

## Viewing Dalits: Understanding Caste in Documentaries

Prashant V. More

---

### Abstract

Documentaries are an essential platform for knowledge production and dissemination. Through documentaries, various social realities are highlighted and brought to the forefront. They are thought to be factual, only showcasing the truth. However, truth is relative. It is dependent upon who is portraying it and in what way. In documentaries about caste, the documentary maker's social location is as important as the subject of the documentary. This research paper argues that within the genre of documentaries, there has been a prominent dominance of the upper caste communities, which is observable in the type of documentaries being made. The way in which the subject of caste is discussed shows how their view on caste relies on speculation and not on lived experiences. On the contrary, Dalit documentaries are much more sensitized towards caste, and there exist key differences in how an upper-caste and a Dalit documentary-maker view caste.

---

**Keywords:** caste, documentary, Brahminical hegemony, representation, identity construction

### Introduction

This paper is an attempt to understand the differences in caste location and origins of the documentary-maker. When upper-caste documentary-makers make a film on caste, how do they portray caste and what are some similar trends among them? What are the things they miss out? How does a Dalit documentary-maker differ from an upper-caste one? What are the reasons behind the difference? These are some of the questions that this paper will attempt to answer. The paper analyzes four documentaries: *Kakekoo* (2017) by Divya Bharathi, a Tamil documentary about the life of manual scavengers; *Beware of Caste* (2016) by Jayakumar Santhosham, a documentary about the caste atrocity committed against the Dalits in Mirchpur in the Hisar district of Haryana; *We Are Not Come Here to*

*Die* (2018) by Deepa Dhanraj, a documentary about Rohith Vemula, a Dalit Ph.D. scholar at the University of Hyderabad who committed suicide after facing caste-based discrimination; and *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) by Anand Patwardhan, which revolves around those killed in the Ramabai shooting in 1997, in the aftermath of which a famous poet and *shahir* (folk singer), Vilas Ghogre, hanged himself.

### **Caste System and the Dalit Movement**

The caste system has existed for more than 3,000 years, as part of the “social system” of the dominant religion of Hinduism. The caste system originates from religious texts and books that ordain people into hierarchies and thereby restrict groups of people in all aspects of their lives. Oppressed for centuries, Dalits were forced to live on the outskirts of the village and were denied basic rights like water, education, health, etc. They were reduced into a subhuman category. The rigid social segregation of caste did not allow them any mobility and, hence, they were forced to continue their generational occupations and trade. The impact of this, which continues to date, is the stigmatization of identity, which has transcended generations. Dalits, even in modern times, continue to be discriminated against in all aspects, whether it is marriage, academia, media, etc. While the forms of discrimination may have evolved, it exists, nonetheless.

An important feature of the Dalit movement has been the various mediums of documentation of the struggle and cultural assertion. Although the history of Dalit literature is traced to Ambedkar and later gains momentum in the 1960s, even prior to the 1960s, writers like Anna Bhao Sathe, Babytai Kamble, and Shantabai Kamble were expressing Dalit concerns and issues in their literature. Baburao Bagul is considered as one of the pioneers of Marathi Dalit literature, and his collection of short stories titled *When I Concealed My Caste* shook the traditional foundations of Marathi literature with its radical depiction of social exploitation. Ambedkar’s writings and speeches served as a catalyst to the post-Ambedkarite and Dalit movement to use various art forms as mediums of their expression and to bring Dalit issues into the mainstream academia and media. A surge in Dalit literature, poetry, art, and music was seen, all documenting the various aspects of the movement, making sure that the struggle and assertion of Dalit rights were not lost in history.

The poetry of Namdeo Dhasal, one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers and a renowned Dalit Marathi poet, was intimately tied with his politics—to oppose all forms of oppression. His first poetry book titled *Golpitha* was a harsh yet poignant counter to the oppression of the dominant caste order and the sacred texts of all religions. Urmila Pawar, a Dalit feminist activist, wrote extensively and critically about the intersection of gender and caste and lived experience of the social realities as a Dalit woman. In art, Sunil Awachar, through his paintings, brought forth the atrocities committed against Dalits. Malvika Raj, a Dalit Madhubani artist, taking an art form traditionally used to depict scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and that was only allowed to be practiced by Brahmins, expressed ideologies of the Buddha and Ambedkar as well as Dalit culture.

