CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF DALIT HERITAGE: AN AMBEDKARAITE READING OF OTT PLATEFORMS

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ABSTRACT

The paper will look into the representations of the Dalit heritage in Indian Over-the-Top (OTT) productions in the years 2014 - 2025 through the prism of the Ambedkarite critical theory. Based on the original ideas of B.R. Ambedkar of dignity, domination, humiliation, and cultural assertion, the paper examines the reproduction by streaming sites or the resistance against caste hierarchies in streaming platforms through content. The analysis, based on qualitative textual analysis of both films and web series posted on Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney plus Hotstar, Zee5, and SonyLIV, the research singles out two opposite patterns of representation: hegemonic savarna narrative, which marginalises the Dalit characters through victimhood motives, stereotyping, and upper-caste saviour narrative; and counter-hegemonic Dalit cinema which puts the Dalit characters in the centre of the frame in terms of centrality, historical awareness, and anti-caste aesthetics. The paper shows that on the one hand, with OTT, there is increased access to a variety of narratives, on the other hand, these platforms are also contested spaces which code caste hierarchies through algorithmic forms of curation and commissioning. Where the image of Dalit dignity, heritage, and cultural assertion are put in the centre, an Ambedkarite structure suggests that representation is a form of politics: this is a precondition to destroying caste in visual culture. The paper hypothesizes as the initiatives of institutional changes: platform regulation, policy principles regarding the caste image and representation, and long-lasting Dalit creative leadership to make the OTT ecosystems agents of liberation, not exploitation.

KEYWORDS: *Dalit representation; OTT platforms; Ambedkarite critique; Caste and cinema; Anti-caste aesthetics*

INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years, Over-the-Top (OTT) services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ hotstar, and local networks like Zee5 and SonyLIV have reshaped the Indian visual culture, production, and cinema consumption trends. This technological change has expanded watcher ship not only between nations but also between classes making viewers be exposed to narratives beyond the remains of schooling schemes of old-fashioned movie theatres and television companies (Hamdulay and Ponde, 2024). As OTT services have grown to grow beyond two operators in 2012 and over fifty today, they represent crucial arenas where representational, memory, and identity issues are negotiated, nowadays (Hamdulay and Ponde, 2024; Panda, 2021).

But the question of who tells what stories, and how, is highly lopsided. Dalit heritage that involves the fight against the oppression of caste, cultural memory, intellectual traditions, geographical histories, and modern demands to dignity have been the marginal subject of visual representation in the mainstream sphere (Jalwal & Kumawat, 2025). Broadening the diversity, OTT platforms often recreate the dominant-caste ideologies, reproduce stereotypes or seek to portray the Dalit lives through the prism of misery only (Jalwal & Kumawat, 2025).

In this paper, these dynamics have been taken using the Ambedkarite thought. Its analysis of the issue of OTT depiction of Dalit heritage and its impact on embedded social hierarchies is based on the ideas of dignity, domination, cultural assertion, and annihilation of caste by B. R. Ambedkar (Ambedkar, 1936; Marotirao, 2023). This paradigm predicts the political stakes of representation as a part of equality and cultural justice struggle.

One of the key research questions explored in this article is based on the following: How do Indian OTT platforms represent Dalit heritage and Dalit lives? looking at the 10-year span (2014-2025) of fast OTT growth, algorithmic curation, and changing production ecologies. And how do these images oppose or reproduce the power of the dominance castes? The paper could serve well Dalit studies, and media scholarship, and Ambedkarite analysis as it attempts to address these questions and generate a possible insight on the contribution of cinema in perpetuating or destabilizing caste oppression.

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AMBEDKARITE PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE AND REPRESENTATION

The concept of cultural humiliation, especially in Annihilation of the Caste, is the core of caste oppression as formulated by B. R. Ambedkar in his work on the subject of representation. According to him, the caste problem not merely separates work, but it subjugates a dignified and cultural agency of the Dalit communities, such that representation and cultural assertion are the two issues which are critical to social emancipation (Ambedkar, 1936). One of the productive approaches to the analysis of visual media is by considering his idea of dignity, which is based on his absence of domination, significant participation, and the cultural value. In Who Were the Shudras? and The Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar even more identifies ways of Dalit cultural assertion by recuperating the past and community.

