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Research Article

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Embodiment of Untouchability: Cinematic Representations of the "Low" Caste Women in India

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Abstract: Ironically, feudal relations and embedded caste based gender exploitation remained intact in a free and democratic India in the post-1947 period. I argue that subaltern is not a static category in India. This article takes up three different kinds of genre/representations of "low" caste women in Indian cinema to underline the significance of evolving new methodologies to understand Black ("low" caste) feminism in India. In terms of national significance, *Acchyut Kanya* represents the ambitious liberal reformist State that saw its culmination in the constitution of India where inclusion and equality were promised to all. The movie Ankur represents the failure of the state to live up to the postcolonial promise of equality and development for all. The third movie, *Bandit Queen* represents feminine anger of the violated body of a "low" caste woman in rural India. From a dacoit, Phoolan transforms into a constitutionalist to speak about social justice. This indicates faith in Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's India and in the struggle for legal rights rather than armed insurrection. The main challenge of writing "low" caste women's histories is that in the Indian feminist circles, the discourse slides into salvaging the pain rather than exploring and studying anger.

Keywords: Indian cinema, "low" caste feminism, Bandit Queen, Black feminism

By the late nineteenth century due to certain legal and socio-religious reforms,¹ space of the Indian family had been opened to public scrutiny. The early 20th century witnessed the emergence of a national movement for freedom from Great Britain. This variety of nationalism was Janus faced where internal reformation continued along with anti-colonial movement.² After India attained its independence from Great Britain in 1947, the greatest challenge for the independent state was to deal with utter poverty and underdevelopment. Anti-colonial and idealist nationalism of the Gandhian variety alone could not meet this challenge. Nehruvian socialism and reconstruction brought complex solutions. The three pillars of Nehru's development strategy, representing a fairly widespread intellectual consensus of the time were rapid planning for industrial and agricultural growth, a public sector to develop strategic industries, and a mixed economy (Chandra 227).

It is rather interesting how cinematic representations of various sections of the society reflected the multiple socio-political contexts in postcolonial India. Years immediately after the independence focused on the rebuilding of institutions and economy. Discourses on social justice and equality were weak and overshadowed by the urgency of drawing boundaries and creating a nation-state. It was gradually within the constitutional framework that gender and caste inequalities were addressed in the nationalist discourses

¹ Hindu religious texts on social treatise were in use in British India for the purpose of lawmaking and governance. Most significant ones included law against widow immolation and child marriage.

² Tom Nairn has used the example of Janus who was a Roman god who stood at the gates of people's homes with one head turned forward, and another turned backwards, symbolising concern for guarding the nation as well as reforming the nation.

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much later. To deal with social injustices and notions of physical pollution and purity, the Indian society historically rooted in the caste system, needed an abolitionist approach in the 20th century. The nationalist leaders were mostly unprepared to face the 'disunity' that would result from an internal social revolution. Indian national congress since 1885 annually hosted a national social conference towards the end of their meetings. By the 1900s, it was decided to dissolve the social conferences. The argument put forth was that Indian social structure was too diverse. Women's issues (debates on widow remarriage and age of marriage) and caste reforms could not be standardised/nationalised. This paved the way for the caste associations to take over the issue of caste and gender. Throughout the 20th century, the Nationalist call for strengthening the bond of unity against colonialism continued to reconfigure the caste composition within the national movements—most notably in the 1920s Non Cooperation Movement; Civil Disobedience Movement (1930s) and Quit India Movement (1942).

Universal and locally available imageries of *Mother India* were being produced to foster patriotism. (Sinha; Atwal; Bose). This enabled varying shades of Hinduism to associate themselves with the cause of freedom movement.

I argue that it is in the realm of Hindi cinema that arguments for caste and gender reform continued to be articulated since the 1930s. Theatre and cinema were products of the colonial times. In cinema, particularly interesting is the creative representation of "low" caste women³ from the colonial times to the 1990s. The "low" caste women's bodies proved to be an extraordinary template for modernising the socio-political discourses for the Hindi cinema makers.

