Masaan and Casteism



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ABSTRACT

In this review, I've tried analysing the movie 'Masaan' on the lines of Ambedkar's ideas about casteism. 'Masaan', directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, is the epitome of how inter-caste relations are treated in a casteist state. The paper is divided into various sections which cover the horrors of living in a casteist state, how ignorance is used to oppress people, the pain of being a lower-caste, the acceptance of one's pain, and how all these elements along with music and poems, make 'Masaan' the key to understanding our hypocritical society. While covering all these elements, I've summarised the whole movie and connected it to the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

'Masaan' is a movie set in the magnificent ghats of Varanasi. The movie shows us how different life gets when castes and genders are changed. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in his 'Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', noted that at the outset, the Hindu society composed of classes which from the earliest times existed in the form of the Brahmins (the priestly class), the Kshatriyas (the warrior class), the Vaishyas (the trading class) and the Shudras (the artisans or the

menial class). The fundamental characteristic of this system was the scope for graduation of an individual from one particular class to the other, provided they earned the essential qualities of that class. While such subdivision of the society appeared natural, considering the diversity in the natural responsibilities to be shouldered by different sets of people, such subdivisions started losing their open-door character of the class system, and became self-closed units called castes. The word "masaan" means *crematorium*, and is justified as the title of the movie, because the entire script revolves around life and death. To portray life and death as black and white is not realistic, because there are always the grey areas of caste and gender discrimination, where, often, many people fall. The movie mainly revolves around the lives and the people related to two young couples who try breaking the casteist barriers erected by the society, and are punished for the same. But it also ends in an uplifting manner, paving the way for change and tolerance.

SUMMARY OF THE MOVIE

Devi's predicament and the horrors of living in a casteist state

'Masaan' begins with Devi Pathak (played by Richa Chadda), an upper-class, Brahmin woman, watching pornography on her computer. It is a completely normal and private moment, made possible because of technology. This makes her feel liberated, even though for an ephemeral time. Because of her caste, Devi is supposed to be socially and sexually restricted within her caste. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had written that ethnically people were heterogenous, which led to cultural unity. But the caste system thrived on endogamy. The movie proceeds to a scene where Devi, and her partner Piyush Agarwal, belonging to the Bania caste, book a room in a hotel so they can tryst for the first time. But their private moment is interrupted by a police "raid" who hold them accountable for "sex trafficking". The police, then, beat Piyush mercilessly and capture Devi's pictures and videos. To "shame" the couple, the police also tell Devi that if they leaked her video, she won't be able to show her face to the "society". It is a real problem when the state becomes the promoter of casteist ideals and stands against heteronormativity. And in order to curb heteronormativity, sometimes, the state makes use of illegal tools of oppression. This is ironic because the purpose of the state is to uphold the law. In the movie, Piyush locked himself in the bathroom. And when the police blackmailed him that they'll contact his father if he didn't get out of the same, he was forced to take his own life in order to "protect" the caste status quo.

Ignorance: The tool of oppression

The cop, inspector Mishra made use of this situation to blackmail Devi and her father, Vidyadhar Pathak (played by Sanjay Mishra), a former Sanskrit teacher who sells trinkets on the ghats of Ganga. Mishra asked for a bribe of three lakh rupees, an exorbitant sum for a trinket seller, to keep Devi's shame and the honour of their Brahmin family. By using words like "abetment to suicide", Mishra took advantage of their ignorance. Ambedkar had argued that the caste system survived because of proscription of right to education to the masses. Devi, despite being computer-literate and not doing anything wrong, is left to face the societal stigma of being caught in an "obscene" act and bringing "shame" to her caste. We are also introduced to Jhonta (played by Nikhil Sahni), an orphan who works for Vidyadhar. Jhonta has a passion for diving in the banks of Ganga and collecting coins. Vidyadhar, despite multiple requests of Jhonta, doesn't allow him to compete with other boys, who are part of a betting game, an immoral thing for an upper-caste man. But after being continuously pestered by Mishra and having a hard time gathering the bribe amount, Vidyadhar is made to compromise his ideals and becomes a rather compulsive bettor.

The pain of being born a lower-caste in a casteist society

'Masaan' then takes us into another world, with the story of Deepak (played by Vicky Kaushal) and Shaalu (played by Shweta Tripathi). Deepak, belonging to the Dom/Dalit caste, is a civil engineering student in his final year. When he is not studying, he helps his family, a long line of corpse-burners, cremate dead bodies at the ghats of Varanasi. We also get to see the harsh realities of casteism when Deepak lights a stove using fire from a funeral pyre. In Deepak, we sense revolution; a spirit to not let his caste define his future. Shaalu Gupta, belonging to an upper-caste, is a chirpy girl interested in Hindi and Urdu poetry. Deepak and Shaalu meet through common friends, and Deepak ends up taking a liking for Shaalu. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in his 'Who were the Shudras?', had analysed the Rig Veda and found the explanation to the origin of the caste system in the Purusha Shukta. The text stated that the various limbs of a human gave birth to different castes. It said that the mouth became the Brahmins, the arms were the Kshatriyas, the thighs were the Vaishyas, and the feet were the Shudras. Ambedkar denounced such inequality because no society had laid down a fixed and permanent system of gradation which had "an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt". Deepak, otherwise historically segregated from Shaalu's caste, because of Facebook and other post-constitutional technology, is able to connect with Shaalu.