Through their music, Vamandada Kardak, Kadubai Kharat, Pralhad Shinde, and Ginny Mahi presented Ambedkar's work, countered Brahmanism, and expressed Dalit culture.

While these notable people, as well as many others from the movement, were able to establish a relative dominance in their fields and were able to enter the mainstream, this trend is seemingly absent when it comes to the realm of visual media, namely documentaries and films. This could be owing to the fact that the tools used to create films have not been accessible to Dalits, as well as that film-making is expensive. However, with the advancement of technology and the coming of smartphones, film-making has become slightly easier to access, yet the field was still and continues to be predominantly controlled by the upper castes.

While the issue of caste has been documented in films, it has always been from a Brahminical lens and only focused on the perceived victimization of Dalits. Furthermore, such films have completely misrepresented the issues, using them only in a tokenistic way. In documentaries, the same scenario prevails. For example, *India Untouched* (2007), *Jai Bhim Comrade*, and *Kakkoos* portrayed the issue of caste in a distorted manner and failed to capture actual realities, owing to a Brahminical viewpoint.

To say that the dominant discourses have been exclusionary, manipulative, and biased towards Brahminical ideology is not sufficient. The presence of these discourses does not mean the absence of any discourse that could challenge it. Counter-discourses have always been present and continue to critique and provide a counter-narrative, often arising from lived experiences.

When in the colonial era, the orientalist standpoint became the primary tool for the British to establish dominance, the counter-narrative of nationalism and demand for an independent India arose. The golden era of the past was stressed upon, seeking to portray how India had been a great nation before it was invaded by outsiders. It highlighted the different cultures and glorified past heroes to show that India was a great nation and aimed to inculcate the feeling of devotion towards the nation in its citizens.

However, this narrative was deeply entrenched with the Brahmin Hindu ideology. During this time, Ambedkar arose to counter the hegemony of caste and Hindu religion. Ambedkar was one of the first to establish a counter-discourse on caste, moving away from the dominant view of caste as a natural order and seeing it as it really was—a brutally oppressive social structure created by Brahmins to maintain control and power. Ambedkar, throughout his lifetime, challenged the institution of caste. He stated that social reform in India was a difficult task due to the caste system and that rather than opposing it, many chose to defend the system. Therefore, a complete breakdown of the system was required, that is, “annihilation of caste”. He further explained that due to the barriers of caste and the rigidity with which they were maintained, one could not choose an occupation beyond their caste, even if they wished to.

He connected this with high unemployment rates in India, saying that since readjustment of occupations was not allowed if one did not wish to do the job assigned to them by their caste, they were left with no options to earn a living. Furthermore, Ambedkar describes how the caste system has caused the destruction of morality, empathy, and public spirit. A person is only loyal to their caste and no one else. The suffering of others is ignored if they do not belong to the same caste. Ambedkar’s criticism and fight against caste led to various movements and the emergence of organizations such as the Dalit Panthers and the Republican Party of India, which sought to emancipate Dalits and fight for their rights. They challenged the State and were forced to bring about reforms for uplifting the lower castes and upholding the Constitution written by Ambedkar. These movements also served as a counter-narrative to the prevalent movements and organizations at that time, which talked about developmental issues in India yet side-lined the issues of the Dalits.

## Counter-Narratives in Documentaries

The development of documentaries in India began before Independence. In 1888, the first recorded documentary was filmed by Harishchandra, and it was about two wrestlers. In 1978, Vinod Chopra made a documentary film titled *An Encounter with Faces*, centered on the lives of children in the streets of Bombay, was nominated for an Oscar, and won various accolades at film festivals. Traditionally, Indian documentaries have focused on social issues and cultures, and they have become an important tool to further one's ideology. The first documentaries, which were produced during the colonial era, echoed the theme of the greatness of the British Empire. As a result, nationalist documentaries arose as a counter-discourse. In turn, when the documentaries were made with a Brahminical lens and viewpoint, Dalit documentaries (henceforth meaning documentaries made by Dalit film-makers on Dalit issues) emerged as a counter-discourse. The aim of Dalit documentaries was to challenge the Brahminical hegemony and portray their identity on their own terms. While Brahmin documentary-makers looked at Dalit communities as the "exotic other" and portrayed them as helpless and in need of a savior, they ignored the real issues and, more importantly, failed, to criticize the caste system. However, Dalit documentary-makers sought to do the opposite. The Dalits were not in need of a savior. They had strong expressions of assertion and they challenged the institution of caste and all those implicit in propagating Brahmanism. While the Brahmin lens looked at Dalits as victims and only focused on their victimhood, Dalit documentary-makers sought to create an assertive identity and challenge the oppressors.

