

# India: The Anti-Caste Film in English Is a Genre in the Making

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**Both ‘The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas’ and ‘Mr. Misunderstanding’ warn us of caste travelling and dominating through liberal-progressive Savarnas - locally and globally.**

Two films released this year mark the beginning of an anti-caste genre in English language Indian films. In the past few years, we have seen anti-caste movies making waves in Hindi, Tamil and Marathi, and we now have a reflection of this in English as well. [The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas](#), a short film by Rajesh Rajamani and [Mr. Misunderstanding](#) by [Muralidharan Chinniah](#) are both noteworthy and impactful examples of this trend.

## Savarna - Avarna

Rajesh Rajamani makes his directorial debut with the dashing 20-minute short, *The Discreet Charm of the Savarnas (TDCS)*. The film about three Savarna, or ‘upper’ caste, characters looking for a “Dalit” to act in their movie unravels the embodiment of caste amongst the Savarnas. Sophisticated, subtle and sarcastic in its exploration of caste amongst liberal-urbane and artistic Savarnas, *TDCS* shows how Savarnas are crippled by caste and cannot imagine a Dalit as elegant, confident, beautiful or intelligent.

The story is about the socially closed worlds of Dilip, Aruna and Swami, who have no access to Dalit worlds but are desperate to find a ‘Dalit-looking’ character for their movie. Dilip reads the best of world literature, Aruna is an assertive feminist, while Swami is a director who believes that a Dalit actor and an actor playing a Dalit are two different things. Their search for a “real Dalit person” only points to their casteless-casteness. *TDCS* explores the normality of deep prejudice through subtlety, showing how the selfhood of liberal and progressive westernised Savarnas reeks of caste prejudice.

A Dalit has to be reduced to pathos and cannot have universal possibilities or claims. She cannot speak for non-Dalits or even ‘look’ like non-Dalits and if she does speak in universal language, she has to *look* or *feel* like a Dalit. And, of course, only Savarnas know what exactly all of this means. This is what Rajesh Rajamani calls their discreet charm.

In the last scene, when they find a Dalit woman, one of the Savarna characters actually blurts out, ‘You are a little too pretty.’ With the following track playing in the background, the irony almost turns into melancholia.

I am gonna find you and make you the face of the nation.  
I have been told where I can find you.  
I have been told about your caste and creed.  
I am gonna find you and make you face of the nation.  
Where are you now come tell me your stories.  
Where are you now come show me your scars.

A senior professor in a reputed social science institute once said to a student, 'You are so fair, how can you be Scheduled Caste?' Caste and race are similar only in the Aryan race-proclaiming Brahmin's mind. *TDCS* engages with caste by looking at the Savarna-Avarna [untouchable] cleavage. But equalisation of caste and race is not something Rajamani is interested in; that would be rather misplaced. Caste is not just about colour and looks. What he shows us is that caste is about the impossibility of equality.

That [Pa Ranjith](#)'s Neelam Pictures presents the film makes this short movie very special. It is a sign of anti-caste autonomy in films, something one rarely gets to see. Unlike movies such as *Article 15*, where the Savarna gaze requires the anti-caste protagonist to be a Savarna, Rajamani turns the gaze on the English speaking urbane and liberal Savarnas, who embody caste despite their left-liberal inclinations — making them a particularly dangerous species. Rajesh also pushes a message for Ambedkarites - to not be a Dalit who amuses Savarnas. Be autonomous, be free!

### **Brahmin vs Non-Brahmin**

Muralidharan Chinniah's [Mr. Misunderstanding](#) is a comedy with no songs, dance and violence. Based in London, it is a slow-paced movie that keeps you engaged during its 80 minute duration. The story revolves around Ram (Harsh Naik), his friend Anu (Sunil Kumar) and Rosy (Catalina Caraus). While Rajamani works on the Savarna-Avarna cleavage, Chinniah makes most of the distinction and hierarchy between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins.

Ram's non-Brahmin friend Anu may be impotent. The film begins with a scene where both are watching porn and measuring their respective sizes, with Ram mocking Anu, saying 'You need seven to satisfy a woman'. Rosy, a white British girl, has heard from a friend who is falling out of a bad marriage, that marriage is not a bad idea and that Indian marriages last long. Rosy meets Ram in the library and love happens. Ram's parents agree to this union as Rosy agrees to pay the dowry (a nod to Indian 'culture').

Their married life begins well but Ram believes Rosy has too many male friends and this leads him to doubt her 'character'. How do we test Rosy's character and who else could be a better man to help with this other than Anu?

Ram's sacred thread (*janeu*), which he wears only occasionally, also becomes a source of contention between Ram and Rosy. Ram thinks the thread is worn because he's a Brahmin and Brahmins are born 'superior' to other Indians. Rosy is not at all convinced and is both amused and irritated at the code [Manu Dharma] that justifies such unreasonable thoughts. She wants to understand non-superior/normal Indians. Ram pushes Anu into testing Rosy's character and Anu gets closer to Rosy. But there's a glitch: Is Anu really impotent?

The movie ticks all the boxes of comedy, drama and romance. In Muralidharan Chinniah's hands, the characters feel real and the film rings true. It tackles caste sensitively, recognising its evils beyond the seven seas, but without dramatising caste.

We live in paradoxical times. The love for religion and religious nationalism is growing and so is the appetite for anti-caste ideas. The *Indian Express* now runs a fortnightly column called 'Dalitality' - the only column in modern India where you know the caste of the writer before reading the column. The writing, of course, is excellent, but the newspaper also ends up suggesting the 'untouchable' voice is best confined to its own corner and its 'own' topics.

Both movies warn us of caste travelling and dominating through liberal-progressive Savarnas - locally and globally. *TDCS*, in engaging with the Savarna-Avarna dialectic, turns the revulsion of

casteless savarnas against untouchables into an opportunity for a sophisticated and humorous dig at caste. *Mr. Misunderstanding* explores the psyche of a global Brahmin, cosmopolitan but rooted in caste. As opposed to Ram, Arun's cosmopolitanism is far more dialogical and appealing to Rosy.

Beyond the polarities of Savarna-Avarna and Brahmin-Non Brahmin, caste has something to do with the structure and purpose of family in India. Heteronormative family hardly constitutes a space of ethics and love. Rather, caste is prior to family and caste provides roots for constructing a family without moral virtues; in short, caste toxicity along with disrespect for women is learnt at home. But, how do we reform the idea of [caste] family? How do we seek caste-free individuals? We desperately need many more anti-caste movies to take on the monster of caste.

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