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# Portrayal of Social Stratification on the Basis of Caste and Class through Movies in Modern Society: Analysis over Three Decades

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## ABSTRACT

*India's film industry has a rich history spanning over a century. Although mainstream Hindi films have dominated, regional and parallel films have also been well-received. Every decade has produced exceptional films with great stories, techniques, and acting. Films serve as a powerful medium for conveying information about history, civilization, philosophy, politics, education, and religion. Indian filmmakers have recently explored unique themes, reflecting changes in society and culture. Societal factors have been a source of inspiration for Indian filmmakers, and contemporary films incorporate themes relevant to present times.*

*Marginalization is the process of pushing a particular group to the edges of society either by force or voluntarily. Socially disadvantaged groups may be marginalized due to factors such as caste, class, gender, or a lack of political opportunities. Meanwhile, privileged groups based on class and caste are considered important within the same society. This difference between advantaged and marginalized groups has been highlighted in popular media such as cinema and books. This research paper delves into the nuanced exploration of how social stratification, particularly based on caste and class, is portrayed through the medium of movies in contemporary society, spanning a time of three decades. The study aims to critically analyze the cinematic representation of these social divisions, discerning the underlying themes, messages, and ideologies that emerge from the narratives presented on screen.*

**Keywords:** *Societal division, caste identity, class divide, Marginalization, diversity, urban and rural India.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*“Indian cinema continues to be a major site which sustains and nurtures stratification based on class & the caste system, along with Brahminical social order.”*

— Anand Pandian, an anthropologist.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ANAND PANDIAN, REEL WORLD: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF CREATION 24 (2015).

Motion pictures are a powerful medium that provides a platform for the expression of the fundamental meanings that exist in the relationships between human beings and their surroundings. Films can convey the complexities of human emotions, behaviors, and interactions, and through this, they can explore and critique societal norms and values. Films can also depict the environment in which the story takes place, highlighting the impact of social, economic, and political factors on the natural world. In this way, films have the potential to stimulate conversations and debates about issues that are relevant to society.

Moreover, the social significance of motion pictures allows for the shaping of public consciousness and discourse. The images and ideas presented in films can influence the way people perceive themselves, others, and their environment. By presenting different perspectives and experiences, films can challenge existing beliefs and stereotypes, broaden people's understanding of social issues, and encourage empathy and understanding. Films can also contribute to social change by raising awareness of social problems, promoting new ideas and values, and inspiring collective action. In sum, motion pictures are a valuable tool for exploring the complexity of human society.

The films containing implicit norms and values based on caste and class have a significant impact on society and its attitudes. 'Social stratification' is a society-wide system that unequally distributes social resources among categories of people.<sup>4</sup> This system is closely tied to the family and the passing down of social resources from one generation to the next. One's social position is determined by birth, and this is particularly true in the caste system where occupational opportunities are limited by one's birth. For instance, a Dalit is often confined to occupations such as agricultural labor, scavenging, or leatherwork, with little chance of accessing high-paying white-collar or professional work. The ascribed nature of social inequality is reinforced by endogamy, where marriages are usually restricted to members of the same caste, preventing the possibility of blurring caste lines through intermarriage. On the other hand, stratification may also be on the basis of 'class'.<sup>5</sup> where a society is divided into groups with different access to resources and power. In this form of social stratification, one's position is not solely determined by birth but also by their economic status and access to resources. Overall, the films that carry implicit caste and class-based values contribute to the perpetuation of social stratification and its impact on individuals' opportunities and life outcomes.

The sociological approach to communication theory is based on assumption that there exists a

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, in HANDBOOK OF THEORY AND RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION (Richardson, John G. ed. 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India: A sociological view* (2003).

definite relationship between mass communication and social change. Some of the relevant theories are:<sup>6</sup>

The cultivation theory: The cultivation theory is a social theory that argues that prolonged exposure to media messages, particularly television, can shape individuals' perceptions of reality. Developed by George Gerbner, this theory suggests that the more time people spend consuming media, the more likely they are to believe the distorted images and messages that are presented. This can lead to a "mean world syndrome," where individuals perceive the world as more dangerous and violent than it actually is. The cultivation theory highlights the impact of media on our perception of reality and the importance of media literacy.

Social Learning Theory: Social learning theory is a psychological perspective that emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of others in shaping an individual's own behavior. Developed by psychologist Albert Bandura, social learning theory suggests that people learn by watching others and imitating their actions, and that this learning can occur both directly (through observation) and indirectly (through media or other forms of communication). This theory also emphasizes the role of reinforcement in shaping behavior, and highlights the importance of cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and motivation, in the learning process.

