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Editorial Note

This issue of *SubVersions* brings together the work done by early career scholars exploring visual images and media narratives to understand how they are constructed *in* and *through* relationships of power and resistance. In teasing out the many complex layers and codes involved in image-making and representation, we hope this set of articles enables a critical engagement with contemporary visual culture.

The first two papers in this issue engage with the enduring gendered politics of who is allowed access to image-making. Drawing on the lived experiences of women who work as cinematographers and photojournalists, the papers situate these professions within a neoliberal landscape and underline the unspeakable inequalities that continue to define them. The paper that follows reflects on memories of the demolition of Babri Masjid through oral histories of women and reads this against popular media narratives to raise crucial questions of historiography. The politics of the image continues to be the central concern in the following paper, which examines the exclusionary nature of social media algorithms. The last three papers concern themselves with the politics of cinematic representation of marginalised identities. Employing textual analyses and reflection they critique the persistence of stereotypes and mark the act of representation as a constitutive.

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Through Her Lens

Apoorva Jaiswal

Abstract

This paper will look at the professional lives of women who work as cinematographers in various media industries. It will focus on what cinematography as a profession means to them and what it entails to be a part of a “culture” industry. All of this is analysed in the backdrop of women’s work and labour and the changes brought in by digitisation and neoliberalisation of the industry (Ganti 2012; McRobbie 2015). The major points of discussion are the informal and passion-driven nature of work and the effects and contestations of digitisation of the field. This is used to foreground the changing nature of the profession itself and its effect on women. Lastly, the question of collectivisation of cinematographers is looked at from a critical perspective, comparing the work focused-individualistic approach of the Indian Woman’s Cinematographer’s Collective (IWCC) with that of a more equity-based, active approach of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC).

Theoretical arguments are backed by lived experiences of five women who are currently working in the Hindi film industry as cinematographers. Three of them received their technical training from one of the two national film institutes, while two had graduated from a mass communication institute. All women were at different stages of their career at the time of their interviews and thus were able to reflect on their past and futures with respect to their careers.

Keywords: cinematography, women, camera, film industry, culture industry, neoliberalisation, work and labour, digitisation

The Industry: A Background

In 1998, Bollywood was accorded industry status, legitimising its output and validating its function in the country’s economy (Ganti 2012). Estimated at INR 180 billion in 2019, the Hindi film

industry is projected to reach a gigantic net worth of INR 260 billion by 2024.¹ While the industry has proven its economic potential, issues like gender disparity persist. In 2016, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, in association with UN Women, published a report citing a highly skewed gender ratio behind the camera of 6.2 men to 1 woman in the Hindi film industry (Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 2014). The ratio of male directors to female directors stood at 10:1 (ibid.). While the skewness is apparent enough, the report gave a number to a previously nebulous estimate.

With the coming of economic liberalisation and the rise of the middle class, employment opportunities for urban upper-class and upper-caste women opened up. Accessibility to global media and to mid-level jobs looking for semi-skilled labour led to an increasing number of urban young women stepping out of the domestic domain to work. Similarly, there has been a slow increase in the number of women behind the scenes as well. Tejaswini Ganti, in her book *Producing Bollywood* (2012), traces this increase in the number of female crew members on Bollywood sets, which, according to Rai (2014), also paralleled a departure from the “postcolonial socialist” in film narratives. She recalls her exchange with Madhuri Dixit, the then Hindi film stalwart, in 1996 by virtue of being the only other woman on set. She compares this to the early and mid-2000s and finds that the presence of women as assistants and associates was common on film sets. However, even in 2020, the inflow seems to be bottlenecking to mid-level positions and limited to certain above-the-line sectors, none of which have any decision-making capacities.

Cinematography, one of the key positions on set, is increasingly perceived as lucrative by film-school aspirants. A first-generation male aspirant shared that many first-generation film-making aspirants prefer to study technical courses. Even if they eventually wish to enter direction, they see the economic stability and steady workflow as one spends more time in the industry as a positive of technical fields. While all key roles in film-making require training, technical trades require a sounder educational background than what might be required for direction, production, or script-writing. This need for education gives cinematography what one might call institutional validity (Mazumdar 2018) a sense of legitimacy in terms of being perceived as a profession (as compared to some other specialisations of film-making). As Van Ness (2005), when talking about the ubiquity of film education in modern times says, “Given the gap between aspiration and opportunity, film

¹ As projected by the Statista Research Department. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/235837/value-of-the-film-industry-in-india/> [Accessed: 26th November 2021].

education has often turned out to be little more than an expensive detour on the road to doing something else.” In India, it has been hard to differentiate film-making from Bollywood, and Bollywood has had a hard time differentiating itself from its nepotism, glamour, and general lack of respectability. According to Ganti (2012), the pursuit of respectability is still a “state of becoming” since had the industry indeed achieved this status, it would not still be claiming to have done so. Further, she explicates that the entry point into all film-crew positions is to act as assistants: assistant cinematographer, assistant director, etc., which requires one to be physically present and available, more or less shadowing the crew day in and out. This respectability is not just in terms of chastity and morality; it is also about the myth of un-intellectual nature of film and media work, which assumes that only academia can theorise, criticise, and be reflexive about production (Jackson 2014), given its proximity with manual labour and lack of institutionalisation (Mazumdar 2018).

Digitisation

Digital intervention in films started creeping in around the 1990s. In 1999, George Lucas incorporated digitally shot footage in his *Star Wars: Episode 1* (Prince 2004). This had huge implications on the global film industry, from how movies were made to who could make movies. According to Strachan (2014), in reference to the music industry, there have been two strands of changes owing to the digital revolution. First, barriers to the traditional entry points are reduced and multiple new segues are forged as entry points into these ghettoised professions. Second, the market available for diverse content creators becomes wider and the reach is manifold of that available through the traditional medium. This applies to the camera department as well. With the proliferation of digital options and affordability, newer content and diverse content creators are fast emerging.

The first major shift that Strachnan (2014) pointed out, i.e., accessibility, has had implications for cinematography to a great extent in that cameras became lighter, the complications with developing film stock were eliminated, and, most importantly, digital cameras became an everyday tool. In terms of camera work, Stephen Prince (2004) traces the history of digitisation. He looks at the shift in Bazinian conception of image-making, the cinematographer’s role as the sole image creator when monitoring of what was being captured on the screen was not possible, and the digital manipulation of full feature length in *O Brother Where Art Thou* (2000). While Prince never really

comments on the question of how it affects labour, he traces the nature of work and how it has changed over the years since the 1980s in Hollywood. There have been clear changes in the aesthetics and the film look (the grain and noise which is almost eliminated in digital) that is highly sought after by purists, but there is also an implied change in the position of the camera person itself. As he puts it,

The cinematographer, in the strictest sense, is the person who creates the image on film by controlling light, color, and composition in order to help the director achieve his or her vision. Using traditional methods, a cinematographer controls color by manipulating light levels on the set and costumes or by using colored gels over the light sources. In doing so, the cinematographer is creating the image in camera. He or she does so by controlling the image variables light, shadow, contrast, color at the point of exposure of a camera negative... The digital turn in cinema has greatly changed all of this. In regard to color timing and the control of many other image variables, digital methods now offer filmmakers greatly enhanced artistic powers compared with traditional photo-mechanical methods. (Prince 2004: 26)

The influx of digital technology has made manipulation possible even after capturing the image to the extent that the pressure of creating images “in-camera” is considerably lower than in the era of film. While this has multiple implications in terms of aesthetics, the process of image-making and the role of the cinematographers itself has come under scrutiny following digital interventions. In the current context, it also signifies the downplaying of risks associated with the profession. One can posit, as the amount of control the cameraperson had over the image creation reduced, more and more women joined the profession. Aligning with the argument that employing women was always considered a risk. As this risk went down, it became more acceptable to have women dabble with cameras. All participants conceded on having felt like a liability, being treated as a risk by employers. Nisha, an established director of photography (DoP), currently working in the Mumbai film industry points out:

So, whether a man or a woman, it is difficult to meet people if you have no contacts, but for guys its easier, first because [while] a woman has to prove her worth, a guy will [only] be doubted when he screws up. So if a film student comes out, they'll be like, “You're from FTII, tumhe kuch to ata hoga (you must know something)”, till he goes and majorly screws up, but if a female film student comes out, it will be, “What have you done, let's see some of your work”. So, till they don't have confidence in you, they won't employ you, so it's like a vicious circle—it's almost as if they don't want to risk ruining a project by hiring a woman.

Having worked on two back-to-back editions of a Netflix show Nisha also talks about the reach of web content, an offshoot of media digitisation. This reinforces Strachnan's second point about digitisation, the widening scope of audience engagement. While talking about her web work, Nisha said:

It was a pleasant surprise. I had never got the kind of response I got for my web series because the reach was far more. The convenience of watching something trumps having to go out and watch things in a theatre, so people far and beyond had seen it. The film people have a lot of permutations and combinations: people don't like an actor, they don't like a director, then your family and friends may watch it but others won't make the effort of going and seeing it, "Choti film hai, TV pe ayegi to dekh lenge (it's a small film we will watch it on TV)," so a lot of your work goes amiss, unless it's like a supremely big Salman–Sharukh film where, irrespective of anything, people are going to land up and watch it. Sometimes certain cinema gets missed because of that, so just the reach of the OTT platform was overwhelming, which is why I went ahead and did the second season. There were no limits on what one could do creatively.

As Nisha puts it, the audience reach accorded by the digital medium tackles the issue of lack of female role models to some extent. Comparing one's access to films made by female film-makers in 2001 to that of now will prove the point. Thus, when young girls are able to access content made by other women, they can aspire to create content too. In terms of one's career, given that film-making is a two-way street, the success of a film is not solely based on how good a film it is, but also on how the audiences perceive it at a point in time. This is directly related to profitability and indirectly related to how profitable the technician is to the next producer who hires the technician.

While digitisation has in a sense democratised film-making in some senses, as Ganz and Khatib (2006: 26) summarise a counterpoint, "The digital allows the representation of multiple yet fractured points of view, which gives a sense of privileged yet partial access." Digitisation has led to massive shifts in how labour on sets is viewed and has transformed into a dispensable commodity, given the casual nature and marginally greater supply (Casilli 2016). This is also foreshadowed by meagrely paid internships, irregular jobs as assistants, and apprenticeships (Casilli 2016, Wing-Fai et al 2015). Further, as problematised by McRobbie (2015) is the practice and romanticisation of "working" into the night and the diluting boundaries between personal and professional lives. Nadiya, the DoP on a major feature in 2017 and a web series in 2018, and a

mother of one, shared that her producer friend who had two children had installed baby cameras in their cribs and was used to monitoring them from her office. While this gives one a sense of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy, it is also pushing individuals, especially women into a privileged and self-chosen position of precarity (Lorey 2015). Regular jobs are done away with, the nine-to-five structures looked down upon, passion has quickly become the new driving force over the earlier sought-after stability, and choice has become the new benchmark of employment.

Duffy and Schwartz (2017) claim that this new influx of web-based work has an increasing number of women due to certain sought-after criteria like multitasking, round-the-clock availability, emotional management at work, and flexibility. While this has led to increasing feminisation of labour on production sets, it is also accompanied by an increased sense of precarity, parallel to which one has to constantly prove one's worth and relevance to one's employer.

However, for good or bad, this has led to an increase in the number of women on set, either through the traditional pathway of film schools or through their ability to work up through the ranks of interns, assistants, and eventually head of departments. Nadiya remarks at this increased visibility:

Each department has more women, not just camera, camera of course has been like this for a while. Now if you just work on a set and you don't see a girl in the camera department, you will be surprised because there are so many girls and not just on the operation side, but even girls in the grips, rigging the heavy ginny set-ups, so girls are there everywhere.

The entry of women at mid-level positions in cinematography is also an indication to a possible feminisation of the profession and the industry itself (Duffy and Schwartz 2017). As the nature of the industry is changing, digital technology is providing more and more opportunities for content creation and more and more cheap labour is required. Therefore, more and more women are employed. According to Duffy and Schwartz (2017), this feminisation has less to do with structural changes in the industry like the decrease in masculine standards of work or better work conditions for women. Rather, it is correlated with cultural and economic devaluation of work. However, it is yet unclear and opinions are divided as to whether it's the cultural and economic devaluation of

work itself that lets women enter or the other way around, where women's entry leads to the devaluation. While talking about science being viewed as a masculine subject Chanana (2007, 591) argues, "*Moreover, subjects are considered masculine not because of numerical preponderance of men but it is the other way around, i.e., science is viewed as masculine and therefore, more men take*". One can argue in this light that by virtue of more women entering the profession, there is a chance that it might be viewed as less masculine, if not feminised.

This is also coupled with a new and wider set of expectations from employees—criteria such as informality, emotional management, self-directedness etc.—become a part of the job. However, to dismiss in a blanket fashion the entry of women in these fields as an absolute result of cultural devaluation or digitisation and downplaying their individual efforts would be unfair. Rather, it would be of service to take a step back from an absolutist position and look at the multiple factors at play.

Passion and Precarity

One of the most important aspects separating cinematography and other above-the-line film labour from other forms of employment is the passion-driven nature of it. A common factor of various culture industries, passion is an important component for seeking employment in these professions. Very few artists have ever reported being forced into cinematography. However, the presence of this choice, to follow one's passion, is dependent on the nature and extent of economic support one can expect from their family. Only those individuals, who are not under any commitment to provide for either themselves or their family are able to avail this first step of having a "choice" (Umney and Kretsos 2015). Amrita, an early-career cinematographer and FTII alumnus currently working as an assistant DoP, when asked about the economic instability and contract-based nature of the job, points out:

See it's always been the case that I don't take money very seriously. Maybe it's because I come from a very stable background [and that] I don't have to support my parents financially. They have their own hospital; I don't have to make sure I earn a certain amount monthly so X amount goes to my family. But this thought has come across my mind in recent times. I did not think about it when I thought of leaving a very safe profession, so to say. It was more of an intuitive call that I had to take, otherwise it would've been a regret. When presented with an opportunity to study in one of the prime institutes in India ... if I [had said] no, I

might've regretted it all my life. That's what I thought then, but now when I think about it, I was always subconsciously aware that I did not have any financial responsibility towards my parents. The only thing that guided me was that I don't want to have any regrets [that] when given a chance, I didn't do it ... That is mostly what guided me.

Amrita's opinions resonated with all of the participants. All participants reported family stability and lack of liability as far as providing for either their parents or contributing to their own family went. Adiba, who moved to Delhi after finding the professional environment in Mumbai not conducive, mentioned how she felt she had to stick with cinematography given that very few people had the opportunity to find their calling and, furthermore, the privilege to follow their calling. This lack of responsibility towards one's parents is an advantage given that it eventually translates into the ability of these women to transgress boundaries of traditional work in their upper-class setups. Family support, even if it's limited to economic support, in the early stages of one's career and later spousal support for women who decided to have children, forms an important support system for women.

Further, passion is often the justification of multiple struggles that first-generation entrants have to face while trying to make it in the industry. This is what Umney and Krestos (2015) call the "contextualisation" of struggle by professionals who have traversed through the instability and reached an economically and socially viable position, people who have "made it in the industry". A number of the current participants also shared the belief that one has to struggle to achieve their dreams. However, no consensus was reached as to what is the benchmark where struggle becomes a side effect of systemic oppression. In this light, passion is not just the fuel that provides an entry point into the profession, it is also the justification for hardships and the struggle for sustenance. This is also an offshoot of the neoliberal framework that has been a common thread of understanding the individual responsibility for making it in the industry. As Mcrobbie (2015) argues, this neoliberal thought of "passion" needs to be critiqued for what it is a "neoliberal delusion". Similarly, Rottenberg (2014: 420) argues that the end product of the neoliberal framework is the independent woman who "accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" and, one might argue, for her failure as well. Amrita used it first to contextualise her time in film school and later to contextualise concerns regarding women's "respectability":

That is not the case. It depends on how you conduct yourself and not how people look at you. It is always like that in any case: in journalism, in medicine, in engineering, in film-making. It is not about how people look at you but how you project yourself, what vibes you give.

Poorva, while talking about changing mind sets, too, takes this rhetoric of individual responsibility.

I think when you work hard and there's sincerity in your work, then people can't overlook what you're doing. You have to really prove it—everybody has to. As a person, you have to prove your worth. But then, there are always male chauvinists, you can't help that, and even women have that. There were few people who were ready to work with me and, in my class, we were divided into a group of five people for work, [out of] which three-four of them would really take me seriously and help me, but there were some who would not change their mind sets about me. I [told myself] at one point, "You know that I can't deal with their problems, I have to deal with mine. I don't want to change anybody, I want to do my work and more of my work, see how I improve and then let my work change their mind sets. But if I go and fight, I don't think they will change."

