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Popular Cinema and the Representation of Caste and Religion in Contemporary India

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Abstract
Popular cinema in India occupies a powerful position in shaping public imagination, moral sensibilities and collective understanding of social realities. This paper is an attempt to examine how caste and religion are represented in contemporary Indian popular cinema arguing that films do not merely mirror society but actively participate in producing meanings, silences and hierarchies around social identity. Drawing on sociological and cultural theory, the study explores how mainstream and select regional films since the early 2000s have negotiated caste and religious identities in a period marked by liberalization, identity politics and heightened media saturation. The paper shows that while caste has long remained invisible or euphemized in mainstream cinema, recent years have witnessed a cautious and selective acknowledgment of caste-based suffering, often framed through victimhood, redemption or saviour narratives rather than structural critique. At the same time religion is frequently mobilized through symbols, rituals, emotional spectacle etc. serving both as a marker of cultural continuity and as a site of political meaning. Minority religious identities are often represented through lenses of fear, suspicion or moral testing, while majoritarian symbols increasingly appear normalized and depoliticized. The study argues that popular cinema operates as a contradictory space where social inequalities are occasionally exposed but more often softened, individualized or displaced through melodrama and affect. By analyzing cinematic narratives, visual symbolism, character archetypes, the paper highlights how films contribute to the normalization of certain identities while marginalizing others. Ultimately, the paper contends that contemporary Indian cinema plays a crucial role in shaping everyday understandings of caste and religion making it a key site for examining the cultural politics of representation, power, and social change in India.

Keywords: Popular cinema, Caste representation, Religion and media, Social identity, Cultural politics, Indian society, Film and ideology, Public imagination

Introduction
Popular cinema in India has long functioned as a powerful cultural text and mass medium through which social values, moral norms and collective anxieties are communicated, negotiated, normalized making it a crucial site for examining the representation of caste and religion. Movies do not merely entertain; they tell stories about who belongs, who suffers, who is redeemed and whose identities remain invisible, thereby shaping the social imagination of millions. Historically, Indian cinema has maintained an ambivalent relationship with caste and religion like while religious symbolism rituals, festivals, deities and mythic archetypes has been prominently woven into cinematic narratives, caste has often been silenced, euphemized or displaced into class metaphors, rural-urban contrasts or individualized moral failure rather than named as a structural reality (Dwyer, 2006) [3]. When caste has appeared, it has frequently been framed through stereotypes, melodrama, exceptional suffering avoiding sustained engagement with systemic inequality. Religion by contrast has been mobilized as cultural atmosphere and emotional resource often depoliticized in form even when carrying deep ideological weight, a tendency that has intensified in the post 1990s period marked by economic liberalization, the rise of identity politics, and the growing entanglement of media with market and political power. The contemporary social context has further transformed cinematic representation as liberalization reshaped aspirations and consumption, identity-based movements challenged older silences and digital media expanded circulation, visibility and debate around films intensifying scrutiny of how caste and religion are portrayed.

