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Exploring Caste, Religion and Class Dynamics in *Homebound*

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Abstract

Cinema is a powerful cultural medium that reflects and shapes social life. In India, caste, religion, and class continue to influence everyday experiences, often through routine institutional practices rather than open conflict. This paper examines the Hindi film *Homebound* through qualitative textual analysis of selected scenes, dialogues, and public interactions. Drawing on Stuart Hall's concept of representation, with support from Ambedkarite and Marxist thought, the study explores how social meaning is produced in ordinary spaces such as schools, recruitment offices, and workplaces. As the narrative moves from the village to the factory and finally to the pandemic setting, different forms of inequality become visible. The film shows how identity affects access to opportunity and how economic vulnerability shapes survival. Unlike many Hindi films that foreground a single social issue, *Homebound* presents caste, religion, and class as interconnected forces. In doing so, the film offers a grounded representation of contemporary Indian society.

Introduction

Cinema, also known as film or motion picture, is one of the most influential and multifaceted forms of artistic expression. It communicates ideas not only through dialogue but also through images, sound, and emotion, making it accessible to a wide audience. As Satyajit Ray famously stated, "Cinema is the most powerful medium of expression in the modern world" (Ray 2). This power allows cinema to shape public understanding of society by presenting certain ideas and ways of life as normal or natural. As a visual medium for storytelling, film does more than entertain; it reflects and shapes social realities. As Indubala Singh notes, it is "an ideological apparatus by the very nature of its seamlessness"(Singh 7). Mainstream cinema places ideology on the screen in seemingly natural and seamless ways, allowing social norms and hierarchies to appear unquestioned.

In India, cinema holds a central place in popular culture and reaches across regions, languages, and social groups. Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, has played a

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major role in shaping social imagination. While some films reinforce dominant beliefs, others question social norms and draw attention to neglected realities. Thus, cinema can therefore be studied as a cultural text that reveals how power and ideology operate within society.

Indian society is deeply shaped by social inequalities related to caste, religion, and class. These structures influence access to education, employment, safety, and social respect. Although legal equality exists post-independence, everyday life continues to be marked by exclusion, prejudice, and unequal treatment. Later in the 20th century, discrimination often appeared in routine social practices rather than in open conflict. Caste hierarchies continue to affect social relations, while religious identity can shape belonging and vulnerability in public spaces. Class further determines economic security and life chances, especially for those engaged in informal or migrant labour. Therefore, this study asks three questions: How does *Homebound* represent caste, religion, and class in its narrative? How do these inequalities shape opportunity and survival? And how does friendship between Shoaib and Chandan reveal both the possibility and limits of solidarity within unequal social systems?

2. Hindi Cinema and Social Inequality: An Overview

Bollywood, one of the most influential film industries in India, is widely recognised for its commercially successful productions. While often rooted in popular entertainment, Hindi cinema has experimented with a range of genres and produced a significant body of socially conscious cinema that engages with the complex realities of Indian society. From its early beginnings, Hindi cinema has reflected social inequalities related to caste, religion, and class, though often in indirect and cautious ways.

"*Acchut Kanya*" (1936) was one of the earliest Hindi films to foreground caste as a central theme. It portrayed the tragedy of inter-caste love between a Brahmin boy and a Dalit girl and marked an important moment in caste conversations in Indian cinema. This broader trajectory continues into what Dolores Herrero calls "Dalit cinema, a movement of visual creative art" shaped by the aim of "embodying and dignifying Dalit subjectivities" (Herrero 1).

In the post-independence period, films like *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) focused on class exploitation and rural poverty, depicting the struggles of peasants displaced by industrial forces, while *Mother India* (1957) highlighted agrarian hardship and moral endurance within a feudal structure. These films acknowledged suffering but largely framed inequality through sacrifice and resilience rather than structural critique. Issues of religion entered Hindi cinema more directly in films such as *Dharamputra* (1961), which examined religious intolerance and communal ideology, and *Garam Hawa* (1973), which portrayed the marginalisation of Indian Muslims in post-Partition society. Writing on Muslim marginalisation in Indian Cinema, Jisha Menon argues that these films "compel their

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audience to mimetically inhabit the position of the privileged citizen and evaluate his own complicity" in the minority citizen's disempowerment (qtd. in Michael 266).

