

Caste in Popular Culture: Exploring Animal Symbolism with Special Reference to *Fandry* and *Chauranga*

Merin John
M.A. English

Abstract

Caste has been a persistent evil of social discrimination for a long time in India. It doesn't have an end, rather it tangles within human identities and manifests in one form or another. However, the new media has given a voice to the mute and a mandatory ear to the audience. Directors and film makers employ extensive use of animal symbolism with implicit hint of 'casting caste' with certain specific animal symbols. Parallels can be drawn between the lower species in the animal and human world. The Marathi film, *Fandry* and the Hindi film, *Chauranga* deals with the issues of caste explicitly. Both the films foreground the issue and invite the thus ignored marginal narratives to the forefront of discussion of visual media. Dalit literature thus has carved a niche in the new media to give an agency to the subalterns. Such films boldly declare the need to overhaul Indian cinema, and also to sensitize the audience towards social issues. It also serves the dual function of sensitising people about caste and gender in particular.

Keywords: *Fandry*, *Chauranga*, Animal symbolism, Speciesism, Dalit literature, Films

Deconstructing the notion of anthropocentrism, many movements have emerged initiating animal welfare and liberation from cruel hands of human beings. However, there have been very fewer studies on the relationship between animals and human beings, though history, religion and human civilisation share a greater bond with animals. The plight of animals seems unchanged even in the present times. While earlier, animals were offered as sacrifice to appease gods, today, human beings are 'sacrificing' them in the laboratories. This concern for animals has stemmed up with the realization that animals can experience suffering in a way similar to that of human beings. However, this paper does not attempt to take side with respect to the utility of animals rather the primary concern is to extend the idea of animals to their representation in films in the light of caste in India.

The use of symbolism in literature gives it wholesomeness. Animal symbolism in particular has a long history and the best manifestation of it can be seen in the *Panchatantra* that has stories that are allegorical and didactic. In addition to it, animals also figured in the religious text such as in the Old and New Testaments. In Indian culture, stories of animals were used to unveil the mysteries of life and the universe. The theory of Charles Darwin *On the Origin of Species* (1859) propounded that human beings had not been created separately from animals in order to master the rest of the world but had instead evolved from animals and were thus just a link in the chain. Extending the hierarchy among human species to animal kingdom,

takes us to the term ‘speciesism’. It was coined by Richard D. Ryder in 1970 and was popularised in 1975 by the philosopher Peter Singer. Speciesism is a form of discrimination that involves treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species. Primarily, it came up to argue and grant equal rights between animals and human without prejudice. However, the paper attempts to include the domain of caste within speciesism and to draw a parallel between the lower species in the animal and human world. Taking the Marathi film *Fandry* and Hindi film *Chauranga* as reference, the study establishes the abundant use of animal symbolism in films.

Film being the medium for expression and representation of reality has a due place for subjectivity. *Fandry*, a Marathi film is set in Akolner, a village near Ahmednagar. It is written and directed by Nagraj Manjule. It depicts the romance of a thirteen year old boy, Jambhuvant Kachru Mane (Jabya). He lives in the outskirts of a village and belongs to the oppressed caste community, Kaikadi. His family earns its living by doing menial jobs and are often forced to hunt pigs to protect the village from diseases and impurity. He has fallen in a one sided love with an upper caste girl named Shalini (Shalu), his classmate, to whom he has never talked but frantically tries to get her attention.

The title of the film *Fandry* not only hints at the literal meaning but also has a metaphorical meaning to it. Metaphorically, Manjule has used the term to depict ‘impurity’ being associated with a Dalit body and his labour. So, when a ‘fandry’ strays around and accidentally brushes against an upper caste being, that person has to be purified. He is critical of the use of the cow urine to purify the pollution caused by the brush of a pig.

The snorting of pigs and hooting of Jabya’s family becomes the significant background score in the film. The theme of untouchability has been shot in the frame where Shalu and her classmates are playing in the ground during the PT hour. The scene gets tense when a girl with whom Shalu was playing gets touched by a pig. A sudden silence and a loud laughter ensue after this. Shalutells others that since her friend was touched by a pig, she shall not be touched until she cleanses herself of the pollution. Though the practise of *varna* system is not so dominant in the classroom setting in the film *Fandry*, it can still be noticed in how Jabya always occupies the last of the seats. Keeping distance from the upper caste is further deemed mandatory and custodial. This can be seen when Jabya’s father Kachru goes to the doctor and doesn’t even sit but stands away from him with his hands bowed. Also, in a democratic space like a Panchayat office, Jabya’s father had to stay outside until the upper caste talk and discuss about the ongoing of the fair in the village. The movement of Kachru outside the Panchayat office juxtaposes with that of the pigs in the film. He is only needed there to serve tea for them and hence becomes an instrument of cheap labour, not having a say in the affairs affecting his day-to-day life also.

