Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema

The cinematic interventions of contemporary Dalit film-makers in India, Nagraj Manjule and Pa Ranjith, among others, represent modes of resistant historiography, employed by Dalits, against the aesthetic regime of stereotypical representation, through innovative techniques in visuals, sound, music, and cinematography. The paper attempts to evaluate and argue for an enabling anti-caste aesthetics articulated through an embodied sensibility in films. The paper argues that these film-makers not only disturb “the unconscious of caste” through an explicit anti-caste aesthetics but also produce affective, expressive archives. In other words, they bring into presence what was previously impossible through the processes of denunciation (of casteist images) and innovation (of anti-caste aesthetics).

The discourse on Dalits and cinema in India has gained academic attention recently, resulting in a range of studies from different perspectives. While some focus on the much debated question of Dalit representation in film content both as critique (Margaret 2013) and as appreciation (Tamalapakula 2018), others study the absence and presence of Dalit film-making itself (Wankhede 2013; Yengde 2018). While Dalits, like many other lower caste/class communities, have been part of the industry as labourers, they were hardly involved in formal production processes. The recent success of Nagraj Manjule and Pa Ranjith—two prominent Dalit film-makers in Marathi and Tamil language cinema respectively—and their celluloid experiments presenting an enabling, anti-caste aesthetics warrants our attention to this context. Both the directors present an aesthetics that is anti-caste in the genre of commercial films, though their approach differs significantly. While Manjule’s films concentrate on the lives of Dalits in rural Maharashtra, especially highlighting the nuances of everyday social discrimination, Ranjith deals with Dalit assertion among Tamils, both inland and diasporic. Their films transcend language barriers, reaching a larger audience through different modes of production (using subtitles, remakes, and dubbing) and wider circulation (through large-scale national and international theatrical release and use of social media platforms). They, perhaps, have successfully pioneered an anti-caste aesthetics beyond the usual progressive narratives of Gandhian socialism in Indian cinema (Margaret 2013).

Oppressed communities, the Dalits in particular, have always engaged with aesthetics in the vernacular, in their struggles for emancipation. The resurgence of anti-caste movements in Maharashtra during the 1960s–1970s and the subsequent growth of Dalit literature that challenged Brahminical aesthetics, is one such example. Those writings emerged as resistance against the caste system, rooted in the Dalit experience of oppression and angst (Dangle 1992). It was largely perceived as an epistemological and political act to establish a different category in literature (Dangle 1992; Satyanarayana 2019). However, one could note that the explicitness of the political overpowered the literary aesthetics in many cases. In other words, the necessity of rational epistemological questions undermined the affective expressive aesthetics of literary works. Though some writers could do both at once, Dalit literature largely remained as an alternative, if not an opposition, to mainstream literature. On the other hand, contemporary Dalit presence in film-making and the employment of...
anti-caste aesthetics in cinema not only critique mainstream cinema but also affect the medium itself, through an affective expressive aesthetics that is at once political and poetic. Thus, anti-caste aesthetics in cinema takes inspiration from, yet goes beyond, the already available category of Dalit aesthetics.

By foregrounding the films of Manjule and Ranjith, in extension to the aesthetic experiments in the vernacular, this paper explores the possibility of anti-caste aesthetics in cinema. First, it examines the relationship between caste and gaze. Second, it analyses the employment of anti-caste aesthetics and its role in turning impossibilities into possibilities. Finally, it evaluates the affective expressive aesthetics that “present” rather than “re-present.” In short, the paper attempts to go beyond representational questions (of erasure, stereotyping, and othering) and explores embodied presence such as “rejection of rejection” (Guru 2009), “oppositional gaze” (hooks 1992), and affective expressive aesthetics in Indian cinema.

**Caste and Gaze**

Dalits, at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy in India, were not only the earlier untouchables but also unhearables and unseeables. These impositions on human senses demonstrate that caste is embedded in the sensorial regime. Recent works on caste take a “sensorial turn” to understand the embodiment of caste and how it affects society (Guru and Sarukkai 2012; Lee 2017; Jaaware 2019). Caste as a sensorial regime is intrinsically linked with aesthetics, and it affects the sensory experience. Thus, anti-caste aesthetics has the potential to significantly rupture the sensorial regime of caste. Though cinema is perceived as an audiovisual medium, studies on it have generally privileged the study of sight over other senses; particularly on caste. To foreground the question of caste in cinema, it is significant to discuss the concept of gaze, especially from other oppressed locations.

