

VISUALISING UNTOUCHABILITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF CASTE VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN SATYAJIT RAY'S *SADGATI* (1981)

MONALISA BHATTACHARYA¹

¹Assistant Professor in the Political Science Department of Trivenidevi Bhalotia College, West Bengal, INDIA

ABSTRACT

Satyajit Ray's 1981 film Sadgati is about Dukhi, a Dalit worker who suffers from the abuse of his upper-caste employer. The film is set in North India and is adapted from a short story by Munshi Premchand. Sadgati uses a starkly realistic approach to present the way that the caste system and class oppression impact individuals in India. The focus of this thesis is to investigate how Satyajit Ray uses Sadgati to depict the connections between caste oppression and social classism that are a part of the system of Dalit and/or marginalized people, and how caste is a continuing concern for the socio-economic conditions of India; with the hope to raise awareness of this concern for the socio-economic conditions of the country, after many decades of social reform following independence from colonialism. In addition, this research intends to analyse how both untouchability and caste repression are portrayed in Sadgati and to compare this to a larger idea of Indian social realism and Dalit studies. A qualitative methodology was employed in this research through a detailed textual and visual analysis of the film Sadgati, along with historical context and previous scholarly literature on caste, society, reform, and cinematic realism. The integration of sociological and film theory perspectives in the study of Sadgati demonstrates that the film Sadgati not only represents systemic inequality; but also critiques the social complicity of the caste system that creates and sustains imbalances. This study will illustrate how the film fulfills an ethical obligation by calling attention to systemic injustice and how Satyajit Ray engaged in socially aware storytelling by using the medium of cinema to raise public consciousness about the need for reform.

KEYWORDS: Salvation, Satyajit Ray, caste system, untouchability, subaltern studies, Marxism, Indian cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The caste system has moulded the Indian social order through a strict ordering, exercising control over power, labour, and status. The caste system's most exploitative aspect is untouchability, which has relegated the Dalits to the periphery of society, denying them their place in society, economic security, and human dignity. This evil was officially abolished by the Indian Constitution, but its societal and cultural manifestations still impact society, especially in rural India. The caste system has organised abstract structures based upon moral dilemmas, which have become possible through the literary and celluloid media. For the Indian film industry, the most unflinching critique on untouchability and caste imbalances is provided by Satyajit Ray's 'Sadgati' (1981). Made from a short story by the legendary writer Munshi Premchand, it portrays through imagery the Dukhi, a Dalit, dying from exhaustion when people from upper castes compel him to work without pay. While Ray is depicting a straightforward narrative, the significance of the message is extremely profound. He did not depict the caste system as an "extreme" or "unusual" act of violence nor did he depict it as a "personal moral failing" on his part; instead,

through the use of caste power, economically exploiting lowcaste individuals and the collective indifference of people in society, the caste system is portrayed by Ray, in 'Sadgati', as a normalised social process sustained by these mechanisms. Dukhi did not die from a violent act but rather, he is the product of a social system that "denigrated Dalit lives"; therefore, he embodies Ambedkar's definition of the caste system, which is a socially acceptable and 'universally' anticipated form of "graded inequality". As stated by Ambedkar, the caste system will destroy "social justice" and undermine our "moral responsibility" as a society (Ambedkar, 2014, 1936, pg. 67).

Through the application of cinematic realism, Satyajit Ray depicts the everyday nature of the caste system and thus makes oppression seem mundane instead of extraordinary. The obsessive desire of the Brahmin priest to remain ritually pure demonstrates that he is totally indifferent to human suffering; this shows how the moral bankruptcy of caste-based religious beliefs. This disparity exemplifies Premchand's criticism of the caste Hindu culture, as he states, 'the caste Hindu culture favours custom over compassion' (Premchand, 1931/2011, p. 34). From an academic standpoint, 'Sadgati' can be viewed using the

Ambedkarite theoretical approach that views casteism as not just a social bias but rather a form of structural violence inherent within religions, work and everyday social behaviour. According to Ambedkar, 'the caste system is not a division of labour, but a division of labourers' (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 75) and this is evidenced through the treatment by Ghasiram of Dukhi's body, that Ghasiram does not see Dukhi as a person but rather as an item to be used for his own personal benefit. The film also resonates with Subaltern Studies, particularly in its representation of silence and voicelessness. Dukhi neither protests nor resists; his inability to articulate his grievances reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as the limited scope for agency and articulation of the subaltern within a 'hegemonic social structure' (Spivak, 1988, p. 287).

Sadgati brings to the forefront the material conditions of caste through its depiction of unpaid labour, economic dependence, and physical exhaustion, thus offering a Marxist reading of caste-class relations. Dukhi's death demonstrates how caste intensifies class exploitation by legitimising the extraction of unpaid labour. Historically, codified caste, through ritualistic hierarchies, labour obligations, and social exclusion, has functioned as an economic and moral system that normalises discrimination (Omvedt, 2011). Satyajit Ray's film shows that economic exploitation is sustained not only by material deprivation but also by ideological frameworks that normalise suffering. According to some critics of Ray's filmic production, he historically critiques the social structures that perpetuate injustices; they hold all society responsible for perpetuating systems of oppression, not only the individual oppressor (Robinson, 2007, p. 89). The entire community's silence when Dukhi dies at the end of *Sadgati* illustrates how the silence of society is also maintained by oppression based on caste; it is not just violence (as in the scene) that upholds this form of oppression - however difficult it may be to acknowledge - there is also a collective complicity by society. Instead of using dramatic techniques to achieve emotional catharsis for the audience, Ray relies on realism to allow the audience to be observers of structural injustice and to consider the ethical implications of such injustices as depicted in his films (Robarge, 2005, p. 61).