While both these statements stem from different instances, both point towards a structural system where women have to strike a balance with what Anyon (1984) calls "resistance and accommodation", wherein women in situations of conflict or domination choose to resist subtly in their own right, either by owning their femininity in ways that assert their presence or by using it for subversion, however, never really translating into full-blown rebellion. For e.g., in her interview, Poorva referred to her male assistant's discomfort at seeing her menstrual blood on her clothes and she responded by engaging in a discussion with him, which, according to her, is an act of resistance on a set populated by men. However, she also engages in accommodation by making a decision that she will not engage in any activism per se, and let her work speak for itself. This accommodation is, however, not necessarily a thing to be looked down upon. Rather, it is a symptom of the structure she is a part of. The neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility will only be confirmed if one expects individuals like her to operate only within the purview of resistance. However, this also branches off into the debate of governmentality² posited by

² Originally coined by Michel Foucault in the twentieth century, the Britannica Encyclopaedia defines governmentality as: "Approach to the study of power that emphasizes the governing of people's conduct through positive means rather than the sovereign power to formulate the law. In contrast to a disciplinarian form of power, governmentality is generally associated with the willing participation of the governed" (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/governmentality> [Accessed: 26th November 2021]).

McRobbie (2015). By giving opportunities to young women for education, professional achievement, and sexual and physical freedom, this governmentality ensures an informal contract of sorts, where women enter patriarchal institutions. However, their survival is ensured by keeping power structures intact, eventually keeping them away from forms of political activism that challenge such dynamics. It's providing women all the resources that mark freedom in a masculine society with the social contract that women will not question the neoliberal source, which eventually profits the economy and the masculine hierarchy. This leads to and fosters the post-feminist thought that a perceived sense of professional achievement and individual freedom is the ultimate realisation of feminist politics and the understanding that there is no need for more. Contesting this post-feminist realisation of choice McRobbie (2004: 261) says, "Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint." Choice, in this sense, is realised for what it is: a privileged position.

The IWCC: Working with Women

The IWCC was informally set up as a WhatsApp group in 2015 by three senior women cinematographers. Independent of the Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE), which otherwise looks after the needs of various factions of the industry, including cinematographers, the IWCC grew into a collective that seeks to help women and other non-cis males with professional development.

The website description reads:

The Indian Women Cinematographers' Collective is a forum by and for craftswomen/ technicians of the film industry, based in India. We intend to make a difference in the industry through our growing numbers, and we believe this is possible only when we stand together.

The Collective is also designed for contemporaries to showcase their diverse body of work. We extend our solidarity to not just our fellow craftswomen, but also to the non-cis male technicians and workers in the film industry.

The world of cinematography and its allied fields, such as gaffing, grips, and assistant cinematography, is growing wider to accommodate talent. We hope to inspire girls and those breaking out of the gender binary to consider roles behind the camera as viable professions.

We invite more from the industry and the ones just graduating from film and media schools to connect with us and be a part of the Collective.

As a group, our vision is to bring under the spotlight the calibre of our work above all else.³

Most of the new entrants in the field have found the collective to be helpful in terms of finding others to relate to, to find moral support, and for social identification. It is involved in conducting regular workshops and supports women cinematographers' representation outside the country, as in the case of Modhura Palit.⁴ Research has shown that subscription to such collectives enhances women's access to information, confidence, self-esteem, solidarity, and access support in times of need. It provides opportunities to learn from each other, pool resources to acquire inputs and capital, receive training, and improve production techniques (Jones, Smith, and Wills 2012). Moreover, collectives like the IWCC also tackle the problem of representation and presence in industry head-on. The fact that aspiring young women can find a repository of women working as cinematographers in the industry on the IWCC website can only lend support to their decision to enter the industry.

However, the collective limits itself to enabling those who are doing "good work", not engaging with the question of the conditions in which that work is produced. Even in its statement, the unwavering and unrelenting focus on work is indicative of its refusal to deal with the underlying reasons for its very own existence. Nowhere has the collective or its members acknowledged patriarchy or the lack of women in the industry. It aspires to engage in discussions and possibilities of equality in terms of number and workflow, without acknowledging the reasons for the lack of the same.

Adiba, who was a student of Jamia and later worked at a content production company as a producer, made a career shift by moving to cinematography. Without specific technical education, Adiba decided to enter the industry based on the contacts she had made over the years as a producer. She recalls a number of horrific experiences she had over the initial period of her work, which included harassment and non-payment of work (she was compensated almost a year late). When asked why she did not seek support from the collective when she went through regarding

³ <https://iwcc.in/about/> [Accessed: 26th November 2021].

⁴ Modhura Palit became the first Indian cinematographer to win the Angenieux Special Encouragement Award at Cannes Film Festival in 2019.

her harassment, Adiba responded with doubt, wondering whether the collective would stand by her during the process, amongst other things.

This lack of critical commentary from the collective during crucial moments in the industry, whether it was #MeToo⁵ or otherwise, limits its participation in helping women share and advance technical and industry-related knowledge. While this knowledge sharing is commendable and democratising as a process, the lack of a conclusive position by an important technical collective like the IWCC in the technical industry binds it in a relatively passive position.

Compared to this, the WCC, a collective based in Malayalam Film Industry has been actively engaging in dialogues about “equal spaces and equal opportunities for women” in the industry. Its website reads:

WCC works towards building a safe, non-discriminatory and professional workspace for women in cinema through advocacy and policy change.

WCC encourages more women to be a part of the industry through outreach initiatives for career advancement opportunities, industry support, and mentorship opportunities for its members.

WCC showcases the creative acumen of women by curating films and bodies of work by women.

WCC seeks to create awareness about gender bias and exploitation faced by women in film industry, both onscreen and off-screen.

WCC promotes responsible filmmaking practices accelerating the work culture transformations required for a gender-just film industry and cinema.⁶

The WCC takes a more active approach, while IWCC seems to be playing into the governmentality trope that McRobbie (2015) criticises. McRobbie (2015) also argues that the neoliberal focus on

⁵Following the 2017 breakout of the #MeToo Movement in the US film industry, a similar movement precipitated in India. The history can be traced to the release of an informally compiled the List of Sexual Offenders in Academia (LoSHA) by a Dalit law student, Raya Sarkar. The veracity of the list and using the Internet as a mode of grievance redressal came under some criticism. Following this, many women came out with stories of harassment in academia, media, and the film industry.

⁶ <https://wccollective.org/about/> [Accessed: 26th November 2021].

the individual also indicates a move away from collectivisation and political activity. However, both the collectives are able to resist this individualistic neoliberal impulse. Moreover, rather than identifying one as depoliticised, one can argue that it “is not about less politics but about a different kind of politics altogether” (Burnham 2001; cited in Hay 2014: 307), which seems to be neoliberal in nature, by focusing on individual work rather than collective mobilisation.

According to Polletta and Jasper (2001: 298) collective identity “involves an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of pre-existing bonds, interests, and boundaries”. This is different from a common ideological commitment. One can argue that while both collectives are based on the same collective identity—the identity of being a woman—their ideological commitments differ. Although both are arguing for a more gender-balanced industry, the WCC is asking for a safe industry, policy changes, and awareness of gender bias. The IWCC, on the other hand, is arguing for more women in the industry by simply proving that women can do as much as men can and maybe better, which is an important argument, but it does not deal with the problems women are already facing in the industry or should be wary of facing if they do decide to enter the industry.

The basic argument remains: Rather than expecting women to perform “like men”, it remains to be seen what we can do to make those workplaces safer, more equitable, and inclusive, and what women can do when education is more equitable and workplaces safer.

Care Work: Women Who Can Have It All

While we were sitting and discussing how women get work based on their physical attractiveness, Nadiya gets a call. On the other end of the line is a potential house help/domestic worker. Apparently, Nadiya’s last cook had to leave due to personal reasons and thus she was actively on the lookout for another one. As Nadiya she gets off the call, her four-year-old son runs up to her and asks about the Tascam kept on the floor in front of me, asking whether it is a new type of camera. Interruptions like these happen multiple times. The concern for a cook comes up again as I’m sitting at Poorva’s dinner table, as she sets the plate for dinner she ordered from a local restaurant. I wonder if these concerns would have come up if I was interviewing a man or if they would’ve shared these concerns with me if I was a man.

Clearly, having the option of hiring a nanny or employing a domestic worker puts these women in a privileged position, but the fact remains that the unequal division of care work pervades, one might say, in a more insidious neoliberal fashion. This is also indicative of how care work is eventually passed on from woman to woman, in this case, from women who are “deemed disposable since they are neither considered strivers nor properly responsabilized” (Rottenberg 2017: 332). This also paves the way for a more class-based distribution of care work, ignoring once more the interplay of gender (Rottenberg 2017).

While economic and marginal social support from one’s family came across as evident in the case of pursuing a career in cinematography at the beginning of the career trajectory, in the current sample pool, spousal support was of great importance for the older participants in terms of one’s ability to choose the quality and quantity of work and the decision to have children or not. As Nisha talks about rethinking her career:

Now I have a four-year-old daughter, I need to reconsider the projects that I take. Up until she was little, I could just pick her up, pack her in a suitcase, and go, but now that’s not possible with her school. For sure, there’s a lot of rethinking one has to do, but because I have a partner [who] supports me, it makes [things] a lot easier. I’m still doing big projects, I’m still doing a lot for outdoor work, but there’s a lot of balancing. Like, now that I’ve done a big project, I will take a break for three months, which wasn’t the case earlier. Now I need to finish a project [and then] I need to space myself out, give my daughter time, so she gets four–five months with me. Of course, that’s a downside for women once you have kids. I was married for five years before I had a baby. Till then, I was working [on] back-to-back [projects], and I had complete support even then, but as women—and women who want families—one does have to rethink a little bit, especially for [me and my husband]. We don’t have out parents in Bombay, it’s really just me and my husband. So, we need to figure out lives out in a way that he’s not taking a long-term project when I’m taking [one], but that’s worked out fine for us.

Nisha also recalled how she used to take her daughter on shoots when she went back to work eight months after her birth. She points out two major aspects of working as a mother: reconsidering career options and making adjustments after having children and eventual unequal division of care work. While most participants who decided to have children did relate to having extremely supportive spouses, it eventually ended up in an unequal division of child-care responsibility. While

Nisha decided to carry around her daughter across the sets she worked on, Nadiya took a four-year break, and Fabeha reportedly decreased her frequency of work.

McRobbie (2015), while talking about what is constituted as remarkable work in academia, says:

The ideal career track in the academy, especially one which carried all the laurels of prizes, awards, fellowships, and a high volume of grants, seemed to have been tailored around the image of the brilliant young man untrammelled by any of the fine details of domestic life. And if the young woman was to follow this pathway and plan the right time to have a child, then when would this right time be?

She remarks how the very successful (read: male) academics of her time had the privilege of not taking care of their own domestic needs, even their own laundry, and did not have to look after their own children. As most of them were men, had wives to look after these needs. However, this masculine understanding became the benchmark of success, in line with Bielby and Bielby's (1996) argument of men defining the rules of the game and the inability of anybody else to match up to that being marked as a failure. McRobbie posits that this unrealistic expectation of success disallows women who balance work and domestic responsibilities to be truly successful and until professional institutions do away with such narrow conceptions of what success in a given field can mean, gaps will only continue to widen.

This argument becomes rather important in the context of women working as cinematographers, given the highly “undomestic” nature of the job, which keeps women away from home, requires one to be at work at odd hours, and needs major muscle work, usually not recommended for new mothers. However, within the industry and outside, women have been hailed for “doing it all”: raising children and working jobs like cinematography, without questioning why only women have to (Rottenberg 2014). As another young female cinematographer, during a brief conversation, remarked, “Oh, you should definitely talk to Nisha, she’s like this superwoman! She carried her child around all through the shoot.” While Nisha’s achievements are arguably commendable, one cannot expect to exemplify her ability to do so, or consider it as a benchmark for “real success”. There’s always a possibility that another woman might choose to take a two- or three-year-long break to raise her child or might not have as illustrious a career as her, but still might be balancing both. What McRobbie is suggesting here is a critical examination of what we consider to be exemplary and, in this case, Superman-like achievement.

While most women reported tailoring their personal lives according to the demands of their jobs, what remains to be done is tailoring jobs according to the requirements of other genders. Provisions for childcare, on and off-set, making film institutes safer for women, etc. require structural changes from within the industry—changes that might only materialise when women are seen as a legitimate part of the workforce and not a cheaper alternative to male technicians. Further, one cannot ignore the number of women who work as assistants, interns, designers, and in other below-the-line positions on sets while having such conversations. Inclusivity in any industry cannot be one-time act of benevolence: it has to be a constant and conscious struggle for improvement.

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Negotiating Access to and in Educational Spaces: Experiences of Women Photojournalists in Kerala

Anna Binu

Abstract

This paper explores the lived experiences of women photojournalists in Kerala. Even as it does extremely well in terms of various human development indices, Kerala records a meagre presence of women in the workforce. It is in this context that this study attempts to examine the gendered nature of the profession of photojournalism by documenting and analysing the experiences of women photojournalists in Kerala. By examining the multiple negotiations that these women engage in order to access both education and employment in a “non-conventional” area of work, the study attempts to highlight the patriarchal control exerted on them. Analysing the social positions of women, the research also tries to examine how they negotiate socio-spatial constraints both in their personal and professional lives. The study pursues lived experiences of women photojournalists through in-depth interviews, encouraging participants to describe how they perceive their social positions and to define issues in their own terms.

Keywords: women, photojournalism, Kerala, patriarchy, agency of women, autonomy, literacy, technical courses, education of women, empowerment

Introduction

The matrilineal family structure in Kerala mostly followed by Nair families and some Muslim families endowed women autonomy, physical mobility, and power. These women were literate and, thus, motivated other women to look upon them as icons. Mathew observes the status and the statistics of literacy rate of women in Kerala as an irony. Although Kerala was far ahead in its literacy rate

compared to other states in India, its vernacular education model was rooted in its culture and tradition. Its lessons taught women to be subordinate to men and instilled the patriarchal notions and beliefs of the society. Women found no seat in the educational system in its early phase; later, the proportion of women gradually increased. But the kind of jobs women take up still adhered to the patriarchal notions and beliefs. Even though matrilineal tradition allowed women to hold position and descend property through the female line, women's autonomy was limited. The "Karanavar" or the elder brother in the household took the ultimate decisions (Mathew 1995).

According to data released by the World Economic Forum, India slipped its place 108 to 112 on the Global Gender Gap Index. This data is proportional to the all-time low participation rate of women in India. The labour force participation rate of women in India ranks lowest among South Asian countries (Jain 2020). In the 1991 census, Kerala ranked twenty-second among Indian states concerning the work participation rate of women, which is contrary to the fact of the high literacy rates of Kerala (Mazumdar and Guruswamy 2006).

For this study, I interviewed seven women who had worked as photojournalists in Kerala. It was difficult to find the contacts of women photojournalists in Kerala as the number was scarce. I travelled extensively and followed them around to conduct their in-person interviews and collect data. At the time of the interviews, four of them continued working as photojournalists, one had transitioned to being a reporter, and two women had moved from journalism to content writing and academia.

Women photojournalists and their standpoint regarding societal norms and approaches are crucial in understanding their work life and issues. The women photojournalists I interviewed in Kerala belong to different class and caste locations. In-depth interviews helped to listen to how an individual understands her experience and explains her situational location and to locate these expositions in relation to her social position (Cuádras and Uttal 1999). Each one of them had unique experiences and their own stories. I have provided pseudonyms for my respondents to protect their privacy.

Education and Matrimonial Prospects

Mithra is a photojournalist at one of the leading English newspapers. She did her diploma course in photojournalism from Udaan School of Photography in Mumbai. She had an interest in photography

since her childhood. She says:

I used to click pictures on my small mobile phone. Smart phones weren't introduced back then. Initially, I didn't take photography seriously. It was just a hobby for me. But when I started uploading my pictures on Facebook, many people appreciated me. So, at this juncture, I realised I have a talent for photography.

Mithra got a job as a photojournalist soon after she completed her course. But at the time of the interview, she had resigned from the job as she was about to get married soon. Her parents believe that her job could mean fewer prospects in the matrimonial market. She says:

My parents were reluctant to allow me to do a photojournalism course. They were worried that I would not get a good marriage proposal because of my course.

In a survey conducted by *Malayala Manorma*, one of the leading newspapers in Kerala, it was found that among women college students, a high proportion of students desired to have a career that balances their professional and personal life duties (Devika and Thampi 2011). As observed by Kodoth and Eapen (2005: 3820), “Women’s education is being oriented in directions that either foster female domesticity or at least does not threaten to destabilise it. A relevant hypothesis here is that a secondary or general higher education is perceived to be in the interests of the family, fostering ‘informed’ child care, health and education.” Education of women is narrowed down to a mere criterion for a good marriage proposal rather than offering them an empowered life. To fit into the “good women” cohort, it is vital that they pursue a course judged to be “feminine”. Women’s educational choices have been and continue to be shaped by the patriarchal norms of the society. Photojournalism, being a vibrant career demanding extensive travel and risk involved, is judged not suitable for women. This inhibits women from expressing a strong passion towards this profession. A woman’s education affecting her choice of career is expected to have an impact on her familial duties. Women are not denied their right to education, but their freedom to choose the course they like is restricted. Often, a woman’s education is the decision of her family or other male counterparts.