Uses and Gratification Theory: This Theory is a communication theory that focuses on why people consume media and what benefits they derive from it. The theory suggests that people actively choose media content based on their individual needs, preferences, and goals, and that the consumption of media is a way to satisfy those needs and derive gratification. According to this theory, people use media to gain information, entertainment, social interaction, personal identity, and even emotional release. Uses and Gratification Theory emphasizes the active role of the audience in selecting and using media, and suggests that media consumption is not a passive experience, but an active and purposeful one.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether the depictions of caste and class supremacy that have been promoted in films since 1991 have served to reinforce a social sensibility. We have examined how pictures, screenplay, clothes, languages, and songs reflect a specific normative form in opposition to which a deviant "other" is produced, focusing on caste and class as significant factors in popular films.

The list of movies that we have analysed during the course of this paper are:

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<sup>6</sup> Hakim Khalid Mehraj et al., IMPACTS OF MEDIA ON SOCIETY: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, 3(6) INT' L J. HUM & SOC. SC INVENTION56-64 (2014).

1. From 1991-2000: Bandit Queen
2. From 2001-2010: Slumdog Millionaire
3. From 2011-2020: Gully Boy and The White Tiger

## **II. BANDIT QUEEN**

### **a. Content Overview**

The film "Bandit Queen," released in 1996, portrays the life of Phoolan Devi, a female dacoit. The opening quote of the movie, "Animals, drums, illiterates, low castes and women are worthy of being beaten," sets the stage for the story's backdrop. In the film, Dalit women are depicted in traditional gender roles and as perpetual victims of marginalization and socio-economic exclusion. They are particularly oppressed by higher caste men of the time. However, Phoolan Devi, who belongs to the lower-ranked Mallah sub-caste, is an exception. From the age of eleven, when she is married to a much older man, her entire life is dedicated to fighting against a viciously prejudiced social structure. The movie sheds light on the various forms of caste-based stratification prevalent in society. It contrasts these hierarchical structures with Phoolan Devi's personal struggle against them. The film portrays several social themes that demonstrate this juxtaposition. These themes include specific instances that highlight Phoolan Devi's rebellion against the traditional caste-based system.

### **b. Social Themes Highlighted in The Film & The Social Reality**

#### **i. Caste based social norms of marriage**

The film depicts Phoolan's early marriage to Puttilal, a widower far older than her, which resulted in a temporary dislocation from her native village. In the real social world, the data on child marriages in India, reveals that in many districts that still have high rates of child marriage, the problem is more pronounced in particular castes including Scheduled Caste.<sup>7</sup>

#### **ii. Economic Dimension of caste: High class within low caste**

Phoolan Devi was born into a family of boatmen who were considered untouchables and were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Throughout her life, she and her family were subjected to continuous mistreatment by landlords who belonged to higher castes. However, it is worth noting that some of her oppressors were also wealthy individuals who belonged to her own caste. Among them was a relative named Mayadin, who played a significant role in arranging

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<sup>7</sup> *Poverty is not the only reason behind child marriages in India*, HINDUSTAN TIMES (March 13, 2018) <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/poverty-is-not-the-only-reason-behind-child-marriages-in-india/story-KYI4goPQHPWaAcMVagem4J.html>.

her marriage at an early age.

In the social sphere, the traditional system of economic interdependence between castes, known as the jajmani or the patron-client system, has been eroded. According to A.R. Desai's study, which employs the method of historical materialism to analyze the last 150 years of Indian history, the economic foundation of the caste system has been disrupted by new economic forces and forms. These include the establishment of private property in land, the impact of new property relations, modern cities, a new legal system, modern education, political movements, and most importantly, class struggle. The film depicts the shift in the economic dimension of social stratification from caste to class, which has been made possible by the growth of a market economy and the associated economic opportunities.

### **c. Masculinity created & consolidated by caste**

Phoolan Devi suffered from various instances of sexual violence throughout her life. She was forcibly violated by her husband, raped by both policemen and a doctor who was treating her, and also preyed upon by young men from higher castes in her village. The film portrays a final incident of gang rape, in which Phoolan Devi was beaten until she was barely recognizable and left unable to speak.

