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Framing the Margins: Caste, Gender, and Nationhood in Reformist-Era Indian Films (1930–60s)

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Abstract

The Reformist Era of Indian cinema, spanning between 1930s and 1960s, was closely associated with India's colonial resistance, movements toward freedom, independence, and the formative challenges of democratic governance. While films from this era have been recognised and acclaimed for their social awareness and critiques the traditional hierarchies, this paper argues that they also simultaneously marginalised the voices of the most oppressed groups—particularly Dalit women—by systematically neglecting their lived experiences and confined them to merely symbolic or subordinate roles. The present paper critically studies and analyses how the cinematic narratives from this era constructed an idealized portrayal of the Indian nation that effectively concealed the oppression related to caste and gender.

Keywords: *Indian cinema, Dalit women, Representation, National Imaginary, Gender.*

Introduction: Cinema, Nationhood, and the Politics of Representation

From the very beginning, Indian cinema has played an important than merely keeping the audiences entertained. In the years between the 1930s and 1960s, when India was trying to find its feet as an independent nation, the silver screen became a space where the story of 'India' was being written and re-written—sometimes boldly, sometimes through whispers and silences. Although from the so-called Reformist Era drew from the optimism of the times: the nostalgia of anti-colonial struggles, Gandhian nonviolence, and Nehru's call for a secular, forward-looking country. Yet, for all their idealism, these cinematic narratives often sidelined the social realities that didn't fit the vision—particularly the ubiquitous, grinding discrimination faced by Dalit women.

There is an irony here. Films like *Chandidas, Achhut Kanya, Do Bigha Zamin*, and *Sujata* reflected the social conscience of Indian cinema. Yet when we really look at them, they seem strangely silent on the specific lives of Dalit women. Instead of grappling with the messy, layered nature of caste and gender, these films tend to sand off the sharp edges, leaving us with stories that are neat, moving, and ultimately too comfortable. Dalit women are usually missing altogether—or when they do appear, it's often in the guise of stock figures and stereotypes, their voices muffled or replaced. The absence of Dalit women from the cinematic frame during India's most formative cultural period represents what Gayatri Spivak would

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recognize as a quintessential act of "epistemic violence" —the systematic erasure of subaltern knowledge and experience through the machinery of dominant discourse.

The truth is, cinema in this era functioned both as a mirror and a mask for the nation. It was a space where dreams of unity and progress were projected onto the big screen. Yet, as Benedict Anderson has argued, nations are as much 'imagined' as they are real. The idea of India as a harmonious whole demanded the suppression of uncomfortable facts. The lived realities of Dalits—and particularly Dalit women—were quietly brushed under the carpet to maintain the illusion of a united, egalitarian society.

This silencing was not accidental—it was architectural. It was not oversight—it was ideology. Dalit women stood at a complicated intersection—caught between caste, class, and gender. They were crucial to movements for social change and to the survival of entire communities, yet their lives were seldom seen as fit for cinematic storytelling. When they did show up, their stories were almost always told through the eyes of those who were not Dalit, not women—or both. The resulting absence was a kind of erasure that mirrored broader social patterns of exclusion.

It is tempting to read the films of the Reformist Era as meaningful, but we must also look at their limitations. Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals, for all their talk of equality, often did little to disturb the foundations of social hierarchy. Films that touched on caste tended to do so in ways that left audiences feeling virtuous, without ever challenging the privileges of the filmmakers or the viewers. On screen, Dalit characters—when present—were too often noble sufferers, quietly grateful for the kindness of their upper-caste counterparts. There was little space for stories of resistance, anger, or structural critique.

There is another, subtler form of silencing at play. It is telling that upper-caste actresses frequently played the roles of Dalit women—Kasturi in Achhut Kanya, Sujata in Sujata—thus severing the link between representation and lived reality. As Gayatri Spivak describes, this is not mere substitution but a form of 'epistemic violence', where those most affected by oppression are denied the right to speak for themselves (Spivak 271).