Ranjini, 40 years old, speculates that she is possibly the only woman photojournalist in Kerala who has been in this profession for more than ten years. She was working in one of the Malayalam dailies,

but at the time of the interview, the newspaper had shut down, leaving her in search of a new job. Ranjini recounts her passion for photography and journalism since her high school days. Even though she enrolled in Botany for her under-graduation degree, her love for photography persisted. During her college days, she participated actively in student politics and political events, and this furthered her interests in photojournalism. Meeting two photojournalists who visited her college campus for an event coverage gave her the necessary impetus to start thinking about photography professionally. However, her interest and enthusiasm were not enough for her to pursue photography as a career. It was only after her wedding, with the support of her husband, that she was able to enrol for a certificate course in photography. Rajani says,

During my college days, I was in a relationship with my neighbour, and we shared our dreams and aspirations with each other. So, I had told him about my passion to become a photographer, and he was of full support of the same, we got married soon and I got enrolled for a certificate course in photography

Ranjini's father, being a strict parent, had never been supportive of her passion for photography. In a study conducted by Allendorf in India about "women's agency and quality of family relationships" (2012: 203), it was found that the higher the quality of familial relationships the more the women experienced empowerment. The bond in familial relationships might help women to assert themselves and superior members with regards to traditional hierarchy in family to consider women's opinion. It was also observed that women enjoyed agency if they maintained good relations with their partners (Allendorf 2012). The support and assistance of Ranjini's husband helped her in pursuing photojournalism, her dream course.

The prevailing social structure of Kerala and its archaic traditions have influenced its investment in human capital and women's educational attainment (Mitra and Singh 2007). Educational choices of women and marriage prospects are interlinked. The main issue faced by most of the photojournalists was the dissatisfaction of/restriction by their own family for selecting the photojournalism course as it is male dominated. Technical courses that involve heavy equipment is often regarded as "masculine". Photojournalism, which demands skilful camera techniques and operation, is also labelled as such, If the profession is male dominated, it is automatically considered an unsuitable

career option for women. While the masculine categorisation of photojournalism makes it difficult for women to join this course, they do join mass communication or journalism courses as an alternative. Two out of seven women photojournalists I spoke to had completed a postgraduate degree in mass communication and journalism.

The old-school traditions of Kerala society embedded in progressiveness and the irony in high literacy rates is not limited to the selection of educational courses but extends to gendered notions of education and professional spaces. In the following section, I will delve more into the nuances of the financial dependency of women on their families having an impact on their choice of course.

Education and Financial Commitments

Only two photojournalists shared their experience of having complete agency in completing an educational course according to their preference. Both were earning and were financially independent women who decided to pursue photojournalism after a small stint in another job sector. The remaining four women photojournalists I interviewed did not have the autonomy to choose a photojournalism course.

Greeshma is a photojournalist for one of the leading newspapers in Malayalam. Her love for travelling made her interested in street photography. She resigned as an accountant in Dubai and pursued her passion in photojournalism. Greeshma says:

I had no support from my family when I said I wanted to study photojournalism. I bought my camera with my own hard-earned money while I was working for a firm in Dubai. I left my job and came to Kerala to focus on photography.

According to Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994), student's educational decisions were not their individual decisions in India. It was always adjudicated by their family. They observed that the prime reason for the same to be the association of familial funds for education and not independent monetary involvement. Financial dependence of children on their parents has a relation to the choices

children make in their education and career. For the two women who pursued a course in photojournalism, it was their economic independence that gave them the agency to choose their careers. However, it needs to be stated that earning money, in and of itself, does not make a woman empowered. It is the control and liberty over the earned money that allows for the agency. This is the major difference between moulding conditions favourable for empowerment and the real experience of empowerment.

Rawat cites Spreitzer, arguing, “The favourable conditions created for empowerment are present in the environment and are external to the woman (termed as *eve* empowerment). If conditions favouring *eve* empowerment make a woman experience empowerment, then it is termed as psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment is a motivational construct and is present within the individual” (Rawat 2014: 46). In the context of women in Kerala, concerning Spreitzer’s argument, more attention needs to be given to women’s psychological empowerment. For instance, women photojournalists could be considered empowered with regard to their literacy level, but they do not experience empowerment because of the lack of agency and autonomy. They are not self-reliant; they cannot make decisions independently and have control of their life. And so, while favourable conditions are available for the empowerment of women, they never lead to the *experience* of empowerment.

Gendered Classroom Experiences

When plunging into the nuances of choices about education, it is vital to dissect the experiences women have during the duration of the course through the angle of gender. This section tries to introspect the extent of accessibility and treatment for women in classrooms and how they navigate through this. Ranjini also added that she tried to get into a studio for training before she enrolled in the photography course. She said:

No studio was willing to accept a woman at that time. It was only later that I heard about the photography course at the Central Human Resource Project in Pulimood. When I approached the institute for admission, they were reluctant to admit me since they had no

other female students at that time. The justification given for the same was that the course included dark-room classes! They did not want a woman alone in a dark room with other male students. They finally agreed to admit me if I arranged one more female student to pursue the course. I persuaded one of my friends to do the same and enrolled for the course. But she left the course after a few months.

Here, the paternalistic, patriarchal, and deeply problematic attitude towards women's entry into traditionally "male" institutions and professions is made evident. Not only were people in power apprehensive about co-ed education, this was also complicated by connotations of men and women working together in a dark room. On the other hand, the institute was receptive to the idea of having two female students in a class. They believed this companionship would safeguard them from the male crowd. This shows the significance of safety for women when they choose their careers.

Ranjini, who now also works as a guest faculty at the Kerala Press Academy teaching courses in photography, argues that the number of women students is abysmally low. She says that she has never taught a class that has an equal number of men and women. She also pointed out that women often drop the course in the middle when given a photojournalistic assignment or internship. Soman (2009) argues that the societal notion of soft and hard jobs for women is instilled deep in women's minds, and they underestimate their potential according to societal standards. Patriarchy being a constitution existing for women, they are accustomed to its overages. Veiled under this, they are side-lined and helpless to react against the subjugation and misogynies prevailing in the archaic society. Women photojournalists find it hard to cope with the night schedules or precariousness of the profession due to the constraints placed on them by their own families or society. Thus, tagging photojournalism as a hard job for women makes the road and the journey more difficult for women to explore and navigate.

Rukma was a photojournalist for a Malayalam daily newspaper. She left her job almost six months ago due to low pay in the field of photojournalism. She found it difficult to meet her basic needs with the salary she received. She is currently working as a content writer for an advertising company. She did her post-graduate diploma in photojournalism from Press Academy, Thiruvananthapuram. She says,

There were twenty-four students in our batch. Out of twenty-four students, only three were women. I was very comfortable with my batch mates and had a good time there. But I noticed the teachers' tendency to appreciate only male students more when assignments were submitted or tasks were completed.

Balakrishnan and Low, referring to a study conducted among engineering students in India, state:

Undisputedly, the much higher number of male students in engineering programmes could make female students feel disadvantaged. Moreover, due to a long-held stereotype ingrained in many societies, engineering has been regarded as a male's domain in which women are less suitable, or less qualified. Given this stereotype, male students tend to receive more attention and praise in the classroom, thus intensifying female students' sense of isolation as a minority in the engineering field. (Balakrishnan and Low 2016: 232)

Similarly, in the photojournalism classes, a tendency to validate the work or assignment done by male students over females is seen. The stereotypical notion of considering works done by men more prominent than by women has been reiterated in this case. Technicalities underestimated to be an alien for women made their work unremarked and neglected. This might even lead to a lack of confidence and other mental traumas in women.

Conclusion

As Shilpa Ranade (2007: 1524) argues, "It is through the body that the spatio-temporal regulations of social structure are produced, reproduced, represented and transformed." Bodies of women are considered not as mere physical bodies but as a culmination of socially formulated ideas. Gendered expectations continue to structure the lives and aspirations of women in Kerala. This paper has tried to draw how the restriction in agencies of women in the progressive societies of Kerala impacts their choices in educational courses/spaces through the lives of photojournalists.

The participants of this research, despite belonging to middle-class families, faced many restrictions in opting for a course and, subsequently, a career in photojournalism. Limited exposure, even if

women decided to opt for a career in photojournalism; lack of institutions where women can pursue their interests; lack of familial support for the same; and the general perception of the profession as masculine hindered the entry of women into this profession. While women are empowered to be educated, they do not feel empowered to choose their education stream. The main reason that constrains women from choosing non-conventional courses are the concerns of families over matrimonial prospects. Photojournalism, being a male-dominated and uncertain field, is estimated to be undesirable for “good women” (Mathur 2008). Financial dependence and institutional spaces being hostile to women also contribute to the lack of participation of women in this profession. Breaking gendered notions and thinking beyond prejudices will ensure higher participation of women in the field of photojournalism.

Anna Binu is an economics enthusiast who is trying to explore the boundless realm of media. She has pursued her master’s in media and cultural studies from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, after her graduation in economics from the University of Delhi. Having a strong passion to explore the unexplored, to meet new people, to make unknown and new cities home, she is a travel bug who has a penchant for documentary film-making. Her expertise lies in ideation, research, and video production. She has a keen interest to contribute to social causes and invoke changes in society in possible ways as she can.

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Remembering Babri Masjid: The Politics of Image-Making

Prakriti Singh

Abstract

The object of this study is to examine the gendered politics of memory-making by engaging with the ways in which women in Ayodhya remember the Babri Masjid demolition. In doing so, this research frames these women as political beings, making and remaking their life-worlds, and not simply as “passive” survivors or witnesses of the demolition. It examines the various ways in which the violence of 1992 continues to inflect everyday life in Ayodhya after more than twenty-five years of the demolition. This research does not merely archive these memories but goes beyond to comprehend them within the current socio-political context.

Keywords: Babri Masjid, Ram Mandir, Ayodhya, demolition, memory, women

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.

—Agha Shahid Ali

Overview

Despite the pomp and grandeur of the old city Ayodhya, it was never home for me. Faizabad, a non-descript town in the periphery, was my home. Ayodhya became a part of my identity only when I moved to Delhi for graduation. People did not know Faizabad, but for obvious reasons, everyone knew Ayodhya.

Ayodhya was often in news and so whenever something about it featured on the television, I would start getting messages from friends. One such “event” was the renaming of Faizabad to Ayodhya. It did not come as a surprise, though, for Uttar Pradesh government was on a renaming spree in 2018. Mughal Sarai Junction was renamed after the right-wing ideologue Deen Dayal Upadhyay, Allahabad was renamed as Prayagraj, and Faizabad was renamed as Ayodhya. This renaming was not done to erase symbols of colonialism but to privilege one of the many available readings of a place’s identity and history. The right wing perceives the entire medieval Muslim era as a dark phase and, hence, many of the places that had Muslim names or had remnants of Mughal Empire were renamed (Ahmad 2018).

History is mostly about the powerful, the one who can write. Most of the literature around Babri Masjid demolition, a major milestone in the history of this nation, revolves around the history of the massacre, role of various political parties, and the general political situation of the nation at that time. There is little that speaks to the people living in Ayodhya. As Ian Talbot points out, “In this great human event, human voices are strangely silent” (Talbot and Singh 1999: 228). Much of what has been written and documented about the demolition and its impact exists in grey literature based on anecdotal references of prominent mouthpieces of the region. There is a clear deficiency of representation of voices of the ordinary residents of Ayodhya and a clearer absence of women’s voices even in the majoritarian narratives of the “historical” event.

Allah ta’ala ne aurat ko bhi insaan banaya hai. (Jamil 2018: 91)

Ghazala Jamil, in her book *Muslim Women Speak*, examines how sexualised violence is often directed at women just by virtue of them being members of a minority community. She suggests that priority should be given to emancipation from such collective oppression before one gets to individual rights to freedom of movement and choice of lifestyle. This was not appreciated by some “feminists” and she was told that these arguments weaken the feminist movement and need to be forgotten for the sake of “sisterhood” (Jamil 2018). Collective oppression of minorities in a place like Ayodhya was visible in the silences of the women I spoke to. This paper is a detailed exploration of how ordinary citizens remember the demolition in their everyday lives, and I have made a deliberate choice to privilege the voices of women.

Under the aegis of memory, this research is an attempt at listening to the voices of women from various social locations in Ayodhya and bringing them to the forefront. Furthermore, this research is an act of resistance—a choice on my own part to break free from the bearings of my own identity and tread into a territory that is not “suitable” for a woman like me. This is a choice to tell the stories which need not necessarily be told, especially by an upper-caste Hindu woman, but necessarily be heard in the purposefully maintained voids of our society.

As an upper-caste Hindu, able bodied, and heterosexual young woman, born and brought up in Faizabad, it was not difficult for me to find women in Ayodhya who would want to talk to me about the day of the demolition. My first visit to Ayodhya was to the house of a Brahmin man, an acquaintance of my father. I started talking to his wife, Raama,¹ with the hope that she would agree to speak with me, and through her, I would be able to meet other women too. But instead of giving me an interview herself, Raama introduced me to her mother-in-law, Shanta, who was 80 years old but, in Raama’s words, someone who remembers every detail about that day distinctly.

Through Raama and her family, I was able to visit a few more houses where I conducted interviews. Because of my social location, it was easier for me to approach Hindu women. They readily agreed to talk to me and were more expressive. The Muslim families I contacted became slightly apprehensive when I told them about the research, and that I wanted to talk about the day of the demolition. Even if they agreed, a lot of the women did not seem comfortable in the beginning. In some instances, I felt that the family only agreed to let me in because they were not able to say no to the person through whom I had approached them. These were difficult situations, but I tried spending more time with these women and talked to them about my background as well in order to build some trust. This helped in a few cases, but in others, I had to settle with silence.

Hailing from Faizabad allowed me to bond with some respondents. Discussing certain commonalities would immediately establish rapport. With Hindu women, there was also a sense of kinship in the interview where they would assume that I understood and related to what they were saying. However, the fact that I grew up in Faizabad and my parents still live there also made things

¹ All the names mentioned are changed in order to protect the identity of the respondents.

easier in Muslim households. So, while I was an “other” in terms of religion, I was still one of them when it came to the region. The ability to speak the local dialect also helped.

My identity of being a student living in Mumbai also marked me as an outsider in some cases. People often mistook me for a journalist or a media person. During my field work, I realised that my position as an insider or an outsider existed in a continuum that kept changing with individual relationships with the respondents. “The fluidity of these socially constructed distinctions meant that as a researcher I was never fully inside or outside the community” (Thapar-Björkert 1999: 44).

With most families that I got in touch with, I would first have to explain my research to the “man of the house”, who could be the husband, the son, the father, or the father-in-law of the woman I wanted to interview. Oftentimes, the men tried to take over, not because they did not want the woman to talk to me but because they thought that they knew the situation better and, hence, having a discussion with them would be more beneficial for my research. The attitude of most men was patronising when they got to know that I only wanted to interview women for my research. Therefore, it was a deliberate attempt on my part to conduct interviews at places where only the respondents and I were present. I also realised that my gender had a crucial role to play in allowing me access to certain spaces, for instance, the bedroom of women, to interview them. I resonated with Butalia, who writes,

In order to be able to hear women’s voices, I had to begin to pose different questions, to talk in different situations, and to be prepared to do that most important of things, to listen: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances. Women almost never spoke about themselves; indeed, they denied they had anything ‘worthwhile’ to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men. (Butalia 1998: 126)

This is something that I increasingly saw materialising in the field. Most of the women I interviewed were surprised when I told them that I wanted to interview them for my research. A few of them also said that they did not know enough about the subject, and that I should have been talking to their husbands or fathers-in-law for meaningful insights for my research.

The conditions under which an event is remembered is also an important site of investigation, as important as the conditions of the original experience itself and the role of the memory in the present (Keightley 2008). I conducted my interviews immediately after the Lok Sabha elections

2019. The results were awaited, and one could see hordes of men standing at various *chowrahas* (junctions) in the evening discussing passionately not just the exit polls but also the Ram Mandir issue. When I started my field work, everyone had already cast their votes, but the conversations about the promises made by various political parties were still on. One major promise made by the ruling government, which has also been a constant in their manifesto, was the construction of the Ram Mandir, if they come to power again. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) released its election manifesto that said, “BJP reiterates its stand to explore all possibilities within the framework of the constitution to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya” (BJP 2014). In 2019 again, it said, “We reiterate our stand on Ram Mandir. We will explore all possibilities within the framework of the Constitution and all necessary efforts to facilitate the expeditious construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya” (BJP 2019).

A Brief Timeline of Events

The dispute over the land where Babri Masjid stood in Ayodhya before 1992 is as old as the idea of India itself. The events associated with it have spanned the present constitutional regime, colonial rule and the Mughal Empire (*The Hindu* 2019). According to a section of Hindus, there existed a temple on the disputed site, which was demolished by the Mughal emperor Babur to build a mosque. The mosque has been there since the Mughal era but was demolished in 1992, which hurt the sentiments of the Muslim community and they objected, saying that there exists no proprietary claim of the Hindu community over the disputed land.