LITERARY REVIEW

There is considerable commentary on the films of Satyajit Ray in the context of their aesthetics of realism, ethics of humanism, and their socio-economic concerns (Zutshi, 2012, pp. 239-246). Satyajit Ray's films are known to depict marginalised social groups in these films with moral subtlety. As a short film, *Sadgati* is a prime example of this approach, bringing to the fore the real experience of Dalit oppression and emphasising labour, ritual marginality, and social cohesion (Robarge, 2005, p. 61).

Satyajit Ray's minimalist style - long shots, natural lighting, ambient sound, and restrained acting - not only serves aesthetic purposes, but also serves a moral and social role, encouraging viewers to engage reflectively with systemic discrimination (Zutshi, 2012, pp. 247-254). Omvedat (2011) argues that mainstream cinema often erases or simplifies the voices of the lower classes, failing to capture the structural and historical dimensions of untouchability (pp. 88-92). Ambedkarite scholarship provides a moral and structural perspective to explain caste hierarchies in '*Sadgati*' films. Ambedkar (1936/2014) highlighted that "the caste system is a social and moral failure, which results in the denial of humanity to the untouchables" (Ambedkar, cited in Kumar & Kumar, 2014, p. 75). Film scholar Zutshi (2012) states that "Roy's films reflected his miserable working conditions, ritual exclusion, and vulnerability in a similar manner as Ambedkar's social theories in which theoretical understanding is made into a moral experience through cinema" (Zutshi, 2012, p. 247). Such a blend of realism in cinema and moral philosophy from Ambedkar's theories makes it possible to assert that the critical moral intervention in the film is achieved.

The film highlights the concept of the subaltern through the lack of voice and marginalisation of Dukhi. According to Spivak (1988), the subaltern person is not able to voice themselves with the dominant society and discourse (p. 287). The silent suffering of Dukhi demonstrates how the complicity and traditional caste hierarchies in Dukhi's village contribute to the ongoing oppression of subaltern people. By including perspectives from subaltern people without offering an imposed sense of empowerment, Ray encourages the moral responsibility of the audience to see and reflect on structural injustice (Omvedt, 2011, p. 92). Marxist theory provides additional support for this way of thinking by looking at Dukhi's labour in terms of the caste-class relationship and how traditional subservience and economic exploitation perpetuate each other (Omvedt, 2011, p. 88). The condition of Dukhi's labour - hard, repetitive, and undervalued - makes a visible example of the economic basis of social stratification and provides both a historical and socio-economic context to understand caste oppression in India as portrayed in the film *Sadgati*.

In the article by Mondal (2022), *Sadgati* is discussed as an effective cinematic lens through which to view and critique the caste system operating throughout 20th-century India, including issues such as the systemic violence perpetrated against untouchables due to their social status, along with other forms of social exclusion based on caste membership. On the other hand, an alternative subaltern narrative of *Sadgati* was presented by Srivastava (2015), allowing for a different interpretation of this film's treatment of caste oppression and the impact it has on social indifference. In another article by Rajak (2020), caste

prejudices are further examined within *Sadgati*, and how Ray's directorial approach to depicting these issues exposes the disconnect between religion and the social structure of liberation from caste oppression. Sinha's (2023) article presents a broader examination of *Sadgati* by focusing on constitutional and class-based perspectives to show how violating a person's fundamental rights is analogous to caste oppression.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Satyajit Ray's 1981 film *Sadgati* will be analyzed through the lens of cinema and will serve to further investigate the intersection of caste, class, and social policy in post-independence India. The primary goal of this research paper is to:

1. Examine in-depth how caste discrimination and untouchability are portrayed in *Sadgati*.
2. Use your knowledge of Ambedkarite critiques to understand the moral/ethical dimensions of the discrimination based on the film *Sadgati*.
3. Explore the experience of the subaltern and social dynamics depicted in *Sadgati* through postcolonial and subaltern theory.
4. Examine the economic exploitation of caste through the Marxist theory of the relationship between class and caste and the material/physical and social/psychological relationship of oppression to labour.
5. Analyze artistic representations of realism and ethical humanism and how these have been used as tools of social critique in terms of artistic form, visual composition and storytelling technique.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In regard to the objectives stated above, the research will be framed through the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of untouchability and caste oppression that are represented in the film '*Sadgati*'?
2. How has Ray's film incorporated Ambedkarite criticism of caste ethics, social justice and structural inequality?
3. How does the film show how the silence, marginalization and complicity of lower and upper caste groups exist? What insights do subaltern studies have to enhance this understanding?
4. How does '*Sadgati*' illustrate the intersections of class and caste and, what does the movie teach us about how Dalits are economically exploited in their historical and cultural setting?
5. How do Ray's techniques of Cinematic Realism, Ethical Humanism and visual Narrative serve to create a significant

connection between the social critique the film makes and the audience's moral engagement with the film?