The nationalist imagination of the time, as Partha Chatterjee explains, relied heavily on a bifurcation between the inner (spiritual) and outer (material) domains, wherein the spiritual domain—symbolized by the home and the woman—became the primary site for preserving and transmitting authentic Indian identity was invested in a certain idea of womanhood (120). In film, this meant that upper-caste women were presented as paragons of purity and sacrifice, guardians of the spiritual 'inside' of the nation. Marginalized women, by contrast, were rarely visible, and when they did appear, they were often marked as 'outer'—hyper-

sexualized, pitied, or simply ignored. Dalit women, not easily categorized as either virtuous heroine or helpless victim, remained largely absent from the narrative. This pattern was reinforced by the realities of the film industry, which remained firmly in the grip of upper-caste men. From script to screen, the power to decide which stories were told and how they were told lay with those least likely to see Dalit women as central figures. Even films that claimed to tackle poverty, such as Do Bigha Zamin, often erased caste altogether, offering a universalized vision of suffering that quietly obscured the particular violence of caste.

The dominant style of Indian cinema, with its fondness for melodrama, sharp moral oppositions, and happy (or redemptive) endings, left little room for stories of structural injustice or collective struggle. Dalit women's histories—marked by centuries of violence, but also by survival and defiance—could not be easily assimilated into the standard formulas. What emerged was a cinema that trafficked in feeling and uplift but stopped short of radical critique.

The absence of Dalit women from these narratives is, then, not just a matter of oversight. It is the outcome of a set of choices—artistic, social, and political—that together contributed to their erasure from the national imagination. Early Indian cinema, in its eagerness to build unity, too often made a bargain with silence.

This study, then, sets out to challenge that silence. It looks at the ways Indian films of the Reformist Era erased or distorted the lives of Dalit women, not just by what they showed but also by what they left unsaid. By bringing in intersectional perspectives and drawing on Dalit feminist thinking, the aim is to make visible the lives that have too long been pushed to the margins of the screen. Lastly, if we want a cinema that genuinely reflects the nation in all its complexity, we must keep asking: Whose lives are visible, whose pain is named, whose stories are allowed to take centre stage? Until those questions are answered, any project of decolonizing Indian cinema—and, indeed, the nation itself—remains unfinished.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality, Nationalism, and Cinematic Gaze

Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which demonstrates how systems of oppression interlock to create unique forms of marginalization that cannot be understood through single-axis analysis the article underscores how the lives of Dalit women are marked by intersecting realities—where the burden of caste, gender, and economic hardship are inseparable. Indian cinema, for the most part, has turned away from this layered existence, often failing to capture the true complexity of their experiences. Bringing in Benedict Anderson's formulation of the 'imagined community,' the analysis considers how film carves out the idea of nationhood, quietly deciding who belongs at its centre and who

remains on the margins. The gaze of the camera, and the politics of who is permitted to see and be seen, become crucial to this discussion. Extending Laura Mulvey's insights on the male gaze, the argument traces how the Savarna gaze in Indian film relegates Dalit women to the roles of sufferers or idealized figures of change—rarely allowing them the dignity of being full, self-possessed individuals at the heart of their own stories. (Crenshaw 1241; Anderson 6; Mulvey 11)

The Reformist Era: Political and Cinematic Context

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the nation underwent significant changes that redefined its political and social terrain. During these years the nation witnessed important events—the founding of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi's advocacy for civil disobedience resonated worldwide and the scars of Partition. The nation's path to independence culminated in the establishment of the Constitution, significantly shaped by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's intellect and determination. Ambedkar emerged as a prominent advocate for both individuals oppressed by the caste system and for women's rights. However, the dominant discourse of this period frequently overlooked his radical proposals, favouring instead a rhetoric of unity and peace that obscured the realities of deep-seated social divisions.