In 1949, two years after India’s independence, the Babri Mosque was desecrated by a group of people who broke open the lock and placed idols inside the dome (ibid). Following this a case was lodged and the mosque was locked. In 1986, the Faizabad Court ordered opening of the locks allowing Hindus to access and worship at the site. In 1987, Doordarshan, the public service broadcaster, started airing the show *Ramayana*, which kindled the collective imagination of Hindus and was crucial in organising the Ram Janmbhoomi² movement to build a temple at the disputed site. In September 1990, L.K. Advani, then president of the BJP, undertook a Rath Yatra³ from Somnath Temple in Gujarat to Ayodhya, seeking to build a Ram Temple at the disputed site.

² Ram Janmbhoomi is the name given to the site that is considered to be the birthplace of Lord Rama by a section of the Hindu community.

³ Rath Yatra literally means a public procession in a chariot. Here, it refers to a political and religious rally.

Thousands of people joined, and the Yatra led to communal violence not only in Ayodhya, but across India. In December 1992, 1.5 lakh people gathered again in Ayodhya following the Vishva Hindu Parishad's announcement to perform Kar Seva.⁴ In a short while, the mob turned violent and the Kar Sevaks demolished the mosque in the presence of several BJP leaders, including L.K. Advani and Uma Bharti (Tanwar 2019).

In 2002, Allahabad High Court began hearing the title suit, and in September 2010, the Lucknow Bench of the High Court gave its verdict, dividing the disputed land into three parts, one for each contesting party—Nirmohi Akhara, Ram Lalla Virajman, and the Sunni Waqf Board. All three of them were unsatisfied and appealed against the High Court verdict to the Supreme Court. In April 2017, the Supreme Court also revived the trial against L.K. Advani, Uma Bharti, and others who were involved in the demolition. In August 2019, the Supreme Court began day-to-day hearing of the title case and then in November 2019, the five-judge bench unanimously paved the way for construction of a temple by giving the possession of the disputed site to the deity Ram Lalla (ibid). The Court also acknowledged that the demolition of the mosque was a violation of the rule of law, and hence it asked the state government to allot five acres of land to Sunni Waqf board at a “prominent” place in Ayodhya (*The Hindu* 2019). Less than a year after this, in September 2020, a special Central Bureau of Investigation court in Lucknow acquitted all 32 accused in the criminal case related to the demolition and said that the demolition was not pre-planned and that the accused people were actually trying to control the crowd (*Scroll* 2020).

Processes of Remembering

For how could you establish even the most obvious fact when there existed no record of it outside your own memory?

—George Orwell

Memories are not sacrosanct. People choose to remember certain things depending on their social location (Butalia 1993). As time passes, our mind modifies and manipulates certain memories in order to reduce the pain associated with them. Butalia asked Mangal Singh, a survivor of Partition, about why only women and children were killed during the Partition and how he dealt with a burden of such a horrific memory. He talked about how they wanted to “protect” their women from rape

⁴ Kar Seva is one of the main teachings of Sikhism. It means selfless service of others. It is derived from Sanskrit words “kar”, meaning hands or work, and “seva”, meaning service.

and abduction but refused to accept the word “killed” and insisted on using “martyred”. According to him, these women became martyrs to the “cause” of religion (Butalia 1997). Using the word “martyred” instead of “killed” makes it convenient for people to live with the memory of those brutal murders. It is not always about pain, though. A group of people choosing to not remember a certain detail or denying an incident that happened in the past is often deliberate and political. The sheer atrociousness of genocide pushes people towards denial, incredulity and refusal. Often, the denial is to normalise hatred or to silence and strangle the voices of a certain group of people. Even in the face of all the evidence available, there are people who still say that the gas chambers never existed (Levi 2005).

It is difficult to work with memory. By seeking testimonies of women who suffered or by asking them to recall a traumatic past, one is also making old wounds fresh again. However, it is essential to tear the veil, examine the impact of these conflicts, and listen to the experiences of those whose lives were affected by violence, for one can hardly comprehend the happenings of today without going back to what transpired in the past (Whitehead 1999). Even though oral testimony is inherent in written sources, the fixation for archived documentary sources drives away the researcher from acknowledging the enormous weight of the oral in the written sources. The rules of the written history are similar to the ones which guide oral history with one crucial distinction. The oral historian converses with the “people without history” to check the abuse of the conventional history (Deshpande 2017).

Media and Religion

In the early nineties, the Sunday morning slot was reserved for shows based on epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Through the power of the visual media, the mythical quality of these epics was given a materiality, a reality. These TV serials achieved “historical accuracy” in the popular narrative even as historians were unable to find any sources to corroborate this. In all these visual depictions, people were considered a homogenised entity—the *praja*— and the social stratifications were invisibilised. These serials managed to invent a Hindu society that had no internal contradictions and contestations (Uma 1998).

Arvind Rajagopal, in his book *Politics after Television*, examines the work of television as a socio-technical apparatus and argues that while television offered respite from the compulsions of real,

existing social relations, it also evoked feelings of closeness and reciprocity with the imaginary characters. It worked by creating new forms of associations. He argues that the institutionalised production and circulation of symbols and images transformed the boundaries of the political sphere. *Ramayana* was broadcast on a State-run television from January 1987 to September 1990. The epic consciously invented a golden age that was much ahead of modern times in warfare and statecraft. The series appealed to diverse social groups and was eventually capitalised on by the BJP to assert the ideology of Hindutva (Rajagopal 2001). Anand Patwardhan, in his documentary *Ram ke Naam* (In the Name of God) (1992), also portrays the use of visual media by right-wing Hindu organisations to gain popular support for their cause. The documentary features one scene, where a boy with jaws clenched and tearing eyes is glued to a video of the Ram temple, which enacts a miraculous appearance of Ram inside the Babri Mosque but covers up the reality of a group of people who were involved in breaking inside the mosque and establishing the idol (*Ram ke Naam* 1992).

Everyday Violence and Nationalism

Any historical event is difficult to date, for its beginning or ending is not finite. It is difficult to contain India–Pakistan partition or the Babri Masjid demolition in a time span because even after so many years, people continue to live the aftermath of it (Butalia 1993). As the years pass, violence is verbally and emotionally trivialised by minimising the significance of pain or fear and by undermining the importance and impact of the event. Violence also becomes trivial as it replays and unfolds over time (Henriksen and Bengtsson 2018).

Cultural violence refers to those aspects of culture that are used to legitimise structural violence. It makes a direct act of violence look and even feel right, for instance, murder on behalf of the country is not considered wrong (Galtung 1990). Once violence is normalised and becomes part of the everyday, it ceases to appal even those who are living it. The actual, physical experience of violence is often not the focus of survivors' accounts. Rather, they talk about the destruction of home and humanity, of hope and future, of disruption of routines and social relations of their everyday lives. People convey their experience of war by their inability to properly mourn for the dead and by talking about the separation from their family members (cited in Latif 2012).

There is significant volume of literature written about the place of women in the rhetoric of nationalism and development. Tapan Basu (1997), in his review of the work of Urvashi Butalia and Tanika Sarkar, argues that what distinguishes the Hindu Right in contemporary India is its ability to mobilise women. He posits that the assertive and active involvement of women in Hindutva initiatives has upset liberal assumptions of always representing women as victims rather than as agents of communal violence. He also points out that even if Hindutva encourages women enough to bring them out of their domestic spaces, it still is an extremely patriarchal ideology. The likes of Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambhara have furthered their own causes and those of their parties through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement rather than promoting the task of emancipation of women (Basu 1997).

Who Remembers, When, Whom, and How?

This paper draws upon women's recollection of the day of Babri Masjid demolition after more than twenty-five years, and the discourse of memory forms the foundation of it. Memory, as a method, was developed for and with the feminist movement and its purpose is neither to find the "truth" nor to achieve a complete construction but to investigate the process of construction that is constituted in the narratives (Haug n.d.). Memory enhances history by democratising it. It has been used to write alternative histories by uncovering the marginal accounts of a particular event. Memory work also blurs the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched for it centralises the lived experience as an important source for construction of knowledge (Keightley 2008).

Remembering is a process that goes beyond the psychology of an individual. It is informed not only by personal experience but also by everyday operations of social and cultural relationships. However, the relationship between memory and socio-cultural environment is not a one-way flow. What we remember is dictated by the conventions of the family, and the norms of the culture to which we belong; however, remembering has a social function in the present too. By remembering according to a particular convention, we are constantly reaffirming and reconstructing those conventions (ibid).

Writing this paper in first person is a deliberate decision for it made it easier for me to communicate how it was to be on the field and my personal stake undertaking this research as a resident of the universe of my research. It is also important for women to say "I" more often because it makes

their stories stronger (Haug n.d.). The absence of “I” in writing establishes distance and creates an illusion of “objectivity” (Butalia 1998). However, this paper is in no way an “objective” rendering of the demolition; it is my reading of the conversations that I had with my respondents. The way they responded was also significantly informed by my social location. Throughout this paper, I was aware that recalling and representing a past has a transactional value in the present too (Keightley 2008). For instance, the ways in which Partition is remembered has enduring repercussions on our understanding of it in the present. The demolition of Babri Masjid is also remembered and recalled in a certain way, and this paper attempts to discuss that remembrance and the kind of conventions it reaffirms on an everyday basis.

Memory explores the vernacular untidiness of lived practices of remembering that conventional historiography attempts to smooth away. It not only involves the elicitation of the past accounts but also reflects on how past is remembered today in the present (ibid). Memory is never unmediated. A lot depends on who remembers, when, whom, and how. Often people are reluctant to remember not only because of the horrific nature of the event but also because of their own complicity in the history. There is no way to know that the stories that people are telling after three decades are not rehearsed performances, perhaps tailored to suit what the interviewer wants to hear. But the point, again, is not to find the “truth”. These stories, with all their problems, expand and stretch the definitions of history and manage to find a place in it (Butalia 1998).

For this study, I used the format of an oral unstructured interview wherein I started by asking people to tell me about the day of demolition and then let the conversation flow to take its own course. To establish reciprocity and minimise hierarchy, I also spoke about my own memories of living in Faizabad and the stories that I have heard of demolition. As a researcher, it was important for me to ask questions in the native language, for memories do not emerge when the appeal to them is done in a language that is not vernacular (Haug n.d.). I recorded all the interviews and made notes of my own observations and the feelings that the interviews and conversations invoked in me. I am also aware that in translating and transcribing these interviews, a lot is lost. The idea of doing this research is not just to archive memories but to go beyond it and comprehend them in the larger socio-political context.

Understanding People's Life-Worlds: A Visit to a Home

It was the afternoon of May 2019 and the temperature was soaring. I was sitting in the drawing room of Aasifa, a 50-year-old Muslim woman who had been living in Ayodhya for the last thirty years. Before I met Aasifa, I explained the reason of my visit to her father-in-law. He heard me patiently and seemed calm. After asking my whereabouts, he called Aasifa's daughter to get me some *sharbat* (refreshment drink). I politely refused, but before I could say more, he said, "*Beta chinta mat karo, mere bobot saare Hindu dost hain, vo bhi mere yahan khate peete hain*" (Don't worry, I have a lot of Hindu friends, they also eat at my place).

In subsequent visits to different houses, I realised that Hindus did not eat in Muslim households and vice versa. Raama, on my second visit to her house, proudly told me how she had never had even a bite of food in a Muslim household. She said that whenever there is an invitation from a Muslim family, her son visits them. She went on to talk about her son and how moving out of Ayodhya and living in a hostel "ruined" him. "*Uske toh bobot saare Musalmaan dost hain, sabke saath khata peeta hai vo*" (He has many Muslim friends, he eats with everyone), she said with a tone of disappointment.

However, for Aasifa's father-in-law, and for many other Muslim men I met during my field work, having Hindu friends who visited their house and shared food with them was a matter of pride. It was something that they told me repeatedly. At some points, I felt like they were mentioning it to make me feel comfortable. Amjad, a 70-year-old man who owns a small cycle repairing shop in Ayodhya, boasted about how all the big Brahmins and priests had attended his daughter's wedding when I visited his house to interview his daughter-in-law.

I had the sharbat at Aasifa's house and, after spending a few more minutes in the drawing room, I went inside. It was afternoon and Aasifa's room was dimly lit by the sunlight seeping through the window. The room had a large bed that could easily accommodate four to five people, an old television that did not seem to work, and a wooden almirah. I sat on the bed beside her. Aasifa was chuckling nervously. We started talking about our daily routines and lives. After every answer, Aasifa would look at her daughter to seek validation and to know if she has spoken anything incorrect. Her daughter was constantly encouraging her. "*Amma, theek toh bol rahi ho, batao naa kya hua tha us*

din” (Mother, you are speaking alright, tell her what happened that day), her daughter said when I asked Aasifa about the day of demolition in 1992.

Remembering the Day of Demolition

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

— James Baldwin

Asking people to revisit 6 December 1992 was extremely challenging. From whatever I had read and understood, I knew that it could bring out stories of trauma, violence, forced migration, and loss of one’s people. On being asked about it, a lot of people looked at me with suspicion, wanting to know what I intended to do with this information.

Aasifa was taken aback when I asked her about what happened on the day of the demolition. Her nervous chuckles turned into a silence that bothered me, but before I could do much, she started sobbing. Her daughter held her and said, “*Hamesha amma rone lagti hain, jab bhi us din ki baat hoti hai*” (Mother always starts crying when we talk about that day). The question of who can ask certain things to who was something that I was struggling with. There was a guilt attached to my identity. As a Hindu woman, I felt that it was unfair for me to ask these questions. I apologised to them. Aasifa looked at me and said that the memory of that day still haunts her. She smiled again nervously, and said:

They were beating our family members. All of us were screaming for help. Everything happened in front of my eyes. I still can't talk about that day without crying. They were throwing such big stones at my house. My room was filled with stones. They threw stones at my husband too. They even threw a bomb, but it did not explode somehow. The police came very late, after all this had happened. We kept screaming for help, but no one turned up. All this started in the evening. I was going to prepare dinner. My father-in-law also got injured. A lot of people died that day and most of them were Muslims.

Being an upper-caste Hindu, I was mostly exposed to the narrative where people talked about the delay in the construction of Ram Temple, but not about the demolition. Many Hindu women I interviewed spoke woefully about how their God did not have a home or a place to live. One of

them said, “*Hum log mahal me baithe hain aur Ram Ji tent me. Unse milne jaao toh aisa lagta hai jail me jaa rahe hain kisi se milne*” (We live in big houses while Lord Ram lives in a tent. Visiting him feels like going to a jail to meet someone).

After a few more minutes of conversation, Aasifa’s daughter suggested that I should interview her aunt, Naaz, too. “She will be able to tell you about that day, without crying”, she said. Aasifa nodded in affirmation and her daughter immediately got up to get her aunt.

Naaz, a 50-year-old, lean woman wearing a light-coloured kurta with a head scarf, entered the room with a wide smile. She was extremely confident. We started talking about her life before she came to Ayodhya and immediately bonded over her time in Mumbai. She shifted to Ayodhya after her wedding around thirty years ago. She said more than anything, remembering the day of demolition makes her angry.

A river of blood was flowing that day. They came to our house too, broke the door and burnt a lot of our belongings. I asked my in-laws to hide under the bed. Both my husband and I got injured. It was an extremely bad sight. My whole colony was burnt. It felt like a calamity when Babri Masjid was demolished, people were killing each other. They were killing Muslims brutally; we had to run for our lives without the hijab. The people who did this to us were Kar Sevaks. Some of them were from here; some came from outside. Nothing happened suddenly. It was not like the authority was unaware of anything. They knew everything. It was all planned.

Naaz’s recollection of the day of demolition and Aasifa’s tears while talking about it, both made me extremely uncomfortable. I found myself a little unprepared to respond to whatever they had to say. I knew that it was not just tears and anger; there was fear, loss of dignity, baggage of a traumatic past, and a sense of violation and betrayal, not just from the State but also from the people who one might even call one’s neighbour.

Resham, another respondent, talked about this betrayal. I knocked at her door, unaware of the fact that she was not informed about my arrival through the mutual friend that gave me her address. I introduced myself and told her the reason of my visit. She did not speak much though. “I don’t know. My family shifted to Ayodhya after 1992” was the answer that I got for most of my questions. I did not want to probe further. It was a deliberate decision to only listen to the stories of people who choose to tell it and otherwise be okay with the silences. However, Resham admitted that she

has heard stories of demolition in the neighbourhood, and even today, whenever something happens, they leave Ayodhya and go to a relative's place. *"Hamare saare dost aur padosi bhi chale jaate hain, agar koi naa jaaye toh hum bhi naa jaaein"* (All our friends and neighbours also go. If no one leaves then we will also not leave), she said.

After Resham, I visited Zohra's house. She was born in 1992. She was quiet and did not say much about the demolition either. When I asked her about the conversations that happen around this issue; she said, *"Log kehte hain yahan Ram Mandir banega toh Musalmaan log nahi rahenge. Yahi baatein hoti hain"* (People say that if the Ram Temple gets built, Muslims will have to leave Ayodhya). Talking to Resham and Zohra helped me understand the aftermath of the demolition. The stories, the trauma, or the fear is not limited to the people who witnessed it that day. It is intergenerational and is also being passed on to the people who moved to Ayodhya after 1992. Aasifa's daughter grew up with the stories of demolition and with the awareness that recollecting that memory is painful for her mother even today. She nudged me to interview her aunt, maybe because it was important for her to show me that it's not all tears and pain, there is anger too.