Recently, there is an influx of Dalit documentary-makers into the industry. However, the numbers are limited and their films do not have a large outreach. Nonetheless, there is a huge difference in how they portray caste realities.

Representation can be understood as an act of stating facts so as to influence the actions of others. Representation can be presented through various forms of popular culture such as films, television, photographs, paintings, etc. Augusto Boal (2006) elaborates how depictions of representation should be interrogated to understand its accusations as they are constructed images. Over time, when it comes to the representation of an under-representation group, it usually contains maximum allegorical significance (Emelobe 2009). Bohannan (cited in Emelobe 2009) writes in the context of Africa,

wherein representations of Africa are limited, and these limited representations are thought to represent all the marginalized people. Similarly, a few images are also taken to be typical of everyone, therefore it is assumed that a dark-complexioned person can stand-in for a whole continent of dark-complexioned people.

Thus, one can infer that representation affects the way in which individuals are perceived and understood. They are meant to influence opinions and actions. The images and meanings that representation creates in our minds have vast implications for the people for whom it is a reality. Representation is more than just likeness to the subject. It can also be a set of ideological tools that serve to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination. Emelobe explains how Hollywood has misrepresented Africa by basing it on dimensional stereotypes that come from preconceived notions.

This can be applied to the Indian context as well, where Dalits too have been viewed in a one-dimensional way. The media has had a tendency to focus on Dalits as helpless victims, with no real power or assertiveness, and portray them as such. Dalits continue to be defined by their caste occupations and never shown in other roles. The media just chooses to conveniently ignore it. Moreover, films and documentaries made on caste almost never challenge the root cause of the oppression, and a superficial depiction is portrayed.

This, in turn, influences the understanding that one has about the Dalit community. At the same time, it also shows how the Dalits are thought of by the upper castes.

### **Dalit Victimhood vs Assertion**

One of the basic differences between the Brahminical lens and the Dalit lens is the portrayal of the Dalit community. While the former chooses to portray them as helpless, in tatters and tears, with no agency to address their problems, the latter focuses on their protest, their voices, their struggle, and the ways in which they assert themselves. Dalit discourses have been dominated by the notions of victimhood and assertion as they provide a lens through which Dalit issues can be understood. In the case of victimization, the Dalit lens is necessary as it brings the harsh reality that people often tend to ignore, to the forefront. Having suffered the oppressive caste system for thousands of years and even

today, there is much pain and anger among Dalits. This then manifests itself as victimhood. However, when pain gives rise to anger, which then turns into the will of wanting to escape this structural violence, this may be understood as an assertion. Assertion becomes the key characteristic to find a way out and provide a solution. Therefore, to show victimization is not wrong, but the message that it conveys should be that of an assertion.

In the documentary *Kakkoos*, the director, Divya Bharathi, only seems to focus on the plight of the Dalits. Rarely is there a moment in the documentary where the manual scavengers are shown to challenge their status quo. Most shots are of them crying as victims of oppression in a system where there seems to be no way out. In contrast, in the documentary *Beware of Caste*, the maker Jayakumar Santhosham, while highlighting the issues the community faces, does not portray them just as victims but shows their struggle for justice as well.

An interesting point to note is an interaction with the camera. While in Bharathi's film, the camera is clearly a foreign object—there is no interaction between the subject and the camera. The camera is an outsider. It watches from afar as the scene unfolds, never directly interacting with the subjects of the film. The camera in *Kakkoos* is a silent observer and depicts manual scavenging through a victimizing lens. The camera oscillates between the faces and feet of people in the film, interspersed with scenes of excreta, thereby focusing more on the macabre effect in order to induce disgust in the audience, disregarding the story and the assertion of the individual themselves. However, in Santhosham's film, there are scenes where children are able to touch the camera. This shows a level of trust and bonding with the community. Hence, the camera is not an outsider—it is accepted.

### **Invisibilisation vs Identity**

The identity of a person is important to one defines themselves. Whether one has material assets or not, their identity and their voice of suffering, assertion, and struggle are *theirs*. So, when Bharathi decides to erase put the manual scavenger in one dimension, what does she really want to do? First, at the beginning of the documentary, she asks the manual scavengers that she is about to interview to only say their caste name. Afterward, as she begins her interview, she does not even display their name; only the location from which they are from is shown in the top-right corner. The audience is

kept unaware of the name and background of the manual scavengers.