Laura Mulvey (1975: 6–18) studies the significance of “look” in classical Hollywood cinema through a feminist reading; cinema as “an advanced representation system” structures “ways of seeing” the woman as an image, and the man as “bearer of the look.” Through Sigmund Freud’s “scopophilia” (objectified look) and Jacques Lacan’s conception of “mirror stage” (narcissism), Mulvey (1975: 8–11) explains how the pleasure of just looking at the screen splits into binary conceptions of active/male and passive/female. Though Mulvey’s theory is significant in analysing the role of camera in White American films, it becomes insignificant for Black female spectators.

Critically evaluating Mulvey’s theory on Hollywood’s constructed womanhood as an object of phallocentric gaze, bell hooks (1992) suggests that Mulvey’s conception of womanhood is all too White and excludes Black women. hooks highlights the rejection of such films by Black female spectators, who identify with neither the victim nor the perpetrator. They form a critical space, she argues, where “woman as an image and man as bearer of the look’ was continuously deconstructed” (hooks 1992: 122–23). Critical Black female spectators resist domineering images of Hollywood that negate Black representation and/or stereotype them as the other of Whites. To engage with mainstream images and its negation of Black representation, they cultivate an “oppositional gaze” that enables them to create an independent Black cinema (hooks 1992). Hence, they not only resist the dominant images but also create alternative texts with rich resources (songs, stories, performances, etc), engendering an alternative community.

While seeing or gazing is hegemonic on the one hand, seeing is also caring in an-other sense. Nathaniel Roberts (2016) discusses the relationship between seeing/looking and caste in a slum settlement in Tamil Nadu. For instance, he gives the example of the Tamil word paar “which literally means ‘seeing’ or ‘looking at’ but which also means ‘attending to’ someone out of concern, acknowledging that person’s presence, treating him or her as consequential” (Roberts 2016: 78). He notes that according to the slum dwellers, the rich or caste people do not look at the poor, “they scrutinize … inspect … but they don’t ever see you as a fellow human being” (Roberts 2016: 78). Hence, the look, which has power, is used in this context to neglect, ignore, and more so, to invisibilise the presence of the oppressed.

Indian cinema largely invisibilises and negates the presence of Dalits, as they are either ignored or stereotyped in the narratives while being largely absent in film production. Here, Indian cinema defies the argument of Siegfried Kracauer (1960: 304), for whom films virtually make the world our home. In India, cinema reproduces the “upper” caste/class gaze as a metonymy for the whole nation. When B R Ambedkar told M K Gandhi that he does not have a homeland (Keer 1971: 166), it indicates the oppression that Dalits in India experience. Caste oppression continuously reminds them of their non-belonging or their “longing-to-be” (Leonard 2019). On the one hand, one could state that the cinemas of India never offered a virtual home for Dalits in India as their presence is either negated or invisibilised. On the other hand, there could be a spectatorial identification, where large majorities are trapped by an image (Pandian 1992). Both cases only show how cinema affects Dalits, and not the other way round, that is, how Dalits affect cinema. It is at this juncture that one needs to look at the experiments of Manjule and Ranjith which transcend the stereotypical critique into a generative discourse. Their films, at once, offer an oppositional gaze as well as a “look” which cares—as an affective gaze. Hence, anti-caste aesthetics not only resists, but also invites one to be part of its becoming. To put it differently, anti-caste aesthetics is an aspect of “becoming” in India. A becoming which is inevitable in the case of Dalits, where being itself is violated.

Manjule and Ranjith’s films employ aesthetics as a way of being and becoming, an aesthetics of experience rather than mere perception of beauty. Though aesthetics has been theorised from various standpoints, it is widely perceived as a study of reflection on the work of art, a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the study of art and experience, or art as a site of experience. Thus, the use of the term aesthetics in this paper has more to do with the questions of experience,
which find beauty in emancipatory struggles rather than dominant perceptions. Instead of a Dalit rejection of aesthetics (Limbale 2018), the paper explores the possibilities of an anti-caste aesthetics as affect—expression and celebration—beyond the narratives of “pain” and “humiliation.” The paper, thus, argues for an anti-caste aesthetics that recognises beauty and joy in life and struggle. While it starts with the negative (Guru 2011)—from invisibility (of Dalit presence in Indian cinema)—in the politics of representation, it moves towards positive implications of (art as resistant epistemology) in the aesthetics of presentation. This presence, which disturbs representation, continuously ruptures the already conceived ideas of Dalits through cinematic stereotypes.