Whose Reality Prevails?

Raama was my first point of contact in Ayodhya. I met a few of my respondents through her. She also introduced me to her mother-in-law, Shanta, an eighty-year-old woman who liked spending most of her time in her room. She got extremely excited when she heard about this research and agreed to talk to me immediately. Shanta lay on her bed comfortably while I sat in front of her on a chair. Her room had a single bed, a small Onida television, a temple in the corner, and a distinct smell of incense sticks. We talked about her daily routine and how her old age does not allow her to do much work. Shanta had spent all her life in Ayodhya. She said her best memories in the town were from the time when the mosque was still present.

On one morning in 1949, there was an announcement in Ayodhya. I was eleven years old then. The announcement was that God has appeared inside the Mosque. We got scared that riots might happen. My father asked me to close the gate of the house. We were asked to remain inside. But after some time, all the people of Ayodhya marched towards the mosque to read the Ramayana. The ceremony and the celebrations continued for the next ten days. There were two officers placed here at that time, Nayyar Sahab and Thakur Guru Dutt Singh. One of them was the district magistrate. There was a command from the Prime Minister's Office that the statue needs to be removed from the mosque immediately. But the officers refused saying that

this might lead to riots. Yes, the statue appeared in the mosque on its own. No one opposed us when we went to read the Ramayana, in fact there were arrangements done. Police was there. Muslims were stopped from entering that place. From the mosque till the road, there were people all around, including kids. It was crowded.

While she was narrating this to me, I asked her to pause and tell me the names of the officers again. It was interesting to see how even after almost sixty years of this incident, she remembered the names. Both these names also appeared in the recent Ayodhya judgment given by the Supreme Court of India. In 1949, Guru Dutt Singh was the city magistrate and K.K. Nayyar was the district magistrate. According to the judgment dated 9 November 2019, on the night of 22–3 December 1949, Hindu idols were placed inside Babri Masjid by a group of approximately sixty people. A first information report (FIR) was lodged, complaining of the installation of idols inside the inner courtyard of the disputed site. However, K.K. Nayyar opposed the direction of the state government to remove the idols, fearing a loss of life (*The Hindu* 2019). According to Guru Dutt Singh's grandson Shakti Singh, a BJP leader in Faizabad, Guru Dutt was a “*pakka Hinduvadi*” (staunch Hindutva supporter). Guru Dutt's son Guru Basant Singh, an eighty-six-year-old man, recalled vivid details while speaking to *The Quint* about the secret meetings held in his house, Ram Bhavan. The visitors included District Magistrate K.K. Nayyar, Superintendent of Police Kripal Singh and Judge Thakur Bir Singh. He said, “The city's top four administrators were adamant on executing the plan to place Ram's idols inside the Babri. Who was going to object and to what end? On the face of it, they behaved like vigilant officials, but in reality, they allowed devotees to pour in and perform kar seva” (Virk 2017).

Unlike Aasifa, Shanta was happy to recollect the day of demolition for me. She was swelling with pride when she told me that she along with her whole family was involved in Kar Seva. Before I could ask more, she went on to say how a picture of her doing Kar Seva got published in India Today.

One day before the demolition, around one lakh Kar Sevaks came to Ayodhya. They came from all over India and were staying on the street, in the temples, and in people's homes. It was planned that we will take a bath in the Saryu River, take a handful of sand from there, and keep it at the spot where we wanted the temple. This was meant to be a symbolic gesture. There were a lot of people. The crowd included men, women, and children. People were also shouting slogans. There were people from Bengal and Odisha saying the slogans in

their own languages like “Maar ke lebo re, chor ke lebo re” (We will snatch it from you by force). These slogans brought a lot of energy and excitement. This went on till the afternoon.

There was a constant smile on Shanta’s face while talking to me about the day. She was talking about it like it was a carnival where people of all ages from all over India came together to celebrate something. There was sense of achievement, pride, of coming together. This sentiment was shared by another woman named Neharika, who grew up in Ayodhya and whose family owned a temple there. She talked about 1992 and told that as kids also they were not scared that day. “It was fun. We chanted Jai Shree Ram and got involved with the crowd”, she said.

Shanta enjoyed the nostalgia while talking to me. She remembered the Kar Sevaks fondly. Apart from pride, there was also a sense of belongingness. “They were beautiful boys from Kolkata and Bombay who walked twenty kilometres and had blisters on their foot. They did not have any tools or weapons; they destroyed the mosque by their hands and nails,” said Shanta.

It seemed like Shanta remembered the day in pictures for when she was telling me about it, I could visualise it too.

I couldn’t see what happened in the afternoon, but people climbed over the mosque to destroy it. No one thought or cared about their lives. There was a lot of arrangement done. At around 2 o’clock in the afternoon, the mosque was demolished. We were watching from our roofs. When the first dome was destroyed, there was a huge balloon of dust in the sky. Then eventually they destroyed the other two domes also. All of us kept water, sugar or some other sweet at our doors for people who were coming back after destroying the mosque.

A Brief Definition of Loss

The demolition that happened in 1992 was a violation of the law and was also condemned by the Supreme Court of India. However, it is deemed “correct” by the Hindu majority of Ayodhya. Most Hindu women, I met, justified demolition in their interviews and negated the possibility of it harming anyone.

Riots happened outside Ayodhya but nothing really happened here. People think that there are fights here but the truth is that we live very peacefully. The danger is outside Ayodhya, not inside. Neither are the Hindus scared of Muslims, nor are Muslims scared of Hindus. At the time of demolition rare and small incidents happened like someone's shop or a rickshaw was burnt. But nothing big happened.

While both the examples given by Shanta, burning of a shop or a rickshaw, led to a family losing its means of livelihood and social security, in the wider narrative, it was still seen as a “small thing”. The notion of losing or sacrificing small things for a bigger cause is not new. The deaths of the Muslim people were negated while the deaths of the Hindus were considered small sacrifices for a bigger religious cause. Shanta talked about how some people died while bringing down the mosque. “When the structure fell, people got buried inside it and died at the spot”, said Shanta. Apart from this, she did not remember any other sort of deaths and denied the possibility of it completely.

While I was asking Shanta about the day of demolition in 1992, she said it is also important for me to know what happened in 1990.

Two years before the demolition, in 1990 when Mulayam Singh was the chief minister, police arrested the Kar Sevaks. The government took people in a van and I am not sure if they took them to jail. I don't know what Mulayam Singh thought of himself that he made sure that these Kar Sevaks were fired on. But he is paying for his bad deeds now. These Kar Sevaks had no weapons. They were just shouting slogans that the temple should be built. The road was filled with people, there were women too, and Mulayam Singh gave a command to shoot these people. Thousands of people got injured and two boys who came from Kolkata died, and since then that lane where they were killed is known as Shaheed Gali. Thousands of people died for the temple, but the government did all the cleaning so fast. The dead bodies were drowned in the Saryu River. The roads were all washed so that no one could know about the firing or about the death of these people. All these people died in 1990 when none of us even reached till the mosque. In 1992, no shooting happened.

Not just Shanta, Neharika, who earlier talked about not being scared on the day of demolition, also narrated the story of 1990 to me when asked about the demolition. She said:

On 30 October and 2 November 1990, two Kothari brothers from Kolkata were killed in Ayodhya. Mulayam Singh was in power that time. Goli unhone chalvayi thi (Firing happened on his orders). A lot of people died in Naya Ghat. Alive people were drowned in Saryu. Mulayam Singh favoured Muslims. 1992 me

Hindu ki sarkar aayi aur phir humne chadhai ki aur hindu vijayi hua (*In 1992, the government that worked for Hindus came to power and we finally won*).

It seemed important for both these women to let me know that people of their community have sacrificed their lives for the temple. Both remembered the deaths of Kar Sevaks in 1990 while had no memory of any sort of riots in 1992. Both Shanta and Neharika said that Mulayam Singh's government favoured Muslims and now he is paying for his "bad deeds". It was interesting to see how these women remembered certain distinct details like the name of the district magistrate or the exact dates when the firing happened. Another thing to note in these interviews was the usage of the term "shaheed" by the Hindu and the Muslim communities. While Shanta talked about the street that is called Shaheed Gali because the Kar Sevaks were shot dead there, most of the Muslim women used the term to describe the demolition of the mosque. "*Masjid Shabeed hui thi 92 me*" (The mosque was martyred in 1992), was the phrase I heard in a lot of my interviews.

It is evident in the interviews that the Hindu women and the Muslim women remembered the day of demolition differently. However, homogenisation of views of a community is not possible. There were diverse views and numerous moments of rupture in those views among the Hindu women as well. While some of them said that no one died on 6 December 1992, others believed the people who died during the demolition were all Hindus. Gunjan, one of the respondents said that Kar Sevaks were mistreated by Muslims, which in turn made them angry. She also said that the police were only protecting Muslims at that time.

The oldest women I interviewed for this paper were Shanta and Ratna. Both were Brahmin and mentioned their caste at some point in time during their respective interviews. While Shanta had spent all her life in Ayodhya, Ratna moved to the town in 1992. They were of the same age but remembered the demolition differently. Ratna said:

At around 10 in the morning, we heard 'Jai Shree Ram' and suddenly thousands of people were out on the street. I don't know how so many people reached there in the span of one night. There are some temples in Ayodhya, which have huge basements and a capacity to hide thousands of men. The police force that came from outside was only there at the prominent locations because obviously they would not know the lanes or by lanes of Ayodhya. A lot of people were shot dead including a neighbour of mine. The hospital nearby my house was

filled with injured people. No Muslim died though. Whenever something like this happens in Ayodhya, they lock their houses and go to their relatives in other towns. They are the first to run away. There were a lot of policemen, and they were killing people. I remember there were so many dead bodies kept under the Neem tree behind my house.

Along with Ratna, most of the Hindu women I talked to during my field work said that the Muslims were not there in the town in 1992. However, the Muslim women, I interviewed, mentioned that today if something happens, they leave the town and go to their relatives' place; however, this has happened after their experience of the violence in 1992. The dominant narrative among the Hindu majority, I felt, was that the Muslims chose to run away in 1992 because it was their fault or because they were wrong. It was not about a community of people being forced to leave their homes because of fear of violence against them. This reminded me of a poem that was being shared widely on social media in the context of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The first stanza of the poem blames the Muslim community for being scared. It also portrays the dominant narrative in Ayodhya quite effectively.

*Agar yahi ke ho, toh itna dar kaise?
Magar chori se ghuse ho, toh ye tumhara ghar kaise?
Agar tum aman pasand ho, toh itni gadar kaise?
Jise khud khak keh rahe ho, vo tumhara sheher kaise?*

*(If you belong here, then why are you scared?
If you have come here in the wrong way, then how is this your home?
If you like peace, then how are you so disrespectful?
You disrespect the city, then how is this your city?)*

Looking Back

When I began this work, I intended to explore the many ways in which women have understood and made meaning of the demolition. In these highly polarised times, I also wanted to understand

how the seeds of communalism have been rooted in our identity since the demolition, and how its memory lingers in the everyday lives of people in the present day.

Speaking only with women was a conscious choice. From drawing rooms to the chowrahas, I have grown up seeing upper-caste men “relaxing” and having intense discussions about religion and politics. I wanted to hear women’s voices, their memory of demolition, and their opinion on the current socio-political climate in India.

Reflections on the Study

The way women respondents reacted when I asked them to remember demolition varied immensely. While some chose to stay silent and did not say a lot, a few of them talked about it for hours. Their stories had varied emotions—from excitement, belongingness, and nostalgia to fatigue, grief, and anger. In my work, I have consciously tried to frame these women as political beings, making and remaking their life-worlds and not simply as passive survivors or witnesses of the demolition.

Certain symbolisms and details the women mentioned while remembering the demolition are relevant today as well. One of the respondents talked about “Jai Shree Ram” being the “call for action” on the day of demolition and the same slogan is being used, even today, to lead the violence committed against religious minorities. The Muslim respondents who did not witness the demolition and have no memory of it also talked about the fear that their families live with even after almost three decades of demolition. The emotions of grief and anger stemmed from a feeling of betrayal towards the State, the media, and even their own neighbours, and point out the glaring persistence of injustice in shaping their lives as it is today. Women remain the disproportionate carriers of remnants of this violence, having to struggle through decades of instability, displacement, and mental and psychosocial trauma that they have had to contain among themselves as fear features a perennial presence in their lives.

The complicity of the State and media in making the Ram Mandir movement a national campaign is evident. The promise of a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya has constantly featured in the manifesto of the ruling party. Hindu respondents hailed the government for it. It can be reasonably argued that the immense value of this issue in the Hindu community and subsequent predation of it by the ruling party has helped it consolidate its majoritarian vote bank in Ayodhya. To the extent that one

of the respondents seemed miffed with their election slogan in 2019—*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*—and clearly told me that the prime minister had won the elections in the name of Hindutva and, therefore, he ought to think about serving the Hindus instead of appeasing everyone.

The Ram Mandir campaign coincided with the liberalisation and the advent of television. The Ramayana serial broadcast in the late eighties weaved a collective fantasy and the visuals made the mythological characters real. With the popularity of *Ramayana*, television inaugurated a new era in politics wherein religion was used to sanction Hindu nationalist initiatives. It led to Muslims becoming the “enemy within”, and their assertion of identity was seen as a disruption.

The socio-political climate of the country has done little to better the lives of minorities in Ayodhya. By the end of my field work, the result of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was announced; the incumbent party won and formed the government again. Thereafter, Section 370 has been abrogated in Kashmir; the Parliament has passed the CAA; and the Supreme Court paved the way for a Ram Temple in Ayodhya, with all the accused in the demolition case being acquitted.

While I have been writing about demolition, a series of events have managed to drill a hole in the secular fabric of this country. The minority community in Ayodhya not only carries a burden of a traumatic memory but also a constant hanging fear of history repeating itself. Women and children leave the town every time the conversation of Ram Mandir gets heated up, even today. There is a concurrent fear of being violated again not just by the State but also by their own neighbours. One of the respondents expressed her disappointment and said that there is no one who assures them of their safety in Ayodhya or stops them from leaving. Some of the women also admitted that that the new residents who are shifting to Ayodhya from other towns of Uttar Pradesh are all Hindus.

My Journey as a Researcher

At the beginning of my field work, I discussed this research with an upper-caste male acquaintance who called me a *vampanthi* (leftist) and said that I am just trying to complicate this issue by digging into things that are already buried. Thereafter, I stopped discussing this work with family and acquaintances in Ayodhya in order to not let others’ opinions deter me from what I set out to do.

A question that I constantly struggled with during my research was: Why am I doing this? The people who have dealt with the demolition are negotiating their ways every day in Ayodhya, they have also made peace with the baggage of the memory that they are carrying. Then what is the point of pushing them to remember unpleasant memories again? However, as Butalia (1998) argues, remembering is essential, for it also begins the process of resolving and sometimes forgetting. Perhaps, it is important to let out both anger and anguish and talk about the pain in order to heal as a community.

Way Forward

Given the time frame, I could only conduct fourteen in-depth interviews wherein the religious identity of the respondents was my primary focus. In an effort to have representation from the women of both Hindu and Muslim community, the intersection of caste and class could not be taken into consideration and that limits the scope of this research tremendously.

This research lays ground for a detailed exploration of people's perception and aspirations with respect to Babri Masjid demolition, and its significance in the conception and proliferation of the idea of "Hindu Rashtra". I believe it is important to ensure that all voices are brought to the fore. However, it is critical that certain voices that have remained unheard are privileged over others to ensure that they find representation in academia and in mainstream literature. Therefore, an intensive sample selection across spatial, segmental, and sectoral dimensions is necessary going forward.

Comprehensive research on this issue is necessary so that it can sufficiently inform the general public, mainstream discourse, and discourse of policy-making and judiciary to ensure that such a history does not repeat itself and does not embed itself into the fabric of this nation.

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Like, Follow, and Share: A Gendered Perspective on the User Experience of Instagram

Divya Patnaik

Abstract

In the last decade, social media has made an explosive entry and has positioned itself as a requirement of daily life. It first marketed itself as a way to connect with new people and reconnect with those from the past. It enabled the creation of an individual space, where one could share content for a global audience. However, it quickly transformed according to emerging needs and became a platform for news, business, entertainment, etc. While much has been said about the power of the Internet, and how it can be a tool of empowerment and assertion for those who have been disenfranchised in the past, the biases that exist in reality, seep their way into social media as well. Social media has become a double-edged sword, where on the one hand, women, queer individuals, and members of Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi communities are able to organize themselves online and curate content that depicted the struggles they faced as well as challenge the status quo. On the other hand, these people are targeted in a similar manner that they are in real life. This paper will focus on Instagram and explore the gender bias that exists within this app. The analysis of gender bias will not only be based on the kind of discrimination that users experience through direct messages or comments, but also look at how the algorithms themselves are inherently discriminatory, such as privacy policies, censorship, advertising, and the influencer culture.

