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Reading the plight of the marginalised through Bagh Bahadur and Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga

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Abstract

This research paper will analyse how Bagh Bahadur and Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga, in spite of made three decades apart, remain essentially linked through their subaltern portrayal stuck within an unchanging socio-economic and cultural silos. Drawing upon Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Studies, along with postcolonial and humanist readings, this paper posits that the disempowered in both films exist at the margins of the all-sweeping civilization, deprived of both economic security and representational agency.

While the socio-historical settings differ for both the films, the protagonist's existential crisis remains disturbingly unaltered. The tiger dancer in Bagh Bahadur, Ghunuram, and the impoverished village headman in Sherdil, Gangaram, symbolize encapsulate their subaltern identities showing how their struggle, culture, and humanity are methodically diminished by power and modernity constructs. This study throws spotlight on how the face of the oppression has changed from rural agrarian exploitation to urban bureaucratic insensitivities keeping the realities unchanged at its very core.

The paper, using qualitative content analysis, further delves on how the dominant voices in the society around the subaltern progressively distance themselves from the lived misery of these marginal characters. In Bagh Bahadur, modern cultural spectacle erases the dignity of age-old indigenous performance, while in Sherdil, media sensationalism, latent activism, and institutional apathy alter poverty into consumable product away from humanitarian crisis it delves in. The voice of the marginalised thus becomes interceded, arbitrated, tamed, and finally silenced by the dominant systems.

The paper asserts that both the films function as cinematic testimonies talking about unaltered subaltern dispossession in India, despite thirty-two years in between. Through lyrical realism and political satire respectively, Bagh Bahadur and Sherdil expose the continuous and sustained failure of dominant society to treat the marginal with empathy and save them from cultural desiccation, economic losses, and finally social abandonment.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Marginalisation, Cultural Alienation, Economic Exploitation, Indian Parallel Cinema

Introduction

Cinema has from its inception had been a cultural mirror bringing to the fore not only the ambitions and victories, but also its ruptures, disparities, and silences. From post-independence filmmaking to contemporary realist cinema, Indian films had repeatedly attempted to bring the marginalised into public life. Films describing the struggles of the downtrodden, dispossessed, and socially neglected have been made whether it was *Do Bigha Zamin* in 1953 or *Masaan* in 2015, which exposed caste oppression and social alienation in contemporary India. These films reveal what could be termed as an alternate history of India.

The subaltern representation in Indian movies is closely associated with the larger treatise of postcolonial and subaltern studies. Ranajit Guha (1988) argued that dominant histories often erased the agency of the masses. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) further quizzed whether the subaltern had the voice to speak within the controlled hegemonic power. Indian cinema, particularly the art-house cinema, has attempted to answer this question by creating cinematic space for those excluded from mainstream, but have failed to change the lived realities of these communities.

The progress of Indian cinema from the uncompromising social dramas of the 1950s to the politically pregnant parallel cinema movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and later the socially conscious movies of the multiplex era, demonstrate how the language for representing the marginalised has changed over time, but not their lived reality.

Cinema plays a vital role in constructing public consciousness regarding social inequality and exclusion. It has the power to humanise sorrow, misery and pain by transforming mere statistics into lived emotional experiences. Marginalisation can manifest in multiple forms, some are direct and visibly violent, while others operate subtly through apathy, systematic disregard, and symbolic exclusion.

Within this context emerged the parallel cinema movement. Originating primarily in West Bengal during the 1950s, parallel cinema developed as a powerful alternative to commercially driven mainstream filmmaking (Indian Cultural Forum, 2021). Deeply influenced by Italian Neorealism, this drive was led by directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, and Tapan Sinha. Instead of dealing in the convention trope of superficial glamour and escapism of commercial films, they turned their focus on the plight of the common Joe.

Parallel cinema brought into focus uncomfortable social realities that mainstream narratives often ignored. It challenged dominant socio-political structures by putting forward themes such as class conflict, patriarchy, corruption, urban alienation, and rural displacement. Unlike mainstream cinema, which celebrated spectacle and fantasy, art-house cinema emphasised realism, symbolism, and socio-political critique. The movement gave cinematic legitimacy to lives that had historically remained invisible within popular culture. Through realism and poetic visual language, these filmmakers revealed the anxieties and aspirations of those existing outside elite social structures.