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These shifts have produced a cinema that is more willing to gesture toward social realities yet often does so selectively privileging certain narratives and symbols while marginalizing others. The research problem addressed in this article lies in understanding how contemporary Indian popular cinema navigates caste and religion under these changing conditions, and whether increased visibility translates into critical representation or merely reconfigures older hierarchies in new aesthetic forms. The central argument advanced here is that contemporary Indian cinema simultaneously reflects and reshapes public understandings of caste and religion through selective visibility, narrative framing and symbolism offering recognition without necessarily enabling structural critique. This argument resonates with sociological analyses of public culture that emphasize how representation is always bound up with power and ideology (Gramsci, 1971) [5]. In the Indian context Mitra's work on religion, caste and public life demonstrates how social authority and identity are negotiated through cultural performance, visibility and narrative rather than formal doctrine alone providing a useful lens for reading cinema as a space where social meanings are staged and contested (Mitra, 2025) [8]. The objectives of this study are to analyze how caste and religion are represented in contemporary popular cinema to identify recurring patterns of silence, symbolism and stereotype, and to assess the broader implications of these representations for social perception and democratic culture. The significance of this inquiry lies in situating cinema not as a neutral mirror but as an active social force that participates in shaping how caste and religion are imagined, felt and debated in everyday Indian life.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework
The analysis of caste and religion in contemporary Indian cinema is grounded in the understanding that representation is never neutral but is deeply implicated in relations of power, ideology and social meaning, a point powerfully articulated by Stuart Hall who argued that cultural texts actively construct reality rather than merely reflect it. Cinema, as a dominant form of popular culture in India functions as a key representational system through which social identities are encoded, circulated, normalized shaping how audiences come to understand caste, religion and social difference. Hall's framework helps to foreground how meaning in cinema is produced through narrative structures, visual symbols, character types and absences, revealing whose experiences are rendered visible, whose are marginalized and whose are made to appear natural or inevitable. This concern with power and meaning intersects closely with Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony which explains how dominant groups maintain consent not primarily through force but by embedding their worldview within everyday cultural practices including popular entertainment (Gramsci, 1971) [5]. In the Indian cinematic context, hegemonic representations often normalize upper-caste, majoritarian religious perspectives as universal or culturally neutral while relegating caste oppression or minority religious experiences to the margins, stereotypes or exceptional narratives. Popular culture thus becomes a crucial terrain where social hierarchies are reproduced, softened or occasionally challenged shaping the social imagination the shared mental frameworks through which people interpret social reality. Cinema contributes to this imagination by offering emotionally engaging stories that personalize structural inequalities, frequently transforming caste and religious conflict into moral dramas of individual suffering, redemption or harmony, rather than sustained critiques of systemic power. At the same time cinema is not a monolithic ideological apparatus; it also functions as a site of resistance where alternative narratives, subaltern voices and counter-symbols sometimes emerge to disrupt dominant meanings, particularly in parallel cinema, regional films and recent Dalit-centered cinematic interventions. This ambivalence underscores the importance of viewing cinema as a contested cultural space where normalization and resistance coexist. The theoretical framework further draws attention to the intersectionality of caste, religion, gender and class recognizing that cinematic representation rarely operates along a single axis of identity. Women from marginalized castes, religious minorities, lower-class backgrounds often experience layered forms of erasure or stereotyping as their identities are filtered through patriarchal, casteist and communal lenses simultaneously. Sociological work on public culture and religious life in India, including that of Mitra, reinforces this perspective by showing how authority, identity and legitimacy are negotiated through cultural performance, visibility and narrative framing rather than formal doctrine or law alone (Mitra, 2025a; Mitra, 2025b) [9]. Applied to cinema, this insight highlights how films operate as public stages where caste and religion are symbolically performed and contested. The analytical focus of this framework therefore lies in examining how cinematic representation constructs meaning through ideology and affect reinforcing social hierarchies while also opening limited spaces for critique, making cinema a powerful yet ambivalent force in the cultural politics of caste and religion in contemporary India.

Methodology and Sources
The present study adopts a descriptive and interpretive qualitative approach to examine how caste and religion are represented in contemporary Indian popular cinema treating movies as cultural texts that produce meaning through narrative, symbolism and affect rather than as neutral reflections of social reality. The research design is based on secondary-source qualitative analysis which is appropriate for capturing broad representational patterns across time, genres and regions without restricting the inquiry to a single field site or audience group. The primary corpus consists of select popular Hindi and regional films released after 2000, chosen purposively for their thematic engagement explicit or implicit with caste, religion, communal identity, social conflict or moral order as well as for their cultural visibility and audience reach. These movies are analyzed alongside movie criticism, reviews, interviews with filmmakers and actors and public reception materials available in public domain which provide insight into authorial intent, industrial context and interpretive debates surrounding representation. To situate cinematic texts within wider intellectual and political conversations, the study also draws on academic literature and media discourse from sociology, film studies, cultural studies and religious studies enabling a theoretically informed reading of cinematic narratives and images. The primary analytical tools employed are textual analysis and thematic analysis through which plot structures, character arcs, dialogue, visual symbolism, spatial settings and recurring motifs are examined to identify how caste and religion are framed, silenced, individualized or politicized. Rather than evaluating movies in terms of aesthetic merit,

the analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed what is shown, what is omitted and how social hierarchies are normalized or contested through storytelling choices. This interpretive strategy aligns with sociological approaches to public culture that emphasize representation as a site where power, ideology, and social imagination intersect (Gramsci, 1971) [5]. Insights from Mitra's work on religion, caste, public life further inform the analysis by foregrounding how authority and identity are negotiated through cultural performance and visibility, a perspective that is particularly useful for reading cinema as a public arena where social meanings are staged rather than merely described (Mitra, 2025a; Mitra, 2025b) [10]. The study acknowledges certain limitations including reliance on a selective film corpus, the absence of audience reception studies or filmmaker interviews conducted firsthand and the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis which may not capture the full diversity of audience readings. Nevertheless, this methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of representational patterns and ideological tendencies in contemporary Indian cinema making it well suited for examining the cultural politics of caste and religion.

