Jaishree Shanker
Associate Professor,
Department of English and
Foreign Languages, M.D.U.,
Rohtak, Haryana, India

Emerging trends of dalit portrayal in Hindi cinema: An analysis of the movies *Aarakshan* and *Masaan*

Jaishree Shanker

Abstract
This research paper aims to explore the emerging trends of Dalit portrayal in Hindi cinema, with a special focus on two films *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* released in the twenty-first century and encapsulating the much-needed and long-awaited new paradigms of Dalit representation. The representation of Dalits in mainstream Indian cinema has evolved over the years, reflecting changing social dynamics and the increasing recognition of Dalit narratives. Dalit representation in Hindi cinema has also undergone significant transformations, moving beyond stereotypical roles and simplistic narratives. The films *Aarakshan* (2011) and *Masaan* (2015) stand out as examples of recent movies that have explored the Dalit experience with depth and nuance. By analyzing these two critically acclaimed movies, this paper seeks to examine the portrayal of Dalit characters, their socio-economic context, and the impact of these films on public discourse. These films depict the struggles, aspirations, and resilience of Dalit individuals in different social contexts. This research paper will analyze the portrayal of Dalit protagonists of these two movies, their agency, and the social issues they confront, shedding light on the evolving trends of Dalit representation in Hindi cinema.

Keywords: Cinema, dalits, narratives, paradigms, society, trends

Introduction
The representation of Dalits in earlier movies of twentieth century has always been a subject of critical examination, as it often perpetuated stereotypes, reinforced caste-based hierarchies, and dwelt largely on marginalized Dalit narratives. The portrayal of Dalits in Hindi cinema has long been a subject of scrutiny and critique. Almost all previous research work on the representation of Dalits in Indian cinema highlights a historical marginalization and a conventional representation of Dalit characters, often reducing them to stereotypes or reinforcing negative caste-based narratives. Studies have explored the historical portrayal of Dalits in Hindi cinema, highlighting the dominant trends and problematic depictions prevalent during that era and the impact of these representations on the perpetuation of social hierarchies and the reinforcement of caste-based discrimination in society.

Methodology
This research paper adopts a qualitative approach, employing textual analysis and content analysis methods. The main data sources for analysis will be the films *Aarakshan* and *Masaan*. The selected scenes and dialogues will be critically examined to understand the portrayal of Dalit characters, their socio-cultural context, and the dominant themes related to Dalit identity and struggles.

Research analysis
During the early years of Indian cinema, social hierarchies and caste divisions were deeply entrenched in society. This influenced the representation of Dalits on screen, with filmmakers often resorting to simplistic and derogatory portrayals that perpetuated caste-based prejudices. Dalit characters were often shown as impoverished, uneducated, and subordinate to upper-caste individuals, reinforcing the oppressive social order.

Many earlier films depicted Dalits using stereotypical characterizations that reinforced negative stereotypes. Dalit characters were often assigned roles that not only reinforced caste-based discrimination but also contributed to the marginalization and stigmatization of Dalits in society.

Corresponding Author:
Jaishree Shanker
Associate Professor,
Department of English and
Foreign Languages, M.D.U.,
Rohtak, Haryana, India

The representation of Dalits in earlier movies often depicted them as inferior to upper-caste characters, perpetuating social hierarchies. Dalit characters were rarely shown in positions of power, influence, or agency. Instead, they were relegated to subordinate roles, serving as foils to the dominant upper-caste protagonists. This reinforced the existing power dynamics and maintained the status quo.

Earlier films often lacked authentic narratives that reflected the lived experiences of Dalit individuals. Their stories, struggles, and aspirations were rarely explored, denying them agency and relegating them to the margins of cinematic storytelling. This absence of authentic representation further contributed to the erasure of Dalit voices and narratives from mainstream cinema. Both scholars and activists have criticized the problematic representations of Dalits in earlier movies and highlighted the negative impact they had on societal perceptions. Dalit intellectuals and artists have resisted these portrayals, calling for more accurate and nuanced depictions that challenge stereotypes and provide a platform for Dalit narratives. These critiques and resistance have paved the way for a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of Dalits in contemporary cinema. The examination of earlier films serves as a reminder of the need for ongoing efforts to challenge stereotypes and foster greater inclusion and representation in Hindi cinema.

Films of the twentieth century adopted a more direct and realistic approach to portray the harsh realities and sufferings of Dalit characters. They focused on the social injustices and brutalities faced by Dalits, presenting a grim portrayal of their experiences. These films often depicted Dalit characters as victims of systemic oppression and explored the consequences of their marginalized status. These characters were often shown in dire circumstances, enduring extreme poverty, discrimination, and exploitation. The focus was on highlighting their victimhood and the systemic injustices they faced. These movies presented Dalit characters as passive victims who suffer silently, embodying the helplessness and oppression faced by Dalits in society. With primary focus on exposing the brutalities and exploitations inflicted upon Dalits, these movies revolved around themes of social injustice, caste-based discrimination, and the dehumanizing impact of the caste system. These films aimed to evoke strong emotional responses from the audience and shed light on the harsh realities faced by Dalits in society.