Keywords: gender, social media, digital divide, social media algorithm, Instagram, cybersexism, privacy, cyber-safety

In the last decade, social media has made an explosive entry and has positioned itself as a requirement of daily life. It has enabled the creation of an individual space, where one can share content for a global audience. However, it quickly transformed according to emerging needs and became a platform for news, business, entertainment, etc. Recently, it has been observed that social

media has become such a powerful tool, that it can even affect elections in countries, and ignite violence against others.

While there had been a few social media platforms before, the most decisive entry was made by Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg. As Facebook became a primary way for people to interact, post pictures, and share opinions, soon, other variations also emerged, for instance, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.

While many forms of social media are in use today around the world, the three major players are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This paper chooses to focus on Instagram, which is primarily an image- and video-based social media platform, and looks at the different components; and how they impact the users, especially women.

Instagram has had a steady growth in active users in recent years, with currently over a billion active accounts. It has boomed as a platform for “influencers”, who regularly post about their preferred subject and generate a large number of followers who are enthusiastic and engaged with what they post. Influencer advertising is a cost-effective way of marketing and is not as obvious as advertising through television or magazines. Instagram has also become a popular way for small businesses to sell their products and create communities with shared interests. It has been instrumental in generating awareness and spreading information across the world.

But there is a catch.

Before the advent of social media, mainstream media such as newspapers and television had always been dominated by upper-caste men, thus creating a gap, especially for marginalised sections. However, once social media started to gain traction, it was seen as a medium that could fill this gap and allow the creation of space for oppressed identities and communities. It is important to note that digital spaces are not free from violence. While it opens up avenues of freedom of expression, it also gives enough room for people to exhibit their hidden day-to-day biases and prejudices. The immediate reactions to public opinions are often expressed in the form of abuse (Munusamy 2018).

According to Datareportal.com (n.d.), 4.72 billion people in the world use social media today, which accounts for roughly 60 per cent of the world's population. Consequently, it becomes necessary to analyse the dynamics within these platforms and if people interact differently in the digital space.

Using the platform of Instagram, this paper tries to understand how users interact within this platform and what kind of an impact it has on them. The analysis is done through a gendered lens and focuses on how female users interact with Instagram and has been their experiences. This paper deals with various issues such as privacy and censorship, as well as the role of the market and advertising agencies and their relationship with Instagram.

One of the primary concerns in a digital space is how people present themselves. Social media has given the ability to the users to determine their identity and how they wish to be perceived by others. The type of profile that one creates is completely up to them - users have total freedom to create content according to what they want other people to think of them. Given that Instagram is a visual platform, the persona created is primarily through photos and videos. Aesthetics play a large role in Instagram and a lot of effort is put into trying to make a story or a post “aesthetically pleasing” so that it gains the maximum number of likes. There is a direct correlation between how aesthetic a profile is and how popular the account. Articles and how-to tips are in plenty, which give advice on how one can decide which aesthetic to use and how it can be achieved. Thus, there is pressure to “perform” in a certain way. However, the use of aesthetics is a double-edged sword.

A study by Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2019) termed this as the “authenticity bind”. This bind refers to a problem commonly faced by female influencers, who are pressured to post in a certain manner but at the same time are criticised or slammed if their posts appear “too fake”. Or if not too fake, then too “real”. This dichotomy of fakeness/realness is based on what women are expected to post. In the same way that women are assigned specific roles and expected to behave according to a normative understanding of femininity, similar terms are dedicated in the offline world. Women are expected to post about fashion, makeup and skincare, family, relationships, etc. Their aesthetic is expected to be “feminine”. Deviance from this often results in trolling and bullying. Moreover, women are more likely to gain followers, recognition, and popularity if they stick to this ideal.

Hypersexualisation is also part of this package. Instagram is a very popular and powerful tool of self-representation, and for women, it traffics heavily in provocative and sexualised images. It has been observed that many women, especially celebrities, fetishise themselves, which also leads to more likes.

This influences and validates the decision for other women to do the same. While there is nothing wrong with women wanting to express their sexuality, it is often not expressed on their own terms. The authenticity bind can be applied here as well. In order to be accepted, the sexualisation of a woman has to be portrayed in such a way that it is not obvious and is “artful”. If it is considered “bold”, then women become the target of threats or unwanted advances. This online behaviour perpetuates a social ideology that sees women as sex symbols and commodifies them for the male consumer.

Additionally, this authenticity bind, as mentioned, is connected to the popularity of the account. This popularity then becomes a tool for marketing agencies and advertisers. Instagram has become a popular platform for the influencer culture, where public accounts post content to gain followers. Once there are a substantial number of people following the account, these influencers connect with various advertising agencies and market company products, from which they earn money. However, those who generate income as influencers have an added pressure to maintain normative femininity, as this is what brands prefer.

Companies that reach out to women are almost always fashion and beauty industries, while tech and sports companies reach out to men. Interestingly, money is spread unevenly. A survey was conducted with 1,600 influencers from more than 40 countries, which found that male influencers on Instagram earn more per post than women, at an average of \$1,411 compared with \$1,315 (Garlick 2020).

Thus, an entire industry that portrays women with traditional feminine roles and interests is created and markets the products accordingly. Women are more likely to receive targeted ads regarding fashion or beauty products. This is because social media only captures a small aspect of our lives

and data brokers frequently fail to accurately capture the rest. Therefore, the Internet selectors used to show ads reflect an incredibly small and massively biased view of our lives.

Furthermore, many ads are based on external lead lists, audience selection, and coarse demographic selectors. Women in STEM fields are far less likely to see many kinds of ads related to their careers, since such ads are often explicitly targeted only towards men. It is important to note that gender-specific advertising also disadvantages LGBTQIA+ community. Audience selectors and lead databases inadvertently built from homogenous sample groups mean minorities of all genders may be less likely to see such ads.

But the influencer is not the only problem. Even the audience that consumes this material is also negatively impacted. A heavily homogenised and biased ideal is created for women, forcing them to look and act a certain way. An example of this is the ideal body type. While television and advertisements already idolise individual bodies, social media increases the promotion of “thin and perfect” bodies. This negatively impacts the mental health of women, who then equate this perfection with beauty. It has also been observed that men too suffer from the negative consequences of body image issues that are created by the media. Films like *Rambo* and magazines like *Playgirl* propagate the “macho male” where men are portrayed as muscular and therefore desirable. Subsequently this has led to the formation of the “Adonis complex of attractiveness” where men have increased their efforts in wanting to build muscle and remain lean. The ideal male body has become more and more unattainable which has resulted in discrepancies between real and ideal, causing low self-esteem and depression amongst men (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia 2000). Maslow’s theory on the hierarchy of needs lists five needs that humans are motivated to fulfil: biological and physical needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and finally, self-actualisation needs (McLeod 2007). Self-actualisation is the desire for development and creativity within an individual. A user’s Instagram profile is how they have decided to present themselves to their followers. For many, this presentation is a tactic for gaining more followers, which leads to a sense of belonging and, ultimately, positive self-esteem (Minnihan 2018).

A lot of importance is placed on the number of followers and likes. In 2015, BuzzFeed posted an article about creating a proper Instagram post, for which a staff member asked their 16-year-old sister to explain the rules. The girl, Grace, points out several things such as timing, not posting too

much at the same time, and using hashtags ironically. Some of the things that stand out are: only posting selfies if they look good but posting them sparingly, and filtering photos on a different app since everyone is already familiar with the ones on Instagram. For followers, one should have more followers than the number of people one follows, so that one seems interesting. In the end, Grace adds, “Have fun and don't take it too seriously.” (Stryker 2015)

While the last piece of advice seems like everything is “breezy”, the particular and often - contradicting rules indicate that there is pressure in trying to maintain your image online. For women, this pressure manifests in several ways. For example, only taking a photo is not good enough. Whether it is a selfie or a moment with friends, it has to look “good”. From lighting to the background, everything needs to be perfect, yet it should not seem like you put in too much effort. Moreover, the outfits that you wear for your photos should not be repeated too often while posting. You always need to look put together, even if you are posting a picture of yourself at home. How many likes you get on a photo determines if it's good enough, and if the numbers are low, then many end up deleting the image. Often, the number of likes is connected with self-esteem and a sense of worth, which creates a social hierarchy - the more likes, the more popular you are, and, therefore, you are at the top of this hierarchy.

As the number of Instagram users increases, it is pertinent to also look at online safety and privacy concerns. Social media in general has often been considered as a medium for anyone to have a space to express themselves. Although online platforms do empower individuals by ensuring their freedom of speech and expression, it simultaneously endangers the fundamental right to privacy and human dignity, as it enables an enormous amount of liberty without putting in place essential safeguards to protect the users. As a consequence, online forums have become breeding grounds for unilateral organised crimes against anyone who advocates alternate ideologies and is different from the normative ideals of society. Furthermore, it has been seen that with right-wing leaders coming to power in several countries, there has been a sharp rise in intolerance towards social equality and diversity (Munusamy 2018). Those who criticise fundamentalism, oppose the government, break stereotypes, belong to marginalised backgrounds, and assert their rights, particularly women with opinions, are often targeted and branded as anti-nationals. This is because such people question traditional majoritarian norms (Munusamy 2018).

However, the target of this online violence is more often gendered than not. The gender gap in India is high and, coupled with the conservative cultural norms that dictate that women do not belong in the public sphere and should not have any social presence, online violence becomes another tool for men to suppress women.

According to the “State of Mobile Internet Connectivity, 2019” report released by the GSMA Intelligence (Bahia and Suardi 2019), only 30 per cent of Internet users are women. Therefore, even in digital spaces, men continue to dominate. Thus, if women post content that talks about equal rights, claiming self-respect, or even just having an opinion that is different from that of a man, they are targeted. Online violence can manifest in various ways, such as trolling, bullying, doxing, slut-shaming, distributing private images without consent, harassment with abusive comments, and even rape threats (Munusamy 2018).

The severity of online violence should not be underestimated as it can have a dangerous impact on a woman’s safety and security as it has the potential to be expressed in the form of physical violence also. Furthermore, this gendered experience can be further unpacked to reveal the casteist nature of online violence. In the same way that women’s empowerment is considered a threat for men, the empowerment of the Dalit community is also seen as a menace for upper-caste groups (Munusamy 2018). Hence, when women from privileged social locations are targeted, the abuse is sexual in nature. However, when women from minority backgrounds of caste, race, religion, sexuality, etc. are targeted, their abuse is often identity-based, with the aim to humiliate, defame, and delegitimize the existence of the individual. For example, when Dalit women are sexually abused, they are often told that they are “too ugly to rape” and that being labelled as a woman with “loose morals” is hereditary owing to their untouchable caste (Munusamy 2018).

Additionally, there have been growing concerns regarding privacy in an online world. With all of your information having the potential to become public, it becomes necessary to regulate how much we share and view this information. While there are some safeguards to provide users control over their privacy, the Internet remains mostly an unsafe place, especially for women. A report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that women were more likely to keep their profiles locked than men (Burnham 2012). This is because having a public audience may threaten their emotional and mental well-being (Sharma 2018). There have been many instances where

prominent female activists have become targets of bullying and gender-based harassment and have been forced to deactivate their accounts due to the disturbing and sexually abusive nature of cyber mob's threats. Furthermore, apart from abusive messages, women are also targeted in the form of illicit sexual surveillance, "creepshots", extortion, doxing, stalking, malicious impersonation, threats, and rape videos and photographs.

Moreover, for women who belong to marginalised communities and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, the risk of cyber abuse increases. While Instagram policies try to regulate such instances, this becomes difficult as it becomes entangled with the debate of freedom of speech and expression. Some content moderation is related to legal obligations, as in child pornography, but a great deal more is a matter of cultural interpretation. Jan Moolman, who coordinates the Association of Progressive Communications' Women's Rights Division, states that "garden variety" violence against women—clearly human rights violations—frequently gets a lukewarm response until it becomes an issue of bad press. Unless an issue becomes highly publicised, abuse against women online seldom receives any proper attention (Chemaly and Buni 2015). This publicity is also often biased, and women from more privileged backgrounds have more agency to demand appropriate action than marginalised women.

Where privacy concerns threaten the safety of women online, censorship policies restrict the way women can express themselves in these spaces. Instagram's censorship policies have often come under fire, such as the much-publicised debate on #freethenipple, which argued that while men's nipple area is never censored, women's is. Even though women were consistently objectified and sexualised in other ways, a nipple was inappropriate while a man was not. Similarly, Rupri Kaur's photo, where she wears trousers stained with period blood, was removed, even though it did not go against community guidelines: she was fully clothed and wasn't attacking any group. This revealed how Instagram's algorithm is inherently biased, where menstruation was seen as inappropriate, yet countless pages where women, many of them who are underage, are objectified and not censored (Christie 2020).

Furthermore, in October 2020, Australian comedian Celeste Barber posted a parody image of herself where she was imitating a post from former Victoria's Secret model Candice Swanepoel clutching her bare breast and exposing the side. But while both photos revealed the exact same

parts of each body, Barber's post was removed, and Instagram notified that it "goes against our community guidelines on nudity or sexual activity" (Christie 2020).

Swanepoel's post, meanwhile, went unreported. In June 2020, plus-size model Nyomi Nicholas-Williams posted an artistic topless photo of herself, in which her breasts were covered by her arms. Instagram promptly removed it. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement, a black woman's censoring did not go unnoticed. After the incident, Nicholas-Williams spoke up about how people of colour and fat people face discrimination that thin, white models are not subjected to (ibid.).

Therefore, there are three different issues at play: the censorship of black people and people of colour; the censorship of fat people and people in marginalised bodies; and the censorship of women and women's bodies. Yet all three bring us to the same conclusion: its time Instagram's algorithm makes room for everybody.

It is evident that Instagram is rife with biases and harmful notions of how women should be. Celebrating social media as an empowering tool is only presenting half of the picture, and unless we tackle the roots of oppression and gender bias, such forms of discrimination will find a space for themselves everywhere. Given that social media is here to stay, measures need to be taken to ensure the safety of the users. In this regard, it is essential to engage and discuss what it means to be an "Internet citizen" and the rights that one should have on the Internet. As an interactive space where new methods of communication have emerged, the Internet and digital spaces have become a relevant topic for the theory of democracy.

The Internet has been seen to have a positive potential for political culture. The new interactive possibilities for communication, deliberation, and participation are an asset to strengthen democratic processes. However, the Internet also has its own set of problems. Issues related to access and the extensive demands on users' media competence are a major concern. Additionally, the Internet is not self-actuating. Therefore, it cannot solve the problems of democracy on its own, but it can be used by societal actors to solve these problems. Hence, Internet technology must be actively internalised, socially and culturally, in order to develop its potential (Grunwald et al 2005).

In conclusion, seeing that digital spaces have been steadily growing and expanding, the spaces also need to be democratic and equal for everyone. Social media platforms need to be held accountable and their algorithms require scrutiny for biased censorship and privacy, as technology is not a neutral entity. Although Instagram has over a billion users, those who gain popularity come from a certain privileged and elite background more often than not. Marginalised voices seldom find space and recognition, and even if they do, they become targets for violence and abuse. Proper safeguards need to be put into place to ensure that the rights of the individuals are protected, and technology needs to be developed in such a way that it accounts for the representation of everyone.

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The Transgender Representation through a Cisnormative Gaze

Sadaf Nausheen

Abstract

This essay is a reflective analysis of transgender representation in mainstream cinema. Acknowledging that majority of trans* portrayal in movies is based on negative stereotypes, the essay seeks to incorporate relatively less violent representations of transgender persons. Based on the narratives highlighted in the Netflix documentary, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020), the essay seeks to look at the impact of misrepresentation of trans characters on trans individuals in reality. It also attempts to problematise this misrepresentation on the basis of trans characters being played by cisgender actors. And lastly, the essay relies upon theorisations of gender to transcend the current understanding of representation; of seeking to move beyond a mere performance of transness while also highlighting the performativity of gender in a larger context, in order to be able to challenge several normativities.

Keywords: representation, cinema, transgender, performativity

Introduction

Cinema reflects culture and also propagates existing biases, which has largely to do with the politics of representation. With movies being consumed by society at large, depiction of characters in certain ways has myriad influences on different groups.

The essay is a reflective analysis of transgender representation in mainstream cinema. The fact that trans*¹ representation has often been misguided in terms of depicting trans* characters as violent

¹ The term trans* (trans asterisk or trans star) is an umbrella term for non-normative gender identities. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “originally used to include explicitly both transsexual and transgender, or

and deviant, is well researched (Kane 2012; Koch-Rein, Yekani, and Verlinden 2020; Reitz 2017). I seek to move beyond this to incorporate relatively less violent representations of trans* individuals in cinema, wherein trans* characters are not shown to be criminals and “othered”. To complicate this, I will look at successful movies in Hollywood like *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) and *The Danish Girl* (2015). This analysis will be based on trans* narratives that were highlighted in the Netflix documentary, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020). The documentary, directed and produced by Sam Feder, focuses on how trans representation in mainstream cinema has impacted transgender individuals and their stories.

