

Article

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## The Cost of Salvation: Revisiting Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* Through a Dalit Lens



Literature is the ultimate manifestation of what one has seen, felt, and experienced. It also shares the experiences of those living on the margins of society. The hierarchies and the discriminations posited by the Chaturvarnya system treat some people as lowly, occupying a subaltern status. The aesthetics and expressions of Dalits have earned a poignant place in the genres of literature and film. Even literature and cinema tend to address them as creative outputs, with attention given to the coinage of Dalits. Dalit representation in Indian cinema has historically been shaped by upper-caste filmmakers, resulting in narratives that often depict Dalits as victims rather than agents of

change. While Bollywood has largely ignored caste realities or reduced Dalit characters to stereotypical roles, parallel cinema, particularly the works of filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, attempted to engage with caste oppression more realistically and critically. This article examines Dalit representation in Indian cinema, focusing on Ray's exploration of caste in the film *Sadgati* (1981).

The representation of Dalits in Indian literature and cinema has long been a critical debate, primarily when non-Dalit authors and filmmakers deal with the subject. "Sadgati", a short story by Munshi Premchand written in 1931, was adapted into a telefilm by Satyajit Ray in 1981. Munshi Premchand, the emperor

of the novelists (Upanyas Samrat), is the forerunner of modern Hindi and Urdu fiction. He lived in a period that witnessed many tremendous changes. He realized that a writer, through his writings, may attempt to end the oppressive social condition and could enlighten society. A novelist, according to him, portrays his period and place faithfully. Balzac of France, George Eliot of England, and Dean Howells of America materialized the art of realism in writing as a reaction against romanticism. Likewise, Munshi Premchand is the first Hindi author to introduce realism in his works. He believed that the words must not be forced out of the character's mouth but should flow in the speech naturally. His themes comprise agrarian life, corruption, child widowhood, the feudal system, caste atrocities, colonization, exploitation of women and peasants, issues related to industrialization, interpersonal relationships, and the political scenario of the times in transforming India. Social evils like caste snobbery, the degraded position of women, the plight of widows, illiteracy, the question of child brides and dowry, religious fanaticism, and narrowmindedness, etc., drew his attention increasingly and consequently became an integral part of his socio-artistic perspective.

The story received a new outlook in the celluloid medium with all the artistic independence and interdependence for Premchand's smithy in Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*. The director par excellence has created a cult status on the world cinema map. He wears many hats as a writer, illustrator, and composer, focusing on social realism. His visual poetry, social realism, and human style have earned him a mark in Indian cinema,

where his *Apu Trilogy* stands tall forever. Both the literary and cinematic versions expose the harsh realities of the caste system and focus on the harrowing plight of a Dalit Chamar (tanner), Dukhi, at the hands of an exploitative Brahmin priest. Dukhi needs the help of Pandit Ghasiram to fix the betrothal of his daughter, Jhuriya. A pandit is considered pious, and its presence is treated with utmost sanctity for all religious functions.



However, the way caste oppression is depicted in Ray's adaptation has sparked significant discourse on whether it fosters true Dalit consciousness or merely reinforces an upper-caste liberal gaze. "The etymology of the term 'Dalit' can be traced to the root word dal in Sanskrit, which means to crack, split, be broken or torn asunder, trodden down, scattered, crushed, destroyed and understood in all the Indian languages that are derived from Sanskrit" (Kumar 3). The paper unravels the representation of Dalits in Ray's *Sadgati*, examining how the film pictures caste oppression, its limitations, and the unsettling fable of a man born as low by caste distinctions.

At its core, *Sadgati* is a story of caste-based exploitation and social hierarchy. The protagonist, Dukhi, is an impoverished Dalit who seeks the services of a Brahmin priest,

Ghasiram, to fix an auspicious date for his daughter Jhuriya's wedding. Dukhi is all set to face the pain of insult for the sake of his darling daughter. Dhuki and his wife Dhania are arranging to host a higher caste Pandit at their home. They are not sure whether he will sit on their cot or whether they should borrow something from the headman for this auspicious visit. Slowly, Dukhi makes a move to Pandit Ghasiram with the hope of meeting him and expressing his desire. Instead of simply providing the service to Dukhi, Ghasiram exploits Dukhi's social position and forces him to perform strenuous labour under the scorching sun. Dukhi asks him to cut the log beneath the Banyan, although he is used to grass cutting. As he is already weak from illness and hunger, Dukhi eventually collapses and dies from exhaustion. The film portrays Dukhi as feverish and unwell, whereas, in the short story, he is not given such an image. In the movie, this scene is depicted with stark realism, emphasizing Dukhi's suffering while showing the Brahmin's complete indifference to his plight.