This article attempts to read cinema as a political text thereby tracingstages which mark a shift in the body politic of the "low" caste women. This article explores three Hindi movies which were produced from the late 1930s till 1990s—*Acchut Kanya* (1936), *Ankur* (1974) and *Bandit Queen* (1996).

Set against a euphoric nationalist struggle and consciousness of caste, Acchut Kanya (untouchable girl) is a 1936 film that softly supports the inclusion of "low" caste females into upper caste households. Ankur (seedling) produced in 1974 is a vivid portrayal of the politics of reproduction in a caste-based feudal set up in the Indian countryside. Bandit Queen (a biopic of the "low" caste female dacoit Phoolan Devi), portrayed the sexual violence on the rural "low" caste women. It looks intensely at the localised/everyday caste and gender-based violence and its aftermath. Phoolan takes up arms and dacoity as a response to the persistence of social injustice which she experiences in the form of rape, servility and humiliation. The movie opens up with a scene where Phoolan (about 11 years) makes a statement about how she had heard women often say that "all men are rascals." She goes through the trauma of being raped by her husband at the age of 11. The representation of sexual violence is intended to justify the strength of anger that Phoolan begins to harbour as she grows up. The intention behind this article is to challenge some aspects of recent feminist historiography on Dalit women. The main challenge of writing "low" caste women's histories is that in the Indian feminist circles, the discourse slides into salvaging the pain rather than exploring and studying the anger. One such recent example is Gupta's article on "Dalit Women as Victims: Iconographies of Suffering, Sympathy and Subservience" (55-72). As the title suggests, the author explores victimhood of Dalit women ("low" caste) women. Although Gupta intends to make a critique of limited frameworks of charitable benevolence and spectatorial pity, where Dalit women appeared as mute sufferers and romanticised submissive beings (55), she ends up adding to the archive of narratives of pity, pain, suffering and discrimination of Dalit women in specific and Dalit communities in general (Paik; Rao). Resistance by Dalit community and creation of counter-publics have also been begun to be documented, the only

³ I use the term "untouchable" and "Dalit" for the caste keeping in mind its socio-political use in academia. The practice of untouchability has been made punishable by the Indian courts of law by the Indian Constitution. It is practised in the underdeveloped parts of India, particularly where education and new job opportunities are lacking. I disagree with the use of term Dalit outside academic references (esp. referring to individual as a Dalit) as it refers to a "downtrodden" individual or a community. A similar consolidation has happened in the case of Black people, but the use of the name of colour represents a difference, not a hierarchy as in case of the term "Dalit." An educated "low" caste member is not a Dalit literally and practically, he/she constantly struggles to get out of the frame of reference. Please refer to the section on the discussion on subalternaeity I argue in favour of a new vocabulary.

restricting factor in such works is the presumption that Dalits form a homogenous community (Brueck). This paradigm overlooks the divisions within the caste/s and also the prevalence of social classes. Given the diversity of India and its openness to the global economy, Dalit educated middle class have emerged as a distinct class active in the political life of India. In the 1990s, there were several independent and autonomous assertions of Dalit women's identity; a case in point is the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (Rege).

Repeated use of the term Dalit in the academic circles has also been problematic. The word Dalit literally means "the downtrodden." It emerged in the context of 1970s labour movement in Western India. The term gained popularity within the academia as new dimensions of economic and political exclusion began to be studied. Low castes themselves used this term to highlight their exclusion from country's resources. However, "low" caste political mobilisation has become a potential area of study in India and abroad. What is lacking is the study of "low" caste women's movement and their anger. Phoolan Devi's life has not attracted feminist scholarship (which is dominated by "upper" caste intelligentsia). My intention behind taking up three different kinds of genre/representations of "low" caste women in Indian cinema was to primarily underline the significance of evolving new methodologies to understand Black ("low" caste) feminism in India. The expectations and the cultural and emotional world of "low" caste women are not very different from the "upper" caste women. The absenting and silencing of this emotion may have helped in universalising Dalit histories, but it has certainly not helped to give voice to "low" caste women's feminism. Men and women suffer differently and experience anger differently. Guru in his seminal article on how Dalit women talk differently from other women has argued that Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenising the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the Dalits) (Guru 2548).