This progress also reflected the changing forms of subaltern representation across decades. In early realist cinema, the focus was largely on agrarian distress, but with time it shifted focus to critique media spectacle and bureaucratic indifference. But despite these thematic and stylistic transformations, the fundamental condition of the subaltern remains unchanged. Cinema has evolved in its understanding of the subaltern, but society has not changed to accommodate the subaltern. This contradiction forms the central concern of this study.

Literature Review

Substantial scholarships exist on subalternity and Indian parallel cinema separately, but fewer studies have examined the representation of the subaltern. This gap becomes particularly significant in the context of *Bagh Bahadur* and *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga*, two films separated by over 30 years were linked through their portrayal of sustained mistreatment and symbolic gagging of the subaltern.

The theoretical foundations for studying subalternity were laid by Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective, and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), in her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. These theoretical involvements remain pivotal to the understanding of *Ghunuram* and *Gangaram* in the two films under discussion.

Scholarly work on Indian parallel cinema focused on resistance to the commercial movies' escapist tendencies. Authors studying the movement have highlighted how filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, and later Buddhadeb Dasgupta employed symbolic realism to cast spotlight on the socio-political crises and human suffering (Indian Cultural Forum, 2021). Studies on parallel cinema argue that these makers interrupted the dominant cinematic language, by making their protagonists vulnerable.

Research specifically on *Bagh Bahadur* has primarily concentrated on its poetic realism, symbolism, and the cinematic style of Buddhadeb Dasgupta. Ramnath (2021), while discussing the film through actor Pavan Malhotra's reflections, identified the emotional permanence of the film and its ability to portray the erosion of folk traditions under the pressures of modern entertainment culture. Similarly, discussions surrounding Dasgupta's cinema often focus on his lyrical imagery, surreal visual metaphors, and the tension between modernity and rural life (Indian Cultural Forum, 2021). Scholars have interpreted *Ghunuram*'s tiger dance as a metaphor for the fading of indigenous cultural practices in the face of aggressive urbanisation and commodified entertainment.

However, despite these understandings, existing studies on *Bagh Bahadur* rarely features the movie within the discourse of subaltern continuity across time. There is also inadequate study on how the film anticipates later forms of marginalisation visible in *Sherdil*.

Similarly, studies on *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* have largely focused on agrarian distress, environmental conflict, and the satire embedded in the narrative. Verma (2024) analyses the film through the lens of unselfish suicide and the real-life crisis, arguing that *Gangaram*'s willingness to die emerges from deep seeded inequalities faced by rural communities. Reviews and critical essays on the film have also discussed the tension between wildlife

conservation and human survival, as well as the film's critique of bureaucratic inefficiency and performative activism (Rawat, 2022).

While these studies throw up important socio-political readings in *Sherdil*, they often treat the film in isolation, rather than as part of a continued tradition of marginal representation through movies. Existing scholarship also tends to privilege the ecological and satirical dimensions making subaltern voicelessness and representational politics secondary.

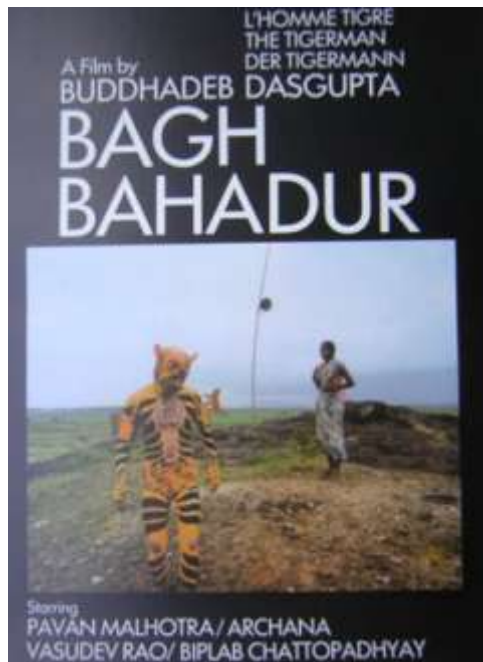
Another important gap in existing literature is the lack of comparative studies of the subaltern across time. There is a very limited studies tracing how the cinematic language of marginalisation has evolved while the lived condition of the subaltern remains largely unchanged. The movement from the lyrical realism of *Bagh Bahadur* to the satirical realism of *Sherdil* represents both a stylistic shift as also a change in how dominant society engages with subaltern suffering through spectacularising, media manipulation and digital tokenism.