However, when she is interviewing men from the leftist organization, she makes sure to display “Comrade” followed by the full name. Are the outsiders more important to Bharathi than the manual scavengers? Do they not deserve to have their names displayed? Time and again, the documentary talks about how manual scavengers have been robbed of their dignity. How has Bharathi done anything differently? She too robs them of their dignity when she chooses not to even show their names. It again gives the impression that a manual scavenger can only be defined by their occupation, and that their names do not matter.

On the other hand, Santhosham’s film gives the Dalits of Mirchpur their identity. Their names are displayed in all interviews he conducts. The audience is given ample information about who they are. It does not snatch away their identity rendering them as a homogenous category of Dalits or as mere victims. The name forces the audience to acknowledge individually the people who have been affected by the violence.

Dhanraj does not follow the footsteps of Bharathi in the exact manner. However, she too invisibilizes the dynamics of the Dalit movement. People do not gather spontaneously to protest. It is not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Some amount of groundwork needs to be established in order to mobilize people. But the documentary makes no attempt to explore this context. Rather, it views the movement as people already gathered and out on the streets, holding posters and shouting slogans, and terms this as a fraternity.

The organic anger that must have arisen, which started in the *bastis* (ghetto) and alleys and then later led to students throughout the country coming to the streets in protest of Rohith Vemula’s death, is not looked into. Why has Dhanraj romanticized the protests to only the streets of metropolitan cities, such as Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, which were organized by popular student groups? Moreover, Dhanraj has only captured the student’s protests that were from established, well-known colleges. However, the Justice for Rohith Movement was not only made up by these colleges. Many smaller colleges, where protest culture did not even exist, participated in this movement, and for the first time, started to discuss institutional murders and caste atrocities.



Furthermore, while tracing Rohith's journey, the audience is made aware of the role of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and the Ambedkarite Student Association (ASA), the two political student groups which were a part of Rohith's journey in the University of Hyderabad. The documentary shows how the ABVP did not allow a film screening organized by the ASA on the Muzaffarnagar riots and how they branded the ASA as anti-national for opposing capital punishment for Yakub Memon.<sup>1</sup> But what is the reason behind this vendetta of the ABVP against the ASA? To explain, the documentary includes an interview, where the interviewee posits two reasons. One was because ASA stood for the annihilation of caste, and the other was the unity of Dalits and Muslims within the group. The documentary-maker interprets this as a threat to the ruling power due to the coalition of the oppressed. However, is the annihilation of caste not the primary cause of threat to those in power?

But the maker makes no note of this and rather explores the Dalit–Muslim unity. But this Dalit–Muslim unity is also problematic, as it homogenizes Muslims into a singular group while hiding the hegemonic groups among them, such as the Ashrafs and the Syeds, which are upper-caste Muslim communities.

The documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* is situated against the backdrop of the Ramabai massacre on 11 July 1997, and subsequently, Vilas Ghogre's suicide. Patwardhan manipulates Vilas Ghogre's identity to that of a leftist, whereas in reality, Ghogre had parted ways from the communist movement. In the title itself, he adds "Comrade", trying to establish a false connection of similarity between the left and the Ambedkarite movement, and he fails to add any of Ghogre's songs that were about the Ambedkarite movement. He only adds those songs that are about poverty, the workers, and inequality. Therefore, he invisibilizes the Ambedkarite identity of Vilas Ghogre, which was an important aspect of his life.

Furthermore, Patwardhan tries to portray that when he questions the caste of a selective group of people, it is by coincidence that they *turn out to be* from the lower-caste community. However, in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Yakub Meemon was an alleged extremist convicted over his involvement in the 1993 Bombay blasts. He was hanged in 2015.

scene where he questions a man in a cafe about the reservation system in India (to which the man responds negatively), he does not ask about his caste and thereby hides his upper-caste identity. Similarly, when he interviews people in Shivaji Park (a predominantly Brahmin area) who complain about the litter after the Chaityabhoomi event on 6 December for the occasion of Ambedkar's death anniversary, he does not question their caste location. With these actions, he lets the upper castes hide behind a casteless identity and only identifies the lower castes in his documentary. While Patwardhan has tried to reflect the identity of the Dalits for the Dalits, but he does so in muddy waters. Had a Dalit with lived experience made a similar documentary, the reflection would have been clearer.

