

SUBALTERN RESISTANCE IN HARIJAN AND DHADAK 2

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Abstract

Popular narratives would argue that caste-based atrocities have reduced their impact and intensity in the post-Independent India. Caste is an important marker even in today's world. India has made remarkable progress in numerous fields in the last decades. However, caste based atrocities still make it to the headlines every now and then. These remote looking instances are manifested and bottled up anger vented out in the disobedience of caste hierarchy. From childhood to adult years-every form that one fills up, the mention of caste is mandatory. In India caste of an individual is the marker of one's identity, ethics and credibility as an individual. In such countries where caste is norm and necessity, it is important that the issues based on it are properly represented. This article will trace the continuance of caste based discrimination in Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* and movie *Dhadak 2*. This article will evaluate the subtler manifestations of caste based violence and discrimination.

Keywords: caste, violence, discrimination, manifestation, dalit

Texts on the caste have divided the debates into Brahmins against dalits debates. However, it is more of dalit verses the non-dalit narratives and representations. Dalit is a term that has been accepted by people belonging to the socio-economically and culturally marginalized communities. Traditionally recognized as the shudras within the varna system. Popular dalit writers have brought about the day to day struggles that dalits encounter even in urban spaces. There is an unsaid rule about having a distaste and dislike for the dalit that continues in the minds of people. Discrimination has found newer course, where untouchability is no more a visible phenomenon. This paper will compare Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan*(1947) with Bollywood movie *Dhadak 2*(2025) for analysing the patterns of caste based atrocity and its recent manifestations.

Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* was written in Odia in 1947 and translated into English in the year 2021. The ideas and plot takes immense inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's *Harijan Andolan*. Mohanty's novel draws on the mahenter communities in Odisha who belong to dalit caste. This post-Independent narrative is a critique of Indian societies that foster hierarchies and pushes people to inferiority and exploited circumstances. *Harijan* depicts heart-wrenching story of caste-based discrimination and oppression encountered by Jema and her daughter Purnima alias Puni of the Mahenter community living in a basti adjacent to the wealthy zamindar families

such as that of Abhinash babu and their associates. They lived in a time when the shadow or glimpse of a Mahenter was associated with ill-luck and giving a bad start to anyone's day.

The central characters Jema(meaning a princess) and Puni(shortened form of the name Purnima meaning full moon) lead lives contrary to their given names. Jema is the middle-aged Mahenterani whose regular day would start when she sets out for cleaning latrines of people of the upper classes. Puni, the symbolic full moon in Jema's life, had to eventually descend down the same career path as chosen by her mother. Neither the mother nor the daughter could choose any other alternative for the birth into such communities dictated the fates of its people even before they were born.

Puni had the most carefree life for the longest time, she was confident that despite being a Mahenter child, her mother will never let her descend into filth, "No matter what else she does, there's one thing that Bou will never do-send me to work! People have grown tired of telling her, but will she listen? No means no! She might be drowning in filth herself but she'll never let Puni go!(34). The normalcy of Puni's life is shattered the day she replaces her mother in her work, when her mother gets beaten black and blue for stealing a cabbage for her daughter. Acting as a proxy for her mother and stepping into her shoes for a day brings her close to her birth reality of being inferior in society:

She would go to work. Just as her friends, Ranga, tabha and Kajalmati were doing. Walking through the basti with the basket of filth under her arm, covered with saal leaves. Kneeling on the ground behind the latrines-then the baskets again. Once again that stinking world buzzing with flies. Her karmakshetra, the world where her destiny lay, where the actions of her past life took her(63).

By the end of the day, her enthusiasm for financial independence had completely been sapped off her spirit. Puni continues to vomit for days at her work, till filth becomes inevitable part of her life. No amount of bathing with perfumed soaps and oils would make her clean anyone, for she believed that she had been defiled. Hunger, filth and alcohol was inevitable to their despicable lives. Puni fails to understand that in spite of working harder, the conditions of the Mahenter community never improves. Her strength wades in undergoing the transformation from being a mahentarani's daughter to being a mahentarani herself. The initial days of association with filth dampens the spirit of Puni, but gradually the satisfaction of giving rest to her mother and be able to arrange proper food for her mother, reassures herself in the job where she had replaced her mother. A mahenter never goes to work for gathering wealth or building skyscrapers, just so she could get a mouthful to eat, just enough to satisfy the most basic needs of a living being(63). Basic needs drive the spirit of the dalits.

