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Keywords: *casteism, sadgati, satyajit ray, film.*

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I. Introduction

What is Casteism? According to *R. N. Sharma*, "*Casteism is a blind group loyalty towards one's own caste or sub-caste, which does not care for the interests of other castes, and seeks to realize the social, economic, political and other interests of its own group*" (quoted in Rao, 2017). So in simple word we can say Casteism is a caste's interest towards its individuals and oppressed others who are inferior to them. It's a basic caste-wise discrimination which has been practicing since the ancient period in India. In the Indian society it cannot be ignored. The relationship between Caste and Society is significant. Caste is a factor behind social stratification which in simple word, the social division of the society. By the definition of *Bottomore* it can be cleared, "*social stratification is the division of society into classes of strata, which from a hierarchy of prestige and power*" (quoted in Pal, 2016). Actually, social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a style of life which often includes an occupation, ritual status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notions of purity and pollution. The Hindu religion has castes that range from Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudra. While the Brahmins are the highest caste, they enjoy all the amenities which the lower caste person isn't allowed to. People are not allowed access to certain things solely because of their caste. This creates a lot of division in Indian society. So from societal aspect casteism is very crucial element for social stratification.

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In this article we will try to understand the caste based oppression in twentieth century of rural India with reference to the legendary film director *Satyajit Ray's* movie *Sadgati*. Originally this movie is based on a short story of same name written by *Munsi Premchand*. This story was first published in 1931 in volume 4 of *Mansarovar*, the collected stories. This Hindi story was translation into English by *David Rubin* appears as the title story of Rubin's *Deliverance and Other Stories*. Satyajit Ray made this film in 1981 produced by Doordarshan. Ray in his book *The Chess Players and Other Screenplays* called this story of a poor Dalit "a deeply angry film ... not the anger of an exploding bomb but of a bow stretched taut and quivering" (1989) where *Sourodipto Sanyal* described as "It is not the worst manifestations of physical violence meted out to lower castes, but the everyday exploitation they face, which is cinematically represented. The issue of caste is also linked to the superstitious practices of Hinduism in the film" (2016). This film was telecasted first on Indian television (Doordarshan) in 1981, and subsequently on Channel 4 in the UK.

II. Casteism Showcasing in *Sadgati*

Being a Bengali *Kayasthas* (in the ancient Chaturvarna system 2nd height caste after Brahmin) Satyajit Ray don't believe in this caste system. Even he criticizes the higher caste's negative attitude towards lower caste. In a Bengali dialogue of his movie *Jana Aranya* (The Middleman) he sarcastically emphasizes that which I try to translate as "being a Brahman decent you can do begging on road but how can you peddle anything?"(37:12-37:15). Actually he criticizes the values of higher caste where they proudly can do beg on road but not do laborious works which gives them little earning but provide self-respect. In *Sadgati* this caste based discrimination is rather more prominent.

The main characters of this film are *Dukhi* (a tanner) played by *Om Puri*, *Jhuria* (Dhuki's wife) played by *Smita Patil*, *Dhania* (Dukhi's daughter) played by *Richa Sharma*, *Ghasiram* (a Brahmin) played by *Mohan Agashe*, *Lakshmi* (Brahmin's wife) played by *Gita Siddharth*. The story is roaming around the life of Dukhi and his misery which was described by *Upadhyaya* as "*Dukhi is so completely grounded under the weight of tradition and Brahmanical superiority that he considers himself a non-entity before the spiritual might of the Brahman. He is so laden with his consciousness of*

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being an untouchable that he follows those norms even when there is nobody to observe or enforce it" (quoted in Upadhyaya & Ahmad, 2010).

Firstly the name of lead character Dukhi is metaphorically significant in the film. By using the name 'Dukhi' which literary means 'Wretched' Premchand as well as Ray traces the 'Dukh' or 'Sorrow' of a lower castes that is offered by higher castes which makes him the ultimate victim of mortal coil as he was "untouchable chamar, an untouchable caste according to the hierarchical caste system" (Rajak, 2020).