Modern scholars of the Ambedkarite tradition apply this critique to the visual culture and explore ways that both cinema recreates the so-called Brahmanical hegemony: the views of the dominant caste, and the aesthetics that portray Dalit subjectivities as unseen or stereotyped. As part of the recent scholarship (2014-2025), anti-caste representation becomes dissociated with inclusion, where the so-called Dalit aesthetic is said to decentralize the dominant account and challenges Brahmanical cultural knowledge as a way of epistemological opposition (Ingole, 2020). An example of this change is filmmakers, including Pa. Ranjith and Vetrimaaran, who developed counter-hegemonic visual cultures and languages challenging their stereotypes and asserting Dalit dignity and cultural memory (Herrero, 2021).

Intersectionality has been core to the Ambedkarite visual criticism, since Dalit women are doubly erased by the casteist and patriarchal systems. Brahmanical patriarchy is aimed at attacking the bodies of Dalit women, their work, and cultural expression (Arya, 2020), and therefore it is essential in the way of intersectional representation. In this way, visual media is an important location where the values of Ambedkarite principles of dignity, cultural assertion, and the destruction of caste are either reinforced or challenged and OTT becomes the important space to analyse these processes.

DALIT VISIBILITY IN STREAMING MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

Since 2014, scholarship on the topic of digital transformation in Indian cinema has expanded, but it is systematically under researched with regard to Dalit representation on OTTs. The transformation of theatrical display to streaming, enhanced by COVID-19 and the emergence of Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney Hotstar, Zee5 and SonyLIV, has changed the way people create and consume media as well as broadening storytelling (Bunkar, 2024). Nevertheless, the issue of caste dynamics in these ecosystems is not explored fully. The mainstream cinema studies reported a tendency of Dalit erasure, tokenism, stereotyping, and proliferation of the so-called upper-caste saviour trope (Bunkar, 2024; Kureel, 2021). These trends are mostly still present on the OTTs, as the series like Article 15, Serious Men, and Tandav still revolve around upper-caste gazes (Bunkar, 2024).

Newer criticism observes that Dalit and anti-caste filmmakers find another outlet through OTT: Pa. Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, Nagraj Manjule, and Neeraj Ghaywan among others have turned to OTT distribution, to anticipate Dalit subjectivity and culture on a new plane (Bunkar, 2024). The characters in works such as Kaala, Karnan, Sairat, Masaan, and Jhund are not pitiable and come out as autonomous Dalits. The series Dahaad (2023) on the Amazon Prime breaks the stereotypes but has an additional Dalit female lead that is played by a Dalit female actor, Sub-Inspector Anjali Bhati.

However, there have been significant loopholes. An Ambedkarite critical analysis of OTT representation is still very scanty; a majority of research has focused on cinema, but there is no attempt to invoke Constructs of the dignity, domination, or cultural assertion and make an analysis based on the ideas of Ambedkar. Suffering is still a greater concern of scholarship compared to Dalit heritage of memory, symbols, spaces, icons, and intellectual traditions, as analytical categories. Besides, there is no detailed coverage of Dalit representation within the key OTT providers. Only a continuing analytical method of Ambedkar focusing on gaps in these areas are the ways to meet these blank spots and deliberate centring of heritage as heritage.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

The research design used in this study is a qualitative research design that involves a critical textual analysis and interpretive content analysis of the OTT films and series, which have Dalit characters, themes, or heritage. This kind of design facilitates subtle meaning of representation and cultural politics in cinematic writings (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The sample is chosen according to such a purposive criterion: The productions with Dalit themes featured in them or the caste hierarchy are created in the last five years (2014-2025) and are released via such large platforms as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, Zee5 and SonyLIV. Article 15, Serious Men, Tandav, Dahaad, Kaala, Karnan, Sairat and Masaan are some of the main texts.

Ambedkarite analytical framework converts the central concepts into categories. The cast hierarchy and cast domination are viewed based on narrative structure and the placement of

characters in the story, dignity and humiliation is viewed through the representations of labour and body treatment and social status and the assertion of the culture is viewed through strategy, intellectual involvement and re-possession of Dalit images.

The following analytical categories have been formulated: (1) narrative structure and point of view; (2) characterization; (3) visual iconography (statues of Ambedkar, blue images, places of worship); (4) space, place (bastis, labour spaces, places of worship); (5) dealing with Dalit past and memory.

Systematic viewing, taking notes in detail and frame-by-frame analysis will be engaged in the data collection. Ambedkarite concepts have been identified through reflexive thematic data analysis within the framework of which similar patterns are detected in the examined films and contrasted than each other (Braun, & Clarke, 2019).

Some of these limitations are a limited sample, platform-specific availability, and language constraints (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and English). The considerations of ethics focus on representational responsibility as it is more concerned with Dalit agency and does not want to perpetuate the victimization narratives.

