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## Voices from the Margins: The Dalit struggles in Shudra: The Rising

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### Abstract

This article explores the poignant portrayal of caste-based oppression and the relentless fight for dignity and justice within the Hindi-language film *Shudra: The Rising* (2012), directed by Sanjiv Jaiswal. Set in ancient India, the film highlights the systemic discrimination and brutal treatment faced by the Shudras, delving into their social, economic, and cultural marginalisation. This article examines the film's narrative techniques, character development, and socio-political commentary to understand its critique of the caste system. By situating the film within the broader context of Dalit literature and cinema, this study underscores the importance of authentic representation and the role of art in fostering social awareness and change. Through detailed analysis, the article reveals how *Shudra: The Rising* not only reflects historical injustices but also serves as a powerful medium for advocating Dalit empowerment and challenging the entrenched caste hierarchy in modern Indian society.

**Keywords:** Dalit, marginalisation, resistance, oppression, dehumanising

### Introduction

The portrayal of caste discrimination and oppression in cinema serves as a critical perspective through which societal issues are examined, debated, and sometimes confronted. *Shudra: The Rising*, a 2012 Indian Hindi-language film directed by Sanjiv Jaiswal, delves into the harsh realities of India's caste system, particularly focusing on the plight of the Shudra community. Set against the backdrop of ancient India, the film navigates through narratives of injustice, inequality, and resilience, shedding light on the enduring impact of casteism on individuals and communities. This research article explores how the film portrays and critiques caste-based discrimination, analysing its narrative techniques, character portrayals, and socio-political commentary. By examining *Shudra: The Rising* within the broader context of Indian cinema's engagement with caste issues, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how cinema reflects and shapes societal perceptions of casteism in contemporary India.

### Historical background of caste system in India

The caste system in India, originating from ancient texts like the Rigveda, initially categorized society into four Varnas Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras based on occupational roles. Over time, these Varnas became hereditary and entrenched, evolving into a rigid social hierarchy that governed every aspect of life. Alongside Varnas, jatis emerged as localized sub-castes with specific occupations and social norms, further stratifying society. Hindu scriptures like the Manusmriti provided religious justification for the caste system, enforcing strict codes of conduct and social segregation. During the colonial era, the administration categorized certain caste groups as 'depressed classes,' later termed 'Scheduled Castes' in the Government of India Act of 1935, based on shared characteristics related to their traditional occupations or social status. Various theories have sought to explain the caste system, including the Brahminical theory, which posits that Brahmins are direct descendants of seven or eight sages considered mind-born sons of Brahma. These sages are traditionally listed as Gautama, Bharadvaja, Vishvamitra, Jamadagni, Vashista, Kashyapa, and Atri. The growth of democracy in post-independent India has significantly contributed to the inclusion and assertion of numerous backward and marginalized groups within modern Indian society.

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A cross various social strata, the deepening of democratic processes has sparked ongoing struggles for mobilization, empowerment, and emancipation from the entrenched feudal oppression imposed by upper-caste Hindu society. India stands out globally not only for its substantial economic disparities but also for its highly stratified caste system, which continues to define social interactions and influences the operations of economic and political institutions in contemporary times. While the dynamics of caste and community relations have evolved over time, the enduring ascriptive status associated with caste remains a pivotal marker in both public and private spheres of life in India. The definition was specifically delineated in The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936, which included a comprehensive list (or Schedule) of castes across the British-administered provinces. The colonial administration's designation of 'Depressed Classes' as 'Scheduled Castes' was the culmination of extensive advocacy and activism by leaders and social reformers from Shudra backgrounds.

### **Dalit Movements for Social Reformation**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, renowned for his pivotal role in combating untouchability, took on the historic responsibility of drafting India's Constitution following independence. On November 1, 1947, he introduced Article 11 to the Drafting Committee, which encapsulated the following resolution:

“Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of ‘untouchability’ shall be an offence which shall be punishable in accordance with law” (Rao 298).