The film starts with Dukhi went to field for cutting grass in spite of his illness which he offered as a gift (Bhet) to the village Brahmin Ghasiram when he asked him to come for fixing an auspicious date for his daughter's engagement according to Hindu customs. Here Dukhi is not represented as a social revolutionary where he proudly protest against the social discrimination and prejudices but he accepted it as his destiny and "The Brahmin pundit takes this as an 'opportunity' to get some strenuous works done by Dukhi, as he knows that Dukhi is compelled to follow his order because Dukhi is religiously bound" (Rajak, 2020). By this, Ray slaps on the cheeks of civilized society. So despite of the inferior treatment by Ghasiram, Dukhi always addressed him as *Maharaj*. Giving respect to others attitude of Dukhi couldn't beat the cunningness of Pandit or his cruelty. He has learned from his ancestors that serving the upper castes is their destiny. And he tries to serve with devotion. So that he ordered Jhuria, "Tell Dhania to break off some Mohwa leaves. Make a mat with them" (*Sadgati*, 2:31-2:34) for Ghasiram as Dukhi knew that being a Brahmin Ghasiram definitely refused to sit on Chamar's cot. Casteism is more prominent when Jhuria said, "We can borrow one (cot) from the Chief (Mukhiya, head of the village) (2:19-2:21) then Dukhi reminded her, "Are you mad or what! They won't let a coat out of their house to light a fire with and you tell lend us their cot? (2:21-2:28) so it is clear that this caste based discrimination is not only restricted in Brahmin but in every corner of the society.

Dukhi also ordered "Make a plate with Mohwa leaves. They are holy" (2:43-2:47) as they would "have to offer him some provisions (Sidha) too" (2:37-2:39). Here 'Holy' word used sarcastically where being holy Mohwa leaves easily excepted by Ghasiram but how he neglect the manufacturer of Mohwa made plate? Respecting a creation and dishonor the creator is a self contradictory thing. He also warned his wife "put four annas on the edge of the leaf. Don't touch anything (4:10-4:14) which indicates touch of lower caste would profane that plate. But when lower caste people made that plate weren't those profane then? Unfortunately there is no answer as this prejudice was made for the upper castes' benefit.

We have to understand that being a representative of *Chamar* community the only identity of Dukhi, Jhuria and others like them were 'Chamar' and that could be clear by Dukhi's addressing some lady as 'Gond's daughter' as she was the representative of Gond community. It was injected into their blood that only identity is that they can achieve by birth not by work and unfortunately these illiterate lower caste people accepted it as an omnipotent truth without arguing which described as—

> "*The dominating exercise of power takes an insidious form when the present order is internalized by the Dalits…*" (quoted in Kant, 2017).

Dukhi addressed Ghasiram with respect, "Your Honor (Maharaj), I've come to see you" (*Sadgati* 8:59-9:01). He assured the Brahmin, "I have kept everything ready, your honor" (9:10-9:12) so that Ghasiram didn't have to worry. But to showcase his higher status he said, "What do you think? Am I free so that whenever someone calls me to go with I will go?" (9:22-9:26). Actually being a Brahmin how could he complacent with just a bundle of fodder as gift? So he wanted to get Dukhi to do some household works for free as it was Dukhi's need he has to obey Brahmin's order because without a Brahmin he couldn't fix the date of his daughter's marriage. As mentioned earlier Dukhi was the follower of social rituals, not the revolutionary. He believed that without Brahmin his daughter's marriage couldn't be done. Dukhi gladly accepted orders from Ghasiram which are as follows—

1) "*See there is a broom lying there. Take it and sweep that balcony (Verandah) clean*" (9:43-9:41).
2) "*There is a store-room across the street out in front. You will find a pile of husk lying there. Take it out and put it in cowshed*" (12:03-12:15).
3) "*I want you to chop wood for me. You will find a log lying below a banyan tree outside. I want it chopped in small slices*" (12:20-12:34).

Astonishingly after every order Dukhi said like a tamed servant "Joe spades (Jo Hukum)" or "Yes sir (Maharaj)". The question is how an illiterate, so called uncivilized dalit showed this kind of penchant? Which *Haider* manifested "Characterized by failure, lack and inadequacy, most of the Dalit-speaking subjects are silent sufferers who bend beneath the lashes of undeserved fate, and encounter expressivity or volubility in others without counter-poising their own expressions of suffering" (quoted in Asaduddin, 2016).

Even he fulfilled first two orders with dedication. But in third case he couldn't succeed as he had no time to take any food from morning. While he was struggling with the wood log a gond (lower caste) questioned why he was trying this as he was not habituated with the work. Then he mentioned the work as "The Brahmin's order" (*Sadgati* 20:52-20:53) and it signified how these lower caste people's life controlled by 'Brahmin's order'.