All three films under discussion are set in an interrelated yet a specific socio-political context.

Achhut Kanya or The Untouchable Girl (1936): Debating Love, Desire and the Threshold of the "Low" Caste Hindu Woman

Themes of mythology, love, marriage and reform dominated the early years of Indian cinema. Rebellious love was not a new theme for the Indian audience. Legends of martyred lovers like Soni-Mahiwal and Heer-Ranjha were well etched in the cultural memory of cinema makers and their audience. While the traditional fictional rebellious romance was surreal and distanced from the reader; the introduction of a "low" caste woman (played by the upper caste/class Devika Rani in *Achhyut Kanya*) in a modern love story was a novel phenomenon. This performativity yielded the power of the "low" caste woman character over the audience. Cinema, therefore, became a site for struggle in the images. Chowdhry has investigated the colonial market's reaction against certain ideological formations and its impact on production processes as well as British policy formation as regards empire films (Chowdhry). Imagination on caste, love and desire was also shaped by Chandalika, a play written by Rabindranath Tagore in the late 19th century. In this play set in the forest, a Buddhist monk asks a poor girl named Prakriti, from the 'untouchable' caste to give him some water to drink. Prakriti gives him water. By taking water from this girl, the monk defies the existing caste rules of untouchability as he is outside the societal fold. Prakriti develops a deep admiration for the monk and asks her mother who practices witchcraft, to cast a spell on him. Despite her efforts to cast a spell on the monk, Prakriti fails. She eventually joins the Buddhist order herself. Achhyut Kanya is a 1936 Bombay Talkies movie directed by Franz Osten, a German filmmaker. It was produced by Himanshu Rai with Devika Rani, his wife in the leading role of Kasturi, the untouchable girl. Kasturi befriends Pratap, an upper caste Brahman boy after Pratap's father is saved by Kasturi's father after a snake bite. Their friendship transforms into platonic love and companionship as they grow up. However, the Pratap's parents feel threatened by this friendship and hurriedly get Pratap married to a girl from a similar caste, named Meera. Meanwhile, Kasturi's parents also get her married to Manu from their caste. Manu has a first wife named Kajri, whom he had abandoned. Even after their marriage, Pratap and Kasturi could not cease to love each other. Meera and Kajri get to know about this and poison Manu's mind against Pratap. In a rather bizarre end, Manu

attacks Pratap on a railway line. Both fall down on the rail tracks. In order to save them from a speeding train, Kasturi runs towards the train with a red flag trying to stop it. While trying to stop, the train hits her, and she dies. However, she manages to save the lives of Manu and Pratap. It is this sacrifice which wins her an honourable status amongst the villagers who erect a small temple-like structure to commemorate her.

