

# Subaltern Cinema: Breaking the Barriers and Hitting the Box-Office

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## ABSTRACT

*Subaltern cinema in India represents the voices, stories, and experiences of the marginalized communities that have been neglected, under-represented or mis-represented in the mainstream cinema. These communities have often been excluded from the mainstream narratives. This paper explores the core concerns that drive subaltern cinema and the challenges it faces which include the systemic, cultural, social and economic challenges. This paper probes into the exclusion of certain communities in the mainstream cinema by focusing on some of the phenomenal films made on subaltern sections. By situating these films within the broader socio-political and cultural context of India, the article highlights the significance of alternative cinematic expressions in fostering inclusivity, contesting dominant ideologies, and democratizing the medium of film. This paper interrogates how subaltern cinema contests dominant aesthetic and ideological conventions by centering women, Dalit, Adivasi, LGBTQ, and working-class perspectives. Drawing from postcolonial and Ambedkarite frameworks, and engaging with the tenets of 'Third Cinema,' this study identifies the core political and aesthetic strategies that define subaltern cinema. Through an analysis of certain select movies on women, Dalits, and Transgenders, it explores issues of representation, cultural assertion, narrative sovereignty, and institutional exclusion. This paper further examines the ecosystem that supports these films, including audience activism, alternate film festivals, and digital platforms, while identifying the challenges they face in production, censorship, and distribution. This study concludes that subaltern cinema is not merely a genre or style but a cultural-political intervention that redefines Indian cinematic modernity.*

**Keywords:** Subalternity, discrimination, marginalization, inclusivity, genders, major and minor cinemas.

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## INTRODUCTION:

Indian cinema has historically been dominated by mainstream Bollywood and regional film industries that often cater to middle-class and upper-class sensibilities. Most of the time these movies are based on romanticizing the struggles or adventures of a hero by omitting the realistic possibilities under natural circumstances. Mainstream Indian Cinema – particularly Bollywood and dominant regional film industries- has long been criticized for its lack of authentic representation of marginalized communities. These films often reinforce hegemonic values through sanitized narratives that cater to dominant castes, classes, and patriarchal norms. In the words of Athique, “Bollywood does not incorporate the regional-language cinemas that constitute the bulk of film production and consumption in the subcontinent in purely numerical terms.” In contrast, subaltern cinema challenges these paradigms by focusing on the stories of those traditionally kept at the periphery: Women, Dalits, Adivasis, Muslim minority, LGBTQ individuals, and the economically disenfranchised and aims to depict the lived realities of marginalized communities. Rooted in postcolonial and subaltern studies, this strand of cinema challenges hegemonic cultural production by centering perspectives from below.

## Defining Subaltern Cinema:

The term, “Subaltern” originates from Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks and was later expanded by scholars such as Ranjit Guha and Gayathiri Spivak. “Subaltern” refers to the ‘low-ranking’ and the ‘oppressed.’ Subalternity refers to social groups excluded from the established structures of power. Just as the main stream literatures focus on male-centered writings and neglect the other sections of writers from the lower or marginalized communities who later contributed to minor literatures. Following the same tradition, the main stream cinema also focuses on the male-centric or hero-oriented films thus making him the demi-god, leaving the audience awe-struck with his fights, dances and dialogues that are far from reality. In the cinematic context, subaltern cinema disrupts these structures by repositing narrative authority thus emerged the minor cinema, with a focus on the neglected communities or marginalized sections in the Indian culture. Subaltern cinema in India has emerged as a vital medium for representing

silenced voices that are often omitted or misrepresented or underrepresented in mainstream cinematic discourses. Subaltern cinema refers to films that are;

- Created by or about marginalized communities,
- Politically engaged with questions of identity, resistance, and representation,
- Often independent, low-budget, and distributed outside traditional channels

These kinds of cinemas are produced mostly in the very recent times in the new millennium to create an awareness among the audiences about the oppressed classes and their struggle for existence in the class driven and caste-driven societies in India. Subaltern cinemas are intended to bring forth the kinds of injustices, atrocities and exploitations meted out to the marginalized classes at the hands of the powerful communities and to represent them in the right spirit to bring a social change. The artificial identities attributed to the subaltern classes are questioned and argued in these movies and a shift from these artificial constructions of caste and gender are recreated and deconstructed in these movies in a very phenomenal manner. To cite a very few among many, *Fandry*, *Periyarum Perumal*, *Asuran*, *Great Indian Kitchen*, *I am Mery Kutti*, *Nanu Avanalla Avalu*, *Iravai Moodu* 23, etc.

