

Original Article

Reading Caste in Cinema: A Thematic Analysis of Audience Responses to Indian Films

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Abstract - The hierarchical caste system in Indian society dictates status and occupation, and leads to social and moral injustice in society. The caste system, although legally abolished by Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, still continues to shape social and cultural realities, especially in rural areas. By examining anti-caste narratives and the ways they either reinforce or challenge these social structures, this work will attempt to address how cinema has the capacity to shape both public perception and collective responsibility in society. Five films were selected that had been released across years in different languages and with differing popularity. The top twenty reviews on Google Reviews by star rating (5 to 1 stars) for the films chosen - *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Article 15*, *Sadgati*, *Homebound*, and *Masaan* - were systematically thematically analysed. The findings showed that, although most reviews had similar opinions no matter the caste or religious background of the respondents, issues like heroism, and an unsimplified depiction of caste-based discrimination in India seemed to be present. For society at large, this paper has found that both general and historically marginalized castes understand the representation of caste in Indian Cinema, though there are some stereotypes and superficial portrayals of historically marginalized castes and religious minorities that still have to be broken instead of constantly reinforced. Increasing the representation of marginalized voices can be incorporated to allow for an authentic portrayal of caste issues, with the necessity of cast and crew belonging to a certain group in order to understand the dilemmas.

Keywords - Caste system, Indian cinema, Caste discrimination, Prejudices, Historically marginalised castes.

1. Introduction

“The media is not just a tool of entertainment and information for the masses, but has played a significant role in bringing social justice and change. In a developing and pluralist country like India, the demographics demand a cautious approach. Changes cannot be drastic and cannot be made overnight. People have to be made aware of problems and their solutions.”
(Singh & Azeez, 2021).

In India, the caste system is a hierarchical social system dictating status and occupation. Although the caste system is deeply intertwined with Hinduism and scripts like the Vedas (Narayanan, 2026) - the earliest body of Hindu scriptures of more than a thousand years ago - the British colonial period hardened caste divisions through numerous schemes like the 1871 census, where they classified and listed castes across the entire country. Even if the concept of caste was not used, which was true for many areas around India, it was still instilled as a uniform measure across India simply to further a colonial agenda. (Srikrishna, 2020). In the colonial era, the caste system was set up to enforce the British’s divide-and-rule strategy. Caste actually did not have much significance

before the British, who then turned it into India’s defining social feature. (Chakravorty, 2019). The caste stereotypes include Brahmins - the scholars, the top of the hierarchy; Kshatriyas - the warriors; Vaishyas - the merchants; and Shudras - the labourers, and Dalits, the bottom of the hierarchy, not even included in the triangle, but below, and dubbed the untouchables (BBC, 2019). Unfortunately, this led to, and still leads to in many places, social and moral injustice in societies. Caste-based social hierarchies are sustained through the projection of entrenched stereotypes, with lower castes being historically framed as impure and systematically assigned to stigmatized forms of labour, including sanitation and other forms of manual work, which are eschewed by higher castes.

The system of endogamy, which is the custom of marrying only within one’s caste, further preserved these inequalities over generations. Each caste looks down on the caste below them, creating a very toxic and unhealthy society and environment.

Apart from violence, Dalits are sometimes denied shared resources in rural villages in India to this day, even infrastructure like wells and arable land being restricted.



Additionally, historically marginalized castes have also been more vulnerable to illness and epidemics due to their lack of access to proper healthcare and hospitals. As a result, those subjected to this injustice have long felt economic disadvantages, with many getting stuck in the poverty cycle. This discrimination also intersects with gender, as Dalit women face not only caste oppression but also gender based oppression. Furthermore, the lack of access and denial of education for historically marginalized castes furthers the narrative of their roles in society as being illiterate. Due to labels stuck on one's life at birth, their life would be widely different from another with a different label.

Cultural hegemony in many regions also explains how a ruling class maintains power not just through force, but by shaping society's shared beliefs, values, and norms (its culture) so that their worldview seems like "common sense," making the social hierarchy appear natural and inevitable, thereby gaining the consent of subordinate groups through institutions like media, schools, and religion. (Cole, 2025) This archaic system has even been abolished by law in 1947 when the government abolished untouchability with Article 15, stating that the Indian Constitution "prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth." Unfortunately, even though the rule of law states this, in certain parts of India, mostly in rural villages, this unjust and bizarre discrimination still occurs.

For instance, in 2012, the NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) issued a notice to the government that there was a social boycott of 13 Dalit families in the Ganjam district. These families were denied access to shops, water sources, temples, and irrigation. (Singh, 2025). In June 2025, two Dalit men were subjected to public humiliation and physical assault by a mob in the Kharigumma village" (Singh, 2025). As recently as October 11th, 2025, a person from the OBC community was humiliated by being forced to wash a man's feet, entirely for sharing an AI-generated meme. (Mohan, 2025). This discrimination continues to plague India; it is not an issue of the past. Therefore, the aims and objectives of this paper are to understand how films representing caste discrimination and oppression are received by dominant and non-dominant castes.

This study also seeks to shed light on how Indian cinema reinforces or challenges caste hierarchies. This is very valuable in understanding if the Indian film industry needs to change or pivot in a certain way to facilitate a deeper understanding of these prominent issues in Indian society.

The impact of caste representation in films is monumental. Popular cinema is essential in understanding the cultural politics of inequalities and identity in India today, as it remains a powerful position where caste and religion are continuously negotiated, normalized, and debated on (Singh, 2025).

2. Impact and Importance of Caste Representation in Films

Films that are anti-caste, or depict caste, are immensely important, especially for Indian audiences. Film, as a form of media in India, is a way for many of the 1.5 billion people to shape new and evolved perspectives on these outdated and archaic social structures. Indian film is the biggest instrument of communication with society as a whole, and nearly 12.5 million people watch films each week in theatres (Amarjit, 2020). Film is a straightforward and almost effortless mouthpiece for change and progress, particularly in a culture that consumes so much media, whether through sports like cricket, TV shows, movies, music, or news. The Stuart Hall theory of representation states that the media does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs meaning through language, signs, and images. (Jhally, 1997) Film festivals, OTT platforms like Netflix & Prime Video, and social media are all expanding to incorporate more and more media from historically marginalized communities like director Pa. Ranjith, expanding on more Dalit storytelling.

OTT media has made it possible to show stories that represent a more authentic and plausible version of Indian society. Social taboos, untouched by mainstream cinema because of censorship or commercial sensibility, are explored with sensitivity and fearlessness in web series and films. Mental health, gender identity, casteism, political satire, and urban disaffection are no longer marginal concerns. (Rani, 2025) Regional films, such as Tamil or Marathi films, address anti-caste themes and ideas far more than mainstream Bollywood (Kishore, 2022). In recent years, it is the Marathi, Tamil, and Malayalam filmmakers who have taken on the challenge of narrating stories that feature Dalit protagonists in an evocative and thought-provoking manner. However, the mainstream Indian cinema (Bollywood) still continues to evade the caste issue and creates a sense of hegemony between castes through its narratives.

The channels of information must also improve and expand to encompass a wider variety of films. However, the audiences and channels are changing after COVID-19, with the decline of blockbuster films and the rise of OTT. People are looking for new and interesting movies with different and unique themes. "With the rise of global streaming platforms and exposure to diverse genres from around the world, Indian viewers have developed a penchant for variety" (Koovejee, 2024). The fast-paced and dynamic environment of India suits media like films to deliver messages, and this paper will examine how films can represent marginalised castes in Indian cinema and interrogate whether they disrupt or reconstruct dominant caste narratives.