6. How can combining Ambedkarite, Subaltern and Marxist theories enhance our understanding of how '*Sadgati*' creates social, cultural and ethical meaning for its viewers?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative research approach in analyzing the film "*Sadgati*" (1981), directed by Satyajit Ray, as a socio-economic and moral text. The reason for applying the qualitative approach is the subtlety of the narrative of the film, as well as the fact that it uses the concept of symbolic realism. As such, the study uses a multi-dimensional approach that aims to combine textual and film analysis and historical-cultural contextualization. The film analysis entails the study of the narrative structure of the film, the cinematography, the sound track of the film, the acting of the film characters, and the use of silence. By applying the approach of analyzing the film's narrative form and content, the study aims to understand the possible ethical functions of the cinematic devices applied in the narrative approach of the film.

Apart from technical cinematic analysis, this study situates '*Sadgati*' in its proper historical and socio-economic context through reliance on supporting literature that engages with untouchability, caste-based labor, and rural stratification in India. Scholars writing on caste provide a foundation to situate it as a moral and structural system of discrimination in society, while sociological and ethnographic studies provide insight into its practical successes in society through subaltern and ethnic communities. The framework of inquiry is triangular, engaging with criticisms offered by Ambedkarite perspectives on caste social systems in India, along with subaltern theories and Marxism, to offer insight into the points where caste oppression, capitalist exploitation, and enforced silence intersect as a social fact in India. The primary source of information for this study is the cinema '*Sadgati*,' supplemented by critical reviews in Indian cinema studies.

DISCUSSION OF THE SUBJECT

This research analyses the film '*Sadgati*' through an Ambedkarite, subaltern, and Marxist perspective and framework, where Ray's restrained realism serves as a powerful social and moral critique of Indian cinema. Through this film, Ray exposes the violence inherent in everyday life and challenges the dominant narratives of social harmony and post-colonial progress. '*Sadgati*' offers a new interpretation of caste and class-based society, which helps in understanding Ray's perspective on humanism and social issues.

UNTOUCHABILITY AS LIVED EXPERIENCE

In India, untouchability is not just a custom but rather a way to exclude people based on their caste that has developed over time, and it also shapes their body, work and how they live every day. The concept of untouchability came from the Brahmanical structure of society, where people who were perceived as 'polluting' (working in sanitation, leather or agriculture) were kept away from other communities so that there would be ritual purification. Research and historical documents indicate that untouchability was exercised by separating groups geospatially, not allowing them to make use of publicly funded resources, and forcing them into hard labour in many rural areas in North India (Dirks, 2001, p.43). The novel *Sadgati*, which is set within a typical North Indian village, provides the reader with an insight into Dukhi's socio-economic circumstances created by the caste system and his dependence on agriculture. Dukhi's passive personality demonstrates the psychological response to caste inequality that B.R. Ambedkar referred to as the internalization of caste discrimination, where social status becomes a norm and justified by caste members through social reasoning (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 67). Additionally, historically, Dalits had to accept the lower social positions to survive because if a Dalit went against the caste system, they would be ostracised from their community and/or face physical harm. Therefore, Dukhi's submissiveness should not be seen as a moral defect but rather as an expected reaction to the oppressive nature of the caste system.

Traditionally, religious sanction and routine rituals have supported cultural practices by which people designated 'untouchable' have been controlled. In *Sadgati*, Brahmin priests represent the power of these authorities by controlling the production of institutionalised knowledge of astrology and ritual. The priest in this story in *Sadgati* represents a long-standing practice in which the caste system's legitimacy through Hindu religious ideology allowed lower caste people's economic exploitation to occur as a social obligation (Dirks, 2001, p.58). The contrast between the priest's fixation on ritual purity and his utter neglect of Dukhi's physical suffering illuminates the cultural hypocrisy present in this characterisation. Roy employs Premchand's realistic representation of rural caste society to demonstrate how the institution of tradition often conceals suffering and cruelty (Premchand, 1931/2011, p.34). In *Sadgati*, Dukhi's labouring body provides the most poignant insight into the lived experience of untouchability; the long, drawn-out descriptions of Dukhi's physical activity represent how Dalit labour has been historically characterised as both objectified and disposable. Ambedkar's phrase that the caste system represents "not a system of division of labour but a division of labourers" becomes visually manifest within this narrative as the depiction of Dukhi's labouring body as being completely expended with neither monetary rewards, nor compensations, nor gestures of empathy (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p.75). The holding of

economic dependence through the historical legacy of the caste system, as well as the restriction of social mobility, exemplifies broader historical trends that hold for all caste systems.

After Dukhi had died, the cultural logic behind the practice of untouchability was illustrated very clearly. The dead body was treated like something that needed to be removed because the dead body itself would cause impurity, as opposed to mourning. This meant that historically, Dalits were not given funerals, and Dalits were ostracised from the rest of society even at the time of their deaths. This denial of the right to a funeral for Dalits only reaffirmed their exclusion from being remembered in social memory (Omvedt, 2011, p. 92). Ray's use of a long shot of Dukhi's unclaimed corpse effectively highlights the concept of the historical erasure of the Dalit community. The villagers were more concerned about the convenience of getting rid of the body than about justice. The role of Social norms that allow for the violation of other people's rights through indifference. The subaltern's experience is represented in the silence of Dukhi, indicating his exclusion from the realm of discourse. Dukhi's inability to voice his dissatisfaction is consistent with Spivak's argument that the voice of the subaltern is routinely denied validity by the power structures that dominate them (Spivak, 1988, p. 287). Ultimately, Ray's realist style transforms into a critique of culture and shows that Untouchability does not operate through physical brutality, but rather through silence, habit, and Cultural Normalisation.

