



Cover Page



PORTRAYAL OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIAN FILMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED BENGALI FILMS

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Abstract:

This comparative study delves into the representations of caste system in Bengali cinema, specifically focusing on rural Bengal. The research examines how various cinematic works portray or overlook caste differences within rural communities. By analyzing a diverse selected films spanning different decades, thematic trends emerge regarding the depiction of social hierarchies, inter-caste relationships and economic disparities. Through a nuanced exploration of character narratives, social contexts and cultural symbols, this study sheds light on the complexities of caste dynamics as reflected in popular Bengali cinema. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions about social identities, power structures and cultural representations in the cinematic landscape of Bengal.

This study will discuss several films by Bengali directors including Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Rituparno Ghosh & Kaushik Ganguly. A few selected movies such as "Mrigayaa" (1977), "Pather Panchali" (1955), "Chokher Bali" (2003), "Amanush" (2010), "Nagarkirtan" (2017) have been analyzed for the work. The depiction of caste in Bengali cinema mirrors the social intricacies and obstacles encountered by those from marginalized castes. For instance, in the film "Amanush" (2010), the protagonist Binod, a lower-caste individual, experiences discrimination and mockery from upper-caste students at college, who belittle his achievements and assume he gained admission through the quota system. This depiction highlights the prevalent biases and prejudices that lower-caste individuals encounter in educational institutions and society at large. Furthermore, the film showcases how Binod's struggles with his identity and the discrimination he faces lead to tragic consequences, culminating in his descent into violence and ultimately, his tragic suicide by portraying the transformation of Binod's character from a victim of discrimination to a psychopath killer due to societal pressures and his inability to accept inter-caste relationships. The film sheds light on the destructive impact of caste-based discrimination on individuals' mental health and well-being, challenging the audience to confront the harsh realities faced by lower-caste individuals in society.

Keywords: Caste System, Rural Bengal, Bengali Cinema, Bengali Dalits, Lower Class Bengali.

Introduction:

This research embarks on a cinematic odyssey, exploring the works of renowned Bengali directors such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Rituparno Ghosh & Kaushik Ganguly. These directors have created films that have made a lasting impact on Bengali cinema. The selected films for analysis include timeless classics like "Pather Panchali" (1955) by Satyajit Ray, socio-political dramas like "Mrigayaa" (1977) by Mrinal Sen, intense narratives like "Chokher Bali" (2003) by Rituparno Ghosh, modern explorations like "Amanush" (2010), and poignant tales like "Nagarkirtan" (2017) directed by Kaushik Ganguly. The main objective of this study is to examine whether these cinematic masterpieces reflect or challenge the existence of caste divisions within the cultural and social fabric of Bengal. Each film serves as an unique canvas, portraying diverse narratives, character dynamics, and societal intricacies that may subtly or explicitly address caste identities, hierarchies, and interactions within rural and urban Bengal contexts. By critically analyzing these films within their respective contexts, we aim to unravel the intricate layers of caste representation in Bengali cinema across different time periods and artistic styles. This exploration goes beyond surface-level narratives, delving into symbolism, character development, social contexts and the intentions of the directors in order to understand how caste dynamics are portrayed within these cinematic narratives.



Cover Page



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Through this comprehensive analysis, we hope to contribute valuable insights to ongoing discussions about identity, representation, social realities, and artistic expressions within the rich tapestry of Bengali cinema. By juxtaposing historical classics with contemporary gems, we can trace the evolving nuances and complexities of caste depictions in cinematic storytelling, fostering a deeper understanding of societal narratives and cultural nuances not only in Bengal but also beyond its borders. For instance, the film "Aranyer Din Ratri" by renowned Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, who belongs to the upper caste kayastha community, featured characters predominantly from upper castes, reflecting a common trend in the industry. This lack of diversity in caste representation has led to a gap in the linear narrative of Bengali cinema, perpetuating stereotypes and biases about caste issues. Additionally, the film "Sadgati" is noted for its portrayal of the caste system in a rural Bengal village, shedding light on the harsh realities faced by lower caste individuals. Despite some attempts to address caste issues in films like "Baghini" and "Karnan," there is still a long way to go in accurately and sensitively depicting the complexities of caste dynamics in Bengali society through cinema. The depiction of caste in rural Bengal's artistic representations holds a profound influence on the audience's perceptions. Through the lens of the upper-caste Hindu gaze, Dalit individuals are often portrayed as feeble, unintelligent and subservient within the rural Bengal context. Similarly, mainstream cinema constructs a social image of the lower-caste individual, known as 'chhotolok', as weak, unclean, and intellectually deficient. These representations in media further ingrain prejudiced beliefs and contribute to the marginalization of lower-caste communities in rural Bengal, impacting how they are perceived by the audience and society at large. The visual and narrative reinforcement of these stereotypes in cultural productions play a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors towards different caste groups, highlighting the significant impact of media representation on the perpetuation of caste-based discrimination.