Additionally, while these films provide escapism, they also shape cultural and social values. Representation in the media is not just important for surface-level growth; it is

politics (Matic, 2023). Representation is a political act because who gets to tell the story defines how Indian society regards this topic and the next steps of justice and equality. It will also examine the audience's reception, whether the films spark awareness and debate, or result in backlash and censorship. Some films in the past, like Phule, have failed to accurately represent the realities of caste discrimination, and therefore have been banned in some states. These movies can also be frequently attacked by political parties if the film is not made by people from their community. For example, this year, Phule, a biopic on anti-caste icons, was moved from its release date and even had some parts of the film changed. It happened after several Brahmin groups complained that the film shows them in a bad light. The main point of these films is to be a platform to spread awareness and create change, but when some members of communities express that their interests are against them in films, the public backlash can be immense (The Hindu, 2025). The skewed display of historically marginalised castes, confined to rural India, living in moral corruption, needs to change to the new age urban dalits, who are educated and have a wider exposure to the world (Arora & Deka 2022).

3. Caste-Centric Films

Cinema acts as a mechanism for change in Indian society, taking into account both inequalities and offering possibilities for change. Films like 'Article 15' (2019), 'Pariyerum Perumal' (2018), 'Sadgati' (1981), 'Homebound' (2025), and 'Masaan' (2015), which this paper will be discussing, challenge stereotypical caste representations and reshape public perception about caste. These films are all anti-caste, but they are not all perfect. 'Article 15', for example, arguably the most popular of the three films, portrays an upper-class Brahmin solving a case for historically marginalized castes. The film is inspired by real-life caste discrimination crimes, such as the 2014 Baduan rape case, but it portrays saviorism, thereby depicting caste but also reinforcing social stigmas, hierarchies, and stereotypes. Article 15 also has other representations, discussing the LGBTQ community and the lack of tolerance for those who are part of the community in rural areas. The setting of the film takes place in the fictional village of Laalgoan, Uttar Pradesh, which highlights the caste discrimination and biases that still hold true in these areas. It is important for films and media to have proper representation to reshape social values and beliefs, as media influences everyday life and public perception.

In Pariyerum Perumal, another film the paper will be analysing, was directed by a Dalit filmmaker, Mari Selvaraj, and includes a more authentic portrayal of caste discrimination and systemic oppression. A boy from a historically marginalized caste secures a spot in a Law school but immediately receives prejudiced insults, with a student even saying that he only got in the school because of "quotas". This refers to the affirmative action policies that applied to

educational institutions and government jobs to promote social justice and representation. Pariyan is then beaten up by an upper-caste family for becoming close friends with their daughter, who was teaching him English. This calls attention to the caste discrimination in not only places like rural villages, but also in towns and educational institutions. Released in 2018, Pariyerum Perumal was a call to action to emphasise the need to change and rethink caste issues surrounding education. Scenes in the movie were perceived to be very realistic and superbly captured the immorality of caste discrimination. Mari Selvaraj underlined the inequality that exists in Indian society in the name of caste (Suganth, 2018). It also further emphasised the need for justice with the violence towards Dalits, with an eerie serial killer being shown killing marginalized castes throughout the film, violently killing without remorse. A call to action, which brought about change in the region,

Sadgati is a short film made in 1981 for Doordarshan, including well-renowned and award-winning actor Om Puri, and directed by Satyajit Ray, one of the most influential film directors in Indian cinema. Satyajit Ray's cinematography has been praised by Malcolm (2022) as being a deep and considerate documentation of people and their troubles. He has the magic of whispering to the viewers about the struggles of real life. Sadgati is a low-budget film about a low-caste man coming to a Brahmin to set an auspicious date for his daughter's wedding. This film, like the others, again tackles many issues. For example, the protagonist's daughter, whom he is marrying off, looks barely over the age of 10. Child marriage was another big problem, and still is in rural areas of the sub-continent. Ray addresses this as an aside to the main problem of caste discrimination - but it is not to be ignored because it is also a statement for change. The Brahmin then proceeds to overwork the protagonist to death, highlighting the lack of appreciation and gratitude for work done by historically marginalized castes and the social injustice surrounding these issues. The film exposes the hardships of caste discrimination in a pre-independent India, but still holds sentiments to today's world.

Homebound, by Neeraj Ghaywan, is a heart-wrenching film about two childhood friends dreaming of becoming police officers, and their struggles with relentless caste and religion-based discrimination. One of the friends is from a historically marginalized caste, and the other is Muslim, and throughout the film, countless real stories of bigotry are shown and presented through the lens of these two characters. The two friends get stuck trying to return to their home village after working in Surat to save money for their families, a distance of over 1500km. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, everything is shut down, and they have to face the journey by themselves. The heartbreaking story is paired with technical brilliance, too. The cinematography in this film is one of the best in Bollywood, using drones for birds-eye shots, visual imagery with shots that make audiences step back and say "wow", as

well as beautiful colours throughout the film. Sound design, lighting, and cinematography all elevate the story (Vyavahare, 2025). India's nomination for the Oscar in 2025, this feature film produced by Dharma Productions, is a key step to hearing stories of discrimination in mainstream society that would not be otherwise heard.

The last film this paper will be discussing is *Masaan*. Also directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, a National Film Award winner. As with most caste-related films that depict discrimination and barriers that hold back people based on labels, *Masaan* is a heart-wrenching film revolving around two stories. One of the girls, Devi, who is blackmailed by the police and has to make money to cover the cost, after being caught being "indecent" with her boyfriend, who commits suicide out of shame. The second story is of a boy named Deepak, belonging to a historically marginalized community, who works on the Ghats of the Ganga, burning bodies. We see Deepak's hopes of escaping marginalization due to his caste and the discrimination he faces due to it, as well as Devi's heartbreak and the situation that the corruption of the police has put her in. Their stories later intertwine, but the main themes of the film are hope, loss, and, unfortunately, tragedy. This paper will discuss how all of these films previously mentioned are perceived by audiences from different castes and whether cinema acts as a catalyst for change.

4. Materials and Methods

Aim: The aim of this study is to understand how films representing caste discrimination and oppression are received by dominant and non-dominant castes. This study also seeks to shed light on how Indian cinema reinforces or challenges caste hierarchies.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How do dominant and non-dominant castes understand the portrayal of Caste narratives in Indian cinema?

This 'understanding' entails both perceived realism as well as moral judgement, which is useful to understand the second question, as it sets us up to see if audiences are picking up on the caste stereotypes that may be portrayed.

RQ2: Does Indian cinema reinforce or challenge caste stereotypes?

This will highlight to us whether the Indian Cinema scene is helping or hindering the caste issue and caste-based discrimination in India.

Participants and sampling: Respondents on Google Reviews were categorised using surname-based and region-specific indicators into four groups: General Castes (dominant caste groups), Historically Marginalised Castes (HMC), Religious Minorities (RM), and an Undefined category

comprising surnames that are cross-categorical, ambiguous, or not readily classifiable. The study recognises that surname- and region-based classification is an imperfect proxy for caste identification and may not fully capture the complexity or fluidity of caste identities. However, this approach remains analytically useful given the nature of the data source. Google Reviews constitute unsolicited, voluntarily generated public narratives rather than responses elicited through researcher-administered instruments. As a result, these accounts are less likely to be shaped by social desirability bias or self-presentation concerns commonly associated with survey-based data, thereby offering a comparatively unobtrusive lens for interpreting patterns of representation and discourse across social groups. For *Pariyerum Perumal*, there were 1121 ratings on Google Reviews, and a total of 37 reviews were analysed. For *Article 15*, there were 2731 ratings on Google Reviews, and a total of 62 reviews were analysed. For *Sadgati*, there were 68 ratings on Google Reviews, and a total of 21 reviews were analysed, due to the fact that the other reviews could not be easily categorized or were written by reviewers using fake names. For *Homebound*, there were a total of 394 ratings on Google Reviews, and a total of 47 reviews were analysed. Lastly, for *Masaan*, there were a total of 1669 ratings on Google Reviews, and a total of 64 reviews were analysed.

