

“MASAAN”: AN INTERPLAY OF CASTE AND GENDER

Anuva Roy & Anwesha Sengupta

M.A. Sociology
Savitribai Phule Pune University

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Abstract

This paper offers a sociological reading of Neeraj Ghaywan's Masaan (2015), examining how the film captures the entangled realities of caste and gender in Indian society. Set against the broader cycle of life and death, Masaan reveals how caste functions as a form of social stratification that shapes not only occupation but social perception and access to opportunity. When caste intersects with gender, these hierarchies intensify, deepening marginalisation. Using the framework of intersectionality by Kimberlè Crenshaw, the paper analyses how the film portrays these overlapping structures of oppression through the lived experiences of its characters. Masaan steers clear of treating caste and gender as isolated phenomena. It depicts an upper-caste woman subjected to patriarchal moral surveillance; alongside a lower-caste man whose social mobility remains undercut by entrenched caste boundaries.

Using qualitative content analysis, we systematically code visual and narrative elements to identify themes such as exclusion, resistance, and invisibility. Content analysis, understood as a method to interpret words and images in cultural texts allows one to uncover latent meanings and everyday forms of struggle embedded in graphic representation.

Rather than framing resistance through legal recourse or overt political rebellion, Masaan locates it in the everyday negotiations. These subtle acts of defiance highlight forms of subaltern resistance that lie outside the scope of formal justice. The film exposes the limitations of legal reform in addressing deeply entrenched structural inequalities and calls attention to the need for a broader conception of social justice.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, Intersectionality, Marginalisation, Exclusion.

Objectives

- To examine how Masaan depicts caste and gender oppression through content analysis.
- To examine Masaan's portrayal of the gap between India's constitutional equality guarantees and social realities.

Introduction

Death is the one certainty we all share, the backdrop against which our lives take shape. But in India, what defines people's lives isn't just mortality, it's also the weight of social identities like caste and gender. These identities don't exist in isolation; they overlap and shape each other in ways that deeply affect people's everyday realities. To make sense of this complexity, we need intersectionality, a perspective that helps us see how these identities come together to create unique forms of inequality. "Intersectionality" is a sociological theory given by black feminist thinker Kimberlé Crenshaw that explores how an individual can experience simultaneous forms of discrimination based on factors such as race, gender, age, ethnicity, physical ability, class, or any other characteristic that places

them in a minority category. When looking into the depiction of caste and gender intersectionality in Hindi films, "Masaan" stands out as a prime illustration.

Masaan is a 2015 Hindi drama film directed by the prolific filmmaker, Neeraj Ghaywan. "Masaan" unfolds against the backdrop of the Ghats of Varanasi, prominently featuring the Harishchandra Ghat, which is known for its continuously burning funeral pyres. The term Masaan itself has an association to pain, salvation and death as it literally refers to "crematorium". The story revolves around the life of an upper class Brahmin girl named Devi Pathak played by Richa Chadda, Deepak, a boy from the Dom community played by Vicky Kaushal and another girl named Shalu Gupta, a high caste Hindu girl played by Shweta Tripathi.

The story unfolds when Devi gets caught being involved in a compromising and intimate position with her boyfriend by a corrupt police officer. She and her boyfriend are then blackmailed by the police officer which ends up taking the life of the latter and Devi is blackmailed into paying a large sum of money to save herself from the shame that came along with the incident and on the other side we have a soft and beautiful love story of two young college going students named Deepak and Shalu whose love story blooms despite their caste differences but due to a cruel twist of fate, Shalu is killed in an accident and their love story comes to a tragic end. This movie depicts the life of these three young people belonging to three different caste groups which are interwoven into each other towards the end.

Literature Review

These are some of the literature we looked at to understand the film better through a sociological lens:

Livelihood Pattern of Death Workers: A Study of the Dom Community in Varanasi - Rajesh Sharma (2025):

Empirical studies on the Dom community, such as Sharma's (2025), provide a detailed understanding of caste-based occupational marginalization affecting this historically stigmatized group. The Doms, classified as one of the Scheduled Castes and traditionally known for occupations such as cremation work, face severe socio-economic exclusion despite the essential nature of their labor. Sharma's study reveals that the community experiences systemic social stigma linked to their association with "impure" tasks related to death and sanitation, which perpetuates their exclusion from mainstream society.