**Aesthetics: Possibility of Impossible**

Such anti-caste aesthetics can be studied as “inaesthetics” (Badiou 2005), where art is immanent and singular at the same time; and a truth procedure, which is irreducible to philosophy. Alain Badiou (2005: 25) analyses the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem to demonstrate the production of intra-philosophical effects in art (in this case, poetry) to argue that “the poem is capable of: to bring forth from language a coming to presence that was previously impossible.” The poet had used the non-existent word “ptyx” (the unnameable) in his poem, like the use of “x” or “y” in mathematics.

For Badiou, this unnamable connotes the possibilities of art and aesthetics in doing the otherwise impossible. For instance, Ranjith and Manjule’s films pioneered a certain kind of anti-caste aesthetics in Indian cinema that was previously impossible. The politics of “naming” in Ranjith’s recent two films exemplifies this. First, the name Kabali, in popular conception, is a lower-caste name in Tamil Nadu. By naming his protagonist and film itself thus, Ranjith gives a new dimension to the name. The reference to the name Kabali invokes the discourse that Tamil films had hitherto created only to be rejected, so as to claim a new meaning. This possibility of transformation could be seen even in the trailer of the film.

Villain: Who is that Kabali? Ask him to come here.

Kabali: (Laughs out aloud) ... Do you think I am the Kabali of Tamil films, who comes attired in lungi, with a black mole on his face and an up-turned mustache? The one who says “yes master” with a dropped gaze when Nambiar calls? (Laughs again) ... This is Kabali Man! (against a heroic background score).

This scene in Kabali deconstructs the previous notions of the name and offers a new possibility of recognition and identification. Moreover, the scene is shot in a low-angle shot, where Kabali becomes prominent and gazes back at the camera, making the character appear powerful and glamorous. This ruptures the previous images of Kabali, offering a heroic substitute. Here, Ranjith enters the hegemonic popular, which is usually unavailable for Dalits to experiment in/with, and breaks it from within by dismantling its own conventions.

However, Ranjith employs these names to counter an existing discourse on names, unlike Mallarmé’s interventions in language. In other words, Ranjith is not necessarily bringing the idea of Kabali into language but rather countering its previous possibilities to create a new discourse. In fact, what was possible (Kabali as a stereotype) had to be countered in a long intervention, as conversation and more so as critique. He breaks the existing aesthetics and interpretations behind Kabali and brings the name into the language of anti-caste aesthetics, which was an impossibility before. Whereas Badiou’s Mallarmé is using a “new-name” (author’s term), “a name that does not name” (Badiou 2005), a name that has to present a new meaning. It does not suggest that the name is countering an already available discourse. It is indeed not bothered by what it counters (if it does). But in Ranjith’s case, it is important that a stereotype is already present to counter, thereby creating a new discourse.

Similarly, *Kaala* (2018), the title of the film, does the same reversal of meanings. Kaala in Hindi or Sanskrit refers to the colour black, which is often associated with darkness in Hindu mythology. But Ranjith employs a different hermeneutic to deconstruct and reconstruct the name Kaala. When Hari dada (the villain) asks sarcastically, “Kaala, what sort of name is that?” Kaala replies that black is the colour of labour. The movie itself is a story of an urban slum community. But unlike other popular films which depict only the negative aspects of slum life, Ranjith highlights their life, struggles, and celebrations. From the act of naming, these films offer an anti-caste aesthetic that is also an oppositional gaze to mainstream Indian cinema. This possibility not only foregrounds the aspirational nature of these films, but also suggests the implications of art from being to becoming, both ontologically (offers a sense of being) and epistemologically (produces resistant epistemologies).

The possibility of the impossible is not new in the realm of aesthetics, as is evident in other parts of the world. While discussing the works of Antonin Artaud, a French theatre practitioner, scholars note that “he had passionately committed his life to possibilities, that is, to what other people would consider impossibilities” (Bermel 2013: 3). Artaud was one of the major figures of the avant-garde movement in Europe. He developed the theatre of cruelty by breaking away from Western traditional theatrical forms, which gave importance to expression instead of text. Through this, Artaud wanted to disturb the senses of the audience, and expose them to their own unconscious emotions. This unsettling of emotions was done through spectacle, gesture, lighting, sound, etc. The theatre of cruelty sought “to exalt, to benumb, to charm, (and) to arrest the sensibility” (Artaud 1958: 91). He intended to break from the representational epoch of Western tradition through delving into the unrepresentable realm of human subconscious.