CASTE, RELIGION AND AMBEDKARITE CRITIQUE

The long-standing bond between caste and religion in India has historically lent credence to this social order by allowing for caste-based discrimination to be construed as sanctioned by God rather than meant as a socially created construct; thus, the historical interaction of these two forces has provided immense support to the continuance of caste-based discrimination as an unassailable element of society and of individual identity. B.R. Ambedkar's criticism of the caste system focused on two key points: first, that caste is not simply an aspect of the division of labour but rather constitutes the systematic organisation of labourers into rigid, hierarchical groups; and second that the support that caste has historically received, in terms of credibility and legitimacy, has been derived from the Hindu religious tradition and ideology. The film '*Sadgati*' (1981) by Satyajit Ray provides a powerful visual depiction of the manner in which religious authority lends legitimacy to the oppression of people from the lower castes and the manner in which this oppression is perpetuated on a daily basis in rural areas of India.

The role of Brahmin priests within society is to hold and to convey knowledge of religious customs, beliefs and practices to members of their community (Dirks, 2001, p. 58). In *Sadgati*, the Brahmin priest's power to determine auspicious wedding days

demonstrates how Religion is used as a power tool. In the story, Dukhi, who is a labourer from a Dalit family (caste), must comply with the priest's directive to have his daughter marry, which gives the marriage social acceptability. Dukhi's identity is shaped by the dominance of tradition and Brahmanical authority, and he perceives himself as being of no value compared to Brahma's spiritual power. The depth of Dukhi's identification with his untouchable status has resulted in his adherence to caste restrictions, regardless if there is an authority to compel him (Mondal, 2022, p.4). This dependency reflects the views of Ambedkar, who explains that as a result of being oppressed by the caste system, individuals must accept the power of religious authority as being natural and necessary and must "worship their own degradation" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 52). Ray shows how the caste system's focus on purity was reflected through their faith in the importance of ritual purity through the priest. The villagers' thoughts following Dukhi's death show that, instead of feeling grief for losing Dukhi, they are more concerned about the ritual impurity of having a Dalit corpse in their midst. Historically, the Dalit community was never given funeral rites or allowed to enter holy places, reinforcing their status as outcasts in our society even after they have died (Omvedt 2011, p.92). Ray uses a long-distance shot of Dukhi's body to illustrate Ambedkar's conclusion that the caste system kills the social consciousness of the people and takes away the normal sense of social responsibility of the people (Ambedkar 1936/2014, p.54). The silence surrounding this death reinforces how religious ideology restricts the moral accountability of the people.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was adamant that without confronting the religious basis of caste, there will never be any change. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar states: "The total rejection of caste is only achievable with the elimination of the religious ideas that founded caste" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 72) whereas director Satyajit Ray does not necessarily promote that idea of the rejection of religion, but rather the loss of respect for a deity in *Sadgati* highlights the moral consequences of the unquestioning religious authority (Ray's depiction of the priest in the film represents the real-world reality of the unchecked power given to the priestly jobs within the framework of the caste system). Ray's adaptation of *Sadgati* derives from author Premchand's naturalist critique of the rural religious culture of India. Premchand depicted how ritual acts of religious ceremony mask the actual exploitation that is taking place and staged the suffering of the downtrodden, illustrating that the traditional practices of Hinduism provide a moral defence for acts of cruelty (Premchand, 1931/2011, p. 34). By converting this representation of the religious precept in the presentation of *Sadgati* to cinematic realism, Ray situates *Sadgati* within the

larger ideological target of exposing the violence associated with the religion/text of 'caste'.

THE SILENCE OF THE LOWER CLASSES AND SOCIAL COMPLICITY

Historically, the persistence of caste-based oppression in Indian society has depended upon both the overt dominance of higher-caste elite groups and the enforced silence of lower-caste groups, supported by the overall social system. According to Srivastava (2015), "The last decade of the 21st century has witnessed a transition in the form and perspective of Indian Cinema, with little being done to portray the lives of Dalit people on screen to raise Dalit consciousness" (p. 31). The silence of lower-caste groups does not arise naturally from their lack of a voice; instead, this silence results from a lack of social and economic opportunity, as well as cultural normalisation through the systemic invisibility of the lives of lower-caste groups. This silence is not simply an absence of sound; it is a means of both oppression and resistance against the oppression created by the caste system. In his film, '*Sadgati*' (1981), Satyajit Ray demonstrates this silencing of lower-caste groups through the use of visual imagery, depicting how lower-caste groups have been rendered powerless through systemic oppression and through the indifference of the systems that support their continued existence under oppression. Ray illustrates through this imagery how the caste system perpetuates itself through collective indifference and moral inaction toward the oppression experienced by the lowest caste. He demonstrates how silence can be used as both a symptom and mechanism of oppression, based upon the theoretical framework of subaltern studies and historical analyses of caste-based societies.