The horror of *Sadgati* extends beyond Dukhi's life into his death. Even in death, caste rules dictate how his body should be treated. The village Chamars refuse to remove his corpse, knowing he was unjustly worked to death. Ultimately, Ghasiram drags Dukhi's

body with a rope and disposes of it among animal carcasses, reinforcing the dehumanization Dalits face even in death. Ray's visual treatment of this moment—showing the Brahmin using a hooked stick and rope to avoid touching Dukhi's body intensifies the film's critique of casteist purity and untouchability. While *Sadgati* exposes caste violence, Ray's adaptation has been questioned for the way it portrays Dalits. Unlike Premchand's short story, which offers some elements of social critique, it is accused of turning caste oppression into an aestheticized spectacle with passive resistance.

The film's portrayal of Dukhi's suffering has been a critical debate, particularly about the concept of Dalit Chetna (Dalit consciousness). Critics and scholars argue that Dalit literature and cinema must centre Dalits' agency, struggle, and resistance rather than just depicting their victimhood. However, *Sadgati* presents Dukhi as entirely submissive, never questioning his fate or resisting the Brahmin's exploitation. Sumit Rajak opines:

Both the literary text and its film adaptation portray the Dalit character Dukhi chamar (Tanner) as submissive, oppressed, and subhuman. The caste order has made Dukhi accept his fate that he was born to be exploited. Even he has the belief to the extent that it is sacred to be exploited by a Brahmin priest, that it is better to be exploited than cursed by a Brahmin priest. What both the writer and the filmmaker focus on in their works is a Dalit's exploitation by a Brahmin, his submission to a fate constructed by the



religiously sanctioned caste system. This subhuman existence is devoid of a sense of resistance. Through the representation of these aspects of a Dalit's life, both the upper-caste writer and the filmmaker attempt to raise awareness against the practice of caste system and untouchability. (5)

Society has not found ways to dismantle caste hierarchies. Progressive casteless consciousness, often seen in the works of upper-caste intellectuals, acknowledges caste oppression but does not propose structural change. Ray's *Sadgati* falls into the latter category. The film sympathizes with Dukhi but offers no possibility of rebellion or change. It functions as an upper-caste liberal critique of caste injustice rather than a radical call for social transformation. This distinction is crucial in understanding why Dalit critics reject *Sadgati* as an example of accurate Dalit representation. Dukhi succumbs to his fate without complaining or raising his voice against the subhuman treatment thrown upon him by the Pandit. He acknowledges and accepts his subalternity. He has no choice other than to follow the commands of the Brahmin. Only then can he fulfil his wish to proceed with his daughter's marriage. Jhuriya is a child and is going to be the victim of child marriage, whereas Pandit's son, almost of the same age, is given the privilege to study. The cruelties of caste are visible right from childhood. Unapproachability, unseeability, and untouchability are still challenges for people born low. "They were considered as lowest of the low and treated worse than animals by Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs,

Buddhists, Parsis, and other religious communities. Their rights and liberties were curtailed under pernicious caste rules. (Roy 1)".



As a filmmaker, Satyajit Ray was deeply influenced by Italian neorealism, mainly focusing on realism and humanism. His adaptation of *Sadgati* relies heavily on visual storytelling, emphasizing the physicality of Dukhi's suffering. Several cinematic techniques highlight the oppression of Dalits, especially the way they are ill-treated by those higher than them in social status. Ray uses high-angle shots to show Dukhi as small and powerless, repeatedly displaying his subjugation. In contrast, the Brahmin is often framed from a low angle, emphasizing his authority. The village setting is methodically created to reflect social hierarchies. One of the most striking visual contrasts in the film is between the Brahmin's clean, sacred space and Dukhi's surroundings, which are marked by physical labour and degradation. Dukhi's hut is shown in isolation, while the Brahmin's home is placed in a dominant position. Even the way Dukhi enters Ghasiram's house proves his subservient status. Panditayin, his wife, also shows her authority by throwing the live fire at Dukhi. A big spark fell on Dukhi's head, and he quickly stepped back and started

shaking his head. He considers that as the punishment for polluting a holy Brahmin's house. He admits the mistake and says sorry to Panditayin. In the conversation between husband and wife, Pandit says if we assign a worker to do all these tasks, he may take a rupee. When Dukhi is not given anything to eat despite the heavy load of the work, Pandit says that these fellows eat a lot and won't settle for a Chapathi or two. Moreover, Panditayin is unwilling to cook in the hot weather. The touching renditions of these scenes make one feel the helplessness of the lower caste.

