

Syllabus

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| Title of the Course: | Caste on Screen: Hindi Cinema and the Making of Contemporary India | Course Breakdown: | 3 + 4 ECTS, 28 hours of online sessions, 60 hours of individual study + paper optional |
| Name of the Instructor: | Reyazul Haque, Nadja-Christina Schneider | Weekly class time: | Thursday, 2 – 4 pm (CET) |
| Language: | English | | |
| Hosted by: | Humboldt-University Berlin, Institute for Asian and African Studies | Certificate issued by: | Humboldt-University Berlin, Institute for Asian and African Studies |
| min. number of participants: | 5 | max. number of participants | 30 |

Description of the course

This course explores the complex role of caste in shaping the contemporary societies in South Asia, particularly in India, where caste-based dynamics contribute to violence against Dalits (literally “oppressed”, social strata located at the bottom of caste system), gender subjugation, communal tensions, nationalism, authoritarianism, and minority persecution. By examining the presence and absence of caste in Hindi films—through both feature films and documentaries—the course examines how cinema influences and reflects these social structures and their consequences. The curriculum is organized into three key modules: (i) an exploration of caste’s history and its persistence; (ii) an analysis of cinema and visual culture as they relate to caste representation; and (iii) a study of anti-caste movements and critical cinematic efforts that challenge caste hierarchies. Each class will feature selected film clips to illustrate how caste based themes are woven into Hindi films. This course is designed to provide both introductory insights for new students and deeper understanding for those with advanced knowledge of the subjects.

Learning Aims

To provide a general understanding about:

- Analysing Hindi Cinema in the context of Indian Caste system
- Understanding the mechanism of Caste System
- Caste and its relationship to gender, and religious minorities

Upon the successful completion of the course students will be able to:

- Understand the ways caste is presented in or omitted from Hindi Cinema
- Understand how Hindi cinema functions as an apparatus of caste and gender, and how it resists
- Learn better about the new trends in Hindi cinema cultures that address the realities of castes
- See what happens when the authoritarian regime, caste society, patriarchy, majoritarianism, and cinema come together.

Course requirements

The final grade for the course will be based on the following:

- Reading and video assignments
 - contribution to discussion in class
1. Introduction: Tell us about the last Hindi film you saw, and how would you like to analyse it?
 2. Assignment: Generate a text with AI on the Indian caste system and annotate and analyse it critically. Words: Generated text min 1000 words, annotation min 1000 words. Deadline: in 4th week class.
 3. Assignment: Form a group of at least two people, chose a film that you like, show us a 5 mins clip (max) in the class, and tell us why you chose it and what makes it interesting in terms of seeing the caste. Such presentations will happen in every class from the 2nd class.

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| 3 ECTS | Reading and video assignments, participation in discussions, two assignments during the term |
| 7 ECTS | requirements for 3 ECTS + plus paper (10 pages, double-space) |

Syllabus / Reading List

Week 1 – April 24th, 2025: Caste on Screen: A History and Methods

- Introduction to caste system.
- The brief outline of the historical evolution of the caste.
- Necessity and importance to understand caste to understand the Indian society and culture.
- How caste shapes contemporary politics and ideology?
- *How to write a film analysis paper on caste?*

Reading material:

- Gopal Guru, “Archeology of Untouchability”, *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, September 12-18, 2009, pp. 49-56. [8 pages]
- Ed Sikov, “Putting it Together: A Model 8- to 10-Page Paper”, in *Film Studies: An Introduction*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010

Additional Reading:

- Anand Teltumbde, “Victimhood of Dalits”, *Seminar*, March 2020. [web page]

Week 2 – May 15th, 2025: Ambedkar: A Present Absence

- The historical role of BR Ambedkar
- How do Hindi films depict Ambedkar?
- Ambedkar as a framed portrait or a framework of emancipation?

Reading material:

- B.R. Ambedkar, “Waiting for a Visa”, *Writings and Speeches*, vol.12, page 661.