This shows that one's identity, and specifically caste, plays an important role, as it defines the experience and opinions that they hold. It provides a context to what their lives are like and hence clarifies the history of the person in question. However, that being said, the entire identity cannot only be defined by caste. A person's caste should not be their only identity.

### **Negotiation vs Confrontation**

A characteristic that is common to the documentaries made by upper-caste people is that they choose not to directly challenge the State or the caste system. Rather they negotiate and fail to address the root cause. Bharathi follows this trend when she does not include any agent of the State, such as government officials or the supervisors, and the audience is only shown the poor conditions of the manual scavengers. While she acknowledges that manual scavenging is a caste-based occupation, she does not raise any question about why this is so and does not answer the questions that the manual scavengers raise during their interview. Bharathi remains cautious, even though during an interview, a manual scavenger who is employed on a contract basis and faces the risk of losing his job if he dares to speak against the State, still chooses to challenge the State. If someone who is in a precarious condition of losing their job can challenge the oppressors, why can Bharathi not do the same, considering that she comes from a much more privileged standpoint? Is not showing the oppressor's view a necessity or a choice for Bharathi? What kind of "revolution" is Bharathi romanticized by? What is her understanding of social change and reform?

On the contrary, Santhosham makes it clear from the beginning of the documentary who the

oppressors are, what their motive for violence was, and even his opinion on what it meant. He directly points fingers at the casteist mentality that the Jats hold, and that they were jealous of the progress that Dalits had made through their hard work.

Santhosham also uses symbols to signify who the oppressors were, using the recurrent imageries of the saffron flag and temple bells in the documentary. He includes the interview of a police officer involved in reviewing the case (Mirchpur caste violence in 2010) who is hesitant to answer questions about it. The importance of including the testimony of the oppressors and directly challenging the problem is that we can clearly identify who the oppressor is. It is not left ambiguous. His ending of the documentary is particularly powerful, where a dog barks at the national flag in the same way the dog from the basti had barked at the Jats for coming into their lanes. One gets a clear image of who can be held responsible rather than theorizing who may be involved. Also, when one shows only the oppressed, the audience has a sense of remorse for them and may feel anger about the injustice only for the individual or a section of the community. But when it is faced with the oppressor, that anger is redirected towards the system. Moreover, the critique of the system and the oppressor has a stronger base, a justification when the point of view of the oppressor is included.

Dhanraj's documentary is appreciable in this way: It does engage with the question of Rohith's caste and interacts with the oppressors such as the State, the university, and the police. Various shots show the interviews given by the Bharatiya Janata Party denying their role in Rohith's death, the university meetings which openly criticize Vice-Chancellor Apparao's actions and role as well as the police brutality towards the protesting students.

However, there is also an interview whose main crux is that this sort of event could happen to any student. This completely disregards institutional murders, wherein the institutions, such as that of education, are known to be intrinsically casteist in nature. Consequently, when an entire institution decides to oppress a student on the basis of caste, to say it can happen to any student is completely false. Additionally, in the consecutive sequences, the narrator states how none of the political parties had come forward to help when Rohith and his friends had been suspended *but* it was students who fuelled the Justice for Rohith movement.

The “but” in this sentence is suggestive of a homogeneous category of students, both Dalits and Brahmins, Left and Ambedkarite. But the visuals suggest differently. In the montages of student protests, the most visible placards are those of SFI (Student’s Federation of India), AISA (All India Students Association), AISF (All India Students Federation), and KYS (Krantikari Yuva Sangathan). This displays Dhanraj’s intentions. The issue shifts from being a fight against a caste to a fight against fascism. The solution that is suggested seems to be “unity in diversity” (Kumar 2019). This is also reflected in the intentions to collect interviews of Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya. Therefore, while Dhanraj does challenge the oppressive forces responsible for Rohith’s death, she shifts the conversation from caste to fascism, thereby entering into a subtle negotiation with the Brahminical structure and, in turn, the State.

What is commendable about Patwardhan’s documentary is that it makes visible how he tries to at least challenge the State and the police, even addresses his attempts to shoot in spaces where it is prohibited to film anything with a camera. At a certain scene, where the police officer accused in the Ramabai Massacre is supposed to be arriving, the police on guard prevent Patwardhan from filming, and yet he keeps the camera rolling. However, as explained in the previous section, when he chooses to not showcase the identity of the upper caste, he then ends up negotiating with Brahmanism and Brahminical structure.