Artaud’s theatre of cruelty and the anti-caste aesthetics of Dalit directors, I contend, share some similarities as they break away from conventional practices and disturb the sensibilities of viewers. If one could argue that the unconscious of the Indian audience is caste uncontouchability, then what these directors make possible is an impossibility. *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), a Tamil film, directed by Mari Selvaraj and produced by Pa Ranjith, exposes how some directors play with the audience’s sensibility. The film tells the story of Pariyan, a young
Dalit man, who aspires to become an accomplished lawyer like Ambedkar. The movie highlights the horror of honour killing and caste violence, capturing the minute ways in which caste operates. More importantly, Pariyerum Perumal disturbs the “real,” or the predictable, using anti-caste aesthetics.

The film portrays Pariyan’s aspiration to study, to become someone else—an other—than what caste society wants him to be, his relationship with Jo (a dominant caste woman) that is against societal conventions, and the ensuing caste violence and his survival with greater moral stamina. Pariyan’s relationship with Jo triggers a series of violence against him. However, Pariyerum Perumal does not end like any other Indian film, where the hero retaliates in the climax and wins against his opponents. Nor does it end like Sairat (2016), where both the protagonists become victims of honour killing. It is the unpredictability that makes the film different. The film is neither a heroic tale nor a tragic story; it highlights the significance of dialogue as a critical engagement with casteist society. In the climax, Jo’s father apologises to Pariyan for his brutal actions, and thanks the latter for not telling his daughter about the violence he had unleashed. He says, “things might change in the future, who knows!” To which, Pariyan replies, with a sarcastic smile, “I know sir. As long as you remain the same, and expect me to be a dog, nothing will change here. Things will remain the same.”

Selvaraj plays with the unconscious feelings of the audience at this point, disturbing and prompting them to think beyond their comfort zones. While Artaud is interested in challenging the unconscious feelings of the audience in order to break notions of false reality, these Dalit directors disturb the unconscious of caste through the use of anti-caste aesthetics. They also look forward to the affective expressive realm of the audience. Their intention is to bring into presence what was previously impossible through the processes of denunciation (of casteist images) and innovation (of anti-caste aesthetics). The song “Naan yaar” (Who am I?) ruptures what was possible in Tamil cinema through an otherwise impossible anti-caste aesthetics. Through images of caste atrocities, the symbolic figure of Karuppi the black dog, and venomous creatures as the scorpion and snake, caste suicides, etc., music, and lyrics, the song disturbs the caste consciousness of spectators. The song exemplifies the oppositional gaze that not only resists but also cares to make changes in society, by affecting others.

Affective Expressive Aesthetics

Arts and aesthetics play a major role in emancipatory struggles across the world. Such struggles significantly depart from the European “art for art’s sake” movement, instead using it for political purposes. Paul Taylor (2016) studies Black aesthetics and notes that the Blacks could not afford to do art just for art’s sake. Similarly, in the documentary film, In the Shade of Fallen Chinar (2016), based on arts and artists in Kashmir University of Kashmir, an artist notes that art works as a tool to heal. He wishes that it would have been great to enjoy and relish art, although impossible for them. Hence, oppressed groups across the world approach art as a platform to challenge hegemony. While aesthetics can reinforce dominant ideologies, it can also challenge the same (Eagleton 1990). Although it needs a different kind of aesthetics, an aesthetics that contests the oppressive normative.

The climax of Manjule’s Fandry (Pig; 2013) enunciates such oppositional aesthetics in cinema as it attempts to break the narrative structure through the act of throwing a stone at the screen/camera. In the end, Jabya, the protagonist, explodes with anger against caste discrimination and throws a stone at his oppressors. The stone rushes towards the screen rapidly and the film abruptly ends—blackout—with that particular scene. Stoning the camera/screen, and in extension the audience, can be seen as a breaking (away from) the narrative (space). The screen space is threatened from within the narrative by the final shot where the frame, camera, and spectator are at once targeted. Perhaps, the shot blurs cinematic realism and the “real” that is just outside the frame, so as to highlight caste oppression faced by Dalits. This approach goes beyond the postmodern reading of the “real” and highlights everyday caste violence.