The 1970s and 1980s marked a stronger engagement with class conflict and institutional injustice. Films like *Deewar* (1975) and *Coolie* (1983) highlighted labour exploitation, urban poverty, and social inequality. Mazumdar notes that *Deewar* roots its narrative in the "memory and experience of urban poverty, homelessness, and deprivation showing how class pain becomes a lived urban condition, not just a plot device." (Mazumdar 15).

In the post-2000 period, Hindi cinema shows a noticeable shift in its engagement with caste, religion, and class, moving away from grand narratives toward more grounded, realistic storytelling. Caste discrimination, earlier treated indirectly, becomes more explicit in films such as *Masaan* (2015), which exposes caste rigidity through death rituals and inter-caste relationships, and *Article 15* (2019), which directly confronts caste violence and institutional apathy in rural North India. These films shift attention from symbolic suffering to systemic injustice embedded within social and administrative structures.

Class inequality and economic marginalisation are explored through realist narratives such as *Peepli Live* (2010), which critiques agrarian distress and media sensationalism, and *Newton* (2017), which highlights the exclusion of marginalised communities from democratic processes. Religious identity and its social consequences also receive sharper attention in films like *My Name Is Khan* (2010), which examines Islamophobia in a global context, and *PK* (2014), Oh My God! (2012), which question organised religion and blind faith through satire. Together, these films reflect a gradual shift in Hindi cinema toward more direct engagement with social structures. However, few studies examine how these structures function simultaneously within the same narrative space, particularly in contemporary realist cinema.

3. *Homebound*: Context and Inspiration

The Hindi film *Homebound*, released in 2024, was written and directed by *Neeraj Ghaywan*, a filmmaker known for his socially realistic, minimalist storytelling. The film stars Ishaan Khatter and Vishal Jethwa in lead roles, with Janhvi Kapoor playing a significant supporting role. The film is inspired by journalist Basharat Peer's *The New York Times* article titled "A Friendship, a Pandemic and a Death Beside the Highway". The film entered public and critical discourse during discussions of India's Academy Awards submissions and was reported to be among the shortlisted or considered films in the International Feature Film category (Bhattacharya). Its recognition stemmed not from spectacle or scale, but from its understated realism, strong performances, and its focus on caste, religion, and class as lived social realities.

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The social concerns explored in *Homebound* gain further depth when viewed through the lens of its director, *Neeraj Ghaywan*, whose personal background informs his cinematic vision. Ghaywan, who was born into a Dalit family and raised in Hyderabad, has spoken openly about negotiating caste identity in professional and social spaces. In an interview titled "Meet *Homebound* Director Neeraj Ghaywan: A Hyderabad BTech, Symbiosis Pune MBA Who Once Hesitated to Say His Full Name", he reflects on concealing his caste to avoid prejudice, stating that he "hesitated to say [his] full name for years" because of the social meanings attached to it (Economic Times). This lived experience lends authenticity to his sustained engagement with caste and marginalisation, first visible in *Masaan* and continued in *Homebound*. Ghaywan himself has noted the rarity of Dalit voices behind and in front of the camera, observing that traditional storytelling in Indian films has centred on upper-caste perspectives, leaving the majority of the population underrepresented (Indulge Express). His position as a filmmaker who has personally experienced social exclusion strengthens the argument that cinema not only represents reality but is also shaped by the social location of its creators.

Homebound is set in rural Uttar Pradesh and follows two childhood friends, Mohammed Shoaib Ali and Chandan Kumar. Shoaib is Muslim, and Chandan belongs to a Dalit family. They grow up together and share the hope of clearing the national police recruitment exam to gain steady work and social respect. As they pursue this goal, they face repeated obstacles. Shoaib is treated with suspicion because of his religion, while Chandan faces exclusion linked to caste. These experiences occur in everyday spaces such as offices, transport, and workplaces. When their efforts to move ahead fail, the two leave their village to work in factories in an industrial town. There, they face long hours, low pay, and insecure jobs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, their situation became more difficult. Chandan eventually loses his life, and Shoaib is left alone, dealing with loss and uncertainty. The film presents a quiet account of friendship shaped by social inequality.

4. Methodology and Scope of Research

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach and offers a close analysis of the film *Homebound* from a Cultural Studies perspective. The film was viewed five times, and key scenes were selected based on their depiction of institutional interaction. Particular attention was paid to dialogue, silence, framing, and character positioning. Stuart Hall's concept of representation forms the primary theoretical framework. Alongside this, Ambedkarite thought is used in the background to understand caste, while Marxist theory supports the analysis of class exploitation. As a single-text study, the paper does not claim to generalise across all films but instead offers an in-depth reading of a single contemporary case.