Representation of Caste in Contemporary Cinema
The representation of caste in contemporary Indian cinema reveals a complex trajectory marked by long-standing invisibility, selective acknowledgment and emerging counter-narratives indicating a gradual shift from outright denial to cautious recognition. For much of its history mainstream cinema largely maintained silence around caste, preferring to translate social hierarchy into the language of class, rural backwardness or individual moral failure, thereby avoiding direct engagement with caste as a structural system of inequality (Dumont, 1970; Guru, 2009) [6-2]. This invisibility functioned ideologically, normalizing upper-caste experiences as universal while rendering Dalit and lower-caste lives peripheral or absent, a pattern consistent with what Stuart Hall described as the politics of representation where absence itself becomes a powerful form of meaning-making. When caste does surface in popular movies it often appears through stereotypes and victimhood where Dalit characters are portrayed as passive sufferers awaiting rescue or through savior narratives in which reform-minded upper-caste protagonists restore justice, thereby reaffirming hierarchical moral authority rather than challenging it (Paik, 2018) [12]. Such narratives individualize oppression framing caste violence as an aberration caused by cruel individuals rather than as a systemic and historically embedded reality. In recent years there has been a noticeable emergence of Dalit-centered and subaltern cinema particularly within regional industries and independent filmmaking, where caste is named explicitly and explored through lived experience, memory and resistance. These movies foreground Dalit subjectivity, anger, dignity and collective struggle disrupting dominant cinematic grammars and refusing the comfort of reconciliation without justice. Language, space and symbolism play a crucial role in this representational shift, as dialects, food practices, occupations, neighborhoods and spatial segregation are used to signal caste location and everyday exclusion making visible what mainstream cinema has long obscured. Cinematic spaces such as villages, slums, educational institutions and workplaces become sites where caste hierarchy is enacted and contested while symbols like clothing, bodily posture and ritual access subtly encode

power relations. This attention to everyday materiality aligns with sociological approaches that emphasize how caste is reproduced through routine practices rather than exceptional events (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) [1]. At the same time cinema remains a contradictory space, as even progressive representations are often constrained by market pressures, censorship anxieties, and the demand for palatable narratives, resulting in selective recognition rather than sustained critique. Resistance and counter-narratives thus coexist with accommodation producing a cinematic field where caste is increasingly visible but still unevenly represented. In the Indian sociological context Mitra's work on caste, religion and public culture underscores how visibility and narrative framing shape the legitimacy of marginalized identities, a perspective that helps explain why cinematic recognition does not automatically translate into transformative politics. The key shift in contemporary cinema therefore lies not in the full dismantling of caste silence but in its partial rupture where acknowledgment is mediated through genre conventions, symbolic compromise and uneven power relations. This transition from denial to selective recognition reflects broader social tensions, as cinema negotiates between entrenched hierarchies and emerging demands for representation making it a crucial yet ambivalent arena in the cultural politics of caste in contemporary India.