Cow being treated as a holy animal by a large section of Hindus is believed to have every product of it to be holy. This myth has led to people sprinkling cow urine on the girl who got polluted by the touch of a pig. The girl had to bathe her body from top to toe after which cow urine will be sprinkled on her. Shalu having brought her friend to her home to get her cleansed, asks her mother to sprinkle some urine on her also so that she also remains fresh and 'pure'. Yamini Narayanan in South Asian Journal writes about caste speciesism which operates behind cow protection. She says how there is a division within cows itself. Only native cows are deemed pure whereas the cross bred cows and buffaloes falls out of the hegemonic structure similar to the state of Dalits and subalterns.

The psychological form of strain occurs when one is publicly humiliated on caste grounds. Jabya who doesn't like to hunt pigs is forced to hunt along with his family. As the school gets over, Jabya hides behind the rock wall so that he can escape from the bullying of his friends and also Shalu's disgrace if seen chasing the pigs. But Kachru finds Jabya hiding and throws stones at him and thus juxtaposing Jabya against the pigs at whom stones are thrown. The village comes to watch the pig chase and the elite even upload videos of this family hunting pigs as "fandry match" inviting more people to come and embarrass them. Jabya is also beaten and scolded badly in front of the whole class and village by Kachru which mars his identity. The elite calls the females of the family of Kachru to be the "cheerleaders" of the match. Jabya is called a Kaikadi boy, blacky or kaalya, dirty pig which questions the caste, colour and dignity of the boy from a young age itself which advances in most of the cases to internalize the fact that they are servile.

A common imagery in caste based films is also made use of in the film by Manjule through the depiction of the portraits of the social reformers. The film has portraits of Ambedkar on the walls in offices and also on the walls of the school as in *Fandry* like a graffiti. The school has been presented as a rigid space where Tilak and Gandhi are only accepted as agents of change. It is the director's deliberate attempt to build a juxtaposition between the school and Dalit huts with the images of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Savtribai Phule, Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Anna Bhau Sathe and Sant Gadge Baba. Further, when the pig is caught by Jabya and his family, it is tied and carried in front of the portraits. This further intensifies the thought of how we have restricted our reformers into mere pictures on screen.

Finally, the theme of resistance also features in the film through the character of Jabya. When Jabya understands that he has nothing to lose, neither the girl, whom he loved dearly but who also came to see his pig hunt and laughed at his plight, nor his dignity, he throws stones at the upper caste men who talked vulgar against his sister Dhurpa and his family. This resistance was unexpected and scared many including Shalu and her fellow friends. However, when the upper caste men come to attack against his retaliation, he picks up a large stone and throws at him which in fact zoom out on to the screen thus can be implied as a mark of resistance against not only on those few people who attacked and bullied him, but also at the

audience who watches them and sees the discrimination. This shot thus presents a reversal of the role of a pig to all those who stay insolent and gaze complacently at all these discriminations still present in the society.

In the film, *Fandry*, much like the pigs, Jabya's family had to stay in the outskirts of the village and is only allowed to do menial jobs such as catching and killing pigs which are infested with rabids. Much alike the pigs with whom the higher caste people avoid contacts, they are also kept at a distance.

The question of how pigs are symbolised to extend the meaning of it merely from a filthy animal into the domain of caste can be answered by the words of the director ManjuleNagraj. He says in one of the interviews that he wanted to raise the question as to how do one not know about *Fandry* and he says, "It is the life of people around you. It is about their happiness and sorrow. It is my story. It is the story of my friends. It is the story of my family. It is the story of many people like me."

The term "Fandry" has been used by Manjule to juxtapose the impurity associated with the Dalit body and the menial labour he has to undertake. If a pig accidentally brushes into an upper caste, they have to purify themselves with cow urine, an illogical practise, an animal waste as a process of purification made mandatory for the touch of another animal. The question of why impure is further associated with pig's stay on garbage and the consumption of the meat by the lower caste people. Manjule in an interview says, "Pig eater's dignity isn't rated too highly". The upper castes have always tried to separate themselves from the downtrodden with their power.

A Dalit household becomes a rooster coop to get oneself trapped in it as well as to bear the brunt of caste and get oneself hidden inside the four walls of it. A close juxtaposition can be seen in the case of the pig which ran into a cave from where stones were pelted to bring it outside and finally get it tied to a rope and killed. The space of occupation of the lower caste is not a site of love and care, rather, gets layered with power and inequality. Jabya also hides like the pigs behind the stone walls so that he doesn't need to come in front of the school crowd where their pig chase becomes a source of mere amusement and entertainment.