This marginalization manifests in limited access to economic opportunities, healthcare, education, and social services. The Doms often reside on the geographical outskirts of towns and villages, physically segregated from dominant castes, symbolizing their social exclusion. Surveys indicate high levels of unemployment and poverty within the community, compounded by discrimination that restricts their participation in public welfare schemes and political representation. The study also points to the internalization of low self-worth among community members due to persistent caste-based denigration.

These findings directly reflect Deepak's lived reality in *Masaan*, where his identity as a Dom and his work at the cremation grounds confine him to a socially marginalized

existence. His struggle to pursue education and social mobility amidst pervasive caste stigma mirrors the ongoing challenges faced by the Dom community.

The film accurately portrays how caste and labor identity intertwine, deepening the socio-economic vulnerabilities experienced by communities like the Doms.

Kimberlé Crenshaw - Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color (1991)

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, first articulated in her seminal 1991 work "Mapping the Margins," is foundational to understanding the multidimensional oppression depicted in *Masaan*. Intersectionality challenges the tendency to analyze social inequalities, such as caste and gender discrimination as isolated phenomena. Crenshaw argued that the experiences of marginalized individuals, particularly women of color, are shaped by the interconnectedness of various social categories like race, gender, and class, which together produce unique and compounded forms of disadvantage.

In the context of *Masaan*, this framework is essential for unpacking the complex realities of the characters Devi and Deepak. Devi, an upper-caste woman, grapples with patriarchal moral surveillance and gendered oppression despite her caste privilege. Her gendered marginalization exposes how caste advantage does not imply immunity from other forms of subjugation. Conversely, Deepak's experiences as a Dom community member reveal how caste-based social stratification severely limits his opportunities and social mobility. His lower-caste identity compounds his vulnerabilities, shaping his interactions with social institutions and personal relationships.

The intersectional lens helps reveal how caste and gender coalesce to create distinct layers of marginalization for both characters that neither caste nor gender alone can explain. Moreover, it illuminates the varied forms of resistance they embody, from overt defiance to subtle negotiations, challenging singular narratives of oppression. Thus, Crenshaw's intersectionality offers a critical analytical tool that captures the film's nuanced portrayal of intertwined social hierarchies, power dynamics, and the lived realities of oppression and agency.

Caste and Cinema: A Sociological Analysis of Caste Representation in Indian Cinema - Amarjit Singh (2021)

Amarjit Singh's 2021 sociological analysis of caste representation in Indian cinema provides a critical examination of how films have historically reinforced caste hierarchies by marginalizing Dalit voices. Singh notes that mainstream Indian cinema often portrays upper-caste characters as protagonists who embody social reform or heroism, while Dalit characters are relegated to stereotypical, peripheral roles. This pattern upholds existing social stratifications by sidelining the lived realities of marginalized castes and maintaining Savarna privilege in narrative focus and characterization.

Singh highlights that, despite India's vast Dalit population, cinematic representation of Dalit individuals remains sporadic, often confined to portrayals of victimhood or subservience, reinforcing caste-based prejudices. Furthermore, Dalit characters are rarely

allowed the complexity or agency afforded to upper-caste figures. The entrenched caste biases in Bollywood have historically limited the scope for Dalit-centered storytelling.

Masaan disrupts these dominant cinematic norms by centering its narrative on Deepak, a young man from the Dom community, foregrounding his aspirations and struggles. This shift challenges traditional caste imagery by giving visibility to lower-caste experiences and complicating upper-caste portrayals, notably through the character of Devi, who faces patriarchal oppression despite caste privilege. By integrating intersectional narratives and resisting stereotypical depictions, *Masaan* breaks new ground in representing caste as a lived, complex reality rather than a mere backdrop.