Films that don't hide the heroes' or antagonists' castes have been criticized by Srinivas and Kaali (1998) for perpetuating "caste power" through patron-client dynamics."<sup>8</sup> The film emphasizes the importance of preserving caste purity, with actresses expected to be faithful and chaste. Honor in social life is gendered based on caste, with women expected to protect their chastity, while men seek to uphold traditional notions of masculinity by making advances. Through its portrayal of these concepts, cinema reflects pre-existing societal beliefs. By amplifying and presenting these beliefs to a broader audience, cinema provides cultural legitimacy to intermediate castes and notions of caste pride.

### **d. Active oppressors & passive society in caste-based segregation**

Throughout the film, the higher-ranked Thakur caste is shown to hold the dominant position in social and political situations. The panchayat, a local governing council composed of men, exercised their patriarchal authority to banish Phoolan from the village because she refused to comply with the sexual advances of higher-caste men, who treated her like property. While society often reacts to rape by focusing on the loss of honor experienced by the victim and her

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<sup>8</sup> Srinivas, K. Ravi & Sundar Kaali, *On Castes and Comedians: The Language of Power in Recent Tamil Cinema*, in *THE SECRET POLITICS OF OUR DESIRES: INNOCENCE, CULPABILITY AND INDIAN POPULAR CINEMA* 212 (A. Nandy ed., 1998).

community, the film presents a different outlook by portraying the violence and trauma that the woman herself experiences, which is a disrupting and eye-opening portrayal.

The film depicts upper-caste men in the village making derogatory remarks about Phoolan after she leaves her husband, interpreting her actions as a sign of promiscuity. This demonstrates that gender boundaries are shaped by the politics of caste. In the real world, caste-based constructions of sexual accessibility are prevalent, with upper-caste men often using violence to assert their sexual access to lower-caste women. The film portrays this reality through a series of images that highlight the prevalence of such attitudes and behaviors in society. The Human Rights Watch report titled *Attacks on Dalit Women: A Pattern of Impunity*, has documented the use of sexual abuse and other forms of violence against Dalit women as tools by landlords and the police to inflict “lessons” and crush dissent within Dalit communities.<sup>9</sup> In Bihar's Laxmanpur-Bathe, members of the Ranvir Sena raped, mutilated, and massacred women in 1997. Similarly, in recent years, women from Dalit villages in Bihar and Tamil Nadu have been beaten, arrested, and sometimes tortured during violent search and raid operations. Despite constitutional safeguards, such incidents are a reality in society, and the plight of lower-caste women often goes unnoticed by society.

### III. SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

#### a. Content Overview

The 2008 film, "Slumdog Millionaire," follows the story of Jamal Malik, an 18-year-old protagonist from the Juhu slums in Mumbai. The movie depicts a stark distinction between different social classes and the belief that individuals are born into their status, with richer people having more control. The film portrays how Jamal is able to climb the social ladder by winning the game show "Who wants to be a Millionaire?" The central theme of the movie suggests that destiny plays a significant role in a person's life.

The Marxist Theory is evoked while watching the movie, which divides people into three categories: the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat. The film does not portray any examples of the aristocracy, but it highlights how the bourgeoisie hold the upper hand in India, using their wealth to control media and influence people's perceptions. The film illustrates several instances of these social themes.

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<sup>9</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, *ATTACKS ON DALIT WOMEN: A PATTERN OF IMPUNITY* (1999)<https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india/India994-11.html>.

## **b. Social Themes Highlighted in The Film & Their Bearing on The Social Reality**

### **i. Class-Based Alienation**

Alienation refers to a state where an individual feels disconnected from their own identity, social relationships, and surroundings. This disconnection occurs when individuals from lower classes are unable to recognize themselves due to their products being controlled and dominated by individuals from higher classes. Engels (1847) suggests that this control by the wealthy over the products of the poor leads to a sense of detachment from one's own creations and ultimately from one's self.. Alienation can be reflected in character.<sup>10</sup>

In the first scene, a body of polluted water sits close to a set of railroad tracks. Around the pond are shacks where women do laundry while trains rumble by just a few feet distant. Young characters Jamal and Salim can be seen, together with other youngsters, playing loudly on the other side of the pond. Jamal's mother has stopped scrubbing, wiped the sweat from her brow, and is staring out the window at the overcast sky. Jamal and Salim are representative of alienation since they are misunderstood and oppressed. They are forced to steal, work as tour guides, and eventually resort to begging after their mother passes away.