In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable shift in the portrayal of Dalits in Hindi cinema, with a greater emphasis on nuanced and authentic representations. Films like *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* have emerged as notable examples of this changing trend. The representation of Dalits in films like *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* differs significantly from earlier films like *Achhut Kanya, Sujata, Sadgati, Damul, Ankur, Bawandar, Tarpan et al.* in terms of narrative approach, portrayal of characters, and thematic exploration.

These two films namely *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* have been praised for their sensitive and complex portrayal of Dalit characters, offering a more realistic and empathetic depiction of their experiences. While earlier films focused on exposing the stark realities of caste-based discrimination and victimhood, more recent films aim to present a multifaceted portrayal of Dalit characters, showcasing their agency, aspirations, and resilience. These newer films

contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Dalit experience and challenge stereotypes, fostering empathy and dialogue around caste-based discrimination in society.

Films like *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* have been hailed as representative Dalit movies for employing a more nuanced and layered narrative approach towards Dalit portrayal. While they do not shy away from addressing the challenges faced by Dalit characters, they also delve into their aspirations, agency, and personal journeys beyond victimhood. These films aim to humanize Dalit characters by showcasing their complexities, dreams, and resilience in the face of adversity. Depicting Dalit characters as multi-dimensional individuals with agency and aspirations, they showcase their talents, ambitions, and struggles beyond their caste identity. These films emphasize the personal growth, ambitions and determination of Dalit characters, challenging the notion of their perpetual victimhood. These movies have attempted to explore a broader range of themes while incorporating Dalit experiences. They delve into issues such as social mobility, the intersectionality of caste and other identities, personal aspirations, and the complexities of relationships in a caste-conscious society. These films aim to present a more holistic and nuanced perspective on the Dalit experience, inviting introspection and dialogue about social change. Aiming to subvert the traditional stereotypes associated with Dalits in Indian cinema, they move away from one-dimensional victim narratives and present Dalit characters as individuals with agency, aspirations, and the capacity for personal growth. By challenging stereotypes, these films contribute to a more accurate and inclusive representation of the Dalit community. Both films serve as social commentaries, raising awareness about caste-based discrimination and the need for social justice. They highlight the structural inequalities faced by Dalit individuals and provoke discussions on issues of education, social mobility, and representation. By initiating conversations around these topics, the films contribute to a larger dialogue on social change and equality. Both films employ powerful storytelling techniques to engage and move audiences. The narratives are emotionally compelling, drawing viewers into the experiences of the Dalit characters and fostering empathy and understanding. Through their storytelling prowess, these films effectively communicate the challenges and aspirations of the Dalit community.

Both films have received critical acclaim and recognition at various film festivals and award ceremonies. This recognition highlights the artistic merit and social relevance of these movies as representative Dalit cinema. The accolades they have received further solidify their importance in the cinematic landscape. These films have sparked public discourse and ignited conversations on caste-based discrimination and social justice in India. They have contributed to an increased awareness and sensitivity towards Dalit issues among audiences, challenging preconceived notions and prejudices. Moreover, the success of these films has created opportunities for more authentic and diverse representations of Dalit experiences in Hindi cinema.

Overall, the evolving trends in the portrayal of Dalits in Hindi cinema, as demonstrated by films like *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* signify a shift towards more nuanced and authentic representations. These films have the potential to challenge stereotypes, foster empathy, and contribute to broader social change by promoting understanding and awareness of Dalit

experiences in Indian society. However, while the emergence of films like *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* signifies a positive trend in the portrayal of Dalits, challenges persist. There is a need for more Dalit voices in the film industry, both in front of and behind the camera, to further enrich the representation of Dalits in cinema.

In the film *Aarakshan*, directed by Prakash Jha, the character of Deepak Kumar represents the struggles and aspirations of a Dalit student challenging the systemic discrimination in the Indian education system. Deepak's character provides a nuanced exploration of the intersectionality of caste, education, and social justice. This analysis examines Deepak's portrayal, his socio-political context, and the ways in which the film sheds light on the challenges faced by Dalit individuals in accessing educational opportunities and confronting caste-based discrimination. Deepak's character confronts the deep-rooted educational discrimination prevalent in Indian society. As a Dalit student aspiring to pursue higher education, he faces numerous obstacles, including prejudice from teachers and administrators, biased admission processes, and the lack of opportunities afforded to him due to his lower caste background. Deepak's struggles resonate with the larger issue of social inequality and the denial of equal educational opportunities for marginalized communities. Deepak's character grapples with the burden of his Dalit identity and the expectations placed upon him. He navigates between his personal aspirations and the societal pressures that define his worth solely based on his caste. Deepak's internal conflict reflects the larger struggle faced by Dalit individuals in reconciling their personal aspirations with the systemic barriers imposed by caste-based discrimination.