Five films were purposely selected to ensure variation across language, popularity, and year of release. The selected films were *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Article 15*, *Sadgati*, *Homebound*, and *Masaan*. For each film, the top twenty Google Reviews were sampled across the full range of star ratings, from five-star to one-star reviews, to capture both positive and negative audience responses. The timeframe of the films is between 1981 (*Sadgati*) and 2025 (*Homebound*). The paper did not take into account the age or gender of reviewers on Google movie reviews, but rather focused on approximately the top 20 reviews per rating, for all movies. Reviews hailed from people of different ages, genders, and castes. Keeping in mind that certain films like *Sadgati* had limited reviews on Google, the present research had to ensure that all movies got equal reviewer representation. In order to attain an equal number of reviewer comments, the number of reviews per star rating was limited to approximately 20 reviews per movie. A total of 231 reviewer comments were analysed in the current study.

Data analysis procedure: The reviews were systematically transferred to spreadsheets for analysis, with each film assigned a separate dataset containing reviewer names, star ratings, and full review texts. Given its earlier release period, *Sadgati* had a substantially smaller volume of available reviews compared to the other films, a limitation that was taken into account during analysis. Particular emphasis was placed on recording reviewer names and textual content, as these were used to infer caste and religious affiliations where possible.

Following data compilation, reviews were coded and organised into broader thematic categories, namely: Audience Impact: Emotion and Reflection, Recognition and Representation of Caste, Filmic Craft and Persuasive Strategies, and, where applicable, Discontents and Counter-Readings. An additional category, Unique Elements, was used to capture film-specific themes or responses that did not meaningfully align with the broader thematic framework.

To facilitate comparative analysis across films and respondent categories, tables and graphical representations were generated. All data collection was conducted during October 2025; consequently, reviews posted after this period were not included in the analysis. Thematic analysis was employed and carried out manually. The Google Reviews

were coded according to whether the perception expressed was favorable or unfavorable toward the film and its portrayal of caste. This was based on the categories and then put into themes for further analysis. Graphical analysis was done using Google Sheets Charts.

5. Results and Discussion

The present study compares different groups on the basis of caste categories, namely, General, Historically Marginalised Communities (HMC), Religious Minorities (RM), and Undefined (Surnames which were difficult to categorize under one caste category). Figures 1 to 5 show a graphical representation of how members of different caste categories responded to the movies under consideration.

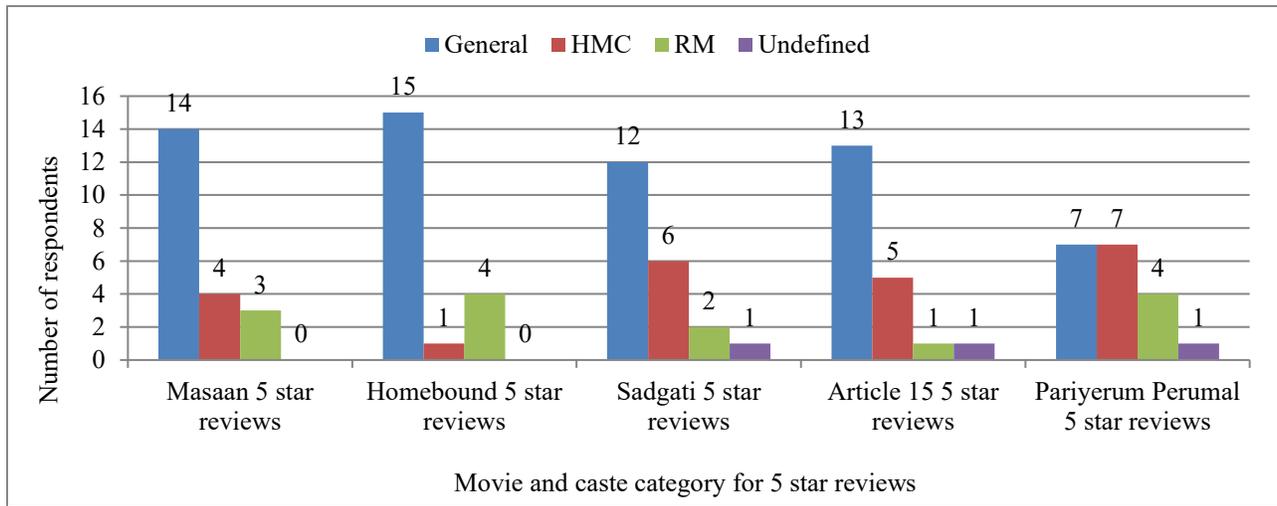


Fig. 1 Shows the breakdown of 5-star reviews on Google for the selected movies across different caste categories

According to Figure 1, the most varied 5-star reviews out of these 5 films are Pariyerum Perumal with 7 5-star reviews from both General and Historically Marginalised castes, 4 5-star reviews from religious minorities, and one 5-star review which was from an undefined respondent. It also has the most reviews from categories other than general.

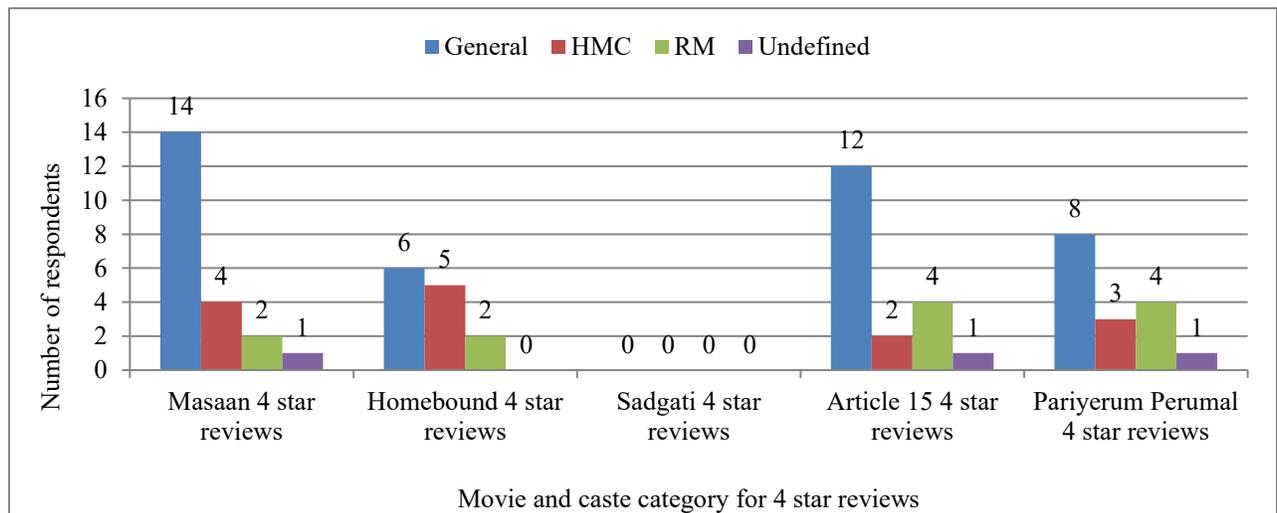


Fig. 2 Shows the breakdown of 4-star reviews on Google for the selected movies across different caste categories.

