The Burden of Being Other: Caste and Communalism in Neeraj Ghaywan's *Homebound*

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Neeraj Ghaywan's sophomore film, *Homebound* (2025), is a mirror held up to the face of contemporary India. Moving beyond the critical acclaim of his debut film, *Masaan* (2015), Ghaywan, a filmmaker invested in the politics of identity and dignity, delivers a scrutiny of discrimination by juxtaposing the lives of two marginalized individuals: a Dalit man, Chandan Kumar Valmiki, and a Muslim man, Mohammed Shoaib Ali. By placing their lifelong friendship—and its eventual fracturing under socio-political pressure—at the heart of the film, the director articulates the truth of the Indian social fabric: that while the mechanisms of oppression may vary—caste-based for the Dalit and communal-based for the Muslim—the lived experience of structural violence and denied dignity is a tragic commonality. The film asserts that in India's stratified society, the Dalit and the Muslim are equally discriminated against by the pervasive power of the Hindu caste system and its communal outgrowth.

The story of the film, inspired in part by journalist Basharat Peer's article (2020) on the migrant crisis during the COVID-19 lockdown, is structured around the aspiration of Chandan and Shoaib to become police constables. Their dream is not merely a career goal; it is a desperate quest for dignity and power—the two most fundamental commodities denied to them by birth. As a Dalit, Chandan seeks to escape the intergenerational shame and structural poverty of his caste, while Shoaib, a Muslim, aims for the social shield and legitimacy that a government job offers against escalating communal prejudice. Their goal of joining the police—-

an institution seen as an enforcer of the very exclusionary status quo—is an indictment of a society where even the lowest rung of state power is seen as the only viable path to self-respect.

Ghaywan demonstrates how the forces of caste and religion intersect to create a double bind of exclusion. Chandan, for instance, internalizes the shame of his Dalit identity to such an extent that he attempts to pass as a Kayastha and deliberately avoids ticking the SC (Scheduled Caste) box on his application form, seeing the reservation provision not as a right but as a visible mark of inferiority that invites further prejudice. This fear is brutally validated in a scene where an upper-caste government officer cruelly taunts him with casteist slurs, equating his ambition to a pig trying to wear a lion's skin. This moment in the film is a representation of how the invisible social code of caste remains more potent than any constitutional provision. The film captures how the language of prejudice, the subtle micro-aggressions of touch, purity, and social seating, function to maintain the caste hierarchy. Chandan's mother being prohibited from cooking the mid-day meal due to her caste is not just a personal humiliation; it is a systemic barrier that blocks even the most fundamental forms of social participation.

Simultaneously, Shoaib's experience exposes the communal arm of the same Hindu-caste-hegemonized system. As a Muslim, his religion becomes the primary marker for his otherness, subjecting him to a different yet equally debilitating form of discrimination. The film highlights how casual bigotry is normalized, such as when references to his faith surface during an India-Pakistan cricket match, immediately shifting his identity from friend or Indian to Muslim outsider. In a new work space, his identity as "Mohammed" is what an Islamophobic manager primarily focuses on, showcasing how institutionalized prejudice operates with a calculated, almost bureaucratic cruelty. For Shoaib, the struggle is not to overcome the shame of his birth as a Dalit but to counter the escalating suspicion

and distrust placed upon his community in a majoritarian state.

The film does not present two separate struggles; it shows their essential unity under the banner of Brahmanical patriarchy and its structural offspring. Both the Dalit and the Muslim characters are denied access to the "home" of national belonging. Chandan is denied the purity of social space, his existence polluting the caste-defined structure, while Shoaib is denied the political space, his loyalty constantly questioned by the communal gaze. Their statuses as migrant workers during the lockdown sequence—the film's dramatic peak—becomes the ultimate equalizer. Stripped of their regional, educational, and social markers, they are reduced to a common, dehumanized category: the expendable poor, walking hundreds of kilometres with nothing but their fragile friendship. In this state of acute vulnerability, the film suggests, the state's indifference is a universal experience for the marginalized, regardless of whether their identifier is caste or religion.

The COVID-19 lockdown in *Homebound* functions as a dystopic lens that magnifies and renders visible the structural violence always already present in Indian society. The pandemic, in this reading, does not create new forms of exclusion but rather accelerates and exposes existing ones with brutal clarity. The image of Chandan and Shoaib walking along a deserted highway—bodies exhausted, identities stripped to their bare, vulnerable core—becomes a metaphor for what can be identified as the dystopic everyday of the pandemic: a state of exception where the marginalized are rendered expendable, their suffering normalized as collateral damage. The lockdown, presented by the state as a universal public health measure, reveals itself in the film as a profoundly uneven experience, one where the fault lines of caste and religion determine who can safely "stay home" and who must risk everything on the road. Ghaywan's representation of this dystopic reality frames the pandemic as a moment when the latent authoritarianism of social hierarchies becomes manifest,

when the abstract categories of "citizen" and "migrant" are suddenly filled with the concrete weight of caste and communal identity. The highway, in this dystopic vision, is not a space of transit but of suspension—a liminal zone where the characters are neither here nor there, neither fully citizens nor simply bodies, but rather the embodied proof of how crisis deepens rather than dissolves existing structures of otherness.

Ghaywan, however, refuses to succumb to fatalism. The character of Sudha, an Ambedkarite woman who possesses a strong moral compass and political clarity, offers an essential counter-narrative of resilience and hope. Sudha's embrace of education and her determination to "carry her own chair" in a society that expects her to sit on the floor represents a principled resistance rooted in B.R. Ambedkar's vision. Her relationship with Chandan—a bond that transcends caste shame—is a flicker of optimism, suggesting that dignity is not something to be granted by the system but to be claimed through self-respect and solidarity.

Homebound is an important piece of Indian cinema, not for its social gestures, but for its quiet, empathetic realism. It documents the daily indignities faced by two communities who, despite their historical and theological differences, find themselves sharing the same low rung on India's social hierarchy, both equally subordinated by the systemic design of caste and communalism. By showing how the anxiety of the Dalit to escape caste and the fear of the Muslim to resist communal suspicion are two sides of the same coin of structural exclusion, the film urges us to recognize a collective oppression. Its importance lies in its ability to generate empathy and, in doing so, to reframe the conversation: the journey back home for all marginalized Indians remains a distant dream until the structures that define them by their caste and faith are dismantled. It is a testament to the necessity of solidarity in the face of a shared burden of otherness.

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