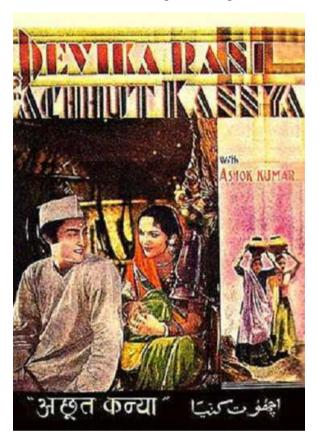


Figure 1: Achhyut Kanya

What is striking about both *Chandalika* and *Achhyut Kanya* is the similar fate of the two untouchable girls. They both fail in winning their love. Both of them eventually sacrifice themselves/their desire and get immortalised in history. Achhyut Kanya is a denouement of the late 19th-century caste reforms led by Jotirao Phule, a social reformer from Western India who opened a school for the "untouchable" Hindus and worked towards their access to public wells and other resources. Another "low" caste leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar had assumed a prominent role in national politics by 1936. Dr Ambedkar in 1932, as a step to empower the "low" castes, demanded separate electorates (reservation of elected seats) for them in the provincial legislative assemblies. The Muslims had been already granted a separate electorate by then. Gandhi went on a hunger strike to oppose Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates. Gandhi's argument was that it would divide the Hindus further. Communal award by the British had already divided Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi succeeded in convincing Ambedkar to take back his demand. By 1936, the Civil Disobedience Movement led by Gandhi had resulted in two roundtable conferences in London. Armed revolutionary politics had continued despite Gandhi's call for non-violent anti-colonial protest. Caste consciousness had transformed into political activism by the time Achhut Kanya was released. It is interesting to note that despite the onset of collisional politics between Ambedkar and Gandhi- softer, feminine images of the sacrificial "low" caste women attained popularity. Through cinematic representation, the "low" caste woman's body seemingly absolved the high caste Hindu men of their guilt. The imagined "low" caste woman entered the "upper" caste male's world of literary myth, romance and suffering. Kasturi suffers from social marginalisation but not a physical one. She is permitted entry into different kinds of households; she visits shops and conducts everyday business without being ostracised. It is only when she wishes to marry Pratap that she is reminded of her "untouchability." Pratap also confesses that he wishes he was also an untouchable. Most songs in Achhyut Kanya have been shot in the artificial forest setting within a studio. This can be contrasted with the significance of agricultural fields for songs after independence in 1947. The limits of engagement of the movie makers of the 1930s were defined by the 19th-century socio-religious reformist zeal. For them, all women's question could be sorted within a reformist-nationalist paradigm.

Ankur or Seedling (1974): Sexual Politics in a Feudal Setting

Ankur is marked by the representation of caste within the class struggle. Ankur contains anguish and pain of the "low" caste Hindus in the countryside. Produced in the countryside of Telangana in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, the film is based on a real-life case. Director Shyam Benegal initiated a new genre of cinema called parallel/art cinema. It is true that Ankur does not speak directly of the Emergency,4 but it reflects the problems of Indian political and economic life⁵ through a realistic story about colonial India. (Nochimson 268). The story is set in the 1950s south India in a hamlet called Yellareddigudda near Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh where feudal land relations prevail. Laxmi, a poor young "low" caste married woman, longs for a child but is unable to conceive. She often visits local temples and priests to perform ceremonies. Her husband, Kistiyya is a deaf-mute alcoholic. They work for the rich local landlord, Kadar Begand live in a small hut in his fields. The story opens with Kadar Beg's graduate son Surya who returns to the ancestral village to look after his property. Surya is married to a child bride but cannot bring her home to live with him until she is physically ready for consummation. Surya shares the belief of his father about the necessity of commanding the "lower" castes to keep them in servitude. Luxmi begins to work as a maid in Surya's house who is attracted to her sexually. Meanwhile, village folk harass and shave Kishtiyya's head for stealing toddy wine. Kishtiyya quietly disappears from the village. Surya takes advantage of Luxmi and gets her into an intimate relationship with him. Luxmi conceives, but Surya forces her to abort. When she refuses he humiliates her. Kistiyya returns after a few days and is happy to learn that his wife is pregnant. He thanks the local village goddess. When Surya learns that Kistiyya is back, he becomes paranoid and begins to suspect that Kistiyyamighthit him to take revenge for impregnating his wife. In a fit of rage, Surya hits Kistiyya and abuses him. Luxmi comes running to protect her husband. Luxmi is also enraged, and she shouts back at Surva openly. The movie ends with a village kid breaking the window of Surva's cottage with a stone. This film symbolises a class cum caste war in rural India.

