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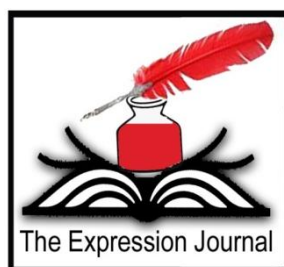
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***SUJATA* AND THE THEME OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND EQUALITY**

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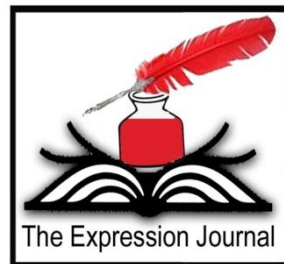
Abstract

This research paper examines the theme of social justice in the context of the film *Sujata*. Directed by Bimal Roy and released in 1959, *Sujata* is a critically acclaimed Indian movie that addresses various social issues prevalent in Indian society, including caste discrimination and the struggle for social equality. Through a detailed analysis of the film's narrative, characters, and cinematic techniques, this paper explores how *Sujata* conveys a powerful message of social justice and highlights the importance of cultural representation in promoting equality. The film *Sujata* holds immense significance in the realm of Indian cinema for its exploration of social justice as a central theme. Set against the backdrop of a deeply stratified and unequal society, the film delves into the pervasive issue of caste discrimination and the quest for social equality. By addressing caste-based prejudices and advocating for the empowerment of marginalized communities, *Sujata* emerges as a powerful narrative that challenges the caste norms of society and calls for justice and equality. The paper also explores the role of cinema in presenting the harsh reality of caste discrimination and the way cinema works in the direction of molding the stereotyped perception of public and creating new paradigms of an equitable society. The movie questions the hegemony of the upper caste strata of society and their unjustified dominance over the lower caste with utter disregard and insensitivity to their humane right of self-respect and dignity and the prevalent use of the word 'untouchable' in Indian society blatantly flouting the legal ban on its use. The movie by negotiating with the social and psychological realities of caste aims at the transformation of the caste-ridden and caste-biased Indian society and spread the message of equality, social justice, and the formation of a society where no life is devalued and all human beings live in peace and harmony.

Keywords

Caste, Cinema, Discrimination, Equality, Justice, Movie, Society, Social Justice, Power Dynamics.

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In Indian society, the caste system has historically been a dominant aspect of social structure dividing people into hierarchical groups based on birth. The upper castes enjoyed privileges and power while those belonging to lower castes, such as Dalits (formerly known as untouchables), faced severe social marginalization and discrimination. This social system of inequality finds an appropriate expression in these words: "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?"). *Sujata* brings this social reality to the forefront, exposing the harsh realities faced by Dalits and highlights, in unequivocal terms, the need for social justice. The theme of social justice holds great significance in addressing the inequalities deeply entrenched within societies. It encompasses the pursuit of fairness, equal rights, and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their caste, gender, class, or other social factors. According to Raj Kumar, India "has been considered the most stratified of all known societies in human history with its peculiar form of the caste system" (115). "Historically, the caste system has formed the regulatory base for the social, cultural and economic life of the people in India" (Thorat 287). With a religious sanctity given to the caste system in India, it has been one of the most oppressive systems to deny the basic human right of equality and social justice to many people. By exploring social justice as a theme, *Sujata* challenges the status quo and prompts audiences to question the existing power dynamics and prejudices that hinder progress towards a more just and inclusive society.

This research paper aims to delve into the film *Sujata* and analyze its portrayal of social justice. Through an examination of the film's narrative, characters, and cinematic techniques, an attempt will be made to explore how the film addresses caste discrimination and raises awareness about the empowerment of marginalized communities. Additionally, this paper will highlight the broader significance of social justice as a theme in promoting equality and fostering a more inclusive and egalitarian society. An in-depth analysis of *Sujata* will highlight

the power of cinema to bring about social change and inspire conversations around issues of social justice.

