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Social exclusion and suppression in the hierarchical fabric of society: *Jai Bhim*, a Dalit representation

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Abstract

The article delves into the multifaceted challenges encountered by Dalits, including economic deprivation, social exclusion, and denial of basic rights, within the context of caste-based discrimination and state violence as delineated in the movie *Jai Bhim* (2021). Through an analysis of the film's narrative, characters, and themes, the research sheds light on the systemic inequalities and injustices perpetuated against Dalits in Indian society. Furthermore, the article explores the role of legal advocacy in challenging caste-based oppression and promoting social justice for marginalized communities. By critically engaging with the research findings and implications, this discussion aims to deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding Dalit struggles and to advocate for meaningful reform towards a more equitable and inclusive society.

Keywords: Dalit, equitable, inclusive, legal, Discrimination

Introduction:

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)

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and social injustices that persist within societies worldwide. Among these, the plight of marginalized communities, such as the Dalits in India, has garnered significant attention due to their enduring struggles against discrimination, oppression, and violence. Scholars, activists, and policymakers alike have sought to understand and address the multifaceted challenges faced by Dalits, including economic deprivation, social exclusion, and denial of basic rights. One avenue through which these issues are explored is academic research, which provides a platform for critical analysis, empirical investigation, and policy recommendations. In this discussion, we will delve into a research article that examines the dehumanizing conditions experienced by the Dalit community in India, focusing on the portrayal of their struggles in the film *Jai Bhim*. Through a comprehensive analysis of the article's findings and implications, we aim to gain insights into the complex dynamics of caste-based discrimination, state violence, and legal advocacy, and to explore potential pathways towards greater social justice and equity for Dalits.

Historical Background of Casteism

The caste system in India, with its ancient roots and complex evolution, has profoundly shaped the social, economic, and political lives of Dalits, formerly known as "Untouchables." This hierarchical system, deeply embedded in Hindu religious texts and societal norms, has historically relegated Dalits to the lowest strata, imposing severe restrictions and roles that have perpetuated their marginalization and suffering. Despite significant legal reforms and social movements aimed at dismantling caste discrimination, the legacy of this system continues to impact millions of Dalits today. The origins of the caste system can be traced back to the Rigveda, one of the oldest Hindu scriptures, composed around 1500 BCE. The Rigveda describes a society divided into four main varnas: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and agriculturists), and Shudras (labourers and service providers). This division, originally based on duties and occupations rather than birth, laid the foundation for a social order that would become increasingly rigid over time.

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The Manusmriti, a key Hindu legal and moral text composed around 200 CE, further codified the caste system, delineating the duties, rights, and responsibilities of each varna. According to the Manusmriti, Brahmins were considered the highest caste due to their spiritual purity and intellectual duties, while Shudras were positioned at the bottom, assigned to serve the upper castes. This text not only entrenched social hierarchies but also provided religious justification for the subjugation and exclusion of those outside the varna system, specifically the "Avarnas" or "Untouchables", now known as Dalits. Dalits, meaning "oppressed" or "broken" in Sanskrit, were historically relegated to roles considered impure and polluting, such as handling dead bodies, cleaning latrines, and working with leather. These tasks were deemed so defiling that Dalits were kept physically and socially separate from other castes. This segregation extended to all aspects of life, including housing, education, and worship, creating a deeply entrenched system of apartheid within Indian society. During the medieval period, the caste system became further entrenched as regional kingdoms incorporated local customs into the broader Hindu social order. This period also saw the rise of the Bhakti and Sufi movements, which, between the 8th and 17th centuries, challenged caste discrimination by promoting the idea of spiritual equality and devotion to a personal god. Figures like Kabir and Guru Nanak advocated for a casteless society, emphasizing that all humans were equal in the eyes of God. However, despite their efforts, these movements had limited success in eradicating caste-based practices, as the social and economic structures supporting cast hierarchies remained intact.