**“Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State”
- Uma Chakravarti (1993):**

Uma Chakravarti’s essay *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India* is a landmark in understanding how caste and gender are bound together. She argues that the control of women’s sexuality, especially upper-caste women, was central to preserving both patrilineal succession and caste purity. In this system, women became the gateways to caste order: their movements were restricted, their marriages tightly controlled, and their chastity turned into a social obsession.

Chakravarti shows how ideology, custom, and state power all worked to keep women subordinated—sometimes through consent, often through coercion. While upper-caste women were “honored” as symbols of purity, they were denied autonomy; lower-caste women, meanwhile, were exploited as labor and sexuality without recognition. By shifting focus from the “status of women” to the structural link between caste and patriarchy, Chakravarti reveals that women’s subordination was not incidental but foundational to the caste system itself.

“Fire on the Ganges” - Radhika Iyengar (2023):

Radhika Iyengar (2023) presents *Fire on the Ganges* as a distinctive work that explores the intersection of caste and gender issues within the Dom community of Banaras. This book outlines a spiritual and ritual expedition in the city of the deities rather than solely focusing on the Doms, a Dalit sub-caste in Banaras. Their realms linger in the middle, like veils, frightening and lethal, as they exist on the fringes of society, a mere dot in the enormity of the metropolis. Iyengar depicts dreams of a community shaped by social exclusion and structural oppression through generations, entrenched in caste hierarchies that marginalize them and deny the basic rights to life outlined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. Iyengar notes the ways their lives intersect at the fringes of this marginalization, where themes of belonging emerge and death is frequent. Protected from the more untouched remnants of the city, their deaths are recorded as a figure that the author uses to advance the narrative. Although celebrating death provides them with hope for survival, she discusses the family, the women, and the children affected by it. This book amplifies the voices of Dalit women and reveals their everyday realities in India, a nation where caste remains a strong and apparent social construct.

"Caste, Gender and State Policies in the 21st Century" - Bhavya and Sarayu(2021)

Bhavya and Sarayu's (2021) study digs into how caste and gender continue to shape people's lives in India, even with constitutional measures like affirmative action and reservation policies meant to promote equality. They point out that while these efforts have opened doors for marginalized groups, especially in education and government jobs, the benefits aren't evenly felt. Deep-rooted social bias and structural barriers still hold many people back, limiting how far these policies can actually go.

This work highlights how an intersectional lens exposes the compounded effects of caste and gender, showing that women from marginalized castes face a "triple burden" of structural inequalities. These include restricted access to education, healthcare, land, and political participation, all reinforced by patriarchal norms and caste prejudice. Together, these forces limit both their socioeconomic mobility and their everyday agency.

These insights directly parallel the social realities depicted in *Masaan*. The film portrays Deepak's struggle as a lower-caste cremation worker, where caste-based occupational stigma limits his opportunities despite his aspirations. Simultaneously, Devi's experiences exemplify how upper-caste women remain vulnerable to patriarchal moral policing, underscoring gender's constraining role even within caste privilege.

Methodology

Content analysis is the study of recorded human communications. Among the forms suitable for study are books, magazines, webpages, poems, newspapers, songs, paintings, speeches, letters, e-mail messages, bulletin-board postings on the Internet, laws, and constitutions, as well as any components or collections thereof.

The methodology for this study is content analysis, which involves examining recorded human communications. We used it to systematically analyze the film from a sociological perspective.

Analysis and Discussion

Caste, Death and Emotional Marginality in *Masaan*

"Saala yeh dukh kahe khatam nahi hota bey?" Is a sentence voiced by Deepak in the movie which metaphorically brings out the grief of an entire caste existing on the margins of Indian society who are greeted by death even before the sun. Deepak belongs to a community of untouchables, the dom community who earn their livelihood by burning pyres. Deepak is a bright engineering student who is juggling everyday to break free from the shackles of the caste system but it doesn't free him from the smoke of the burning pyres. In India, caste still dictates, to a large extent, what work people do. People belonging to the marginalised communities are intrinsically bound to the occupation specifically attached to their caste. Deepak is no exception here as the evils of the caste based segregated society does not spare him as well, because of his caste identity, Deepak himself had to burn the body of Shalu, the person he loved the most.