However, despite Ray's masterful use of cinema to depict oppression, the film has been critiqued for lacking political urgency. Unlike Dalit filmmakers who focus on caste assertion, Ray's adaptation remains within passive observation. The reception of *Sadgati* among critics and scholars has been divided. Some have praised Ray for bringing caste injustice to the forefront of Indian television, while others have critiqued his approach. Bhaskar Chattopadhyay observes :

While Premchand's story is a scathing account of the tragic lives of untouchables in this country and of the horrors of superstition and blind submission to the self-proclaimed voices of God, Ray's handling of the subject lends a sense of failure and dejection to the entire affair — even when Dukhi is alive — as if it's all over, and as if nothing can be done to help the poor man. Even as Dukhi seethes in rage and directs his fury at the log instead of his oppressor, muttering expletives at the lifeless piece of wood, we can't help but accept that we have

failed him in all possible ways. We feel as if his mere existence, his entire life, all up to this point, has been a lie — that he was born into slavery and that he would die an enslaved person, never to question his master, never to stand up to him, or face him, or look him right in the eye to show that he resents him and everything that he stands for. It is with this sense of hopelessness that Dukhi collapses to his death. The failure is so impactful that we hardly even get a chance to pay any attention to the other injustice happening right in front of our eyes — the marriage of a young girl child. (1)



The film also depicts another scene in which a widower comes to meet Ghasiram. He quotes Bhagavad Gita, assuring him of the

confidence to marry again and procreate. Just as a person sheds his tattered clothes and puts on fresh ones, the soul abandons a decayed body and finds abode in a fresh one. He states his own story as his first wife died seven months after the marriage. He married a second time, and in three years, she died of a snake bite. After two years, he married the third one. He easily moves on in his life, so he won't be able to comprehend the loss incurred by Dhania and Jhuriya. The film shows Panditayin with a sense of guilt, especially when she hears the cry and anguish of Dhania. In the short story, the Panditayan is as heartless as the Pandit. They both consider Dukhi's death as his fate. While Premchand's story contains a degree of irony and indirect critique, Ray's film smooths the rough edges, making the caste critique more abstract. Premchand's Brahmin is more openly villainous, whereas Ray's version portrays Ghasiram as a product of a defective system rather than an active oppressor. One of Sadgati's most significant criticisms is that it does not depict any Dalit agency. In contrast to Dalit literature, which centres Dalits as active subjects, Ray's adaptation presents Dukhi as a passive figure. The absence of rebellion or collective assertion strengthens the notion that Dalits are meant to suffer without hope of change.

The name "Dukhi" connotes one who is sad. Dukhi yearns for better living conditions. He is capable of earning that only through his death. When the Brahmin finally lifts the corpse and throws it away, Dukhi gains moksha from his pious act. The ascribed status of Dalit remains with him till his last breath. Even if the Gond and the other people of his tribe are unaware of the monstrous

treatment shown upon him by the Pandit, nobody comes to protest, or nobody raises their voice against him. Dukhi attains salvation by the act of Brahmin, although he never wishes to do such a polluting act of taking the corpse of a tanner by caste. Pandit becomes polluted by holding the dead body. Alok Mukherjee cites in his translation of Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* that "Dalits enable the purity of upper caste society, and become impure in the process. This society needs the Dalit labourers and depends on them for their elegant survival, but they do not wish to be reminded of it. Scriptural authority was invoked to designate the Dalit as polluted and untouchable" (3). Dukhi and Ghasiram manifest the dialectics of purity and impurity in their relationship. The film's restrained dialogue and visual storytelling enhance its impact. Ray's decision to show the Brahmin dragging Dukhi's corpse has been noted as one of the most potent critiques of untouchability in Indian cinema.

Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* remains a powerful film that depicts caste oppression, but it falls short of providing a true Dalit perspective. While the film successfully critiques the Brahminical social order, it does so from an upper-caste humanist viewpoint rather than an anti-caste resistance framework. According to Nishat Haider:

Ray's *Sadgati* combines the thematic and narrative persistence of Premchand's story with material variations, resulting in the film adaptation not being a simple or reductive reproduction that loses the Benjaminian aura. At every moment, the film indicates a point where it can



anchor its moves and find a response; it directs its looks and voices beyond the limits of the scene. At this position or interface – between spectator-as-interlocutor and film-as-text – Ray intervenes in the filmic enunciation. Ray's enunciation returns us to the site of cinematic representation, which boldly insists that it is no different from cinematic 'communication', which decisively puts him on the opposite side to those who deeply suspect the very concept of representation of Dalit situation and issues.

Ultimately, *Sadgati* is a poignant but incomplete representation of Dalit life. While it exposes caste injustice, it does not offer a path toward liberation. Dalit becomes a mere victim of caste politics and social structure. The artistic interdependence and independence while moving from one aesthetic genre to another are explicitly visible in *Sadgati*. Salvation takes a massive toll on the life of a Dalit despite the barriers of artistic medium.

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