Colonial Impact on Caste Dynamics

British colonial rule in India, which began in earnest with the establishment of the British East India Company in the mid-18th century, had a profound impact on the caste system. The British administration conducted extensive censuses and classified Indian society into distinct castes and sub-castes for administrative convenience. While this bureaucratic exercise was initially intended to understand and manage the diverse Indian populace, it ended up solidifying caste identities. British policies also reinforced caste hierarchies by granting land rights predominantly to upper castes and relying on upper-caste elites for local governance. This not only perpetuated economic disparities but also entrenched social divisions. At the same time, the introduction of Western education and missionary activities provided new opportunities for social mobility, leading to the emergence of a Dalit intelligentsia that began to challenge caste discrimination.

Social Reforms and Independence Movement

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the rise of social reformers and movements aimed at challenging caste discrimination and uplifting Dalits. Jyotirao Phule, a prominent social reformer from Maharashtra, was among the first to critique the caste system and advocate for the education and empowerment of Dalits. Phule established schools for Dalit children and launched movements to challenge Brahminical hegemony. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a towering figure in the Dalit movement and a key architect of the Indian Constitution, vehemently criticized the caste system and worked tirelessly for legal and social reforms. Ambedkar, born into a Dalit family,

faced severe discrimination throughout his life, which fuelled his resolve to fight for Dalit rights. He led campaigns against untouchability, promoted education among Dalits, and advocated for political representation and affirmative action policies. Mahatma Gandhi also played a significant role in the struggle against caste discrimination, although his approach differed from Ambedkar's. Gandhi referred to Dalits as "Harijans" or "children of God" and worked to integrate them into mainstream society through non-violent means and moral persuasion. However, Ambedkar criticized Gandhi for not addressing the structural inequalities embedded in the caste system more aggressively.

Post-Independence Reforms and Continued Struggle

With India's independence in 1947, the Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, outlawed untouchability and aimed to promote social equality. Article 17 of the Constitution explicitly abolishes untouchability, and a range of affirmative action policies, known as reservations, were introduced to provide educational and employment opportunities for Dalits. These measures were designed to redress historical injustices and facilitate the socio-economic upliftment of Dalits. Despite these legal safeguards, caste-based discrimination persists in various forms. Dalits continue to face significant social, economic, and political challenges. Social exclusion remains prevalent, particularly in rural areas, where Dalits are often barred from entering temples, using common wells, or accessing other public amenities. Economic exploitation also persists, with Dalits frequently confined to low-paying, menial jobs and subjected to bonded labour and other exploitative practices. Educational barriers have also been a significant obstacle for Dalits. Historically, Dalit children were denied access to education, and even today, they face discrimination and marginalization within educational institutions. Although affirmative action policies have increased Dalit representation in schools and colleges, the quality of education and the social environment often remain hostile. Political disenfranchisement has been another major issue. While legal provisions have been made for the political representation of Dalits, they often face intimidation and violence when asserting their rights. Dalit political leaders and activists frequently encounter resistance from upper-caste communities and political structures that seek to maintain the status quo.

The caste system in India, with its deeply entrenched historical roots and complex evolution, has had a profound and lasting impact on the lives of Dalits. From its origins in ancient Hindu scriptures and its codification in texts like the Manusmriti to its reinforcement during the medieval period and under British colonial rule, the caste system has systematically marginalized and oppressed Dalits. Despite significant efforts by social reformers and legal reforms post-independence, the legacy of caste discrimination continues to affect millions of Dalits. Addressing these challenges requires not only legal and policy measures but also a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and practices towards caste and equality.

Dalit Literature

Dalit literature, as described, is a profound form of artistic expression that captures the struggles, sorrows, and experiences of Dalit communities in India. This literature is

not merely a reflection of suffering but also a potent vehicle for social change and resistance against caste oppression. Here's a detailed explanation of the passage.

Definition and Themes of Dalit Literature

Dalit literature is defined by Arjun Dangle and other scholars as a genre that brings to light the harsh realities of the caste system and untouchability in India. Dangle emphasizes that this literature matures with a sociological perspective, embodying principles of negativity, rebellion, and loyalty to science, ultimately becoming revolutionary. This revolutionary nature of Dalit literature is underscored by its focus on the socio-political aspects of Dalit life, striving to confront and dismantle caste-based oppression. Sharankumar Limbale's perspective further elaborates on this by stating that Dalit literature artistically portrays the myriad sufferings endured by Dalits, creating a "lofty image of grief" (Limbale 30). This grief is not passive; it is imbued with a sense of activism and a call for change. Dalit literature, therefore, becomes a form of resistance, documenting the "shrewd rusticity" and "jolting experiences" of Dalit life, while challenging the societal structures that perpetuate these experiences.