According to *Figure 2*, films like *Article 15* and *Masaan*, which have been out for several years in mainstream cinema, seem to be very popular. In this figure, *Sadgati* reports no 4-star reviews across different caste categories.

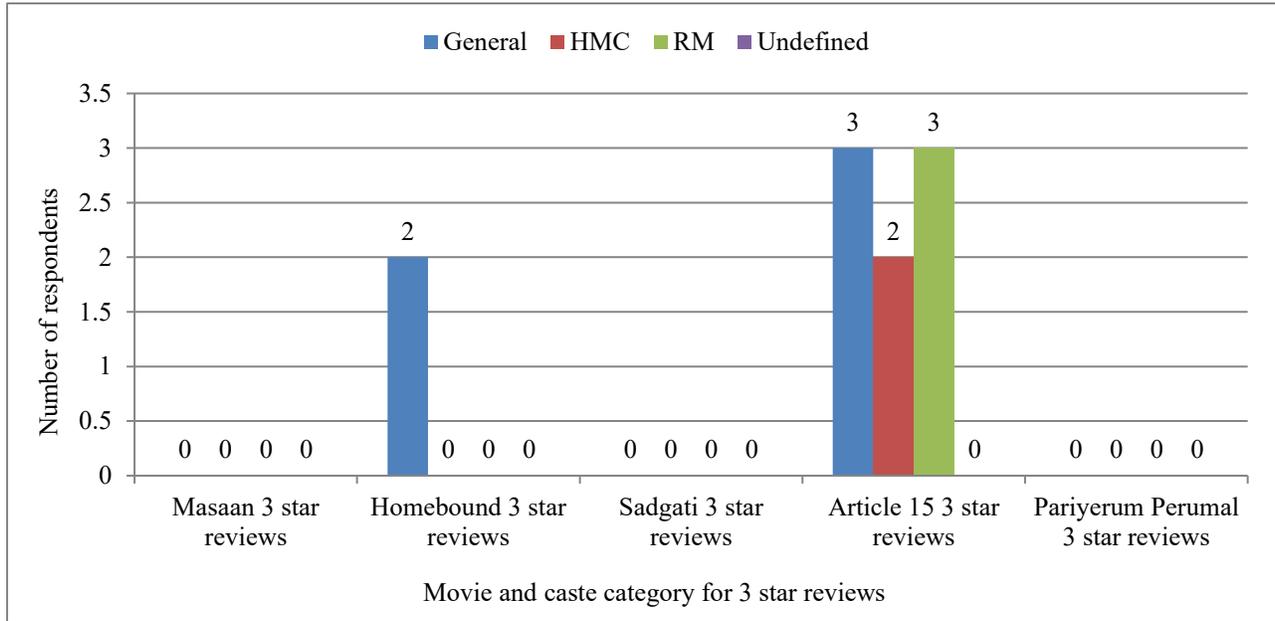


Fig. 3 Shows the distribution of 3-star Google reviews for selected films across different caste categories

Figure 3 underlines the fact that people tend to have polarising opinions about caste in Indian Cinema, rather than discussing these films in a neutral manner. The topics brought up in these kinds of films bring about emotions, which is why

emotional engagement was such a regular code. Therefore, society tends to be passionate about its responses, even on a public platform like Google Reviews.

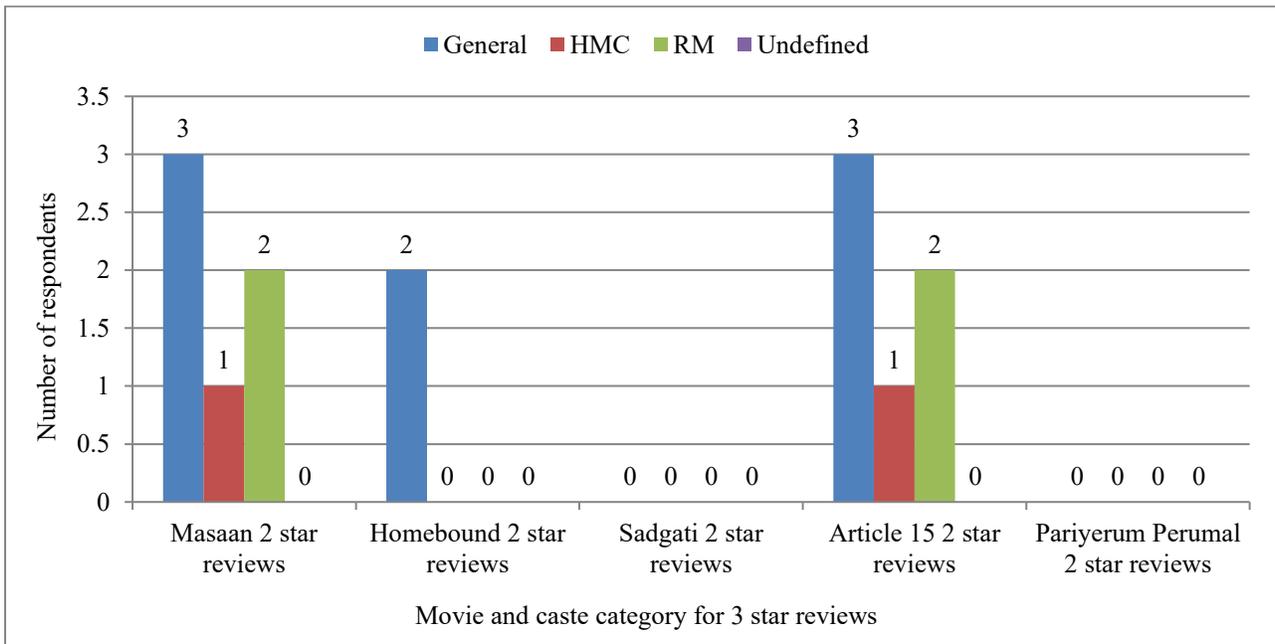


Fig. 4 Distribution of 2-star Google reviews for selected films across different caste categories

According to *Figure 4*, the negative comments for movies like *Masaan* and *Article 15*, the two most popular films on the list of five, seem to be coming from a range of categories. On

the flip side, *Homebound* only has negative reviews from the General categories, which is true for 3-star and 1-star reviews too.