Sujata deals with the story of an untouchable girl, who is adopted and raised by an upper-caste couple, Upen and Charu. The infant girl's low-caste parents had died of cholera that had spread like an epidemic and there was no one left of her caste to take care of her. In the given circumstances, some coolies working under Upen come to his house, amidst the birthday celebration of Upen's one year old daughter, Rama, to entrust the girl's patronage to Upen. Charu, guided by her motherly instinct, ignores the fact of *Sujata's* caste and prevails over a reluctant Upen who wants to avoid getting into this messy situation. Having accepted the baby girl in their house, Upen shows a neutral attitude to the fact of *Sujata's* caste whereas his wife, Charu, despite the fact that it was she who had taken the initiative to take charge of the girl and despite being a very affectionate and humane person, cannot reconcile with her deep-rooted caste consciousness. Her caste prejudice comes to the surface when Upen asks her about the girl naming her *Sujata*. Charu, though laughingly but immediately says: "Baat wahi hui ki aankh ke andhe aur naam nayan sukh. Neech jati ki ladki aur aapne naam rakh diya *Sujata*." ("It amounts to this only that you boast of qualities which you don't have. The girl belongs to a low caste and you have given her the name *Sujata* given to those born in a high caste"; *Sujata* 12:10-17; my trans.).

Her consciousness of *Sujata's* low class and caste becomes all the more strengthened during the visit of Giribala, a highly religious and devout lady from Upen's native place, whom the couple affectionately addresses as Buaji (paternal aunt). Buaji is accompanied by an acquaintance, Bhawani Shankar Sharma, who like Buaji, is a devout Brahmin and has very rigid caste notions. Well aware of how strongly Buaji will react on finding an untouchable girl in their house, Upen who himself does not at all believe in caste disparities, cautions his wife by telling her: "Charu, Buaji ko to tum jaanti hi ho. Jaat-paat, chhut- achhut ko lekar kitna jhmela karti hain. Aaya se zara kah do ki us achhut ladki ko outhouse mein hi rakhe. Unke saamne na padh jaaye kahin." ("Charu, you know aunt well. She is very particular about caste and untouchability. Ask Nanny to keep that untouchable girl in the outhouse only. She should not be before her in any case"; 14:31-41).

Though they try hard that Buaji does not come to know of *Sujata's* caste and presence in their house, the truth is revealed and as was expected, Buaji raises a strong objection to this. She vehemently counters all logic of Upen in his efforts to convince her that untouchables are also human beings and deserve the same treatment as people from the upper caste. Bhawani Shankar is even more headstrong and his deeply entrenched caste prejudices are revealed as he says: "Dharma kahta hai ki achhuton ka sirf sparsh hi bura nahi, apitu unhe paas rakhna bhi paap hai." ("Religion says that not only the touch of untouchables is bad but keeping them near you is also a totally sinful act"; 17:08-12).

Another statement made by him becomes a veritable reflection of the repulsive caste prejudices of society during those times. He says: "Achhuton ke shareer se ek prakhar ki gas nikalti hai jo kuleen mannushyon ke tan, man aur aatma ko dooshit karti hai." ("The untouchables emit a kind of gas from their body that pollutes the body, mind and soul of high born men"; 17:21-28). The movie, released in the year 1959, was a sincere effort to showcase not only the still prevalent concept of untouchability and societal attitudes to it but also the frequent and unmindful use of the extremely derogatory word like untouchable notwithstanding the legal abolition of its use and caste-discrimination by that time.

The casteist reactions of Buaji and Bhawani Shankar have no effect on Upen who is quite rational and forward in his thinking but succeed in disturbing a visibly upset, Charu who from now onwards in the story keeps on insisting that Sujata should be sent away either to some orphanage or to some child welfare agency. Meanwhile, Sujata, as she grows up in the house of Upen and Charu along with their daughter, lures them with her childhood innocence and charm. Hence, whatever efforts they make to send her away are only half-hearted and therefore, remain unfruitful and Sujata stays with them only to bloom into a responsible young girl, shouldering all chores in the house and sharing a deep bond of affection with all three members of her foster family.

It becomes a significant aspect of the story that despite being a part of the family by now, Sujata still remains an outsider which is evident from the discriminatory grooming of Rama and Sujata. Rama is educated, modern, and free from household works, whereas Sujata remains illiterate, docile and does all the work in the house. Sujata, in her growing years, had many a time felt extremely unhappy because of this disparate treatment and had also questioned it with her child-like innocence. One such incident is beautifully portrayed in the movie when Sujata insists on sleeping with Charu just as Rama does. When she is told that Rama has a right to sleep with Charu as she is Charu's daughter, she retorts that she also is Charu's daughter and rushes to Charu asking with her characteristic innocence: "Ammi, ammi, akeli Rama hi tumhaari beti hai kya? Bolo na Ammi, mai tumhaari beti nahi?" ("Mother, mother, is only Rama your daughter? Please speak, mother. Am I not your daughter?"; 46:01-08). The reality of Sujata has not been disclosed to her but Charu has figured out a fine line of segregation by introducing to people Rama as 'hamaari beti' (our daughter) and Sujata as 'hamaari beti jaisi' (like our daughter). Sujata has also adjusted herself to these usual but baffling ways of life.