Moreover, existing researches often treat cinema as a representative medium, rather than a site for ideological discourse. The dominant voices surrounding the subaltern in both films, whether the circus and urban entertainment construct in *Bagh Bahadur* or the bureaucracy, media, and judiciary, in *Sherdil*, create controlled narratives of the social conditions while remaining emotionally removed from the real lived experiences of the marginalised.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address these gaps by doing a comparative analysis of *Bagh Bahadur* and *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* through the theoretical frameworks of subaltern studies, representation theory, and postcolonial discourse. And by doing so, the paper aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on the representation of the subaltern in Indian cinema from the longitudinal perspective.

Research Questions

1. How do *Bagh Bahadur* and *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* both portray the continuous subaltern marginalisation despite being separated by three decades?
2. How do the films narrate the relationship between dominant socio-cultural structures and the erasure of subaltern identities and livelihoods?
3. How do the cinematic narratives show the distancing and control of dominant voices, such as entertainment structures and bureaucracy, from the lived realities of the oppressed?
4. How does the metamorphosis from lyrical realism in *Bagh Bahadur* to satirical realism in *Sherdil* reflect the evolution of subaltern representation in its corresponding social structure?



Pic: I:1 Source Internet–Posters of Bagh Bahadur and Sherdil- The Pilibhit Saga

Content Analysis of Bagh Bahadur

Bagh Bahadur is a multi-layered narrative that analyses the cultural, economic, and existential insolvency of the subaltern. Through the protagonist Ghunuram, a quarry worker and traditional Bohurupi tiger dancer, Buddhadeb Dasgutta constructs a heart-breaking narrative, the director makes us sit up and take notice of the systematic erosion of indigenous identity. Dasgutta's cinema has often been described as "visual poetry," where realism merges with metaphor and ordinary lives assume allegorical significance (Ramnath, 2021). This style becomes the central axis to understanding how Bagh Bahadur addresses the four research questions.

Continued marginalising of the subaltern

The first research question examines how the film portrays the continuity of subaltern marginalisation. Although Bagh Bahadur was released in 1989, Ghunuram's condition reflect a much bigger historical continuity of exploitation and invisibility of rural labourers and folk artists in India. Ghunuram's life is split between physically exploitative labour in a stone quarry and emotionally stirring participation in the folk tradition of Bohurupi tiger dancing. The opening interaction between Ghunuram and the Munshi immediately establishes the subaltern vulnerability. The Munshi mocks his desire to return home for the performance season and indirectly threatens his employment if he didn't return on time, revealing how the downtrodden are denied both economic security and cultural dignity.

The film re-establishes that the subaltern survival is dependent upon submission to dominant systems of power. Ghunuram's annual transformation from labourer to performer temporarily allows him to reclaim some social identity and self-worth. However, this dignity remains fragile because it is dependent on how the community accepted it. Once the circus arrives with its caged leopard and its spectacle-driven entertainment, Ghunuram's social

value collapses instantly. His displacement from relevance mirrors the historical condition of the subaltern described by Guha and Spivak (1988), where dominant systems repeatedly erase indigenous voices and identities.

Thus, the film reveals that marginalisation is not merely economic but also cultural and symbolic. Ghunuram is not only poor; he is obsolete in terms of spectacularising of culture entertainment. His art form, identity, and existence are slowly pushed out of public memory and the continuity of this obliteration connects Bagh Bahadur to later films on the subaltern.