Literature Review :

Bengali films have a long and illustrious history that dates back to the early twenty century. It is known for its artistic brilliance and social consciousness, making significant contributions to both the Indian and global film industries. Researchers such as Mukherjee (2008) and Chattopadhyaya (2015) have extensively documented the evolution of Bengali films, shedding light on its historical context.

One of the most influential figures in Bengali films is Satyajit Ray. He brought a new wave of realism and humanism to the industry, leaving a lasting impact on world cinema. His masterpiece "Pather Panchali" (1955) delved into the lives of rural Bengal with depth and sensitivity, showcasing Ray's nuanced portrayal of societal nuances and human struggles. Critics like Robinson (1991) and Wood (2003) have analyzed Ray's films, recognizing his cinematic brilliance.

Another notable filmmaker is Mrinal Sen, who was known for his bold and politically charged narratives. His film "Mrigayaa" (1977) explored social issues and received critical acclaim. Scholars such as Dasgupta (1999) and Mukherjee (2012) have dissected Sen's cinematic language, highlighting his critiques of class divides, exploitation, and societal injustices.

Rituparno Ghosh, a contemporary visionary, delved into complex human emotions and societal norms in his films. "Chokher Bali" (2003) is a prime example of his artistic exploration. Critics like Bandhyopadhyay (2006) and Chatterjee (2018) have analyzed Ghosh's narrative styles and thematic explorations, particularly focusing on the intersections of genders, class, and traditions.

While Bengali cinema often addresses socio-cultural realities, there is limited research specifically focusing on caste representations. Chattopadhyay (2016) examined caste dynamics in select Bengali films, highlighting the nuanced portrayals and occasional stereotyping.



Cover Page



In recent years, films like "Nagarkirtan" (2017) by Kaushik Ganguly and "Amanush" (2010) have sparked discussions on gender identity, marginalized communities, and societal acceptance. These films offer potential avenues for exploring caste dynamics within the context of Bengali cinema.

Methodology:

The research has been conducted under qualitative method using content analysis method. The previously mentioned films are analyzed for the same. A selection of films directed by famous Bengali filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Rituparno Ghosh, spanning different genres and decades. Included are films that are known for their social commentary, realistic portrayals and thematic depth, which have brought up the scenes of caste and division in Bengal. Recurring motifs, symbols and themes related to caste are identified, such as stereotypes related to occupation, social interaction, marriage alliances, discrimination or resistance. Each film is placed within its historical, cultural and socio-political context, taking into account relevant historical events, social movements and cultural norms prevailing during the film's setting or production period. This research explores how historical factors can influence the portrayal of characters in narratives and the dynamics between characters

Documentaries, and critical writings on the directors and their filmmaking philosophies have been taken up, particularly in relation to social themes and representations. Analyzed how each director communicated caste-related themes, whether through clear commentary, subtle nuances or symbolic storytelling techniques. Highlighting variations in storytelling techniques, character development, and thematic focus, the portrayal of racial or racial divisions in selected films is examined.

Perspectives from cultural studies, sociology, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality have been used to advance the examination of race representations in film. Connections between race and other identity markers, such as gender, class, religion, and region are explored in cinematic narratives. Cinematic portrayals of caste recognize potential prejudices, stereotypes or oversimplifications and attempt to explain the complexities and nuances with sensitivity. The artistic integrity of the films is maintained while critically analyzing their social and cultural commentary. Formulating the findings and analysis into a well-organized report or academic paper, presenting coherent arguments supported by evidence from the film, relevant understanding and relevant theoretical frameworks.

An attempt is made to understand the complexity of the portrayal of caste in specific Bengali films, with the intention of providing valuable analysis of how cinema mirrors, questions or sustains racial dynamics within the cultural and historical settings of Bengal.