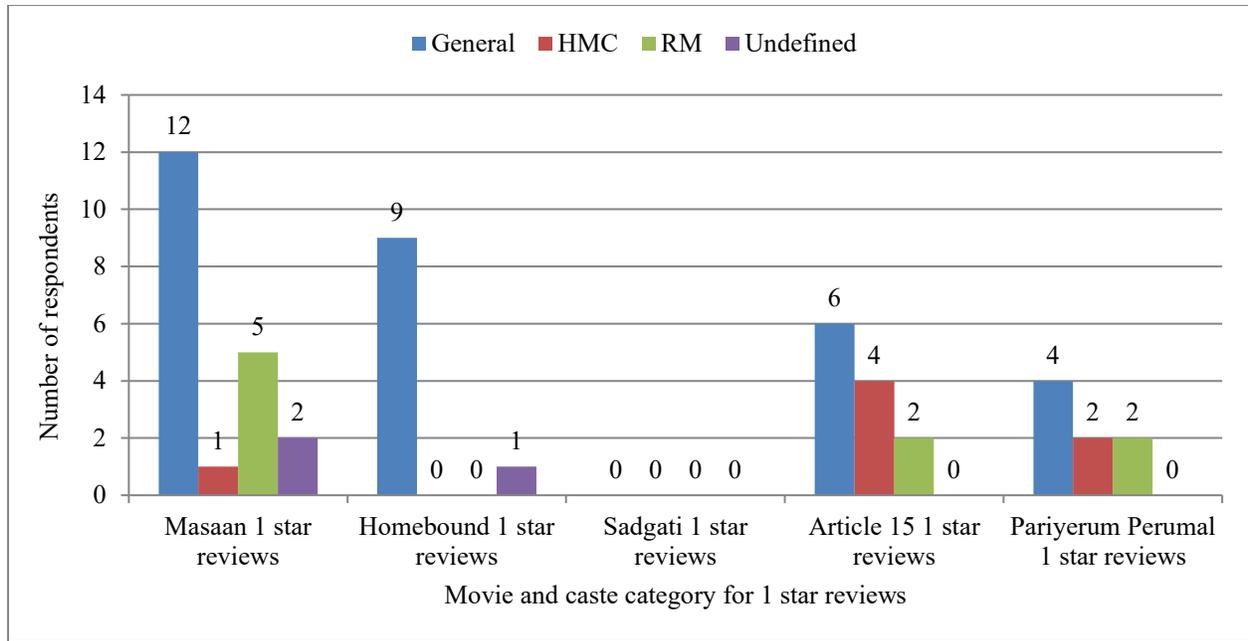


Fig. 5 Distribution of 1-star Google reviews for selected films across different caste categories

Figure 5 reinforces the message that Homebound reviewers who were upset with the representation of the film were only from the General caste, and therefore could not speak from experience about caste or religious bigotry. Instead, these respondents were upset with how the “majority” was represented, expressing this in their many reviews.

Masaan, Article 15, and Pariyerum Perumal did have some dissatisfaction from historically marginalized castes and religious minorities, though, most likely because of the heroism shown in a couple of these movies, where higher castes are seen to be “saving” those in the minority.

Table 1. shows the thematic analysis of Google Reviews for all the selected films

Themes	Codes	Description
Audience Impact: Emotion & Reflection	Cognitive impact	Focuses on the psychological effect on viewers: emotional resonance, reflection, moral evaluation, and calls for societal change.
	Emotional Engagement	
	Call to action	
Recognition & Representation of Caste	Caste oppression and symbolism	Captures how reviewers interpret the film’s portrayal of caste realities, oppression, symbolism, and representational politics. Central to the research question on caste representation in cinema.
	Counter narrative	
Filmic Craft and Persuasive Strategies	Perceived Realism	Shows how cinematography, direction, music, and acting shape the film’s message and influence viewers’ interpretations of caste.
	Acting	
	Directing	
	Cinematography	
Discontents & Counter-Readings	Music	Represents negative or resistant interpretations: critiques of political bias, stereotyping, boredom, or lack of nuance. Important for balanced audience reception analysis.
	Representation Critique	
	Politically Incorrect	
	Boring/Unoriginal	
	Slow plot	
	Unanswered questions	
	Weak directing	
Waste of time		

	Propaganda elements	
Unique Elements	Elderly discrimination	These are the elements that are unique to each film, with the first code being shown in <i>Sadgati</i> and the next two in <i>Homebound</i> .
	Government discrimination	Exam
	Corporate harassment	

In the next stage, this paper will discuss the thematic analysis of the movies undertaken in the study, and what that means for society as a whole.

5.1. Film-Wise Interpretation of the Thematic Analysis

5.1.1. Pariyerum Perumal

The first theme has 3 codes: Cognitive impact, Emotional Engagement, and Call to action.

According to a respondent from the general caste, the movie had an incredible cognitive impact as per their review, which stated the film was: *“One of the most intriguing storylines told to perfection.”* Emotional engagement was also spoken about regularly with another respondent from the general caste, saying: *“The setting, the characters, and their emotions are the strength of this masterpiece.”* Another respondent talked about the Call to action, commenting that they: *“would like to say that this film is a must watch for every people if we really want to understand the cruelty of this nasty practice which is so deeply imbued in our society.”*

The second theme has three codes: Caste oppression and symbolism, Counter-narrative, and Perceived Realism. Caste oppression and symbolism came up in almost every response, as it is a core part of the film. These respondents seemed to be mostly from historically marginalized castes, but the caste categorization was approximate and might not be 100% accurate. One of the respondents said the director used: *“the Dog Character as a metaphor to prove the point of view from a low caste person who is oppressed and crushed but fighting hard for survival.”* The counter-narrative was mentioned too, with a commenter saying that: *“This film shows a part of the ugly truth of our society in which we take pride in living shame on us.”* The third code is Perceived Realism, where audiences expressed that the film was realistic according to their perspectives. Another respondent from a historically marginalized caste said, *“This movie deserves attention. It talks about a very relevant issue. It is a must-see for every Indian citizen.”*

The third theme, Filmic Craft and Persuasive Strategies, is much more subjective than the other themes, but it is still important in discussing film. This theme has four codes: Acting, Directing, Cinematography, and Music. Acting was praised regularly, a respondent from a religious minority specifically commenting: *“Powerful performance by Kathir. Never saw Kathir in it, it was Pariyerum Perumal BABL.*

Casting was excellent.” Directing was done well, too, with another respondent from a religious minority saying: *“Bravo to the director and crew on much of the thought-provoking storyline.”*

Lastly, the theme Discontents & Counter-Readings covers the one-star reviewers, who were unhappy with the film for three main reasons, which are covered by the codes, Representational Critique, Politically Incorrect, and a Boring or Unoriginal storyline. The most thorough review came from someone part of a historically marginalized caste who stated: *“They stereotype Tamils as low caste and poor Dravidians, and High caste are straight up evil and disgusting human beings. No nuanced depiction whatsoever can be found in these movies. They subtly refer to the political message that Tamils are not Hindus and are really Poor, Oppressed, and Uneducated.”* Covering all three codes. Another respondent, from the general caste, wrote: *“Typical South movie. Same old story and caste system”*, which could show that some audience members saw unoriginality in the storyline.

Overall, the critique for Pariyerum Perumal has been positive from the general castes, historically marginalized castes, and religious minorities, praising performance, engagement, and representation. However, there are some viewers, from historically marginalized castes and general castes, who are unhappy with the way the story was presented in this black and white way, and wanted some “nuanced depiction”.

Article 15

Reviewers who viewed Article 15, hailing from general castes as per this paper’s categorization, claimed that: *“It’s a hard-hitting film which is very bold and direct given the subject of ‘Caste-based discrimination’.”* Another respondent stated that, *“the point that the movie drives home is amazing, it’s one of those movies where once you walk out of theatres, the principles, the values and the messages still remain in your mind to ponder on.”* The third and fourth codes are meaningful and impactful, which all respondents expressed in different ways. One respondent wrote: *“I believe you can’t just act in a movie like this without having thought about what can be done to bring a change in our society. I hope it was not just made to make money but to actually create awareness to [the] majority of the population who are not aware of these things still happening in society.”* This review highlights just how much media and film can be a powerful tool for change,

especially in India. Awareness is an important step in solving issues, and certainly those that are deeply ingrained in society.