The film delves into the complex intersection of caste and merit through Deepak's character. Despite his academic excellence, he finds himself at a disadvantage due to his Dalit identity. Deepak's experiences challenge the notion of a purely merit-based education as he categorically retorts: "Karenge muqabla merit se bhi tumhara. Magar race ki starting line ek honi chahiye." ("We're ready to compete with you on merit. But the starting line for the race should be the same for everyone"; *Aarakshan* 48:29-33; "Scripts" 16). The movie exposes the systemic biases that hinder the progress of Dalit students and highlights the need for affirmative action policies, such as reservations, to address historical injustices and provide equal opportunities for marginalized communities.

Deepak's journey in *Aarakshan* is influenced by his relationship with his mentor, Dr. Prabhakar Anand. Driven by a commitment to social justice, Dr. Anand recognizes Deepak's potential and supports him in his pursuit of education. This mentorship showcases the transformative power of compassionate educators who stand against discrimination and play a crucial role in empowering Dalit students. It also emphasizes the importance of allyship in dismantling systemic barriers.

The film *Aarakshan* highlights the larger issue of social justice and the fight for equal rights in education. Deepak's character becomes a symbol of resistance and empowerment, representing the aspirations of countless Dalit students striving to break free from the shackles of caste-based discrimination. Through Deepak's journey, the film calls for a more inclusive and equitable education system that uplifts marginalized communities and provides them with opportunities to thrive.

Deepak's character offers a poignant portrayal of the challenges faced by Dalit students in their pursuit of education and social mobility. The film sheds light on the systemic discrimination and biases prevalent in the education system and advocates for affirmative action measures to address these inequalities. Deepak's journey represents the resilience, determination, and aspirations of Dalit individuals striving for a more just and inclusive society. *Aarakshan* serves as a powerful medium to raise awareness about caste-based discrimination and encourages discussions on social justice and equal access to education.

In the critically acclaimed film *Masaan*, directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, the character of Deepak embodies the struggles, aspirations, and ambitions of a young Dalit individual in contemporary India. Deepak's portrayal offers a nuanced exploration of the intersectionality of caste, class, and personal aspirations. This analysis examines Deepak's character, his socio-cultural context, and the ways in which the film challenges stereotypes and highlights the complexities of the Dalit experience.

Deepak's character defies traditional stereotypes associated with Dalits in Indian cinema. Instead of being limited to menial jobs or portrayed as victims, Deepak is shown as an ambitious and talented engineering student. His aspirations and dreams for a better life challenge the notion that Dalit individuals are inherently destined to a life of poverty and marginalization. This portrayal breaks down the monolithic depiction of Dalits and underscores their agency and potential for personal growth.

The film subtly comments on the impact of caste on personal relationships. Deepak's romantic involvement with an upper-caste girl, Shalu, adds a layer of complexity to the narrative. His friends caution him, as one of them says, "Ladki upper-caste hai bhai. Zyada senti-venti mat ho jaana. Use pata hai na tere bare mein?" ("Dude, she is from an upper-caste. Don't get too sentimental. Have you told her about your lower caste?"; *Masaan* 00:53:24-28; Sub-titles 00:53:24-28). The portrayal of their relationship exposes the deep-rooted biases and societal pressure that reinforce caste divisions. The tension and internal conflict Deepak experiences reflect the broader social dynamics and challenges faced by individuals attempting to break free from the confines of caste-based prejudices.

Deepak's character embodies resilience in the face of adversity. Despite the challenges he confronts, he remains determined to build a better future. Even in his relationship with Shalu, he resolves to make Shaalu confront the truth of his social identity than escaping from it as he tells her, "Hum Harish-chander Ghat pe rahte hain. Harish-chandra ghat pe. Paida bhi Wahin hue they. Lakdi uthaana murda jalaana, ye kaam karte hain hum. Hum kya, humaare baap-bhai, chacha sab yahi kaam karte hain … Samajh gayi kahaan rahte hain? Chalna hai? ("I live at Harishchandra Ghat. Was born there too. We stack up wood, burn bodies, light pyres. Not only have me, my father, my uncles, my brother … all of us done this. Do you want to come?"; 01:02:19- 26; Sub-titles 01:02:19- 26). Deepak's journey reflects the struggle to reconcile his personal identity with the social identity imposed upon him. His inner conflicts, aspirations, and the strength to transcend societal limitations contribute to a multidimensional portrayal of a Dalit character.

The film encourages empathy and understanding towards the Dalit experience through Deepak's character. By

humanizing him and depicting his dreams, desires, and emotional vulnerabilities, *Masaan* challenges preconceived notions and stereotypes about Dalits. Deepak's character creates a connection with the audience, fostering empathy and inviting reflection on the systemic inequalities that persist in society.

Conclusion
The films *Aarakshan* and *Masaan* mark a significant shift in the portrayal of Dalits in Hindi cinema. These movies contribute to a broader trend of nuanced representation, challenging stereotypes, and promoting social awareness. The analysis of these films illuminates the evolving trends in Dalit portrayal, highlighting the progress made while acknowledging the ongoing challenges. By exploring the complexities of Dalit experiences, cinema can play a vital role in fostering empathy, understanding, and social change.

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