This highlights the importance of challenging the oppressors and how entering into a negotiation will only help in perpetuating the Brahmin supremacy. If a documentary made on caste does not challenge the real oppressor, it implies the opposite: that they are in agreement with the oppressor. Therefore, there is no neutral or apolitical stance on caste.

### **Abstract vs Concrete**

Upper-caste documentary-makers generally seem to lack a basic structure or core in their documentaries on caste. The final product then seems scattered. In Bharathi’s documentary, there is no clear sequence of events. The entire documentary is a collage of scenes of human excreta, interviews of the manual scavengers, and members of the communist party. In addition, the scenes have no linkage to each other. Therefore, the story is not effectively told, and the main crux is lost

between the aimless transition of scenes. This is reflected in Dhanraj's documentary as well, where there is again a lack of ordered sequence.

Therefore, this absence of clarity may be interpreted as an absence of conceptual clarity in the director's mind who is not able to convey the message of the story. By being entrapped in the abstracts, both the directors, whether consciously or subconsciously, disillusion the audience about reality. After watching *Kakkoos*, the only understanding that the documentary leaves you with is the image of the Dalit as a victim. It offers no insight on other mechanisms at play and neither does it attempt to move beyond the montage of excreta. It has no clear message to the audience. Perhaps Bharathi herself does not know what it is that she wants to say.

Similarly, in Dhanraj's documentary, there is an absence of sequence. Although it is not as scattered as Bharathi's documentary, there is no clear storyline to Rohith Vemula's life either. Moreover, Dhanraj fails to start by giving an appropriate context and directly starts with the student protests in the aftermath of Vemula's death. In comparison, another documentary made on Rohith Vemula by Srikanth Chintala, a Dalit director, begins with explaining the oppression of caste even before Ambedkar, thereby setting the context and clarifying that caste is the main oppressor and culprit. There is a clear structure to that documentary.

Patwardhan's documentary is a three-hour documentary that also has a loose narrative and follows no clear sequence. It tries to cover a variety of events and themes but fails to encapsulate the whole truth and, therefore, it is a documentary of only half the truth.

On the other hand, in Santhosham's documentary, there is an ordered sequence of events, beginning with the backdrop of Haryana and Hisar and moving towards the setting of the Dalit community in Mirchpur; the jealousy of the Jats, which led to the violence; and the aftermath of events that followed.

One can then ask if the clarity of the documentary is interlinked with the conceptual clarity of the director, which then is related to the social location of the director. In other words, can we directly infer that the clarity of the documentary is dependent upon the social location of the director?

The question of modes of the documentary must also be highlighted. In a poetic mode, there is the use of the abstract, loose narrative and a non-linear sequence, all of which are characteristic of Bharathi's, Dhanraj's, and Patwardhan's documentaries. However, in this mode, the emotion prevails over the truth. The aim of this mode is to create feelings rather than portray facts. Therefore, while all three documentaries are not devoid of facts, the goal seems to be an emotional reaction. Therefore, the question then arises: Do upper-caste documentary-makers view caste as only a subject of emotion? Is caste only a subject to gain the sympathy of the upper castes? Isn't the truth about caste more important than the savarna sympathy for caste?

In conclusion, documentaries are an important medium of expression and a platform for sharing knowledge. However, this privilege has remained with a select few, that is, the dominant caste. The dominant caste view has completely taken over the sphere of documentaries, wherein the lens used to look at any subject is tainted by Brahminical supremacy and ideology. Consequently, caste issues have been grossly misappropriated and manipulated, and thus, a contorted understanding of caste is propagated to the audience.

The way in which caste has been portrayed till now has always been through the perspective of the "other", wherein lower castes have only been looked at as data collection subjects to be studied. Rarely has there been a representation that has focused on the intricacies of the caste system and the complex way in which it functions. The representation of caste has largely been tokenistic and superficial.

Given that access to media and documentary-making is largely determined by privilege and money, the entry of Dalits in this space has been slow and limited but has been increasing, nonetheless, because the newer generations have just started to familiarise themselves with the tools and the technical ways with which caste can be portrayed. Dalit documentary-makers are focussing on being sensitive towards their lived experiences. The importance of having Dalit representation in this medium is due to the creation of more authentic expression as the authenticity is linked to lived experiences.