Life takes a new turn for Sujata when after his retirement, Upen comes back to his native place, the place where Buaji also lives along with her maternal grandson, Adheer. The boy is an educated bibliophile and has a progressive outlook towards life. When he meets Sujata, he instantly falls in love with her. When he reveals to Sujata his feelings, she reciprocates unaware that Charu and Buaji have already planned Adheer's marriage with Rama. In the subsequent course of the movie, Sujata's caste identity gets revealed to her, and Adheer is dissuaded by Buaji from marrying Sujata.

The story unfolds as Sujata grapples with her love for Adheer and the societal barriers that stand in their way. Though nothing, not even Sujata's caste is going to deter Adheer from his decision of marrying Sujata, she herself steps back the moment she comes to know of the plans of Adheer's marriage with Rama, thinking it the best way and opportunity to show her gratitude to her foster parents. Sujata's goodness touches the heart when she gets ready to marry a man of her own caste who is not only a widower but also the father of two children. This match, in fact, stands chosen by Buaji who in one scene of the movie had shown her profoundly casteist mindset while telling Charu not to find a reasonably good match for Sujata but to marry her off to just anybody from a low caste. She says: "Sujata ke liye koi sharif ghar ka ladka dhoonda ja raha hai. Are chodo bhi, choti jaat mein sab chalta hai." ("You people are searching for a boy of a decent family for Sujata. Just leave these efforts, any boy will do for a low caste girl"; 01:16:24-31).

The movie very deftly showcases the same caste discriminatory attitude of the society at large when in one of the scenes, the father of a prospective groom for Sujata, on coming to know of her caste identity from Upen, had vehemently blurted out: "Mujhe aapse ye umeed

nahi thee ... Agar ye pata chalta ki ladki kali hai ya looli hai, to bhi main ek baar soch dekhta. Khabardaar, aainda logon ko thagne ke liye akhbaaron mein ishtihaar-baazi mat Karna.” (“I did not expect this from you ... If I came to know that the girl is dark-skinned or lame, I could have given it a thought. Watch it, in future, don’t advertise in newspapers the wrong information in order to cheat people”; 01:14:14-27).

Throughout the narrative, "Sujata" highlights the deep-rooted prejudices and societal norms that perpetuate discrimination. The film explores the complexities of caste discrimination, as well as the themes of love, social inequality, and the quest for acceptance. After exploring multiple dimensions of caste discrimination in Indian society and its varied social and psychological ramifications, the movie moves in a positive direction in the form of a decisive stand of marrying Sujata taken by Adheer. As he conveys his decision to Giribala, it is almost calamitous for her, and harping mainly on Sujata’s low-caste status, she uses every arrow in her quiver to change the mind of Adheer who remains determined and logically counters Giribala telling her that low caste people are also human beings and deserve to be treated equally and respectfully. It is quite heartening to see Adheer as a harbinger of much-needed social reform and change as he argues with Giribala:

GIRIBALA. Chi, chi,chi. Mere thaakuron ke saamne khada ho kar us achhut ladki se byah karne ki baat muh se nikaal raha hai. Hut jaa mere saamne se. nikal jaa yahan se. (Shameful, shameful, shameful. Standing in front of my Gods, you are talking of marrying that untouchable girl. Don’t stand before me, Go away from here).

ADHEER. Sujata ko kya tumhaare thakur ne nahin, kissi aur ne banaaya hai? Ye jo tumne Buddha, Ram Kishan ki tasveeren laga rakhi hain, inme se to kabhi kissi ne nahi kaha ki unchee neechee jaati hoti hai, insaan insaan mein farak hota hai. (Has Sujata been created by someone else, if not by your God? You have installed pictures of Lord Buddha, Rama, Krishna, none of them ever said that high or low caste exists, one man is different from another).