Throughout the movie, he is reminded of his vulnerable position due to his caste identity- when his friends remind him not to take his relationship further as society would never accept their relationship because of their caste differences.

Another scene in this film beautifully captures the nuanced essence of the life of these historically persecuted people. "*Shamshan ke aag se hi unke ghar ka choola Jalta hai*", this line shows how this movie has been able to present the unfiltered reality of these communities. In one scene, Deepak lights a stick from the fire of a burning pyre and goes on to light up the stove of his house. That scene symbolically highlights how the burning funeral pyre lights their stove – how it helps them earn a living to feed themselves.

Caste & Gender in Masaan

The film Masaan intricately portrays how caste and gender hierarchies intersect, and this is where Uma Chakravarti's framework of Brahminical patriarchy becomes crucial. Chakravarti points out that "caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order and are closely interconnected," with the control of women's sexuality And especially that of upper-caste women functioning as the central mechanism to maintain caste purity .

This logic is mirrored in the scene where Devi is refrained from entering the shamshan ghat as a shopkeeper says: "*Ghat pe ladies nahi ja Sakti.*" At one level, this reflects ritual restrictions within Hindu customs, where women are not allowed near the funeral pyre and only men perform the last rites. But at a deeper level, it reveals how women's movements and presences are strictly regulated, tied to an older anxiety that women's sexuality and autonomy could threaten the stability of caste order itself. The very exclusion from such spaces signals the historical construction of women as both polluting and in need of control.

This is why in many parts of India, people still prefer having boys instead of girls. Sons are seen as bearers of ritual continuity and lineage, while daughters are imagined as potential sites of rupture. As Chakravarti explains, "the purity of caste is contingent upon" the purity of women, which makes their sexuality the object of constant surveillance. Devi's experience shows this tension clearly: even though she is from an upper caste, she cannot break free from the gendered norms and expectations laid down by society.

The repression of female sexuality is a crucial marker of this structure. Devi is frowned upon and, in contradiction to her name, becomes the "bad woman" for expressing her desires in the film. This highlights how the stigma surrounding premarital sex in India even if it's consensual almost always falls squarely on women. Within Brahminical patriarchy, chastity and obedience were elevated as the highest ideals of womanhood, precisely because controlling female sexuality was central to preserving caste boundaries. Devi's condemnation is thus not just moral policing; it is the echo of a long history where women's bodies are made the battleground for both caste purity and patriarchal authority.

At the same time, Masaan takes a stand against the caste and gender divide by exposing the paradox that conservative and rebellious attitudes exist in the same space.

In our society “*ghar ki ijjat*” is vested upon a girl’s shoulder as her responsibility, yet the film presents two empowered women- Devi and Shalu, who embody high social aspirations despite these barriers. Shalu, fully aware of caste difference, still declares: “*Agar bhag ke bhi jaana hoga, to bhag bhi jayenge.*” On the other hand, Devi, though socially shamed, transcends these norms by standing firm in her conscious choice and resisting passively throughout the course of the movie.

Chakravarti notes that women are regarded as “gateways-literally points of entrance into the caste system”, which is why both Devi and Shalu’s choices carry such weight. By refusing to conform, they challenge the very structure that depends on their compliance. In doing so, the film reveals what Brahminical patriarchy fears most: that women’s non-conformity has the potential to destabilize the entire edifice of caste and patriarchy.

Thus, Masaan stands as an epitome of hope. It brings out how men and women, who have been forever oppressed, today exercise their agency and autonomy to break free from complex obligations imposed on the basis of caste and gender. By situating Devi and Shalu against the backdrop of Brahminical patriarchy, the film can be read as more than a personal story as it becomes a critique of the social order itself, exposing the contradictions of tradition and the courage it takes to resist them.

Constitutional Ideals vs Social Realities in Masaan

Masaan starkly reveals how constitutional ideals are continually thwarted by entrenched caste and gender prejudices. The film’s exploration of moral policing, ritual exclusion, and institutional complicity asks viewers to confront the need for justice that surpasses merely legal reform and requires a deeper transformation of social attitudes.