Hindi films have often addressed caste, religion, and class as separate and isolated issues**,** usually highlighting one form of inequality at a time. For example, *Article 15* focuses mainly on caste discrimination, while *My Name Is Khan* centres on religious identity and

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prejudice. Similarly, films dealing with migration or labour often foreground class alone. *Homebound* is rare because it presents caste, religion, and class as interconnected forces. This layered narrative, in which multiple forms of inequality intersect, makes the film an important subject for academic study.

5. Social Inequality in *Homebound*
5.1 Representation of Caste

In *Homebound*, the discrimination on the basis of caste is represented through the character of Chandan, who belongs to a Dalit family. It is evident in everyday institutional practices that regulate access, voice, and dignity for Chandan's family. Rather than explicit violence or explicit speech, caste operates through a process of meaning-making in which social position is communicated through exclusion and denial of opportunity. This aligns closely with Stuart Hall's formulation of representation, where he states:

Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language, signs and images to produce meaning. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the real world of objects, people or events, or to imaginary worlds. (Hall 17)

The first significant instance occurs during Chandan's police recruitment process. Although he has completed the required formalities, he is repeatedly made to wait and discouraged from asking questions. When he seeks clarification, an official tells him, *"Yeh sab har kisi ke liye ek jaisa nahi hota"* ("These things are not the same for everyone") (*Homebound* 00:41:56). The statement does not mention caste, yet it clearly signals unequal access. Through this exchange, Chandan is shown not as an eligible candidate but as someone whose claim to the institution is conditional. Hall's idea helps explain how such moments produce meaning: inequality is not announced but made to appear normal through everyday language and procedure.

A second scene involving Chandan occurs when he is advised informally to reconsider his aspirations after repeated setbacks. He is told, *"Zyada upar ka sapna dekhna mushkil hota hai"* ("It is difficult to dream beyond a certain point") (*Homebound* 00:49:22). The suggestion is framed as practical advice, but it reinforces a social boundary. Thereafter, Chandan shows signs of withdrawing from public interaction. His silence, lowered gaze, and hesitation to speak further indicate how caste disciplines behaviour over time.

Caste discrimination becomes explicit in the episode involving Chandan's sister, who works as a cook in a government school. Once her caste background is revealed, she is asked to leave her job. The justification given is, *"Log sawal uthayenge"* ("People will raise objections") (*Homebound* 01:01:48). Responsibility is displaced onto an abstract public, allowing the institution to present exclusion as necessity. This reflects B. R. Ambedkar's argument that "Caste is a system of graded inequality in which castes are arranged in a hierarchy of ascending and descending order of reverence and contempt" (Ambedkar 47). The film visualises this graded structure by showing how both ambition and livelihood are

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restricted at different levels of the same social hierarchy. These scenes show that in *Homebound*, caste persists not through open violence but through representation that normalises exclusion in everyday life.

5.2 Representation of Religious Minority Identity

In *Homebound*, religious identity is represented through the everyday experiences of Shoaib, whose Muslim identity becomes a marker of suspicion and exclusion in public. Rather than portraying communal violence, the film focuses on ordinary moments where religion is used to stereotype and humiliate. This approach reflects Stuart Hall**'s** view that representation often works through stereotyping, where individuals are reduced to a single identity trait that comes to stand in for their entire social being (Hall 257).

A key scene unfolds during a local cricket match, a space normally associated with play and community. Shoaib initially participates without incident, but once his religious identity becomes known, the tone shifts. He is taunted with remarks such as *"Pakistan ke liye khel raha hai kya?"* ("Are you playing for Pakistan?") and *"Yeh match tumhare liye nahi hai"* ("This match is not for people like you") (*Homebound* 00:34:11). Framed as jokes, these comments link Shoaib's Muslim identity to national suspicion. Through this exchange, Shoaib is no longer seen as an individual player but as a political symbol. Hall argues that "Representation is not a direct reflection of reality but the way meaning is given to things through language, discourse, and social practices" (Hall 28). Hall's concept helps explain how such everyday language produces meaning by associating identity with threat, making prejudice appear normal and socially acceptable.