Results and Discussion:

Pather Panchali (1955), Satyajit Ray: Satyajit's famous work deals with themes of poverty, family dynamics and rural life in Bengal, portraying people from different social strata. Although racial differences are not overtly emphasized, subtle cues such as occupation and social interaction indirectly point to class structures. Satyajit Ray's artistic vision prioritizes universal human experience over direct commentary on color, providing a broad narrative of human challenges that transcend specific social categories.

Mrigayaa (1977), Mrinal Sen: This film by Mrinal Sen confronts exploitation by tribal communities, highlights power dynamics and social injustice. By juxtaposing tribal identities with the influence of the dominant caste, the narrative reveals the tensions and conflicts arising from cultural clashes. "Mrigayaa" presents a poignant critique of caste-based oppression and marginalization, using cinematic storytelling to illuminate the complex social realities prevalent in rural Bengal.

Chokher Bali (2003), Rituparno Ghosh: This movie is an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's novel. In this movie, director Rituparno Ghosh brings out the adaptation delves into the complex relationships, social norms and individual aspirations between characters from different socio-economic backgrounds. Racial biases and social hierarchies subtly



Cover Page



shape character interactions and social judgments. The film intricately navigates caste dynamics within the elite Bengali milieu, highlighting the tension between tradition, modernity and individual agency, thereby reflecting the larger social complexities.

Amanush (2010), Rajeev Biswas: Inclusion of caste themes: The film subtly weaves caste-related themes through character backgrounds and social perceptions, especially in rural settings. Although not central to the story, caste segregation affects social attitudes and character motivations.

Nagarkirtan" (2017), Kaushik Ganguly: The film Nagarkirtan (2017) directed by Kaushik Ganguly explores transgender identity, social stigma and personal journey. While caste is not the main focus, the film subtly touches upon intersecting identities and social prejudices, leaving many questions about struggle and social acceptance.

Different films vary in their stark depiction of caste divisions, but they all provide valuable insight into Bengal's socio-cultural landscape through thematic nuances, character interactions and contextual details. The directors use a variety of cinematic language and narrative techniques to tackle caste-related themes, from subtle allusions to outright criticism, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of social reality. This study highlights the multidimensional nature of the representation of caste in Bengali cinema, emphasizing the importance of detailed analysis considering the historical, cultural and instructional context. Future research could explore audience perceptions, reception studies, and comparative analyzes across regional cinemas to improve our understanding of racial dynamics in film narratives.

Overall, while not every film explicitly tackles the caste divide, their narratives and characterizations provide insight into the socio-cultural complexities of Bengal, contributing to broader discussions about identity, power dynamics and social justice within the realm of cinema.

Conclusion:

The exploration of caste or caste divisions within Bengal's cultural tapestry has been illuminated through the cinematic journey of eminent Bengali directors Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Rituparno Ghosh, and Kaushik Ganguly. Films such as "Mrigayaa" (1977), "Pather Panchali" (1955), "Chokher Bali" (2003), "Amanush" (2010), and "Nagarkirtan" (2017) offer valuable insights into this nuanced exploration. These films depict caste dynamics in different ways, reflecting the unique artistic visions, narrative styles and thematic focuses of each director. Satyajit Ray's "Pather Panchali" subtly hints at traditional societal hierarchies, while Mrinal Sen's "Mrigayaa" presents a stark critique of caste-based oppression within tribal communities, shedding light on power struggles and social injustices. Rituparno Ghosh's "Chokher Bali" intricately weaves caste prejudices into aristocratic settings, delving into the tensions between tradition and individual desires. "Amanush" and "Nagarkirtan" touch upon caste themes within broader narratives of personal struggles, societal expectations and identity explorations, albeit with varying degrees of explicitness.

Through comparative analysis, it becomes evident that some films directly address caste dynamics, while others incorporate caste themes as subtexts within broader socio-cultural narratives. The directors' nuanced approaches, historical contexts and character interactions play pivotal roles in shaping these cinematic representations. The diverse range of films analyzed not only showcases the evolution of cinematic storytelling but also contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding identity, social structures and cultural complexities in Bengal and beyond. Progressing ahead, additional interdisciplinary investigations and comparative examinations of regional cinemas have the potential to enhance our comprehension of how cinema addresses complex socio-cultural contexts, thereby contributing to more extensive dialogues on representation, inclusivity and social justice in artistic creations.



Cover Page



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