

Representation of Marginalized Communities in Bollywood and Media: A Social Justice Inquiry paper

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Introduction

India's screen culture operates at a scale where representation stops being just an artistic choice and becomes a genuine social issue. In 2023–24, India approved over 17,000 films (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2024), and OTT viewership is projected to hit around 600 million by 2025 (Ormax Media, 2025). When media reaches that many people, the question of who gets portrayed — and how — starts to carry real weight.

Most industry conversations about this stay in the lane of economics or aesthetics: what sells, what looks good (Nandy, 1998; Thomas, 1995). But those frameworks miss something important. Caste, class, gender, institutional gatekeeping, symbolic power, these are sociological questions, and they need sociological answers. This paper argues that representation in Bollywood isn't just a matter of style or market demand. It's a product of social power (Ghosh, 2016). And unless we understand who controls the story, more faces on screen won't automatically mean fairer storytelling.

To make that case, this paper maps out the scale of the problem, works through the visibility-versus-structure debate, tests the argument against three specific pieces of media, *Paatal Lok*, *Article 15*, and *Made in Heaven*, and explains why meaningful representation requires shifting authorship and authority, not just adding diversity to the cast list.

Background and Significance

India produces over 2,000 films a year (Ernst & Young, 2024). OTT platforms now have more than 600 million users (National Film Development Corporation, 2023). That's not a niche cultural space, that's one of the most powerful storytelling ecosystems on the planet (Gopal & Moorti, 2008).

And the patterns of representation within that ecosystem are deeply uneven. Caste is routinely erased or filtered through an upper-caste lens. Gender representation, even where it's improved, still tends to reinforce patriarchal assumptions. Class gets aestheticized rather than critically examined. Religious minorities appear selectively. People with disabilities are largely absent. LGBTQ+ characters are still largely confined to token or comic roles (Chakravarty, 1993).

These aren't random gaps. They're consistent outcomes of who holds power in the production process.

What makes this a social justice issue rather than just a cultural complaint is scale and repetition. When hundreds of millions of people — especially young people — keep seeing the same limited range of stories, it shapes what they think is normal, aspirational, or even possible. That kind of symbolic reinforcement has real consequences for self-perception, social attitudes, and whose lives are considered worth telling stories about.

Literature Review

The core argument here draws on Stuart Hall's work on representation — the idea that media doesn't just reflect reality, it actively produces meaning. Representation, in this view, is never neutral. It's a site where power gets encoded and contested.

Shakuntala Banaji builds on this by grounding it in actual audience experience: how people interpret films depends on who they are and what social worlds they inhabit. Anamik Saha shifts the lens again — instead of focusing only on what's visible on screen, he asks how representation gets made inside cultural industries: who commissions it, who funds it, who has final say.

Together, these three give this paper its core framework: representation is a question of meaning,

audience, and institutional authority — not just screen time.

Cultural studies started by asking how media encodes ideology, Hall's early work is the foundation. Feminist film theory followed, revealing how women were systematically objectified and denied narrative agency (Butler, 1990; Mulvey, 1975). Dalit scholarship went further, showing that caste wasn't just misrepresented but actively erased from the frame (Kothari, 2010). And the most recent wave of platform-era scholarship asks how streaming changes access, visibility, and who gets to tell stories (FTII, 2022).

The field's intellectual arc, then, moves from what is shown to who controls what is shown. That's the trajectory this paper builds on.

There are broadly two camps in the contemporary conversation.

The Visibility Argument holds that OTT expansion has genuinely opened things up. Banaji's audience research is relevant here: when more people can access more stories, marginalized communities gain visibility they were historically denied. Digital platforms have disrupted traditional gatekeeping in real ways (National Film Development Corporation, 2023), and that matters.

The Structural Critique pushes back. Saha's work on race and the culture industry makes the point clearly: diversity on screen doesn't automatically mean power has shifted. What matters is who's writing the stories, who's signing the checks, who's in the room where decisions get made. Dalit scholars like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege reinforce this, you can't separate representation from the social structures that produce it.