Unlike Fandry, which was not a popular film though it received widespread appreciation and importance, Sairat (Wild; 2016), Manjule’s second film, became the highest grossing Marathi film till date. It was a commercial success and received many accolades for the concept and narrative treatment. Sairat explored the possibilities of the sense of sound—beautifully composed songs, apt background music, and most importantly, deafening silence—to establish the intensity of emotions. In the climax, contrary to the usual intensifying music, to show the death of the protagonist and his beloved, Manjule employs pin-drop silence to convey the horror of (dis)honour killing in India. In comparison to sound, silence speaks aloud. An extremely orchestrated silence transfers from the screen to the spectator—a contagious emotion—rupturing the genre of romance in Indian cinema in its treatment of caste. Perhaps, this is the unnamable, which cannot be brought into language as sound, but only as silence: the silence of death, “the absolute signified, the sealing off sense” (Nancy 1993: 3). A sanctified killing to shut the senses off could be captured only by silence, especially in a film that highlights Dalit sensibilities of sound.

Sairat urges one to unravel the ethico-political dimensions of the sense of touch in a regime of untouchability that operates as culture in the subcontinent. “Touch,” the word, means “to have physical contact with something or somebody,” but it also suggests “to invoke affect.” As cinema cannot be touched physically, unlike sculpture, it is the affective sense of touch that is at work. Apparently, without physical touch, cinema can touch its spectators and produce feelings in them. But cinema also has the potential to force humans to explore their sense of touch; both touching oneself and others. Touching one’s own intimate parts while watching something, or to be involved in touching, or even kissing one’s own partner during an intimate scene on the screen, are examples of cinema-induced touch. However, I focus on the affective aspect of touch here.

The “untouchables” have been a “touchy” subject for Indian cinema: either it resolves itself within a Gandhian (religious/cultural) or a Nehruvian (statist) paradigm but never ethico-politically. Whereas Sairat treats Dalit lives ethico-politically,
through an affective aesthetics. *Sairat* could touch the viewers, and “pollute” the conceptions of popular Indian cinema.\(^{22}\) The film, which otherwise follows popular yardsticks (*Sairat* has all the elements of a Bollywood flick and was remade into Hindi), differs in its manifestation of caste—not normalised but effectively presented as an atrocity. It disrupts the manifestations of caste in Indian cinema, by offering an anti-caste aesthetics—visuals and sound—that is capable of affecting the spectators. Moreover, the film is also an affective archive of the brutalities of honour killing without fetishising violence.\(^ {23}\)

Hrishikesh Ingle (2018) discusses Manjule as a catalyst in bringing marginal narratives to mainstream Marathi film industry and the subsequent changes that have come about in his wake in the Marathi cultural sphere. Manjule is a multifaceted artist—film-maker, poet, writer, and actor (he acted in both *Fandry* and *Sairat*). His film narratives and writings foreground anti-caste aesthetics rooted in the artistic experience. While acknowledging the impact of Manjule’s experiments in Marathi cinema, one needs to also look beyond the region as his films transcend regional barriers through different modes. For instance, the music for *Sairat* was recorded at Hollywood, California, for the first time in the history of Indian cinema.

Foregrounding Manjule’s films, Suraj Yengde (2018: 14) argues for a discursive Dalit cinema that “has the potential to offer performatory resistance to the interwoven threads of the caste–capital nexus.” He notes that, by critiquing different forms of oppression such as caste, gender, class, and so on, “Dalit cinema could foreshadow a cohesive battle against hegemonic caste supremacy” (Yengde 2018: 14). Yengde foretells a Dalit cinema like Dalit literature, as a kind of category that is already available and needs to be occupied. However, Manjule’s films cannot be reduced to mere categories, if there is one, for he at once blurs the boundaries of mainstream and its alternative. Instead of occupying categorisations, such as “Dalit cinema” or “Dalit popular,” directors like Manjule and Ranjith rupture the premise of the mainstream itself so as to generate an anti-caste discourse on/in cinema.