CODIFYING CASTE: STEREOTYPES, SILENCE AND THE SAVARNA GAZE

The patterns of caste representation prevalent in theatrical cinema, marginalisation and stereotyping of Dalit characters or silencing, are largely transferred and brought to the extreme in OTT platforms. According to Kureel (2021), this epistemic violence on the oppressed castes by Indian media entails prioritizing the naturalising discourses and privileged dominance existing in Indian media. This works through the Hindi-language OTT ecosystem with genre convention on the same: more often than not, Dalit characters are servants, background characters, or victimized, in need of an upper-caste mediation. Police procedurals and legal dramas can put Dalit characters in subordinate roles as either domestic employee whose labour goes unnoticed, as side witnesses or a criminal being suspected. This codification is an expression of the so-called Brahmanical gaze, when the authority of narrative in the upper caste is given a form of omnipresence (Arya, 2020).

This is the trope of the upper-caste saviour which is still in the middle in OTT shows that cover the subject of caste, with the foregrounding here being the inclusion of an upper-caste lead character, whose righteousness is brought to light through their storyline. Although it has been passed off as an improvement of the caste system, this system strengthens the benevolence of the upper caste and marginalizes Dalit autonomy. According to the Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema, mainstream cinema represents Dalit characters as inactive or pathetic a trend that is

followed in OTT media (Bunkar, 2024). This is added to by symbolic erasure: Dalit history and heritage, its icons, symbols, places of work, rites, and rituals, now play out as aestheticized backgrounds instead of a place of political significance. An image of ambedkarite, blue flag, bastis tend to look decontextualised, devoid of ideological meaning.

Such depictions are identified as a Dalit-imposed conformism by an Ambedkarite criticism, which limits dignified dignity. Ambedkar hypothesized the rejection of agency and identity as a source of caste oppression. OTT narratives replicate this humiliation by portraying the Dalit characters as reliant, characterless or simply sympathetic characters. Their subjection is being Brahmanical common sense, which presupposes that the worldviews of upper castes are as normal (Ingole, 2020). OTT platforms perform a sort of representational slow violence the accrued epistemic damage of systematically erasing and stereotyping Dalit individuals (Kureel, 2021).

ANTI-CASTE AESTHETICS AND DALIT COUNTER-CINEMA

Anti-caste and Dalit directors relying on the OTT systems of distribution have crafted unique strategies of cinema that are not based on the dominant depictions; they focus on Dalit hero-protagonists, Dalit life, and the Dalit historical awareness. Pa. The films of Ranjith, Madras (2014), Kaala (2018), Attakathi (2012), and Sarpatta Parambarai (2021) can be regarded as the examples of counter-cinema: they create a complex figure of a Dalit character, who is independent and finds himself or herself in the complicated social worlds. By using the element of Aadalumpaadalum-padaalum (performance and song) Ranjith incorporates the element of Gaana, an art form of urban Dalit, and places working-class Dalit aesthetics at the centre of the cinematic language. Combining Gaana and hip-hop in his work with The Casteless Collective, inspired by anti-caste philosopher Iyothee Thass, he builds what researchers call a collective against caste (Leonard, 2023). Similarly, in Karnan (2021), Pariyerum Perumal (2018), and Vazhai, by visual metaphors, bound donkeys, authoritative chairs, tea glasses where the caste is segregated, Mari Selvaraj reveals the current caste violence in everyday life. In Selvaraj, the haunted ecologies are considered as living libraries of the memories of the castes, laying the Dalit epistemologies on subaltern geographies (Mathivadhani, 2025).

Another intervention that is important is the representation of Dalit women. OTT-released movies like Narappa and Love Story (2021) show Dalit women as humans possessing independent agency and intellectualism and do not support the staples of submissiveness. In Sairat (2015), a protagonist who is a Dalit woman takes the story over as she fights the caste and male domination. The film by Neeraj Ghaywan, entitled Masaan (2015), which is available on Amazon Prime, introduces the

sexual autonomy and self-determination of Dalit women to break the caste and gender hierarchies.

These forms of counter-cinematic practices are the operationalisation of Ambedkarite consciousness in terms of narrative and visual forms. These works are driven conceptually and aesthetically by the principle of dignity that was practiced by Ambedkar and is expressed as freedom of domination and understanding of the value of culture. The symbols of the Dalit have a distinct political drive: the figures of Ambedkar, blue flags, and other sites belonging to the community become violent signifiers, not just decorative items. Past is revitalized historically: Karnan makes allusions to actual atrocities, and Sarpatta Parambarai is able to place Dalit boxing in a historical context of anti-caste struggles that followed the independence. Visual language upholds non hegemonic aesthetics by laying stress on brightness and taking the Dalit bodies, spaces, rituals and so forth as valuable in themselves. By focusing on the Dalit agency, historical consciousness, and cultural assertion, these film makers, methodically disorient the Brahmanical gaze and declare Dalits as valid, complicated and dignified objects of motion picture.