The second theme, Recognition & Representation of Caste, was also mentioned thoroughly. It was discussed by a respondent from a historically marginalized caste when they very passionately wrote that: *“Through its powerful narrative and evocative storytelling, Article 15 shines a light on the harsh realities faced by marginalized communities in India.”*

Additionally, the code of this theme - caste discrimination- was expressed by another member of a historically marginalized caste: *“As a viewer, Article 15 is a compelling and thought-provoking film that left a lasting impact on me. The movie delves into the dark realities of caste-based discrimination in India, shedding light on a topic that often remains hidden or ignored in mainstream narratives.”* This review again underlines the power the media has in spreading information, and how messages of caste-based discrimination need to be more widespread and mainstream for there to be changes in society. There was also praise in other aspects with the third code, perceived realism seeming to come up several times, with viewers perceiving the film as realistic and honest.

One more respondent from a historically marginalized caste stated: *“Movies like these deserve more than just a 5-star rating. It’s rare we see such honest and bold attempts in Indian cinema. [The] Movie perfectly showcases the bitter truths that exist in our society, which we are completely unaware of.”*

The third theme, Filmic Craft and Persuasive Strategies, has four codes - Directing, Cinematography, Music, and Acting. The latter was praised by almost every single review, 30 times in the selected reviews of *Article 15* for this paper, especially the acting of Ayushman Kharana, with many reviewers enthusiastically praising him and the rest of the cast.

A respondent wrote: *“Phenomenal performance by Ayushman Khurana....one of his best performances by far!!! Absolutely loved it!!!”* A respondent from a religious minority talked specifically on filmic craft with his review: *“In this tale, the director questions a lot of issues that are still prevalent... Absolutely one of the finest cinematographies in Bollywood recently. Beautiful shots of mornings, swampy lands, and nights. Wonderful editing and coloring. Perfect casting. Shows the utilisation and synchronization of brilliant supporting casts. Fine performances by everyone. Hats off to the director for bringing up such sensitive issues and beautifully explaining them in a mainstream method.”* Being one of the most mainstream films talked about in this paper, good film techniques are crucial, and *Article 15* does this well, incorporating beautiful visuals and brilliant acting to anchor audiences.

On the other hand, there have been many negative reviews for the film, which is the fourth theme, Discontents & Counter-Readings. Many complaints, such as unanswered questions, weak directing, propaganda elements, and bad delivery, were all expressed. A respondent from a religious minority covered some of the discontents, *“I felt the movie was very slow and not unidirectional in its flow... The toggling between the primary plot and the larger plot of caste-based politics kept happening at an irregular pace to the point that you would soon lose interest in both of them.”* Apart from the bad delivery, some respondents felt: *“The ending also had some unanswered questions, like what happened to the main antagonist Ramlal Niharia, who wasn’t even shown in the movie, yet he was controlling the police, CBI, and even got Nishad murdered. Overall, a one-time watch for me. Could’ve been better in its execution.”*

It seems that societal groups like religious minorities, historically marginalised castes, and general castes have a common opinion that most of the themes and concepts shown in the film were shown correctly, just that the delivery was subpar. The film was a hit at the box office with a budget of roughly ₹25 Crore and earning ₹93-94 Crore worldwide. However, it did seem heroic with an upper caste policeman shown as the hero, saving the lower castes. Skye Arundhati Thomas (2019) brought this up in his opinion column, mentioning that *“The film regurgitates an old Bollywood trope of the upper-caste ‘Brahmin saviour’, and it slowly becomes clear that Ranjan’s naivety is also that of the film’s makers.”* This possibly even cemented caste divisions and stereotypes while trying to dismantle them.

Sadgati

One respondent from a historically marginalized caste talked about emotional engagement in the short film, talking about his own experiences: *“Even today, the pain of being called a Chamar haunts us. Such a plight of Dalits is very much disturbing. Self-dignity of human beings is still a question to society”.* There is also undoubtedly a huge cognitive impact of a film of this nature, and this was expressed by another reviewer from a historically marginalized caste, who said that: *“This movie has the power to change a person. Masterpiece.”* The third code, powerful storytelling was mentioned by a respondent saying *Sadgati* was a *“Heart touching true story written by prem ji. It is focus[ed] on that day and today.”*

A reviewer from a religious minority in India mentioned that the film was: *“A must watch to understand untouchability and the power of religion in India.”* Again, a respondent speaking about similar personal experiences that have been brought to light by films like these. Lastly, for this theme, the code of Perceived Realism is also present with a comment from a respondent from the general caste, saying: *“Very good film, shows the exploitation of lower caste by the upper caste”.* Exploitation of those who are marginalized or a minority

seems to be a huge theme in responses, especially after such a thought-provoking film.

Filmic Craft and Persuasive Strategies seemed to be present in all 27 reviews, with the codes being Acting, Directing, Cinematography, and Editing. One respondent from a general caste praised both directing and acting, stating: *“A Masterpiece of Satyajit Ray with memorable acting by Om Puri Ji.”* Another responded, also from a general caste, with praise for the cinematography and editing: *“Camera did well with the shadow and light. And this movie is noted for its editing too, which itself will help a fresh viewer, unaware of Indian culture, to understand the different hierarchy among us.”*

The response on Google Reviews for *Sadgati* was overwhelmingly positive, with only 5-star reviews from all castes and religions. Nonetheless, the film was made in 1981 and was broadcast on Doordarshan, long before the days of Google Reviews. Also, since it was a film by Satyajit Ray, one of the most influential directors in Indian cinema history, people might have a skewed perception, as some might disagree with the legacy he left behind. There may be criticism for the movie, but because of the gap in time between production and widespread access to reviewing systems, they might have only been verbally expressed.

Homebound

The film certainly had a cognitive impact on all audiences, and a respondent from the general category expressed it well: *“This is a powerful, thought-provoking movie that forces you to reflect on your own privileges and confront the harsh struggles faced by so many in our country. It portrays, with heartbreaking honesty, the government’s glaring inadequacies and the devastating impact of systemic failures on ordinary lives.”* With the film being put on OTT platforms like Netflix, viewership was huge, with Times Entertainment exclaiming that *“‘Homebound’ takes OTT by storm”*. This is great for awareness and the spreading of this important message. The second code, emotional engagement, was the most discussed code out of the 117 reviews. A respondent from the general caste category commented, *“The word heartbreaking doesn’t do justice to this movie. It is so beautiful it stuns you into silence, crippling you with grief that you never before knew existed. I wouldn’t be lying if I said that every single person in the theatre was weeping their hearts out.”*

For the code of Caste Oppression and Symbolism, a respondent from a religious minority, which to clarify is anyone who is not hindu, wrote that: *“This movie is an absolute masterpiece—exactly the kind of cinema audiences long to see. It not only captivates but also sheds light on the struggles faced by the lower caste, a reality that everyone should be aware of. The film portrays these hardships with remarkable depth and sensitivity, making it both powerful and*

unforgettable”. The corporate bigotry shown in this film is saddening, and is a perspective not talked about in a widespread sense. Another respondent from a religious minority mentioned that the film showcased *“how people are desperate to get government jobs and what kind of problems they face.”* This was yet another problem brought up by the film, specifically the hatred towards historically marginalized castes taking up “quotas” and the sentiment that they are being “handed everything to them on a platter” where in reality they face many hardships and struggle a lot with anti-caste bigotry. There is also perceived realism in this film, with many respondents mentioning how the issues presented are parallel to reality. *“This film doesn’t feel like just a story. It feels like someone held up a mirror in front of us. It makes you ask yourself: how much do we take for granted? How many people suffer quietly, with no one noticing? The way it shows how broken systems crush simple lives is honest, raw, and unforgettable.”* The film itself is based on a true story with a very realistic presentation.