The essay is divided into three main parts. The first part attempts to look critically at the dominant form of representation of trans characters in mainstream cinema and how that impacts trans* persons and their lives. The next part looks at some better cases of representation but attempts to problematise it by highlighting the implications of cisgender appropriation of trans* characters and what it entails in terms of opportunities at the ground level. Lastly, the essay brings in Judith Butler² and the idea of gender performativity to further complicate the understanding of the boundaries of gender, and places Butler’s theorisation of the same within the debate on trans* representation in cinema.

Transgender Characters as Figures of Comic and/or Violence

It has been a practice in cinema to represent, or rather “showcase”, transgender persons as figures of comedy; the character’s transness becomes a source of humour. This exists along with the tendency to depict them as violent. An often-sighted depiction of such transphobia is *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). A psychological thriller, it seems to grossly misuse trans* narrative in order to create a sense of vulgar thrill. This negative stereotyping in films and television casts trans* women as antagonists, who are villains primarily due to their “trans-ness” (Reitz 2017). The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), which is a non-governmental media monitoring organisation funded by queer folx in media in USA, created a list of 102 episodes of TV shows featuring transgender characters between 2002 and 2012. Out of these, 54 percent of episodes had negative representation of trans* characters at the time of airing (Kane 2012). Several popular

(now usually) to indicate the inclusion of gender identities such as gender-fluid, agender, etc., alongside transsexual and transgender”. The essay uses the term “trans*” when signifying a larger umbrella of identities, and trans when talking of particular identities.

² Butler, in a 1988 essay titled “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”, theorises the idea of gender performativity, which implies that the so-called reality of gender is sustained only to the extent that it is performed by a sexed identity.

movies follow this “trend” and often portray the main antagonist as a trans* woman. Hence, feminisation of the character offers the villainous plot (Reitz 2017).

Such representation creates an environment where cisgender individuals respond to transgender individuals with fear. Beyond this, it has a direct negative impact on trans* individuals themselves. *Disclosure* highlights the moral dilemma that many trans* individuals go through due to such depiction. Laverne Cox of *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019), states in *Disclosure* (2020), “The ways in which trans people have been represented on-screen have suggested that we’re not real; that we’re mentally ill; that we don’t exist”. In the same documentary, Tiq Milan, writer and media-maker, said, “The more we are seen, the more we are violated.” Since the impact of cinema is huge, such misrepresentation results in internalisation by trans* individuals of their gender identities as a problem in itself.

Transgender Characters as Victims

When trans* characters are not shown as perpetrators of violence, they are the ones who have violence inflicted upon them. Both ways, agency and the complexities of trans* characters, just like any other character, are ignored. As per the aforementioned study by GLAAD, in 40 per cent of the 102 episodes that were listed, trans* women were subjected to extreme violence (Kane 2012). This may depict the kind of violence that trans* individuals have to face given their gender identity. But it also creates a sense of extreme fear among trans* individuals for being themselves. Nick Adams, who is GLAAD’s director of trans* media and representation, and also appeared in *Disclosure*, said that most of the times, when growing up, trans* individuals are not parts of families where other trans* people are around, so eventually, there is a shift to the media to understand experiences and feelings, to get an answer to the question: Who are like us?

But when representation is based exclusively on atrocity, it results in further alienation. For actor Brian Smith, *Boys Don’t Cry*,³ a movie that went all the way to the Oscars, was “terrifying”. It is a film that tells the story of Brandon Teena, a young trans man in Nebraska who was murdered along with two others in 1993. This was the first time that a trans* character was not portrayed as a

³ *Boys Don’t Cry* was the first mainstream film in Hollywood to be centred upon the life of a trans man. It is based on the life of Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old trans man from Nebraska who was murdered in 1993 by two cisgender men owing to hate crimes against transgender persons. The film also touches upon Brandon’s relationship with his girlfriend, Lana Tisdel but seems to be focussed on Brandon’s attempts at being accepted for his identity and the violence he faces due to the same. Despite being one of the first movies that focused upon a trans character without villainising them, it has been criticised for being more about explicit portrayal of Brandon’s death than his life.

criminal or comically (Rigney 2003). But Laverne Cox said that after watching the movie, she felt like she was going to die. Such representation becomes a warning of what can happen if trans* people come out (Rigney 2003). It instils fear of the possibility of being violated if they “choose” to be themselves. And this portrayal does nothing to depict the structural problems that cause such direct forms of violence. The problem is not in talking about violence, but rather how this discourse takes place. One problem is that only stories of loss of agency are the ones being told over and over again. As Tiq Milan pointed out, there was a complete erasure of black representation in *Boys Don't Cry*. It failed to talk about Philip DeVine who was also murdered that night in 1993 and was an ally to Brandon. For Tiq, invisibilisation of a black character also meant an erasure of queer Black folx. In his words, “[This is] taking away representation and saying that I cannot exist.”

Another critique that *Boys Don't Cry*, along with *The Danish Girl*,⁴ has received is portrayal of a transgender character by a cisgender actor. *The Danish Girl*, which also won an Oscar, is loosely inspired by the lives of Danish artists Lili Elbe and Gerda Wegener. It shows the way in which the two artists navigate the journey of Lili Elbe as one of the first persons to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Both movies were applauded for their “bold” representation and talented acting. Hilary Swank, who played Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*, and Eddie Redmayne, who played Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl*, progressed tremendously in their acting careers with the two respective roles. The problem here is not visible on the surface but needs to be unravelled.

The Problem of Transgender Representation by Cisgender Actors

According to a study conducted by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, transgender persons (in USA) did much worse in aspects of their lives that affect their economic well-being (Carpenter, Eppink, and Gonzales 2020). In another study by National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in USA, it was found that more than one in four transgender persons lose their jobs due to discrimination. Discrimination is experienced at a higher rate by transgender persons of colour (NCTE 2020). In situations of stark inequalities, if Hollywood wants to make a difference, it is difficult to understand why transgender actors are not given roles, while roles representing

⁴ *The Danish Girl* is based on the lives of Danish artists Lili Elbe and Gerda Wegener. The movie journeys through Lili's transition and the ways in which it is navigated by both Lili and Gerda. Touching slightly upon the issue of sexuality, the movie portrays Lili's relation with her gender. After having consulted several “experts” about the same, Lili becomes the first recipient of sex reassignment surgery in the 1920s. However, given the complications that arise from the surgery, the movie ends with Lili's death. While the movie is applauded for its performances and the portrayal of the transition of Lili Elbe, it has been criticised for giving undue attention to the changes in Gerda's life and the marriage between Lili and Gerda as Lili's transitions.

transgender persons are given to cisgender actors. According to a report by *IndieWire* in 2019, despite the so-called progress, Hollywood's most famous trans* actors continue to struggle to find jobs (Dry 2019). Additionally, the report states that landing a role does not end the problem. Many trans* actors feel conflicted about speaking up against problematic points in their own dialogues (Dry 2019). Despite increased opportunities, the playing field is not at par and decision-making is in the hands of cisgender individuals.

Another noteworthy point brought out in *Disclosure* is the “performativity” of transness by cisgender actors. In the documentary, according to actor and writer, Jen Richards, “Having cis men play trans women is a direct link to the violence against trans women”. Paraphrasing further, such representation is part of the reason why cis men also murder trans* women, which arises out of the fear that other men will think that they are gay for having been with trans* women. Transphobia, combined with homophobia, becomes a source of brutal violence. Richards then states that the men, due to whose judgement other men end up murdering trans* women, know trans* women only from media, and the people who are playing trans* women are the (cis) men that they know. This issue does not arise when a trans* woman is played by a trans* woman. “When you see these women off screen still as women, it completely deflates this idea that they’re somehow men in disguise; the transness of it doesn’t have to be played”, says Richards. However, when someone like Eddie Redmayne plays a trans* woman, no matter how brilliant of a performance that is, the only thing that remains remarkable of such performance is transness and how convincingly he portrays it. Many a times, this reduces the character to a mere performance of femininity and hence, transness, rather than, as Richards goes on to state in *Disclosure*, “a whole person of whom transness is one aspect”. After the movie is complete, the actor continues to live with cis privilege having appropriated the trans* struggle.

The Danish Girl is also criticised on the grounds of exploiting the trans experience in order to highlight the crisis that cisgender people go through as a result of a closed one coming out as trans* (Trota 2014). This is with regards to the character of Gerda, played by Alicia Vikander, whose emotional and social struggles of losing her “husband” provided the viewpoint through which we saw Lili’s story.

While Brandon’s character in *Boys Don’t Cry* may not have been used as a plot device in a similar manner, the cis gaze dominates the screenplay. It is true that Hilary Swank believes that if the movie was made in contemporary times, the role would have been played by a trans* actor. She also stated

in an interview to *IndieWire* that while there are several steps needed to be taken to further the inclusivity of all identities in Hollywood, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has revised its standards to include diverse talents both off and, on the screen, (Lattanzio 2020). However, while such changes have taken place here and there, a structural transformation, whether underway or not, is precarious. Movies continue to depict trans* characters in age-old stereotypical roles.

Moving away from Hollywood and into the genre of independent cinema, is *A Good Man* (2020), a French-Belgian drama, which first premiered at the Deauville Film Festival in September and was also screened at the Cannes Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival. Based on true events, it depicts the story of Benjamin, a trans man, in the midst of transition, choosing to undergo pregnancy. While many critics have praised the film for its empathetic approach, it has received backlash for portrayal of the trans character by a cis actor, Noemie Merlant. In her defence, the director, Marie Castille Mention-Schaar, said that due to lack of trans* actors in France, she decided to cast a cis actor. Quite interestingly, she went back to Hilary Swank's "strong depiction" of the trans experience in *Boys Don't Cry* to further her point. She also stated that her movie included a trans actor, Jonas Ben Ahmed, playing a cis role. However, the role played by Ahmed was secondary and the arguments given by the director were rejected by trans film critic Danielle Solzman (Fuster 2020).

There are two points regarding representation that emerge. First is the lack of accessibility of trans* actors to be found by casting directors, instead of lack of their numbers in the industry. Solzman herself stated that the problem is in the lack of accessibility provided to trans* actors to reach out and to be reached out by others. This leads to the second point, which is the lack of trans masculine representation within the already lacking trans* representation (Wickman 2003). The problem exacerbates with the almost absence of trans embodiments in feature films that are explicitly neither female nor male identified (Straube 2014).

This (mis)representation brings us to the problem of the antithetical conundrum pointed out by Judith Butler. Butler states that transgender characters are continuing to struggle to be recognised as gendered people. However, to be recognised solely as a gendered person in a cisnormative structure could push one into a binary of sex. Acknowledging the lived realities of transgender persons, Butler states that transgender characters are "allowed" to shift from one category to another but not transgress boundaries in a way that would disrupt the essentialist construction of sex. The notions of essentialism in characters conceals the performativity of gender, as a whole,

that takes place in our real lives (Butler 2006). Butler's point is to move beyond seeking inclusion that may disturb, albeit within bounds, the status quo but does not transform the same. The inclusion of trans characters that fit a cisgender idea of transness may not do much to subvert the cis gaze in itself (Mocarski et al. 2019).

Here, I bring into focus the demands by Actors' Equity Association, a union representing US actors and stage managers in theatre. According to Equity, it is not easy for trans* actors to build a career out of scarce trans*-specific roles for which they might be sought. In a 2019 guide published by the association, entitled as "Guidelines for Entertainment Professionals Working with LGBT+ Performers",⁵ it was noted that "the fact that [a performer] is trans may be completely invisible in the role, but it powerfully represents diversity in the industry." Hence, it calls for more casting directors to hire transgender performers to play non-trans characters (Perraudin 2019). This situation may solve the conundrum that Butler points out, moving beyond the performativity of transness but also not concealing the very performativity of gender. However, at present, the cisnormative gaze constantly decides the kind of representation that trans* characters get. These issues intersect with problems of race, religion, and class to create junctures of invisibilisation.

Conclusion

The politics of representation plays a vital role in shaping mind sets and societies. The cycle of misrepresentation has started to be intercepted. But there are several more steps to be taken. From trans masculine and trans feminine experiences, realities of individuals at every point of the gender spectrum are required to be narrated. Representation is about taking up one's deserved space and more often than not, it continues to oscillate between cisgender heterosexual men and women from the viewpoint of the male gaze. Queering the politics of representation has often been associated with bringing about structural change, with dismantling heteronormativity that dominates much of queer representation as well. Only when the framework that defines the practice of film-making, in all its aspects, changes can we expect the problems at the deep ends of the structure to vanish. This, however, requires several demands, struggles and measures. One of the first steps in doing so is no doubt true representation of marginalised identities.

⁵ Available from: https://www.equity.org.uk/media/3465/equity_lgbt-casting-guide.pdf [Accessed: 2nd August 2021].

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Enabling/Disabling on Screen: Portrayal of Disability in Hindi Cinema

Ajaykumar Shukla

Abstract

This essay analyses a section of films from Hindi cinema and its various approaches to portray disability. It also looks at how the Hindi cinema shapes the perception of non-disabled people towards disability and disabled people in the society. It follows the methodology of textual analysis of selected Hindi films that deal with disability as the central character of the plot. This study only looks at the physical disability and does not deal with mental disability. I will analyse the text of films that portray disability in various stereotypical and non-stereotypical manners. I shall engage in critical analysis of the text of Hindi films under 3 broader themes: (a) disability as punishment; (b) disability as over-heroism; and (c) non-stereotypical portrayal of disability.

Keywords: disability in cinema, Bollywood and disability, portrayal of disability, Hindi cinema and disability.

Introduction

Disability has always been marginalised in society. Disability has been looked down upon or seen differently from normality that's defined by the society. Disabled people face discrimination in society in terms of access to education, employment, and public spaces. Disability is widely misunderstood even today. Research has consistently indicated that disabled people are marginalised in society, as there is a lack of awareness and sensitivity about disability in society. Disability is often perceived as the punishment for the previous life or misdeeds by the parents in the past. This perception is prevalent not only among less educated people but also among the educated. Various groups and NGOs have tried to eradicate these stereotypes but due to their limitations, they could not spread awareness among a large number of people.

Cinema is a powerful medium to reach a large number of audiences. Cinema mirrors society in several ways. While it is caught up between the real and reel life, it still serves as an important medium of entertaining people, educating them, and bringing a behavioural change in their practices and attitudes. Cinema shapes the perception of an individual of society and, hence, it has been particularly effective in changing people's perception and uprooting societal stereotypes. Therefore, cinema as the powerful medium of mass communication should carry some responsibility. As it is the depiction of society, it should be careful with its representation of certain groups. Over the years, cinema has been criticised for its representations. It has continuously promoted stereotypes about love, emotion, and violence in the society. Disability is always used to elicit responses like sympathy and emotional drama or as a tool to generate comical moments. Stereotypes have also been developed through cinema related to disability, such as: disabled people are dependent on others for their basic needs; they have a sixth sense; or are sometimes likened to angels. As Mohipatra (2012) notes, "Portrayal of disability in films swings primarily between two extremes—pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, and awesome heroism are at one end of the spectrum while discrimination, coping-up, emotional swings and aspirations of the human soul are at the other end."

According to the United Nations (UN) (n.d.), disabled people are the largest minority of the world. Therefore, non-disabled people, or so called "normal" people, do not usually come in direct contact with disabled people. It is possible that they learn about disabled people or disability through media (mostly through cinema in the Indian context). Hindi cinema has astonishing reach across the countries. It is important that films should be ethically and politically correct in terms of their representation of disability so as to bring awareness among people, but unfortunately Hindi films have failed to do so. After living for 10 years in a residential special school for the blind, when I moved to college to pursue my further studies, I realised that sighted people have several misconceptions and stereotypes about people with visual impairment. When I became friends with them, I came to know that those stereotypes have been developed through cinema. For example, the idea of sixth sense was depicted in the Hindi film *Aankhen* released in 2002, in which three visually impaired people successfully rob a bank using their so-called sixth sense.

This essay analyses a section of Hindi cinema and its various approaches to disability portrayal. It also looks at how the Hindi cinema shapes the perception of non-disabled people towards disability and disabled people in the society. It follows the methodology of textual analysis of selected Hindi

films that deal with disability as the central character of the plot. It also aims to study the reading of disabled people and their portrayal in Hindi cinema. This study only looks at physical disability and does not deal with mental disability. I will analyse the text of films that portray disability in various stereotypical and non-stereotypical manner. I shall engage in critically analyse text of the Hindi films under 3 broader themes: 1- disability as punishment, 2- disability as over heroism and 3-beyond the stereotype.

Now, let us look at the various ways Hindi cinema portrays disability and disabled people.

Disability as Punishment

The representation of disability as punishment can be found in Hindu religious practices and beliefs. Disabled people are often considered to be sent by God. Their disability is also sometimes seen as the outcome of karma—the misdeeds of the past. Even the ancient Hindu text like Manusmriti states that the disability is the suffering for punishment of the crime which the person has committed in the previous life (Kaur 2019).

Another negative sentiment towards disability can be found in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. In one story of the Mahabharata, King Dhritarashtra is made blind by the gods because in a previous life, he had brutally blinded a swan. In the Ramayana, there is Manthara, who is portrayed as the sinful manipulative servant with a hunched back. These kinds of portrayals in Hindu mythology constitute the perception of disability being treated as punishment. Unfortunately, even in the twenty-first century, disability is often perceived as a result of personal or parental sin. Even my own parents still believe that I became visually impaired because they committed some crime in the past, which obviously is due to the Hindu orthodox mindset.