### **ii. Social Mobility**

In dialectical materialism, derived primarily from *Karl Marx's* writings, the story of society consists of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.<sup>11</sup> In general terms a thesis is a starting point, an antithesis is a reaction to it and a synthesis is the outcome. Briefly stated, according to Marx,<sup>12</sup>

- Under capitalism, the proletariat were exploited by the bourgeoisie who were the owners of the means of production. This was the thesis or starting point.
- The polarisation of the two classes would reach a stage where the proletariat would revolt against such exploitation. This was the antithesis.
- The outcome, in the long term would be a new form of relations within a classless society, namely communism. This would be the synthesis.

The film represents a struggle to change life from destitution in a road to be millionaire and expresses the process of dialectical materialism.

### **iii. Presence of Thesis**

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<sup>10</sup> Frans Magnis Suseno, *Karl Marx* 215 (1999).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*



In the beginning of the film, Jamal and his brother Salim are living in very poor conditions in the Juhu Slum. In one scene, a Bollywood actor comes to their slum and Jamal goes to great lengths to meet him. The actor signs a photograph for Jamal, and we can see the stark economic differences in India as both young and old people gather around the actor's helicopter. Despite their hard work and taking risks, Jamal and Salim are not being paid a fair wage.

#### **iv. Presence of Anti-Thesis**

The film portrays the Marxist cycle where Jamal's family inherits debt and a difficult way of life, which continues in a vicious cycle. The conflict depicted in the movie, where Jamal and Salim's mother is killed, highlights the underlying violence and societal perception that lower class people are dangerous.

The movie illustrates Jamal's struggle to live as a proletariat, surrounded by the bourgeoisie who have more power and money than he does. The character Maman is portrayed as an oppressor who comes from a higher social class and exploits street children to become beggars. Prem, the game show host, initially accuses Jamal of cheating as he finds it hard to believe that someone from a lower class background with no formal education could answer all the questions. The police torture and interrogate Jamal throughout the movie, as he knows all the answers on the game show, at the behest of the television host. This creates an antithesis between Jamal's struggles on his path to becoming a millionaire.

#### **v. Presence of Synthesis**

Jamal, Salim, and Latika - who belong to the lower class - strive to transform their lives and future for the better by defying the societal limitations placed upon them. Despite being impoverished, Jamal professes his love for Latika and his determination to improve their circumstances, and he acts on this by competing on the game show 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire'. Eventually, Jamal succeeds in winning the grand prize of 2,000,000 rupees by correctly answering all the questions.

Jamal's rise to millionaire status symbolizes a shift in the social class hierarchy within the society.

#### **c. Bearing on Social Reality**

Slumdog Millionaire is closely tied to the social reality of Indian society, portraying the struggles faced by the underprivileged and poor. The movie highlights how being in the lower class makes the pursuit of equality seem unattainable, and shows the various obstacles that Jamal must overcome. The wealthy upper class, who hold power, authority and control over

means of production, are depicted as exploiting the lower class. The film addresses the conflicts that arise between the poor and the rich, and ultimately shows Jamal's success as a representative of the socially and financially oppressed, resolving these conflicts. Jamal's journey towards becoming a millionaire is seen as a step towards achieving equal prosperity in life, which is the goal of all the characters in the movie and people in the real world. This suggests that despite widespread affirmative action programs and political mobilization of the disadvantaged groups in India, barriers to occupational mobility still exist for these groups.

#### **IV. GULLY BOY**

##### **a. Content Overview**

"Gully Boy" provides a glimpse into the sociology of urban life in India, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals from low-income backgrounds as they navigate through the crowded and bustling urban spaces to achieve success. The protagonist, Murad (played by Ranveer Singh), starts his journey as a slum-dweller and rises to fame as a Bollywood rapper. The film portrays both personal and societal transformations, depicting the changes that take place in the lives of the people residing in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Dharavi, Asia's largest slum. While the movie is based on a true story and serves as a source of inspiration, it also sheds light on the struggles faced by millions of people living in the shadows of affluent and urban societies as they strive to make a name for themselves."