The character of Dukhi largely embodies the oppression faced by Dalits and their inability to express themselves; their voices are not legitimized, and as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states, "the subaltern cannot speak," (Spivak 1988, p. 287) meaning that statements made from a position of extreme marginalization are not recognized within the dominant framework of understanding (Dirks, 2001, p.45). The absence of Dukhi's voice and words does not mean that she had no voice; Dukhi is silenced by the social and psychological trauma of being a Dalit and the fear of the upper castes, and in this way, she preserves the history of the oppressed through her silence.

The portrayal of silence by lower castes in Satyajit Ray's work is rooted in the customs established by rural, caste-based communities. In addition, Dukhi's passivity and inability to speak out against the treatment he receives are indicative of how people with low status have learned to internalise the caste hierarchy; this internalisation is a result of the conditioning of the oppressed to view the injustice of the caste system as their destiny (for instance, Ambedkar's view of internalisation as

stated in *Engaged Buddhism*, 1936/2014). Historically, when Dalits have risen to protest, many times they were met with a violent response or an economic boycott, which served to reinforce silence as a means of survival (Omvedt, 2011, p. 90). Along with the role of social silence in relation to the silence of (most) marginalised groups, Social silence and inaction form an important counter-point to the ongoing existence of caste violence, according to the observations of Ambedkar (1936/2014). In *Sadgati*, Dukhi is seen to be abused by members of his own village, and the villagers are therefore complicit in the abuse as it is through their inaction that they are permitted to continue perpetuating the abuse. Ray's depiction of the apathy of the villages he represents depicts the view that while the caste system causes people to act evilly, it is also created by societal apathy and acceptance of that evil through silence (for example, Dirks, 2001, p. 61). In the last scene of *Sadgati*, when Dukhi dies, we see villagers react without any emotion. Villagers do not express sadness or anger over Dukhi's death. Although Dukhi's body has died, Villagers see this as just a 'problem' concerning their community that would need to resolve the issue of 'purity' associated with rituals. The Villagers demonstrate an act of historical denial of Dalit people respect to bury correctly and take part in communal grief (Omvedt, 2011, p. 92).

Satyajit Ray believed that no change had occurred in the socio-political system regarding individuals like Ghasiram (the upper class) (Dube, p. 56). Just as natural forces like storms and rain cannot be stopped, similarly, the police and administration cannot touch upper-class individuals like Ghasiram; Satyajit makes this clear in *'Sadgati'*. In the final scene of *'Sadgati'*, Ghasiram (upper class) drags the dead body of Dukhi (lower class) outside the village and throws it away, then bathes and sprinkles Ganges water while chanting mantras. In the final scene, Satyajit shows the axe stuck in the tree stump. But the small axe does not have the power to cut down such a large stump. Through this scene, Satyajit highlights the traditional dominance of the upper-caste Hindu class in the prevailing social system of India, which is as powerful as that tree stump (Nyce, pp. 184-85). Even though Dukhi strikes the stump repeatedly in a fit of rage, he cannot cut it down. This requires the blow of a larger axe (a mass movement of the lower classes) (Ray, 1981). Satyajit, in *'Sadgati'*, wanted to convey that a greater social revolution is necessary for the untouchable (lower) classes to break free from the all-encompassing dominance of the upper class in Indian society.

MARXIST PERSPECTIVE: LABOUR, EXPLOITATION AND CASTE-CLASS RELATIONS

The film *'Sadgati'* (1981), created by Satyajit Ray, examines not just how caste operates within society but also how class and caste are interconnected within North Indian culture. It exposes

the pervasive nature of economic exploitation within a social framework by showing how these concepts are used to control labour, keeping Dalits economically and socially excluded and thus dependent on underpaid or unpaid work. The caste system was developed so that previously untouchable groups were limited to the performance of tasks viewed as 'dirty', e.g., agricultural work, manual scavenging and textile production, which perpetuated both class-based domination and social exclusion. Dukhi's forced labour in *'Sadgati'* is illustrative of this type of exploitation, portraying caste as both a mechanism for domination (socially) and an economic means of oppression.

Dukhi's repeated surrender to the Brahmin priest's demands illustrates how the exploitation of the lower classes through labour can take place without recompense. Ambedkar described caste as being "more than a simple division of labour; it is the division of those who perform labour." The relationship that exists between a person's social identity and their ability to work determines who does what work (Ambedkar 1936/2014, p. 75). Through prolonged sequences showing Dukhi performing highly strenuous physical labour, Ray depicts the effect of systemic discrimination on the individual material costs of discrimination. Ray's film confirms that the exploitation of labour cannot be separated from the hierarchical structure of society, i.e., using Dukhi as an example, Dukhi's body is a physical illustration of the way upper-caste power structures and authorities use the economic exploitation of labour as a means to establish and maintain power over Dalits. In addition to creating the opportunity for upper-caste individuals to use Dalits to gain economic benefit, the cultural acceptance of caste-based labour plays a key role in affirming the socio-economic relationship of class to caste. Social and religious codes and customs legitimised the economic subjugation of Dalits in the rural Indian context, and, because Dalits were expected to give their unpaid labour in service of religious duties (Dirks 2001, p. 58), Ray amplifies this theme by showing that the priest justified Dukhi's labour under the guise of a religious duty. As demonstrated in this interaction, there is an interrelationship between cultural norms and the material conditions that create them, and as a result, there is an ongoing process of reproducing caste-based exploitation of labour across generations.

