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REPRESENTATION OF CASTE IN EARLY KANNADA CINEMA: A STUDY OF
"CHOMANA DUDI" (1975)

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ABSTRACT

From its very inception Kannada cinema has its own narrative and thematic representation which was exclusively rooted in mythological stories, historical events and at times certain social issues and concerns. The representation of caste in terms of themes, contents in the film narrative either was minimal or was completely absent in the Kannada cinema, even rare and sporadic representations were from the dominant hegemonic perspective, which was essentially brahminical. In the context of nationalist narrative which was exclusively brahminical, the conception of nation and national culture as represented in early phase of Kannada films was on revivalist terms, furnished and popularised by German indologists and Orientalist. As these perceptions found to suit and protect the interest of upper caste communities, they were not only popularised but also adopted as the signifiers of true nationhood in which caste hierarchy as a salient feature and denominator of Indian society was brushed aside by all most all ideological groups as an insignificant aberration. Reflecting these attitudes and tendencies the Kannada literature and film industry regulated by these brahminical castes pushed the caste question to the margin. The themes of Kannada films revolved around brahminical culture, tradition, and their social practices and their existential crisis's in the wake of the emerging changes ushered in by colonial modernity. As film critics have pointed out, the filmmakers simply used the stories from mythologies and historical contexts to construct the dominant the upper caste social and cultural system with no space for the untouchable (dalit) experience in main stream cinematic narrative structure.

According to film historian, Theodore Baskaran, silent films and early talkies were more committed to espousing the Gandhian principle of anti-untouchability. Later films began to avoid frontal confrontations with caste issues. "Entertainment became important" says Baskaran. Says *Masaan* Neeraj Ghaywan: "Cinema is an escapist, aspirational, larger-than life world. In that sense, it is too Brahminical in its ethos to give good space to caste narratives.

This dominant orientation was blind to the life of the communities who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with their own traditions, social and cultural practices. However the inclusion of Dalit representation in Kannada cinema made a beginning in mid 50s but this was only in short appearance, to suit the context of the thematic narrative. The presence of Dalit appearance in early Kannada cinema was limited to single shots or scenes without any comprehensive acknowledgement of its deep rooted oppressive realities and practices.

In this context as an exception the film *Chomana Dudi* (Chomas Drum), was made in the year 1975 recognised and critically engaged for the first time in the annals of Kannada film history with the issue of caste repression and deprivation. In this direction my paper tries to discursively analyse the recognition and representation of caste in *Chomas Drum*. The film was based on a successful novel by Jnanapeeta awardee acclaimed writer Shivarama Karantha written in Kannada in 1933 and was made into a film by B V Karantha in the year 1975. Here I make a modest attempt to examine the historical contexts and changing dynamics of the perspective of caste itself due to the emergence of dalit social movements influenced by Phule, Ambedkar and others and the increasing visibility of dalit experience in the public space due to the impetus provided by the constitutional mechanism.

KEY WORDS: Mythological and historical Narrative, cultural domination, representation of caste, true recognition of dalit.

When Shivaram Karanth wrote his novel *Chomana Dudi* in 1933, nationalist movement under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress was in full swing, quit India movement, mobilization of low caste communities under the leadership of Ambedkar, Gandhian ideology and reformist zeal were in the forefront. Kannada literature and cinema reflected these events in their narratives. In other side the influence of Navodaya literature had triggers to write progressive issues like critique on dowry system, religious persecution, woes in the extended family system and exploitation of women in literary writing. These influences shaped the consciousness of Karantha and his writings. They provided the issues, contexts and raw material for his creative endeavour. Karanth very effectively articulated the issues of gender and caste in most of writings.

Kannada cinema made its beginning in 1930s, the first talkie film *Sathi Sulochana* appeared in 1934 which was based on Ramayana. Since beginning till 1970s there were almost 200 films that were made in Karnataka (in Kannada language) but there was not a single film dealt or centered around the dalit experience, though the dalit population was demographical formidable.

Kannada film industry evolved and was highly influenced by the existing theater tradition in its early phase and there were few artists who were from low caste background. But their visibility in theatre as well as cinema was not palpable as the lower caste issue and identities were not the priority of the Indian dominant communities who were hegemonic and controlled and mediated ideas of culture and society from their essential castist perspectives. Mobilization of lower caste into mass assertion was also not significant during this phase. Later in 1950's with the emergence of Kannada modernist writing popularly known as Navy movement, social issues occupied the forefront of literary and cinematic narratives essentially due to the influence of democratic modernity and modernism in literature.

The 1970's witnessed the emergence of mass dalit movements in Karnataka with the establishment of Dalit Sangharsha Samithi (DSS), which galvanised the dalit youth to be more assertive in their quest for equality, dignity and resource redistribution. The emergence of dalit literature in Kannada as an independent genre and its institutionalisation as a recognised area of experience along with the increasing presence of the untouchable communities in the public arena forced the cultural world to recognise caste discrimination as an important aspect of Indian life to be reformed and rectified. Progressive writers and young voices like Devanooru Mahadeva, Siddlingaiah, were already raised in Kannada writing. The movement influenced by Marx and Ambedkar also vocally supported these causes and the progressive union writer's demand for dalit representation in literature and as well as in cultural studies.