##### **b. Social Themes & Their Bearing on Social Reality**

###### **i. Portrayal of Urban Class Divide in Indian megacities**

The movie employs various symbols to illustrate the struggles of its characters and their ultimate success from poverty to prosperity. It delves into topics such as women empowerment and the societal barriers of caste, class and religion, while also teaching us about the subtle methods of bridging the gap between social strata in modern urban societies. Through Murad's childhood friend Moeen, the movie highlights the link between drug trafficking and the despair of orphans living in impoverished areas of the city. Murad's father, who had been a driver all his life, is also portrayed as being socialised in a way that restricts his aspirations, which results in him investing his money in ensuring his son becomes a graduate who would ultimately serve his masters in a similar profession. Moreover, the movie also highlights the frustrations of wealthy women who are desperate for a better quality of life and are outraged by the government's negligence. This highlights that the desire to improve one's life is not limited to the marginalised, but also exists among the rich and privileged.

## **ii. Application of Modernization Theory**

Modernization theory is a development theory that emerged in the mid-twentieth century and posits that traditional societies can develop into modern societies through a series of stages involving economic growth, technological advancement, urbanization, and cultural change. The theory suggests that industrialization and modernization are necessary for social and economic progress, and that traditional societies must embrace modern values and practices to achieve development. However, modernization theory has been criticized for its Eurocentric bias and for overlooking the cultural and historical specificities of non-Western societies. Critics argue that it promotes Western ideals and values as universal, ignoring the diversity of cultures and traditions in the world.

The creators of the movie aim to show the reality of class-based differences in modern society by portraying urban poverty. Recent studies suggest that modernization can change the relationship between caste and class. It has been argued that the emergence of new jobs in a modernizing economy will lead to more people moving away from traditional occupations to new ones, including those previously associated with higher classes. This trend could ultimately weaken the influence of caste and class in economic decisions due to the market's free play in a liberalized economy. Panini summarizes these changes as the effect of economic liberalization on weakening caste's hold on the economy.<sup>13</sup>

Panini's views shed light on a specific form of modernization theory in India. It suggests that modernization will lead to a decline not only in ascribed characteristics, such as one's father's social class, as theorized in the West, but also in the caste system's importance in job recruitment. Srinivas (2003) also agrees with Panini's views, but extends the argument to include a range of other changes, such as improvements in communication, education, and governmental policies that support weaker sections of society, all of which weaken the connection between traditional occupations and caste. Srinivas also suggests that monetization and market forces are combining to remove the historical baggage from economic relations, even in cases where caste remains a factor.

## **V. THE WHITE TIGER**

### **a. Content Overview**

"The White Tiger" is a movie that explores the issue of class stratification in India. It follows

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<sup>13</sup> PANINI, THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CASTE, CASTE ITS TWENTIETH CENTURY AVATAR (1996).

the story of a young man named Balram Halwai, who comes from a poor rural background and aspires to rise above his circumstances. Through a series of events, Balram lands a job as a driver for a wealthy family in Delhi. As he becomes intimately involved with his employer's family, he begins to uncover the dark side of India's capitalist society and the corrupt system that perpetuates it.

The movie portrays the stark contrast between the lives of the wealthy and the poor, highlighting the immense power imbalance that exists between the two. It also depicts how the privileged classes are able to maintain their power and wealth through the exploitation of the lower classes. Balram's character serves as a representation of the struggle faced by many in India who seek to break out of the cycle of poverty and oppression.

Overall, "The White Tiger" provides a scathing critique of India's class-based society and the harsh realities faced by those who are not born into privilege. Through its portrayal of Balram's journey, the movie invites audiences to reflect on the inherent inequalities in the social fabric of India and the urgent need for systemic change.

Numerous movies have portrayed the caste system prevalent in India, but "The White Tiger" presents a devastating portrayal of how this system can corrupt both the servants and their masters. Based on Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel of 2008, the film's protagonist is Balram Halwai, a poor boy from a large family whose aspirations lead him to become the first driver for a wealthy landlord's family, and later to amass his own riches through corruption and conspiracy. The movie exposes the complex dynamics of employer-servant relationships in India, while also addressing the country's class and caste-based divisions, and rich-poor divide. Balram, who recognizes that his caste prohibits upward mobility, believes that the only way to rise to the top in India is through crime or politics. Through cunning manipulation, Balram ingratiates himself with the landlord's Westernized son Ashok and his Indian American wife Pinky, but his journey towards success is filled with corruption and betrayal.

After a fatal accident that implicates Ashok, Balram is pressured by the family to take the blame. Initially, Ashok and Pinky are against this plan, but they eventually join in. This is concerning because they are otherwise decent individuals who have been influenced by societal pressures. The system has twisted them just as it has transformed Balram. However, Balram fails to understand that he is still trapped in the cultural catastrophe of the caste system, which is chillingly portrayed. It's a tragedy that has been chillingly conveyed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rashmi Ahlawat, *Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger: A Socio-Political Study of Poverty and Injustice*, 2 INT'L J. HUMAN. 11, 13 (2016).