In addition, the film shows how the different communities tacitly support each other's economic inequalities. Even though the villagers witnessed Dukhi working to the point of exhaustion and eventually dying after tremendous physical labour, they choose to let it happen. By remaining passive about this, the villagers are following a historical pattern of allowing their lower caste members to be exploited, which allowed the labour-based caste system to become entrenched (Omvedt, 2011, p. 90). Using a Marxist approach, we can understand this passive acceptance as an example of the ideological consent of a

subordinate class, with the oppressed being coerced into believing that their subjugation is natural or even sanctioned by God. Therefore, 'Sadgati' addresses the direct exploitation of labour, but also the cultural and social forces that allow for that exploitation to occur. Dukhi's death is the ultimate expression of both caste and class oppression. The physical and mental exhaustion he had to endure, which ultimately led to his death, was not accidental; rather, it was the logical outcome of an economic system that treated Dalit bodies as commodities without any rights or protections. Historically, Dalit agricultural workers lived in perilous and grueling conditions in return for very little pay. As a result, the class dependence of Dalit workers was a crucial factor in maintaining the class structure (Omvedt, 2011, p. 88). The manner in which Ray depicted the death of Dukhi creates an emotional context for the critique of the intertwined and interdependent exploitation of the Dalit worker. Instead of presenting the analysis of exploitation on a theoretical level, Ray creates a more direct and tangible experience of the human toll taken by exploitation.

CINEMATIC REALISM AND MORAL HUMANISM

The film "Sadgati," by Satyajit Ray, is well-known for a combination of moral humanism and cinematic realism, which has captured much scholarly attention over the years. Ray's realist style derives from the tradition of Indian literature, as well as from global cinematic movements such as Italian Neorealism, emphasising the mundanity of everyday social reality (specifically the experience of caste oppression). In *Sadgati*, Ray uses the camera to emphasise the physical labour, gestures and surroundings of Dukhi, who is a Dalit. This allows the viewer to see how material conditions, social hierarchies and ritual norms converge to produce systemic injustice. Film critics like Deepti Zutshi argue that through Ray's adaptation of Premchand's story, Ray heightens Premchand's critique of society by translating the story's narrative tension to visual, rather than textual, forms (2012). This can be seen through Ray's use of long takes to present Dukhi's acts of labour, Dukhi's physical agony and the uncaring reactions of the village elders. Zutshi refers to this visual rhythm as a reflection of 'the oppression inherent in caste', and cites it as evidence of Ray's broader realist philosophy of the use of *mise-en-scène*, space and performance to demonstrate the foundational structures that create social injustice. By developing an observational approach to cinema, Ray has enabled viewing to become a form of moral engagement with social inequality.

In Satyajit Ray's film, Dukhi is portrayed as a dignified character in spite of his status as a structural outcast and his marginalisation. In contrast to many of the businessmen and politicians of the day, Ray portrayed humanitarian views on the way people are treated. While he did not portray the suffering of

Dukhi as an irrational or a sentimental subject, instead, he portrayed the individual experience of Dukhi within the frame of the greater good of the people who make up that larger society (Ajith, 2025). According to Ajith, 'Sadgati remains a classic example of how Ray critiques the Brahminical social system and the Brahminical caste system' (p.6) while coming from an upper-caste humanistic position, not from a theoretical position against caste oppression or resistance to caste oppression. Although Dukhi's hard work and suffering is on the screen throughout the film, Ray did not attempt to dramatise or exaggerate the pain or feelings of suffering of Dukhi (Ajith, 2025). This view aligns with Ray's view that film should show 'the raw material of life' (Ray, 1976, p.42), thus allowing the viewer to see life as it is without captions or embellishments. Omvedt supports that there is strong historical data that points to the view that many of the rural Dalits during the time of Ray were manually forced to work very hard and were not given many resources or support (Omvedt, 2011, p.88).

Through sound, silence and environmental detail, Ray's film *Sadgati* presents an authentic representation of morality and the human condition. The village's ambient soundscape, the absence of music during scenes depicting labor and death and the actual arrangement of space create the emphasis on caste oppression both materially and morally for the audience to perceive. As Rajak (2020) asserts, "In depicting the vulnerable and exploited position of a low caste community at the hands of the Brahminical social order, Ray has relied more heavily on visual imagery than on dialogue" (p.6). Thus, the visual portrayal of Dukhi (Om Puri) in the film *Sadgati*, as well as the Dalit community in general, serves to address the problem of precarious livelihood. The absence of a narrative conclusion or emotional closure creates a moral impact through a lack of emotional closure for the viewer in the form of Dukhi's death; rather than treating his death as a means of resolving social complicity or structural injustice, the viewer is encouraged to reflect on these concepts actively. As critics have indicated, this deliberate restraint creates a moral obligation for the viewer to reflect upon the depicted social and ethical climate by transforming the viewing experience itself into a moral act.