This representational logic continues within the police recruitment process. During verification, Shoaib's name and background invite extra scrutiny. An official remarks, *"Tum jaise logon ke saath hamesha kuch na kuch dikkat hoti hai"* ("There are always problems with people like you") (*Homebound* 00:46:38). Merit is displaced by suspicion, and Shoaib is positioned as a potential risk rather than a candidate. This scene shows how representation operates materially, shaping how institutions classify and manage individuals. Religious identity here functions as a prior assumption that overrides individual effort. This representation resonates with findings of the Sachar Committee, which documents the persistent socio-economic marginalisation of Muslims in India across various sectors (Sachar).

In both scenes, Shoaib responds with restraint and silence rather than protest. His reaction reflects a learned survival strategy in which minimising visibility becomes necessary in hostile public spaces. Together, these scenes reveal that rather than overt hostility, the film represents religious marginalisation as an everyday process sustained through language, humour, and bureaucratic routine.

5.3 Class and Industrial Exploitation

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In *Homebound*, class becomes the dominant form of oppression when Shoaib and Chandan migrate from their village to an urban, industrial town in search of factory work. Their move is motivated by the belief that living far from caste- and religion-based discrimination will provide economic security and dignity. In the industrial setting, caste and religion appear less visible, but the film shows that this does not lead to equality. Instead, both men become part of a labour system defined by economic dependence and limited choice.

Several scenes depict the harsh conditions of factory work. Shoaib and Chandan work long hours in physically demanding environments, with no control over their schedules or wages. In one scene, workers are informed of sudden shift changes without explanation. When dissatisfaction is expressed, a supervisor remarks, *"Kaam nahi chahiye toh aur log line mein khade hain"* ("If you don't want the work, others are waiting") (*Homebound* 01:14:09). This exchange reduces workers to replaceable bodies and reflects Karl Marx**'s** observation, "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces" (Marx 69). Labour here benefits the system, not the labourer.

Another scene shows the cramped rooms shared by factory workers, where exhaustion shapes daily life. Conversations focus on wages and money sent home, not on dreams or long-term plans (*Homebound* 01:18:42). This loss of aspiration reflects Marx's idea of alienation, where work separates individuals from their goals and sense of self. The film also echoes the broader reality revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when migrant workers were left without income or protection. Shoaib and Chandan's situation reflects this collective precarity. The film suggests that industrial modernity does not dissolve inequality; it restructures through replaceability and insecurity.

While caste and religious identities expose Chandan and Shoaib to exclusion and humiliation in their hometown, the move to an industrial setting merely alters the form of oppression rather than ending it. The final moments of the film underline this continuity with tragic clarity. Chandan's death during the COVID-19 pandemic occurs not through direct communal or caste violence. It is a consequence of exhaustion, precarity, and unsafe working conditions, reveal how class exploitation ultimately becomes fatal. His loss is quiet and unacknowledged, mirroring the invisibility that marks the lives of working-class subjects. The absence of outrage or accountability in the aftermath reinforces the film's central argument: social inequality persists by changing its surface, not its structure.

6. Conclusion
Homebound presents a restrained portrayal of social inequality shaping ordinary lives in contemporary India. From the beginning, Shoaib and Chandan hope that education and a government job will help them escape hardship. These aspirations reflect a common belief that effort and discipline can lead to dignity. However, as the film progresses, caste and religious prejudice repeatedly block their attempts to move forward. When they leave

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their village to work in factories, the form of oppression changes but does not disappear. The film suggests that when caste and religion appear muted, class emerges as the most pervasive form of control within the film's social world. Throughout the narrative, these structures are evident not through violence or explicit language but subtly through everyday institutional practices.

The final moments of *Homebound* take place during the COVID-19 pandemic, when existing hierarchies become more visible. Chandan's death during the pandemic shows that social and economic insecurity harshly affects those already living on the margins. The film presents this loss quietly, without a dramatic spectacle. Thus, as a cultural text, *Homebound* depicts that these social systems continue to affect opportunities and survival in modern India.

One of the most significant aspects of the film is the friendship between Shoaib and Chandan. Their bond shows that caste and religion do not divide people naturally; they are enforced through institutions. In a quiet scene inside their shared living space, away from public scrutiny, Shoaib remarks, *"Yahan koi poochta nahi kaun ho tum"* ("Here, no one asks who you are"), to which Chandan responds, *"Bas isi liye saans aati hai"* ("That is why it feels easier to breathe") (*Homebound* 01:09:14–01:09:32). This exchange makes clear that their relationship remains free from hierarchy, even as the outside world constantly marks their identities. Yet this space of solidarity cannot protect them from the larger structures that ultimately determine their fate.

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