

## *Sadgati: Through the Lens of Satyajit Ray*

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### Abstract

*Celluloid has emerged as the most effective medium that reflects contemporary social issues, trends and patterns of an existing society. The last decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a transition in the form and perspective of Indian Cinema. But the lives of the dalits have been very little cast into screen to raise Dalit consciousness. This paper seeks to analyse how Satyajit Ray deals with the caste question in Sadgati, a film adapted from Premchand's short story of the same name (translated into English as "Deliverance", 1931). This paper deals with the treatment of the marginalised and the outcastes in the post-independence era. Dukhi, an untouchable, goes to the village Brahmin to get an auspicious date for his daughter's marriage fixed. But the Brahmin made him work hard without paying in exchange. Dukhi succumbs to death out of starvation aggravated by this excruciating labour. Produced by Doordarshan in 1981, the film suffered non-commercial fare, yet most of the scenes come alive through the hands of this distinguished director who has tried to take the plot very realistically into the screen through its dramatic dialogues and the required sensitivity. This paper undertakes to examine how casteism in society breeds crime, how caste-hierarchies are socio-politically constructed and are not religious issues, and how transformation in society is possible following legal procedures, implementation of laws and socio-economic initiatives. It will also show that mass awareness is possible if celluloid can be taken as a more challenging medium to focus on the Dalit question, to bring equality, to bring peace and to bring a change in society.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Indian Cinema, caste, society, film adaptation

Celluloid has emerged as the most effective medium that reflects contemporary social issues, trends and patterns of an existing society. The last decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a transition in the form and perspective of Indian Cinema. But the lives of the dalits have been very little cast into screen to raise Dalit consciousness. In this modern world where people prefer to be techno-savvy than devoting time in reading between the lines because moving

characters in celluloid capture eyes and hearts easily compared to printed words in a literary text. Often in the case of film adaptations, the film versions proved to be more demanding than the literary texts, and at times they are regarded as less significant, supplementary, subordinating, derivative, lacking in spirit and originality of the book. Pere Gimferrer in his book *Cinema and Literature* puts it as: "... the cinematographic history of novels adaptations offers an eloquent collection of samples of sterile loyalties, infidelities and even fertile betrays" (16). Thais Flores Nogueira Diniz in his article "Is Adaptation Truly an Adaptation?" says:

The process of adaptation has been seen as unidirectional – going always from literary text to film – with priority for the former at the expense of the latter. Consequently, the study of adaptation tended to concentrate on the comparison between two types of text and the measure of success attained transferring from one to the other. In summary, the concern of critics has been to verify the faithfulness of the film compared to the work of fiction, that is, if the film manages to capture all the elements of the narrative: plot, characters, etc. (218)

This paper analyses the adaptation of a literary text into film and the screening of various common aspects of Dalit literature problematising the Dalit question in Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*.

When a film is made on any sociological problem, the purpose behind it is to bring social transformation through mass awareness. In India very few movies have been made on the marginalised sections of our society. This paper seeks to analyse how Satyajit Ray deals with the caste question in *Sadgati* (1981), a film adapted from Premchand's short story of the same name (translated into English as "Deliverance", 1931). This paper also examines the treatment of the marginalised and the outcastes in the Indian society. Produced by Doordarshan, the film suffered non-commercial fare, yet most of the scenes come alive through the hands of this distinguished director who has tried to take the plot very realistically into the screen through its dramatic dialogues and the required sensitivity.

In the very first scene, Dukhi, (played by Om Puri) is seen working hard in the field cutting grass, fully starved, only to sell them to earn money for the visit of Ghasiram, the Brahmin (played by Mohan Agashe) in his home to fix an auspicious date according to Hindu astrology for the marriage of his daughter, Dhania, a child of approximately 10 years or so. Dukhi's wife Jhuria (played by Smita Patil) is seen pursuing Dukhi to leave his work and eat before he goes to the Brahmin's home to bring him.

Ghasiram forced Dukhi to work without food, water and pay in exchange while he himself ate and slept. Already ailing and weak due to a recent fever, Dukhi agreed and began with cleaning the Brahmin's house and stable. When he was asked to chop a huge block of wood, Dukhi's anger increased with each blow of his axe. Working in scorching sun, hungry and malnourished, Dukhi died of excruciating pain, excess labour and starvation. When none

of the outcastes became ready to remove the corpse in fear of police investigation, in the night when no one was looking, the Brahmin tied a rope on the leg around the ankle of the dead (because of the fear of untouchability), pulled it to a remote and filthy place and dumped the body there along with the dead and decomposed bodies and skulls of dogs, cats, vultures and other animals, and then sprinkled holy water on the spot on the road to cleanse it of the untouchable's touch. In this context, reference can be made to the dramatic dialogue of a Dalit's who speaks in one of the scene in Sanjeev Jaiswal's *Shudra*, another movie based on the life of dalit, that: "Hum paida hote hai marnekeliye...Chahe Thakur mare, chaahe bimari".

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular", says, "The reasonable and rarefied definition of the word subaltern that interests me is: to be removed from all lines of social mobility" (475). She writes: "Subalternity is a position without identity" (476). Dukhi, the dalit protagonist of Ray's film represents this 'position without identity' as he acts as a medium here to complete the task assigned by the Brahmin.

Satyajit Ray has efficiently dealt with the question of dalit self and dalit identity in the movie which in any form of art are constructed by undergoing humiliation, repression, subjugation and abnegation of self because of exclusion and marginalization. As Kashinath Ranveer comments:

These ruling classes – Brahmins . . . have created ideologies and have fashioned them in such a way that these subordinated classes have been forced to look at themselves from the eyes of their masters, the ruling classes. Through the creation of the notions of caste . . . these subordinated and oppressed groups of the society have been made to suffer from self-scorn, self-hatred, self negation, self abnegation and self erasure. Hence, they were deprived from the very notion of their self, self esteem, self dignity and self respect. (108)

The movie brings into being not only the struggle of the Dalits for their basic needs of food, water, medicine but also the struggle for their freedom, dignity and respect as well. Thus, the film compels the audience to think: Is caste more important than humanity? How did the caste system come into existence? The film attempts to awaken those who still believe in the age-old casteism blindly because in the legal sense of the term, India is a secular country. Neerja Jayal Chand points out in this context that:

Coming from different parts of India, with diverse linguistic, social and cultural contexts, the one common thread that runs through all Dalit writings is that of pain and human suffering, consequent upon an outdated, hackneyed Brahmanical law, which divides human beings into unkind categories, irrelevant in an age of democratic, egalitarian social equality and justice and

which goes against the preamble of Indian constitution which officially claims that India is a secular state. . . . (81)

This paper concludes by showing how casteism in society breeds crime, how caste-hierarchies are socio-politically constructed and are not religious issues, and how transformation in society is possible following legal procedures, implementation of laws and socio-economic initiatives. It shows that mass awareness is possible if celluloid can be taken as a more challenging medium to focus on the Dalit question, to bring equality, to bring peace and to bring a change in society.

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