"Sadgati" depicts caste-based labour and ritual impurity, as well as both caste hierarchy and its practice of untouchability. In this way, the author and filmmaker interpret the Dalit subject through their caste upper-caste bias, and focus on the process by which a Brahmin figure systematically exploits the Dalit subject; thus indicating a Dalit subject's internalisation of a predetermined fate, within a caste-hierarchy to which the Dalit subject has been subjected based on religion. The existence of the Dalit subject, as represented by the author and filmmakers, depicts a profoundly inhuman existence, characterised by submission to deprivation and a lack of overt resistance;

nevertheless, the author and the filmmaker use the representation of the Dalit subject to indicate the entrenched structures that perpetuate caste oppression and the practice of untouchability; therefore clearly positioning their work as an attempt to critique social structures and provoke an ethical awareness of inequality. Through the integration of historical insights and the cinematic form, Ray creates a mode of realistic representation that acknowledges and captures the material and ideological aspects of oppression. Cinematic realists should not be concerned with sentimentality but rather Morality and Moral Reflection. Ray's use of long shots of Dukhi's Dead Body has become symbolic of the Visual Indictment of (Socially) Excluded People (Ray, 1976, p. 95). According to Sen (2012), Ray's Humanism was derived from recognizing the Value of Human Beings in all walks of life (Sen, 2012, p. 143). *Sadgati* serves as both a form of Cinema and a Critique of Society.

The thematic analysis of Satyajit Ray's film, "*Sadgati*," demonstrates the dual role of Ray's film as an art form and a critique of societal and moral issues related to caste, labour, and social ethics. The plight of Dukhi shows how the lived experience of untouchability, or being an untouchable, results in a tangible and material way of living in rural India, where untouchables experience a formal subjugation (improve their lot), being exploited for their labour, and being marginalised socially. By portraying Dukhi's exhausting work, physical exhaustion, and eventual death as the result of untouchability, Ray is presenting the reality and moral reality of untouchability, not as an abstract idea but more so as a physical and material reality (Omvedt, 2011, pp. 88-92). The connection between Ray's film and Ambedkarite criticism of caste oppression strengthens the moral as well as structural aspects of caste and social injustice. According to Ambedkar (1936/2014), caste is a structural failure in moral leadership for judging people as a systemic moral failure and denying both dignity and agency to Dalits (p. 75). The visual framing, visual representation of the formal exclusion from society, and the social complicity in the system of caste oppression demonstrates Ray's translation of these theoretical critiques into a visual and moral narrative. In addition, Sinha (2023) states that Dukhi's refusal to complain, and acceptance of exploitation depict how much Dukhi internalised his caste-based oppression, while also suggesting that a strict adherence to caste-based injustice by the villagers perpetuates structural inequities and injustices. The film highlights how caste oppression endures through social indifference and moral inaction, reflecting Ambedkar's critique of a society that normalises inequality by neglecting collective responsibility (p. 36).

Individual experiences of suffering are depicted against a backdrop of broader socio-cultural and historical contexts by Ray's complex form of realism, establishing a link between caste

and class systems in India. In addition, the Marxist interpretation of labour explores how oppression through economic exploitation and traditional social structures (race/class) mutually reinforce one another. Examples of this are depicted through the type of physical labour, which is not only unpaid and unrecognised but also functions as an example of the "materiality" behind the racial oppression perpetuated by capitalism (Omvedt, p.88). The use of long shots, minimal cuts, and ambient sound has been used by Ray's realist aesthetic to emphasise both the materiality and ethics of labour, thereby reinforcing the link between moral judgement and economic oppression.

The idea of Subaltern supports an understanding of structural inequalities by illuminating the limits of both voice and agency within the context of hierarchies. To understand the experiences of suffering women, for example, we can look at Spivak's (1988) argument that those in a subaltern condition are frequently denied structural avenues for voicing their pain and suffering, as illustrated by the fact that many women who suffer cannot find the means to speak out about that suffering (pp. 287-289). The linkages between ethical humanism and the invisibility of subaltern groups provide a bridge for filmmakers to use theory to evoke empathy for people who experience systemic oppression, while still refraining from creating melodramatic portrayals. Ray's nuanced realism situates individual experiences of suffering within a broader historical and cultural framework, thus demonstrating the significance of caste-class relations in India.

The combined use of several theoretical frameworks - namely, Ambedkarite, Subaltern, and Marxist - create an increased level of understanding in the analysis of *Sadgati*, considering different views. Through an examination of all three areas (historical, cultural, and cinematic), *Sadgati* has been shown to have both 1) the role of Socially Relevant Document, with a large amount of historical supporting detail, and 2) the moral stimulus and ethical engagement of the viewer through contemplation (Robarge, 2005, p. 61). The combination of cinematic realism and the focus on moral humanism from director Ray helped elevate *Sadgati*'s format from that of simple display to Critical Reflection upon the social inequalities that still exist with respect to Caste and Class divisions in society today. Instead of relying on dialogue-driven narratives or melodramatic scenes, Ray prioritises visual and spatial representation, silence, and labour to convey oppression. According to Haider (2015), "The ethical vision of Ray in portraying the traumatic life of Dukhi in *Sadgati* is articulated as much through what he leaves unseen as through what he shows directly. He opens up a space for us to explore conflicting ideas about what it means to bear ethical witness" (p. 213). This approach aligns with scholars' observations that Ray's films

operate through moral realism, where form and content are inseparable, generating both knowledge and moral consciousness.