The third theme discusses Acting, Directing, and Cinematography, all of which were done superbly. One of the two main characters in the film is muslim, and therefore goes through hardships and struggles of his own, separate from those of the other boy, Chandan. who is shown to have come from a historically marginalized caste. Ishan Khattar, who plays Shoaib - the first boy, acts beautifully in this film, and also has a Muslim connection, as his mother is Muslim. According to the Indian Express, *“Ishaan Khatter says he’s half Hindu, half Muslim but ‘fully human’”*. The perfect message for this heartbreaking film. The challenges of inter-religion marriage in India are immense, which the actor might have faced as he was a child of that union. However, he has a Hindu surname, which most likely helped mitigate most religious bigotry against him. A respondent corroborated this with her comment: *“Ishaan and Vishal are stellar with their earnest portrayals of Shoaib and Chandan. The supporting cast is great as well.”* Directing was highly praised, too. With the number of different issues brought up in this film. The way Neeraj Ghaywan, 10 years after *Masaan* - which will be discussed next, has brought together so many struggles, it’s simply incredible. A respondent from a historically marginalized caste went as far as to say that *Homebound* was the *“Best Direction film of 2025”*. However, one thing is for certain - the cinematography in this film was one of the best in 2025. The crew made such gorgeous frames that gave so much to the story. As a respondent said *“A must watch movie. It touches your heart with nothing but the truth. Beautifully done. Every shot, every scene, every sequence, every transition says something.”* Birds flying high in the sky expressing freedom, drone shots showing the perilous journey, and how much Chandan and Shoaib still have to travel, and beautiful lighting adding so much to the film.

The fourth theme, Discontents & Counter-Readings, was very bare with not many comments compared to the five-star

reviews. A respondent from the general caste was very unhappy with the way the themes were represented, saying that *“again, the Muslim and Dalit card is played as happens in Bollywood movies, especially Karan Johar movies. It seemed to be anti-Hindu... It was a story of two boys from poor families. They could be Hindus too, but Bollywood has to portray Hindus badly and others as innocent.”* This respondent is obviously upset that the hardships which those who aren't of the majority face on a daily basis are being showcased in mainstream cinema. However, just because issues of minorities are being shown, it doesn't mean that those in the majority are shown as villains. Despite the claims by the reviewer, there have been remarkably high reviews given to the movie by people of all religions, even by general Hindus, with many hindu characters and general caste characters seen to be helping the protagonists throughout the film, notably the sales expert who first told Shoaib that he has a knack for sales. Furthermore, there was not a single negative comment from a historically marginalized caste or religious minority, which could highlight how realistically this movie portrayed their struggles. On the other hand, there were many obscure comments from the general castes. *“Director showed a skewed perspective of the nation”, “Just another propaganda from the Bollywood”, and “not so good storyline only justifies Muslims as patriots for India”,* were some of the sentiments written on Google Reviews.

With negative comments only coming from the general castes, historically marginalized castes and religious minorities seemed to perceive the film well. However, as the categorisation was approximate, it is not certain. Additionally, as the film is India's nomination for best international feature film at the Oscars, the work provides a critical opportunity to analyse other demographics outside of India's reception of the film, and whether it will spread even more awareness abroad about caste and religious discrimination.

Masaan

Cognitive impact was discussed in many audience members' reviews because of the gravity of the situation the two protagonists find themselves in. A respondent from the general category mentioned that: *“Every aspect of this movie is so mesmerizing. It captivates your attention fully and till the end never let[s] you [be] distract[ed] even for a little bit... After watching this movie, you will appreciate whatever you have in your life.”* The other main code that we have seen in all the film reviews is emotional engagement. In order for there to be awareness about topics, engagement is necessary, and an appeal to pathos is a great way to do that. Another respondent from the general category put it simply: *“Masaan is a poignant and powerful exploration of love, loss, and redemption. Set against the stunning backdrop of Varanasi, the film weaves together two poignant stories that will leave you spellbound.”* The film's heartbreaking descriptions are what make it such a powerful film, and it is why many people rate it so highly.

Caste oppression and symbolism were clearly showcased throughout the film, and many respondents from historically marginalized castes expressed this through their reviews: *“The way they depicted the sufferings of common people, the perpetual failure of luck, never-ending pain, the condition when one gets stuck reluctantly due to sudden consequences, unable to do anything rather than to suffer. Heartbreaking movie, but a masterpiece worth watching.”* Another respondent from the historically marginalised caste category also touched on how the movie provided a counter-narrative to the usual content being shown in Bollywood and mainstream Indian cinema, saying that: *“It's a different angle focusing on the controversial issues like inter-caste relations, pre-martial physical relations, the mental and physical sufferings, and a lot more!!!”* The film was also perceived to be very realistic by respondents from historically marginalized castes, with a respondent expressing: *“Masaan clearly discusses social discrimination like sexual morality, casteism, and inequalities... The plot of the movie is very interesting and discusses the political and social conditions in India, where caste and private sex were considered taboo.”* This corroborates the fact that the Issues being brought up in *Masaan* are realistic to the reality in India.

Acting was praiseworthy in this powerful film, with both Vicky Kaushal, Sanjay Mishra, Shweta Tripathi, and Richa Chadha all acting superbly. One respondent from the general category mentioned that: *“The actors have flawlessly gotten into their roles and portrayed the character that'd stay in you even years after watching the movie.”* Editing and directing were notable too, with another respondent from the general category saying that: *“its compelling storyline, skillful editing, and masterful direction by Neeraj Ghaywan create a narrative that lingers in my heart and mind long after the credits roll.”* The cinematography was truly marvelous in this film, too. Beautiful frames that are similar in wonder to *Homebound*, also by Neeraj Ghaywan. A third respondent from the general caste said: *“The cinematography is breathtaking, capturing the essence of the Ganges and the city's vibrant culture.”* Filmic Craft and Persuasive Strategies were done very well according to all categories, but there were some grievances.

The fourth theme has two codes. The first is representational critique, with a respondent from the general category thinking that the movie was very mediocre: *“I dont realize how this movie is so acclaimed. The performance of all actors is average. It's nothing like they have done something extraordinary. Didn't even realize the message what the director wants to say.”* The second code is “Not entertaining,” which was the opinion of many who gave the film 1-star on Google Reviews. They were spread across categories, with a respondent from the general category expressing that *“This movie is so boring and bland.”*, while a respondent from the religious minority category said *“Whatt!?? Is it a movie??? It doesn't have any story. I recommend not to watch this.”* Another respondent, from the historically marginalized caste

category, mentioned the movie: “*Might be critically acclaimed, but it almost bored me to death.*”

Mixed responses through the different categories in both discontent and praise for the film could mean that, regardless of caste or religion, the movie hit home differently due to personal biases. There was a majority of respondents from the general category, but that is to be expected, and is true for all the data collected for each film used as a case study for this paper. Overseas, the critique was positive, with the movie winning the FIPRESCI Prize at the Cannes Film Festival (2015) in the Un Certain Regard Section and nominated for multiple awards in the Melbourne and Busan film festivals, all noteworthy festivals (Press Trust of India, 2015).

6. Discussion

The two questions this paper proposed at the start of the paper were: How do dominant and non-dominant castes understand the portrayal of Caste narratives in Indian cinema? As well as: Does Indian cinema reinforce or challenge caste stereotypes? To answer these questions, one needs to compare the critiques of the films in the four different categories.

