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Exploring the intersectionality of caste and gender in the movie *Bawandar*

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the exploration of intersectionality of caste and gender in the movie *Bawandar*. Directed by Jagmohan Mundhra, the film depicts the true story of Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman from a village in India, who fought against the deeply ingrained practices of caste-based discrimination and gender-based violence. This paper aims to analyze the film's portrayal of the complex intersection between caste and gender, examining the unique challenges faced by Dalit women and the impact of these intersecting identities on their lives. By exploring the socio-cultural context, narrative elements, and character development in *Bawandar* this paper aims to analyze and highlight the systemic oppression faced by Dalit women and the urgent need for social change.

Keywords: Caste, gender, intersectionality, violence, discrimination, Dalit

Introduction

Caste system has played a significant role in the building of the edifice of Indian society. It has played an equally vital but sinister role in devaluing human life and robbing the low-caste marginalized people of their essential human dignity. "Historically, the caste system has formed the regulatory base for the social, cultural and economic life of the people in India" (Thorat, 287). By means of a hierarchical segregation on the basis of birth, it has contributed in the establishment of a stratified society in which people belonging to the higher caste were bestowed with all the privileges of life whereas those who were at the lowest pedestal of caste hierarchy came to be dominated by the privileged caste and were assigned the duties of doing all menial tasks for them. It has rightly been observed: "The system bestowed many privileges on the upper castes while sanctioning repression of the lower castes by privileged groups. Often criticized for being unjust and regressive, it remained virtually unchanged for centuries, trapping people into fixed social orders from which it was impossible to escape" ("What is India's Caste System?").

These lower caste people came to be known as Dalits to signify their marginalization and suppression. Caste has played a real havoc in their lives as it deprived them of all means of a dignified socio-economic life. The seriousness of the marginalization of Dalits from the social and economic aspects of life gets a proper expression in these words: "The term 'Dalit' ... describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on the ground of their lowly birth. The word 'Dalit' is a descriptive word evocative of bondage and agony, the anguish and frustrated aspirations of a vast victimised section of the Indian population right down the ages" (Michael 108). Dalits have gone through the acute pain of caste-based discrimination in various forms of oppression, including untouchability, denial of basic rights and opportunities, and exclusion from social and religious practices. Discrimination based on caste has affected all aspects of their life including education, employment, access to resources, and participation in social affairs.

Caste as a repressive system of subjugation became all the more oppressive for Dalit women as they came to be doubly marginalized because of their low caste on one hand and being a woman on the other. Both caste and patriarchal structures put Dalit women in an extremely deplorable position of disadvantageousness. The movie *Bawandar* is a poignant and impactful film that tackles the deeply rooted issues of caste-based discrimination and gender-based violence in India.

Released in 2000, the film is based on the true story of Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman who fought against the prevailing social norms and stood up against her gang rape committed by higher-caste men.

Bawandar holds significant importance in addressing the intersecting issues of caste and gender. It sheds light on the experiences of Dalit women who face compounded discrimination due to their caste and gender identities. Intersectionality recognizes that individuals' identities cannot be viewed in isolation but rather are shaped by various intersecting factors such as caste, gender, class, and many more. Understanding the intersectionality of both caste and gender is crucial to comprehend the complex and interrelated forms of oppression faced by Dalit women. Priyadarshini, an independent filmmaker says that "caste and gender cannot be separated from one another. A Dalit woman undergoes three to four times the oppression that an average caste-privileged woman undergoes. So, any form of anti-patriarchy movement could only (and should only) start from the Dalit woman."

Methodology

The present research paper seeks to adopt a qualitative approach by making use of content analysis and textual analysis methods. By analyzing the movie *Bawandar* and its portrayal of the intersectionality of caste and gender, the research paper further seeks to examine the challenges faced by Dalit women due to their intersecting identities and the impact of these challenges on their lives. Other main objectives of the present research paper comprise an exploration of the representation of agency, resistance, and empowerment of Dalit women in the film and an understanding of the social commentary and critique provided by the film regarding caste and gender based discrimination.

The research paper will focus primarily on the movie *Bawandar* and its analysis in terms of the intersectionality of caste and gender. It will draw insights from the film's narrative, character development, and social commentary. Additionally, it will consider the broader socio-cultural context of caste and gender disparities in India. The research will utilize critical analysis and interpretation to delve into the nuances of the film's themes and shed light on the experiences of Dalit women in the context of converging identities of caste and gender.

The story of the movie is set in a rural village, a place characterized by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and practices. Gender roles and expectations are heavily influenced by traditional values and customs. Women are often expected to conform to prescribed gender roles, including being responsible for household chores and maintaining family honor and reputation.

Power dynamics in this village are largely patriarchal, with men holding positions of authority and decision-making power. This power imbalance perpetuates the marginalization and subjugation of women, especially Dalit women who experience intersectional oppression due to their caste and gender identities. They are at the lowest pedestal of social hierarchy and face compounded discrimination and violence. They experience discrimination not only from higher-caste individuals but also from within their own communities. Dalit women are subjected to caste-based violence, including physical, sexual, and verbal abuse. They often lack access to resources, educational

opportunities, and healthcare and have limited agency and voice in society.

The socio-cultural context of caste-based discrimination, gender roles, and power dynamics in the village highlights the complex and intersecting challenges faced by Dalit women. "These villages rooted in caste-ism ... can hardly tolerate any deviance from the established social order" (Ray). *Bawandar* explores these issues, offering a glimpse into the lived experiences and struggles of Dalit women as they confront systemic oppression and strive for justice and equality.