The study of subaltern cinema intersects with several critical frameworks. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" raises questions about voice, representation, and epistemic violence- issues central to understanding how marginalized subjects are depicted or silenced in cinema. Building on Gramscian theory, the 'Subaltern Studies Collective' emphasized the need to write history "from below," a methodological stance that can be applied to visual narratives as well.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha has examined the politics of representation in Indian cinema and the ways in which it reflects and reproduces social hierarchies. His work, along with that of Wimal Dissanayake and Moti Gokulsing, interrogates how mainstream Indian popular cinema tends to normalize caste, class, and gender hierarchies.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's critique of Eurocentrism in media analysis provides tools for understanding how dominant cinematic forms marginalize non-western and oppressed voices. Their insights are especially relevant when comparing Indian subaltern cinema to global decolonial cinematic movements such as Third Cinema, as theorized by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino.

In the Indian context, Ambedkarite thought forms the moral and philosophical bedrock for many Dalit filmmakers, who see cinema not just as an artistic practice but as a form of resistance and restitution. The narratives in the subaltern cinema are scripted in such a way that they promise a better future for the poor, provide a sense of hope, and pave the way to escape the bitter pains of reality. The ideal representation without demeaning the marginalized sections and their identity and a hope for social change is envisaged in these films. To cite the recent film in Tamil, *Mamannan*, directed by Mari Selvaraj is about the dignity and self-respect to be carried by the people who got elected as the leaders in the politics without bending their heads in front of the affluent classes. Also, another film *Asuran*, echoes B. R. Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, organize" as the path to emancipation.

#### **Chief Concerns of Subaltern Cinema:**

**Representation and Identity:** Subaltern cinema prioritizes authenticity in representation, avoiding the caricatured or tokenistic portrayals of common people on mainstream cinema. These films often draw from lived experiences and oral histories, presenting nuanced depictions of marginalized identities. These films are oriented towards creating an awareness about the societal issues being faced by the subaltern people thus to cater to the social change.

**Resistance to Dominant Narratives:** Rather than offering escapist fantasies, these films interrogate real social hierarchies and injustices. Their resistance is often grounded in the ideologies of B.R. Ambedkar, Karl Marx, and feminist thought. Dalit subjectivity, sensibilities of women and other genders, democracy, and radical equality are the major concerns of subaltern cinema. The suffering is not romanticized but picturized in the true sense to as to create the real-life experiences.

**Cultural Assertion:** Unlike the mainstream cinema which is flashy and sophisticated in expression, subaltern films emphasize regional dialects, traditional and folk music, and local customs. This emphasis serves as a mode of cultural preservation and political assertion, re-inscribing the significance of subaltern knowledge systems.

**Aesthetic Innovation:** Due to limited resources, many subaltern filmmakers experiment with narrative form and technique by using natural lighting, hand-held cameras, and non-professional actors. They prefer to have the insignificant actors, to the most extent, the subalterns. Just as the Dalit writers claim that the

Dalit writing should be endowed with separate aesthetics of their own which will not comply with Sathyam, Shivam, Sundaram (Truth, Divinity, and Beauty), Subaltern films make use of natural resources and realistic situations. This aesthetics heighten the sense of realism and immediacy.

Subaltern cinema explores the unexplored experiences of the oppressed, suppressed, or marginalized communities. This paper highlights some of the movies made on the sensibilities of women, caste-based discrimination and the trials and tribulations of transgenders that are captured from the lived experiences. Women, though constitute half of the creation are never considered equal to men in the patriarchal world and their sensibilities were never taken into consideration either in the male-centered literature or hero-oriented films. Women are systematically marginalized in the name of Indian culture, tradition, and religion. Their roles are just confined to the dances, and as objects of beauty. Female-lead films can be counted on fingers and they are also made in a very unrealistic manner attributing heroic qualities to the heroine. But in the subaltern movies, the real pain and suffering of women is unveiled with the bold themes and bold decisions taken by the female characters.

For instance, *Great Indian Kitchen*, which is originally made in Malayalam in 2021, hit the patriarchal assumptions and presumptions in the contemporary setting. The identity of a woman as artificially attributed in the Indian male-lead societies and its impact on the women in the younger generation is articulated in this cinema. The film has drawn critical acclaim for its raw and unsettling portrayal of gendered oppression in the domestic space. It operates at the intersection of feminist cinema and subaltern storytelling, offering a powerful indictment of patriarchy entrenched in every day cultural practices. This cinema, directed by Jeo Baby got rejected by mainstream distributors and hence released in OTT platform. This itself shows the indifferent attitude of the film distributors who are more concerned about the commercial successes by involving the popular heroes.