CONCLUSION

'Sadgati' (1981) by Satyajit Ray portrays both a social-culturally based opinion on Historical Realism and Ethical Humanism. Ray critiques society through 'Sadgati'. In this film, he portrays the oppression of the caste system through the life of Dukhi. Dukhi's suffering represents an experience that shows how an individual's suffering can be used to understand the structural inequalities in Society, as well as the cultural failure of morality in Indian society. The film shows how caste oppression exists materially and tangibly (as opposed to being simply an ABSTRACT notion) through a cultural/historical lens with cinematic artistic form, encouraging audiences to reflect on how caste oppression manifests itself in their lives. From the perspective of Ambedkarism, 'Sadgati' represents one of the many ways in which critiques of the caste system will continue to be relevant in India and illustrate how Dukhi had to suffer from forced labour, ritualistically oppressed, and eventually rejected, thereby showing how this systematic denial of human rights and social recognition happens. Using Dukhi as a model represents how oppression must be recognised as a systemic aspect of the caste system, addressing both historical and contemporary injustices, rather than as something individualistic or coincidental.

Sadgati illustrates how subalterns (those at the bottom of society) experience their marginalised position through silence and limited movements within society as a whole. Through Dukhi, Sadgati illustrates how subalterns cannot articulate their experiences within the dominating discursive constructs of their time. Satyajit Ray's film captures this silence rather than attempting to eliminate it, using a naturalistic approach to create a greater discourse surrounding the condition in which subaltern individuals exist. By documenting the indifference of the villagers and their ritualistic acts regarding Dukhi's suffering, Ray is also documenting how people's actions towards others impact oppression. Rather than solely acting as oppressors through violence and oppression directed towards a specific group, the oppressive nature of society and the normalisation and collective inaction surrounding this oppression creates a new reality/structure for the oppressed to exist within. When viewed from a Marxist perspective, Sadgati illustrates the relationship between caste and class in relation to the economic exploitation of the subaltern caste.

By representing Dukhi as a labourer, and depicting his struggles as directly related to the historical marginalisation of the untouchable caste as labourers, Sadgati addresses how the bodies of the subaltern individuals are described in a socio-ritual

sense. The film also illustrates how Satyajit Ray's realist cinema captures the labour process of Dukhi through the physical nature of his labour as well as the exhaustion and the continual repetition of his labour. The connection between social exploitation and economic exploitation is made by the depiction of the body of the labourer in relation to the religious and ideological constructs surrounding caste. The film's approach of embedding personal suffering in a larger context offers an opportunity for viewers to understand systemic inequality as a product of class and caste. This perspective is consistent with both Marxist critique and Ambedkarite ethical analysis. The film's intent to create an artistic representation of its socio-economic content has led to the creation of a historical record of Sadgati. This is illustrated by Satyajit Ray's visual portrayal of the moral, cultural and structural effects of oppression.

REFERENCES

- Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste*. Verso. (Original work published 1936)
- Ajith, A. (2025). *The cost of salvation: Revisiting Satyajit Ray's Sadgati through a Dalit lens*. E-CineIndia. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press.
- Dube, S. C. (1990). *Indian society*. National Book Trust.
- Dutta, K. (2004). *Satyajit Ray: In search of the modern*. Rupa.
- Haider, N. (2015). Framing Dalit: A study of Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*. *South Asian Review*, 36(1), 197–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2015.11933011>
- Mondal, A. (2022). Understanding scenario of casteism in twentieth-century India through Satyajit Ray's film *Sadgati*. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: C (Sociology & Culture)*, 22(6).
- Nyce, B. (1988). *Satyajit Ray: A study of his films*. Praeger Pub.
- Omvedt, G. (2011). *Understanding caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and beyond*. Orient Blackswan.
- Premchand. (2011). *Sadgati and other stories*. Penguin. (Original work published 1931)
- Rajak, S. (2020). Problematizing Dalit *chetna*: *Sadgati* as the battleground of conflict between the “progressive casteless consciousness” and the anti-caste Dalit consciousness. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(4).
- Ray, S. (1976). *Our films, their films*. Orient Longman.

- Ray, S. (Director). (1981). *Sadgati* [Film]. Doordarshan. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRpaPV3QayY>
- Roberge, G. (2005). *Satyajit Ray: Cinema and society*. Indiana University Press.
- Robinson, A. (2007). *Satyajit Ray: The inner eye*. I.B. Tauris.
- Sen, A. (2012). *The argumentative Indian*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sinha, J. (2023). The representation of class conflict in cinema and violation of fundamental rights: A study in the context of Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*. *Journal of Communication and Management*, 2(1), 33–39.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Srivastava, A. R. (2015). *Sadgati*: Through the lens of Satyajit Ray. *Subalternspeak: An International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 4(1).
- Zutshi, D. (2012). *Sadgati*: Satyajit Ray's deliverance of Premchand's *Sadgati*. In M. Asaduddin & A. Ghosh (Eds.), *Filming fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray* (pp. 239–260). Oxford University Press.