While Manjule highlights caste atrocities on Dalits through his films, Ranjith on the other hand celebrates Dalit assertion as a resistant filmic practice. He does this not as an alternative, parallel film practice but within the popular domain. Apart from direction, Ranjith also produces films under the banner Neelam productions.\(^{24}\) As a painter himself, Ranjith often paints his films with colours that enhance the power of images. His films often inter- refer earlier popular Tamil films to deconstruct them through the medium itself. Unlike most of the cinemas of India, where going back to the past is a nostalgic act to celebrate a golden era, Ranjith’s films refer back only to deconstruct them adequately, like the name Kabali (discussed earlier). In addition, the film songs contest the popular songs of earlier eras through music and lyrics. “Ulagam oruvanukka” from *Kabali* deconstructs the song “oruvar oruvan mudhalali” from *Muthu* (1995), an earlier superbhit of Rajinikanth. While *Muthu* sings “There’s just one master, the rest are mere workers,” two decades later *Kabali* retorts “Is the world for (just) one? Who are the toiling ones? Kabali will be the one to answer.” Similarly, Ranjith’s *Kaala* can be read as an antithesis of Mani Ratnam’s celebrated film *Nayakan* (*The Hero*; 1987). Rajesh Rajamani (2018) observes that *Kaala* is a deliberate attempt to erase the “Brahmin–Savarna gaze on Dharavi” in popular Tamil film imagination created by *Nayakan*, and to rewrite it from an anti-caste perspective. He contrasts the images from both the films to highlight the striking differences between them, and in turn demonstrates the deliberate deconstruction by Ranjith in *Kaala*. For instance, in *Nayakan*, the protagonist (Kamal Haasan) is mostly seen in white clothes. Curiously, even the accompanying characters are clothed in white. On the other hand, in *Kaala*, the entire movie, even its title, is aesthetically black.

**Halfway between Gesture and Thought**

However, Ranjith used white frames to portray the antagonist of *Kaala*, Hari dada. This visual play of colours, in contrast to *Nayakan*, deconstructs the frozen images of popular Tamil cinema. Unlike most films, where such deconstruction is through dialogues that refer to old films, *Kaala* inverts the images instead. These citational or intertextual references made by Dalit filmmakers are oppositional, not nostalgic, and it calls for a going beyond the frozen images. The downplay of language, if not dismissal, might look similar to Artaud’s theatre of cruelty. Artaud (1958: 89) stresses on the importance of expression over language in theatre and urges practitioners to “put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of a unique language halfway between gesture and thought.” However, this was to enhance the possibilities of theatre as “expression in space” rather than an inversion of images. It distinguishes the liveliness of theatrical performance against cinematic images which are removed from time and space. Thus, the anti-caste aesthetics offered by Manjule and Ranjith does not follow avant-garde theatrical practices of Artaud in a complete sense, though certain characteristics appear in both forms.

Ranjith provides a new dimension to Rajinikanth as a character in *Kaala* and gives a new reading of him as superstar. Rajinikanth is generally known for his superhero and hypermasculine characters. But he plays a senior citizen throughout *Kaala*, otherwise an impossibility in his usual films. Surprisingly, his younger age part in the film is a graphical representation. Unlike the mass entry of Rajinikanth in other films, *Kaala* introduces his character differently, comically: Kaala (Rajinikanth), a grandpa (albeit stylish for his age), gets clean bowled whilst playing cricket with his grandchildren. Similarly, most of his introduction songs are usually sung by his characters themselves in first person (that is, Rajinikanth—the star—sings and presents himself to his fans); whereas, in *Kabali* and *Kaala* the entry songs are sung in the third person, where Rajinikanth—the hero—is a mere participant with minimal action. By doing so, Ranjith kept the star image of the actor’s persona at bay on-screen and operated the impossible, perhaps as a performative experiment, to re-conceptualise hero-ness differently in Tamil cinema.\(^ {25}\) While re-conceptualising hero-ness, Ranjith also foregrounded women characters beyond victimhood and glamour. Kalai in *Madras* (2014); Kumudhavalli and Yogi in *Kabali*; Selvi, Zareena and Puyal in *Kaala*; these women
exuberated life with agency. They are forthcoming, assertive, and capable of fighting injustices with self-respect and dignity. In a way, Ranjith brings a thoughtful anti-caste feminism to the filmic medium.

From Resistance to Engagement

Though there are many documentary films on Dalit lives which are equally brilliant, the popularity of cinema transcends regional boundaries and could affect spectators at a large scale. Sairat was premiered at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival in February 2016 and received a standing ovation. It became the highest grossing film in the history of Marathi cinema. Similarly, both Kaala and Kabali were premiered in Malaysia and Kabali became one of the highest grossing Tamil films abroad. These films go beyond the autobiographical narratives of Dalit lives and touch the other through affective expressive aesthetics. In his study of theory and empiricism, Gopal Guru (2012) discusses why Dalits make a conscious choice to undertake empirical research over theory. He suggests that Dalits uphold their lived experience over theoretical representation. Be it in literature or films, however, the significance of autobiographical, over other narrations, might restrict the possibilities of aesthetics. While it is significant to have autobiographical narratives, it is also important to experiment with forms and narratives that are at once particular and universal. Manjule’s and Ranjith’s experiments with different forms of expression convert lived experience into a narrative that is at once local and universal, yet singular and immanent.