Representation of Religion and Communal Identity
The representation of religion and communal identity in contemporary Indian cinema operates through a complex interplay of tradition, morality, spectacle and political meaning revealing how movies mediate religious life not as lived social practice alone but as emotionally charged and symbolically loaded narratives. Religion frequently appears in cinema as a marker of cultural continuity and moral order, conveyed through rituals, festivals, sacred music and mythic references that create a familiar affective landscape for audiences often presenting faith as timeless, harmonious and ethically grounding (Dwyer, 2006) [3]. This aestheticization of religion transforms belief into spectacle where visual excess and emotional intensity substitute for sociological depth allowing movies to evoke devotion and nostalgia without engaging with the material and institutional complexities of religious life. Within this framework, Hindu symbolism has increasingly been normalized as cultural common sense appearing as background atmosphere rather than ideological position, a process that aligns with broader currents of cultural nationalism in which majority religious signs are presented as universal markers of 'Indian culture' rather than as particularistic identities. Such normalization renders majoritarian symbols invisible as ideology while making minority religious identities hyper-visible and politically charged. The representation of religious minorities particularly Muslims and Christians often oscillates between moral testing, suspicion, conditional belonging where characters must demonstrate loyalty, sacrifice or ethical purity to be accepted within the national narrative. This pattern contributes to communal othering where difference is framed through fear, threat or exceptionality rather than everyday coexistence reinforcing boundaries between us and them through cinematic storytelling. Cinema thus becomes a powerful medium for circulating political narratives that draw upon religious emotion especially in times of social anxiety where fear is mobilized through plotlines involving

terrorism, conversion or moral decay, subtly aligning religious identity with questions of national security and cultural survival. At the same time, these narratives often rely on selective realism presenting certain aspects of religious life like rituals, symbols, conflicts while abstracting religion from its social embeddedness in caste, class, gender and locality. Everyday religious practices negotiations and inter-community solidarities are frequently displaced by ideological abstractions that simplify faith into moral binaries or civilizational clashes. This cinematic abstraction contrasts sharply with sociological understandings of religion as lived practice, embedded in routine interactions and local contexts. In this regard Mitra's work on religion and public culture in India is instructive as it demonstrates how religious authority and identity are produced through everyday performances, negotiations and economic realities rather than through symbolic spectacle alone (Mitra, 2025) [11]. Applying this insight to cinema highlights the gap between lived religion and its cinematic representation where complexity is often sacrificed for emotional clarity and ideological coherence. Nevertheless, cinema is not a uniform ideological instrument; moments of nuance and resistance do appear particularly in films that foreground interfaith relationships, ordinary religious coexistence or the contradictions within majoritarian politics. Yet these moments remain constrained by market pressures, censorship climates and audience expectations resulting in a representational field where religion is simultaneously familiar and politicized, intimate and abstract. The key insight that emerges is that cinema mediates religious identity through emotion, spectacle, and selective realism shaping public perception by privileging affect over analysis and symbolism over structure. In doing so contemporary Indian cinema participates actively in the cultural politics of communal identity, reinforcing dominant narratives while occasionally opening limited spaces for critique making it a crucial site for understanding how religion is imagined, felt and contested in the public sphere.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how contemporary Indian popular cinema represents caste and religion demonstrating that movies function not merely as reflections of social reality but as active cultural sites where social hierarchies, identities and moral boundaries are constructed, softened, contested etc. By analyzing cinematic narratives, symbolism and silences, the discussion showed that caste has moved from near-complete invisibility toward selective recognition often framed through victimhood or exceptional resistance while religion is frequently mediated through spectacle, emotion, ideological abstraction rather than everyday social practice. Cinema thus plays a crucial role in shaping social perception as repeated visual and narrative patterns normalize certain identities particularly upper-caste and majoritarian religious perspectives while marginalizing or simplifying others contributing to what audiences come to see as 'common sense' about society. The implications of these representational practices are significant for democratic culture as cinematic portrayals influence public understanding of inequality, belonging and moral legitimacy, often depoliticizing structural injustice by individualizing suffering or resolving conflict through sentimental closure. While moments of resistance and counter-narratives do emerge especially in Dalit-centered and independent cinema, they coexist with dominant market-driven conventions that limit sustained critique and favour palatable storytelling. At the same time audiences are not passive recipients of meaning, and interpretation varies across social location, experience and political awareness reminding us of the limits of representation and the gap between cinematic intention and social reception. This complexity underscores the need to avoid simplistic readings of cinema as either purely oppressive or emancipatory. Drawing on sociological insights on public culture and the negotiation of authority and identity, the article highlights how visibility and narrative framing alone do not guarantee social transformation, even as they reshape the terrain of debate. Future research could extend this analysis through audience studies, comparative regional cinema, the impact of digital platforms on film circulation and reception. The central conclusion that emerges is that popular cinema remains a powerful arena where caste and religion are continuously negotiated, normalized and contested in contemporary India making it indispensable for understanding the cultural politics of inequality and identity today.

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