*Great Indian Kitchen* exposes how patriarchy operates not only through violence but through routine, ritual, and silence. Male characters are never overtly abusive but their dominance is systemic, invisible, and normalized. Many women can relate themselves with the wife in the cinema as they are expected to perform unpaid domestic labour without recognition or rest. Domestic work is shown as never-ending, thankless, and physically exhausting and un-noticed by men in the family. The protagonist, a young wife, is made to cook, clean and serve in silence while men eat, rest, and leave without acknowledgement. Kitchen becomes the symbol for the domestic imprisonment in which she has to obey the rules and regulations imposed on her by men in the family. It is very ironical that women have been given the position of 'kitchen queens' but work as servants as per the choices of men in the family. The film critiques how "culture" and "tradition" are often euphemisms for female submission. Customs around menstruation, cooking, and servitude are used as to strip women of autonomy. No name is given to the female protagonist deliberately because she represents every other married woman in any Indian household. So, the wife is a subaltern in the movie who is nameless, voiceless, invisible-both literally and metaphorically. The film is a practical answer to Spivak's question, "can the subaltern speak?" For most of the film, the subaltern cannot speak as she is silenced by culture, marriage, religion, and family. When she finally walks out to embrace the act of dancing, her favourite art form, it is not with confrontation but with dignified resistance- her first act of agency is simply choosing herself. The film ends with a suggestion by her to her mother who pampers the son. She pleads that the boys should also be brought up like girls, assigning domestic work so that they can understand the plight of the wives in married life and can share the work with them. *Great Indian Kitchen* is certainly an eye-opener to parents and the dominant men to understand that a woman's silence cannot be ignored and they should be given their space to realize their dreams and aspirations. The protagonist's decision to walk away from the household becomes a radical assertion of agency. The film critiques how tradition disguises subjugation and uses domestic space as a battleground for autonomy, making it a landmark in Indian feminist and subaltern cinema. The film has resonated with audiences, sparking conversations about gender roles, domestic labour, and the need for change in the attitude of men, society, and family in understanding the anguish of women who are destined to perform multi-tasking.

*Thappad* (The Slap) in Hindi, also serves as the finest example of showcasing a woman's pride and self-assertion. The consequences of slapping the wife in the public space and its telling impact on the psychological workings of individuals, the intervention of family and societal attributes are clearly demonstrated while focusing on the self-respect of a woman. The decision of getting divorce despite carrying the child becomes vital and speaks volumes about the agency and autonomy, and self confidence that a woman should carry and it reflects that a wife's responsibilities should not be carried out at the

cost of her self-denial. The re-evaluation of marriage takes place by the wife after a single slap leading to assertion of self and reclaiming autonomy.

The Last Colour is yet another movie which portrays the horrible lives of Indian widows in Vrindavan and Benaras. It is directed by an Indian American chef Vikas Khanna. The cinema addresses the age old-taboo of widowhood, depriving the widow women of their rights and value of life. The politics of patriarchy and cultural restrictions that are imposed on widows are captured in this film in a very appealing manner. The poor flower-selling girl befriends with one of the widows and promises her to bring colour to their lives when she later denied to play Holy due to cultural restrictions. After 24 years the girl becomes an advocate and fights for societal reforms that would bring about rehabilitation of both street children and widows after she wins a case for trans women. The film kindles a hope for all the destitute women be it widows, orphans and transgenders.

Maamannan (2023) is yet another movie made to bring forth the caste-based politics in the rural set up. Directed by Mari Selvaraj originally in Tamil, this movie is a powerful political drama that explores the intersection of caste, power, and identity within the contemporary Tamilnadu. Through the narrative of a Dalit MLA and his son, the film presents a vivid portrayal of subaltern struggles- the challenges faced by those marginalized by caste hierarchies and hegemonic politics. Maamannan gives voice to oppressed, critiques dominant caste structures, and ultimately offers a cinematic articulation of subaltern agency and resistance. It centers its narrative around these silences and ruptures by focusing not just on physical oppression, but the psychological and symbolic violence that sustains caste dominance.

In Maamannan the title character – played by Vadivelu – is a Dalit MLA, someone who has risen through democratic politics. But despite his formal power, we see that he is still not respected or accepted by dominant-caste leaders like Rathnavelu, played by Fahadh Faasil. This shows that representation does not always equal empowerment. Even within the assembly, Maamannan is still treated as lesser.

At the beginning of the film, Maamannan is silent about his past. He avoids confrontation and tries to keep the peace. This reflects what Spivak questioned: “Can the subaltern speak?” In Maamannan’s case, he technically has a voice, but it is muted by social fear and trauma.