There are some noticeable moments in the film. Luxmi is taken by surprise when Surya asks her to make the morning tea for him. By norms of the village, a member of the untouchable caste could not serve food or drink to the member of the upper caste. When Kistayya goes missing one day, Luxmi is heartbroken. She and Surya develop a physical attraction for each other, and gradually the master-maid relationship turns into a sexual one. Luxmi feels comforted and happy in this secret relationship with Surya. Surya initially comes across as a radical to Luxmi who braves breaking caste taboos. Surya, on the other hand, is a self-centred individual whose ultimate aim is to satisfy his sexual need. Luxmi is the ideal choice as she is an irresistible, attractive and an equally vulnerable woman. This is manifest in the way he mistreats Luxmi when she tells him that she is pregnant. He turns violent and forces her to abort. There is an inbuilt irony: Surva's father also has had an 'illegitimate' son from his secret relationship with a village woman. To compensate her she had to be given a plot of land by her father. Surya had been harbouring dislike for his father's openly secret family. The other interesting aspect of women's lives which is significant from a gender

⁴ This refers to the period from 1975-1977 in Indian history when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared Emergency. The nation was brought under Article 352 of the Constitution, and resulted in the suspension of the Fundamental Rights and jolted democracy.

⁵ The twin figures of peasant exploitation—the money lender and the zamindar (landlord), are familiar characters in the narratives of Indian cinema. In the context of Asian peasant societies, Scott deployed the concept of "moral economy" of the peasant to delineate the ideology of survival and reciprocity, which depended on traditional rationality rather than on classical economics.

perspective is the centrality of the seedling, i.e. Ankur. The control of Surya over Luxmi's body is complete and is defined by social power. Historically Andhra Congress Socialist Party was dominant in carrying out anti-Zamindari (landlord) movement in Andhra Pradesh since 1934. By 1970, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), its mass organisations, Kisan Sabha and youth organisations had penetrated into the majority of states' villages and succeeded in building networks (Josh). Deepak Kumar in his seminal work called Trishanku Nation recalls that after independence, the year 1967 marked a watershed in Indian polity and life. For the first time, the Indian National Congress tasted defeat. The "illiterate" masses showed political acumen. Kumar claims that democracy had taken roots, no doubt, but the loss of moral fibre emerged as the real problem, almost simultaneously (Kumar 15-16). In terms of postcolonial gender debates, "low" caste women's feminist argument surfaced as late as the 1990s.

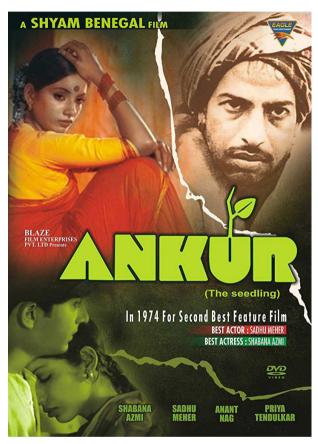


Figure 2: Ankur

Bandit Queen: Female Violence as Social Justice

The book, *I, Phoolan Devi—The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen* is a true story of Phoolan Devi, born into a family of Mallahs (boatmen was considered "lower" caste), in the north Indian village of Ghura Ka Purwa. French authors Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali interviewed Phoolan around 1994. Phoolan had turned into a dacoit by early 1980s. She was arrested in 1984. Besides looting, she was charged with the murder of over twenty men at Behmai in Central India. Although she denied the charges, she surrendered to the police in 1984 and served a term in jail for ten years. After her release from the prison, she joined politics and remained a member of parliament until 2001 when she was shot down by an upper caste man who wanted to take revenge on her. What makes Phoolan's life worth examining is not only the extremely violent chronology of events of her life but also the controversial representations of her life through cinema and biography. Phoolan's biopic was made for the first time by the Indian director Shekhar Kapoor in 1996.

It was based on a biography written by Mala Sen. Although Phoolan had consented to the movie—when it was finally released Phoolan was aghast to see the elaborate nude and rape scenes. There were other scenes of violence—such as the killing of Rajput men at Behmai. This was clearly denied by Phoolan in her statement to police as well. The academic debate about whether representations are class based/colonial/ postcolonial needs to be invoked here. In her brilliant interpretation of Phoolan's life, Leela Fernandes locates her in the context of a globalised economy where biographies and cinema may be produced for a particular national audience (Fernandes).