The Role of Dalit Literature in Social Change

According to Sharatchandra Muktibodh, authentic Dalit literature arises when Dalit life is presented from a Dalit point of view. This perspective is crucial as it ensures that the narratives are not filtered through the biases of upper-caste writers. Instead, they provide an unadulterated voice to the Dalit experience. Bagul reinforces this by linking Dalit literature to the broader themes of democratic socialism, new science, and technology, asserting that the essence of Dalit literature lies in its revolutionary potential. By advocating for socialism and making the common man its hero, Dalit literature seeks to subvert traditional hierarchies and promote a more equitable society.

Activism and Commitment in Dalit Literature

Limbale highlights that Dalit writers are activist-artists whose writing is deeply intertwined with their commitment to social movements. Their literature is not just art; it is a form of activism that seeks to change society by articulating its problems and expressing an impatience for change. This activism is seen as essential in fostering a "Dalitised dialogism," a concept where Dalit literature encourages mutual participation and support, subverting the logic of caste-based superiority.

MN Wankhade adds that Dalit literature forges a connection between people and writing, bridging the gap caused by the self-imposed isolation of the upper-caste aesthetic traditions. Dalit literature seeks to establish friendship and harmony between people and literature, making it a unifying force.

Representation and Resistance

Dalit literature rejects romanticized notions of pastoral beauty and instead reveals the stark materiality of marginalized lives. It documents the instances of deprivation, suffering, and resistance experienced by Dalit communities, portraying them as ethnographies of justice. Saptarishi Mandal's characterization of Dalit narratives as "Ethnographies of Justice" underscores the literature's role in highlighting the injustices faced by Dalits and their efforts to combat these injustices.

Revolutionary Mentality

Despite the differing definitions and viewpoints, it is clear that Dalit literature is driven by a revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is characterized by aggression and rebellion against caste oppression, advocating for the values of a new creation that marches towards the victory of humanism. This revolutionary nature is often couched in linguistic indecencies, reflecting the raw and unfiltered emotions of the Dalit experience. Dalit literature, as depicted by the scholars, is a powerful form of expression that serves multiple purposes: It records the lived experiences of Dalits, challenges the dominant caste narratives, and acts as a tool for social and political change. By giving voice to the oppressed and fostering a sense of solidarity and resistance, Dalit literature plays a crucial role in the ongoing struggle for equality and justice in Indian society. Through its portrayal of the harsh realities of Dalit life and its commitment to activism, Dalit literature continues to be a significant and transformative force.

***Jai Bhim*, Representation of Dalit Struggles**

Jai Bhim is a 2021 Indian Tamil-language legal drama film directed by TJ Gnanavel and produced by Jyothika and Suriya under the banner of 2D Entertainment. The film stars Suriya, Lijomol Jose, and Manikandan, with Rajisha Vijayan, Prakash Raj, Guru Somasundaram, and Rao Ramesh in supporting roles. The storyline delves into themes of police bias and state violence against a marginalized community, focusing on a 1993 incident. Inspired by a legal case fought by Justice K. Chandru, the narrative revolves around Sengeni and Rajakannu, a couple from the Irular tribe. Rajakannu is arrested by the police and later goes missing from the station, prompting Sengeni to seek the assistance of lawyer Chandru in her quest for justice for her husband.