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The gond sarcastically asked, "So can't he even let you feed, even if he doesn't give you money?" (20:16-21:19) and insisted Dukhi to ask Ghasiram "for some food" (21:20). But his conscience stopped him to take a favor as he believed that by asking Ghasiram to go to his house was already a favor so "how can I ask food?" (21:27-21:28). This is his ethics which is nothing but casted pearl before swine. He asked that gond for Bidi (low quality cigar) which might give him power to cut and even the gond gave it to Dukhi. Being a lower caste the gond felt the pain of Dukhi and helped him as much as he could. But Dukhi needed a fire to light the biri. He thought Ghasiram's wife might help him with the fire. But unfortunately he was wrong. Her question "Why is that man come back again and again" (23:13-23:15) towards her husband and when her husband disclosed the reason of his coming her question why her husband went to "Now? In the middle of the day" (23:24) was really selfish. As it was not seems unfair to her to have Dukhi worked forcefully without remuneration 'in the middle of the day' but her husband's going. This partiality is not just because Ghasiram was her husband but being a dalit this was his duty to work as per order of higher castes.

Dukhi asked for fire to Ghasiram and listening to that Ghasiram showed a little grace as he asked her wife to give him fire. But her wife screamed with anger reminding Ghasiram that "You are not worried about anything of caste rules (Dharama-karama). Tanners, Washer men (Dhobi), Bird shooters (Pasi)… they just come walking in. As if it is not a decent Hindu house, but an inn" (23:43-23:51). She even more loudly said, "Tell him to get out or I will scorch his face with a fire brand" (23:54-23:58) so that Dukhi could hear. With that she added, "If he ever comes back here, I will give him the coals in his face" (24:16-24:20) which ironically remarked as "She was speaking the truth—how could a tanner ever come into a Brahman's house? These people were clean and holy, that was why the whole world worshipped and respected them. A mere tanner was absolutely nothing" (Upadhyay & Ahmad, 2010). In reply for the first time patience of the Dukhi ignited and he just said in innuendo, "It's because we are such fools that we get kicked about" (*Sadgati* 24:39-24:41).

After Dukhi's departure the personal conversation of husband-wife brought out a little sympathy towards Dukhi but when it's conflicted with their own comfort they easily neglected Dukhi's basic needs which described as follows—

Lakshmi (Ghasiram's wife): "*Has the tanner had anything to eat?*"

Ghasiram: "*Perhaps not. He is been here since morning*".

--"*How can he chop wood on an empty stomach*?"

--"*Why don't you give him something to eat?*"

--"*Then let him be hungry. I can't go cooking in this hot weather*". (24:51-25:19)

After smoked the hookah due to physical weakness he felt asleep which was not tolerated by the Brahmin and said, "Have you come here to snooze?" (25:49-25:50) and Dukhi for the first time admitted, "I had nothing to eat since this morning" (30:10-30:12) which was easily thwarted by Ghasiram by saying, "So what? Finish your work, go home and eat whatever you want" (30:14-30:17) and alarmed him, "So if you don't find an auspicious date for your daughter's marriage don't blame me" (30:25-30:29). He ordered boldly, "Hit hard…. Don't stop until you have split it" (31:34-31:44). Hearing this, Dukhi's stubbornness rose and he madly hit the wood and after a couple of minute's hard struggle he fallen down. Dukhi died. His death was happened without a single protest which *Zutsh* describes "…stories like 'Sadgati', he occasionally thrusts questions and statements at the readers that are capable of creating ripples in the smooth waters of the reader's probable indifference towards those problems" (quoted in Asaduddin & Ghosh, 2012). Even Ghasiram's wife reacted Dukhi's death very casually like, "Go to the tanners' colony. Tell them to come and take the corpse away…. maybe he had fever. Some people die in their sleep, don't they? After all, you didn't know that he would die" (*Sadgati* 34:04-34:25). And initially we assumes that the Brahmin couple is the reason behind his death but if we think deeply we understand the Brahmin couple is just a part of the society but main culprit of this oppression and repression is the society with its evil caste system and prejudices.