Deepak and Shaalu: The train and the track

After going on a date with Shaalu, Deepak is reminded by one of his friends about the differences in Deepak and Shaalu's caste. The love story of Deepak and Shaalu, despite their caste differences, is portrayed beautifully through various songs and poems. Deepak, after borrowing his friend's motorcycle, surprises Shaalu when she's on her way to Allahabad for a picnic. They share an intimate moment later, a sort of liberation for both. On their way back, when Shaalu tries guessing where Deepak lives, Deepak gets frustrated and in a fit of rage, tells her about his origins. Here we sense a preconceived notion in Deepak, which he has automatically assumed, that Shaalu would leave him after finding out his caste. Shaalu departs for a religious trip with her family the next day. After calling him, she lets Deepak know that her family doesn't conform to exogamic norms, but she's ready to run away with him if they have to. In one of the scenes, we can hear Shaalu's family members praising the food of a place, and they justify the sumptuousness by mentioning the caste of the cooks. To get out of his present life, Deepak starts preparing hard for his exams and interviews. But this dream is only short-lived when Deepak gets woken up by his brother for cremating myriad dead bodies. After noticing numerous bodies and the tensed situation, we can sense something is wrong. But for Deepak, it's just another day. But just before cremating a dead body, Deepak receives the shock of his life when he realises it is Shaalu's after noticing her ring. Upon learning that, on her way back, Shaalu's bus met with an accident and no one survived, Deepak is unable to accept the truth. The terror, confusion and devastation are visible on Deepak's face. It becomes more agonising when he is made to cremate her body and break her skull, a ritual to free the soul of the dead. Sadly, this favours the casteist, endogamic norms of the society. One of the poems which Shaalu had recited to Deepak had the lines "tu kisi rail si guzarti hain, mein kisi pull sa thartharata hoon", which talks about the relationship between trains and tracks. It also shows Deepak and Shaalu's relationship which, just like trains and tracks, is incomplete without each other, but meets only for a short time, only to hope to meet again.

Shaalu's ring

After Shaalu's body is cremated, her ring is what's left of her. Shaalu's ring is a symbol of freedom. When Shaalu mentions her ring to Deepak for the first time, she tells him how her uncle gave the ring to her when she was nine, and the ring got stuck in her finger, as her finger grew bigger, as she grew older. But after her cremation, her ring is not stuck anymore. This ring symbolises the stereotypical norms that binds people until their death. Sometime later, Deepak accepted the reality and decided to move on in his life. After throwing Shaalu's ring in the river, he tried retrieving it, only to fail.

Moving on: Life goes on

In Devi's life, she has to face the stigma of the stereotypical society. After resigning from a job, which her father gets her, she applies for a job in the railways which she is able to land. We also see the hypocrisy of the society when Mishra, the cop who coerced Vidyadhar for the bribe in exchange for his daughter's "shame", has a daughter himself. The only use of stereotypical ideals is to misuse them for achieving one's malafide intentions. Vidyadhar becomes a compulsive bettor who gets addicted to betting money on Jhonta. After Jhonta almost drowns in the river once, Vidyadhar realises his mistake. We find out that Jhonta almost drowned because he accidentally swallowed a red ring. This is Shaalu's ring which reaches Vidyadhar. This is how the two stories connect. Vidyadhar sells the ruby ring and is able to arrange the bribe money on time. Devi also moves on and decides to join Allahabad University. Deepak, while grieving, reappears for his exams and lands a job as an engineer with the railways. He is finally able to change his society-made destiny. He is able to break the barriers of caste and is successful in his little revolution. Ambedkar would have been proud of him. 'Masaan', towards the end, shows us a beacon of light. In the last moments of the movie, Devi is shown weeping as she tries to let go of the little gift Piyush gave her. Piyush's gift, just like Shaalu's ring, is a symbol for the past that doesn't let one proceed further in life. Deepak meets Devi here as he offers her water. These two complete strangers, sharing a similar pain, get on a boat as they visit the sangam. This ending symbolises that despite the stereotypical notions of society, there is some hope after all.

The beautiful music, the deep poems, the pain of living in a hypocritical society and the need to move on in life makes 'Masaan' the masterpiece it is.

CONCLUSION

'Masaan' is a must-watch and continues to be relevant each passing day. The society doesn't let go of its casteist ideals easily, and it's almost considered a crime to defy age-old traditions. This movie gives us a glimpse of the hardships of living in a casteist state. Like Devi says in one scene "choti sheher, choti soch" (small city, narrow mentality), ignorance continues to block the road to a progressive society. While we have come a long way as a state, with laws for abolishment of untouchability and introduction of the SC/ST (Prevention of atrocities) Act, there is still a lot of room for their implementation.

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