Indian cinema during this critical period reflected these ideological tensions. Films of the time became deeply engaged in nation-building projects, often portrayed caste issues as problems that belonged to an earlier age, and suggested they had already been resolved or were on the verge of disappearing. This simplified representation fulfilled an ideological purpose: it enabled filmmakers and primarily the upper-caste, urban audiences to easily assume that India had transgressed caste inequality and thus overlooked the existing social inequalities. Despite the stated progressive goals of Indian cinema, cinema was primarily in the hands of privileged upper-caste men. These filmmakers shaped narratives in ways that implicitly reflected their perspectives, leaving little room for nuanced portrayals of marginalized groups. Films from this era practiced a reformist vocabulary—addressed issues like poverty, class divisions, widow remarriage, and rural exploitation—but presented these issues in a rather oversimplified and sentimental manner. These narratives provided a comforting illusion of progress; one where social difficulties were solvable by acts of individual generosity rather than systemic change.

Most strikingly, cinema's treatment of caste—particularly its treatment of Dalit women—was superficial at best and harmful at worst. When Dalit characters, especially women, appeared onscreen, filmmakers ignored the complexity and harsh reality of their lives. Instead, their struggles were either romanticized into sentimental tales of noble suffering or entirely erased,

rendered them as invisible in the national imagination. The portrayal of Dalit women was neither authentic nor reflective of their lived experiences of oppression but was tailored to the comfort of upper-caste sensibilities. Thus, the cinema of the Reformist Era became complicit in reinforcing a limited and sanitized national vision. It provided viewers with the satisfying illusion of moral progress, yet simultaneously upheld entrenched caste and gender hierarchies. By excluding genuine portrayals of Dalit women's experiences, the films from this critical historical period left lasting gaps in India's collective memory, gaps that contemporary scholarship must critically revisit and illuminate.

Achhut Kanya (1936) – Reform or Re-inscription?

Achhut Kanya is often hailed as the first film to discuss caste and untouchability. It is the story of a Brahmin boy named Pratap and an untouchable girl, named Kasturi. Although the film has been hailed as progressive, yet it reinforces dominant caste ideologies by holding on to social hierarchies. Kasturi is presented as a moral and selfless figure, who represents the idea of the 'pure' Dalit woman and the one who sacrifices her own desires in order to keep up with the social order. Rather than challenging the caste system, her character reinforces social system and solidifies it.

Moreover, Devika Rani, an upper-caste actor, performs the role of a Dalit woman, which is emblematic of a broader representational politics that suffices what Spivak defines as 'epistemic violence' (ibid 271). This replacement does not reflect the absence of Dalit women in cinema; but constitutes a process of silencing whereby the subaltern is spoken for, rather than being allowed to speak. The performance of a Dalit identity by an elite actor reduces caste oppression to a mere dramatized gesture, stripping of its material and historical importance. This cinematic strategy sustains what may be called the savarna gaze — a mode of looking that allows Dalit womanhood to be seen only when shaped and made comprehensible through upper-caste values and moral codes. Instead of unsettling the entrenched hierarchies of caste, such portrayals subtly reinforce them by disguising their conservatism as progressive social concern. The Dalit woman is thus transformed into an emblem of sacrificial virtue: her figure cleansed, domesticated, and emptied of real political power. Her pain, repackaged for upper-caste spectatorship, does not agitate for structural redress but rather soothes the privileged conscience, offering an emotional release that leaves power relations intact. This form of selective inclusion coupled with real exclusion lies at the very heart of early Indian cinema's nation-building project — a project that constructs an image of unity precisely by erasing the dissenting voices that expose its contradictions. In this light, Devika Rani's portrayal is less an act of progressive representation than a clear example of how dominant cinema displaces Dalit subjectivities, highlighting instead the pressing need

for stories told as well as portrayed by Dalit women themselves— stories anchored in their lived realities and resistant to co-option.