The caste discrimination was not ended yet. The dead body of Dukhi made a trouble for the upper caste as it was lying on the way of upper castes' well. So being an untouchable dead body it makes their way profane and without making the well holy they couldn't take water from it. And no doughty "This is a serious matter" (37:31-37:35) for them and was cleared by the words of a Brahmin, "Until the corpse is removed, we can't use this road to go to well. How long we live without water?" (37:36-37:42)

On the other side no sooner did that gond informed about the death of Dukhi than he went to tanners' colony and assimilated the dalits and induced them to protest against this wrong doing and alert them "He (Ghasiram) will ask to remove the corpse…don't touch the corpse, or you will be in trouble with police" (35:24-35:32) as "it's a police case and the guilty one in the Brahmin" (35:33-35:39). After some time Ghasiram came to tanners' colony and asked to remove the dead body but by their attitude he understood, "They would not remove this corpse" (38:30-38:32). But Lakshmi's attitude was like if they didn't remove the corpse it's their sin because being Brahmin they couldn't remove that dead body. But her husband said, "They just turned a

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deaf ear and looked at me with red eyes" (38:47-38:50). After sometime when it was raining Lakshmi was afraid of the decomposition of the dead body and odd smells.

In the mean time when Jhuria was informed about her husband's death she was devastated and cried loudly in front of the Brahmin's house, "Maharaj – you made him chop wood – made him work hard – when he had just recovered from fever. He had no strength – yet you made him work. What harm has he done you that you were so cruel?" (40:35-40:56). At the end point of the story this little voice was heard from the oppressed. But this was not end though. As Ghasiram had no way to remove that dead body he made a way to got rid of this mess. He took a round branch of tree by which he pulled up the leg of dead body without touching it and tide with a rope and dragged the dead body by the rope and left that body into a heaps of rubbish where many decomposed animals' skeleton were already there. The last scene of the movie was most ironical which was described as "The backbreaking toil that extracts Dukhi's life ironically places his body in a no-man's land where it is lies unclaimed" (Kant, 2017). After solving the problem of dead body being a puritanical Brahmin he had to the place make holy where the dalit dead body lied and for that he freshly bathed, chanted holy mantras and sprinkled holy water (Gangajal) to purify the place. In this way he made the 'Sadgati' of the dead body. The English title of the film '*Deliverance*' is also significant. Here this name approves two meaning

1) First is how Ghasiram get deliverance from the dead body which might give him trouble.
2) Secondly the metaphoric meaning of this is how lower caste's people like Dukhi get rid of the worldly misery offered by higher castes by death and attains 'Mukti' or 'Deliverance' from the eternal world.

III. Analyzing Practical Scenario with Film Depiction

Being a neo-realist filmmaker (Specially Italian neo-realist) Satayjit Ray's film *Sadgati* is a realistic portrayal of casteism in twentieth century. Although the film comprises a fiction story. So there must be qualms among its relevant in practical field. May be the actual scenario is not so pathetic in twentieth century or even today as showcased in Ray's film. So for that we have to take evidence of secondary sources to understand is this film a fable of Ray or is there any relevance with real society.

The first evidence is the census of India in 1900s by British Government where in 1935, "the British Government of India came up with a list of 400 groups considered untouchable, as well as many tribal groups, that would be accorded special privileges in order to overcome deprivation and discrimination. Those groups included on this list came to be termed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In the 1970s, however, many leaders of castes considered untouchable started calling themselves Dalits" (Sekhon, 2000).

After 1910, "*Dalit leaders started focusing on distancing themselves from Hinduism and began to advocate for a separate electorate for the Dalits. But Gandhi… tried to instead encourage the incorporation of Dalits as part of reformed Hinduism*" (Deshpande, 2010).

The pioneer of Dalit Movement in India *B.R. Ambedkar* believed that "the subordination of Dalits was primarily economic and political, and could only be overcome by changing the social structure through legal, political, and educational means" (Sekhon, 2000). In 1956, he encouraged around six million Dalits to convert to Buddhism "*as a means of escaping the social stigma of untouchability within the Hindu caste system*" (Sekhon, 2000).

So it is very clear that casteism and caste based discrimination is there in India and this is not an imaginary story made by Ray but it has relevance in society. Now let's look at how lower caste people are oppressed at that time. The torture towards dalits and lower castes as shown by Ray in the film was actually the same in real society?

Our first evidence *Kilvenmani massacre* was an incident in *Kizhavenmani* village, *Nagapattinam* district of Tamil Nadu on 25 December 1968 in which a group of around 44 people, the families of striking Dalit village labourers, were murdered by a gang, allegedly led by their landlords. The chief accused was *Gopalakrishnan Naidu* (Gough, 1974).