Additional Reading:

- Sumit Rajak, “Visualising the Invisible: Decoding Caste Pride and the Casteist Slur in Bollywood Films”, *Routledge Companion to Caste and Hindi Cinema*, Edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Oxon, 2023. [11 pages]
- Harish S. Wankhede, “Ambedkar Was Ignored by Indian Cinema For Years. That’s Changing Now”, *The Quint*, 2021, <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/ambedkar-was-ignored-by-indian-cinema-for-years-thats-changing-now#read-more>

Week 3 – May 22nd, 2025: Screening the Caste: Approaches and Methods

- Cinema Studies’ and the question of perspectives and gazes
- Interrogating the cinema as an apparatus

Reading material:

- **M. Madhava Prasad, “The Absolutist Gaze: Political Structure and Cultural Form” *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, Oxford University Press, 1998.**

Additional Reading:

- Harish S. Wankhede, “Dalit Representation in Hindi Cinema”, *Routledge Companion to Caste and Hindi Cinema*, Edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Oxon, 2023. [15 pages]

Week 4 – June 5th, 2025: Untouchability and Beyond

- Untouchability and its role as a marker of the caste
- Anxieties around senses: touching, seeing, smelling, and the body

Reading material:

- **Prem Singh, “The Representation of Dalit Body in Popular Hindi Cinema”, Unpublished, available on *Academica.edu* [14 pages]**

Additional Reading:

- BR Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, Chapter 4-8, & 12-14, [7 pages]

- Sukhdeo Thorat, “Political Economy of Caste Discrimination and Atrocities”, *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*, edited by A. Teltumbde and S. Yengde, Penguin Book, 2018, [11 pages]

Week 5 – June 12th, 2025: Gendered Anxieties of a Caste Society

- Hindi films and their stances on love, relationships, and family
- Feminist perspectives and caste/anti-caste movements depicted in Hindi cinema.

Reading material:

- **Jyoti Atwal, “Embodiment of Untouchability: Cinematic Representations of ‘Low’ Caste Women in India”, *Open Cultural Studies*, 2018, [11 pages]**

Additional Reading:

- Farhana Naaz, “The Construction and Representation of Lower-Caste Women in Bollywood Films”, *Routledge Companion to Caste and Hindi Cinema*, Edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Oxon, 2023. [11 pages]
- Uma Chakravarty, “The Axis of Gender Stratification in India”, *Gendering Caste*, Sage, New Delhi, 2018, [11 pages]

Week 6 – June 19th, 2025: Discussion on the movie clips

Week 7 – June 26th, 2025: Discussion on the movie clips

Week 8 – July 03rd: Intersectionality and Caste

- Caste system, and its relations with social and religious minorities
- Cinema’s approach to mobilise these fault lines.

Reading material:

B.R. Ambedkar, “What Path to Salvation?”, Speech delivered by Dr. Ambedkar to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, 31st May 1936, Bombay. Available online at Speech delivered by Dr. Ambedkar to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, 31st May 1936, Bombay. Available online at

https://franpritchett.com/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_salvation.html

Additional Reading:

- Dilip M. Menon, “Blindness of Insights: Why Communalism in India is about Caste?”, *Blindness of Insights*, Navayana, New Delhi, 2006 [31 pages]

Week 9 – July 10th, 2025: De-brahminising Spectatorship

- Questioning and analysing the role of spectators
- What new ways of seeing are emerging out of Hindi cinema practices?

Reading material:

- Jyoti Nisha, “The Oppositional Bahujan Agency”, *Routledge Companion to Caste and Hindi Cinema*, Edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Oxon, 2023. [16 pages]

Additional Reading:

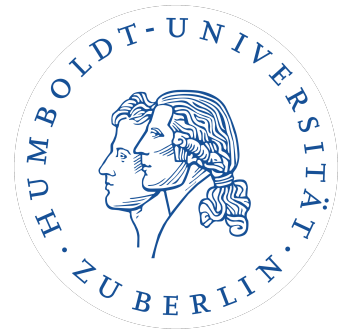
- Prashant Ingole, “Anti-Caste Music and Cinema”, *Dalits in the New Millennium*, Edited by Sudha Pai, D. Shyam Babu and Rahul Verma, Cambridge University Press, 2023, Pp.133-149.
- Braj Ranjan Mani, “Introduction”, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, Manohar, 2005 [32 pages]

Week 10 – July 17th, 2025: Discussion on the film *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, Summing up and Conclusions

- Resisting the caste through cinema
- How the new ways of looking are critical to imagining a new society



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- A self-reflexive perspective and cinema's role

Reading materials:

- **Manju Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema", *Economic & Political Weekly*, September 19, 2020, vol. IV, no 38, Pp. 47-53.**

Additional Reading:

- Suraj Yengde, "Dalit Cinema", *Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol 11, No.3, 2018 [16 pages]