

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking
Double-blind, Peer-reviewed and Open Access Journal in English



Vol. 5 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2025 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 64-76

www.literaryherm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com



From Overt to Covert Treatment of Dalits- A Study of *Shudra: The Rising and Quota: The Reservation*

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Research Article

Keywords: Academia,
Covert, Dalit, Movies,
Profiling

Article History

Received:

June 7, 2025

Revised:

June 14, 2025

Accepted:

July 1, 2025



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPLJLH)



Abstract

Aims: *The present paper attempts to study the covert oppression of Dalits in Indian academia through an analysis of two independent movies- Shudra: The Rising and Quota: The Reservation. The two movies have been selected to depict the changing nature of oppression in the forms of caste-based profiling and the use of languages as a tool for differential treatment meted out to Dalits by the upper-caste people. This paper traces the various trajectories of Dalit education in India. The present paper attempts to show that there are caste hierarchies in the educational system and the caste-based profiling and language are the two important aspects of practising castes.*

Methodology and Approach: *The present paper takes recourse to the cinematographic techniques like editing, movement, distance, height and angle of the camera as well as the pro-filmic elements like setting, props, costume and lighting to study the representation of Dalits in the select movies.*

Outcome: *Through the analysis of the two movies, the present paper concludes that despite several efforts made by the reformists to provide Dalits an opportunity for higher education, academia still remains an anti-assimilationist space.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The priority should be the merit, not the caste. There should be policies and laws which can reduce educational inequalities by finding out the newer forms of caste-based oppression which can help Dalits achieve intergenerational mobility.*

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Caste is a continuation of the ancient rituals based on the religious texts and is a lived experience. Oppression based on caste has a political inference because the very moment one utters the word ‘oppressed’, an image of the ‘oppressor’ immediately emerges. Dalit oppression has changed its course from the corporeal, coercive punishment to the covert form of subjugation where Dalits are being judged on the basis of language, dresses and even the way of thinking. When Mulk Raj Anand handed over his manuscript of *Untouchable* to Gandhiji, the Mahatma replied that untouchables like Bakha can never think intellectually and regarding this Anand writes “I read my novel to Gandhiji, and he suggested that I should cut down more than a hundred pages, especially those passages in which Bakha seemed to be thinking and dreaming and brooding like a Bloomsbury intellectual” (qtd. in Ambedkar 73-74). Article 17 of the Indian Constitution states that “Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden” (Sukumar 74). However, in recent times, untouchability is practised in the form of profiling which is not regarded as a caste-based discrimination by the law. Hence it is able to humiliate Dalits without any fear of breaching the Constitution. Dalits have to listen to derogatory remarks like they are the ‘quota’s children’ who have got admission only because of reservation policies. Even a smile mixed with frown, a hand gesture, or just a silence which appears to be impeccable can be used as a tool for discrimination (Golani and Narayan 6).

The Constitutional policies gave the untouchables a chance to accumulate cultural capitals and reach the same height as the Caste-Hindus but reservation has produced the opposite effect than what was intended. The upper-caste people often call Dalits “sarkaari brahmin” (Sukumar 70). Even if a Dalit student who is prosperous feels that he or she should not seek admission through reservation and confer it to someone who seriously needs reservation, that student has to face atrocities from the administrators that Dalits are wasting the seats of the unreserved candidates. The viva-voce is sometimes meant to intimidate Dalit students from pursuing higher education where they are asked about their surname which is a caste-based profiling. In many universities, Dalit students are advised to opt for Arts rather than Science because they are considered to be unworthy of science streams. The suicides committed by Dalit students are moulded by the University authorities as the incapability to cope up with the

academic pressures. Dalits are excluded from the power relations which shape the social structure. In Indian universities the upper-caste teachers, administrations and peer groups are the sources of power-structure.

Dalit education in India has been problematic. Teltumbde notes that during the Colonial Period Wood's Despatch- the magna carta of Indian education failed to incorporate Dalits into its educational model because of the fact that the Caste-Hindus banned the entry of Dalits into academic spheres and details an incident that took place in 1856 when a Mahar student from Dharwad in Karnataka appealed to the government that he was not getting admission at a government school only because of his lower caste identity (Teltumbde 58-59). A. K. Biswas points out that Vidyasagar in 1854 denied admission of wealthy goldsmiths into the Sanskrit College because of their lower caste status and Vidyasagar justified the decision as "in the scale of castes, the class (goldsmith or *Subarna Banik*) stands very low" (mainstreamweekly.net).