The significance of these films lies in their reaching out to the other—as an invitation to the other—through an affective anti-caste aesthetics. They are capable of presenting not only the affective expressive but also rational epistemological truths.26 In Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1996) terms, art is the coming into presence, an exposition of the senses into the world, absent previously but made to disappear in its presentation. Perhaps, art is at the threshold of existence, reminding us the limits of the world, the limits of ourselves. For Nancy (1993: 1–4), “representation is what determines itself by its own limit,” whereas presence is to be born, a verb which is always in action, “to find ourselves exposed, to exist.” To be born is not used as static but “to transform, transport and entrance all determinations” (Nancy 1993: 2). These directors explore this possibility—to express the unnamable—of bringing into presence a previously absent entity to a sensory reality. In the process, they create affective expressive archives of anti-caste sensibilities, which not only reject stereotypical representation, but also affect the other by producing a generative discourse of “presence.”

NOTES

1 Previously, Dalits and other lower caste were primarily employed as background crew in production units, such as light boys, spot boys, and location helpers; as post-production workers in theatres, studios, etc; as background music artists; and most importantly, as junior artists, stunt men, and background dancers who would often be directed and edited out of the frame.

2 The author watched Kabali in Hamburg, Germany, in a packed theatre. While Bollywood films frequently enjoy worldwide releases, this is rarely the case for Indian regional language cinema. Though Tamil films are well-received in South East Asia, such a response in Germany was unexpected. Similarly, Sairat (a Marathi-language film) too successfully ran in theatres of Hyderabad (a non-Marathi-speaking city) for a long time.

3 Aniket Jaaware (2019) points out the fusion of the literary and the political in Dalit literature and notes that the explicitly political ceases, almost, to be literary.

4 I use the term Dalit here, not only to suggest the oppressed/othered social location but also a move towards the possibility of an emancipated future (Choudhary 2018: 61). However, it is not used as a definitive category.

5 This is similar to how bell hooks (2016) defines aesthetics in an African American context, “aesthetics then is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming.”

6 Etymologically, the word aesthetics is derived from the Greek word ἀσθένεια (to perceive), ἀίσθητος (perceptible things), and ἀίσθητικος (things perceptible by the senses). By the 18th century, in German, the term aesthetic, relating to perception by the senses, gained popularity and was translated to the English language in the 19th century.

7 Sharankumar Limbale (2018: 121) notes that “Dalit writers have rejected traditional artistic standards and aesthetics, and have attempted to develop a separate aesthetics of their own.” While it is significant to rupture the dominant perceptions of aesthetics, it is also important to recognise the role of anti-caste aesthetics in universalising the particular.

8 “The battle to me is a matter of full joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or worldly in it. For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality...” (Ambedkar 1942: 275–76). Recently, while addressing the Class of 2019, Harvard Divinity School, during the multireligious commencement service, Cornel West (2019) spoke about the joy in struggle: “Last but not least, in celebrating you, I want you to never, ever forget that you have the capacity to preserve revolutionary joy... There’ll be joy in that kind of struggle, joy in your intellectual courage exercise, joy in your moral and spiritual witness enacted even as you fall on your face.” Then, an anti-caste aesthetics should entail an invocation of such a joyful struggle of love, life, freedom, equality, humility, and justice, even in the face of death.

9 For instance, the tag line of the male protagonist in the Tamil movie Kabali (2016), portrayed by Rajinikanth (who simply reads the word Magizhchi (joy, happiness), strikingly different from the superstar’s earlier movies. Ranjith (2019) notes that he does not want to make films of Dalit suffering and humiliation, instead he wants to present the colourful lifeworld of happiness and festivities. He started a music band, The Caseless Collective, which features gaana (a Tamil folk form mainly performed by Dalits), hip-hop, and other forms of world music. Such shift in Indian cinema, which questions the preconceived notions of Dalit identity is, what I would suggest, a move from negative to positive.

10 By immanent, Badiou means art is rigorously coextensive with the truths that it generates. Whereas singularity denotes that these truths are not given anywhere else than in art.

