

Article

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## Violence: Rite of 'Dalit Identity' Discourse?



“*Idhu namma kaalam. Ezhundhu vaa!*” (This is our time. Arise & Arrive) dialogue from Pa Ranjith’s *Sarpatta Parambarai*, film which revolves around boxing – most violent of bloody sport and clan prestige.

Mahatma Gandhi, epitomised non-violence as a potent tool to express one’s strong dissension against injustice. It is Mahatma’s peaceful protest, against the brutal force unleashed by the mighty British Raj, to cow down the citizens into servility and submission, that ultimately won India her freedom. It is now nearly 125 years since that Child from Porbandar, the young lawyer from South Africa, rose to singularly take on the mantle of leading India to her freedom and

independence. Answering violence with peaceful, pacifist protest, dialogue and reasoning, affirmative action, than by bullet with bullet, baton with baton, Gandhi epitomised what non-violence and civil disobedience can do to unreasoning powerful State authority and its venal, brutal ways. Shaming the perpetrators at their inhuman actions and atrocities being committed by the British dispensation ultimately ensuring they Quit India and Bharat gaining her Independence & Freedom.

But trust our blue blood, modern day young and aspiring film directors to take lessons from India’s painful past. Give wings to it in their works as they bring to centre stage of public discourse the various ills that still dog the Indian society. Sadly,

that is not to be. Film maker after film maker, in recent times, with wanton disregard to the fact that violence only begets violence, have been celebrating it as a virtue and birth right.

Extolling vicious, vituperative violence, in film after film, as legitimate form of registering one's displeasure at how the marginalised, the underprivileged, especially the Dalits, are being treated in society. Yes, Dalit oriented films, have become the staple fodder to draw unsuspecting crowds lately. So much so, every second or third film that graces the movie marquee today, be it at traditional single theatres or streaming platforms, invariably revolves around, championing the cause of the much abused Dalit minority.

In an express effort to enable Dalits wear their 'identity' boldly and bravely in society. Hold their head high as the dialogue quoted above exhorts them. Face the fusillade of social discrimination. These crop of film makers have taken to Dalit narratives in their outings at cinema. Yes, after years of suppression, subjugation, and deprivation, their time may have come, to retort and reclaim their due. As *Chauranga* director Bikas Mishra avers "the politics of identity – caste – are central... Things have to be destroyed and demolished for a new world to emerge."

While one does not dispute their legitimate desire to present the problems that have been haunting the marginalised ilk since eons even to this day. What, however, one sees as case for serious concern, is the way these directors make common cause in depicting and advocating violence as a necessary and inevitable recourse to protect one's identity as also earn their due and respect in society.

There have been films in the past, such as *Chauranga*, *Court*, *Fandry*, *Sairat*, *Masaan*, *Anhey Ghore Da Daan*, *Papilio Buddha*, *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Mandela*, and the like, which capture the humiliation and discontent in the lives of the marginalised and underprivileged sections, in much more humane, subtler, sensitive manner. However, this has changed in recent years, especially in Tamil cinema, as to how Dalit protagonists, from being servile and subservient, have taken a 360 degree turn,

to take on the powerful oppressors and fight back – in tooth for tooth – eye for an eye – manner.

This, especially so, with the emergence of film makers belonging to the marginalised class such as Pa Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, Balaji Shaktivel, Vetri Maran and the like. This has also invited criticism in that by foisting aggressively assertive, heroic Dalit figures, the film makers have conveniently cultivated a commercial narrative than reflect the actual reality, in a more nuanced and subtle manner. It is fine to make the Dalit empowering, assertive, and aspirational but how is what begs the question. As renowned Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in his eponymous and epochal work: *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, eloquently states "identity can be a (very) complicated matter."

For, according to the renowned scholar and commentator, "violence is promoted by the sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique, often belligerent, identity, which makes extensive demons on us – sometimes of a most disagreeable kind." Unfortunately, these school of film makers, in their express belief that they are trying to rouse the collective conscience of society to look inwards at the atrocities and injustices being meted out, are taking easy way out.

By "suggesting" violence as the only way forward for the marginalised Dalits to have their voice heard and identity respected and slap the society in its face for all the wrongs since time. What makes matter worse, by these self-appointed guardians of Dalit rights and reason, is, as the eminent economist and social conscience keeper Sen further states in his book "violence is fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible peoples (here, read the vast movie going masses of India), championed by proficient artisans (here, read film directors, lead actors who portray the injured Dalit) of terror."

It is this rather narrow minded and blinkered approach of these handful of film makers. Some of whom have had the luxury, and fortune of good education, espousing "violence as a tool of defence and defiance." A means to legitimate end that raises an abject sense of disquiet and rightful anxiety in the

way they are visually portrayed with no justification (even if so) whatsoever.