However, the situation gradually started changing and Dalits availed themselves educational opportunities in 1858 when the British declared that all government schools must be open for people of every caste and class (Teltumbde 59). In 1921, Krishnaraja Wodeyar of Mysore state helped Dalits to procure reservation in higher education. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur established a number of hostels for the untouchables. When Shahu Maharaj ascended the throne in 1894, the number of Dalit students enrolled in primary education was only 234 but that number rose to 27,830 during 1921-22 (70). Shivram Janba Kamble of Pune founded Shri Shankar Prasadik Somvanshiya Hitintak Mitra Samaj in 1904 with an attempt to establish a school and library entirely for the Dalit students. In 1921 he set up the Depressed Classes Committee which petitioned the education minister to employ Dalit teachers, give scholarships for the well-being of Dalit students and moreover, establish at least one hostel in each district to accommodate the Dalit students (75-76). Another prominent reformist Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy who is better known as Periyar came forward to provide Dalits with educational opportunities. He believed that education is able to sabotage the caste system because it has the potential to rescue people from the ignominious jobs which associate one with the caste identity. He proposed an elementary education for the children of all communities. Education for him was

a possible way to get rid of the clutches of untouchability. He had been demanding reservation in jobs and education for the untouchables from the Tiruvannamalai Congress Conference since 1920. In 1924, he resigned from the post of Secretary of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee as a protest against the discrimination of Dalit students at the National Training School Hostel at Tirunelveli (archive.org).

In Karnataka, Dalit Sangharsh Samiti was established in 1973 by the youths of Dalit community which ran parallel to a significant event when the Dalit minister B. Basavalingappa termed the mainstream Kannada literature “Bhusa” (Teltumbde 13). It demanded hostel accommodation for Dalit students. All these events contributed to the educational opportunities for Dalits.

Movies often become strong voices of protests as they incorporate themes of inequality and social injustice which urge people to question the existing social orders. They are important in shaping and influencing society by helping people think about their lives from new perspectives. The theme of Dalits and education has been depicted dexterously by the director Sanjiv Jaiswal in *Shudra: The Rising* and *Quota: The Reservation* which are independent films. The first film delineates the caste system in ancient India where Dalits used to face overt oppression and they were barred from the purview of education. Whereas, the second film is set in modern day Indian academia where Dalits are claiming the educational spaces which were denied to them in the earlier times. There are several review articles on the two select movies among which few have been reviewed here.

An announcement of the film launch published in Mid-Day says: “In the film we will be able to see a Dalit student being given the voice to represent the community, narrate their story and compel change. Looking to lift the curtains on both nuanced and blatant caste discrimination, the film is a promising tale of true incidents...” (mid-day.com). It also reveals the fact that the movie was not released in the theatres due to censor board protest and the non-availability of screens in theatres and as a result of non-cooperation, it was released on OTT platforms (mid-day.com). It draws our attention to the statistical data of 18 Dalit students’ suicide between 2018-2022 for which caste-discrimination must be treated as a grave issue in educational institutes.

Anirudh Dave says about the movie *Quota: The Reservation*, “It’s about raising voices against those atrocities, regardless of whether these voices are heard or not” (nationalheraldindia.com). Dave also expresses the view that the characters in this movie are pessimistic because their dreams of pursuing a profitable career are being shattered in the urban spaces. Sanjiv Jaiswal, the director of the two films says in an interview “Through my film, I want to show and tell people what happened in the social history of India and that it was just our past” (tellychakkar.com). He discusses in detail the caste-prejudices prevalent in our society. Like Satyajit Ray, he too chose amateur artists rather than established actors to focus more on story-line and portray an entire community’s persecution at the hands of upper-caste people.

The movie *Shudra: The Rising* opens with a voice-over commentary which introduces the viewers with the genesis of the caste-system based upon Chaturvarna. The opening scene is a graphic narrative where a non-diegetic sound effect is being used to show the Aryan invasion. As the main scene begins, the director uses the low-key lighting which is also known as chiaroscuro to delineate the world of Dalits filled with uncertainty and terror. A long shot which does not disclose the entire bodies of the Dalits but only their legs are visible where the bells are being tied and it is followed by a medium long shot where the Dalit bodies from below the knee upwards are gradually being revealed where brooms are attached. This opening scene is the classical image of Dalits who were reduced to an almost non-human status and had to carry spittoon around their necks so that the earth may not get polluted by their saliva. They had to attach a broom around their waist to sweep away their own footprints so that a Caste-Hindu might not accidentally step on the same footprints and they needed to tie a bell around their legs so that others might be aware of a Dalit coming and can avoid the untouchable’s shadow. These are not just cinematic representations but were the grim reality of our caste-ridden society where the untouchables of Poona had to live exactly like this during the reign of the Peshwas (Ambedkar 102). Apoorvanand defines a Dalit’s body as a site of physical and mental exploitation where “the pain seems to originate from the guts of the body itself, from the misfortunes of being physical” (qtd. in Kant 413-414). The costume worn by Dalits in contrast to the upper-caste people implies the class differences in the

