structures. Gangster films, however, tend to square the issue around communal violence or frame the chronicle of the gangster's life through the injustice of class oppression. Barring *Bandit Queen*, based on the life of Phoolan Devi, there is no explicit reference to the caste underpinnings of gang violence. Therefore, it is unsurprising that movies made on gang-life crudely suppress the caste affiliation of the dangerous gangsters who often sought justice later in life for the many injustices of their youth.

The famous dissent of Dawood Ibrahim Kaskar's gang leader Rajendra Nikalje (Chhota Rajan) has been widely reported in many movies, documentaries and investigative shows. Another well-known gangster Mahindra (Maya) Dolas' notorious exploits made it to the blockbuster, Vivek Oberoi-starrer *Shootout at Lokhandwala* (2007). In movies such as this, the issue of "lower" caste militancy is not addressed. The social injustices of the gang world are not interpreted through the prisms of oppressed caste subjectivity. It is instead calibrated to reflect a normative caste-class dynamic.

Pa Ranjith's artistic exploration has an implacable longing for settling the question of existential fragility. It has an emotional intensity triggered by the tension of lived experience. Constructive thinking is summoned through art to present Dalit culture and also simultaneously protest the oppression of his kin. Be it the Ram-Raavan story wherein the villainy of Ram - normally the hero of the piece - is shown against the backdrop of riots, reminiscent of the turbulent events triggered by the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, or the land woes of Dalits and working class people in the urban poverty index, or the suicide of Anitha, a medical student protesting against the controversy-ridden NEET exam. In the film, beef meat and oxtail soup, a delicacy in Dalit households, is proudly cherished. This last is perhaps particularly contentious given the recent public injunctions against eating beef on the grounds that the cow is sacred to Hindus. Such a monolithic conception of Hindu doctrine alienates not only the most obvious other - the Muslim - but also those within the Hindu fold whose lifestyles do not accord with Brahmanical prescriptions.

The movie's strong dedication to the lost lives of Dalits is an effort to bring value to the life of the wretched of the earth-an unprecedented and hitherto unimaginable instance in the history of any film production in India.

The under-sociality of urban caste poverty

"Garbage and filth have defeated me" laments the leader of the Navbharath Nationalist Party, Haridev Abhyankar (Hari Dada) in the rusty fumescent tones of a Sher Khan, played by Nana Patekar. In his first visit to Kaala's home, Hari refuses to consume water from a Dalit household, in a depiction of the strict adherence to caste proscriptions informed by notions of pollution and purity.

I have seen breaking up of houses and slums in a similar context of 'attikraman' (invasion), an anti-poor diktat used against vulnerable denizens of rural-urban India. Indian slums are Dalit populated and so this space acts as a repository of casteist violence. However, it is here where strong Dalit assertion takes place too. The trinity of Buddha-Phule-Ambedkar and their social ideology is inscribed into these spaces, and Ranjith is not alien to this culture. He introduces the protagonist played by Rajinikanth in a second frame followed by the camera's slow zooming out onto the trinity of Dalit icons painted on the walls of chawls. Rajinikanth is playing cricket, an everyman's sport, on the public grounds of the Bhagwan Gautam Buddha Vihar, a name redolent with meaning for the Ambedkarite.

In many ways it is Ambedkar's film. Like Ambedkar, many migrant Dalits and "lower" castes found refuge in the protected chawls of Bombay. Gandhi's India on the other hand, with its the vision of a country of "village republics," did not offer any solace to the Dalit subject imprisoned in the entrenched caste structures of the Indian village [5]. In contrast, Ambedkar's call to the untouchables to leave the village and migrate to urban, metropolitan, modern India provided a brighter, more promising alternative. Because of this, Ambedkar's India is problematic for the casteist, anti-Ambedkar forces. The people of Dharavi are no exception. Poor health care, inadequate access to education and sanitation, added to the prejudice and scorn of the rich classes makes their life and their children's future a painful prospect [6].

The institution of the public toilet has occupied a central place in the lives of slum dwellers, eventually becoming fabled for generating a unique sociality. People wake up according to their toilet schedule and thus there is a sociality of relief-a morning ritual developed around this "unclean" act. People stand in line and wait for their turn. During the wait, they exchange accounts of their day's schedule, trade newspapers, *beedis*, *tambaku* and also get the chance to develop fledgling romances. There are frequent references to this in the film where such a lifestyle is recognized and presented as a genuine life instead of overly romanticizing or ridiculing it.