For *Pariyerum Perumal*, the film was negatively received by historically marginalized castes and general castes, who were unhappy that the story did not have “nuanced depictions” of caste discrimination. Additionally, in *Pariyerum Perumal*, we could see how the language and region of the film, with the film being the only one in Tamil from the selected list, influenced how viewers reacted. With a viewer from the general caste, according to this paper’s categorization, saying that: “All Dravidian movies are like this. They stereotype Tamils as low caste and poor Dravidians, and the high caste are straight up evil and disgusting human beings.” The fact that the movie was from this southern region affected how this audience member viewed the film. Another respondent said, “Typical South movie. Same old story and caste system.” This again highlights how the takeaway from the film changes with region and language. Mainstream Bollywood stories are always in Hindi, and we can see how, because the film was made in Tamil, some audience members perceive it differently.

Secondly, for *Article 15*, all categories were unhappy with the heroism shown in the film, which possibly even cemented caste divisions and stereotypes while trying to dismantle them. Due to the gap in time since its release, *Sadgati* has received completely positive reviews from all categories. For *Homebound*, as discussed previously, the negative comments only came from the general castes - mainly from people who had beliefs that the film was anti-majority (Hindu). Lastly, for *Masaan*, all categories had a critical opinion of the film, mostly from general and religious minority categories; this was not due to an error in representation, but instead because they were not entertained. Other popular media show that Brahmin groups opposed *Article 15*, with a representative of

the Brahmin Sena saying, “The film is showcasing the Brahmin community as mean, and rapists, and that is why we are revolting against it. Even after this, if the movie is released, Brahmin communities from around the country will lodge FIR against Anubhav Sinha”. In addition to the protests, the group also defaced the film posters (Sabrang India, 2019).

The general trend seems to be that dominant and non-dominant castes both understand Caste narratives in Indian cinema, and the majority of society wants to see more caste-based cinema to raise awareness about prominent issues in Indian society. However, do these films reinforce or challenge caste stereotypes?

According to the data gathered, *Article 15* seems to be one of the only films where respondents expressed that the film reinforced caste stereotypes because of the heroism shown by the protagonist. The Brahmin hero is the main focus of the film, which strengthens the stereotype of the Brahmin saviour, with the caste-based discrimination issue being sidelined and reduced to a mere plotline (Digra, 2024). This might make for a more enjoyable and entertaining film, as mentioned by some respondents, however it takes away from the actual message of the film, which is the critique of caste based discrimination in India continues by mentioning how the heroism in this film can be compared to the White Man’s Burden, but instead of a white man, there is an upper-caste man’s burden to protect historically marginalized castes and help them rise above their struggles like caste-based discrimination (Digra, 2024). Apart from those in the audience who realise this stereotype, a noteworthy portion of Indian society will most likely take away the message that historically marginalised castes are unable to help themselves, which is absurdly untrue. Stardom in society is a major factor as to why mainstream cinema in India, in general, relies on saviour figures. Big names like Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan tend to play roles that highlight saviorism, like in *Ra.One* or *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*. These “masalfied” films showcasing saviorism tend to do very well at the Box Office, with the former grossing over US\$35 million worldwide (IMDb, 2011). Therefore, many films, not just caste-related films, have saviour roles. There are also mythological roots, with figures like Rama and Krishna playing saviour roles throughout the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. This all culminates in many films showcasing saviorism in the Indian Caste scene.

Additionally, *Pariyerum Perumal* had some respondents who mentioned that stereotypes were reinforced about the nature of caste issues. This is one perspective that believes that even with the repeated telling of caste-based differences, there is no change in real life. This is touched on at the end of the film, too, with the protagonist telling his partner’s father, of a higher caste, *that the cycle of oppression won’t break unless he changes*. Change needs to be in society as a whole, and one perspective brought up by some respondents is that it will not happen. The stories and narratives of historically marginalized

castes are not treated with worth in Indian cinema, just like how they are treated in reality (Singh & Azeez, 2021).

The stereotypes are not necessarily in the nature of caste issues, or in the dialogue or narration, but in something as simple as costume design and body language, with a man from a historically marginalized caste usually portrayed with an underdeveloped, flimsy body and seemingly mentally empty appearance in Indian cinema. The film scene is also still mostly unexplored and untouched by Dalit issues or narratives (Singh, 2020). There are only very rare occasions, like in *Homebound*, for example, that historically marginalized characters are shown as strong, resilient individuals capable of defying societal norms (Gomathi, 2023).

Other literature discussing caste narratives in mainstream cinema brings up the point that these caste-based films are mainly used for entertainment instead of for social change. They benefit from mass appeal and maximization of profit instead of portraying real caste issues and struggles (Singh & Azeez, 2021). In most cases, awareness and social change are secondary to profit. The good thing is cinema is beginning to engage with caste and religion both as a structural and an interpersonal force, while also having a nuanced portrayal to reflect the persistent challenges and complexity of life as a historically marginalized caste or religious minority (Verma, 2023).

7. Conclusion

The present paper aimed to understand how films representing caste discrimination and oppression are received by dominant and non-dominant castes. The study also tried to shed light on how Indian cinema reinforces or challenges caste hierarchies. The findings showed that, although most reviews had similar opinions no matter the caste or religious background of the respondents, issues like heroism in *Article 15*, and an unsimplified depiction of caste-based discrimination in India in *Pariyerum Perumal*, seemed to be present. We can see from Stuart Hall's representational theory, mentioned in the introduction, that the images on screen capture meaning that audience members then interpret in different ways. For example, it was found that certain films, such as *Homebound*, the most recent film out of the case study films, had negative comments only coming from the general castes. This highlighted how historically marginalized castes and religious minorities seemed to perceive the film well and represented a possible positive step forward in the film industry, with representation for both caste and religious minorities shown in the film.

On society at large, this paper has found that both general and historically marginalized castes understand the

representation of caste in Indian Cinema, though there are some stereotypes and superficial portrayals of historically marginalized castes and religious minorities that still have to be broken instead of constantly reinforced.

Limitations of the study:

1. The data that was analysed in this paper was analyzed manually, which restricted the quantity of data that one could analyse in a given moment.
2. For certain films, like those written in the 1980s, the reviews may be old. With Google Reviews being released in 2007, many respondents might have changed their perspectives on certain issues, from negative to positive, and vice versa.
3. Another limitation is that only the top 20 reviews on Google Reviews were analysed per star rating, with many data points missing, due to the lack of reviews for films like *Sadgati* and *Pariyerum Perumal*, which were less mainstream due to *Sadgati* being released in 1981, and *Pariyerum Perumal* being from the Tamil film industry, which could be inaccessible for a mainstream Bollywood audience that does not know the language and do not want to view with subtitles.
4. *Sadgati* in particular was a huge limiting factor as it only had 5-star reviews, making cross-film comparisons uneven.
5. Caste was analysed solely by looking at the surname of the reviewers. The research paper relied on the internet and sociological experts to determine the caste of the reviewers. However, since caste connotations differ by region as well, there might be human inaccuracy in determining the caste of the reviewers. This paper also has an undefined section for surnames that fell in more than one of the castes in multiple states in India.

Future recommendations for the Indian film industry as a whole are to focus on breaking generational stereotypes regarding both Caste and Religion, prominent issues in India today, instead of focusing on the entertainment value of reinforcing said stereotypes. Additionally, increasing the representation of marginalized voices by incorporating more historically marginalized directors, writers, and actors is very important to allow for an authentic portrayal of important issues. For there to be palpable change in society, audiences have to want to act and make a change. For that to happen, the first steps need to be in the media. The next steps need to be taken in public policy. Policy reforms also need to be brought about that address caste-based discrimination and provide fair opportunities for those in historically marginalized castes more strongly. This means not just having quotas that can be filled in Government jobs and universities, but also structures and laws preventing this discrimination, as in many regions in India, this problem is still very prevalent, even though the caste system is completely archaic and outdated.

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