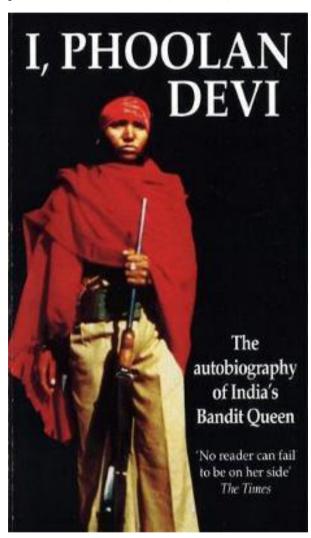


Figure 3: Bandit Queen

Phoolan was married at the age of eleven to Putti Lal, whose age was thirty. Despite the fact that she was a child who naturally had no idea of conjugal love/relations, her husband forced her to leave her parents' house as he wanted to consummate the marriage. It was a common practice in north Indian villages to "fix" marriages of the children. However, it was generally not before the age of puberty that the girls were sent to live with the husband, who was normally older than the girl. Phoolan would get angry whenever she was told that Puttilal is her husband. She experienced rape by her husband time and again. In her biography, she recalls how she had immense storage of physical energy. She would cut grass with her sickle and thrash it for the animals. She could carry heavy baskets and jars of water on her head. She says "I was born with my mother's anger" (Devi 12). Phoolan describes how her primary education in school at the village was discontinued. "The Brahmin (upper caste teacher) was an impatient man who punished children." There is a long established linkage of national development with issues such as lack of nutrition and inadequate education of women.⁶ According to Phoolan, she had learnt to steer the heavy boat across the river against the current when she was young. She alludes to the skills of her caste—Mallahs (boatmen). She knew how to help Rukmini (her older sister) and her mother plough soil and sow the seeds. (Devi 19). She recalled the separation of temples according to caste and class - 'Our village had two temples, one dedicated to *Kali* (the fierce looking Goddess) where my father went all the time to make offerings and pray for help, an another, much more beautiful, dedicated to Shiva, where the rich went to give thanks for all they possessed" (Devi 23).

At the age of ten, she also fought against her cousin, Mayadin, who had grabbed her father's land. She recalls that he tried to teach them letters with blows from his stick. He insulted them us when they didn't repeat what he said correctly, and when he was very angry, he struck them on heads, which had been shaven bald because of lice (23). There were other girls who had to carry bricks up and down the wooden ladders all day long while their fathers or husbands built the walls of the rich.

Phoolanbe came conscious of exploitative practices of the powerful employees and knew well how to assert, she says—"they (Phoolan's friends) liked working with me, they told me, because I knew how to make sure we were paid. From then on, we warned everyone who hired us that if they didn't pay us, the thunder and lightning would come, and their houses would fall on their heads" (154).

Her dystopian narrative becomes more sharp as she narrates the inevitability of her being driven into the life of a dacoit—"I had become a dacoit in the minds of the elders of my village....I had refused the fate marked out for me by my birth; I had fled my village, my family and my community. That was my only crime. Now they wanted to crush me." (188).

Summarising her will power to tolerate extreme violence at the hands of men without begging for mercy, she says this was a force which was a gift of Goddess Durga. ⁷

She describes vividly how the police canned her repeatedly—"They canned me harder this time, flying the skin from my arms and legs. My limbs were raw and streaming with blood. I screamed with pain, but nobody dared to stop them. The villagers came out and huddled together in the chilly morning air watching from a distance. A beating was a common enough spectacle for them, and they had seen me beaten before" (192).