Erasure of subaltern identity

The second research question analyses how the dominant socio-cultural structures work together to exploit and erase subaltern identities. In Bagh Bahadur, modern entertainment culture symbolised by the circus functions as the rising force that displaces indigenous performance traditions. Dasgupta creates a stark symbolic opposition between Ghunuram's tiger dance and the fretting circus leopard. The tiger dance represents a cultural intimacy with nature, traditions, and spirituality, whereas the circus leopard represents the commodified spectacle, an urban intrusion, and the pleasure of domesticating the wild commercial purposes.

The irony that destroys Ghunuram psychologically is that the villagers prefer the spectacle of a caged leopard over authenticity of his performance. The audience that once celebrated him now dismisses him as fake because of their addiction towards packaged as entertainment. This shift reflects how capitalist modernity consumes and replaces local traditions. Dasgupta uses the circus metaphorically as an all-pervading cultural force that subjugates rural consciousness.

The dislocation is particularly aching because Ghunuram's performance is not merely entertainment but the foundation of his social identity. His dreams of marrying Radha and establishing a meaningful life are connected to his recognition as a Bohurupi artist. Once that recognition disappears, he loses not only livelihood but also masculinity, dignity, and emotional belonging. The dominant socio-cultural order therefore destroys the subaltern not through direct violence alone but through irrelevance and humiliation.

Dasgupta further intensifies this conflict through visual symbolism. The lush green rural landscapes associated with Ghunuram gradually transform into barren, grey spaces occupied by the circus tents. This visual transition shows the intrusion of industrial and urban modernity into organic rural existence. The progress associated with the circus becomes destructive rather than liberating.

Distancing of dominant voices from subaltern realities

The third research question focuses on how dominant voices distance themselves from the lived realities of the marginalised. In Bagh Bahadur, this distancing is not mediated through digital media or bureaucracy as in contemporary cinema but through social perception and cultural consumption. The villagers consume Ghunuram's art only as temporary amusement

without understanding the emotional and existential significance it holds for him. Once a more sensational form of entertainment arrives, they abandon him without empathy.

The circus authorities further deepen this alienation by directly humiliating Ghunuram and dismissing his performance as fake. The label of "fake tiger" becomes deeply symbolic because it reflects how dominant society delegitimises subaltern forms of cultural expression. Ghunuram embodies the spirit of the tiger through art and imagination, yet society now values the caged animal as more authentic simply because it satisfies voyeuristic spectacle. His humanity and artistic labour are therefore reduced to irrelevance within the logic of commodified entertainment.

Dasgupta's treatment of Ghunuram aligns with Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern voice is repeatedly overwritten by dominant frameworks of representation. Ghunuram never receives the opportunity to articulate his anguish within any institutional space. His final act of resistance in challenging the leopard, is not seen as a cry of existential despair, but as a foolish spectacle. His death becomes another forgotten moment in the endless cycle of exploitation and spectacle.

The final visual of Sibal beating the drums beside Ghunuram's fallen body while the circus survives proves this distancing. Society continues moving forward while the subaltern disappear silently. The drums become a symbolic echo of resistance that no one is left to hear.

Evolution of subaltern representation in Indian cinema

The fourth research question analyses how the film contributes to the evolution of subaltern representation in Indian cinema. Bagh Bahadur belongs to the tradition of Indian parallel cinema, which rejected the glamour and heroism of mainstream filmmaking in favour of realism, symbolism, and socio-political critique. However, Dasgupta's treatment of the subaltern differs because he combines pragmatism with poetic imagery and metaphorical storytelling.

Ghunuram is simultaneously an individual character and a metaphor for disappearing folk cultures. Dasgupta transforms the personal tragedy of a tiger dancer into a broader commentary on cultural extinction. His use of lyrical realism allows the audience to emotionally experience the slow death of indigenous traditions. The film therefore marks an important stage in the evolution of subaltern representation where suffering is depicted through cultural isolation and symbolic destruction.