Article 14: Equality Before Law - Devi and her partner, despite being consenting adults, face humiliation from the police for their consensual relationship, highlighting how private morality undermines equality and limits women’s autonomy. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law for all citizens, irrespective of caste or gender. However, in this case, Devi is punished by the police, with the legal system enforcing moral codes rather than upholding constitutional rights. The paper explores how Devi’s experience exposes the limitations of constitutional equality, as private morality often supersedes legal protections for women. Devi’s situation reflects the persistent moral surveillance and shaming of women’s sexuality, a legacy of patriarchal norms designed to control upper-caste women and uphold societal order. The police, acting as moral authorities, ignore her legal rights, reinforcing social biases instead of enforcing the law. This is analyzed through Uma Chakravarti’s concept of Brahminical patriarchy, where the regulation of women’s mobility and sexuality is key to maintaining caste purity. Devi’s ordeal demonstrates how patriarchal power operates through both family and state institutions, ensuring that the honor of the household depends on controlling women’s bodies. Consequently, equality under Article 14 remains vulnerable when influenced by social prejudice and patriarchal oversight.

Article 15: Non-Discrimination - Article 15 directly forbids discrimination on grounds such as caste and gender.

Yet, Devi is barred from entering the cremation ghat ("*Ghat pe ladies nahi ja sakti*"), a ritual restriction justified by tradition but laden with gendered exclusion. We see that the control of women's mobility and sexuality is pivotal to maintaining caste purity. Simultaneously, Deepak's relationship with Shalu encounters subtle caste opposition: friends caution him about the impossibility of their union, revealing persistent hierarchies that outlast legal reforms. The film's visuals of Deepak, confined by both occupation and social perception owing to his caste, mirror the ongoing exclusion and stigma that Article 15 seeks to eradicate, showing that old hierarchies still endure beneath constitutional guarantees. Drawing on Rajesh Sharma's study of the Dom community, the paper shows how caste remains deeply entrenched in everyday life. Deepak's occupation as a cremation worker reflects the inherited stigma of "polluting" labor, a stark reminder that social discrimination persists despite Article 15's formal prohibition. At the same time, Devi's gendered exclusion from ritual spaces underscores how caste and gender intersect, producing dual forms of discrimination that law alone cannot dismantle.

Article 21: Right to Life and Liberty - Article 21 guarantees the right to life and personal freedom, which includes privacy and dignity. In the case of Masaan, a police raid on adults who were willing to be together violated the autonomy and privacy of Devi and her partner. The sad result, her partner's suicide, shows how constitutional rights can be easily broken when the government uses moral judgment and pressure. The paper points out that these issues are not just one-time problems but are part of a bigger system failure: the police often act as watchers and controllers instead of protectors of individual rights. These actions show the big difference between what the law says and how people actually experience it, especially when rules are ignored because of social biases and traditional ideas about gender. We can support this with Radhika Iyengar's story from *Fire on the Ganges*, where the Dom community lives on the edges of Banaras and is treated without respect or safety. Deepak's life shows how this kind of exclusion happens, and Devi's treatment shows that even women from higher castes can lose their freedom when society follows strict moral rules. Both narratives reveal that Article 21's promise of dignity and freedom is not really protected when people are treated unfairly and watched by those in power based on old beliefs.

Conclusion

Masaan invites viewers to witness not just a story, but a reflection of lived realities that often remain invisible, where legal protections and social justice remain out of sync. It calls attention to the silent, persistent struggles of individuals caught in the web of caste and gender, where constitutional guarantees of equality and liberty are frequently undermined by entrenched social norms and institutional biases. The strength of Masaan lies in humanizing those whom society and often the legal system marginalizes. It challenges the audience to see beyond the formal promises enshrined in law, urging a deeper empathy for the complex realities of identity, dignity, and aspiration.

The film exposes the gap between legal ideals, such as Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Indian Constitution, and their inconsistent application in everyday life, highlighting the need for not only legal reform but also transformative social change. The film leaves us with a spark of hope: if we lean into the legal system and pair it with real human effort, we can stitch together a future that's fairer and lifts everyone up.

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