Achhut (1939) Redemption without Reform

In 1939, under the direction of Chandulal Shah, Achhut was yet another social film which touched upon the theme of caste and untouchability. The film chronicles the story of Lakshmi, an untouchable girl who is not allowed to draw water from a temple well by the Pujari. Laxmi is hurt when the priest hits on her head with the pitcher she had filled with water, this incident and many other atrocities committed by the upper-caste forces the untouchables to convert and leave Hinduism. Laxmi's father gets converted and chooses the path of Christianity. In the film, Lakshmi is adopted by Seth Haridas, who also has a girl of his own both the girls are brought up well. When both the girls grow up and tend to love the same boy, Seth's true character comes to fore. He sends Laxmi back to her parents. When Laxmi returns to her mother, she learns of her 'untouchable' identity. She also comes to know of her childhood marriage to a sweeper-boy named, Ramu.

Since, Laxmi is troubled by the existing issues of untouchability in her society, she takes up initiatives to reform her society. When the villagers come forward, they face resentment by the pujari, the jamadar and the zamindar. The trio then exercise their control over things and decide to show the untouchables their place. Laxmi, then comes forward and says, "we sweep and keep you clean and die in gutters, so that you can live healthy. That is our crime! Isn't it?" (Achhut). The only desire of the untouchable community was to live a peaceful life, as human beings. To this, the pujari adds, "and tomorrow you will ask for the rights to enter our homes, our temples" (Achhut). This infuriates the procession, led by Laxmi, they decide to move towards the temple. However, the temple gates are closed; bars put on and guards are posted outside. A lathi charge soon breaks and untouchables are beaten. Laxmi is sentenced to a month's imprisonment by the local magistrate.

In the end, Haridas Seth, a trustee of the temple comes to village along with Savita. He fights with the trustees of the temple and wins. The temple gates are then opened for the untouchables. At the entrance, Laxmi addresses her people, "Don't be flattered by getting entry to the temples! Even today, the high society tyrannises over the untouchables. I tell them that every Indian, outside India is treated as an untouchable. You resent that attitude and still, why do you treat your own people like that" (Achhut).

Doh Bigha Zamin (1953) – Class without Caste

Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zamin is a masterpiece of the neo-realist cinema, the film chronicles the struggles of a peasant family, a victim of capitalist development. The film powerfully presents class exploitation, while systematically omitting caste exploitation. Shambu, the protagonist of the film is portrayed as an ordinary peasant stripped of caste identity, a technique that generalises his suffering but takes it away from the specificity of Dalit experiences. Also, Dalit women, who formed a substantial part of the agricultural labour force, have been entirely absent from the film's terrain. The erasure is not incidental—it is ideological, serves to construct a unified suffering subject fit for national empathy; while leaving out the 'other' whose oppression is too deep to integrate into the narrative of progress. This act of discriminatory visibility runs over the true reality of caste, and allows the peasant figure to stand as a representation of innocent victimhood unaffected by social hierarchies which complicate the story of national unity.

By evacuating caste from its frame, the film transforms systemic exploitation into an abstract moral tragedy rather than confronting it as a deeply entrenched social order. Crucially, this erasure is gendered as well: Dalit women, who have historically laboured at the harshest margins of the agrarian economy, are doubly erased—absent not only as workers but as subjects with distinct experiences of caste and gender oppression. This narrative strategy enables the audience to grieve the loss of land and livelihood while remaining insulated from the more unsettling realities of caste-based violence and exclusion. Therefore, the film highlights how cinema committed to social realism reproduced dominant silences, crafted sentimental universals that masked the fractures of caste and gender. In doing so, it highlights the need for critical frameworks that push beyond class analysis to expose how cultural texts maintain the fiction of a cohesive, caste-neutral nation.