movie. Dalits are almost naked and their small piece of cloth is dirty, whereas the Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishya are wearing the clothes which represent their affluence. In the initial section of this film, we find that Dalits are not being allowed to enter the temples. This was the overt form of oppression because a Dalit's shadow was considered to be profane and the sanctity of the temple had to be protected. When Sandhli, the wife of Charna is subjected to the male gaze of the upper-caste Thakur and when the father of Badri dies of thirst because of the Caste-Hindu's denial of providing a single drop of water from their pond, a bird's eye view is being shot to showcase the truth that untouchables are diminished in power.

The Dalit characters are constantly thinking in terms of their supposed sins committed in previous birth. When Charna dies because of corporal punishment by the goons of Thakur, the camera uses an extreme close up shot of Charna's brother Bala whose face and eyes are mainly focused. The fire which is burning before him now has a different meaning than the fire of Charna's pyre. The fire which is a prop has turned into a zeal for Dalit uprising. Badri is now forming a Dalit consciousness and is saying that he receives joothan only after serving the upper-caste people. There is a flashback where Bheru is recollecting his son Channa who is given a point-of-view shot as he is listening to the spiritual preachings of the gurukul. This shot can be described as a Dalit's urge to enter the academic space which is marred by structured and inhuman violence perpetrated in the name of the ancient Brahmanical lawmaker Manu. The Dalit boy's tongue is cut off for uttering the name of Lord Shiva because it was a religious order by Manu. There is one dissolve shot when Bheru's flashback ends. A panning shot shows the faces of Badri, Bala and Bheru who are now planning to kill the son of Thakur. After killing Thakur's son, Badri pees over him which is a form of resistance. The background music which is a non-diegetic sound plays an important role when Dalits are being burned alive by the people of Thakur. It shows the vulnerable situation of Dalits and the camera pans over their mutilated bodies. The movie concludes with a voice-over narration which says that this oppression of Dalits is not only a problem in India but it is spread world-wide. The penultimate scene in this movie can be described as the failure of Dalits to revolt against the upper-caste people because they had no agencies.

The second movie portrays Dalits in a modern scenario where they are trying to pursue higher education. As the movie *Quota: The Reservation* begins, we find Rajshekhar, the Dalit leader, sitting in a room amidst a thunderstorm and looking at a book *Saurabh Rawat: Ek Kranti Kari*. Then we have a short flashback where we meet the character of Saurabh for the first time and then his revolutionary voice is merged over to the present scene via an L-Cut where the flashback ends. The first flashback is used to introduce the giant flashback which unfolds and moves the story forward in a linear way. The main purpose of using this flashback is to answer the question that has started developing in the mind of the audience: who is Saurabh Rawat and why is Rajshekhar's mind triggered when he sees the book? We find that the setting is a modern Indian medical college where Saurabh is a first-year student. Pankaj Shukla and two of his friends who are upper-caste students of final year are passing derogatory remarks among themselves when they see Saurabh and his friends from a certain distance - "I am worried because of these quota-holders. They take up 40-50% seats. Look how they stride in.....as if they own this college. I can sense from their faces they're from the quota" ("Quota- The Reservation" 00:05:31-00:05:44).

The word 'quota-holders' (Sukumar 74) challenges the merit of Dalits by placing it against terms like 'buddhijeevi' (74) or 'bhadralok' (74) which are the terms associated with intellectual or critical thinkers. This is the first example of a caste-based profiling which is the newer form of untouchability and a way of judging Dalits on the basis of their dresses, colour, language and thought process. The way an upper-caste person sees, talks and even reads is the outcome of this practice of profiling for which Saurabh is being termed as 'chamaar' by Pankaj. Commenting upon the vocabulary regarding Dalits in urban spaces Aarushi Punia says "In northern India, they are referred to as *chamaar*, which comes through the association of workers involved with moving carcasses and tanning of hides or skin (*chamri* in hindi) to produce leather, and upper castes often use this as a slur for Dalits who may or may not belong to this subcaste" (16). The term 'chamaar' is similar to the word 'nigger' because both comes from someone who thinks himself/herself as superior and the other as intellectually inferior or ugly. When Saurabh's surname reveals his Dalit identity, he is humiliated by Pankaj. N. Sukumar writes "The Bard of Avon might have famously questioned, "What's in

a name?” but one’s name can also assure inclusion or exclusion from the social life of the campus” (90).