The politics of the strongman Hindu leader is given in the axioms of communalism couched in the language of development. In the film, slogans extolling a "pure Mumbai" are calculated (as in real life) to raise the consciousness of the disgruntled urban middle class who is at the receiving end of the state's manipulations. The frustrations of this class capitalized by fringe political organisations, helps in changing the public sentiment over the issue of caste and violence by stoking an immediate otherness. Thus, the cleaning of slums becomes a token achievement of the upwardly mobile middle class, or a bourgeois bohemian gesture at best. However, the notion of cleanliness is intrinsically attached to the basic tenets of purity, and so, central to the practice of untouchability.

The film alludes to the staging of caste communal tensions by the Hindu fundamentalist and nativist Shiv Sena and later MNS party that banked on the sentiments of *Marathi Manos* (Marathi linguistic nationalism) by creating a xenophobic atmosphere, first against Tamilian migrants, and later north Indian workers. Bal Thackeray's virulent rhetoric against the Tamil diaspora stoked anti-Tamil riots. The post-colonial regime of regional politics has been inflected with the capitalistic, anti-poor, casteist proclivities of the ruling class. Thus, the right wing Maharashtra politics has matured on the back of anti-labour and anti-Dalit hatred. But in response, there has been a strong working class assertion mobilized under the communist banner. The insignia of the hammer and sickle are animatedly shown in the recitation of the story of working class resistance in *Kaala*. Dalits have been brave; they took up cudgels against oppression by offering leadership to helpless masses spanning the political spectrum. But these heroes, both big and small have gone unsung, without reference in the annals of Indian social and political histories.

Essentially, Ranjith has brought forth the issues that most left and Dalit political parties have failed to address-to club the Dalit social and economic agenda with a larger intersectional movement cutting across shades of the oppressed, providing an impetus for all to join the struggle of each other. The powerful signposting of the Anti-Eviction Campaign "No Land, No House, No Vote" is one such instance, which if enacted, would explode the settled complacencies of the electoral culture of India.

A Dalit Harlem moment

The Dalit art world is having its Harlem moment. With the widespread acceptance of Dalit production the Dalit movement is witnessing its resurgence on a grander scale. It will ascend and become acceptable, as more radical and deep-community oriented art is unabashedly embraced.

The enormity of Harlem was fueled by a traditionally connected southern black population that brought with it its tales of suffering, oppression, struggle and triumph. The Dalit experience on the other hand is seeing its days partly due to the recounting of personal histories, rooted in grandmother's embraces and grandfather's wisdom. The inheritance of such a legacy and a Dalit tradition fortified by oppression, has sustained succeeding generations. Dalit artistic expression has tapped into these very repositories and converted it into the logic of art.

The editing of the film deserves accolades and so does the music. Ranjith has brought out the flavor of slum rap, hip-hop music and public street dances alongside traditional Dalit *paraia* performance of the so-called "impure" outcastes - to aurally stage his Dalitness front and centre. Although there have been reservations over reclaiming an erstwhile humiliating caste-profession, the genre of *Gaana* has been vaunted by outfits like The Casteless Collective as an exemplar of Dalit music. In like manner, Punjabi assertion of one's *schamar* identity subverts a monotype identity through miscegenation with the self-assertions and articulations of individuals. The neglect of Dalit music can once again be attributed to a Brahmin supremacist project. With its deeply grounded rhythmic patterns and tonality of resistance, it is a genre of music foregrounded in the oral nature of thought, praxis and experience. It channels esthetically pronounced truths through the medium of art.

Additionally, the film has shown the manner in which the use of social media as a nu-platform, has become in effect the socio-political media for Dalits: Kaala is shown commanding his supporters to feed social media with relevant updates about their struggle.

The release of the film was marred by the refusal of some film theatres in Maharashtra and other parts of India to distribute the film. *Kaala's* plight in this regard echoes the similar experience of other films centred on Dalit pride like *Shudra The Rising* (2012), or, Bomak Murali's *Sharanam Gacchami* (2017). The weight of such resistance to a film about Dalit consciousness can further be understood when weighed against the lead Rajinikanth's stardom, as well as his imbrication in contemporary politics.