Sujata (1959) – The Sanitized Dalit Woman

Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959) occupies an intriguing state in the discourse of caste and cinema. Although the film is celebrated as a progressive film for its explicit condemnation of untouchability; however, its narrative structures subtly reaffirm the moral hierarchies it probably challenges. The film's central premise—the adoption of a Dalit child by an upper-caste family—immediately establishes a framework in which caste hierarchy is challenged through upper-caste benevolence rather than Dalit resistance. Sujata's acceptability within the family depends entirely on her ability to internalize upper-caste cultural codes and to pose no threat to the family's social status. She is depicted as modest, dutiful, self-sacrificing, and overly grateful for the kindness shown to her, thereby reinforces the stereotype of a 'good Dalit'.

At the very centre of the narrative lies the intricate relationship between Sujata and Adheer, a young Brahmin. Their connection holds importance not due to its challenge to the caste hierarchy, but rather because it serves to symbolically reintegrate Sujata into the savarna social structure. Her acceptance by the Brahmin family hinges entirely on her integration into their cultural norms and her renunciation of any subordinate identity. Having been nurtured in a Brahmin milieu, Sujata assimilates their principles and presents no opposition to their social or moral ascendancy. The depiction of her integration serves as a commendation of individual merit and compliance, rather than an examination of the systemic issues surrounding caste oppression. Consequently, the discourse simplifies systemic caste discrimination to mere individual bias, suggesting that it can be remedied through the benevolence of those in position.

The film significantly attempts to sidestep an engagement with the stark realities and pervasive violence faced by Dalit women, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, social isolation. By avoiding these harsh realities, caste oppression is portrayed as a moral dilemma that can be effortlessly addressed through the compassion of the savarna family and the self-erasure of Sujata. Sujata's development presents a lack of space for collective resistance or solidarity; her transformation is illustrated as internal, spiritual, and ultimately lacking in political significance.

Within this meticulously crafted cinematic framework, Sujata's silence serves a critical function—a narrative approach that associates her with the nationalist conception of passive and resilient femininity. The eventual acceptance of Sujata by the Brahmin family does not challenge existing caste hierarchies; rather, it serves to reinforce upper-caste paternalism, dependent on her compliance with prevailing societal norms. This representation subtly diminishes the authentic challenges faced by Dalit women and shifts focus away from the systemic frameworks that perpetuate caste-based oppression.

Looking from a Dalit feminist perspective, the film Sujata highlights the constraints present in the reformist narratives of mainstream cinema. This prompts audiences to critically examine the narratives that go unrepresented when perspectives are dominated by those of the upper caste. Which perspectives prevail when discussions of caste are limited to personal solutions that prioritise individual progress over communal change? Consequently, Sujata serves as an important reminder that cinematic critiques of untouchability, lacking a thorough structural analysis, may inadvertently perpetuate the very silences they purport to confront.

Absences and Erasures: Beyond the Text

The most unsettling aspect of Reformist Era cinema's relationship with Dalit women lies not in its problematic representations but in its systematic exclusions. During a period when Indian cinema was actively engaged in constructing a national imaginary, the near-total absence of Dalit women from both the screen and the industry itself represents a form of cultural violence whose effects continue to reverberate today. They were absent—not only from the stories told on screen, but also from the creative work behind the camera. There were no Dalit women involved as leading actors, directors, writers, or producers. This exclusion was not incidental; it mirrored a wider social reality in which Dalit women were denied educational, cultural, and institutional opportunities, keeping them at the furthest margins of public life.

This absence was reflected in the themes that filmmakers considered worth exploring. Central concerns in the lives of Dalit women—ranging from caste-driven sexual violence and the degrading toil of manual scavenging to their participation in temple entry movements and their contributions as agricultural or domestic labourers—remained entirely outside the frame of what was considered cinematic. Instead, the suffering of upper-caste women within the joint family system was repeatedly dramatized, presented as a metaphor for the nation's struggles, while the more deeply entrenched forms of exploitation endured by Dalit women were left unexplored.