His son, Adhivēeran – played by Udhayanidhi Stalin – represents a new, more assertive form of subaltern identity. He openly challenges caste dominance, refuses to bow down, and protects the pigs in his village – pigs that are symbolically tied to Dalit identity and often looked down upon. The pig becomes a symbol of pride, not shame. This reflects how subaltern groups can reclaim symbols that were once used to humiliate them.

A key turning point in the film is when Maamannan finally delivers a powerful speech in the assembly. This moment is significant – it's not just political, but emotional. It's the subaltern finally speaking, on his own terms, demanding dignity and remembering those who suffered before him. What makes Maamannan so important is that it doesn't show subalternity as just victimhood. It's also about resistance, dignity, and reclaiming power – whether that's through politics, culture, or speech. Maamannan is more than a political drama. It's a subaltern narrative – one that critiques how caste power survives in modern democracy, but also shows how the marginalized can fight back and find their voice.

Many films have been produced on caste-based issues in the recent time. Through parallel narratives of grief, love, and shame, the film Masaan (2015) critiques moral policing and caste stigma in the holy city of Varanasi. The dialogue, “Yeh dukh kaahe khatam nahi hota bey?” (Why doesn't this pain ever end?) raises pertinent questions about the caste discrimination and the anguish of subaltern sections in India. In Pariyerum Perumal(2018), the protagonist, a Dalit student, faces relentless humiliation and violence. His assertion of identity- “I am not a caste. I am a human being.”-is a direct challenge to caste ontology. In Sairat, a tender inter-caste romance ends in honour killing. This film fuses mainstream cinematic aspects with radical political commentary. The Court is a cinema in which the trial of a folk singer accused of inciting suicide, exposes the absurdity and bias of India's judicial system. The dialogue, “Justice is not a product that can be delivered in thirty minutes or less” is clearly posits the institutional stagnancy. In Fandry, a Dalit teenager's unrequited love for an upper-caste girl in rural Maharashtra, becomes a microcosm of caste violence. Dalits are considered “others” and questions, “Ye ghaal duscharya Gharat janmala yeta kya? (Do these wounds happen only in the homes of others?). The climatic scene where Jaya hurls a rock in defiance, becomes a symbol of reclaimed agency.

The plight of Dalits and their identity crisis is represented in many other films like Asuran in which the narrative ends on Ambedkarite ideology that the upper caste may exploit the Dalits economically, physically, and culturally but they can never grab the knowledge they acquire through education which

can be used as a weapon to fight for their rights. Karnan is also a subaltern movie portraying the struggles of the rural people against power and police. Iravai Moodu,<sup>23</sup> is a very recent film which showcases the Chunduru massacre of Dalits in Andhrapradesh and to create an awareness among the public on how rich people can escape from the imprisonment though they commit grave and unlawful things where as the oppressed people can never escape though their deeds are done out of poverty and exclusion from the society. All these are movies are intended to focus on the need for understanding the lives of subaltern sections and be empathetic towards them.

Another section of subaltern people facing lots of discrimination and exclusion are transgenders. Problems pertaining to the issues of LGBTQ are also paid attention by the movie makers in the recent times. Transgender individuals in India often constitute a subaltern group, facing marginalization not just socially and culturally but institutionally through caste, patriarchy, rightlessness, and economic exclusion. The autobiographies written by these are being adapted for film versions. I am Vidya, by transgender Living Smile Vidya is made into Naanu Avanalla Avalu ("I am Not He, I am She") in Kannada language. Living Smile Vidya's autobiography as well as the film adaptation becomes a crucial act of subaltern speech: a reclamation of narrative and identity. The film articulated the lived experiences of Vidya reclaiming agency in a world structured to silence her. The film mirrors and offers space to voice historically suppressed people basing on their sexuality and foregrounds her humanity without any romanticizing her struggles. The subaltern concept of exclusion and marginalization is evident in Vidya's rejection by family, employment discrimination, and social invisibility. Her denied voice and visibility is amplified in the film, giving a transwoman narrated representation. Subaltern agency through narrative in the film is projected by making Vidya an active subject – choosing her destiny, voice, and identity. The community of transgender people, their struggle for existence through sex work and begging, their trials for attaining "nirvana"(sex change) are translated into the film with all dedication and for social change by the director Lingadevaru in the most passionate manner in this film.