Based on a real story, *Bawandar* tells the story of Sanwari Devi (cinematic name changed from Bhanwari Devi to Sanwari Devi), a low-caste woman who works as a saathin, a village worker appointed by government to spread awareness against evils like dowry, child marriage, female foeticide and other such issues of social relevance. Sanwari's struggles begin, when she tries to stop the child marriage of a young girl from a higher-caste family. Her courageous act disrupts the existing power dynamics and exposes the underlying caste and gender bias prevalent in her society. Subsequently, Sanwari becomes the victim of a horrific gang rape, as higher-caste men seek to assert their dominance and punish her for challenging the status quo.

The film follows Sanwari's journey as she seeks justice and fights for her rights. Sanwari takes her case to court, challenging the oppressive caste and gender norms that perpetuate violence against women. The film depicts her resilience, courage, and determination in the face of societal backlash and legal hurdles highlighting how these identities of caste and gender intersect to compound the challenges faced by Dalit women as Sanwari's nightmarish experiences are shaped by both her lower-caste status and her gender. The film explores how the intersections of caste and gender result in systemic discrimination, marginalization, and violence against Dalit women.

The narrative demonstrates how Sanwari's caste identity amplifies the vulnerability and powerlessness she experiences as a woman. She faces caste-based discrimination and prejudice from higher-caste individuals, which is further exacerbated by the patriarchal norms and gender-based violence prevalent in the society. Sanwari Devi's case truly represented " ... the problems underprivileged women face in legal battles, deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes in the countryside, and the dangers faced by female activists in trying to change those mindsets" (Saini). The film exposes the deep-rooted prejudices, social hierarchies, and power dynamics that perpetuate these forms of oppression. It portrays how Dalit women like Sanwari are subjected to various forms of violence, including sexual assault and social exclusion.

Through Sanwari's story, the film confronts the reality of impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of sexual violence against Dalit women. Justice eluded Sanwari Devi because of her low caste status and also because of many inherent bottlenecks in the overall system. The police official mocked and derided Sanwari and her husband for having come to him for a police complaint and thereafter, tampered with the evidence. Her medical examination that was to be a very crucial evidence in the court and ideally should have taken place within the first twenty hours, got delayed by fifty two hours because there was no female doctor in her village. On being asked to go to the city for medical examination, she, still grappling with her physical and

mental trauma, reached the city at night. On reaching there, she was asked to get orders from the Magistrate which she could not get at that late hour.

Having been subjected to brutal violation of her female dignity in September 1992, Sanwari Devi had to wait for three long years for the verdict of the court. And when it finally came, it went in favour of the rapists who were all acquitted on grounds that were met with criticism and backlash by women organizations. The subsequent judicial progression of the case has still not come across a final outcome. Sanwari's struggles after the rape point towards the loopholes in the entire system and become a serious point of deliberations, debate and action for some effective remedial measures keeping in view the fact that the rape victim had to wander from place to place for seeking justice whereas the culprits probably went home comfortably.

The movie comes as a strong social message for all women and especially Dalit women by presenting Sanwari as a strong protagonist who refuses to be silenced and fights for justice. Challenging societal norms, she confronts the stigma associated with rape victims and perseveres through a grueling legal battle. Her character embodies the courage to question traditional norms and fight for justice, despite the risks and hardships she encounters. In fact, her case became a landmark case as it became the basis of Vishakha guidelines (1997) which came as a major step towards the empowerment of working women like Sanwari Devi. "The *Vishaka guidelines* were a set of guidelines that were intended to protect women at the workplace. These were instituted by the Supreme Court of India in the year 1997. These are procedural in nature and state the method that is to be followed while dealing with cases related to the sexual harassment of women" ("Vishaka Guidelines").

Bawandar portrays the strength and determination of Dalit women who resist and assert their rights, despite facing tremendous social and legal obstacles. Throughout the film, Sanwari faces numerous obstacles, including social stigma, victim-blaming, and systemic injustice. However, she remains steadfast in her pursuit of justice, seeking legal recourse and raising her voice against the oppression she and other Dalit women face.

With her unwavering determination and refusal to be silenced or marginalized, she embarks on a legal battle, challenging the oppressive structures and demanding justice for herself and others who have suffered similar injustices. The movie also highlights the importance of collective action and solidarity as Sanwari finds support from individuals like Mohan, her husband; Shobha Devi, a social worker and an upper caste lawyer who share her vision of a just society.

Conclusion

The present research on the intersectionality of caste and gender in *Bawandar* highlights the importance of understanding and addressing the complex realities faced by Dalit women in India. By delving into the film's themes, characters, and social commentary, it deepens an understanding of the intersecting struggles of caste and gender, and the urgent need for justice and equality. The in-depth analysis of the movie effectively demonstrates how caste and gender intersect to shape Sanwari's experiences and determine her place in society. As a Dalit woman, Sanwari faces compounded forms of discrimination and violence. Her caste identity places her lowest in the social

hierarchy, subjecting her to systemic marginalization and exploitation. Simultaneously, her gender positions her as a target for gender-based violence and reinforces patriarchal norms that restrict her agency and autonomy. The film highlights how caste-based discrimination exacerbates gender-based violence and reinforces the societal barriers that prevent Dalit women from accessing justice and social mobility. Movies like *Bawandar* call for greater understanding, empathy, and action as an essentiality to challenge this systemic oppression and work towards a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

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