GIRIBALA. Inki baat kya karta hai tu, wo to devta hain, devta. (You can’t talk of them, they are Gods).

ADHEER. Wo sab insaan ko insaan samajhte hain, tabhi wo aaj devta hai. Insaan se nafrat karna sabse bada paap hai, naani. (They all considered man as man, that is the reason that they are Gods today. Grandmother, the biggest sin is to hate a human being).

GIRIBALA. Rahne de apne upadesh. Mujhe dahram sikhaane aaya hai. Kaan khol kar sun le, us ladki se tera byah kabhi nahi ho sakta. Wo achhut ki ladki hai. (Don’t preach me. You want to teach me about religion. Listen to this for once and all, you can’t marry that girl. She is the daughter of an untouchable). (02:02:30-03:15)

Finding Giribala repeatedly talking about Sujata’s untouchability, he further argues telling her the irrationality of considering birth in a particular caste as the criterion of calling people high or low. He says:

ADHEER. Toh kya janam hi sab kuch hai? Achha! Agar kissi Brahman ki ladki ko koi shudra pale, to tum use Brahman maan logi? (Is it birth only that counts? Okay! Tell me if a Brahman’s daughter is brought up by an untouchable, will you consider her a Brahman?)

GIRIBALA. Kabhi nahi, uski jaat to gayee. Wo ab shudra ki ladki ho gayee. (Never, she is no longer of her caste. She is now the daughter of an untouchable).

ADHEER. Phir to main kahoonga ki Sujata bhi Brahman ki ladki ho gayee kyonki Upen baabu jaise khaandaani Brahman ke yahan wo pali. Asal mein koi bhi janam se nahi,

apne sanskaaron se chota bara hota hai. (Then I will say that Sujata too has become Brahman's daughter because she grew up in a traditional Brahman's house like that of Mister Upen. In truth, man is low not by birth but is high or low by his sacraments). (02:03:25-45)

As a final outcome of these arguments, Giribala's surrender before Adheer assumes a symbolic significance of the surrender of old values before the new values. When Charu comes to know of this, she is quite angry with Sujata blaming her as the biggest hindrance in Rama's marriage with Adheer. In her highly anguished state of mind, she falls down the stairs and needs to be given blood for saving her life. When the blood of all persons of high caste does not match Charu's blood, it is the blood of the low-caste girl that finally matches and proves life-giving for Charu. The scene is highly dramatic as well as strategic to serve the filmmaker's purpose of conveying the message of equality. The matching of blood erases all lines of caste disparity and as the high-caste blood of Charu mingles with the low-caste blood of Sujata, all dissimilarities between them get symbolically removed. The movie ends with Sujata's acceptance into Upen's family as "hamaari beti" ("our daughter"; 02:23:45) and with both Upen and Charu happily marrying her to Adheer.

Sujata was an iconic movie that presented to its audience the caste bias of society and the dire need for social change in pursuit of social justice. The movie beautifully portrayed not only the social dynamics of caste discrimination but also focused on the psychological trauma undergone by the victims of caste prejudices. The movie, as its focal point, dealt with an issue that had vital social relevance and with its powerful storyline, made a very honest attempt to challenge caste stereotypes.

It laid stress on the upholding of quintessential human values that make life worth living and ensure a beautiful life for all human beings on this earth. With the strength of many powerfully depicted scenes in the movie, it could send the message that caste is a social construct made by man and works as an antagonist to deface the beauty of human life. Through the well-crafted character of Adheer, movie emphasized the relevance of more such people in real life who with their radical and progressive views can be the emissaries of social transformation.

The film *Sujata* serves as a powerful exploration of the theme of social justice shedding light on caste discrimination and the social as well as psychological struggles faced by the marginalized people in Indian society. Through its compelling storyline and well-developed characters, the film effectively captures the oppressive caste system and its impact on individuals' lives. Moreover, *Sujata* not only presents the harsh realities of caste discrimination but also highlights the transformative power of empathy and love in challenging societal norms. It remains a significant cinematic work of high social relevance that has set a benchmark of cultural representation of the theme of equality and continues to inspire and provoke discussions about caste disparities, equality and the pursuit of social justice. It serves as a testament to the power of cinema in raising awareness, fostering empathy and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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