## **b. Social Themes & Their Bearing on Social Reality**

### **i. Evolution of Caste Identity in modern urban India**

After the death of his father, Halwai's father abandoned the family and left him in the care of his authoritarian grandmother in a poor village. He always had an interest in business and thought he would pursue it further. With his newfound English skills, he was able to land a job as a driver for the son of an affluent family who had recently returned from the United States.

The film provides a striking illustration of the vast chasm that exists between India's various castes. When Halwai goes to work for Ashok, he brings home bags full of cash while other families in the area go hungry. Halwai and the other drivers live in a roach-infested garage while Ashok and his wife Pinky dwell in a high-rise apartment in Delhi. As a result of political corruption, the rich are able to maintain unimaginable levels of riches, while the poor are left to struggle.

Halwai is initially respectful of his master, but he comes to like Ashok and Pinky. Instead of "Sir" or "Madam," they demand to be addressed by their given names, and they won't even allow Halwai get the keys out of the ignition. They are shocked to see Ashok's father extend his hand to Halwai, and they show their disapproval. Halwai begins to wonder if he is a friend or a servant, a driver or an acquaintance as a result of these exchanges. His anger at the injustices he sees grows throughout the novel, until it explodes violently at the end.

He was constantly subjected to physical and verbal abuse, including being punched, having food he had prepared thrown at him, and being called a f—ing pig. Ashok's wife Pinky, who moved to the United States when she was 12 and developed strong, uninhibited opinions, was the only bright spot in his life. She took on a classic feminist stance by publicly condemning Ashok's father and voicing her outrage at the way Halwai was treated by Ashok's family.<sup>15</sup>

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

In the analysis of films produced between 1991 and 2000, it becomes evident that these movies predominantly portrayed narratives and visual depictions that glorified the middle and high castes in Indian society. The stories often revolved around characters from privileged backgrounds, emphasizing their lifestyles, aspirations, and achievements. This trend reflected the prevailing societal values and the influence of dominant caste groups during that period.

However, as the new millennium unfolded, a noticeable shift took place in the themes and

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<sup>15</sup> A.J., Sebastian, *Poor-Rich Divide in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger*, 1(2) J. ALTERNATIVE PERSP. SOC. SCI 229 (2009).

narratives depicted in Indian cinema. The first decade of the 2000s witnessed a growing focus on class-based stratification, exploring the disparities and challenges faced by individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Films began to emphasize the importance of education, personal initiative, and determination as means to rise above social barriers and achieve upward mobility. This shift in focus reflected a changing socio-political landscape and a growing awareness of socioeconomic inequalities in Indian society.

The following decade, the 2010s, marked a significant turning point in Indian cinema. Filmmakers started delving deeper into social issues affecting both rural and urban populations, shedding light on the struggles and injustices faced by marginalized communities. Movies such as "Gully Boy" addressed the pressing issue of youth unemployment, providing a platform for underprivileged sections of society to share their stories and perspectives. These films aimed to challenge existing power structures and amplify the voices of those who had long been marginalized.

In 2020, "The White Tiger" made a powerful impact on a global audience by highlighting both caste and class-based social stratification in India. The film exposed the harsh realities faced by individuals trapped in a system that perpetuates inequality and exploitation. Through its narrative, "The White Tiger" offered a critical commentary on social hierarchies and the struggles faced by those born into disadvantaged backgrounds.

The evolution of themes and representations in Indian cinema over the past three decades reflects the changing dynamics of society and the film industry's role in reflecting and influencing public discourse. From a focus on celebrating privileged castes to exploring class-based disparities and eventually delving into social issues affecting marginalized communities, films have played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and raising awareness about the challenges faced by different sections of society.

In conclusion, the analysis of films produced between 1991 and 2020 reveals a significant transformation in the thematic structures and visual representations depicted in Indian cinema. The shift from celebrating the middle and high castes to addressing class-based disparities and later focusing on social issues affecting marginalized communities reflects the evolving consciousness of filmmakers and society at large. These films have provided a platform for underrepresented voices, challenging existing power structures and promoting dialogue on social justice and equality. As Indian cinema continues to evolve, it has the potential to contribute further to the ongoing discourse on societal issues and inspire positive change.

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