The decade of the 1990s holds special significance for feminist studies. The film *Bandit Queen* was released in 1994 following Phoolan Devi's first biography which was published in 1991. Biographies and the general interest taken by foreign women activists in Phoolan led to the internationalisation of the theme of the suffering Dalit woman. These representations by the educated and informed elitist activist intelligentsia pose some debatable questions for the academia. How does one negotiate between 'packaging' the rape victim for the international audience and between consumption of the same rape re-enacted for the home audience? Although Phoolan consented to the making of the film, she was shocked to see such graphic representation of her rape in the filmi style. Phoolan had herself told the biographers that her anger was consolidated by the repeated instances of rape since her childhood.

In one of her interviews to media after she returned from jail, Phoolan spoke about her pre-bandit life. She narrated that after her rape by several people—from the "upper" caste, her own caste and those stationed at the police station, she was often taunted by her village folks that she would always live in shame and disgrace for the rest of her life. She told the interviewer that she had determined that she was not responsible for her own plight and that she had been wronged. So, it was now her turn to take on these men. She specifically mentions three scenes in the movie Bandit Queen which she found highly objectionable and demanded deletion. One was the scene where Phoolan is paraded naked by the rapists while the villagers sit and watch. The second and third were explicit rape scenes. She argues forcefully:

⁶ Jyoti Atwal, "Gender Equality for a Progressive Society," in a special issue on Empowering Rural Women, *Kurukshetra*, Ministry of Information and Broadcast, Government of India, January 2018, pp. 46-49. In the present day, Indian State is increasingly focused on removal of gender injustice and discrimination within the rural and urban areas. The monitoring target of the Twelfth Plan for Women and Children was laid down in 2015. It was noticed that poorer young girls in villages suffer from malnutrition and forced labour inside homes. Out of 46 per cent of children affected by malnutrition in the country about 70 per cent are girl children. There is simultaneous exploitation of *Shram* and *Sharir*, i.e. "labour" and "body."

⁷ A popular Hindu Goddess known for her power to battle the forces of evil and slay demons.

"Mein Zindabhaithihoon; mere saath jo kuchbhihua, iskamatlab ye nahinaap business karo!" (I am here sitting alive, whatever happened with me does not entitle anybody to do business).8

It is crucial to draw a parallel between the representation of the history of Slavery in the United Kingdom and the cinematic representations of "low" caste women's lives. Alan Rice in his seminal work on the commemoration of the bicentenary of the ending of the slave trade in Britain in 1807. He focuses on Whitworth Gallery in Manchester and museums in Lancaster where he claims that "radical museological praxis" (Rice 295) acquired centrality. The work songs/blues songs9 were selected and played next to the paintings in a tape loop. This symbolises the "triumph of the human spirit despite poverty and degradation" (295). These blues songs were contrasted with the Manchester weavers' songs which spoke of oppressive factory conditions. The politics of representation needs to acquire a central space in the study of marginalised peoples throughout the world. Another significant issue of Indian history is the exploration of the subaltern. Subalternhood should not be considered a static concept but one which struggles to capture the dynamics of the constantly changing situations. The politics of recognition (rather than politics of victimisation) reminds an individual of his earlier subjecthood where the subaltern could not speak (Spivak). But this view of Spivak has positive as well as negative features. Her view does not capture how a subaltern learns to speak when the new situation develops as a result of his/her own struggles. This psychological transformation results in the evolution of a new emotional world. The dynamic concept of subalternhood seems to be passing through four distinct stages:¹⁰

- 1. Victimisation
- 2. Anger (post victimisation)
- 3. Struggle for recognition/social equality
- Confidence of being recognised socially equal