One of the earliest films to portray disability as punishment was the 1936 Bombay Talkies film, *Jeevan Naiya*. The film, written by Niranjan Pal, was based on an idea of social justice. Pal used his screenwriting as a means of highlighting problems with traditional beliefs, specifically those related to Hindu orthodoxy. In the movie, the lead character abandons his wife because of her background: she came from a family of dancers. Subsequently, the husband is blinded in an accident and nursed back to health and happiness by the woman, who, unknown to him then, is revealed to be the same devoted wife he abandoned due to social taboo. *Koshish* (1972), directed by Gulzar, is considered as the first

attempt to discuss people with speech and hearing impairment using sign language. While the attempt can be appreciated, the film does not get away with internalising the social stigma of disability as punishment. *Kosbisha* is yet another example, where the evil brother Asrani, who torments his deaf sister and brother-in-law is himself crippled, which he perceives as punishment for his acts. In *Dhanwaan* (1981), the rich and arrogant atheist Rajesh Khanna is blinded and unable to buy a new pair of eyes for himself. He eventually finds a benevolent donor only when he feels remorse and turns to God. According to Prasad, Kashyap, and Rabindranath (2018), “In Bollywood, the idea of disability had been used as the severe punishment for a range of sins. For example, the wicked father-in-law is blinded in *Aadmi* (1968), in *Kasam* (1988), the chieftain of a village of criminals gets disabled in a police attack in *Jalte Badan* (1973), Kiran Kumar, a drug addict, gets blinded.”

In the film *Sholay* (1975), Thakur (Sanjeev Kumar), the police officer, has his arms amputated by the robber Gabbar (Amjad Khan). Unable to avenge himself, Thakur employs two mercenaries to destroy the Gabbar’s gang, but sets up a climactic duel between himself and Gabbar. He begins the duel by saying that even without his arms, Gabbar is no match for him, and concludes it not by killing Gabbar, but by crushing his arms with spikes. Indeed, as Sawhney (n.d.) states, “The punishment for the evil is not a swift bullet, but an enduring disability similar to the one imposed on him.” Similarly, in *Andhadhun* (2018), Tabu damages Ayushman Khurana’s eyes because she realises that he is pretending to be a visually impaired person, but he is not, and he may have seen the murder that took place at Tabu’s place when he visited her house as visually impaired musician to play the piano.

Disability as Over-Heroism

While a certain section of society associates disability with karma, some people think that the person with disability comes with special powers or special abilities. This is the reason why people think that disabled people have sixth sense, and this stereotype is even prevalent among educated sections of the society. According to Mohapatra (2012), “The terminology of ‘differently-abled’ is a recent one which got its recognition after three stages of debate and discussion from handicapped to disabled to physically challenged.” But the society is also addressing those with disability as “special people” or “Divyang”. “Divyang” is a Hindi word that means divine body. This terminology is irrational. What is so divine about a disabled person’s body? In India, it is widely believed that God loves those who help weak people because weaker people are considered to be closer to God. So, they help disabled people

to please the God and not out of concern or humanity. This is the root cause of why this new terminology of “Divyang” or “special people” came to existence. This is problematic because the views about disability as sins of the past and closeness to God are very regressive approaches to the issue at hand.

Some film-makers have tried to show the disability in a so-called positive way by giving it a heroic persona, but I would argue that they have failed to do the same. Unfortunately, film-makers are unable to detach themselves from the societal stereotypes. In fact, I would argue that it is the result of a lack of research or insight into the lives of those with disability. To portray disability in a positive light, film-makers are known to enhance other senses and skills of a disabled person to superhuman levels because he/she lacks a particular physical ability. As Mohipatra (2012) says, “In Indian Cinema, the relationship between sympathy and heroism is parallel. The golden rule is if the main protagonist is with special abilities, then first he earns the sympathy of the audience, then struggle for survival and finally ends up as a hero.” For instance, in the 2017 Hindi film, *Kaabil*, Hrithik Roshan and Yami Gautam play a visually impaired couple whose situations, circumstances, and struggles are placed in the film to create sympathy in the minds of audience. In the end, with his extraordinary planning, Hrithik Roshan takes the revenge of his wife’s murder by killing the villains. At the film’s climax, he is proven to be a great hero.

In yet another film, *Iqbal* (2005), a poor villager who is deaf and mute wants to become a cricketer. The factor of sympathy is also added in the film through disability to capture the emotions of the audience. The film is inspirational, and the protagonist Iqbal has the element of heroism.

Akshay Kumar, Paresh Rawal, and Arjun Rampal successfully rob a bank despite being blind using their “sixth sense” in *Aankhen* (2002). In this film, heroism of disability has been glorified extensively. The film portrays the biggest stereotype of disabled people—that of the sixth sense. In one of the sequences, visually impaired persons from all over India are asked to apply for a workshop where they would be awarded a scholarship. Akshay Kumar (one of the three selected applicants) says in his application, “God is the biggest dealer of this world. He took away my eyes but gave me a special thing and that is the sixth sense. After knowing about your advertisement about the workshop, my sixth sense alerted me.” Such statement by a visually impaired person presents more convincing power for audience to believe in things like so-called sixth sense. This dialogue is very misleading for the audience.

Another stereotype the film portrays is that of the disabled person as beggar. Paresh Rawal's character is shown as a blind beggar in the beginning. In another sequence, the film takes the glorification of sixth sense to the next level, where Akshay Kumar is portrayed as having a great sixth sense, through which he realises that his friend Paresh Rawal's life is in danger when he and Arjun Rampal are out to call the doctor. After his sixth sense alerted him, Kumar and Rampal move back to the training centre where their friend has been trapped by Amitabh Bachchan. This false representation of the disabled having a sixth sense is very common in Indian films and television, and disconnected from reality and real experiences of those living with disability. While training before the bank robbery, Sushmita Sen teaches all the visually impaired protagonists to count the steps to reach a particular section of the bank. This is yet another stereotype—that visually impaired people count steps to move from one place to other.

While these movies present people with disabilities in a positive light, they also distort the true identity of these people and does not contribute to spreading awareness about disabled people. The factor of heroism is an effective tool to make audience feel inspired by Hindi films and, in some ways, a reason why disabled people are perceived as inspirational. The film enhances other skills and senses of disabled characters and propagate it as the sixth sense of disabled people.

Beyond the Stereotypes

While various directors have portrayed disability in an inappropriate manner, some directors have taken an effort to spread awareness about disability by making films from disabled people's perspective, where their films truly depict the limitation and abilities of disabled people.

Sparsb (1980) is one such film directed by Sai Paranjpe, which deals with the life of a blind principal. The protagonist of the film portrays an independent visually impaired school principal, who not only manages the school and staff but also manages his household works like cooking and cleaning. A visually impaired person's strength and limitations have been very well represented by the director. The film realistically portrays the complex conflicts between abled and disabled bodies. It conveys the message that disabled people do not want unnecessary sympathy, pity, and help. It also raises important issues about disability of what disabled people have to go through when society constantly questions their abilities. In one of the initial sequences, the protagonist of the film, Anirudh

(Naseeruddin Shah), reaches the house of the female protagonist of the film, Kavita (Shabana Azmi), instead of a doctor while listening to her sing. There, Shabana Azmi informs him that he has reached the wrong place and subsequently guides him to the right address. While climbing down the stairs, noticing his visual impairment, Kavita shows interest in helping him descend. In response to that concern, Anirudh immediately says, “No thanks, as I have reached here without anyone, I can also go without anyone.” Through this sequence itself, the director successfully establishes that visually impaired or disabled people do not want unnecessary help. One of the important aspects of the film is that it shows a disabled person attending parties and involving himself with different aspects of society and, most importantly, becoming a part of the mainstream society. In the party, Kavita meets Anirudh and there arises a very basic conversation that is interesting from society’s perspective. Anirudh recognises Kavita by her voice. Shocked, Kavita asks him how he recognised her, referring to his visual impairment. Anirudh clears that he recognised her through her voice, but she says that she hardly spoke three–four words to him, referring to their previous accidental meeting. Here, Anirudh gives a very basic and logical answer. He asks, “Would you have to see a person again and again to recognise that person?”

In yet another sequence, society’s attitude towards a person with disability— “Bechara” attitude (helplessness)—can be seen when Kavita visits Anirudh’s office, agreeing to his request for volunteering at the school. Anirudh asks her what she can teach blind students. To this, she replies that she can teach singing, storytelling, and handicraft, as well as everything she knows partly. She then adds, “*Main yehi chahungi ki becharon ko zyada se zyada de saku*” (I would want to teach those helpless people as much as I can). Anirudh makes a small request of her. He says, “It would be great if you could forget the word ‘helpless’ as soon as possible. We need help but not sympathy. Students over here definitely lack something, but there is no point of keep making them remind their disability. In fact, it is important to realise them that there is still hope in life. Will you think in this manner? It is going to be a big challenge for you. Don’t forget: If you will give them something then they will also give you many things. No one is doing any favour to anyone, and no one is helpless.” In the same sequence, Anirudh is pouring coffee for Kavita. Seeing that, Kavita gets up out of concern and says that she will help. Anirudh gets angry and says, “Sit down, please, sit down. You are my guest and let me host you. If I need any help, I will tell you.”

Another conflict between abled and disabled bodies can be traced when Anirudh and Kavita go to a restaurant for the dinner. Kavita's thinking of Anirudh being unable to dance due to his visual impairment reflects the constant struggle of disabled person. Subsequently, the staff gives the bill to Kavita instead of Anirudh because of his stereotypical thinking attached with visually impaired people. Such incidents shatter Anirudh's confidence and self-esteem. This reflects in his behaviour when Kavita brings cake for him, and he is reluctant to cut it. In another sequence, Anirudh explains Kavita about how he is reluctant to receive any favours because of his disability. He raises this concern when he realises that Kavita is doing many things for him. In the same sequence, he also refers to the blind students and him as "Bechara". This clearly indicates how his disability and abilities are constantly threatened by the society through these various incidents.

The film also challenges the socially constructed idea of beauty. In a sequence, Kavita describes her beauty to Anirudh by talking about her fair complexion, hazel eyes, and long, dense hair, whereas Anirudh describes her beauty in terms of her beautiful voice and the attractive fragrance of her body. One may argue that he is a blind, so complexion may not matter to him, and he is using other senses to describe her beauty. But I would argue that even non-disabled persons have those other senses. Despite this realistic representation, it is problematic to note that Shabana Azmi's character is a widow. This can be read as being there for no substantial reason other than attaching some element of "lack" or social marginalisation to her character, so that she can be in a relation with a disabled person.

Margarita with a Straw (2014) is a film that deals with disability without pity and sympathy. It is probably the first film that deals with disability and sexuality together. We never talk about disability and sexuality on the same page. If you take disability out of the equation, it still an interesting film about a young, horny, awkward teenager and is a coming-of-age story. Sexuality is still treated as a taboo in India; it is one of the biggest issues even today. But when sexuality of a disabled person has been never discussed. Disabled persons have always been desexualised by the media and the society. Laila, the protagonist of *Margarita with a Straw*, has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair to move around. She is interested in exploration of her sexuality for which she is completely unapologetic and has no shame in accepting it. The film explains that just like any human being, even disabled persons have sexual feelings and there is no harm in exploring that. In one of the initial sequences of the film, the protagonist Laila is shown watching porn and having pleasure. In the subsequent sequence to that, she asks for a vibrator in a shop and laughs about it. In the next sequence, the protagonist is shown as

making out with a boy. Thus, the director establishes Laila's exploration of her sexuality in the beginning of the story itself. The film also deals with the conflict between abled and disabled bodies. Laila breaks down when she feels rejected by the lead singer of the band group for whom she develops feelings. This is what a disabled person faces on a daily basis when he or she feels rejected or don't receive love from the so-called abled bodies.

When Laila moves to New York to study, the film depicts how that city is accessible for disabled people. There, Laila meets Khanum, a young, visually impaired activist, and Jared, who has been assigned to help Laila. Here, her sexual exploration takes a different route. She develops great friendship with both. In a club with Khanum, Laila opens about her experience with dating. She says, "Why would anybody date me?" referring to her disability and adds that this is what she has experienced in the past. After this conversation, both start dancing. They have great time together. Then, Laila reaches Khanum's place at night and both enjoy some intimate moments. Both fall in love with each other and then Laila moves in with Khanum. Soon after, she also has sex with Jared, for which she feels guilty because she was in a relationship with Khanum.

I think this movie moves beyond stereotypes because of the absence of pity, sympathy, punishment, and heroism attached with disability. Laila losing her mother, her expectations of true love, having sexual desire, daily struggles, and Khanum's feeling of betrayal make the audience aware that these struggles and human desire are universal and disabled people are also a part of this universe. However, a critique of these films that try to portray disabled people in non-stereotypical manner is that non-disabled actors play the character of disabled people. Though both films try to draw a thorough picture of disability, they fail to give right intention and are trapped in the societal stereotype that disabled people cannot act in films.

Conclusion

In Hindi commercial or mainstream cinema, the protagonist has a great importance. The protagonist is considered as the ideal person who is perfect, who is always right, who cannot be defeated, and is truly influential. The protagonist has the perfect heroic persona. Hindi films have always been criticised for promoting stereotypes. Stereotyping disability as punishment, sixth sense/over-heroism, pity, and dependence has been used excessively in them. Prasad, Kashyap, and

Rabindranath (2018) say, “The disabled bodies thus have conventionally fulfilled either supporting character roles, or else if they are the central characters or protagonists, they must become an object of tragedy or their senses and skills would be stretched beyond reality, in an exaggerated fashion.”

Considering the fact that the many in society lack direct experience with disabled people, the film-makers draw on their prejudice and incorporate the stereotypes related to disability in the film that are already prevalent in society. This is why we can clearly see the absence of authentic research in films about disability.

As discussed earlier, films generalise and stereotype disability and disabled people by incorporating heroism as a character of disability. They enhance other skills and senses of disabled characters and promote it as the sixth sense of disabled people. This is misleading for a non-disabled audience and disturbing for disabled people. Stereotypes like sixth sense and extraordinariness of disabled people in films distort the true identity of the disabled people. Extraordinariness of disabled people takes away their right to be ordinary. The right to be an ordinary person is one of the most basic rights of someone with disability needs, but terms like “Divyang”, “special person” and “sixth sense” act as exclusionary tools of disabled people from the mainstream society. Everybody is an ordinary person besides his or her achievements or talent. Disabled people who achieve something in their lives is not because they got extra supernatural power or they have divine bodies, but because of their determination and human efforts.

There are not many films that deal with the real-life disabled personalities. The current film-making trend is inclined towards making biopics where the film-makers seek real-life stories and personalities. But when it comes to stories of real-life disabled people, film-makers are reluctant. The reason for this attitude by the film-makers may be the non-disabled majority of the audience. The success stories of the disabled people are largely untold and, even if they are told, they are focussed on glorification of their condition rather than their achievement. The film-makers depict disability in films according to their own convenience, which obviously lacks authentic research and stereotypes are thus glorified. The depiction of real-life stories of disabled personalities becomes important to educate audiences and a way for these stereotypes to be eradicated.

The other problem of our film industry is that non-disabled actors play the characters of disabled

people. Film-makers don't work with a disabled person to play disabled characters because of the stereotype that disabled person won't be able to act or work in the industry. Robert Mccrue contextualises disability in the root sense of the word, he argues that the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability in an authentic way replicates the theory of the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness. "Compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa" (Mccrue 2013). This criticism also applies to those film-makers who depict disability in non-stereotypical manner. I understand that there will be some limitation, but physically disabled people can be assigned to play the role of a disabled character. Due to lack of opportunity, disabled people are also reluctant to make a career in the film industry, and even if they do, they are denied opportunities by the industry. Making disabled people a part of film production will create a positive inclusive environment in society. The authenticity of the representation of disability can be improved by making disabled people part of the film-making process.

One of the most significant points I would like to raise is the issue of accessibility. Due to prejudice and ignorant nature of our society, the accessibility issue faced by disabled people to consume media content or cinema has been never discussed. The film-makers never consider disabled people as their audience. Audio description of the film for visually impaired persons and sign language in the film for hearing/speech impaired people can solve the issue of accessibility for disabled people. There are mobile applications like Excel Cinema, which make available audio description for visually impaired people if requested by the makers of the film. There are some films like *Andhadun* and *Kaabil* that were screened separately for visually impaired people with the help of audio description by Excel Cinema, but again, this is an exclusionary approach of the society. Why can't visually impaired people or disabled people experience the pleasure of watching cinema with non-disabled people in the theatre? Digital accessibility rights are extremely important for India and one of the ways that can make the society inclusive for all.

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Madhurai Film Festival. He has worked at Fever 104 FM (HT Media) and delivered a special lecture in Xavier's College, Mumbai, on portrayal of disability in Hindi cinema. He wishes to contribute to the upliftment of disabled people.

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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.¹ 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

¹ 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.

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