As Rajesh Rajamani, in his review of *Asuran*, rightly observes “our society’s engagement with caste—whether it’s cinema or any other domain—has been very poor. We have reduced the narrative to caste as a problem that concerns only Dalits, and involves the perpetration of physical violence. In reality, caste in India works in a myriad of ways. But most of our filmmakers do not seem to see the value in representing these aspects.”

Yes, while some films do take a pacifist approach, abjuring violence or underplaying it, a handful of them, though, believe in blood baying Dalit protagonist as answer to right civil society’s wrongs. Tamil cinema, especially, may have progressed into embracing Dalit protagonists who are capable of fighting their oppressors. However, their glorification and justification of “physical violence” as a tit-for-tat seems rather misplaced.

To instigate a new discourse in public sphere, both among afflicted and perpetrators, on subaltern struggles of marginalised and oppressed underprivileged sections of society, their brutalised existence, these new age film makers, get carried away depicting visual violence without realising the deleterious effect it may have on the consuming, participative audiences.

Be it *Palasa* 1978, or recent releases *Asuran* and *Karnan* or for that matter *Kaala*, and *Kabali*, with Dalit protagonists, violence becomes the baton of battle against the dominant and domineering class. For that matter latest Telugu film - *Ardha Shathabdam* whose tagline reads – DEMOCRATIC VIOLENCE and the like, Dalit film makers believe

violence is the appropriate answer to raise in revolt and reclaim one’s dignity and identity.

Passive and peaceful resistance, the primordial Gandhian philosophy that won India, her Freedom and Independence, conveniently consigned to pages of history as a blip. Today, playing to the gallery, populating their visual narratives with gratuitous, gruesome and vengeful violence, streaking the screen in blood, has become the new normal. A pointer to the tempestuous trajectory can be gauged by sword wielding Dhanush in *Karnan*: “*Nimirndhu paathadhukku adichaanga. Nimirndhu paathaachu, inimey kuniya mudiyaadhu.* (They beat us for just asserting ourselves. Now that the assertion started, we won’t back down).” Or as Rajnikanth says in *Kabali* ‘*kaal mela kaal pottu ukkaruven da*’ (we will sit putting foot over foot).

While visual violence may be market driven demand with idolised icons playing the lead, it is in fitness of things, film makers must take responsibility how their films are received by impressionable audiences given to mimic their larger than life screen idols. The problem, rightly pointed out by film scholar M K Raghavendra, in his recent book - *Philosophical Issues in Indian Cinema*, published by Routledge, is that “Dalits are consistently shown as powerless. It is as though Dalit existence has meaning only in relation to caste society, and that victimisation is the essence of ‘Dalithood’.

The problem with such representations, as M K Raghavendra, notes is that “popular cinemas narrativise the social experiences of the communities corresponding to their constituencies.” Indeed, with popular star as the vehicle to propagate their singular agenda, these film makers’ “strategy is to place a key social happening at the centre of the narrative and use it to relay a ‘political truth’ to then be learned by a chosen protagonist/character.”

Hence, as Raghavendra, further elucidates, “It is therefore easy to confuse the star with his/her role – which might also explain the phenomenal success of some film stars as political leaders. Stars rise into prominence when their physiognomies and screen presences answer to the requirements of the time, and it is uncommon for film stars to play against the types they are habituated to playing.”

“The audience is invited to identify with the protagonist, and it is evidently intended to imbibe the same truths. The effect this has on film narrative is that characters then become empty receptacles for instruction,” explains Raghavendra.

As Suraj Yengade, further posits, in his essay on Dalit Cinema, in *Journal of South Asian Studies*, notes, these new age film makers may be making “an effort to instigate a new discourse, both among afflicted and the perpetrators.”

“However, instead of abjuring excessive visual violence as form of retribution, are only stoking a dormant volcano of impressionable audiences into angry avengers.” Instead of extolling machismo virtues and overt “caste and identity glorification” it has been argued “Dalit film makers should be careful and conscious in every aspect of filmmaking.”

Shouldering immense responsibility, they should shun “over-glorification of violence, pride and bigotry” to emphasise on “alternative education, constitutional resolution and empowerment.” Hence, as research scholars observe “Dalit films shoulder an

important responsibility that the mainstream films do not shoulder. They have a responsibility towards the society. Dalit films cannot simply follow the mainstream films and go ahead with glorifying of caste, violence, and political propaganda or follow other gimmicks of the commercial films. Dalit filmmakers should be careful and conscious in every aspect of the filmmaking.

Dalit cinema should set high standards for itself and emerge as a new wave alternative cinema, especially over-glorification of violence, pride and bigotry must be shunned and alternative education, constitutional resolution and empowerment must be emphasised. Dalit cinemas should be careful as to not set a wrong example for the Dalit community and strive towards attaining equality and an egalitarian society.

Will that happen? Future films and their makers may provide the answer. Till then, violence, seems, will continue to rule roost in Dalit cinemas, as they fight for affirmation, acceptance and assimilative identity in the socio-political scheme of public discourse.

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