Unlike mainstream cinema, where resistance often leads to triumph, Bagh Bahadur presents tragic dignified resistance. Ghunuram's death does not change society, nor does it restore his lost identity. Yet his refusal to surrender completely gives the subaltern a fleeting moment of heroic agency and thus creates painful contradictions of survival within oppressive systems.

Thus, Bagh Bahadur becomes not only a film about a dying art form, but also an endearing creative testimony to the unfinished history of the marginalised in India.



Pic: 1:2—Source internet. Pictures of Ghunuram and Gangaram respectively

Content Analysis of Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga

Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga is a powerful contemporary cinematic commentary on the condition of the subaltern in modern India. While the film employs the tropes of satire, dark humour, and absurdist situations as narrative devices, beneath the flippant tone lies a scathing critique of poverty, bureaucratic apathy, media spectacle, and the commodification of marginal suffering. Through the character of Gangaram, the sarpanch of the forgotten village of Jhundao, Srijit Mukherji exposes how the marginalised remain stuck within structures of deprivation and invisibility despite the apparent modernisation of Indian society.

Unlike the lyrical realism of Bagh Bahadur, Sherdil uses satirical realism to portray the ridiculousness of a socio-economic system where a man must court death in order to secure survival for his family and village. Yet despite the stylistic shift from poetic allegory to socio-political satire, both films remain deeply connected through the portrayal of the subaltern as dispensable without any moral qualms within dominant power structures.

Continued marginalising of the subaltern

The first research question examines how the film portrays the continuity of subaltern marginalisation despite the passage of time. Sherdil grand stages that although India has progressed both technologically and economically, the societal realities of destitution of the rural communities remain largely unchanged. Gangaram's village, Jhundao, exists outside developmental visibility to such an extent that it does not even appear on any official map. This absence becomes deeply symbolic because the village's invisibility within geography mirrors the invisibility of the marginalised people of that village within state consciousness.

The villagers suffer from famine, starvation, and recurring animal attacks, yet government remains absent except through complex bureaucratic procedures and unreachable compensation schemes. Newspaper reports that inspired the film documented how impoverished villagers near the Pilibhit Reserve forest deliberately exposed family elders to tiger attacks so that surviving relatives could claim compensation money (Verma, 2024). Srijit Mukherji transforms this disturbing social reality into a broader commentary on societal neglect and economic desperation.

Gangaram's decision to sacrifice himself is therefore not just an act of personal despair but the outcome of a system that has failed to reach out to these people. The film repeatedly emphasises that the poor are forced into impossible choices because the state recognises their deaths more readily than their lives. This continuity of exploitation strongly connects Sherdil with earlier cinematic portrayals of subaltern suffering. While Ghunuram in Bagh Bahadur loses relevance due to cultural displacement, Gangaram loses dignity through economic abandonment and bureaucratic indifference.

Furthermore, Gangaram's desire to finally become visible through martyrdom reflects the existential crisis of the marginalised in contemporary India. Recognition becomes achievable only through spectacle, death, or tragedy. The two films thus tell that despite decades of socio-economic transformation; the subaltern conditions and fate hardly change.

Erasure of subaltern identity

The second research question looks into how dominant socio-political and institutional structures add to the exploitation and destruction of subaltern identities. In Sherdil, exploitation operates through bureaucracy, developmental politics, conservation discourse, and media sensationalism. The state machinery repeatedly disgraces Gangaram and dismisses his appeals for help. Although he is the elected sarpanch of his village, he is treated by urban officials as rustic, ignorant, and insignificant. His concerns regarding famine, poverty, and starvation are reduced to mere paperwork in the giant maze of bureaucracy.

The compensation policy itself becomes symbolic of societal violence and apathy. The state places a measurable monetary value on death caused by tiger attacks, while failing to address the problems of the villagers living in dangerous proximity with forests. Thus, the system indirectly incentivises self-sacrifice. Gangaram's tragic plan to be eaten by a tiger emerges from the logic of a state that responds more efficiently to death than to poverty.