We are all aware of *Phoolan Devi*, the famous dacoit of UP and later became politician. She was born in a *Mallaah* (boatman class) family. Her life story is not less than movie script. In a nutshell, she was abducted by an upper-caste Thakur friend of her husband *Vikram*. She was locked up in the *Behmai* village and was raped in the village by Thakur men, until she managed to escape after three weeks (Arquilla, 2011). Phoolan then formed a gang of Mallahs of her own, which carried out a series of violent robberies in north and central India. Seventeen months after her escape from Behmai, Phoolan returned to the village, to take her revenge. On 14 February 1981, her gang massacred 22 Thakur men in the village. Later she surrendered and sentenced for eleven years in prison (Devi, Cuny & Rambali, 1996). On July 25, 2001, Phoolan Devi was shot dead by assassin named *Sher Singh Rana* when she was serving as a Member of Parliament in Delhi. *Shekhar Kapur* made a movie based on the her life named *Bandit Queen* (1994), adapted from *Mala Sen's* 1993 book *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*.

Next is *Karamchedu massacre* which was an incident occurred in *Karamchedu, Bapatla district* of Andhra Pradesh on 17 July 1985, where Kamma landlords killed six Dalits and raped Three Dalit women.

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Hundreds of Dalits in the village were displaced from their home after their houses were burnt and looted. Scholars have reported that the massacre happened because a Dalit (Madiga) boy objected to a Kamma boy soiling the water tank where Dalits drew their drinking water (Andhra Pradesh Civil Libraries Committee, 1985). The massacre has highlighted the discriminatory and violent tendencies of caste hierarchies. Here we can relate this scenario with the fiction scenario of film *Sadgati*.

Ranvir Sena is a militia functioning as a higher-caste landlord group based in Bihar. It has committed violent acts against Dalits and other lower castes people which are as follows—

1) 21 Dalits including 11 women, six children and three infants were slaughtered on 11 July 1996 by the Ranvir Sena in *Bathani Tola, Bhojpur district*. The perpetrators targeted women and children in particular, so as to deter any future resistance (Banerjee, 2012).
2) On 1 December 1997, sena members killed 63 Dalits–16 children, 27 women and 18 men–by guns in *Laxmanpur-Bathe*. The dead included 5 teenage girls who had been raped and mutilated before being shot, and 8 people from the Mallah community (Narula, 1999).

Like this there is multiple example of brutality of Ranvir Sena towards lower castes. And in rural to urban level of India such incidents were not rare then and even today. In *Tsundur massacre* 8 dalits were killed on the 6 August 1991. In *Melavalavu massacre* six Dalits were killed in June 1996. The list is endless. So after analyzing so much evidence of caste based oppression and torture we can say that defiantly Ray's Sadgati was not mythic story but actually iniquitous scenario of social discrimination.

IV. Conclusion

"Sadgati vividly sketches the pitiless plight of the Chamars in the discredited lives they lead and the ignominious death they face" (Kant, 2017).

Now-a-days this situation might have been changed slightly, but not totally. So the question is— is there any relevance of caste based discrimination and oppression today? The answer lies in some newspaper headlines like recent *Hathras dalit girl* rape and murder case; a dalit boy is brutally beaten up by his school teacher & later died for touching upper caste's water pot (Ghosh, 2022); a dalit was being threatened with dead threats by the Thakurs of his village after he complained that utensils of Scheduled Castes school children used for their mid-day meals were kept apart on the premises, and washed by the children themselves (Rehman, 2021). All these can clearly describe how casteism is relevance even today.

Unfortunately the news of oppression, exploitation and marginalization of lower caste people wouldn't end yet. There is millions of similar news available on newspaper archives. The most astonishing thing is when the world is trying to combat with cancer, missiles are sending to the universe, train lines are being made under river; bullet trains are attaining new technologies to run faster a dalit individual being born in lower caste family is facing of caste based torture somewhere in remote India. We can say in urban and metropolitan cities this scenario of dalit torture might be lesser but not abolish. But in rural India it is massive to control though Indian Constitution protects the rights of all people irrespective of caste. It conserves equal opportunity to every citizen.

However, we can conclude by understanding the reference of *Sadgati* even today with *Bhaskar Chattopadhyay's* remark "The story of Sadgati was written almost one hundred years ago. The film itself was made 40 years ago. But even today, the evil shadow of untouchability and caste crimes hover over us" (2017).

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