A cutting-on-action shot which means cutting from one shot to another while the character is still in motion is used when Pankaj attacks Saurabh and injures him. When Saurabh goes to complain to the liaison officer, he is advised not to complain which shows the wilful ignorance of the authority to deal with issues like caste violence. When he goes to the police station to launch an F.I.R., the inspector says that he is using his caste identity as a victim card which is a realistic portrayal of the harassment faced by Dalit students. The academic institutes are unwilling to acknowledge the subtle forms of caste discrimination because they pretend to be modern and caste-free spaces. When Saurabh justified the reason for complaining to the police as the lack of investigation from the college authority, his HOD says that he is blaming the college management and upper-caste students. There is a cross-cut during the telephone conversation between the Dalit student leader Rajsekhar and Sarvesh Kumar, the reporter. The casteist discrimination against Saurabh is termed by the Dean as a personal dispute between students and he denies any discrimination in the campus. Richa Valmiki, a Dalit student from hostel number 2, is punished for using the bathroom of hostel number 1. This shows the physical segregation of Dalit students. Prof. Sukhadeo Thorat, former Chairperson of the University Grants Commission of India, writes, “In Patna, they have a Yadav hostel and a Kayasth hostel. In Allahabad University, they have separate hostels for Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The Ministry of Social Justice builds separate hostels for SC/ST students, which is another way of segregating students. They should rather reserve seats for SC/ST students in common hostels” (truestoryaward.org).

The thoughts of Richa’s mother regarding changing the surname of her daughter to avoid caste prejudices runs parallel to Aarushi Punia’s observation about profiling as a snare for Dalits- “Profiling traps the urban Dalit in a conundrum with respect to self-representation- should they reveal their Dalit identity to build solidarity with the Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi community but risk social ostracization and stigmatisation, or should they hide their Dalit identity and try to evade caste-based discrimination?” (8). The God’s eye view which is an aerial shot is used to highlight the perturbed situation of Saurabh when he fails in

exam. The God's eye view is mainly used in crime genres to manipulate feelings of unease and distortion of reality embedded in a character's psyche and to highlight vulnerability, miniscule and fragile position of the character amongst the landscape. There is one flashback when Saurabh sees his dreams shattered. An internal diegetic sound is applied to represent Saurabh's thoughts which reminds him of the humiliating words of Professor Trivedi when he requested him to recheck the paper- "You guys are undeserving" (00:46:47-00:46:50). Saurabh, the incarnation of a progressive Dalit dismantles the idea of merit and reservation when he commented before committing suicide that his ancestors had been bearing oppression for which Dalits are still at the back of the queue. Similar observations come from Rajesh Golani and Rajendran Narayan writing in the editorial of *The Hindu*, "Metaphorically speaking, in a 10-meter race, people like us were running downhill, and many others from historically marginalised backgrounds were doing so uphill. In most cases, not only did our slopes differ but also that some of us were just running 50 m downhill while many others had to run 500 m uphill and the only metric to compare our abilities was the time taken to complete our races. This is what ranks or grades do" (6).

The idea of merit follows the path of the ancient *Varnashrama* system because in most institutes we come across names of students in the merit list where the pattern is general category, followed by OBC and then SC, STs. According to Michael Sandel, hubris and the politics of humiliation among the elites emanate from the idea of meritocracy. The "credentialist prejudice" (Sandel 9) which is a repercussion of merit is practised by the upper-caste students to humiliate others who lack the societal ideal called merit. Even if a Dalit manages to pursue research in academic fields, he/she is always in a dilemma to choose Dalit discourse as the research topic because of the fact that it can reveal his/her Dalit identity. Caste no longer remains exclusively an Indian problem; it has entered into the American academia as well. A 2016 study by Equality Labs which is an American civil-rights organisation reveals that 41% of the South Asian Americans belonging to lower-castes face discrimination in academic institutes. Harvard University in 2021 declared caste as a "protected category" for all the students. IIT Bombay has produced an anti-discrimination guideline after the suicide of Darshan Solanki which prohibits the new entrants from asking each

other's JEE ranks or GATE scores which might reveal their caste or category. Like a black person who has been associated with the image of slavery and intellectual deficiency, a Dalit is always asked to act like a Dalit and academic excellence fails to erase his or her Dalit identity.

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