Mukherji further complicates the issue by bringing to the fore man-animal conflict. The tiger reserve becomes a contested space where wildlife conservation policies clash with human survival. However, the film refuses simplistic binaries. As Mukherji observed, the film concerns "the poorest of the poor" who survive on the margins of forests and are therefore destined for conflict with nature (Rawat, 2022). The tragedy lies not in conservation itself but in developmental imbalance and an unstoppable urban expansion that displaces both animals and humans.

This critique attains a powerful climax through Gangaram's courtroom monologue. Comparing the marginalised to endangered species, he argues that like animals they too require a protected place to survive. His appeal that the poor may soon become museum exhibits stuffed with sawdust and displayed as extinct beings becomes a chilling metaphor for social erasure. Through this speech, Mukherji transforms Gangaram from an individual character into a representative of all marginalised communities threatened by displacement, migration, and economic exploitation.

The film also critiques the expanding city as an insatiable force consuming both forests and rural identities. Gangaram warns that villagers displaced from their land would ultimately become anonymous labourers in cities, stripped of dignity and selfhood, mirroring the fate of countless subaltern communities in contemporary India.

Distancing of dominant voices from subaltern realities

The third research question examines how dominant voices distance themselves from the lived experiences of the marginalised. Unlike Bagh Bahadur, where indifference emerges through cultural replacement, Sherdil exposes the helplessness and suffering in the age of media and digital activism.

When Gangaram's story becomes public through newspapers and television, the dominant response is not empathetic engagement but performative concern. Social media hashtags such as #Gangaram and #SherdilGangaram begin trending. Candlelight vigils, debates, television discussions, and activist interventions suddenly emerge around his plight. However, these responses remain disconnected from the actual structural causes of poverty and marginalisation. Gangaram's suffering becomes consumable content within the urban media ecosystem.

Mukherji criticizes the transformation of human tragedy into spectacle. The public engages with the story because it is emotionally dramatic and unusual, not because it represents a long-standing humanitarian crisis. This reflects the argument of Spivak (1988) that the subaltern voice is frequently mediated and appropriated by dominant structures. Gangaram becomes the subject of narratives constructed by journalists, activists, courts, and media platforms, yet very few attempt to understand his lived reality or change it.

The irony of the film lies in the fact that Gangaram finally achieves visibility only when he becomes a spectacle of suffering. His desire to be recognised as a hero exposes the emotional hunger for dignity among the marginalised. Yet even this recognition remains temporary and superficial. The dominant voices surrounding him are more invested in debating the issue than addressing the conditions that created it.

The tiger itself assumes symbolic significance in this context. When Gangaram confronts the tiger and desperately begs it to kill him, the animal refuses because unlike humans it kills only for survival. His frustration erupts in the lines where he accuses the tiger of behaving like a fake circus animal and calls himself "Sherdil". This moment encapsulates his desperation and tragic dehumanisation.

Evolution of subaltern representation in Indian cinema

The fourth research question analyses how Sherdil reflects the evolution of subaltern representation in Indian cinema. Unlike the classical parallel cinema, Sherdil emerges from the multiplex era where social consciousness and entertainment must coexist. Multiplexes have brought together both commercial and art house movies for urban leisure. Consequently, contemporary filmmakers increasingly adopted hybrid narrative to jolt the viewers even while entertaining them.

Mukherji is an exponent of this evolved art form. Although commercially successful within the multiplex ecosystem, his films frequently engage with urban isolation, social alienation, and marginalisation (Rawat, 2022). In *Sherdil*, he uses satire to make uncomfortable realities accessible to mainstream audiences without diluting the political significance. The absurdity of Gangaram's mission creates moments of humour, yet beneath the veneer of humour it is deeply disturbing.

This marks an important shift from the poetic realism of Dasgupta to the starker satirical realism of contemporary cinema. While *Bagh Bahadur* relied on silence, symbolism, and visual melancholy, *Sherdil* employs courtroom speeches, media satire, and dark comedy to expose the same systemic neglect. However, despite these stylistic differences, the fundamental representation of the subaltern remains unchanged. Both Ghunuram and Gangaram are individuals crushed by forces beyond their control.

