

Hindi cinema has been woefully inadequate in representation of Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan characters, says Professor Sumit Baudh

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A recent episode of the show Made in Heaven featured Radhika Apte playing a Dalit academic character. A subsequent controversy stemmed from a Dalit writer claiming that Apte's character was based on her, without any credit. The filmmaking team's response included a mention that the idea of 'coming out as Dalit' was coined by Professor Sumit Baudh. Baudh, Professor and Executive Director, Centre on Public Law and Jurisprudence at the O.P. Jindal Global University, talks to Ketaki Desai about the episode, Dalit movements in the US and casteism on college campuses.

Your 2007 piece has been credited with first using the term 'coming out' in the context of caste. What was the context for that

coinage?

The context of 'coming out as Dalit' was social movements mobilizing differently in the areas of Dalit rights and LGBT queer rights. There was an absence of openly 'out' queer persons among Dalit groups, and a corresponding absence of openly 'out' Dalit persons among queer groups. This would have been less remarkable had I not been both queer and Dalit. The idea of 'coming out' in a published article in 2007 was to engage these sites of social

movements into collective conversations. The idea drew upon experiential grounds of being 'closeted' about my Dalit and queer conditions in the past. It was not an appropriation or a transplant of an idea simply from the existing LGBT queer discourses in English speaking cultures of the world. It was based on my lived experiences on the axes of caste, gender identity, and sexual orientation—in India.

What do you make of the current controversy about the Made in Heaven episode featuring a Dalit academic character?

The current controversy about the Made in Heaven episode 5 featuring a Dalit academic character has to be understood in a layered manner—of intra-minority differences. That is to say, there are stark and subtle differences within subordinate minority group positions such as men and women who are Dalit. As we know, the making of the episode is led by Neeraj Ghaywan who is openly Dalit.

The demand for credit has been raised by Yashica Dutt, who is also Dalit, on the ground that the fictional character of Dr. Pallavi Menke having 'come out as Dalit' is based on an idea that was articulated by her for the first time, among other ideas and positions presented in her memoir of 2019 'Coming Out As Dalit.' There is an intense invocation of the rhetoric of caste and gender inequalities on identitarian lines—of Dutt positioning herself as a Dalit woman and making allegations of appropriation and erasure of her work by the more dominant segments of the entertainment industry. The matter got more complicated with Ghaywan and others in the team rejecting Dutt's demand—on the ground that she was not the first person to articulate the idea of 'coming out as Dalit.' This rejection was done by referring to my published article that had articulated the idea as far back as 2007. Interestingly, Dutt's memoir of 2019 has neither acknowledged nor given any credit to me. There appears to be some hypocrisy on the part of Dutt demanding acknowledgment from Ghaywan, while having curiously failed herself in acknowledging my article in her memoir.

Further, and more importantly, Made In Heaven presents a number of interconnected threads, narratives, subplots, and stories that mostly revolve around its lead characters. Each episode weaves these lead characters into the narrative of a wedding. Episode 5 tells the stories of two weddings, of which the story and character of Dr.

Pallavi Menke is one. The idea of 'coming out as Dalit,' is peripheral to this story. Frankly, to me, it does not deserve the kind of credit that is being sought by Dutt.

There could be other similarities between the lived realities of Dutt and the fictional character of Dr. Menke, but each episode of the series starts with a standard disclaimer that it's a "work of fiction." Even just a charitable acknowledgment and credit to Dutt would render the entirety of the series, a work of fiction, to be partly "reality based." This could open the possibilities of other potential claimants demanding credit, or worse, making allegations of defamation against Made In Heaven. In this context, therefore, there cannot be any attribution and credit to Dutt. The publicity gathered by her over social media, and mainstream print media by now, is more than sufficient acknowledgement and recognition in the context of the Made In Heaven episode. The public conversations all this has stirred is a valuable educational site for advancing contemporary understanding of caste, gender and sexuality.

Representation of Dalit or Bahujan characters in mainstream media has increased in recent years. What do you think about the quality of this representation?

Correct, and somebody in the field of media studies might be able to make more authoritative commentaries on this. My knowledge of this kind of representation is amateur, impressionistic and limited to the subject matter of caste and the law in mainstream Hindi cinema. Among other underrepresented groups, Hindi cinema has been woefully inadequate in representation of Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan (DAB) characters. Even critically acclaimed cinema has often gone off and amplified bizarre distortions—in this representation DAB characters—as impeccably virtuous (as in Sujata 1959), juvenile and enraged (as in the ending scene of Ankur 1974), silently suffering (as in Aakrosh 1980), addicted to alcohol, amenable to alternative moral codes (as in Chakra 1981), inarticulate, impoverished, submissive, tragedy figures (as in Sadgati 1984), grotesque spectacles of violence (as in Bandit Queen 1994), etc. There is a world of difference in the representation of DAB characters in contemporary films such as Masaan (2015), Newton (2017) and Article 15 (2019) where there are more layers to the characters that

lend themselves to greater credibility and relatability among the viewers. The cutting edge frontiers of this representation, of course, can be seen in non-Hindi cinema films such as Marathi film *Sairat* (2016), Tamil films *Kaala* (2018) and *Periyerum Perumal* (2018). Filmmakers like Ghaywan (*Masaan* 2015), Nagraj Manjule (*Sairat* 2016, *Jhund* 2022), and Pa Ranjith (*Kaala* 2018, *Periyerum Perumal* 2018) have demonstrated the significance and substance of this representation, and the core qualitative artistic difference it can make, beyond any identity politics and other identitarian associations with their own Dalit origins.