Documentaries made by Dalits have challenged the dominant narratives of caste representation in media and completely shattered the grammar and aesthetics that have been prevalent till now.

Moreover, they are relatable for Dalits. If one is to take the example of an upper-caste woman crying and a Dalit woman crying, their forms of expression will be different. More importantly, no one can impose the dominant aesthetic on the Dalit woman as that is a suppression of her emotions and invalidation of her feelings.

Dalit documentaries have created their own methods and narratives that are able to do justice when talking about caste and its functioning. Pain, anguish, and suffering are acutely conveyed, as is rage. Rage over the oppressive system that prevails is explicitly portrayed in Dalit documentaries that seek to question the audience, the State, and the Brahminical supremacy about their treatment towards the Dalits and forces them to think over their actions and acknowledge the true perpetrators of the caste system.

Dalit documentaries are relatively new as compared to other documentaries in the Indian space. Furthermore, they are also trying to establish a completely new language and method of making documentaries according to their own aesthetics. There has been a critique by the mainstream that Dalit documentaries are crude and unsophisticated. This has prevailed in Dalit literature as well. For example, when Jyoti Rao Phule started to write, he was critiqued by Vishnushastri Chiplunkar for his style of writing and grammar. He was told by Chiplunkar to first learn the proper way of writing and then write. This shows the lack of acceptance by the mainstream of the Dalit form of language and aesthetics. But when Dalits have been historically excluded in all aspects, they will obviously seek to create a new system of their own. Dalit documentary-making is still going through a process of learning and understanding. Therefore, it does not warrant our harsh criticisms but rather support, space, and platform so that the scope of Indian documentaries can be widened.

Looking at art as life and looking at life as art are two different perspectives. For the privileged, it is the former. For them, art is more important and develops different forms of imaginary artistic expressions. However, Dalits and the Dalit movement depict their life, struggle, and self-assertion through art. For them, the art itself is not important: It is a medium of expression for their survival, their reality. This can be observed in documentaries as well. When an upper caste, privileged documentary maker makes a documentary, it is a form of creative or artistic expression. They treat the documentary as art and incorporate into its complex technicalities and jargon. However, for Dalits,

the documentary is not art. It is a way through which they can highlight their lived experiences, realities, and the struggles they face in their daily lives. It is a way in which they can bring their truth into the public realm. It is not based on speculation but on experience.

Lastly, this is not to say that a documentary-maker must only make a film based on their social location. A Dalit documentary-maker does not have the sole right to make a film regarding the Dalit community. However, if a savarna filmmaker wishes to address the issue of the caste, they must do so while acknowledging their positionality, and more importantly critiquing the role of Brahmanism in sustaining the caste system, which till now savarna makers have not yet done. The savarna filmmaker must approach Dalit issues with a sense of “methodological humility” (Narayan 1988), where they are aware of the conflict that their caste location creates and, therefore, must introspect and critique dominant caste groups for their involvement, rather than adopting a victimized approach towards lower-caste communities. Furthermore, this applies to all different identities and across various artistic practices. Discussions around equality and resistance can only move forward if everyone, both the dominant and the oppressed, engage in understanding their own as well each other’s position.

**Prashant Vijaykumar More** is a Mphil scholar at the Indian Institute of Technology and a Masters graduate of Media and Cultural Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He is a documentary maker and photographer by passion. His project 'Occupational Inheritance' was exhibited at The Institute for Endotic Research (TIER), Berlin, Germany. He also has been a JENESYS (Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths) Fellow for a conference on communication in Japan. His interests lie in the areas of caste, education, gender, and empowerment.

## References

Boal, Augusto (2006) *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. Oxford: Routledge.

Kumar, Veeravenghai Vinith (2019) “‘Why We Have Come Here to Die?’,” 7th July. *www.roundtableindia.co.in*. Available from:



[https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9676:why-we-have-come-here-to-die&catid=119&Itemid=132](https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9676:why-we-have-come-here-to-die&catid=119&Itemid=132) [Accessed: 3rd October 2021].

Narayan, Uma (1988) “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice”, *Hypatia*. 3(2): 31–48.

Emelobe, Emeka Dibia (2009) “Filmic Representation in Postcolonial Discourse: A Study of Selected Film Texts,” *Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*. 3(1).