11 “The right to name” is a significant aspect of anti-caste politics as Dalits were not allowed to have certain names. Ambedkar’s and Iyothee Thass’s cases are examples of the right to name or to embrace a name not in accordance with prevailing caste conventions, but outside the frame.

12 In most Tamil films, Kabali is a name given to a negative character or docile sidekicks, mostly Dalits from the slum. In older Tamil films, Kabalis, thus far, have appeared variously with big moustaches, protruding tummies, kerchief around neck, black mole on face, and knife tucked into waistband. Because of such stereotyping, the name Kabali evokes the memory of an archetypal negative character in film audiences.

13 M N Nambiayar is a veteran actor who often played villain to Tamil superstar M G Ramachandran and Shivaji Ganesan in the 1950s and 1960s in a career that spanned seven decades.

14 In Indian myths, negative characters, mostly Asuras (demons), are depicted as dark (both in appearance and characterisation). Similarly, in popular cinema, villains are shown as having a dark skin colour. Moreover, darkness has been used as a marker of “lower” class/caste identity in most of the films.

15 Mari Selvaraj is a Tamil film-maker who debuted with the film Pariyum Perumal. As an emerging Dalit film-maker from Tamil Nadu after Ranjith, Selvaraj is very vocal about bringing Dalit narratives onto the screen. He believes that Ranjith has changed the stereotypical representation of Dalits in Tamil cinema. He also notes that such change can make people uncomfortable as they are not used to it. Selvaraj thinks that art can change people’s mindset and wants to create cinema which can change the status quo (Rajendran 2018).

16 Honour killing is the murder of a family member, who is perceived to have brought dishonour...
to the family. In India, most honour killings are linked to caste inequalities, especially involving those choosing to marry outside their caste.

17 Fundy tells the story of Jahila, a Dalit boy and his struggles in a caste entrenched society. His family follows their caste occupation of catching pigs. However, the dominant castes and even his fellow students make fun of him and often physically beat him up.

18 Apparently, half of the film’s budget was spent on music, as Ajay–Atul, the music directors of Saarit, recorded the songs at Hollywood in the United States.

19 In Saarit, Archie, a dominant niche cast, falls in love with Parshya, a low-caste man. When Archie’s family opposes their relationship and physically assaults Parshya, they escape to another city and start a family life there. Two years later, when Archie’s family finds out about them, the male members of the family murder both Archie and Parshya.

20 Jaaaware (2019) discusses the sense of touch, both in terms of touching oneself and touching others.

21 For instance, see Swathy Margaret’s (2013) discussion of Malapili (1938), for a detailed analysis of cultural Gandhism and the depoliticisation of untouchability. In a different context, the Malayalam film Neelakuyil (1954) foregrounds racialism at the cost of ostracising a Dalit woman, whereas Article 15 (2019) shows how Dalit question is resolved within the statist paradigm.

22 Laura Marks (2000) discusses the power of intercultural cinema to touch viewers through haptic visibility. Since touch is considered polluting in the caste regime, I argue that Saarit corrupts the hegemonic popular from within.

23 Most films on Dalits in India largely resorts to the body-humbling violence on Dalits that in an effective expression of their lives. See for instance, Pappilio Buddha (2013) and Article 15 (2019). Pappilio Buddha, a Malayalam movie, which attempted to portray Dalit struggles in Kerala, is celebrated for its realist aesthetics. The movie is seen as an exception among mainstream Indian cinema as it portrays Dalit political action (Yengde 2018). However, the film foregrounds Dalits without going into their everyday lives. There are vehement criticisms of the film for its recreation of Dalit stereotypes (Raj 2013; Kumar 2013). Similarly, Article 15 is also criticised for its depiction of Dalits as victims (Wanpede 2018).

24 Neelam in Tamil means the colour blue, popularly considered the colour of Dalit liberation. The colour blue recurs in many of his films: In Munstr, the football jersey of the protagonist’s team and the wall painting are blue, In Kaaala, blue comes as a colour of victory in the end.

25 Though not referred otherwise within the film, Rajinikanth acted as a Dalit hero in Kabali and Kaaala. However, both films are set outside Tamil Nadu. Kabali, which is spatially located in Malaysia, Kaaala is set in Mumbai. Perhaps, without this spatial displacement, it would have been difficult to operate the impossible in these films.

26 On a similar line, in the study of Puma Zai, an early Mizo performance, Thirumal et al (2018: 76–77) note that art as a weapon of the dispossessed could speak truth like philosophy, science or religion.

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