During the colonial period, social reform movements brought caste discrimination and oppression to the forefront. These movements emerged as early as the 19th century, with Jyotirao Phule (1828-1890) leading significant efforts to uplift Shudras by advocating for their access to education and recognition of separate economic and social interests. Spanning across India, these movements were not confined to specific regions but were a pan-Indian phenomenon characterized by their dual objectives of social and religious reform. Periyar EVR Ramaswamy Naicker's Dravid Kazhagam movement, for instance, aimed to redefine the identities of Shudra symbolized by public acts like burning effigies of Rama and promoting a counter-narrative praising Ravana's virtues. In Kerala, Narayana Guru's Ezhava movement culminated in the establishment of a new religious sect known as Sree Narayan Dharma Pratipalana Yogam. Similarly, the Satnami movement among the Chamars in the Chhattisgarh plains of Eastern Madhya Pradesh sought to distance themselves from Hindu society and establish an independent religious sect. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a pivotal figure in India's social and political history, led transformative caste movements that profoundly impacted Indian society. Born into a Dalit family in 1891, he dedicated his life to combating caste-based discrimination and advocating for the rights and dignity of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits. Ambedkar's leadership spanned various fronts: he mobilized Dalits through socio-religious movements like the Mahad Satyagraha (1927), challenging the denial of public water sources to Dalits, and spearheaded the Temple Entry Movement, advocating for their right to enter Hindu

temples. His advocacy extended to political representation, where he championed Dalit rights in legislative bodies and played a crucial role as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of India's Constitution. His efforts ensured the inclusion of provisions for social justice and affirmative action, laying the foundation for the empowerment and inclusion of Dalits in post-independence India. Ambedkar's legacy continues to inspire movements for social equality and justice across India, resonating deeply in the ongoing struggle against caste-based discrimination.

### **Dalit Literature**

Alok Mukherjee, the translator of Sharankumar Limbale's “Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature” (2004) <sup>[7]</sup>, states in the translator's introduction:

“Dalits are an important political and social force in India. Their literary and critical writings constitute a major challenge to, and questioning of, the theorizing about Indian politics, society, culture and literature by intellectuals from upper caste Hindu and other dominant communities, and by non- Indians. To fail to pay attention to this challenge and questioning, is to engage in a hegemonic discourse that excludes the realities and experience of nearly a quarter of the country's people” (Limbale 07).

One could argue that Dalit aesthetic theory shares similarities with theories of subaltern literature. Dalit aesthetic theory is deeply rooted in the history, politics, and culture of Dalits, presenting a perspective that is uniquely indigenous. In traditional Indian literature, themes of untouchability were often portrayed from the viewpoint of savarna or upper caste writers. However, Dalit literature rejects such perspectives, asserting that only writers who have experienced the hardships and suffering of Dalit life firsthand can authentically portray these realities. This is the essence of Dalit literature – to offer a voice and representation that is genuine and reflective of Dalit experiences. Earlier figures like Ravidas, Jyotiba Phule, who preceded Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, exhibited caste consciousness in their writings but generally adhered to Indian poetic traditions and accepted Hindu religious tenets, while simultaneously lamenting their oppression by higher castes. Dalit literature, as defined by Arjun Dangle and other scholars, emerges as a genre that starkly exposes the realities of India's caste system and the scourge of untouchability. Dangle emphasizes that this literary tradition evolves with a sociological lens, embodying themes of defiance, rebellion, and a steadfast commitment to truth, ultimately becoming revolutionary in its essence. This revolutionary character of Dalit literature is underscored by its profound exploration of the socio-political dimensions of Dalit existence, striving ardently to confront and dismantle caste-based oppression.

Sharankumar Limbale further elaborates on this perspective by asserting that Dalit literature artfully portrays the myriad sufferings endured by Dalits, creating a poignant depiction of profound sorrow. This sorrow is not passive but infused with activism and a fervent call for societal transformation. Dalit literature thus serves as a potent form of resistance, documenting the harsh realities and challenging societal norms that perpetuate such experiences of hardship and marginalization.

### **Representation of Dalit repression and resistance**

**Shudra: The Rising** starkly portrays the lives of the Shudras, the lowest caste in the Hindu Varna system, in ancient India. The film depicts the relentless oppression and dehumanization faced by the Shudras, who are condemned to perform menial labour and live in abject poverty, denied basic human rights and education. The narrative weaves through their daily struggles, highlighting the severe discrimination imposed by the upper castes, particularly the Brahmins, who maintain rigid control over societal norms. Despite the overwhelming adversity, the Shudras show moments of resistance, unity, and an unyielding spirit, striving to challenge their subjugation. Interwoven with cultural and spiritual dimensions, the story underscores the profound impact of the caste system on their lives. Sharankumar Limbale writes:

“Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief.” (Limbale 30)

### **The narrative of Shudra: The Rising**

Poignantly addresses the cruel realities of caste discrimination and the relentless struggles faced by the Shudras in India. In one harrowing scene, a man recounts the tragic demise of his father, precipitated by an unquenchable thirst. The elderly father, parched and desperate for water, sends his son to search the vicinity for relief. The son eventually discovers a pond where upper-caste boys are bathing. Despite his pleas, they refuse to share the water, shattering his pot and subjecting him to severe humiliation. Desperately, he collects water in the remnants of his broken pot, but by the time he returns, his father has already succumbed to his thirst. The narrative highlights the extreme social exclusion faced by the Shudras. Water, a basic necessity for life, becomes a symbol of the Shudras' broader deprivation. The refusal of upper-caste boys to share water and the subsequent destruction of the man's water pot is a stark example of how the caste system denies even the most fundamental human rights to the Shudras. This act of breaking the water pot serves not just as a physical denial but also as a metaphorical shattering of the Shudras' dignity and humanity. The father's death due to lack of water, a basic need, poignantly illustrates the lethal consequences of caste-based discrimination.

In another profoundly distressing scene, a powerful upper-caste man visits the village and is captivated by the beauty of a woman. Driven by his lecherous desires, he commands that the woman be brought to his mansion for his gratification. Tragically, the woman is a pregnant Shudra, but her condition and lower caste status do not spare her from the man's predatory intentions. The woman's pregnancy underscores the vulnerability of Shudra women, who are subjected to sexual violence and exploitation. This act of violence is not only a personal violation but also a societal assertion of dominance, where the upper castes exercise absolute control over the bodies and lives of the lower castes. The pregnant Shudra woman's plight illustrates how caste and gender intersect to compound the oppression faced by lower-caste women, making them targets of both sexual violence and social exclusion.

A particularly heart-wrenching episode involves a young boy who innocently recites a Shiva mantra he overheard.

According to the oppressive social customs of the time, it is considered a grave sin for a lower caste individual to utter such sacred verses. A Brahmin overhears the boy and, adhering to these brutal norms, calls for a village council to decide his punishment. In a shocking display of cruelty, they cut out the boy's tongue. He dies from the grievous injury, cradled in his mother's arms, leaving a community shattered by the relentless brutality of caste-based injustice. The punishment of the young boy for reciting a sacred mantra reveals the cultural and religious exclusion imposed by the caste system. By barring the lower castes from participating in religious practices, the upper castes monopolize spiritual power and reinforce social hierarchies. This exclusion ensures that the lower castes remain culturally and spiritually marginalized, perpetuating their subordinate status. The violent enforcement of caste norms, as depicted in the punishment of the boy, illustrates the brutality with which the caste system is maintained. Such acts of violence serve as a deterrent to any challenge against the established order, instilling fear and submission among the lower castes. This use of violence underscores the oppressive and inhuman nature of casteism, where any deviation from prescribed social roles is met with extreme punishment.

After enduring relentless torture and humiliation at the hands of the Brahmins, some young Shudra men rise up in violence and kill the son of a powerful Brahmin. This act of retribution leads to a brutal retaliation, culminating in a massacre of the Shudra villagers, carried out by the Brahmins' goons. The rise of young Shudra men in violence against the Brahmins can be seen as a desperate and reactionary response to the prolonged and systemic oppression they have endured. After years of suffering humiliation, deprivation, and brutal punishments, the act of killing the Brahmin's son represents a breaking point for these young men. It is an assertion of their humanity and a demand for justice, albeit through violent means. This retaliation can be understood as a form of resistance against the relentless dehumanization and social injustice inflicted upon them. However, it also highlights the limited options available to the oppressed, who see violence as the only means to voice their grievances and fight back against their subjugators.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Shudra: The Rising**

**Shudra: The Rising** powerfully depicts the inhuman practices of casteism through its harrowing narrative and vivid scenes of oppression. The film sheds light on the systemic and multifaceted nature of caste discrimination, highlighting how it denies basic human rights, perpetuates gender-based violence, enforces cultural exclusion, and maintains social hierarchies through brutal violence. By bringing these stories to the forefront, the film calls for a critical examination of the enduring legacy of caste-based oppression and underscores the urgent need for social justice and equality.

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