Article 15 is a useful case study for exactly this tension. The film brings caste violence into mainstream conversation and that's not nothing. But a significant critique is that it does so through the eyes of an upper-caste police officer, which risks reframing Dalit suffering as a problem for a savior to solve. A film can highlight oppression while still reinforcing whose perspective gets to be the authoritative one (Indian Express, 2019).

Most existing research stays at the level of textual analysis, what's on screen, how characters are coded, what stereotypes appear (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016; Dyer, 1993). What gets less attention is the institutional level: who writes, who funds, who approves, who edits, who profits. This paper argues that gap is where the real action is. Representation isn't just a content problem; it's a power problem.

Research Question

To what extent does narrative and institutional power in Bollywood shape the representation of marginalized communities?

The question is deliberately open rather than assuming the answer. The goal is to examine how power structures in authorship, commissioning, production, and distribution influence not just whether marginalized groups appear on screen, but how they're framed when they do.

Argument

Representation only becomes socially meaningful when increased visibility is accompanied by a real shift in who gets to create and control the stories. More faces on screen is not the same as fairer storytelling. If marginalized communities are depicted through lenses they didn't choose, within frameworks they didn't design, the result can be symbolic inclusion that leaves existing hierarchies intact, or even reinforces them. In short, power over the narrative matters more than presence within it.

Three things support this. First, media shapes what audiences perceive as normal or credible. Repeated exposure to particular kinds of stories, who gets to be heroic, complex, sympathetic, calibrates social expectations in ways that are real and lasting. Second, authorship affects authenticity. Stories written

from the inside of an experience tend to differ significantly from stories written about that experience from the outside. What gets emphasized, what gets softened, what gets left out, these choices are shaped by what the storyteller actually knows and has lived (Hooks, 1992). Third, institutional structures determine what gets made in the first place. Casting, hiring writers, greenlighting projects, allocating budgets, shaping marketing, all of these decisions happen before a single frame is shot. When those decisions are concentrated in the same hands, increased on-screen diversity doesn't necessarily change who actually holds creative authority.

Paatal Lok and *Article 15* both bring caste into mainstream Bollywood conversation genuinely, but both also illustrate the limits of visibility without authorial redistribution (Indian Express, 2019; The Wire, 2020). In *Article 15*, the emotional and moral center of the story is an upper-caste officer's awakening. Caste violence becomes the backdrop for his transformation. That framing isn't incidental; it's a structural choice that shapes how audiences are invited to relate to the story.

Paatal Lok is tonally darker and more morally complex, but complexity in portrayal doesn't automatically mean the communities depicted had any say in how they were portrayed. *Made in Heaven* raises similar questions about LGBTQ+ and class representation progress that's real, but still mediated through particular institutional and authorial positions (Chauhan, 2025; The Hindu, 2023).

The strongest version of the opposing view isn't wrong — OTT platforms have genuinely disrupted some traditional gatekeeping. More experimental, socially engaged content has reached audiences who wouldn't have encountered it through theatrical distribution. That's a meaningful development, not a minor footnote.

But access and equity aren't the same thing. If the same relatively small group continues to control writing rooms, commissioning decisions, production funding, and platform priorities, then the gains in visibility are real but limited. Improvement without redistribution is still improvement — but it's not transformation. The question this paper presses is whether the current moment of increased visibility is actually changing the underlying structure, or whether it's producing a more diverse surface over the same foundation.

Representation becomes socially significant only when visibility is paired with a redistribution of authorship and narrative control. Without that shift, inclusion stays symbolic, a more diverse face on the same hierarchy.

Conclusion

The argument this paper makes is uncomfortable but not pessimistic. Bollywood and Indian streaming have changed genuinely, and those changes matter. But sociological analysis reveals that the production of content (who creates it, who funds it, who approves it, who distributes it) remains concentrated in ways that constrain what increased on-screen diversity can actually achieve.

None of this is easy to fix. This is a commercial industry, and production decisions are shaped by risk aversion, audience segmentation, and established hierarchies that don't dissolve just because there's normative pressure to diversify. Structural change is institutionally difficult even when it's the right thing to do (UNESCO, 2018).

But the conclusion stands: until the power to tell stories is more broadly distributed, visibility reforms will remain a surface-level intervention — real, but insufficient. The framework of cultural inequality stays intact beneath the more diverse cast list.

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