The rich and the affluent life of Abhinash babu's community and that of the community act as foil to one another, their difference not only visible but could be heard and even smelt. Characters also stand in contrast to one another, the luxurious life of Manomayee against the life of poverty that Puni and her mother had to undergo. While she listened to music on gramophone and sang classical music, Puni emerged herself in filth for earning a meal for herself and her mother. Aghore babu's leisurely spending of the hours of the day stand in stark contrast to Sania who rode the carriage that carried filth to be dumped in the outskirts of the town. The glimpse of urban and rural, the rich and the poor, the filth of the mind and the defiled body are kept in closed proximity yet at the level of not touching one another.

Indian society that Mohanty depicts in its utmost reality, thrived on the basis of hierarchies in the society-of rich/poor, man/woman, sahib/ghulam, upper-castes/mahenters. In this novel the boundary wall beneath Abhinash babu's house(the richest and most influential

personality of that town) made the demarcation evident with the slum-dwellers who resided on the other side of the wall. The boundary wall kept these two worlds separate and the distinctions very clear. The rule was very clear that there was no trespassing needed on either side, intrusion would not be considered any lesser than molestation and violation.

In Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* the caste demarcation were physically visible in the form of boundaries walls of houses, in modern and urban context those boundaries are territories where one is ghettoised. Caste based oppression can be seen in clear manifestation in a 2025 released Bollywood movie, *Dhadak 2*, a spiritual sequel to *Dhadak 1* which again highlighted hierarchies in a Rajasthani set up. *Dhadak 2* movie is inspired from the Tamil movie *Pariyerum Perumal* by Mari Selvaraj that presents caste-based conflicts in an urban and contemporary scenario. Its protagonist is Neelesh (Neel) Ahirwar played by Sidhant Chaturvedi and the female lead is Vidhi Bharadwaj portrayed by Tripti Dimri. The plot mostly takes place on a premier Law institute where Neelesh has been admitted on reservation. Neelesh's admission on the grounds of reservation is itself a point that incites bullying from his classmates. Neelesh and his dalit friends had to occupy last bench in class as the front benches were reserved for upper class boys. On his very first day Neelesh is asked about his surname which he utters after much humiliation. On the very first day in college, Neelesh realizes that caste-based ostracization will continue in the classroom as well.

Things start to worsen for Neelesh when Vidhi's family finds out that they are in love. Vidhi's cousin who is also her class-fellow in college, publicly humiliates Neelesh by painting his face black and abusing him. Things take a very nasty turn when Vidhi invites Neelesh to her sister's wedding and Neelesh is beaten black and blue by her cousin and his friends. They even urinate on him to further humiliate Neelesh and establish their caste superiority. Vidhi remains unaware of the happenings with Neelesh and is bewildered finding Neelesh missing classes post the wedding. Things escalate and lead to the suspension of Neelesh from college. When his father is summoned by the principal to meet him in college, Neelesh's father is further humiliated by undressing him in public by the students who were the troublemakers for Neelesh. Neelesh in turn fights for his rights and life when a professional murderer is hired to kill him. Finally, the movie implicates a happy ending as Neelesh and Vidhi loudly protest in public against the injustice done to Neelesh on the basis of his caste. However, the most disturbing facts are related to Neelesh's dog Birju and how he was smothered by upper caste people who wanted to teach him a lesson. The incident with Birju specifically emphasises the deep entrenched hatred that exist within caste hierarchies. The most prominent incident in the film is the death of the dalit scholar Sekhar's suicide. Sekhar from the very beginning of the movie is seen as an advocate of dalit rights, he is considered as an ideal for all dalit students of that institution. He is seen as calm and self-confident person who was aware of the limitations of the system entrenched in discriminatory practices. His and his fellow activists wearing black colour against the system was reflective of his distrust of the system. The stipend of many dalit scholars had been stopped and they were on an unending protest against the system. What baffles everyone is not the death of Sekhar but his murder which was being fabricated as murder.

Dhadak 2 movie raises pertinent questions on the accepted discriminatory patterns within academic institutions. This movie clearly warns us without a statutory warning that age old practices still linger in societies without being apologetic. This movie is also a reminder that education may not always solve caste-based problems but having a representation in educational system can serve as a crucial example for dalit youth trying to make place for himself in society. There is hardly any progress in the dalit narrative in Puni's case to Neelesh humiliation. Puni did

not have a word like education in her dictionary and Neelesh would become lawyer may be fighting a dalit atrocity case some day.

This movie and the stories of its characters like Neelesh and Sekhar is not very different from the story of Jema, Puni or Sania. They all seem to be fighting an immortal war with caste hierarchy in society. One might believe that caste based atrocities might have been reduced in its quality and quantity, but it would be wrong to say that it is possible to eradicate it completely. Caste is a reality and the practice of caste based hatred a norm for many. Till the demarcations of caste remain, caste based atrocities will exist, their manifestations now masked and under some pretext.

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