Njan Marykutty, is yet another film on transgender based on the real story of a transwoman, whose ambition is to become a Sun Inspector of police. Marykutty, the protagonist of the film, is a transgender woman navigating a deeply heteronormative and patriarchal society. Her desire to live openly as a woman and to pursue her career as a sub-inspector, brings her into conflict with societal norms, religious conservatism, and institutional bias. She is ostracized by her family, misgendered by the public, and subjected to the systemic ridicule by media. In this context, Marykutty's identity positions her firmly as a gendered subaltern, echoing Spivak's assertion that marginalized women are doubly silenced-first by colonialism (or in this case, mainstream culture), and then by patriarchy. Despite the hardships and exclusion from the family and facing many insults in the public, Mary Kutty realizes her dream and proves that gender does not matter as long you have capability and passion in achieving the goal. This film interrogates the silencing of subaltern identities, while depicting a complex journey of resistance and self-assertion.

Significantly, Njan Mary Kutty departs from typical cinematic portrayals of transgender individuals in Indian films, who are often reduced to caricatures or symbols of comic relief. Mary Kutty is intelligent, articulate, and morally grounded- and most importantly, she speaks. She advocates for herself in public forums, challenges societal stereotypes, and asserts her dignity with remarkable resilience. Njan Mary Kutty challenges viewers not just to empathize with the subaltern, but to recognize the systems that continue to silence and disempower them, even in narratives that claim to empower. Certainly, it kindles a lot of hope and inspiration for many transpeople to achieve their desires and live a decent life.

Ardhanari is also one more gripping film on the issues of LGBTQ. It deals with the plight of a bisexual man who undergoes a lot of agony and exploitation at every step of his life. As a trans person he cannot have any choices of his own but to end up his life as an unwanted and alienated individual. This film raises some pertinent questions about the rights that are denied to transgenders i.e, right to adopt a child, right to procure property and exclusion and atrocities against them. This cinema certainly demands the attention of the viewers as it takes us back to the history of epics and the past stating the fact that the transgenders existed before, existing now and will exist in future also but they should be treated as human beings with all our empathy and respect.

#### **Challenges in making Subaltern Cinema:**

- Institutional Marginalization: Limited access to state funding, training, and production resources. No producer will come forward to incur the finances as they focus on commercial output.

- Censorship: Critical themes are often suppressed or censored by the state authorities to avoid discrepancies.
- Distribution barriers: Theatrical and digital releases are constrained by profit-oriented calculations.
- Reception Bias: Middle-class audiences often find these films too bleak or discomforting.
- Industry Gatekeeping: Class and caste hierarchies reproduce themselves in cinema's professional networks. Directors, actors and technicians from the subaltern classes are not considered.

#### **Audience Activism and Reception:**

Grassroots engagement has been pivotal in amplifying subaltern cinema. Campus groups, civil rights organizations, and cultural forums organize screenings, discussions, and social media campaigns to challenge the marginalization of these films. Audience reception here becomes participatory and activist, contributing to meaning-making beyond the screen.

#### **Subaltern Film Festivals- Spaces of Resistance:**

Festivals like the International Dalit Film and Cultural Festival(IDFCF), Samabhav and KASHISH Mumbai International Queer Film Festival foreground underrepresented narratives. They serve as counterpublics, challenging commercial curation norms and offering platforms for emerging voices.

#### **Subaltern Cinema and Global Counterparts- THIRD CINEMA:**

Indian subaltern cinema resonates with the ethos of "Third Cinema" in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Both reject capitalistic cinematic logics in favour of politically engaged, formally experimental storytelling. Like Fernando Solanas, Ousmane Sembene, and Haile Gerima, Indian filmmakers such as Nagraj Manjule, Mari Selvaraj, and Pa Ranjit use cinema to construct counter-histories and revolutionary imaginaries.

### **CONCLUSION**

All the above-mentioned films are taken as the path-breaking cinemas only as example and there are many other films on subaltern concerns especially in the recent years. These films matter in academia as they archive lived realities of communities often erased from historical records. They challenge cinematic language- moving from voyeurism and sensationalism toward empathy. Above all, they function as counter- discourse, allowing subaltern and queer voices to "speak." Subaltern cinema functions as both a mirror and a catalyst- reflecting India's deep-seated inequalities while challenging viewers to imagine alternative social realities. Its aesthetics, rooted in realism and regionalism, work in tandem with its ideological critique. Although marginalized by institutions, these films persist through audience solidarity, alternate film festivals, and digital circulation. Supporting subaltern cinema, therefore, is not simply an artistic choice but a political necessity in the struggle for cultural democracy. Given the support, these subaltern cinemas are surely crossing all the barriers and hitting not only the box-offices with much more strength and creativity but also touching the minds of the viewers.

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