There's a lot going on in this area, and a lot more needs to happen, especially in the composition and casting of lead actors. For example, Radhika Apte plays the role of Dr. Pallavi Menke in the said episode of *Made In Heaven*, and she makes some subtle errors in her delivery. There is inconsistency in qualifying her wedding—alternatively as Dalit wedding (which is incorrect) and Buddhist wedding (which is correct). In her opening scene, Dr. Menke advances an incorrect understanding of American society as being casteless when she says, “here I was just a woman of color.” These kinds of errors illustrate why representation matters among actors: who plays what role, and with what kind of caste-consciousness. A Dalit Buddhist actor, with a consciousness of Ambedkarite Buddhism, is unlikely to have made these mistakes even if they were part of script.

Caste protections in the US have been on the rise, from universities to California's caste discrimination bill. How useful are such policies?

Critical race perspectives in the US have brought attention to graded hierarchies among racial minority groups, especially as these relate to formal and social citizenship, and the corresponding structures of first and second class citizens. These numerical gradations are more than a black and white binary, more than first and second class citizens. Graded hierarchies of white, off-white, black, Asian, model minorities, shift positions in varying contexts. There seems to be sub-gradations within second class citizens that are rendered obscure until these come to light through lawsuit claims, such as the New Jersey temple case of 2021, that drew attention to the forced labour conditions and exploitation of a segment of workers described as ‘low caste.’ There have been allegations of caste-based discrimination in white collar jobs in a major tech sector company in California in 2020.

The passage of caste protection by Seattle City Council this year, and an ongoing initiative to recognize caste as a legally protected category in California are steps in the direction of equal protection.

Is there anything we can learn back from Ambedkarite and Dalit movements and organising across the globe?

Yes, there are several important lessons that can be learned from Ambedkarite and Dalit movements and organizing efforts across the globe. These movements have valuable insights to offer in terms of social justice, equality, and inclusive organizing. Learning from these strategies can help address other forms of systemic discrimination as well. Dr. Ambedkar himself stressed the significance of education as a tool for empowerment. These movements highlight the transformative power of education in uplifting marginalized communities and breaking the cycle of generational disadvantage. Ambedkarite and Dalit movements emphasize the importance of collective mobilization and solidarity. They demonstrate that when people come together to voice their concerns and demand their rights, they are more likely to bring about meaningful change. These movements underscore the importance of political representation for marginalized communities. Ambedkar's role in drafting the Indian Constitution and his efforts to secure political rights for Dalits serve as a powerful lesson in the significance of having a voice in governance. Learning from Dalit movements across the globe can foster a sense of global solidarity among marginalized communities. Incorporating these lessons into broader social justice and human rights movements can lead to more inclusive, equitable, and just societies.

You've written about your experience with systemic casteism in law school in India. Could you describe that?

My experience of systemic casteism at alma mater, the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bengaluru, is an interesting continuum of past and present. The rank-based system of roll call operated from 1988 to early years of the millennium. This system placed disproportionate levels of significance on the outcomes of the entrance examinations, fostered false ideas of merit and an environment of undue competition that unnecessarily burdened students with constant comparisons and pressure. The system also segregated students

in the categories of the General, the Scheduled Castes (SC), the Scheduled Tribes (ST), the Foreign Nationals, and the Waitlisted. This segregation—on the basis of caste, tribe, and national origin—carried profound implications for all students and faculty combined.

This year 2023 happens to be the silver jubilee year of my graduation from the NLSIU. On this occasion, by way of reconnecting with the alma mater and with my former fellow classmates, I suggested that the NLSIU Class of 1998 seek an acknowledgment of the institutional wrongdoing of the past. The mere suggestion evoked some very strong opposition—by way of denial—that there was never any discrimination at the NLSIU. And even if the roll call was somehow wrong, there was never any intention to cause any harm to anyone. These arguments of denial and intentionality had to be countered with an understanding of implicit bias and microaggressions that are often illegible and can operate without any intentions on the part of the perpetrators.

Even those who were supportive of the suggestion of seeking this acknowledgment, there were some who placed significant conditions for extending their support. Wrongdoing of the past was insufficient by itself to justify even just an acknowledgement. There had to be a correlation with the present. There were extended conversations over how the roll call was symptomatic of a deeper malaise of casteism. Despite its discontinuity, there are other ways in which implicit bias and microaggressions based on caste have continued to operate at the NLSIU. India's premier law school has lost two students to suicide in less than two and half years (Nov 2016-March 2019). They were both from the same graduating class, and they happened to be also enrolled in the categories of the SC and the ST. There were no public conversations about these suicides because, understandably, there is so much stigma associated with suicides, and there is also so much stigma associated with being referred to as a "quota students".