CULTURAL POLITICS OF DALIT HERITAGE ON OTT PLATEFORMS

OTT platforms are viewed as the sites of struggle over the narratives of Dalit heritage which are vied against each other. The conflict of dominant savarna images and anti-caste anti-Cinema represents wider conflicts of power and presence of culture. Although OTT distribution enables Dalit filmmakers to reach more people and impose counter-hegemonic narratives, platform logics have an influence on the selection of stories for turned into green lights, hotspots, and automatically promoted. According to Jalwal and Kumawat (2025), mainstream media fosters the ideologies of dominant caste and patriarchy, but streaming platforms like Amazon Prime and Netflix start to order content focusing on Dalit, which makes them main questions: are these changes an indicator of the actual equity promotion or a strategy of diversification of neoliberal capitalism?

Algorithms and panel formations are more attributes used as gatekeepers that judge which Dalit narratives are visible. As Saha (2025) demonstrates, even in the digital infrastructures of algorithmic discrimination that should reflect diversity rhetoric, the effect of caste is so strong that it creates a system of social and political control. Dalit heritage- monuments, icons, rituals, symbols, etc. becomes subject to commodification, with the dominant discourses taking over and making things clean of any traces of Dalit. Instead, it will be counter-cinema where heritage is politicised, and symbols of an Ambedkarite heritage and historical memory are restored as an opposition to these.

The diversity and inclusion discourse of the platforms is an issue which should be questioned according to Ambedkar. These strategies are sold as progressive and are based on neoliberal logics of commodifying the representation (Ingole, 2020). Ambedkarite structures require systemic change: not only by having Dalit characters, but the dignity, agency and lack of domination in the centre. This discloses how diversity based on platforms can co-exist with a caste hierarchy.

The bottom line is that OTT platforms are still the arenas of ideological battles. Their capacity to publish anti-caste cinema with the mainstream narratives provides a platform where the heritage is reclaimed and colonized at the same time. It takes more than representation to realise the principals of the Ambedkarite but it must be questions of platform governance, algorithmic justice and whether digital inclusion is becoming a substantive cultural and political power.

SYNTHESIS, INTERVENTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Over a period of time (2014-2025), the OTT platforms in India have turned into a complicated space of the cinematic representation where Dalit heritage and Dalit lives are debatable. Although still marginalized, stereotyped, and silenced by dominant savarna discourses, Dalit filmmakers and the use of OTT distribution have used victimhood and salvation tropes to impose counter-hegemonic aesthetics based on Dalit agency, historical awareness, and cultural assertion. Such binary as erasure vs. visibility, domination vs. dignity organizes the modern Indian visual culture.

This requires an Ambedkarite structure in traversing this terrain. Ambedkar focuses on dignity, the absence of humiliation, and acknowledgment of cultural value through foregrounding to understand the political route that was involved in representation. The paper indicates that media representation is not aesthetic, but a composition of social stratifications: the way in which the Dalit folks are portrayed dictates their inhabited recognition and social status (Ambedkar, 1936; Kureel, 2021).

It should be concrete interventions. OTT platforms are encouraged to commission and promote Dalit and the anti-caste creative community, consider the advice of Dalit scholars during employee editorial decision feedback, and use guidelines respecting caste sensitivity beyond token advice. The policy makers should put in place regulation mechanisms that deal with caste stereotyping in streaming's just as gender-sensitivity policies (Jalwal and Kumawat, 2025). The priorities of the researchers should be the value of Dalit audience studies, auditing algorithms that are biased against caste in the field of

recommendations, as well as a comparative analysis of the South Asian streaming ecosystems by region.

It is questionable that Ambedkarite consciousness will be able to transform the streaming platforms or neoliberal arguments that will commoditize Dalit heritage will consume Indian visual culture. Dalit counter-cinema reveals the transformational quality of cinema: where the Dalit dignity and the liberation of the caste are made central to cultural production, cinemas become instruments of destroying caste and not propagating it. To realise this potential, it must engage long-term struggle, on the part of filmmakers, scholars, activists, and viewers, to make OTT platforms uphold Dalit cultural assertion and general liberation as an alternative to Brahmanical hegemony.

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