Thus, *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* shows how Indian cinema has evolved aesthetically and narratively while the lived condition of the marginalised has remained disturbingly constant. The film critiques not only poverty and bureaucracy but also the emotional distance of urban society from rural suffering.

Conclusion

The comparative study of *Bagh Bahadur* and *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* brings to the fore the uneasy continuity in the lived realities of the subaltern in India despite the passage of more than three decades. Through the lives of Ghunuram and Gangaram, the two films cast light on how the deprived and powerless continue to remain tied to the post of continued cycles of cultural erasure, economic manipulation, institutional apathy, and existential invisibility. While Indian cinema has grown artistically and visually from the lyrical realism to the satirical realism of the multiplex era, the truth of the matter is that the lived realities of the subaltern have remained completely unchanged.

Both Ghunuram (played by Pavan Malhotra) and Gangaram (played by Pankaj Tripathi) carry "Ram" in their names, symbolically summoning spirituality, morality, positivity and hope. Ironically, they get no divine intervention to ameliorate their suffering. Their lives are marked by an unceasing quest for little dignity and recognition, along with a very basic dream of sustaining a peaceful family life. But that remain perpetually beyond their reach as mere survival itself becomes an act of resistance against systems that have already abandoned them.

The paper also brings forth a reality that subaltern condition is not merely defined by poverty, but also a continuous denial of identity and dignity of life. In *Bagh Bahadur*, Ghunuram's livelihood and self-respect as a Bohurupi or tiger dancer is snatched away at the arrival of the spectacle of a circus, bringing about commodified urban entertainment drowning the indigenous cultural spaces. In *Sherdil*, the survival of an entire village depends upon the ferocity of a tiger and a compensation package that values death more than life. The irony in both narratives lies in the inverted human and animal relationships. While

Ghunuram loses his identity to a caged leopard, Gangaram seeks recognition through death at the hands of a tiger.

Meanwhile, Bohurupi connects the two films as a dominant motif. Ghunuram is mocked for merely imitating a tiger through an age-old cultural performance, while Gangaram, in a dark moment of frustration, calls the tiger a Bohurupi from the circus because it goes against its animal instinct to kill him. This intertextual resonance becomes intensely important within the construct of subaltern studies. Both characters exist in worlds where their dignity, and identity are defined by dominant power structures, at the cost of humanity that is habitually questioned, slighted and made a spectacle.

The findings of this study also bring us face to face with how urban modernity invade the rural spaces. In *Bagh Bahadur*, the modern culture of spectacular entertainment obliterates folk traditions and pushes the indigenous artists to the brink. In *Sherdil*, aggressive urban expansion, man-animal conflict, bureaucratic apathy, and media tokenism force rural communities into tight corners gasping for survival. In both films, the villages become an abandoned place, where the marginalised are left to negotiate survival without institutional empathy or meaningful support. The city, meanwhile, emerges as an all devouring overriding force.

The study further proves that dominant society is increasingly distancing itself from the lived suffering of the subaltern. In *Bagh Bahadur*, villagers consume Ghunuram's art casually, before abandoning him for the imported entertainment without a second thought. In *Sherdil*, Gangaram's tragedy becomes adjusting within the media discourse and lip service activism. There are hashtags, debates, candlelight vigils, and public outrage, but no real change in their condition. This aligns strongly with Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern voice is mediated and appropriated by dominant discourses.

From the cinematic representation point of view, the two films also delineate the evolution of socially conscious cinema. Buddhadeb Dasgupta's lyrical symbolism and poetic realism become Srijit Mukherji's political satire and absurdist humour. Yet, both films remain true to their commitment to highlighting those lives that mainstream narratives often erase. Albeit, one does through silence and metaphor, and the other through unsettling irony.

Finally, the study concludes through Indian cinema has progressed in thought, content, narration and ideological disposition, it has had little effect on the subaltern conditions. Between 1989 and 2022, the language of oppression has gone a sea change, but the essential condition of marginalisation remains intact. Ghunuram and Gangaram reminds us that behind all the development lies an India still waiting to be discovered and recognised.

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