Hence in this context, B V Karantha made the film *Choma Dudi* based on the novel of Shivarama Karantha written in 1933. It was the first film which critically located the aspirations of dalit communities in modern terms, where a dalit character and his life occupied the centre stage. Critical issues like land redistribution were raised, poignant details of dehumanising caste repression and exploitation were portrayed.

B.V. Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* is an evocative film on caste distinction which is portrait of one man's disintegration as a victim of the caste system and who is unable to circumvent it. The representation of dalits in film and literature had particular purpose. In a way that the film narrative particularly focuses on the larger themes of poverty, rural feudalism, exploitation and also looks at the caste issue with subaltern imaginaries.

In the film, Choma a Dalit, the landless labourer, represent the condition of untouchables in rural India. As Ambedkar said the problem of land is not the only concern of dalit but more than that it is a concern for social recognition. Choma and his family is an untouchable bonded labourer in a village, he is not allowed to own farm land, something which he desires most in his life. Although Choma owns a pair of bullocks but still he cannot use them to till his land because of this deprivation. Caste as a system also has economic dimension and the political economy of caste is determined by upper caste interests.

The only liberative avenue available to Choma is to convert himself to Christianity, which not only is instrumental in transcending his untouchable identity but also fulfils his aspiration to be a land owning farmer, the option shunned by Choma, who is chained to the shackles of tradition. He realises that the fate and destiny are determined by his caste status and positive change and emancipation are not a possibility. Frustrated he spends his time drinking and playing his drum. Choma has four sons and a daughter, two of his elder sons, who work in a distant coffee estate, strive to pay off the family debt. One of the sons dies of cholera and the other converts to Christianity by marrying a Christian girl. Choma's daughter, Belli works in the plantation and falls for the charm of the Manuel, the estate owner's writer. But later she is raped by the estate owner, who then waives off Choma's debt. Later, she returns to Choma's and discloses the truth. His youngest son drowns in a river, while swimming and people watch the incident without coming to his rescue, as touching him would be pollution a violation of caste principles. Discovering his daughter in a compromising position with Manuel he beats her and kicks her out of the house. In utter frustration he then chases off his bullocks into the forest. The film concludes with Choma shutting himself in his house playing the drum till he dies.

Shivarama Karanth wrote his novel *Chomana Dudi* in 1934, there were no influential anti caste movements in Karnataka but he was influenced by Gandhian reformist zeal to write the novel. Though a non dalit, Shivarama Karanth weaved his narrative on untouchable life, the first of its kind in Kannada literary history. The film raised number of questions, as to why Choma was not allowed to own a piece of land. And other set of argument questioned the limitations of Karanth's progressive commitments. To answer to this criticism was saying that the social context was not ripe for such "liberal granting of the land" to dalit or low caste man in that period. What is important is that a dalit like Choma's aspiration to own a piece of land in his life is itself an important historically significant development which could be attributed to the liberative spirit of colonial modernity. Karantha forbids conversion to Christianity as an alternative, though that could save and rescue Choma and his family, as one of his own sons succeeds after becoming a Christian.

The aspirations of Choma found universal validity among the emerging untouchable castes, where ownership of land as an important criteria for economic mobility in an agrarian society, became a pressing issues in the later years to be addressed by democratically elected governments, though not very successfully.

Many writers and anti caste movements have articulated this demand time and again. Another interesting factor was that the film *Chomana Dudi* was not a blockbuster and was not exhibited in main stream theatres, but it triggered a new wave of Kannada feature films and also it inspired young filmmakers like T.S. Nagabarana and B. Giriraju to come forward to produce a films on dalit with larger themes of poverty, rural feudalism and exploitation.

Ngabarana's film *Grahana (The Eclipse -1978)* is on critique of caste system. The film is based on Hebbarama festival celebrated in Ujjani village of Kunigal taluk in Tumkur district. The plot concerns an annual village ritual where a small number of untouchables are selected to be Brahmins for a few days only provided they mortify themselves throughout this period, often in an extremely cruel fashion, as a kind of purification ceremony.

During one such ceremony, a person dies and his body cannot be buried by members of either caste. The village headman's son Puttaswamy, calls the police, who remove the corpse. Puttaswamy then lives with the dalits for a while. As this infringes the rules of the ritual and of caste behaviour, the headman commits suicide. In spite of these traumas, the rituals continue the coming year.

B. M. Giriraju films like *Jatta (2013)*, and *Amaravathi (2017)* which are much talk about Ambedker-sims. The film *Jatta*, dabbles with and intertwines various issues like feminism, male chauvinism, religious intolerance, adultery, Ambedkar-isms, corruption and cultural beliefs; all of which are dealt through dalit narrative perspective. However the film *Amaravathi*, which again talks about swagers lives and their social

reality but still its debate on dalit identity and also it questioning on the basic rights of poura karmikas who are being lived in metropolitan city. The film throws some light on some ugly truths and topics that are for removed from being spoken about leave alone be the subject of a main stream film. In Kannada cinema these films have proven that even in globalization period also untouchability and dalit identity are still negotiated.

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