Another film *Chauranga*, is set in an impoverished village in North India headed by zamindars. The film is a debut production of the director Bikas Ranjan Mishra. The title means 'chaar rang' or shades/colours of four. It being a strong tale of caste-based discrimination might have adopted the title to indicate caste based on colours. The film is drawn from his own life and living in the village of Bihar where caste and politics define social life.

The film progresses through the eyes of a Dalit boy Santu and his love for the daughter of the zamindar. His elder brother Bajrangi goes to a school in town with the aid of the zamindar. Dhaval, the village zamindar funds Bajrangi's education in exchange of using

Dhaniya, their mother. She also plays an important role in the film exposing the heinous sexual exploitation of the zamindars like Dhaval upon women like Dhaniya. Apart from the Dalit woman, three other women characters belong to the family of the zamindar – one, the neglected wife, second, the comely daughter of zamindar, Mona and third, the mute grandmother. The story takes its birth with Mishra's attention on a report about a young Dalit boy in Bihar, who was pushed under a train because he had written a love letter to an upper caste girl.

Santu becomes a hero of resistance as he refuses to touch the feet of the zamindar, Dhaval to achieve his dream of going to school unlike his brother Bajrangi. Furthermore, Bikas Mishra has tried to weave in the plot with his own personal experience as he comments in an interview.

It's traditional for us to touch the elders' feet when we go to someone's house, but I was warned that I should not do that when I go to his house. Even if I tried, his father would never allow me to. If I touched his feet by mistake, he would touch my feet back. I felt these differences personally and wanted to show that in my film. Sitting in Mumbai, it can look like a story from a different time, but these differences are lived experiences. (Upadhyay,2015)

Santu is least conscious of caste and its intricacies as he blindly falls in love with the daughter of zamindar and watches her, sitting upon a jamun tree, pass on her scooty to school. However, his ignorance to caste does not receive proper attention in the film, as it is shaded with the age, him being a very young boy and hence immature.

The use of animals in the film makes it different from other plots. Mishra has carefully studied his own characters according to which he used certain specific animals. Dhaval being a zamindar is supposed to have a stock of cattle and a shelter. Most of the exploitation against Dhaniya by other petty assistants of Dhaval and the latter himself happens under the cow shelter. This can be contrasted with the mansion that the zamindar lives and thus can be juxtaposed with the humble life of Dhaniya and the extravagancy of Dhaval. Cow being a very holy animal is respected and worshipped. However, it is only lower caste like Dhaniya who is condemned to clean the dung, the shelter and cows.

Chauranga also has extensive use of the animal pig alike *Fandry*. Unlike the latter, Dhaniya's family accepts them to be 'pig people' and follows their roots. They consider pig herding as a means of income. The contrast with respect to casteist speciesism can be seen as one notices how the priests are gifted only with goats and cows. Moreover, there is a scene in the film where the blind priests get angry at the sound of a pig snorting in his front yard. He beats the pig left and right almost kills it with his stick.

Another significant symbol is that of the goat tied in the house of the priest. The sexual connotation to the goat also underlines man's lust for sex and a female body. The priest

reaching out for the goat's udder secretly in his house reveals the masked side of the religious and powerful people. Before the crowd, both Dhaval and the priest are gentle and noble men. However, behind their gentleness they hide their evil part. The goat when touched by the priest at night becomes Dhaniya and during daytime, he keeps himself apart from the goat spending more time on religious activities.

The shifting scenes of the snake slithering on ground becomes yet another symbol in the film again indicating the evilness displayed by the upper caste on the lower caste people. The snake with the eggs signified the birth of new crimes committed by people like priest and Dhaval. The sex scene where Dhaval forcefully copulates with Dhaniya and her death is shown along with the snake slithering away. Thus, alike *Fandry*, there is a pure association of symbols employed by filmmakers to depict both the upper caste and lower caste distinctly.

Conclusion

Films, thus, have marked the coming of age of Dalit movement with varied themes touching the society. The makers certainly deserve much applause for their commendable contribution to sensitize the masses. Such realistic portrayals also ensure the enlarging of the scope of subjects. The cinematography, music, camera angles and the silences provoke the audience to think and to act compared to other literatures. Films such as *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* have also employed animal symbolism to establish the nexus between animals and human beings. Film being a new media can also attract and grab the youth to the societal problems and hence becomes the appropriate medium for addressing them and evoking them to actions.

Works Cited

- Fandry*. Directed by Nagraj Manjule, Holy Basil Productions. 2013.
- Rajan, Benson, and Shreya Venkatraman. "Fabric-Rendered Identity: A Study of Dalit Representation in Pa. Ranjith's Attakathi, Madras and Kabali." *Artha-Journal of Social Sciences* 16.3 (2017): 17-37
- Upadhyay, Shweta. "Caste through a village lens." *Fountain Ink*, 2nd Feb. 2015.
<https://fountainink.in/qna/caste-through-a-village-lens>