However, the above passage of transformation gets complicated in the case of women where it becomes extremely difficult for them to move to the third stage for a struggle for recognition or the fourth one, which involves experiencing confidence after being duly recognised. Even when they share their subalternity with subaltern men, they remain a distinct group in itself/ for itself. Ramnarayan Rawat in his brilliant study of the "low" caste Chamars has pointed out to the stereotypes in the colonial and postcolonial narratives which perpetuated the notion of untouchability. Chamars (traditionally leatherworkers) constantly challenged their profession-based identity as leather workers, as they had moved on to other professions during the colonial period (Rawat). His work adds to my argument here that the Subaltern is not static. Vivek Kumar, a renowned sociologist has also pointed out to the rigidity of the caste system, where one stands above the other. Despite the rigidity of the caste system, "low" caste people react differently depending on the stage of their subalternship. Caste is, therefore, experience and not only a social-economic division in the Indian society. Phoolan says "I was discovering piece by painful piece how my world was put together: the power of men, the power of privileged castes, power of might. I didn't think of what I was doing as rebellion; it was only means I had of getting justice . . . I was a woman who belonged to a lowly caste." (154) Her rebellion began when she was only 14-15 years of age after she had experienced inhuman treatment and unbearable violence. There has been plenty of debate about how Black women react or respond to oppression. Much has been written about Black feminist struggle and victories from within the constitutionalist domain and tensions within the Black feminist movement (Davidson; Brown; Carby; Sequoia).

In Domestic Allegories of Political Desire, Claudia Tate uncovers the political significance of black women's domestic fiction in the post-Reconstruction period. Tate's cultural analysis draws upon a broad range of texts, including antebellum works such as Harriet Wilson's Our Nig, domestic fiction by Pauline Hopkins, Katherine Tillman, and Angelina Weld Grimké, and modernist classics such as Zora Neale

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyUkMRJvn7c&t=73s (in Hindi. All translations are mine)

⁹ The blues are a blend of ballads and field hollers, historically an African-American song form. Hollers were the work songs of the slaves when they worked in plantations.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Prof Bhagwan Josh with whom I had a long discussion on the question of the subaltern.

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Knufer talks about African American Women's Clubs in turnofthe century Chicago where Black women expanded their agendas and refined their protest strategies to meet the needs of the new migrants and the changing economic and political landscapes. While women play the central role in this work, in the early chapters Knupfer struggles to cast women as intellectuals rather than simply as activists.

Despite obstacles and the changing nature of African American activism, black women reformers continued to play an important role in "the unfolding narrative of twentieth-century black consciousness and civic advancement" (Knufer 160). In contemporary India, it is by unpacking the word Dalit that one can clearly see the gender dimension and the various stages of subalternhood. In terms of national significance, Acchyut Kanya represents the ambitious liberal reformist State that saw its culmination in the constitution of India where inclusion and equality were promised to all. The movie Ankur represents the failure of the state to live up to the postcolonial promise of equality and development for all. It was rebellion over constitutional methods which took over in some States in India. Ironically, feudal relations and embedded caste-based gender exploitation remained intact in a free and democratic India. The producer, Shyam Benegal himself tells us in a tv interview that it took him 12 years to make Ankur as nobody was willing to buy this idea. 11 Telangana's peasant struggle in the 1950s and 60s shaped Benegal's ideological struggle which was aimed at the destruction of feudal relations in rural South India (Mukherjee 2004). The director was clearly responding to the social change around him. The third movie, Bandit Queen represents feminine anger of the violated body of a "low" caste woman in rural India. However, the biopic does not highlight the real transformation of Phoolan, but the autobiography does. From a dacoit, Phoolan transforms into a constitutionalist to speak about social justice. This indicates faith in Dr BR Ambedkar's¹² India and in the struggle for legal rights rather than armed insurrection. In present-day India, caste-based violence against women is quite rampant in rural parts. Emergence of Black sisterhood in India is a necessary pre condition to unite women at the level of villages and cities. It is a dire necessity for the Indian feminist scholars to stop patronising "low" caste women in their writings. "Low" caste women's own voices of political unrest, love/desire and perspectives on reforms/development need to be factored in. They need to be made visible in history not as either passive or enraged victims but also as self aware contributors to the national life and development.

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¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfW5PRnZ5OMand https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ylAVN17YUWQ

¹² Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a scholar, a social reformer and a leader who dedicated his life to eradicating social inequality in India. He belonged to one of the "low" castes of Western India. India became an independent nation on 15 August 1947, and Dr Ambedkar was appointed as the Union Law Minister and Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. He drafted India's Constitution.

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