Pa. Ranjith has sharply observed that Dalit women in Indian film are rarely granted the dignity of being central figures; instead, their presence is often instrumental, serving to underline or legitimate the transformation or benevolence of others (Nisha, The Caravan, July 2018). The omission of Dalit women from Indian cinematic history is not merely a gap in representation; it is the product of a much broader ideological resistance. At a time when the nation was being reimagined and re-narrated through cinema, its most oppressed women were simply left out of the conversation.

During the so-called reformist decades, this exclusion was even more apparent. While some upper-caste women found footholds in the film industry—albeit in limited and often typecast roles—Dalit women were left completely outside its creative and technical spheres. Their absence from these cultural circuits was, in effect, an extension of their marginalization from education, social influence, and the mainstream public sphere. The stories of Dalit women—their struggles, their labour, their resistance—remained untold.

Even in films that touched on the question of caste, Dalit women were seldom allowed the depth or agency reserved for others. The narrative arc of a film like Achhut Kanya resolves itself in the noble sacrifice of its Dalit heroine, carefully sidestepping any real critique of

structural inequalities. In Sujata, the protagonist is presented as worthy only to the extent that she can be assimilated into the world and values of the savarna elite—her grace, her docility, her education. These portrayals are crafted to elicit pity or approval, but not to challenge the dominant social order. And, crucially, these stories were authored and brought to life by upper-caste men, for audiences that reflected their own social standing—a dynamic that Gopal Guru describes in terms of the 'theoretical Brahmin' and the 'empirical Dalit'. The control of the means of cinematic production, from studios to distribution networks, remained concentrated in the hands of the elite, ensuring that Dalit women's realities—so often marked by pain, but also by resilience—were omitted from the nation's cinematic record (Guru 4493; Prasad 4; Rege 12).

The Aesthetic of the Nation: Whose Story Gets Told?

The 'nation' imagined in early Indian cinema was shaped by a dominant ideology which emphasized unity in diversity, secularism, and progress. However, this vision was often constructed through the exclusion of Dalit subjectivity—especially Dalit women's. This is particularly evident in how the woman figure was used to represent the nation. As scholars like Partha Chatterjee have shown, the 'woman as nation' motif posited women as bearers of tradition and morality. In this schema, only upper-caste women could embody 'Bharat Mata', while Dalit women remained outside the frame of representation—neither tradition-bearers nor modern citizens (Chakravarty 16; Chatterjee 116; Rege 11).

Legacy and Afterlife: Contemporary Implications

The representational erasure initiated during the Reformist Era has had long-lasting impact. Until recent decades, Dalit women were denied of any cinematic presence. Even today, representations are rare and often stereotypical. Recent films such as Fandry (2013), Sairat (2016), and *Kaala* (2018) have attempted to capture Dalit voices, but such portrayals are rare. The historical silencing of Dalit women's perspectives means their stories are only now beginning to emerge, often through independent and regional cinema. This delayed representation has also shaped popular consciousness. For generations of Indian audiences, the 'Indian woman' in cinema was imagined without Dalit women. This exclusion becomes not just an aesthetic problem, but a political one—one that shapes how rights, justice, and humanity are distributed.

Conclusion: Rewriting the Nation's Cinematic Archive

The early decades of Indian cinema offered a powerful tool for narrating the nation, but in doing so, they also institutionalized the silencing of Dalit women. The systematic silencing of

Dalit women during the Reformist Era of Indian cinema represents more than a historical injustice—it reveals the mechanisms through which cultural institutions participate in the construction and maintenance of social hierarchies. The Reformist Era's claim to progressive storytelling is undermined by its failure to engage meaningfully with caste, especially in its intersection with gender. To understand Indian cinematic history—and by extension, Indian nationalism—one must interrogate whose voices were suppressed to construct the dominant narrative. Only by centring Dalit women's experiences, aesthetics, and agency can we begin to dismantle the exclusions built into our national imaginary. The history requires more than retrospective critique; it demands active efforts to amplify marginalized voices in cinema today, and to reconstruct an inclusive archive where Dalit women are not merely seen but heard, not merely represented but empowered.

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