In 1993, Rajakannu and Sengeni, a couple from the Irula tribe, worked in the fields of oppressive caste men to control rats and venomous snakes. One day, Rajakannu was called to capture a snake at a wealthy man's home. The following day, a burglary was reported at the house when the man's wife noticed her jewellery was missing, and suspicion fell on Rajakannu. The police invaded Rajakannu's home, beat, and unlawfully detained Sengeni, who was pregnant. They also arrested and tortured Rajakannu's brother Iruttappan, his sister Pachaiammal, and his brother-in-law Mosakutty to extract information about Rajakannu's whereabouts. Sengeni was released, but Rajakannu was imprisoned and tortured to make him confess to the crime. Later, Sengeni was informed that all three detained men had absconded, and the police threatened her to reveal their whereabouts. Mythra, who taught adults from the Irula tribe, learned about Chandru, a lawyer who fought for tribal communities, and persuaded him to seek justice for Sengeni. After hearing Sengeni's story, Chandru filed a habeas corpus case in court, which advised them to file in a lower court. Chandru requested a witness examination, which is not standard in habeas corpus cases. Citing the Rajan case, the court yielded. The Solicitor General represented the police, arguing based on police officers' evidence that Rajakannu and the other two men absconded from police custody the night they were arrested. Chandru discovered the police were committing perjury and asked the court to investigate Sub-Inspector Gurumurthy, head constable Veerasamy, and constable Kirubakaran. Advocate General Ram Mohan took over the legal case,

claiming the three men had fled to Kerala. Varadarajulu, Iruttappan's employer, testified that Iruttappan informed him he had fled after committing a robbery. Chandru found out the three policemen had gone to Kerala to make a phone call to Varadarajulu, with Guru mimicking Iruttappan's voice. The court appointed Inspector General Perumalsamy as the lead officer in the case upon Chandru's request. After weeks of searching, Chandru, Perumalsamy, and Mythra found Rajakannu's corpse on a road near the Pondicherry border the day after he supposedly fled, and they cremated his body. They believed Rajakannu was murdered in custody rather than dying in a car accident. Chandru spoke to the pathologist who conducted Rajakannu's post-mortem, and he believed Rajakannu's death was due to a broken rib cage that could have been caused by a car running over him. Veerasamy admitted to Ram Mohan that Rajakannu died in custody. After Rajakannu's death, Veerasamy called Guru, who instructed him to say both had escaped and left Rajakannu on the road, framing his death as a car accident. Mosakutty and Iruttappan were sent to another jail in Kerala. Ram Mohan advised the officers to maintain their narrative in court. Chandru checked the police station's call history and told the court that a call to Guru's residence was made at 9:10 p.m., which contradicted Veerasamy's evidence. Chandru asked for more time to investigate. Chandru, Mythra, Sengeni, and the Irula tribe campaigned against the injustice. Chandru found out that the police coerced Iruttappan to call Varadarajulu. Mythra located Iruttappan and Mosakutty, who testified in court about the torture they underwent and how the police officers killed Rajakannu. Perumalsamy revealed that the police officers took bribes from the thief. Chandru also presented evidence of tyre marks on the road near Rajakannu's corpse, which matched the footprints of Guru and Kiruba. After hearing this evidence, the court arrested the police officers responsible for Rajakannu's death. Sengeni was awarded ₹3 lakhs (equivalent to ₹18 lakhs or US\$23,000 in 2020) and half a ground of land as compensation, while Iruttappan, Mosakutty, and Pachaiamma were awarded ₹2 lakhs each (equivalent to ₹12 lakhs or US\$15,000 in 2020). Sengeni thanked Chandru for his help, and Chandru attended the inauguration of Sengeni's new house, fulfilling Rajakannu's dream of buying her a new home.

In the movie depicting the struggles of Dalit life within the hierarchical structure of Hindu society, the issue of legal rights for Dalits emerges as a central theme. Throughout the narrative, the characters, particularly the protagonist and his community, face systematic oppression and exploitation due to their marginalized status and lack of awareness about their legal rights. The movie portrays how the Dalit community is often unaware of their legal rights, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and injustice. This lack of knowledge stems from historical disenfranchisement and deliberate efforts to keep Dalits ignorant of their rights by the dominant caste groups. As a result, when confronted with situations of exploitation, discrimination, or violence, Dalits often find themselves powerless and unable to assert their rights. The movie highlights the role of legal advocacy and empowerment in challenging caste-based oppression. Through the character of Chandru, a lawyer dedicated to fighting for tribal communities, the movie showcases the importance of legal representation for marginalized groups. Chandru's efforts to seek justice for the Dalit protagonist and his community demonstrate how legal intervention can

be a powerful tool in addressing systemic injustices and holding perpetrators accountable. The movie also sheds light on the obstacles and barriers that Dalits face within the legal system. Despite Chandru's advocacy, the legal process is portrayed as complex and biased, with institutionalized discrimination often working against Dalit interests. The characters encounter resistance from powerful forces within the legal establishment, including police officers and government officials, who seek to obstruct their pursuit of justice.

