

Have we ever bothered to think why the tragedies of Delta Meghwals and Rohith Vemulas fail to enter the mainstream public imagination? What discourse constructs our world of realities where the inhuman tragedies that continue to perpetrate the horrors of caste and gender violence fail to even attract sympathy, let alone bringing those involved in committing these heinous crimes to punishment? Rather, the mainstream public sphere is characterized by a perpetual invisibilizing and negation of the violence that emanates from caste and patriarchal structures. *Sairat*, a film by Nagraj Manjule, is a cinematic intervention against such constructions of reality and compels us to look beyond what meets the eye.



Those who have seen Manjule's debut film *Fandry* would remember the iconic climax where the protagonist Jabya flings a stone with full vigor towards the camera, as if it were aimed at the audience. *Sairat* is perhaps a reminder that the stone that Jabya threw at us in *Fandry* is not sufficient to demolish the structures of caste and patriarchy. As I was returning from watching *Sairat*, I was informed about the gruesome rape and murder of a female Dalit law student from Perumbavoor in Kerala. On another Whatsapp group, we were told that a Dalit student from Delhi University has been at the receiving end of casteist abuse by his senior from the law school, and the officer at the concerned police station has been hesitant to file the First Information Report. *Sairat* highlights that fact that such incidents are recurring events and realities that one often chooses to ignore, consciously or otherwise.

Archi- *Sairat*'s female protagonist- is a daughter of the local MLA and her access to the pleasures of affluence are made abundantly visible through her powerfully crafted character. Archi's character transgresses the norm of the submissive, shy 'heroines' in mainstream Indian films. Manjule, while circumventing these clichés, gives a great deal of agency to Archi's character and boldly marks her desires. Manjule also highlights that the bravado that Archi exhibits is not accessible to other female characters in the film. Archi's ability to transgress into a strong female character is enabled by a patriarchal structure of power that she inherits as a daughter of the local MLA belonging to the dominant caste. In a scene where Archi drives a tractor and stops at the male protagonist Parshya's house, Parshya's mother looks at Archi and says, "You drive tractor like a man". Upon looking at Archi, Parshya's mother's face is marked by an expression that is simultaneously in awe of Archi for driving a tractor and aware of the realities that confine her or her daughter within the boundaries of their lower caste female subjecthood. This moment reminded me of the gruesome events that took place in Khairlanji a decade ago where four members of the Bhotmange family belonging to a Dalit caste were murdered by the members of politically dominant Kunbi caste. The women of the family, Surekha and Priyanka, were paraded naked in public and later hacked to death by mutilating their bodies. One of the many things that had attracted the ire of the Kunbis was the fact that Priyanka *dared* to ride a bicycle to school while her mother Surekha had fought for retaining the ownership of her own piece of land. It is the same unholy collusion of patriarchy and caste that 'allows' Archi to ride a Royal Enfield while simultaneously making Priyanka Bhotmange a victim of caste violence in Khairlanji for riding a bicycle. Manjule's brilliance lies in how routinely he highlights this difference just by the subtle expression on the mother's face, bereft of any melodrama that one has come to associate with mainstream Indian cinema.

In a scene towards the second half of the film, Manjule crafts another such moment that succinctly captures the core of the film. Archi's father has to surrender his candidature to Sonal *Tai*, a female colleague in his party. This surrender on the father's part, as we are made to understand, is a result of the 'shame' that Archi has brought to him and his family by eloping with a boy from lower caste. Earlier in an opening sequence, the father is shown criticizing the opposition contestant suggesting that since the opposition leaders cannot 'control' the ladies of their own family they are unfit to rule the constituency. One can not help but notice the blow his male ego has received from two women with aspirations, his daughter Archi, and Sonal *Tai*. The shot closes with a decisive look on the father's face that is linked with the climax of the film that, like in *Fandry*, leaves the viewer shaken and speechless.



The daily violence of caste and patriarchy is often invisibilised in the mainstream public discourse, including films. Manjule's films, inspired by the Ambedkarite discourse, forcefully draw attention to these routine acts of violence in a layered manner compelling the audience to take note of the same. Underneath *Sairat's* narrative as an epic love story lie the banal realities of violence of both caste and patriarchy. *Sairat*, and *Fandry* are reminders that we need to open ourselves to these lived realities of the society that we inhabit, whose denial otherwise validates our comfort zones.

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