Rajinikanth stands as one of the most important actors on the Tamil and indeed, the Indian film scene. His reputation of being a pro-poor, pro-working class hero who is always standing beside slum-dwellers or farmer, rescuing them from feudal caste oppression, has converted his followers into veritable devotees. The deification of Rajinikanth is comparable to the following of other famous Tamil political leaders-Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha. However, in his recent overtures towards the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Rajini has provoked a sense of betrayal among his legions of followers who found their hero's move towards the right unprecedented. Therefore, reintroducing Rajinikanth as a *jhopadpatti ka bhaiya*-the affectionate brother of the poverty ridden slums, or the protector of the commoner - Pa Ranjith has leased a public image to the politically problematic "Super Star."

In these times of extreme fear and hatred spread through Brahminist ideals, Ranjith's pro-people stand has put his name into the annals of legendary film makers like Ousmane Sembene, Motoharu Jonouchi, Jean-Luc Godard all of whom challenged the status quo amidst growing suppression and violence. Like these directors, Ranjith is on to something that is nothing less than the radical restructuring of everything that goes into the making of a feature film; a revolutionary cinema to incite social revolution. *Kaala* is a soft victory and a proud new contender in the field of Dalit Cinema.

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Notes

[1] An identity pride war cry among the Dalits and other oppressed castes. "Bhim" refers to Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, or B.R. Ambedkar, the first law minister and architect of the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar is today associated with a distinct progressive ideology based on social justice and a humanist, rationalist spirit based on the egalitarian strictures of Buddhist philosophy.

[2] The Nana Patekar persona has been constructed through his nationalist, anti-corruption, honest Indian presentations in consecutive film roles.

[3] See Yengde, Suraj (2018), "Dalit Cinema," in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.

[4] Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar constitute a three-fold ideological structure of sorts for the Dalit movement. Jyotirao Phule was a nineteenth century social reformer and anti-untouchability crusader who emerged at a moment when the Hindu religion, under pressure from the onslaught of colonial ideas and values, was being revised. Phule provides a contrast to contemporary revivalists who attempted to reconstruct a classical Hindu tradition as a reactionary formation against the colonial order. Ambedkar followed several years later, becoming an outspoken critic of Hindu caste politics and sparring often with Gandhi, whose more paternalistic attitude towards Dalit uplift clashed with Ambedkar's more stark vision of structural inequality. Ambedkar towards the end of his life converted to Buddhism, preferring it for its egalitarian structure and its "capacity to change according to times." Incidentally, the history of the development of Buddhism on the subcontinent is intrinsically tied to a context of urbanization, trade and social exchange.

[5] Gandhi's firm belief in localizing self-government by promoting traditional values of governance over the modernized liberal functioning of state was fixated with the codes of "village panchayats" (village councils). These village councils were traditionally vested with arbitrary power to settle disputes. Each village panchayat to date continues to be dominated by the dominant caste groups who exercise their unsurmountable control over "lower caste" subjects who are tied to them in a feudal set-up. These village panchayats eventually gained notoriety for surpassing constitutional mandates by issuing patriarchal dictates against the women and "lower caste" citizens of the village. Gandhi's ideal "Every Village A Republic" drew upon the romanticized foundations of a self-sufficient village system that was "independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others". The understanding was that the village would have no caste, and each resident would adhere to the principles of work beyond caste conscripted job.

[6] Made famous by its depiction in *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and often referred to hyperbolically as "Asia's largest slum," Dharavi is an extremely diverse settlement drawing together Hindus, Muslims and Dalits. Kalpana Sharma, author of *Rediscovering Dharavi* (Penguin, 2000) also points out that the area is predominantly a Dalit settlement, with not only Tamil but also Haryanvi, Andhra and Kannadiga Dalits. It is a reserved Scheduled Caste constituency. The Tamil Dalit community, the Adi Dravidas, came to work in the tanneries that functioned in the locality till the mid-1980s. Dharavi has for some years been at the centre of civic redevelopment plans, aiming to convert it into a business district on the lines of the Bandra-Kurla complex. Such plans pose a threat to the heterogeneous fabric of the area, famed for its thriving informal economy and grassroots commerce.