The movie underscores the need for grassroots mobilization and community empowerment to complement legal advocacy efforts. Through Mythra's role in educating the Dalit community and mobilizing support, the movie emphasizes the importance of collective action in addressing systemic inequalities and advocating for change. By empowering Dalits with knowledge of their legal rights and fostering solidarity within the community, the movie suggests that meaningful progress can be made towards achieving justice and equality. The issue of legal rights for Dalits in the movie serves as a lens through which broader themes of social injustice, empowerment, and resistance are explored. By highlighting the struggles and triumphs of the Dalit characters as they navigate the legal system, the movie brings attention to the urgent need for legal reform and social transformation to address the entrenched inequalities faced by marginalized communities in hierarchical societies like India.

The deplorable economic condition of the Dalit community is vividly portrayed through their living conditions. The characters are depicted as residing in an area characterized by mud huts with roofs made of leaves. These makeshift dwellings symbolize the poverty and deprivation faced by the Dalit population, highlighting their marginalized status within society. The choice of mud huts with leaf roofs as the primary housing for the Dalit characters serves as a stark contrast to the more affluent living standards of the dominant caste groups. It underscores the economic disparities and lack of access to basic amenities such as proper housing, sanitation, and infrastructure experienced by the Dalit community. The portrayal of these living conditions serves to humanize the struggles of the Dalit characters and shed light on the harsh realities of poverty and deprivation. By depicting their humble dwellings, the movie effectively conveys the challenges and hardships faced by Dalits in their daily lives, including the constant struggle for survival and dignity.

The portrayal of the dehumanizing conditions faced by the Dalit community in society not only highlights their economic hardships but also underscores the systematic denial of their legal rights and access to justice. The movie vividly depicts how Dalits are often unaware of their legal protections or face significant barriers when seeking recourse for injustices perpetrated against them. This aspect further compounds their already dire situation, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability and exploitation. Therefore, alongside addressing economic disparities, it is imperative for societal reform efforts to prioritize the empowerment of Dalits through legal advocacy and the promotion of equal rights under the law. By amplifying the voices of the marginalized and holding accountable those who perpetuate discrimination, meaningful progress can be made towards dismantling the dehumanizing structures that perpetuate

Dalit oppression and fostering a more just and inclusive society.

Conclusion

The plight of the Dalit community in India, deeply rooted in the historical caste system, continues to be a significant issue despite various legal reforms and social movements aimed at uplifting them. As Sharankumar Limbale poignantly states, Dalit literature artistically portrays the "sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty" endured by Dalits, presenting a "lofty image of grief" (Limbale 30). This literature serves as a powerful medium for expressing the lived experiences of Dalits, challenging oppressive structures, and advocating for social change.

The film *Jai Bhim* exemplifies the enduring struggles of Dalits, highlighting the systemic discrimination, violence, and legal challenges they face. Through its portrayal of the dehumanizing conditions and the fight for justice, the film underscores the critical role of legal advocacy and grassroots mobilization in combating caste-based oppression. The characters' experiences in the film illustrate the intersection of economic deprivation, social exclusion, and denial of basic rights, emphasizing the need for comprehensive societal reforms.

Addressing the challenges faced by Dalits requires more than legal measures; it necessitates a fundamental shift in societal attitudes towards caste and equality. Dalit literature, as a form of activism and resistance, plays a crucial role in this transformation by documenting injustices, fostering solidarity, and promoting a vision of a more equitable society. By giving voice to the oppressed and highlighting their resilience, Dalit literature and films like *Jai Bhim* contribute to the ongoing struggle for social justice and human dignity for Dalits in India.

Overall, achieving social equity for Dalits involves a multifaceted approach, integrating legal advocacy, educational empowerment, and a sustained commitment to dismantling the entrenched caste hierarchies that perpetuate their marginalization. Through continued efforts and the amplification of Dalit voices, there is hope for a future where justice and equality prevail.

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